### Mind the Gap

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th><strong>Explicit</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td><strong>No Archive Warnings Apply</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M, M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td><strong>Coco (2017)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Héctor Rivera/Imelda Rivera, Ernesto De La Cruz/Héctor Rivera, Ernesto De La Cruz/Imelda Rivera, Ernesto De La Cruz/Héctor Rivera/Imelda Rivera</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Héctor (Coco 2017), Mamá Imelda (Coco 2017), Ernesto De La Cruz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Porn With Plot, Threesome - F/M/M, Love/Hate, Humor, Anal Sex, Oral Sex, Sex Toys, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, NSFW Art, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Shower Sex, Anal Fingering, Bondage, Polyamory, Hand Jobs, BDSM, Figging</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Mind the Gap**

by **PengyChan**

**Summary**

Modern Day AU. Tired of Ernesto’s snide remarks, Imelda decides to put him in his place - and her husband is more than happy to help. It was supposed to be a one-night deal. Things quickly get out of hand.

OT3, mostly porn and humor. Plenty of instances of Ernesto being Dramatic, Imelda getting Sick Of His Shit, and Héctor trying to be the peacekeeper. Don’t expect anything serious.

[The art in each chapter is by Elletoria. Also check out their work on Twitter!](http://archiveofourown.org/works/15807054)
Challenge

Chapter Notes

It occurred to me I had yet to post this on Ao3 so here it is. Started out as just porn, decided to grow something resembling a plot, so now there’s also gonna be Drama. I entirely blame the Coco Locos Discord server for this. All of it. Y’all corrupted me. Thanks.

Ernesto de la Cruz is not enjoying this.

Fine, so he’s hard. And leaking precum. And grasping the sheets below him so hard that his fingers hurt, and biting his lower lip to keep himself from moaning, and pretty damn sure he’s about to lose that battle.

But he’s not enjoying this. At all.

Earth will spin out of its orbit and hurl into outer space before he admits otherwise to himself and, most of all, to Imelda. He can just imagine her self-satisfied smirk, the I-told-you-so look she’d give him, that tilt of the chin and… and…

… This is not helping, really, because Imelda is gorgeous as she’s infuriating. Maybe he should stop thinking about her at all and focus on something else. Héctor, maybe - the way he’s stroking his back and mumbling something against his hair, the way Ernesto’s face is pressed against his chest with each thrust forward, how he can hear almost every thump of his heart.

Imelda has stamina, he has to give her that. And a whole lot of nerve, given how she pulled that strap-on out of seemingly nowhere - he’d almost choked on his drink; that was not something he’d expected to see thrown on the table in front of him - and dared him to take it.

Maybe they were all more than slightly tipsy, maybe he’d gone a bit too far with his boasting over his conquests and maybe he shouldn’t have mocked Héctor over how boring married life had to be, especially in front of his wife. And maybe it would have been a good idea to back off. Ernesto almost had: he’d given an incredulous laugh and glanced at Héctor, expecting to see him doing the same… only that Héctor hadn’t laughed. His eyes, dark and impossibly large, had moved slowly from him to his wife, and then back to him.

And he’d licked his lips, a quick nervous gesture that Ernesto had seen countless times and that in that moment, suddenly, had made him feel as though he’d caught fire.

Jesus Christ, she’s used it on Héctor.

The thought alone - that thing had been inside Héctor - had sent a jolt straight to his groin, and yet Ernesto had tried again to back off. “No way,” he’d said, standing up so that he could look down at Imelda. Not an easy feat, because somehow she seemed to be the one to always look down to everyone, despite being so short. “I won’t be bending over for you.”

To be absolutely fair, he’s not precisely bending over. He’s on his hands and knees. There is a significant difference the--
“Ah!”

A sharp thrust cuts off his thoughts and tears a hoarse cry from his throat, barely muffled against Héctor’s skin. He has a moment to hope that Imelda did not hear it before he hears her chuckling, feels her hands gripping his hips tighter only for a moment before trailing up and down his heaving sides, fingernails scraping his skin just enough to make him shudder. She leans on him for a moment, he feels her breasts pressing against his back, warm breath between his shoulder blades.

“What was that?” Imelda wonders aloud against his skin, and he grounds his teeth at the smugness in her voice. But that voice sounds rougher than usual, too, her breathing heavy. He wonders if her skin is as flushed as his own, if her hair is sticking to her neck. What does she look like right now?

Ernesto suddenly wants to turn and look, steal a glance over his shoulder, but then her hand wraps around his aching cock and a fingernail scraps over the underside, tracing a vein. Another finger pokes at his slit, only for one moment, to make it clear that she knows it’s leaking. Ernesto presses his face against Héctor’s skin, biting back another groan, as she wipes her hand across his back.

“Héctor, did you hear that?”

He feels Héctor’s chuckle more than he hears it. “I did hear something,” he says, and cackles at Ernesto’s huff. “Sorry, amigo. You know I can’t lie to her,” he adds, and one of his hands runs through Ernesto’s hair, as though that can make up for the betrayal.

It’s his fault if Ernesto got himself dragged in this, really. All his fault. If not for his presence, if not for the way he looked at him, Ernesto would have walked right out the moment he saw the strap-on, the moment Imelda threw that stupid challenge in his face. Or maybe not, but he probably wouldn’t have stayed.

It was Héctor to keep him there. It was Héctor to prepare him, using a frankly ridiculous amount of lubricant. Ernesto may have remarked about it, if not for one fact that made it hard for him to collect his thoughts: Héctor has very, very skilled fingers. Given what an excellent guitarist he is, it doesn’t come as a surprise.

Ernesto has wondered before what other uses he could put those hands to and well, here’s his answer.

Come to think of it, he could blame his current state to his ministration rather than Imelda, the way she lets her nails rake over his back, the forceful buck of her hips. It seems a more acceptable compromise than--

Imelda pulls back suddenly, leaving only the tip of the dildo inside, and every fiber of his being cries out against the loss of contact. Ernesto pushes back without thinking, to get that damn thing back in him, and it takes a moment to realize why Imelda is suddenly laughing. When he does, he feels as though his face - no longer pressed against Héctor’s chest - is about to catch fire.

“That was--” he snaps, turning to glare at her over his shoulder, but what he was about to say next - unfair, which is probably not the most brilliant thing to utter either way - dies in his throat when he sees her. Imelda’s skin is flushed, her hair is sticking to her neck, and there is a glint in her eyes as she grins down at him. She’s still breathing fast, her breasts rising and falling with each breath, the nipples dark and turgid.

She is a loud, mouthy, bossy, an utter and complete pain in the neck but oh, he thinks he can see why Héctor seems to believe she’s the only woman in the world. He really does.
Imelda blinks, her grin giving way to a perplexed look for an instant, and Ernesto realizes he’s been staring at her with his mouth hanging open with several moments. Before he can catch himself and say something, anything, Imelda grips his hips again and rotates hers.

The burst of pleasure is so intense that it’s almost painful, and Ernesto has to bite on his lower lip almost hard enough to draw blood to keep himself from letting out another moan. One of her hands slips between his legs to palm at his dick, pressing it against his own belly, and he lets his head drop forward, his arms suddenly shaky.

Ernesto finds himself wishing more than anything that Héctor would support him again - but he’s sitting back, glancing at Imelda, his own mouth slightly agape. He’s still wearing his underwear, for some reason, but it does absolutely nothing to hide his erection. And while Ernesto can understand the sentiment, having just taken a look at Imelda himself, it’s still annoying.

“I’m still here, you know,” he snaps, causing Héctor to recoil.

“Ah, I… lo siento,” he says, and reaches for him, but Imelda’s hand gets in his hair first and pulls, sharply. Ernesto lets out a cry, and another sudden twist of her hips turns it into a moan he’s unable to restrain. His eyes find Héctor, and he sees he’s licking his lips, eyes moving back and forth between the two of them.

“You talk too much,” Imelda says, sounding somewhat bored, and lets go of his hair. “Héctor, would you be a dear and put his mouth to a better use?”

Héctor’s eyes go wide as saucers, and Ernesto’s cock twitches, his thumping heart skipping a beat. His groin may very well be molten fire, he can hear blood rushing in his ears.

Héctor is staring down at him, beet red, as though waiting for permission, and Ernesto doesn’t trust himself enough to talk; he fears his voice would break and that is something Imelda would never let him live down. So he just lets himself sink on his elbows, biting back a moan when the dildo within him shifts, and mouths at Héctor’s cock through the fabric of his underwear.

*Try to ignore me now,* he thinks, and his lips twitch in a smile when Héctor gasps and clutches at his hair. He doesn’t mind the sting, he doesn’t mind it at all; all he focuses on for the next few moments is the hardness, the *heat* of it. Even the dildo up his ass feels distant when Ernesto closes his lips around the head of it and gives it a suckle though the fabric.

“A-ah! E-Ernesto,” Héctor gasps, and something about his voice makes it sound like a prayer. He instinctively buckles up towards his mouth, but the fabric is still in the way. Ernesto pulls at it with his teeth, letting out a huffing noise, and Héctor recoils.

“Oh! Right,” he mutters, and quickly takes off his underwear, throwing it away as though it’s burning in his hands. It lands somewhere on the bed, but Ernesto is paying it no mind: all he can focus on for the next few moments is the hardness, the *heat* of it. Even the dildo up his ass feels distant when Ernesto closes his lips around the head of it and gives it a suckle though the fabric.

There is a touch on his back, and Imelda’s hand is rubbing between his shoulder blades; it is not quite a caress but it’s not too forceful, either. She may mean it as encouragement, he supposes, as though he needs any.

Ernesto has never wanted anything more.

There are a few beads of precum on the very tip and he immediately swipes his tongue over it, getting a moan out of Héctor that makes him shiver. He takes the head in his mouth, finally, and just
as Héctor gasps and pulls at his hair, Imelda begins moving again. They murmur something at each other over Ernesto, something his mind is too clouded to grasp, and then they both begin to move.

Héctor’s movements are as jerky as Imelda’s are fluid, and yet they work together without seemingly any effort, their thrusts steady and deep; Ernesto could be jealous of that, if not for the fact that remarkable teamwork is going to his advantage. Or at least, it would if he were enjoying any of this.

Which he’s not, clearly, but for the sake of his best friend he can at least pretend to.

Another thrust from Imelda shoves Héctor’s cock deeper in his mouth, and he relaxes his throat to allow it. That gets a throaty groan out of Héctor and it feels like the best sound to ever have come out of Héctor’s mouth, or his guitar. Héctor pushes deeper still, pulling himself upright on his knees. His hands let go of Ernesto’s hair to clench on his shoulders, pushing him slightly back – and onto the dildo strapped to Imelda, who in turn is gripping his hips just as tightly.

He’ll have two sets of bruises in the morning, for sure, one on his shoulders and one on his hips. An annoyance, he tells himself, and of course he could get them both to let go if so he wishes.

He only needs to let Héctor’s cock slip out of his mouth and speak up, tell them to go easy, that if he gets bruise they will receive matching ones. But he does not and it’s only a matter of pride, of course, so that they won’t think he gets hurt so easily. It’s not like he dreads the thought of letting Héctor’s cock out of his mouth, or that he doesn’t want Imelda to stop fucking him.

Thinking of it in those terms, after being so careful not to think at all, causes Ernesto to shudder. If not for Héctor he may very well have fallen face down on the mattress; his arms suddenly feel so very weak, and Imelda’s full weight on him is not helping matters.

He feels her breasts pressing against his back and her hair tickling his skin, and then she’s biting him lightly between the shoulder blades. She speaks softly, almost tenderly. It throws him off for a moment, and it takes him a conscious effort to focus on her words.

“He likes it when you do this with the tongue,” Imelda says, and runs her fingers over the underside of Ernesto’s cock, causing him to shudder. “Try it.”

He does, flattening his tongue against the underside before he gives another suck, and is rewarded with a loud moan and a violent buck of Héctor’s hips. He almost chokes for a moment, and Héctor pulls back suddenly.

“What! Lo siento, I didn’t mean to, are you--” he babbles, only to trail off with a yelp when Ernesto snarls. He lifts one hand, holding up both his weight and Imelda’s on one elbow, and reaches around Héctor’s hips to pull him towards him again. He swallows him without a word, and his friend cries out, gripping his shoulders again, shuddering.

There is a laugh above him, and Imelda rises up on her knees, taking away some of the weight his left arm was straining to support. She keeps tilting her hips, the dildo hitting all the right spots in him, and keeps fondling his cock - all movements Ernesto copies with his tongue on Héctor’s own. His friend keeps gasping and panting, so he’s definitely doing this right.

All that he wants now is to feel - their touch, their moans, their scent, the pleasant fullness in him,
warm breath against sweaty skin. Not that he’s enjoying it, of course, but--

A fingernail scrapes over his cock, and Ernesto moans around the erection down his throat. It causes Héctor to shudder and then *whine* when Ernesto pulls back, lightly scraping his teeth over it the same way Imelda did with her nails. Héctor’s hands clench on his shoulders again as he buckles back down his throat, and then there is an added weight as he leans over his back. Breathless and somewhat lightheaded, Ernesto doesn’t even wonder about it - until suddenly Imelda is pressing deeper in him, her weight bearing down on his hips and hand letting go of his cock, and the dildo stills. They are *both* still now. What the…?

Ernesto doesn’t look up - he cannot, he’s pressed too tightly between them and can’t pull back - but he hears something right above him, murmurs and chuckles and the unmistakable noise of two people making out.

Really now. *Really.* They’ve got him spitroasted and achingly hard and they’re just making out right above his head, like he’s not even there? That won’t do at all. Ernesto may *not* be enjoying any of this, but he wants their attention back where it belongs - namely, *on him.*

“YOWCH!” There is a yelp, and Héctor bolts back as though Ernesto just bit him. Which he did. But very, very lightly. Doesn’t even warrant so much yelping, really.
Ernesto will keep this in mind next time Héctor claims he’s the over the top o--

There is a growl not too far away from his ear and, suddenly, pain. Something grips his scrotum and clenches, causing Ernesto to let out a strangled cry that quickly turns into a shriek when Imelda’s hand twists.

“Nice grito,” she pants, refusing to slacken her grip. “Pull that one more time, and I’ll make sure you never sing the same way again. Claro?”

Ernesto tries to speak, but he can’t find the words; his brain is frozen somewhere between pleasure and pain; he can barely hear Héctor saying something on how it wasn’t too bad, more a scrape than a bite, he overreacted. He lets out a whine, and clearly it isn’t enough.

“Claro?” Imelda asks again, and gives a sharp thrust that causes him to cry out.

“S-sí! Claro! Claro!” he chokes out. Imelda lets go, and his arms give out; he falls down against the mattress, face pressed against the sheets - but he’s still on his knees, and he’s never felt so terrifyingly exposed. He shuts his eyes, heart thundering in his chest.

“Do you think he’s learned the lesson?”

“I’m sure he did, mi amor. Just. Go a bit easier?” Héctor lets out a chuckle, and a hand runs through Ernesto’s hair. “You all right there, amigo?”

Ernesto opens his mouth to answer, but Imelda chooses that moment to tilt her hips and all that leaves him is a moan. I hate her, he thinks, but then the dildo grinds against just the right spot, her nails rake across his back, and he hates her just a little less.

He arches into her touch and mutes the blasphemy that leaves him against the sheets before turning his head, panting, ears buzzing. The scratches on his back sting, his heart seems to be about to burst in his chest, everything is too warm, every touch is electric, Héctor’s cock is out of his mouth and Imelda alone is doing this to him, Héctor is watching them and it’s frustrating but also sweet, sweet, intoxicating.

I don’t enjoy this I don’t enjoy this I don’t--

“A-aaaah...!” He grasps the sheets almost tightly enough to tear the fabric, muffles his cries in the crook of his arm. There are more shove, each a burst of light behind his eyelids, a jolt of pleasure that goes straight to his groin. There are murmured words somewhere above him, then a pause, and he can hear another kiss.

He would protest, but he feels too spent to - too overstimulated - and in the end he doesn’t need to: the thrusts resume and Héctor sits on the mattress, pulling his head on his lap. His dick is still hard and glistening with spit, a scant couple of inches away from Ernesto’s face; his friend is murmuring something, asking if he’s okay, and doesn’t seem to expect him to resume lavishing attention on it.

He does anyway, pressing his lips against the base and giving the skin a small suckle - Héctor gasps loudly at that - before he brushes his lips and tongue up the length, lifts his head just enough to take the tip in his mouth and then sinks down on it, relaxing his throat, taking all of him until his nose is nestled against Héctor’s pubic hair. He’s got to say, he’s rather proud of himself: it’s long enough to be a serious challenge to deepthroat.

Mine is thicker, though.

“A-ah! Dios mío, did you just--” Héctor stammers, a hand clenching in his hair, and that is very
satisfying. Ernesto gives a pleased hum around him, bobbing his head, and he’s rewarded with Imelda’s hand back on his own aching cock, pumping slowly. Her thrusts slow down, too; they’re deeper, more thorough, almost languorous. He feels every bit of the dildo moving in and out of him, every single fake vein carved in it; he feels her weight shift, feels her hair fall down across his back. It makes him shiver.

“Good,” she rasps approvingly against his shoulder blades, and squeezes, and he can’t hold back a moan, dick down his throat and all. “Very good.”

Ernesto moans again, and buckles into her hand. His head spins, his thoughts scatter, and he’s aware of nothing but the heat and their touch, on him, in him, everywhere. Imelda bites down on his shoulder, Héctor clenches the hand in his hair again and then, suddenly, lets go.

“A-ah, mierda, I--” he gasps and moves as thought to pull back, but Ernesto refuses to let that happen, no señor, no way. He may not be enjoying this at all, but he doesn’t half-bake things. When he does something, he does it right - so he reaches out with one arm around Héctor’s waists and pulls him back towards him, takes all of him back in his mouth and holds him in place. There is an undignified squeak, then both of his hands are back in Ernesto’s hair and Héctor is groaning, coming undone down his throat.

Ernesto takes it, vaguely aware that Imelda has stopped thrusting and is now leaning across his back, vaguely aware of the fact his legs are trembling, too weakened to carry both of their weights for long. Everything feels distant except for Héctor’s release, the hand that Imelda brings to rest on his throat as though she wants to feel him swallow… and the hand on his cock that suddenly squeezes, just at the right moment, just the right away.

His whole body seizes up in a violent bust of pleasure, clenching around the dildo still in him as Imelda gives one last, sharp push. Héctor’s cock slips out of his mouth as he pulls back to gasp - only that he cries out instead, and everything afterwards is a blur.

He drops on the sheets, panting, unable to get enough air in his lungs; he feels the strap-on being pulled out of him with a slick noise, and he’s too overwhelmed to even make a sound. He just rests there - boneless, breathless, lost to the world - for what feels like a long time. He hears gasps and moans, feels the mattress tipping; through half-closed eyelids he sees that Imelda has taken off the strap-on and that Héctor’s face is between her legs. He watches her grasp his hair and arch her back, watches the rise and fall of her breasts as she moans, riding out her own climax.

Part of him wants to reach out - for her, for Héctor, for whatever it is that he can see between them and that he’s cut out of - but he’s tired, his head still spinning, and his arm remains motionless on the sheets. He watches them settle down together, on top of each other, and kiss deeply before Imelda rests her head on Héctor’s chest, a satisfied, cat-like smile on her lips. She closes her eyes, holding onto her husband, and doesn’t spare him a single glance. Héctor, on the other hand, does look his way. He’s grinning stupidly, a somewhat dreamy expression on his face, his hair dishevelled.

“You okay?” he asks, his voice a bit husky, and Ernesto can only nod, not trusting his own voice. Héctor’s smile widens a fraction. “Isn’t she amazing?” he mouths, his gaze flickering towards his wife, and thank God he doesn’t wait for an answer: he just he closes his eyes, settling his head down on the pillow with a contented sigh. One of his hands tangles in Imelda’s hair and Ernesto’s fingers twitch, but he doesn’t move.

He refuses to reach out first and besides, why should he? They’re husband and wife and he was just thrown in for some sex without strings attached. Now he’s got a good chunk of the bed for himself and he’s going to enjoy it. He needs a good night’s sleep, after all: come morning he will be feeling sore, no doubt, and Imelda will be insufferably smug over the fact that he did, perhaps, enjoy it. Just
a little.

With a sigh, Ernesto closes his eyes and lets himself sink into a dreamless sleep. There is a gap between him and them, and none of them reaches out to bridge it.

Yet.
Morning

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to have a point, but it mostly turned into backstory to explain how they ended up on the same bed. Plus more porn.
But really did any of you expect anything different.

Imelda wakes up first.

It is one of the unchanging facts of their married life. Héctor falls asleep first, sleeps like the dead, wraps his limbs around her like a boa constrictor at some point through the night and hardly, if ever, awakens before her. That morning is not an exception.

Imelda rises on one elbow - Héctor stirs, but only barely, when his arm slips off her - and gazes down at her husband with a smile. They haven’t bothered to pull the sheets over themselves, because the night has been much too warm, and she’s treated to the very pleasant sight of his lean body against hers. She runs a hand over his side, smiling a little when he shivers and sighs, until it rests against his cheek.

Under the mop of unruly hair, Héctor’s sleeping face couldn’t look more serene. She’s always liked how long his eyelashes are, although she rarely mentions it; last time she did Héctor started batting them ridiculously often whenever he decided she was being too serious over something, like picking the flowers for their wedding, and on a couple of occasions she laughed so hard she almost thought she would never be able to breathe again. But now he’s asleep, and she can admire them at her heart’s content--

A slight snorting sound snaps her from her thoughts, and the smile forming on her lips fades; still sleepy and in Héctor’s arms, she forgot they are not alone on the bed. Imelda tears her gaze from Héctor’s face and raises an eyebrow towards Ernesto, ready to throw in a few sharp words, but there is no need to: he’s still asleep on the other side of the bed, a gap between him and Héctor.

He’s on his stomach, head resting in the crook of his arm, that stupid hair he always keeps checking in every available mirror tousled, the sheets bunched around his ankles. His back rises and falls regularly with his breathing, and Imelda’s eyes go to the marks she’s clawed across it, to the faint bruises on his shoulders Héctor’s grip caused and the more marked ones she’s left on his hips.

Overall, she finds the sight… satisfying, for the lack of a better word. Worth the annoyance of his presence, because she got the satisfaction of knowing she has won.

She planned nothing of what happened that night, of course; had anyone told her the previous afternoon that she’d awaken the next morning with her husband’s insufferable friend with them on the bed, she would have laughed. She can hardly bear having him in her home - and he is always in her home, as though he doesn’t have his own apartment at the ground floor of the same building. He’s always around Héctor, behaving all the world like she’s just there to pick up the dirty glasses and dishes they leave around.

Héctor is usually the one to clean up any mess and say that Ernesto means nothing by it, of course; Ernesto is just like that, hardly bothers to pick up after himself, “you should see what his place looks
like!

Imelda has precisely no intention to set foot in his apartment and find out what it looks like. Unlike Héctor, who seems in blissful denial, she can see the truth exactly how it is: Ernesto resents her, and is trying to get on her nerves because it’s about all he can do.

It wasn’t always the case: back when they were all children in Santa Cecilia, when the boys were inseparable almost from the crib and she was only a girl who hung with them from time to time, he hadn’t minded her. They butted heads sometimes - he’d downright pouted when she’d beaten him at skipping stones - but overall, they got on reasonably well; never quite friends, but good enough acquaintances.

When they had moved to Mexico City to pursue their musical career she’d missed Héctor from time to time, but rarely thought of Ernesto. And then, when she moved to Mexico City as well a couple of years later and they ran into each other, it soon became clear that things had changed; it was as though, in that short time, the boy Héctor was had grown into a man. He was still the person she’d known, and yet so different. They’d talked over drinks, laughed, talked some more; for a time both had forgotten that Ernesto sat at their same table.

She had known right away that Ernesto wasn’t especially pleased with the direction things were taking; in their childhood days, she’d been the third wheel… but suddenly it was him, and Ernesto really hates it when something isn’t about him.

Maybe he could have coped with it, had it been a one-time thing, but as things changed - as she and Héctor met again and again without him in the picture, as it progressed to dating and engagement and finally marriage, putting an end to their days as two carefree bachelors - Imelda could tell he was growing more and more frustrated; she could tell that his cutting remarks were not jokes at all and she knew, although Héctor never told her anything about it, that he had tried to talk his friend out of getting married. Unsuccessfully.

When their wedding day had come Ernesto had been impeccable, all laughs and smiles and pats in the back in his role as Héctor’s best man… but Imelda could tell he was playing a part. She could see the frustration behind that smile, the anger and maybe - that was something she’d wondered about once or twice - downright jealousy.

His best man speech had been hardly anything noteworthy - no wonder Héctor was the songwriter between the two of them - and she had known that, beyond the light-hearted jokes about his best friend getting ‘tied down’, there was something much deeper: a resentment that had been growing for the past months and years and that Ernesto knows better than to spell out clearly.

He knows that if he ever does, Héctor will take her side. He knows that if he’s ever forced to choose, he’ll choose her. Ernesto has lost a competition she’s never wanted or agreed to, and he hates it.

That knowledge, and the no small amount of smugness she gets out of it, is usually what keeps her from snapping. She knows that Héctor doesn’t want to be forced to choose and that losing his best friend would hurt, so she ignores the remarks behind his jokes. They’re nothing but a pathetic attempt at lashing out at her, not worth a thought.

But of course, in the end she reached the boiling point. Last night’s boasting about his conquests - like men and women who fall for his dubious charm are nothing but that to Ernesto, to be used and discarded the next morning - angered her; his snide remark on how Héctor probably should count himself lucky if he got a kiss those days made her furious. So she marched in the bedroom, grabbed their strap-on and threw it before Ernesto, with no small satisfaction when he choked a little on his drink.
She threw the challenge in his face with a sort of savage triumph and hardly any thought at all, fully expecting him to get up, mumble an excuse, and leave with his tail between his legs - possibly embarrassed enough to never show at their door again, if she was lucky.

She didn’t expect him to stay. Didn’t expect him to look at Héctor, look at her, and take that challenge. But he did and she could have called it off… except that she would have never lived it down if she did and gave Ernesto a reason to get smug. Except that she’d looked at Héctor’s face and the desire on his features was all that it took to decide.

She’d thrown the challenge, she’d seen it through, and she’d come out on top in more ways the one; the way Ernesto had come undone beneath her had been very satisfying.

Which reminds her, he took that dildo far more readily and easily than she expected; maybe Héctor was especially good at getting him ready, but she suspects Mr. Manly is not, after all, always the one on top as he likes to claim. And the eagerness when he took Héctor in his mouth… how long has he wanted to do that?

Well, that is one thing I can’t blame him for.

The thought makes Imelda smirk, and she turns away from Ernesto’s sleeping form to look back at Héctor. She leans down, hand slipping down to his groin, her mouth pressing against his temple. When he awakens with a startled mumble, Imelda nibbles at his earlobe and shushes him.

“Ssssh… quiet. Come shower with me.”

He does, grinning sleepily at her. For a moment as he sits up he seems startled to see Ernesto sleeping on the other side of the bed - Imelda can see his face and ears especially turning crimson as he remembers what happened the previous night - but he just nods at her, and slides silently off the bed and out of the room with her, towards the bathroom.

Nothing’s better than a nice shower to start the day right.

When they bought the apartment - with some help from Imelda’s family, truth be told - both of them had agreed on three very important things: there would be a room she could use as a workshop to make shoes she then sold online, one spare room they could turn into a nursery one day, and a very large shower in the bathroom.

Right now - pressing Imelda against him, water rushing over them and hair in his eyes, trying to get a good grip on her soapy skin while she squirms and laughs - Héctor is inclined to think that the latter was the best idea of them all.

“Careful not to slip,” Imelda chides him when they tumble through the stream of water and against the tiles, her laughter echoing in his ears. Héctor manages to get a hold of her and hold her tight, her back against his chest. He presses a kiss against her neck, spits out a mouthful of wet hair, and she laughs again. “Maybe I should cut it,” she muses aloud.

“No, don’t,” Héctor murmurs against her shoulder. He’s sure Imelda would look divine even with a dead fish on her head, but he loves her hair - the thick braid she usually wears, the loose curls he can run his fingers through when they’re down, the tight bun she ties it in when there is some serious work to do and she needs to focus. “I’d hate to see it go.”

One of his hands reaches to palm Imelda’s breasts, the other slips down her soapy stomach and to her
sex, and she’s not laughing anymore. She leans back against him with a pleased hum, rests her head on his shoulder and closes her eyes. One hand clutches at his arm; the other reaches back to grasp Héctor’s hair, and he groans just a little. His fingers slip in her easily, she’s already so wet and he’s growing hard, pressing against the slick skin of her lower back. There is little friction, but it is enough to make him shiver.

“Did you take your guitar in the shower, or…?” Imelda mutters, and Héctor laughs again into her hair. He curls his fingers, making her moan and feeling more than a little lightheaded. There is nothing he doesn’t love about this, nothing he doesn’t love about her.

“You were amazing last night,” he mumbles, pressing his thumb against her clit, shifting his hips to get some friction against slick skin. He smiles. “He never stood a chance.”

“Of course not,” Imelda says, gasping, hand clenching tighter on his hair. He can almost hear the smirk in her voice. “It was about time I shut him up. Though it was mostly you to take care of that part,” she adds, and bucks her hips to get his fingers deeper in her just as Héctor kneads her nipple with a thumb and lets out a chuckle.

“Hadn’t really planned to do that,” Héctor breathes, blushing a little. He’s already achingly hard against her wet skin and the memory of how his cock just disappeared in Ernesto’s mouth - the stretch of his lips over the base, the heat of it - is not helping matters. “I was going to just watch.”

“Like he was going to let that happen. I knew he’d seize his chance to get a piece of you,” Imelda says, and gasps when he twists his fingers, tossing her head back. “I-- ay, yes, like that, do it again - I told you he would, if given the chance. He must have wanted you for years. One thing we can agree on.”

“I never realized,” Héctor mumbles, and it is true. He’s known for a long time that Ernesto’s sexuality can be summed up with ‘yes’, but he had never thought it could possibly include him until Imelda had pointed it out to him as though it was something obvious. Looking back, he probably should have realized the remarks towards his wife weren’t just friendly banter.

“Oh, Héctor. I love you, but you can be so unobservant,” Imelda sighs now, leaning back against him, and Héctor can almost see her rolling her eyes. The hand on his arm lets go to reach back, and she squeezes his cock gently, stroking him in a way that matches the movement of his fingers in her. Her thumb brushes over the tip just as his own presses over her clit, and he moans. Imelda’s chuckle makes her tremble against him.

“Want to see who can make the other come first?” she asks, her voice a bit hoarse. She tilts her head back, places a kiss on his jaw. “The loser checks on that idiota.”

Héctor smiles, and takes the challenge knowing full well he won’t win. Unlike Ernesto, he doesn’t mind losing.

Victory is nice but Imelda can make defeat taste very, very sweet, too.

He wakes up to a stinging back, a sore ass, and a raw throat.

And to laughter, too. Imelda’s laughter, a few rooms over, immediately followed by Héctor’s as well. Sounds like they’re having a great time. Good for them, Ernesto thinks sarcastically, holding back a groan as he rolls on his back.

Jesus Christ, it feels like he’s been ran over by a truck. Everything is sore and there is no way he can hide that; he’s not even sure he can walk normally. Imelda will notice for sure, and be insufferable
about it. Maybe he should try to get dressed as quickly as he can and make a dash for the door. If he makes it out of there before she notices him--

“Oh, you’re up! Well. Awake, at least.”

Too late. Ernesto turns to the door to see Héctor standing in the doorway, wearing a shirt and shorts, hair damp and looking pretty damn pleased. Which he should be, really, given the blowjob Ernesto treated him to. His throat definitely feels that now - no singing for a couple of days for him - so he better be grateful for it, Ernesto thinks, purposefully keeping himself from glancing towards Héctor’s groin. He just lets out a grunt and lets his head drop back.

“We’re going to make breakfast. Well, almost lunch at this point, but still. Food,” Héctor speaks again, walking up to the bed. Somewhere in the back of his mind Ernesto is vaguely aware of being naked, but what does it matter now? It’s nothing he hasn’t seen before, having grown up together, and now he’s also seen him on his hands and knees, taking him down his throat while his wife fucked him raw with a strap-on.

He suspects they’re slightly past the point where modesty means anything.

“Will get there,” he says hoarsely. “In a minute.”

Héctor quirks an eyebrow. “Sore throat? Caught a cold, amigo? Need a scarf?”

“Chingate.”

“Imelda did. In the shower,” Héctor quips, gaining himself a glare than turns into surprise when he sits at the edge of the bed, pulling something out of the pocket of his shorts - some kind of ointment. “I assume it’s not just your throat.”

It is not, in fact, just his throat - but he’s not about to admit as much. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“As if. I’ve been on the receiving end of that thing too, amigo,” Héctor points out with a shrug, nodding towards the discarded strap-on on the floor. The mental image very nearly causes Ernesto’s breath to catch in his throat.

“Ah,” he says, and Héctor laughs, lifting up the tube in his hand.

“I find this helps a lot. At least give it a try,” he says, and Ernesto sighs. May as well, the thinks, and he holds out his hand for the ointment - but instead of handing it to him, Héctor tilts his head on one side. “Need help to put it on?” he asks innocently.

Except that he’s not being innocent at all; through his stunned surprise Ernesto can see it in the glint in his eyes, in the faintest trace of a smile beginning to curl his lips.

Absolutely not, Ernesto wants to say, but he does not. His eyes flicker to the ointment and on the hand holding it, on those long fingers that can coax melodies from of of any out-of-tune guitar and that, just last night-- the thought of having his fingers in him again--

His face seems to catch fire, and Ernesto lets his head drop back on the pillow, staring at a spot on the ceiling, a small crack in the white paint. This would be the moment to refuse, but he finds he doesn’t want to. “... If you must,” he rasps.

Please, he thinks.

There is a chuckle, but it doesn’t feel like he’s being mocked and that helps. Héctor’s finger pokes
his side and he turns on his stomach, knees bent and legs spread, biting back a groan when his back protests. It makes him feel so exposed it’s almost terrifying, but then Héctor’s hand is rubbing his back in slow strokes, fingers gently tracing the marks Imelda’s nails must have left on it, and Ernesto buries his face in the crook of his arm.

“You’re tense, amigo. You should relax,” Héctor says casually, and Ernesto hears the sound of a bottle being opened, of something being squeezed out of it. He feels the heel of a hand rest against his ass; the other hand is still on his back. “Gonna feel a bit cold at first.”

It *does* feel cold, and Ernesto bites back a hiss when Héctor’s finger, coated in ointment, presses lightly against him. Héctor doesn’t try to push in and just rubs the lotion in small, circular movements. It is soothing, yes, but most of all it makes blood rush to Ernesto’s groin and he’s suddenly very, very happy that he’s turned on his stomach. Maybe, if he plays it cool, Héctor won’t even notice and… is he humming now? Really?

“What are you--” Ernesto starts, his voice faltering and face on fire, but trails off with a gasp when Héctor presses a finger in him and leans over his back to talk closer to his ear.

“Relax,” he repeats, and he probably should, but he’s making it so damn difficult. His ass is sore but the ointment is soothing, Héctor’s movements are slow and thorough, and he wishes he’d be less gentle, he wishes he’d just fuck him, press him down and make him take it like Imelda did. He wouldn’t mind the soreness, then… not too much, anyway.

He’s had worse. He’s bled. When he was still in his teens, figuring everything out and terrified of being caught - people in the spit of a town they were born in talked and talked; even when he went
out of town he feared being spotted, feared he'd return home to his parents sitting in the living room, waiting, knowing - quickies in back alleys or cars were the norm. It was fast, sometimes almost brutal, often with far too little preparation. It left him hurting more than it sated him, but he’d told no one that, not even Héctor. He’d been too ashamed and Héctor too young, then; the four years between them had felt like a chasm.

Things are different now: Mexico City is different, the crowd he hangs with is different, and he has long since learned to take what he wants without shame. Most of the time, at least; he’ll curl up into a hole and die before telling Héctor what he wants, especially with Imelda within earshot. So he clenches his teeth, tries to relax and ignore the heat in his groin.

He struggles to keep his breathing even and he can manage… until Héctor shifts forward to place a kiss on his bruised shoulder and his finger curls, pressing down against his prostate. That tears a moan out of his throat, his hips rock back, and words tumble out of his mouth with no thought at all.

“Ay, Héctor, por favor, por favor--!” he chokes out against his arm. He feels Héctor smile against his skin, feels his free hand petting his hair.

“It’s all right,” he’s saying lightly, like they’re having a chat over a glass of tequila, like his finger is not pressing against his prostate and massaging it in small circular movements, like Ernesto is not hard and leaking in the sheets of his and Imelda’s bed. He doesn’t even feel the soreness anymore. “Let me help you out. Amigos help their amigos.”

This is not how amigos usually help each other, Ernesto thinks, and lets out noise that is both a laugh and a moan. It is hard to think, it is hard to breathe, and in the end he just surrenders. Not in a million years he would have thought this could happen - Héctor, he’d thought, was someone he could never have; he’s his best friend, would never look at him that way, is married - but it is happening and oh God, he doesn’t want him to stop.

Héctor is murmuring something, but he’s rubbing harder against his prostate and even if he could understand a single word Ernesto still would say nothing: his mind fails to form a single coherent thought, let along to come up with an answer. He just moans, arches his aching back, and opens his eyes.

And sees Imelda.

She’s not really in front of him: he’s looking at her reflection in the full-length mirror along with his own, skin flushed and hair tousled and mouth open. She’s at the door, leaning against the doorway and wearing a bathrobe, the very picture of composure as she watches her husband turn him into a trembling mess.

And she’s smirking, that that smirk he hates, still damp hair sticking to her cheeks.

Ernesto wants to say something scathing, but he thinks back of how her hair stuck to her face and neck the previous night too, of her grip on his hips and her breasts pressing against his back, of that one moment he understood why Héctor chose her, and his mind draws a blank. Only a whine leaves his mouth, and it turns into a moan when Héctor rubs harder against just the right spot, when her eyes find his through the mirror and their gazes hold.

Her smirk turns into a knowing smile, Héctor’s finger twists inside him, and that’s it. He comes with a long, drawn-out moan, burying his face in the pillow between his clenched fists. Héctor doesn’t stop massaging his prostate until it has passed, until he’s too spent to even move, too tender and overstimulated to withstand it. He lets out a whine that is almost a sob, and Héctor understands; his finger pulls out of him, still slick with the soothing ointment.
For a few moments Ernesto just pants, face buried into the pillow, thinking of nothing. There is a touch on his head, and Héctor is petting his hair.

“Better?” he asks. Ernesto jerks his head in a nod, still gasping for breath. There’s a chuckle, a kiss against his temple.

“Told you that stuff is good. There’s still enough hot water for a shower, if you’re quick about it. We’ll wait for you for breakfast,” Héctor says, then his hand leaves Ernesto’s hair and hears him getting off the bed. Ernesto turns to see him pause at the door, glance back at him over his shoulder, and grin. “You see, married life isn’t that boring. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re having trouble keeping up,” he says, and laughs at Ernesto’s glare.

As he leaves the room, Ernesto lets his head drop back down and realizes, belatedly, that Imelda is no longer there either; she must have left right after he came, probably with that insufferably smug smirk still on her face, the same he’s sure he’ll find himself facing in a matter of minutes.

She hasn’t said a word but, to his chagrin, Ernesto knows she doesn’t need to; they both know she has won.

This time.
Someone had to give and to absolutely no one's surprise it wasn't Imelda.
Yet.

The last notes of the last song haven’t yet faded, but Héctor cannot hear them any more than he can hear his own voice: the moment they’re done, the public erupts.

It has been by far their most successful night yet, an event in Ciudad Juárez Ernesto was able to get them in by talking to the right people, pressing the right buttons, or whatever other magic he was able to work. As much as Héctor likes to quip that Ernesto’s job when not playing mostly consists in going out for drinks with people every night - sometimes taking him along, although less often now that Héctor is married - he has to admit that his networking is what gets them most of the work… and that this time, he has outdone himself.

Still elated, Héctor waves at the public and turns to glance at Ernesto, as always after a successful concert, and he returns his grin before turning back to the public and spreading his arms as though he’s expecting the crowd to embrace him. His friend often has a smile on his face, but he rarely beams this way.

This is when he’s at his happiest, when he gets to bask in the cheers of a crowd, the larger the better. Imelda has muttered once that he may be compensating for something and Héctor has to admit it made him snicker, but he knows that she isn’t too far off. He is compensating all right... though not for what she thinks.

It doesn’t matter. I don’t need them, I don’t need anyone else. Just me and you. The world will be our family.

The sullen but defiant look Héctor remembers is gone, now, replaced by pure triumph that lights up his face. Despite missing Imelda - ay, has he really been gone only three days? It already feels like weeks! - he couldn’t be happier for his best friend.

After the concert ends they mix with the crowd, as they always do. Héctor talks, shakes hands, drinks, poses for pictures, laughs, drinks some more. Ernesto is positively holding court, and by the time they make it back to their hotel room - leaning on each other and still singing, drunk out of their minds - it’s very late and they tumble inside more than they walk.

They stumble into the room, wrestle like idiots over something stupid Ernesto said, and fall in a heap on the closest of the twin beds, Héctor’s own. There is laughter, a moment of silence, and then Ernesto’s mouth is pressing against his throat, his hands are reaching under his shirt and his knee is parting Héctor’s legs.

While that is a very interesting development, Héctor knows better than to indulge. He tilts back his head, pressing a hand against Ernesto’s chest, causing him to still. “Wait.”

Ernesto blinks down at him, looking almost hurt for a moment before the expression fades into something more guarded. “... Right. No wife’s permission, huh?” he mumbles, looking away. It’s the
first time he’s brought up what happened a couple of weeks ago, the first time he’s made even just a passing reference to it. He hasn’t been at his place since, hasn’t seen Imelda and, between the two of them… it just was not discussed. Until now.

“Nah, it’s not that. Permission granted,” Héctor mumbles. He’s not so naive he didn’t think of that scenario the moment he knew he and Ernesto would be on their own in a hotel room for a few days. He and Imelda talked about it, of course, they talk about everything, and she laughed.

“Well, if that’s the case, you better make him squeal,” she said, leaning in to kiss the bridge of his nose. “I want all the details when you come back.”

Héctor promised, and left two days later with Ernesto, a small bottle of lube in his luggage.

“She allows it?” Ernesto is saying, frowning in confusion as though he cannot begin to imagine Imelda allowing this without her in the picture… or Héctor saying no regardless. “Then why--”

“Because I’m drunk, pendejo. You’re drunk. We’re both drunk and this would be a mess,” Héctor points out with a roll of his eyes, and pushes him away. “You wouldn’t even get it up.”

That gains him a supremely offended look. “This accusation wounds me. I always get it up.”

“I heard otherwise.”

“I heard you should mind your own business,” Ernesto grumbles, but he does pull back to sit on the back and lets go and doesn’t protest when Héctor laughs. He blindly reaches into the open suitcase by his bed, and snickers at Ernesto’s surprised expression when he places the bottle of lube on the nightstand.

“Tomorrow,” Héctor says.

“It already is tomorrow. It’s--”

Héctor huffs, rolling his eyes and hitting him with a pillow. “Fine, then. Later, is that better? You know what I meant anyway,” he mutters, and grins. “I’ll make it worth the wait.”

Ernesto backs off, looking a little too stunned - or drunk, or both - to say anything more. He just shakes his head and taking a few step towards his side of the room before stripping for bed, discarding his clothes onto a chair. With his back turned to him, he doesn’t notice Héctor undressing just as quickly and pulling something out of the suitcase that Imelda slipped in among his clothes while they both giggled like idiots.

Holding back from giggling right now, Héctor puts on Imelda’s lacy, silken white nightgown. It only reaches his mid-thighs, due to Imelda being… well, she insists that he’s the ridiculously tall one and maybe she is right, but that doesn’t change the fact she is rather short.

“Are you going to turn off the--” Ernesto starts, and turns, only to trail off with a choking noise. Resting on the bed, hands folded behind his head and legs crossed, Héctor shrugs.
“Already settled, I’m afraid,” he says, and yawns, stretching. The hem of the nightgown climb further up his thighs. “Mind switching the lights off yourself?” he adds innocently.

Ernesto’s mouth opens, closes, opens again. No sound comes out, and Héctor loses his battle not to burst in giggles and snorts. He hears Ernesto’s groan over his own wheezing.

“Jesus Christ, Héctor…!”

“Hahahaha! To– heh. Tomorrow,” he finally repeats when he can trust his voice, still grinning, pretending not to have noticed the bulge in Ernesto’s underwear as his eyes keep roaming across his body. All right, so maybe he can get it up while drunk, but he’s still going to have to wait.

Grumbling something rather rude through clenched teeth and avoiding to look at him, Ernesto marches - well, it’s more of a waddle given his current predicament; Héctor bites the inside of his cheek not to laugh again - to the light switch, and smacks it more than he presses it. In the dark there is more grumbling, steps, the sound of something being bumped into, a muttered curse, and then a groan of springs when Ernesto lets himself fall on his bed.

“I hate you,” Héctor hears him groan, voice muffled by the pillow. Dramatic as always.

With a snorting laugh, he turns on his side. “That’s one odd way to show hatred.”
“Chingate.”

“You’ll get to do that later if you let me sleep now.”

“Cabrón.”

“Sleep.”

Of course, he doesn’t sleep right away: no matter how quietly he tries to take care of the problem Héctor left him with, the noises are unmistakable and so is his quickening breath, the tiny groans he’s trying to hold back.
“This is not what I had in mind.”

“Let me guess. You thought you’d top.”

“Honestly? Yes.”

“Can’t really hear you protesting, though.”

“... Hmph,” Ernesto grumbles. Héctor presses a kiss against his back - mostly so that he can feel him smiling - and makes a point to twist his fingers, getting a muffled curse out of him.

His friend is bent over on the bed, face pressed against the sheets, hands already clenching into fists while Héctor prepares him. Thoroughly. “Feeling all right? Do you need more lube?”

“No. Just-- nnnh…! Get it over with!”

“Por favor,” Héctor chides him, and presses a finger against his prostate. “Manners, Neto.”

There is a gasp, and Ernesto’s hips push back against his fingers before he seems to regain control over himself. He goes still, then, and grumbles. “... I usually top, you know that.”

“Hu-uh,” Héctor mutters, pulling out his fingers and reaching for the bottle of lube. He squeezes out a generous gollop, warms it up for a few moments in his hands, slathers it over his length. He’s achingly hard and, he’s sure, so is Ernesto. He’ll check in a minute.

“Just because I’m letting you--” Ernesto starts again, but Héctor isn’t up to listen to a tirade on what a sacrifice he’s making by letting his best friend fuck him. He reaches around him, and his fingers close on very clear evidence that he’s as eager for this as Héctor is. He gives a brief squeeze, and Ernesto trails off with a hiss. Héctor smirks, leaning over his back.

“You’ve got a bit of a problem here. Let me see if I can help you with that,” he says. He lets go of him, grasps his hips - Imelda left bruises there last time, he might see if he can do the same - and pushes in, just the head. It’s tight, warm and slick; Héctor bites his lower lip, stifling a grunt of pleasure, and stills. As much as he’d love to go all the way in, he won’t budge until Ernesto asks, or demands - and he doesn’t waste time in making his displeasure at the sudden pause known. He tries to buckle back, but Héctor’s grip on his hips doesn’t allow him. His groan of frustration - “Seriously?” - is both predictable and amusing.

“Only taking a minute,” Héctor grins, and runs one hand across Ernesto’s back. He’s already sweating, skin feverishly hot and breathing fast. When he rests his hand on his upper back, Héctor can feel the thumping of his heart. “Letting you get used to it, since you usually top.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t take--” Ernesto begins to protest, trailing off with a gasp when Héctor pushes, just a little more, just another inch before he stops. Ernesto presses his face on the sheets, letting out his frustration with a sound that reminds Héctor of an angry ox.

It makes him snicker, even if he’s ignoring his own need too. “Patience is a virtue, you know.”

“I don’t give a damn about virtue, pendejo,” Ernesto very nearly snarls. His hands are again clenched into fists. He’s so frustrated he doesn’t even seem to realize he’s admitting to wanting more. “I want Old Testament fire and brimstone and I want it no--” his voice turns into a startled moan he tries to
muffle on the sheets when Héctor snaps his hips forward, driving deep into him. He leans forward on Ernesto’s back, wrapping his arms around him.

“Well,” he pants against his ear, grinning. “Was it worth waiting a min--ah!”

He trails off with a startled moan when Ernesto suddenly clenches around him, sending a jolt of white-hot pleasure up his spine and straight to his brain. Beneath him, Ernesto is scoffing in clear satisfaction. Of course he’s not going to just hand over all control; Héctor never expected him to. And, truth be told, he would have been very disappointed otherwise.

“Big words,” Ernesto pants, “from a man who’s going to be done in the next two minutes.”

With a roll of his eyes, Héctor pulls out almost completely only to shove back in, tilting his hips as he remembers Ínelda doing the night he shared their bed. She had Ernesto going wild, and he can only hope to do the same. If the strangled noise that Ernesto muffles against the sheets is anything to go by, he’s not doing a bad job. Smirking, Héctor wraps one leg around Ernesto’s own to gain better leverage and starts picking up a pace, reaching to grab Ernesto’s cock again. It’s still hard, the tip already wet, and Ernesto whines in the back of his throat, clearly torn between buckling into his grip and pushing back onto his cock.

In a moment of generosity - but when is he ever not generous? - Héctor solves the problem for him by burrowing deep into him, tightening his grip at the same time and leaning across his back. “Let’s bet on that. First one to come pays all drinks,” Héctor gasps against his ear, and nibbles at it for good measure.
Ernesto will never admit it, but Héctor is fairly sure that the moans against his ear are at least part the reason why he is soon shuddering beneath him, clenching around him and spending into his hand, muffling his few cries - he’s so much quieter in bed than Héctor would had expected of him, even when his mouth isn’t full - against the pillow.

Somewhat dizzy with pleasure and more than slightly smug, Héctor nibbles at his ear again. “Drinks are on you,” he whispers, only getting a grunt as a reply. He chuckles and rolls his hips, and the grunt turns into a moan. Héctor smiles. “Don’t get too comfortable,” he murmurs against the back of his shoulder. He can feel him tremble beneath him, and he runs a hand through his hair. “I’m not done yet.”

In the end, he does not make him squeal; he will have to apologize to Imelda for that. And yet he feels that the whines that escape Ernesto’s throat, the gasps when he’s overly sensitive, overwhelmed - too much too much too much but oh, how does he keep pushing back against him, how does he protest when he feels empty - will do just as well.

“... All good?”

“Mmmh.”

“What, no words?”
“Words are your thing, pendejo.”

“You could sing about how great it’s been.”

“Or I could break a guitar over your head.”

“Pfft, you’re such a sore loser. Or are you just sore?”

“No. Get off my back.”

“All right, all right. I just wanted to help.”

“No, I mean-- get off my back, Héctor. You’re heavier than you look.”

“Oh. Right,” Héctor mutters, and rolls off Ernesto, almost falling into the gap between the two beds. Ernesto reaches to grab him on time, and pulls him closer.

“Don’t get a concussion, or your wife will blame it on me,” he mutters, and says nothing more for a few moments, shifting a bit. It is a tight fit, the two of them on his bed, but it isn’t half bad. With a yawn, Héctor drapes an arm around his friend’s waist. He’s pleasantly warm.

“No worries, my skull doesn’t crack so easily,” he points out. “Come for dinner tomorrow.”

Ernesto stiffens, clearly taken aback. “... At your place?”

“Where else?” Héctor replies lightly, his fingers tracing abstract patterns on Ernesto’s shoulder. There’s more on offer than just dinner, and of course Ernesto knows it, if the way he licks his lips is of any indication. He hesitates, but Héctor knows he will accept.

There is a challenge going on between him and Imelda, and Héctor knows very well neither is backing down. Not that he has any complaints.

He gets to reap all the benefits, after all.

“So, he said yes.”

“He said nothing, which means yes. Not that I can blame him. I’m irresistible.”

Héctor grins at her over a couple of boxes - he is hopeless at making shoes, but he can and does help her out with the postage - and bats his eyelashes, causing Imelda to snort out a laugh. "Not with a stamp on your forehead, you aren't."

"I've got a-- ah, how did it get there?"

Another laugh, and Imelda puts down the shoe she's been working on. The other half of the pair is already done, and she can finish this one tomorrow. She is ahead with this order, anyway.

"Dreading it so much you're trying to post yourself to Chile, mi amor?" she asks, putting the tools back in their place. Héctor has offered to tidy up her workbench so many times but, bless his soul, he seems to have a talent for mixing everything up and ensure nothing is in its proper place. Imelda finds it quicker to do it herself while he deals with the postage.

Héctor laughs. "Oh, no. I think it's going to be fun."

"Does he think he'll get to be in charge?"
"He didn't say, but... it is Ernesto. So, probably."

"He never learns, does he?"

"He's a slow learner. But he learns."

"I'm doubtful."

"You're a good teacher."

"But couldn't make a shoemaker out of you," Imelda remarks, and they both laugh. Héctor tried, he really did, but his hands are just not meant to work leather, apparently. They're perfect to coax melodies out of guitar strings… and out of her. Not that she’s saying as much now and, when Héctor speaks again, it’s with a sheepish grin.

"I'm sure I'm not a lost cause yet. I could give it another try, if you--"

Imelda shakes her head, lifting a hand. "I'll stop you there. First of all, singing on stage is not for me--"

"I think you'd be wonderful--"

"--And secondly," she cuts him off, "I can't quite imagine that diva wishing to share the spotlight with anyone else."

Héctor doesn't even try to protest that description of his best friend. "He shares it well enough with me."

"With you, yes. I'd be a different story, and you know it," Imelda remarks, standing, and wipes some leather polish off her hands. Across the workbench, Héctor looks thoughtful.

Ernesto de la Cruz is the single most self-centered individual she has ever met; even Héctor cannot deny that, however much he downplays his best friend’s worst flaws. Ernesto is angry enough that, in his view, she stole Héctor away; he would never let her take away even a fraction of the spotlight.

Not that she'd want to, but it is something Héctor talked about at least once... and, while he never told her as much, Imelda is certain Ernesto's reaction was not a pleasant one. He probably didn’t quite say it would be him or her, but that must have been the message.

It doesn’t matter; he can carry on being childish all he wants, keep every bit of the stage for himself if it’s so important for his oversized, fragile ego. She has Héctor - he’s hers and she’s his - and nothing he does or says, no cutting remark or temper tantrum can change that. He can have Héctor if he’s willing, and share their bed, only because she allows it.

And if he thinks he can beat her at this game he's so very, very wrong.

This is wrong. This isn't how it was supposed to go.

The way Ernesto had envisioned it when Héctor had told him he’d be the filling, as he put it, was Imelda on the mattress, Héctor on her and himself on top of them both, as he should be. He had plans to make Héctor come in record time, before Imelda could get any satisfaction, just to get to sneer at the look on her face.

A very pleasant mental image, really, but after the first predictable couple of hours - he’d come in, brought drinks, traded barbs with Imelda, talked about music and future projects over dinner, and
showed them both another video of their performance he’d found online - things had very quickly taken a turn.

Maybe it was the drinks. He was still in the mood to celebrate their triumph, and he’d brought in more than what he usually would have… and then drank most of it. Not enough to be drunk, never that, he’s still lucid, but enough to make him malleable, for the lack of a better word.

Yes, that has to be it. It is the only explanation for where he is now, once again face down on that mattress. This is not what he wanted. He’s not enjoying this. He’s not--

“Aaaah...!”

A long, drawn-out moan against his ear, along with a sudden tilt of Héctor’s hips, causes Ernesto’s eyes to snap open. He bites on his lower lip to hold back a groan, tries not to focus too much on what’s happening - on Héctor’s weight on him, his skin against his back, his breath against his neck, his cock in him and oh God he’s so full, so warm, so hard against the mattress - and turns to his left, where the full-length mirror is.

On top of him, buried to the hilt in him, Héctor is flushed and shaking, gasping against his ear and hips shuddering. And Imelda is there, of course, naked except for that damned strap-on, infuriatingly beautiful, one hand on Héctor’s back working her fingers in him with the other. She’s smirks and suddenly she’s looking at him through the mirror, staring at him in the eye, and twists her fingers in her husband.

She can play him better than either of them can play a guitar and the reaction is immediate: Héctor moans and buckles back and then forward, a movement so sudden and pleasurable that Ernesto can’t hold back a groan, clenching his hands on the sheets beneath him. There is a laugh - oh, this damn puta, she has no right to be so smug - and Imelda pulls her fingers out of Héctor to climb on the bed as well.

Look away, a voice whispers in the back of Ernesto’s mind, and he knows that he should do just that now that Imelda is not looking, but he finds he can’t do that. He stares, breathing in gasps and transfixed, as Imelda bears down on Héctor, pushing the dildo - the same one she used on him, oh God, there were nights when he could almost feel it in him again and hated himself as he reached into his underwear - inside him, and leaning down on him.

“Ay, I-- Imelda, por favor…!” Héctor’s moan turns into a cry as the weight shifts, pressing Ernesto further down into the sheets before he can think that Héctor never calls out his name quite like that. He’s trapped between the mattress and their combined weight, Héctor’s cock deep in him, long and hot and throbbing - and he’s not enjoying this, he thinks almost desperately, staring at his own flushed reflection, mouth open like a fish out of water.

And yet he can’t think of anywhere else he’d rather be.
Before he can try to collect his thoughts Imelda moves, tilting her hips, the muscles in her smooth thighs working, her breasts pressing against Héctor’s back as she places an open-mouthed kiss against his shoulder. He gives a shuddering moan, hands clenching on Ernesto’s arms, and Ernesto finally tears his gaze away from their reflection, staring at the wall with wide eyes.

When he comes, minutes later, his own rushing blood and Imelda’s laugh are all he can hear.

Very much unlike the idiot currently struggling to catch his breath on the other side of her bed, Imelda has a good grasp on priorities.

Putting Ernesto in his place is both fun and pleasurable, of course, and more rewarding than she’d expected, but the most important thing is Héctor’s pleasure... closely followed by her own. Now that Héctor is spent - Ernesto gave the most pitiful whining sound when he finally finished and pulled out of him; no one had said anything, but it was clear that he’d come well before then - it’s time for her to finish, too.

She’ll get to gloat later, if she feels like it. Maybe she won’t, after all. Héctor’s tongue in her is very, very distracting - as are his lips closing down on her clit, the gentle suckle, the hands holding onto her thighs as she gasps and trembles and buckles against his mouth, heat pooling in her lower belly and the pressure of it all unbearable, every muscle in her body coiling up like a spring, almost there, almost there--

“Oh, ah, Héctor--!”

Orgasm hits her like a warm, tingling wave that causes her back to arch and her body to twitch and
shudder for only a few moments before all strength leaves her. Imelda falls back on the mattress and tosses her head back, breathing heavily, feeling as though her very bones have turned to mush. She feels hot and cold at the same time, but then Héctor is pulling her in his arms, smiling widely and lips still glistening with her juices, and there is only warmth.

“Amazing, you are amazing,” Héctor is murmuring, nuzzling her neck, and Imelda sighs before settling against him, at peace with the world.

Well. Most of it, anyway. When she opens her eyes, gazing past Héctor’s shoulder, she is reminded that they are not alone on the bed… and this time, Ernesto is not asleep; his head is turned towards them, hair dishevelled, and his eyes are open. A small knowing smirk almost curls her lips, but she stops herself when she notices something in his gaze, a sort of longing that he never allowed himself to show before.

And then it’s gone; he notices her looking and, after a moment’s hesitation - as though he’s surprised she’s spotted him, like his bothersome presence could ever be easy to miss - he scowls. That’s better, Imelda thinks, that’s something familiar she can scowl back at.

“Next time--” Ernesto starts, his voice not yet very firm, but Imelda cuts him off with a scoff.

“Assuming there will be one,” she retorts, and his deepening scowl gives her no small measure of satisfaction. She wraps an arm around Héctor’s side, feels his barely restrained chuckle against her. “Do you want more of this?” she adds, and faintly wishing she could take a picture of Ernesto’s expression. He looks taken aback at outraged at the same time.

“I only-- this-- isn’t about y--” he sputters, rising on his elbows, but trails off when Héctor laughs. He turns to glance at Ernesto over his shoulder, hand tangling in Imelda’s hair.

“Of course you do. I’m that irresistible,” he says, and both Imelda and Ernesto roll their eyes at the same time, but not at each other. “Let’s just sleep and there will be a next time. You said you usually top. I’d like to see that,” he adds, and that shuts Ernesto up real quickly, the annoyance turning into surprise. He scoffs, and turns away.

“Depends if I’ll be in the mood,” he grumbles, and leans back down, hogging most of the sheets for himself in the process as though he’s been invited to stay for the night - which he was not. It doesn’t matter: Héctor and Imelda can keep each other warm enough. Soon they’re asleep, resting close, smiling faintly; when Héctor starts snoring, Imelda doesn’t stir.

Neither of them notices, the next morning, how Ernesto inched closer through the night, beginning to slowly close up the gap in the middle of their bed.
“Oh, there you are. Did you absolutely have to sing in the shower?”

“I did not--”

“I could swear I heard a grito. Or were you just shrieking?”

“Well, if a certain someone hadn’t finished all the hot water…” Ernesto grumbles, causing Imelda - who personally turned off hot water the moment she and Héctor were out of the shower - to smirk.

“Serves you right for getting up last. And to think Héctor and I shower together to save water,” she says, causing Héctor to snicker over his breakfast.

“We’re very environmentally conscious,” he mutters through a mouthful, causing Ernesto to roll his eyes. “But the shower is pretty big. Maybe next time we can all save water and--”

“Absolutely not,” Imelda and Ernesto snap exactly at the same time, causing Héctor to recoil and lift his hands in surrender. Not that it stops either of them from speaking again.

“As much as I’d love to see her melt when water touches her--”

“It’s a miracle he even fits in it on his own, with that ego in the way,” Imelda cuts him off, and he glares at her. She supposes he means to be intimidating; he only comes across as the overgrown pouting child he is. She smirks, and pushes a plate towards him, a couple of tacos mañaneros in it. “Eat. You look like you need the energy to keep up.”

Several things happen in quick succession: Ernesto opens his mouth to retort only for his stomach to grumble loudly before he can utter a single word, Imelda’s smirk widens, and Héctor tries to disguise his laugh with a very unconvincing coughing fit. Ernesto scowls at both of them, but eventually he sits down and starts eating. Within minutes he’s talking about music through mouthfuls, about a producer they absolutely need to meet - he knows people who know him, he can get them in touch - and entirely ignoring Imelda… who, on the other hand, is ignoring him as well and checking her emails for new orders on her phone.

Héctor dutifully nods along with what Ernesto says, and promises he’ll be available whenever this Armando Abascal can meet them, but truth be told he’s only half-listening. What he’s really wondering, as his gaze moves back and forth between his wife and his best friend, is how much time should he let pass before he suggests another night together.

He’s not an idiot; he can tell that as much as they butt heads over everything, the central focus of it all - the thing that keeps Ernesto coming and Imelda letting it happen, the rope they’re both clutching while trying to win an unspoken tug war, the one person who binds them - is him.

They keep trying to outdo each other and, really, that works to Héctor’s advantage given everything that he gets out of it… but now he’s starting to wonder if that is actually the entire story. Maybe it is
most of it, yes, but Héctor’s mind keeps going back to how relatively easy Imelda was to convince to invite Ernesto over again, and how quickly Ernesto had been to bend down on their bed again despite all his complaints.

As much as she rolls her eyes and as much as he protests, Héctor can tell they are enjoying the fuck out of this, pun intended. Or at least, they’re enjoying it far more than either is willing to admit. Héctor wonders, for the first time, what it may take to get them to say as much.

A lot, very likely: they are both stubborn and prideful, as much as they like to deny having anything in common. Making them admit something as simple as the fact they’re enjoying the challenge, or at the very least the sex, isn’t gonna be easy. But then again, if you want your life to be easy, you do not pick Ernesto as your best friend, and you do not marry Imelda. Héctor has done both, and regrets neither.

It’s time to up the game.

I bought a pair of boots last month, and it was my best purchase in years! They were custom-made to my measurements, fit perfectly from the first day and didn’t give me a single blister as I trekked up a mountain. I cannot recommend these enough!

The review is followed by a smiley as well as a full five-star rating, and Imelda finds herself smiling back at it. Almost all the reviews are like that - the only exception are a few whining about late delivery caused by postage issues she had no control over, as she always mentions in the reply - but she’s always happy to see a new one, giving her credit for a job well done.

When the first glowing reviews began coming in, as well as the beginning of a steady flow of income, it took all of her willpower not to take screenshots and send everything to her parents, writing nothing but I told you so. She held back because she’s not that childish but oh, was she tempted. Told you so has always been one of her parents’ favorite sentences to utter.

Don’t take chances. Don’t attempt anything new. Follow our advice. Stay in your lane. Oh, you tried and failed? Well, we told you so.

Sometimes it was warranted - Óscar and Felipe’s attempt to build a homemade pressure cooker when they were eight was one such occasion - but a lot of the time it was unnecessarily smug and grated her nerves like nothing else. Getting to make things work despite their misgiving was always very, very satisfying.

Moving to Mexico City for a course in business management? They had supported her in the end, but not without a lot of stubborn silences, thinly veiled jabs and grumbling. But she stood her ground, and excelled; Imelda knows they’re proud… but she also knows that they are somehow disappointed for having been proven wrong, for never getting to tell her that they told her it was a bad idea.

Starting her own business, and online? It would never work, they told her, too many people already did the same. And making shoes the old way, to order? Who even does that anymore? Who would pay money for that when you can buy much cheaper shoes elsewhere?

But it did work; she's found herself a niche in the market and her business has grown to the point she now estimates that, in about a year’s time, she might very well think of looking into renting proper premises and employing a few people. Again, the told you so mantra failed to leave their lips, and they were proud of her. They usually are, despite everything.
And then she decided to marry Héctor which, of course caused friction. That too, according to them, was a bad idea. They didn’t dislike Héctor, whom they had seen from time to time when they played together as children; they knew that, while a troublemaker - that was usually Ernesto’s fault, but he had a way to evade all the blame somehow - he was a good kid who had grown into a good man.

When Héctor’s parents had died when he wasn’t yet seventeen - a gas leak, a spark, and they were both gone while their son was a couple of towns over for a gig - hers went to the funeral with her, after donating some money to help pay for it. Imelda has hazy memories of that bleak day, of Héctor standing alone before the coffins until Ernesto reached him and passed an arm around his shoulders. She remembers walking up to them, and squeezing Héctor’s hand, but she cannot recall what she told him.

The following year, both Ernesto and Héctor packed up quite suddenly and left for Mexico city to turn their passion for music into a proper career. Her parents had talked about it over the dinner table, expressed their sympathy for Héctor and wished him luck, and that was the last they'd said of him. Until their daughter moved to Mexico City, met him again, and began dating him. Until she had announced they were going to marry.

A musician, and with no steady job and no family behind him? They hadn’t liked that at all, questioning how he’d even be able to provide for her and pretending to have forgotten how her business was beginning to take off well enough to support them both in bad times if need be.

Óscar and Felipe supported her quite vocally - they always liked Héctor, who was a very willing guinea pig for some of their experimenting back when they were just children - and in the end, while grudgingly, her parents stopped arguing. They came to the wedding, were perfectly polite, but Imelda knew that they were waiting for the day that told you so would be warranted.

So far, it never was: Héctor always finds work. As much as Imelda doesn’t like to admit it, she knows that Ernesto - his used-car-salesman charm, his shameless self-advertising and the fooling around he calls networking - is the main reason why. Héctor has so much talent and plenty of charm of his own, but lacks the ambition and drive Ernesto has; that pendejo is the one who gets them most of the paid work and, for that, Imelda can tolerate him. Grudgingly.

Oh yes, Third Wheel Ernesto. What would your parents think of that development?

The thought makes her laugh aloud - oh God, they would flip if they knew - and she doesn’t realize how loud she was until Héctor’s head peeks into the workshop. “Found another singing cat video, mi amor?”

Imelda rolls her eyes - it was one time she laughed to tears, just one time, can he stop bringing it up? - and turns from her laptop to glance at him. “I was thinking about Ernesto.”

Héctor raises his eyebrows. “What a coincidence. So was I.”

“Not that way.”

“I was thinking we could have him over next Friday.”

“No. I need at least another two weeks without seeing or hearing of that--”

“I have an idea,” Héctor cuts her off, and he’s grinning so widely she can’t help but be intrigued. When that expression appears on his face, she knows he’s thinking something really interesting. She leans back, folds her hands, and crosses one leg over the other.

“... You have two minutes to convince me.”
One minute later, Héctor is already sending out a text message.

“Do you really have to go already?”

Sitting on the bed with only the sheets around her, Luciana - or Lucia? He doesn’t remember and just refers to her with pet names to avoid trouble - is pouting. Ernesto kisses that pout.

“I have a meeting. I’d love to stay,” he lies, and follows it up with another lie. “I’ll call you.”

Another number to block, of course. She’s getting attached, he suspects, and Ernesto doesn’t like that, no señor. Best for both of them if he ends this here. Most of all, best for him. He’s a free man, no strings but those of his guitar, and he’d rather keep it that way.

Plus, last night wasn’t even fun. It usually is, with Lucia - or Luciana? - but this time it was… underwhelming. Not that he can pinpoint the reason; she did or said nothing out of the ordinary, and there was nothing wrong with the sex itself. It hasn’t exactly left him unsatisfied, but something was lacking and that gnaws at him in a way he cannot explain.

A few more reassurances, just enough time to throw his clothes back on, and Ernesto leaves the apartment, heaving out a long sigh of relief. He glances at a cab passing by, and digs into his pockets to pull out some change. Not nearly enough for a fare. He shrugs and gets walking towards the bus stop, putting the change back in his pocket - and feels his phone vibrating against his hand. A text from Héctor.

*Come Friday at nine. You don’t want to miss this one.*

"Red or white?"

"Black. You look good in black."

"All right, let me see..." Héctor lets out a hum and rummages in the closet, finally pulling back with some black lingerie in his hands. He unfolds it, glancing at the transparent skirt, and holds it up. "Is this mine or yours?"

"Yours. I'd need to walk in stilts to wear that one without tripping over the skirt."

"Or very high heels," Héctor mutters, glancing at Imelda. She's standing in front of her section of the closet, tapping her chin with a finger. She tilts her head towards him, and the braid falls from her shoulder down her back; Héctor has to ignore a sudden urge to undo it, and run his fingers through her hair.

"Is that a suggestion?" she asks, and Héctor grins.

"You look wonderful in heels."

"Aw, what a charmer."

"Plus, it's nice not having to bend over too much to kiss you."

"Aaaand you ruined it."

Héctor gives her his tried and tested Can't Be Mad At Me smile. It always works. "I'll make sure to kiss you plenty to make up for it. You still love me, right?"
Imelda laughs. "Against my better judgment," she says, and reaches in the closet to pull out some lingerie of her own - the red lacy one that never fails to drive Héctor loco. "This, with the red boots?"

"Sounds perfect."

"I get the feeling you'd say that no matter what I put on."

"You could just stay naked. You're perfect when you're naked."

Imelda's smile turns into a smirk. "Ah, but isn't it better when you get to unwrap me?"

That, of course, is a logic Héctor cannot possibly argue against. Trying to think of something else - anything that will keep him from thinking of the moment he'll get to unwrap her, because this isn't the right moment to get hard - Héctor turns away from her and begins putting on the lacy black lingerie... which, truth be told, was a nightmare to find his size. Maybe he is ridiculously tall, which is why he has so little lingerie of his own and mostly borrows from Imelda, when they feel like it.

Sometimes Héctor still has trouble believing what an amazing woman he had somehow managed to marry. Back when they had been dating just for a few weeks and were learning to know each other in ways they definitely hadn’t as kids, there were very few things about himself Héctor was afraid to talk about... his taste for crossdressing being one of them.

He knew plenty of people would find it ridiculous at best, and break up with him as soon as the confession was past his lips; the thought Imelda could do that - ridicule him and turn away - scared him more than words could say... but when he finally brought it up, his face hot as fire, there was no rejection nor mockery. Imelda had seemed intrigued, and - for the first time - she had told him about her taste for strap-ons, adding that she’d wondered if the mention of it would send him running for the hills. It had been his turn to be intrigued and soon enough they both ended up laughing, their faces bright red but relieved beyond belief, clasping each other’s hand.
When they had met at her place the following week, Imelda surprised him with lingerie for them both. It was one very, very interesting evening; Héctor was delighted to find out that Imelda was as aroused as him. Crossdressing soon became normal - not something that happened every time, but often enough. It was exciting, and fun, and if made for some really nice pictures that they took great care to keep in a very, very safe place.

Not long afterwards, they’d tried the strap on together for the first time and it had been more enjoyable than Héctor had dreamed it could be - so much so that he’d lasted… forty seconds, maybe. Likely something closer to thirty.
But practice makes perfect, and they had a lot of practice since.

“When is he going to show up?” Imelda speaks interrupting the reminiscence. She sounds suddenly annoyed, and Ernesto isn’t even there yet. It’s kind of a new record, but Héctor hopes they might begin to get along better, in time. It’s a project he’s actively working on.

Héctor glances at the clock on the wall, slipping on the lingerie and lacing it up. “I told him to come in about half a-” he starts, only to trail off when the doorbell rings. “... Well, there he is.”

“And there he stays.”

“Imelda.”

“He’s got to learn to take you seriously when you give him a set time,” she points out, frowning. Héctor wonders if she even realizes how beautiful she is like this, scantily dressed in red silk and laces as she puts on her boots, the braid falling over her shoulder. “He can’t come and go as he plea-”

Clack.

Imelda freezes. So does Héctor. She turns. He smiles innocently. “I, uh--”

“You gave him the spare key?”
“I figured it would be a good idea, in case one of us got locked out. I mean, he lives downstairs, and we have his spare key.”

Imelda scoffs, lacing up her boots. “We’ll talk about this later,” he says, but Héctor knows she’s conceding the point. “And you go make it clear to him that he’s not supposed to use that key when he damn well pleases.”

“All right.”

“Use those exact words, or I will. Loudly.”

“Fine, fine,” he promises. Of course he doesn’t use those exact words, even even if he did, they would be wasted. The moment Héctor shows up in the living room, Ernesto’s jaw very nearly drops - and so does the bottle of wine in his hands, really, but he manages to catch himself just on time before it slips from his fingers and crashes on the floor.

That would definitely put Imelda in a bad mood.

“You’re early, amigo. How much cologne did you put on?” Héctor asks, tilting his head on one side in the most nonchalant way possible - like he’s fully clothed and they’re having a chat over a drink.

“I… a dash,” Ernesto mutters, gaze running across him, and he swallows.

Héctor raises an eyebrow in doubt.

“All right, maybe two. I… I brought… I… are those earrings?”

“Clip-on ones, no worries. No one had to be subjected to the sight of yours truly crying before a needle. Unlike that poor tattoo artist in Oaxaca who saw you jumping five feet in the air the second the needle touched your skin,” he adds. That is a little story that never fails to make Ernesto defensive, and it doesn’t fail now either.

“I just… I changed my mind, all right? I realized that defacing my skin was a stupid idea.”

“Of course. Was that why you were also holding my hand?”

“I was not--” Ernesto starts, but suddenly there is the clicking of high heels on hardwood floor, and his gaze goes past Héctor, to the door. He doesn’t turn to look, but he can tell the ex act moment Imelda stands in the doorway from the way Ernesto’s eyes go wide, and his jaw slack. His brain seems to have crashed and, really, Héctor cannot blame him.

“Oh, there you are,” Imelda says, and walks up to Héctor. She leans on him, and taps her lower lip with a finger as she glances at Ernesto. “You’re awfully overdressed.”

That causes him to recoil, as though snapped out of a trance. The look on his face goes from the personification of a blue screen of death to sudden, clear awkwardness.

“I, er…” he starts, and swallows, his gaze moving back and forth between them. His skin is flushed, and he tugs at the collar of his white shirt. “I thought we. Dinner. First,” he manages.

Ernesto.exe is not working. Please restart.

The thought almost makes Héctor laugh, but he manages to hold back, allowing himself just the smallest quirk of his lips as Imelda shrugs and walks up to Ernesto - who almost, almost steps back… but does not. He just stays still, transfixed, as Imelda reaches to toy with the upper button of
his shirt.

“Later. First, let’s get this off you,” she says, her voice soft, and tilts up his head to look at him in the eye, a hand reaching to cup his cheek. Normally, Héctor would expect his best friend to smell the trap from a mile away. Now, however, he's not at all surprised when stares at her and, slowly, he smirks. Look at him, Héctor muses, thinking he knows what’s ahead.

_Ay, mi amigo, you won’t see this coming._

He somehow manages to stay serious as Imelda pulls her hand away from Ernesto’s face. Ernesto lifts his own free hand as though to catch it, but he stops himself just on time; Imelda doesn’t seem to notice, and takes the bottle of wine from Ernesto’s limp fingers.

“A good choice,” she practically purrs. “I’ll get the glasses. Héctor, would you be so kind to get him ready?”

Héctor smiles and holds out his hand, gesturing for Ernesto to follow, and he does.

Oh, he's _definitely_ getting the wrong idea of where this is going.

Ernesto is very much enjoying the way things are going.

It’s not something he’s ever going to admit aloud, of course, but the fact stays that this is finally taking the direction he wanted - with Héctor and Imelda entirely focused on what mattered. Namely, on him. Oh yes, Ernesto can get used to this.

He was slightly disappointed when Héctor slapped his hands away on the way to the bedroom, but very much willing to let himself be undressed down to his underwear. He was already getting hard and he expected Héctor to get rid of his boxers, too, but he had not. Instead he'd pushed him on the bed, straddled him, and kissed him deeply.

On the mouth.

That caused his mind to go blank for a moment, because despite everything that has happened - the kisses Héctor had dropped on his shoulder and neck and face, the fact Ernesto gave him, all humbleness aside, the best blowjob a man could ask for - a kiss on the mouth was something that had just never happened before between them.
Taken aback, he found himself letting Héctor lead; it was slow and thorough, and entirely too brief. All too soon, Héctor pulled back and grinned down at him. Ernesto opened his mouth to protest, or demand more, but he placed two fingers on his lips and gave him a look that made words die in his throat. His eyes roamed across on his body, on the silk and laces on him and, in that moment, he could have let him do anything.
Which includes, apparently, tying his arms to the bedpost with silk scarves.

“Try to break free,” Héctor tells him. He does, and he can’t. To be fair, it’s not like he tried with all his might; he’s a pretty strong guy, so of course he could break free if he really wanted to... but for now, he’ll play along.

"Good knots," he says, and tries to catch Héctor’s mouth again, only to miss when he pulls back to turn to the door.

Ernesto follows his gaze and there’s Imelda, carrying two long-stemmed glasses of red wine in one hand and a third in the other. She looks down at him, tilting her head on one side, and Ernesto has to make a conscious effort not to squirm when her gaze pauses on his groin.

He’s painfully hard and, he knows, his boxer shorts are doing absolutely nothing to hide it. Suddenly very much aware of how helpless he is, he braces himself for the calm expression to turn into a mocking smirk… but it doesn’t. She just hands two of the glasses to Héctor, and smiles.

“He might need help to drink,” she says, and looks back down at him, calmly sipping her wine.

What game is she playing?

The thought makes it briefly to Ernesto’s mind, but he chases it away before it can fully form - because thinking that would mean that deep down he knew something was up, and that would open up the very annoying possibility that he’d willed himself to ignore it to go along with... whatever Imelda is planning.

If she’s planning something, of course. Which she isn’t, or else like hell he’d have handed over control like that. Ernesto wills himself to believe as much, and turns his attention on Héctor - who has put down one glass and is holding the other in one hand, the other on the back of his head to support it.

“Salud,” Héctor says with a grin, and brings the glass to Ernesto’s mouth. Impatient as he is to get things going, he drinks in slow gulps. It’s good wine, if he says so himself - and he does say so; he picked it, after all - so there is no reason to make it go to waste. Once the glass is empty, Héctor pulls it away. A few drops fall on Ernesto’s collarbone, and before he can even protest Héctor lowers is head and suckles at his skin where the drops fell, causing Ernesto - who now he feels pleasantly warm as well as desperately aroused - to shiver.

He tosses back his head, and his gaze finds Imelda, who’s almost finished his own wine and is staring at him, her expression unreadable.

“Good choice,” Héctor chuckles, and takes the glass he left by the table - guzzling it down way too fast, but Ernesto really doesn’t give a damn whether he properly tastes it; there is one thing he wants Héctor to taste now, and it’s not the damn wine.

The empty glass is placed back, and Héctor is grinning more widely. The next moment he’s back on the bed, crawling towards him, and then he’s reaching to brush back Ernesto’s hair, humming.

“Looking good,” he mumbles, and something seems to leap in Ernesto’s chest. Héctor is smiling, Imelda is towering over him, and he has a few moments to savor, once again, their full attention… until they turn to glance at each other, smirk, and are suddenly a few steps away from the bed, in each other’s arms. What the…?
“Hey!” Ernesto calls out in protest, or at least he tries to; all that leaves his mouth is a choked-out noise. He tugs at his bonds, but the knots don’t give in at all - Imelda’s fault, surely, who else may have taught him to tie knots? With a snarl, Ernesto glares furiously at them as they lock lips, hands all over each other. “Seriously? Untie me!”
“Oh, we could do that,” Imelda says, turning to glance at him. She’s leaning her head against Héctor’s chest, and traces abstract patterns over it as she speaks again. Her voice is silk-covered steel. “We could untie you, and you can go home. Or you can stay put, and if you behave you get a reward later. Your choice.”

Ernesto opens his mouth to snap at her to go ahead and untie him, but then Héctor moves to kiss her neck, and words die in his throat. For several moments he can only watch them with wide eyes because oh, they are a sight to behold, heat is pooling in his groin and his cock is so hard it hurts.

“I…” is all he manages in the end, and nothing more. Imelda smirks.

“A rare good choice from you,” she says, and Ernesto wants to hit her, wants to scream, wants to fuck her, and he can do none of those things. He scoffs, and turns away. Fine, so they can tie him up, but they can’t make him watch, and so he won’t. He won’t play along, won’t even steal a glance. He shuts his eyes, and keeps them shut.

For two whole minutes.

By the time the last bit fabric hits the ground - once they’ve done unwrapping each other like you do with a gift, as Imelda would put it - Héctor is desperately hard, Imelda is soaking wet… and, unsurprisingly, Ernesto is beyond frustrated.

“Are you always this slow? I think I’m about to fall asleep.”

The moan leaving Imelda as Héctor nips at her breasts turns into a scoff halfway through. She turns to glance at Ernesto, an eyebrow raised. “Are you? There seems to be a small part of you that is still very much awake.”

Ernesto glares at her, and bends his knees to try hiding the very obvious bulge in his underwear. Not that he can hide his flushed skin, or the marks on his wrists from pulling so hard at his restraints. He shifts his gaze on Héctor and his expression turns mocking. “You know, if it were me in your place, your wife would already have forgotten how to talk at this point.”

That annoys Imelda enough to pull away from Héctor. “Another sound from you, and I’ll stick a gag in that stupid mouth,” she warns, crossing her arms over her heaving chest.

Ernesto sputters. “You wouldn’t!”

“One more word, and I will,” she hisses. She is beautiful like this, hair undone and eyes burning, and her tone makes it clear that she means every word. Ernesto can see that, too, and he goes quiet for a moment… then there is a flash of something in his eyes that Héctor cannot quite pinpoint, there one moment and gone the next, a bolt of lighting against Imelda’s steady fire.

Then, Ernesto sneers. “You wouldn’t,” he repeats, and that’s it. Next thing Héctor knows, Imelda is at the dresser and the ball gag is in her hand. Ernesto has just enough time to sputter again before said ball gag is shoved in his mouth, the strap fastened behind his head. That causes him to give a noise like that of an angry ox, and to shake his head furiously, but of course it isn’t enough to dislodge it.

Imelda grasps his hair, and forces his head back so that he’ll look at her face; he stares at her with wide eyes before he catches himself and glares. She responds with a smile. “I like you best with your mouth busy,” she says, and her free hand reaches down to palm him through the boxer shorts. The glare immediately fades, and buckles into her touch one moment before she pulls her hand away, causing him to whine in the back of his throat. The grip on his hair slackens, and she ruffles it.
“Behave, and Héctor will take care of that,” she says, giving his erection one last pat before she stands and, without another word, she’s in Héctor’s arms again.
They fuck against the wall, with Imelda clinging to him, scratching his back and biting bruises on his neck and shoulder. Even in the midst of it all - skin on skin, his wife’s body so welcoming and warm, the scent of her hair in his nostrils and oh God he’s not going to last much longer - Héctor knows, with utmost certainty, that Imelda is looking straight at Ernesto over his shoulder... and that he’s glaring back.

He loves them both but ay, sometimes they can be so predictable.
"Another chorizo?"

"No."

"Oh, I insist. You clearly wanted it pretty badly only a short while ago."

The remark, uttered with a smile fake as a three pesos coin, gains Imelda a sullen look from Ernesto that fails to impress her in the slightest. Héctor tries to disguise his chortle as a coughing fit, but if Ernesto's reaction - stabbing the chorizo with his fork while staring at him dead in the eye - is anything to go by, he wasn't very convincing. He gives Ernesto a sheepish grin, crossing his legs in mild discomfort when his friend chomps down on the sausage without breaking eye contact, and chews viciously.

All right, so precisely none of them is being very subtle tonight, but Héctor supposes they're way past that.

“Oh, come on. It’s not like we left you hanging,” Héctor says. All right, so they made him wait a fair bit, but considering that the original plan was to make him plead Hector thinks they went pretty easy on him. Once he and Imelda were done Héctor turned his attention on his friend almost right away, taking the gag out of his mouth under his wife’s watchful eye.

“You all right there, amigo?”

“Untie me,” Ernesto demanded, and even light-headed as he was Héctor found it quite telling that he didn’t have it in him to add an insult, and that his voice had cracked towards the end. He was hard and covered in sweat, both from the arousal and the efforts to free his hands and dislodge the gag. His eyes shifted from him to Imelda and then back to him, pupils blown wide even as he tried to put on a believable scowl and pulled at his bounds.

Héctor smiled. “Don’t you want to come?”

“I’ll take care of it once you untie me!”

“Or I could take care of it myself,” Héctor said, running a finger down his stomach and to the waistband of his boxer shorts. Ernesto shivered under his touch and, really, it was the only answer Héctor needed. The next minute his hand was coated in lubricant and beneath the fabric, gripping Ernesto’s cock, tight but not too tight, and Imelda was grasping Ernesto’s hair. She forced his head back, exposing his throat and getting a hiss out of him. Héctor saw Ernesto swallowing, say his Adam’s apple bobbing for a moment before Imelda lowered her head to murmur in his ear.

“Got to work for it.”

And he did right away, with no other protest but a broken-up groan as he buckled into Héctor’s fist again and again and again. It was quick and desperate, his breathing fast and thrusts erratic, and soon
enough he was done, spilling into Héctor’s hand with a shuddering moan before going limp again. He didn’t even react when he and Imelda untied his arms, nor when each of them took a hand in theirs to massage the angry red marks on his wrists.

“You look good like this, amigo. Should show up at the next concert just as you are now.”

Ernesto mumbled something that sounded much like he wanted him to do something very unpleasant with a dead fish, causing Héctor to laugh, but he didn’t say much of anything afterwards… or now, over dinner.

He just chews, and glares. Héctor smiles.

“Come on, you know it was funny. But I’ll make it up to you,” he adds, picking up his glass. Out of the corner of the eye, he can see Imelda’s lips quirking upwards. He waits for Ernesto to start swallowing before he speaks. “You can fuck me next.”

The sudden coughing fit is loud as it’s predictable, and this time Imelda laughs first while Ernesto hunches over the table, hacking and wheezing.

_That’s for telling everyone of that time I choked on a chorizo_, Héctor thinks, but he knows better than saying as much with multiple pieces of cutlery within Ernesto’s reach.

“Sorry, was it the wrong moment?” he asks instead, snickering. That’s when Ernesto looks up at him, face all red and eyes teary, and coughs out something that is most likely an insult to all the men in his family seven generations back, which somehow involves goats.

He doesn’t notice - and Héctor doesn’t mention - how Imelda casually puts down the arm she had raised to pat him in the back in case he _really_ began choking.

Stay for the night, Héctor said.

Like hell, Ernesto wanted to reply, only that of course that would mean giving ground to Imelda, which was most definitely Not Happening. Plus, well… he did want that chance to fuck Héctor in the morning. He’d _earned_ it, after all. So he shot a challenging glance at Imelda - he was _mildly_ disappointed when she seemed uninterested in returning it at all - and muttered that sure, if he _really_ insisted, he’d stay.

Except that he’s beginning to regret it, and he’s not entirely sure why.

He’s got one side of the bed all for himself, since those idiotas keep insisting on sleeping draped all over each other. He’s stolen most of the blankets. He’s warm and has plenty of space; he’d slept in worse conditions while touring, or on Héctor’s old couch after he _hurriedly_ left his own home. Héctor isn’t even snoring; he should fall asleep quickly.

But hours tick by, and he just _can’t sleep_. Something feels amiss and he can’t figure it out, like an itch he cannot scratch, a sort of hunger he cannot sate. He lies in the dark, staring at the ceiling, listening to the quiet breathing on his left - the breathing of two people, skin on skin, keeping each other warm.

It makes him scowl in the dark, something sitting heavy in his chest which he’s quick to dismiss as annoyance. Because it is annoying, how all over each other they are all the time. God, do they ever take a break? Do they really need to be so clingy, resting so close there seems not to be a single inch of space between them, like he’s not even there? It’s… _rude._
As though to rub salt into the wound - *wait, what wound?* - Héctor chooses that moment to shift and let out a content sigh, no doubt while snuggling up against the bruja he decided to marry after a moment… well, more like about a couple of years of mental blackout. It makes him scowl, but that is not unexpected.

What *does* catch him by surprise is the unexpected pang of something when he hears Imelda yawning and shifting as well, when he imagines the smile on her face while she sleeps in Héctor’s arms. She smiles a lot at her husband, Ernesto thinks, until her gaze turns to him. Then, she sneers. It used to annoy him, it really did.

But now that he thinks about it, the weight on his chest heavier and heavier, Ernesto de la Cruz is not annoyed: he’s *livid*. He turns on his side without thinking, a hand reaching out for what should be Héctor’s shoulder. And his hand does touch skin - but too soft to be his.

*Imelda.*

There is an unintelligible mumble, the hand beneath his own shifts, and Ernesto pulls back as though the touch alone has burned him. He waits, heart hammering in his throat, for her to awaken, to utter something scathing - but she does not. There is only another yawn, the creaking sound of springs and she and Héctor shift and then, again, silence.

Except for their breathing, of course. That keeps going, slow and regular, while Ernesto holds his own for what feels like a very, very long time.

Tomorrow’s fuck had better be worth this nonsense.

Ernesto does not, in fact, get to fuck Héctor the next morning.

He doesn’t even try to, which strikes Imelda as more than slightly odd, given how keen he was on the idea. There is no attempt to touch him, nor the suggestion is even uttered, after they wake up. Or as they shower - again, she and Héctor shower together and Ernesto goes in later, which he *pretends* doesn’t bother him - and then have some breakfast.

There are a few digs at her, but they’re half-hearted and hardly warrant a response. She can see Héctor wondering about it, too, the looks he shoots Ernesto even as they talk about a new song he has decided to write, as they go through possible titles and lyrics, which part each of them should sing. He seems distant, and for once he’s not talking over her husband; he’s hardly talking, and has has the unmistakable expression of a man who has hardly slept.

When Héctor leaves the room to fetch his notes for the new song, she decides against uttering a jab about the dark shadows under Ernesto’s eyes and just pours more coffee in his empty cup. He stares at it as though not comprehending for a few moments, then nods.

“Gracias,” he mumbles, and brings it to his lips to drink it in one gulp, black and hot and bitter as it is. That is odd, too: he won’t drink coffee without sugar and milk in it, usually. Imelda raises an eyebrow when he puts the cup down with a grimace.

“Not of your taste?”

“... I think I burned my tongue.”

That makes Imelda chuckle. “And here I thought you’d take the chance to complain about my coffee,” she mutters, and waits for a moment for Ernesto to latch on that excuse to resume a more… normal sort of conversation between the two of them.
He does, and there is something soothing about how familiar it is. It feels far more natural than Ernesto quietly thanking her for a cup of coffee.

“Oh, right. It did taste awful,” Ernesto mutters, glancing up at her, but she could almost swear she’s seen the corners of his mouth quirking upwards. “As most of what’s on your table. Héctor should have picked a better cook.”

“Which would rule you out as well, from what I’ve heard of your cooking. What was that again about the eggs in the microwave?” Imelda mutters, and smirks when Ernesto stammers, face reddening. “How did you even make to adulthood?”

“That was-- it was one time!”

“Or the time you microwaved the fork and almost set the kitchen on fire?”

“That was also only one time!” Ernesto protests. “I can cook just fine!”

“And yet you live on delivery food,” Imelda says, glancing at his stomach. “It kinda shows.”

“Wha-- it does not! This is muscle! Just… just well-padded!” he protests, and sits up straight. Imelda decides against pointing out how painfully obvious it is that he’s sucking in his stomach. Truth be told, she feels just slightly bad for pointing it out: she remembers how chubby Ernesto used to be when they were kids, and how self-conscious he was about it. He may not have a visible six-pack now, but he is in a pretty good shape… although he does tend to get winded while in bed with her and Héctor. But then again, who wouldn’t?

“Fine, fine,” she concedes. “But I still have doubts over your cooking skills. If you have any.”

“I can cook better than you do!” Ernesto snaps, and turns to the door just as Héctor steps back in with his notes. “Héctor! You’re coming for dinner at my place!”

Her husband stop in his tracks, blinking at him. “… We are?”

“Yes,” Ernesto mutters, glaring at Imelda. She responds with a smile.

“Oh, I look forward to it,” she says with the sweetest voice she can muster, and her smile widens a bit at Héctor’s confused expression.

“Hello?”

“Sofía? It’s--”

“Ernesto, yes. Cell phones have a screen, and the names of contacts show on it when they call. It’s been a thing for a while.”

“So you didn’t delete my contact.”

“Not yet. I’d love to keep talking, but I’ve got a client with her head in the dryer and--”

“You can cook.”

“... Guilty as charged?”

“I need you to teach me how.”
“Trying to impress your next prey?”

Ernesto reaches up to rub the back of his neck with his free hand, looking at the blackened lump that has solidified on the pan. He’s not sure he can salvage his only pan; maybe, if he chisels away at the lump… “You could say that.”

“Just take him or her or whatever out for dinner. Spare yourself the embarrassment, and them a bad case of food poisoning.”

Granted, giving Imelda food poisoning wouldn’t be the end of the world, but Héctor might not appreciate it. Ernesto shakes his head. “I can’t. I said I’d cook something.”

There is a long sigh at the other side of the line. “All right. I can think of a few easy dishes you could manage. How long do you have to learn?”

Ernesto glances at his watch. “About five hours.”

“En serio?”

“Five and a half?” he tries, and he can hear the smacking sound of skin on skin. The mental image of Sofía smacking her forehead in the middle of the hair salon makes him smile a bit.

“Forget it. Have you tried cooking?”

“Yes. It… didn’t go that well.”

“Good, at least your kitchen is a mess and it will make things more believable. Now follow my instructions closely: slowly step away from the stove, close the door, end this call, arrange some food delivery and then hide the boxes.”

“... Really?”

“Welcome to the world’s easiest cooking course. I’m amazed you didn’t think of it yourself.”

He did, truth be told, but a very stubborn part of him refused to give up without trying. He wants to see Imelda impressed, and he wants it to be over something he did do himself.

“So you’re telling me to lie about it?

“Why not? You lie about your size all the time.”

“I do not--”

“Sure, sure. Look, I have to go before someone’s head catches fire. Just get dinner delivered, move it on nice plates and call it a day. Don’t call back unless it’s with an update,” Sofía cuts him off, and ends the call. Ernesto scoffs, and glares at the pan.

“I don’t need to lie about my size,” he informs the charred remains. Somewhere in the back of his mind he’s mildly thankful for the fact that, despite all the jabs between them, that is not something Imelda had brought up against him by comparing it with Héctor’s.

Not that she’d have any reason to, after all: his cock is perfectly fine, and Héctor is the one with the ridiculously long dick. He checked online and his is perfectly average. Or just slightly below it, but it’s thick and that’s what counts, surely.

With an indignant huff, Ernesto turns his back to the stove and marches out of the kitchen, looking
Everything is delicious and very, very suspicious.

Of course Héctor is about ninety-nine percent sure that Ernesto cooked none of this; they used to share that small apartment before Imelda came in the picture, after all. He was subjected to his best friend’s attempts at cooking more than once… and Ernesto to his. It did not go down very well for either of them.

Ernesto has many talents; he can play, he can sing, he was born to perform… and to get them in touch with just the right people to get them exposure, venues to play in and paid work. For all of his talent in songwriting - perhaps the one thing he’s really good at - Héctor knows he would likely amount to nothing without Ernesto by his side. Without him, he’d probably still be in Santa Cecilia, without a family and getting by with a few odd jobs while writing music he’d play for fun and nothing else.

Imelda won’t even hear it, and insist he could do just fine on his own, but she also refuses to see what her parents saw from the first moment: she has married down. Maybe she loves him too much to see it, but if Héctor has a chance to somehow be worthy of her, to provide for her and not make her ever regret her choice of a husband, he owes it to Ernesto.

But there are two things he knows Ernesto cannot do: songwriting, and cooking. Imelda knows it as well and she certainly look suspicious, but alas, she has no proof. She eats, joins some small talk, and keeps eyeing towards the door leading out of the dining room. Héctor is not in the slightest surprised when she excuses herself to go to the bathroom.

“You did get rid of the boxes, didn’t you?”

Ernesto shrugs. “I don’t have the foggiest idea what you’re talking about,” he says smoothly, pouring some more wine in his glass. Héctor snorts out a laugh.

“Very well. If, by chance, you had some food delivered - which you did not - would you have thought of getting rid of the boxes, in case someone hypothetically went to check your bin?”

That gains him a wide grin. “Of course. I’d leave nothing to chance, hypothetically speaking,” he says, and pours some wine in Imelda’s half-empty glass just as she walks back in the dining room. To her credit, she looks just mildly annoyed and it would be unnoticeable to anyone who doesn’t know her as well as Héctor does.

“I noticed your frying pan is done for,” she comments, not casually at all, as she sits down.

Ernesto gives her a bright smile, resting an elbow on the table and leaning his chin on his hand. “The first attempt didn’t go too well,” he says, his voice dripping false modesty. “But practice makes perfect.”

“Oh, it does,” Imelda says, her voice rotting honey, and leans her chin on her hand as well. She smiles back. “The pozole was delicious. Mind sharing your secret?”

Ernesto’s smile falters. “… Qué?”

“Well, for starters, what part of the pork did you use?”

“Oh. I, uh… the… the leg. Clearly.”
“Clearly. And how long did you let it cook?”

“Uh… I wasn’t really checking the time. Until it was tender,” Ernesto replies, and shoots a very, very quick glance at Héctor, who’s staring at the scene - God, it’s like watching a car crash in slow motion - while biting the inside of his cheek and trying not to laugh.

Ayúdame, that look says. Héctor holds back a laugh and gulps down some wine.

“When did you add the chile guajillo?” Imelda is still asking, her voice sweet as her smile is sharp. “How much of it?”

“I, well--” Ernesto starts, only to trail off when Héctor lets out a grito and slams the empty glass down on the table, causing them both to wince and turn.

“Oh! I had an idea!” he exclaims, grinning widely. All right, so it’s not a sudden idea as much as something he’s had in mind for a few days now - the embryo of a plan - but this seems the best moment to bring it up. “About that song I’ve been writing! I know why it didn’t work!”

They both blink. “… You did?”

“I thought it worked just--”

“It needs to be a duet, but it shouldn’t be the two of us singing,” Héctor says, grinning. “I’ll stick to playing. What this song needs is a woman’s voice.”

The mixture of confusion and relief on Ernesto’s face turns into annoyance, but of course he pays no mind at all. He’s saving his sorry culo, after all, and he’ll thank him later. On the other side of the table, Imelda is raising an eyebrow.

“A woman’s voice,” Ernesto repeats, and makes a face. “If you say so. I suppose I could see if someone is available….”

Oh no, amigo. You know exactly where this is going and we’re doing it on my terms.

“Why bother? We have a singer right here,” Héctor says, and turns to smile at Imelda. “She sings wonderfully, you should know that.”

“But--”

“The song still needs work,” Héctor speaks up, and his smile widens at Imelda’s unimpressed look. “You’d be perfect.”

“I’m not singing on stage.”

“Not on a stage. Just among us, so that I can figure out how to make it work,” he says, and some of the tenseness in her frame fades. Then she glances at Ernesto, and Héctor can see her lips twitching just a little at his annoyed expression. As much as he enjoys - he will claim he tolerates it, but the truth is plain - Imelda’s presence in the same bed, he draws a line at singing with her.

Sucks to be him, Héctor thinks, and clearly Imelda shares that thought.

“… Well. If you really need me, I figure I can help,” Imelda says slowly.

“We don’t really need--” Ernesto starts, only to trail off with a wince when Héctor’s foot - clad in a nice Rivera leather shoe - connects with his shin. “I mean-- fine,” he grumbles, and empties his glass. Héctor holds back a satisfied grin, and stands.
“All settled, then! But we’ll worry about the song later. Now, I think there was something on offer,” he adds, and tilts his head towards Ernesto. “It would be a nice thank you for the dinner. If you’re still up on it.”

Ernesto blinks at him and Imelda, clearly confused. “Something on offer? What are you-- oh. Oh! Right!” he exclaims, and stands - only to pause, and make a noticeable effort to appear nonchalant. He clears his throat while Imelda hides a smile behind her hand. “I mean… if you’re up for it.”

And oh, yes, he is. He really is.

The sound of Héctor’s moans is almost like a song, and it is one Imelda never tires of.

She loves that sound as much as she loves his breath against her breast, his hair tickling her skin, his arms around her, the warmth of his body as he clings to her, shuddering. She loves the few jumbled words he manages to gasp out from time to time, and how her name sounds spoken like that, when she murmurs back to him that he’d doing so well, he’s so good. She loves it all so much that she can even tolerate Ernesto panting like a bull as he grips her husband’s hips and drives into him again and again with deep groans, pushing him against her.

He fucks like a mindless animal and really, it’s not surprising. He was never very imaginative… but at least he seems to make up for it with sheer stamina. Imelda has to concede a grudging point there.
A harder thrust than others tears a strangled cry from Héctor’s mouth, and he muffs it against her breast. Imelda murmurs something soothing, trying to ignore the head pooling in her lower belly - not her turn, not yet - and finally glances over at Ernesto for the first time in several minutes.

In all the years she’s known him, she has never seen the appeal; she doesn’t really see it now, either. There is no logical reason, as far as she’s concerned, why he would be such a hit with women with Héctor standing right there. Good for Imelda that no one had snatched him up first, really, but it still puzzles her.

Still, she has to admit she doesn’t find the sight unpleasant, either. He sounds like a bull and he’s built like one, too, broad-shouldered and deep-chested; it is a stark contrast to Héctor’s lean frame. He’s breathing fast, skin covered in sweat, as he thrusts mercilessly into her husband; his hair, usually styled so carefully and kept in place with hell knows how many different fancy hair products, is falling in messy bangs in front of his eyes.

Still, it’s his expression Imelda’s gaze lingers on - the way he’s squeezing his eyes shut and clenching his teeth - and again, she finds she likes him best like this, when all conceit is gone from his face and he’s not keeping up some stupid act. If he looked like that more often, then perhaps--
“Ah-- aaaaah...!”

A twist of Ernesto’s hips causes Héctor to cry out, and the heat in her lower belly turns into raging need. Imelda presses her lips against Héctor’s temple for a moment before she glances back at Ernesto and speaks.

“Sit back.”

Her voice is like the crack of a whip, and it causes Ernesto to still and look back at her. He’s still panting and she expected annoyance at the interruption, but he seems too far gone to be annoyed: he just looks rather confused and very, very needy.

Good. It makes him easier to work with.

“Sit back,” Imelda repeats, and strokes Héctor’s hair. “With him on your lap. Don’t pull out.”

There is only a moment of hesitation, then Héctor rocks back against him with a whine of protest, and Ernesto recoils with a hiss. He does shift to sit back - good for them, Imelda thinks, that Ernesto’s bed is king-sized - and within moments Héctor is sitting on his lap, Ernesto’s cock still deep in him. He moans, skin flushed and hair tousled, lips still red from when he’s bitten them, and he’s the most alluring sight Imelda has ever rested her eyes on.

“You should see yourself now, mi amor,” she murmurs, and he looks up at her with clouded eyes, licking his lips. His cock is hard and leaking, and she shifts forward to sink on it without a second thought, letting it fill her to relieve the need that has now turned into ache.

They groan at the same time, all three of them, and Héctor is the loudest of all. He jerks beneath her, trapped between their bodies, with Ernesto in him and Imelda around him, and her hands on his chest and Ernesto’s mouth sucking marks on his neck. And it feels good, all of it - the warmth and the hardness and the sounds, Héctor’s scent and even Ernesto’s, beneath the cologne.
“E-Ern… ‘Melda…’ Héctor is stammering, breathing fast and desperate, arms reaching back to grasp Ernesto’s head, hips shuddering as though he’s not sure what to do, if push back against his best friend or up into his wife. Imelda looks at Ernesto over his shoulder, and he meets her gaze; his eyes are clouded with pleasure, but she sees the challenge a moment before he twists his hips and makes Héctor moan.

Try to do better, the look on his face tells her, and Imelda gladly takes that on.

They both move fast and hard and relentlessly, each trying to make Héctor moan louder than the other, but soon enough the challenge is unimportant, their thoughts lost in the wave of pleasure. Soon enough, it’s about their own pleasure as much as Héctor’s… although his cries of pleasure still are the sweetest sounds Imelda has ever heard.

For a time there is only that, moans and groans, the occasional cry and muttered pleas, skin on skin and fast breathing and whispered praise, touch and motion and warmth as pleasure builds and the
ache at her core fades into ecstasy.

In the throes of her climax, she feels Héctor’s mouth on her breast. A warm hand is cupping her ass, calloused fingers digging into her skin; she cannot tell whose hand it is, and she finds she doesn’t care.

They stay there for the night.

It wasn’t the plan, because Imelda never had any intention to sleep in Ernesto’s bed, but after they collapsed on the pillows, amongst rustled sheets, none of them felt like getting up again.

“Do we have to pay for boarding?” Héctor joked, gaining himself a light smack.

“Heh. Make breakfast tomorrow, and we’ve got a deal.”

“Why us? You’re such a great cook,” Imelda muttered, and there was some snickering - even from Ernesto - before they settled down to sleep. It didn’t take long for Héctor to doze off, and now she’s about to follow suit.

Imelda yawns, and her hand slips from Héctor’s hair on his upper back, rising and falling steadily with each breath; she likes falling asleep like this, matching her breathing with his own. She closes her eyes, smiling a bit, and she’s about to surrender herself to sleep when a sudden touch on her hand startles her.

Ernesto.

Despite the pang of annoyance, Imelda feels more than a little smug at the thought she’s placed her hand on Héctor’s back first. She waits a few instants for Ernesto to pull back his hand as thought the touch burned him, because of course he would, except that he does not. To her surprise - and annoyance, but mostly surprise - his hand rests over hers and grips it loosely.

What the hell does he think he’s doing?

Imelda lifts herself on her elbow, glaring towards him and opening her mouth to snap, but words die in her throat when she doesn’t meet the smirk she expected: Ernesto’s eyes are shut, his mouth slightly open against the pillow and breathing steady, clearly asleep. Unless he’s pretending - but that would be painfully obvious to her - he’s not actively trying to annoy her; he just reached out for Héctor in his sleep.

And grasped her hand.

Imelda's eyes shift from his stupid, sleeping face to their hands, both resting on Héctor's back. If she pulls her hand back, she's giving ground. If she shakes his off, she could wake both him and Héctor up and she's really too tired to deal with Ernesto's drama that night. She keeps staring at his hand over hers for a few moments before she rolls her eyes and, with a sigh, rests back down and closes her eyes. She expects annoyance to keep her awake but, truth be told, it fades quickly enough.

The next morning she awakens first and, when she pulls her hand from beneath Ernesto’s, he doesn’t even stir.
Tunes

Chapter Notes

Sorry, no smut in this chapter - there will be in the next one, I promise!
Meanwhile have some Uncomfortable Realizations About Being Far Too Comfortable, puppies, and something that I guess it might be fluff because come on. Puppies.

There are very few things about Mexico City that Ernesto doesn't love.

Of course, the main reason might just be that he's simply better equipped for life in a big city, rather than in some small, stifling town in buttfuck nowhere. Anything is better than that, and he'll take the maddening traffic every day for the rest of his life as long as it means he never has to set foot in Santa Cecilia.

A small voice in the back of his mind occasionally tries to remind him that the problem isn't the town itself, but he always does a good job at ignoring it, as he ignores the yells and insults and honks from the cars lining up in the road as he walks down the sidewalk.

Apparently, the cause of today's disruption is some ass who decided to park their car badly enough to block the way of the garbage truck, which of course is now stuck along with all cars behind it. Whenever the owner of that damn car shows up, Ernesto muses, they'll find plenty of angry motorists ready to tear them a new one.

He passes by the car, walking fast - he wants to be home before the drizzle turns into actual rain again - and, some twenty meters ahead, there the garbage bin the truck was clearly headed to. It seems that trash hasn't been collected in a bit, because it's overflowing and plenty of sacks and boxes have been left all around it. Once the obstruction clears, the garbage guys are going to be busy. It’s all wet, too. Sucks to be them.

With a shrug, Ernesto finishes the last of his beer, crushes the can in his fist, and throws it at the heap of garbage as he passes it by. The garbage yelps.

“Huh?” Ernesto blinks, taken aback, and comes to a stop. There is more yelping, whining, and he takes a few steps closer, stepping over soaked cardboard to take a look. The can landed inside a soggy cardboard box, and inside there are three filthy, squirming things that look a lot like rats… except that he’s never heard rats yelping, or trying to let out the tiniest howls he’s ever heard.

Oh, Ernesto thinks. Oh.

He picks up the box, which stinks to high heavens, only to hear another, tiny yip. He looks down to see yet one more puppy trying to scramble towards him, stumbling over trash and then falling into a puddle. It stays there, shivering, and doesn’t move as Ernesto reaches down to pick it up and place it in the box with the other three. The water washed away some of the filth, so he can sort of guess he’s looking at four chihuahuas… probably too young to be away from their mother.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, glancing around to see if their mother is anywhere to be seen, but no; just those yelping, trembling pups in a wet cardboard box. Someone must have left them there and oh, Ernesto sure hopes that someone was hit by a truck as soon as the deed was done.
“Pinche cabrón,” he snarls, and blinks when one of the pups yaps. “No, not you! I’m sure you’re the best perrito. Or perrita, whichever you--”

“Señor? Do you need help?”

“Huh?” Ernesto looks up to see a woman with a blue umbrella looking at him, and it occurs to him he’s been standing in the middle of the sidewalk, talking to a cardboard box. “No, I--” he begins, and one of the puppies chooses that moment to start yelping, to be joined by the others quickly enough - thin, terrible cries. It makes something in his chest ache.

“... Actually, yes,” he finally says. “Do you know if there is a vet nearby?”

Héctor is helping Imelda preparing a few pair of shoes for shipping when his cell phone rings, and the tune - The World Es Mi Familia, the one he set for Ernesto’s number; Imelda’s ringtone is Un Poco Loco - causes Héctor to almost drop the roll of tape.

It wouldn’t be the only thing to drop, either. As usual he left his phone too close to the table’s edge, and the vibration very nearly sends it falling on the ground. He catches it just on time - the screen is already shattered, better not give it the final blow - and gives Imelda an apologetic look.

“Ernesto,” he says, and takes the call. He’ll just tell him to call back in five minutes, once the postage is sorted for the day. “Hey, amigo! I’m a bit busy right now, can you call ba--”

“Héctor!” Ernesto’s voice comes from the other side of the line, and Héctor’s own voice dies in his throat. He sounds anguished in a way Héctor only heard once years before, when he knocked at his door to ask if he could stay for a few nights, trying and failing to hide the darkening bruise on his jaw. But at least that time there was anger for him to cling to; now he only sounds so broken, it makes his blood run cold.

Did he have an accident? Was he hit by a car? Was he robbed? Is he okay?

“Ernesto? What is it, what happened?” he asks, his heart beating somewhere in his throat. He’s vaguely aware of the fact Imelda has paused and is looking at him, silent and attentive. The explanation that follows comes in that same broken up voice, and it’s not very long. Héctor has no idea what ‘parvovirus’ exactly is, but he can tell that it’s bad and Ernesto seems close to breaking down in a vet’s waiting room.

“He says they’re sick and they’re so tiny, I just know they’re not gonna make it!”

His wail - no other way to describe it - is loud enough to force Héctor to pull the phone away from his ear. Imelda raises an eyebrow.

“Is he crying?” she mouths.

“Naah, I don’t think--” Héctor begins, only for something that sounds a lot like a sob to come from the other end of the line, followed by a loud sniffle.

“So tiny …!”

“All right, all right. Try not to… I’m sure they’re in good hands. There is nothing more you can do and the vet will know how to help them. I’ll come pick you up, sí? As soon as I can. Send me your location and I’ll be there.”

He ends the call, and explains Imelda what’s going on as quickly as he can while reaching for his
jacket, the car keys and his wallet, because with his luck someone will stop him for a traffic check
today of all days and he doesn’t want to be caught without his driving licence. Imelda listens, and
nods.

“Take him here for dinner. I made too much soup, anyway, and giving it to him is better than
throwing it away.”

Héctor blinks, taken aback. “I thought we were going to go out for dinner tonight? We didn’t cook
any--” he starts, and trails off when she rolls her eyes.

“I will make too much soup,” she says, slowly. “And I’d rather he eats it than having to throw food
away. Is that clear?”

Oh. Ooooh, right. Despite his worries, Héctor grins. “I love you.”

“If you tell anything about this to your stupid friend, you’ll both pay.”

“I love you so much,” Héctor declares, and kisses her smiling lips. “Sorry I can’t help you finish.”

“I can manage, my hero,” she says with a dramatic sigh, and pats his cheek. “Now go. He needs a
knight more than I do. And, Héctor?”

“Yes?”

“... Put your shoes on before you go.”

Oh, right. He just knew he was forgetting something.

Imelda has almost finished preparing all orders for shipping when her cell phone gives out a loud
noise of breaking glass that heralds all messages from Felipe. Or maybe it’s Óscar; his message tune
is the sound of wailing sirens, but the twins often use each other’s phone, so there is no telling.

Well, their punctuation usually gives them away, but this is a vocal message - what is the point, why
don’t they just call? - and in such cases, she guesses who it’s from in only about seventy-five percent
of cases. This time, however, she doesn’t really need to guess: they’re both talking.

“Hola, hermana!”

“¿Qué pasa?”

“Is Héctor there?”

“Hi, Héctor!”

“We wanted to know when you’re coming next month!”

“So that we can make sure we de-clutter the guest room on time!”

“We’ve been working on projects!”

“So many projects!”

“We also got a driving licence!”

“Well, Felipe did, but we can share it.”
“That sounds like the worst possible idea,” Imelda mutters, and a purring sound answers her words, something soft pressing against her arm. She chuckles, and scratches Pepita behind the ears and down the back; the gray cat arches into her touch, looking up at her with those intelligent eyes of hers. Imelda didn’t hear her coming in, she never does, but Pepita never wastes time in making her presence known.

“I’ll feed you in a minute,” Imelda promises. She has a bag of cat kibble stored away for her, but she doesn’t go fetch it right away. She just stands there, and frowns slightly down at her phone.

“So that we can make sure we de-clutter the guest room on time!”

Right, it is almost that time of the year again. Time sure flies.

They go back in Santa Cecilia to visit old friends and her family pretty often, usually depending on when they both are free for a few days, but there are a few dates when they must be there: Día de los Muertos, Christmas, Easter… and the end of September, when a special Mass is held every year, and she and Héctor visit the cemetery together.

It will be ten years this time, she thinks. Ten years since his parents died.

She and Héctor weren’t that close when it happened, but she still remembers what a terrible blow it was for him - both his home and family gone in an instant. She remembers the grief that seemed to grip their entire town, the awful feeling of not knowing what she could possibly say to make it any better, any more bearable.

And she remembers - how odd to think about it now - being grateful for the fact Ernesto had stood by him throughout it, an arm around his shoulders. Sometimes she thinks that it was that memory, more than anything else, to lend her the her strength and patience to bear Ernesto’s presence in her life throughout her marriage.

… Although, come to think of it, he has never joined them on that yearly trip to Santa Cecilia, never came to any Mass in memory of Ricardo and Emilia. As far as Imelda can recall, he never returned to Santa Cecilia at all after leaving.

It didn’t bother her before - it was a welcomed break from his presence, and she hardly thought anything of it - but it does bother her now. Héctor will drop anything to help him out over some stray dogs he found, and Ernesto never bothered to even to pay his respects to Héctor’s parents, who were like a second family to him by all accounts. It is... wrong.

Her phone rings suddenly - La Cucaracha, which is not a ringtone she hears often: Ernesto doesn’t usually call her - and Imelda takes the call, still frowning but not precisely angered. This is not the right moment for it; she will find another time to tell Héctor he should really expect more from his best friend.

“Ernesto? What’s happening? Is Héctor th--”

“It’s me,” Héctor voice speaks up from the other side. “Sorry, mi amor - my phone sort of died.”

She sighs, but her lips twitch upwards. “You forgot to charge it.”

“I forgot to charge it.” She can almost hear the sheepish grin in his voice.

“Where is Ernesto?”

“I got him into a restroom. He’s splashing some water on his face, I think.” A pause. “If he doesn’t
come back in five minutes, I’ll go looking.”

“Is it as bad as he made it sound?” Imelda asks, but she knows it is. After Héctor left, she may or may not have checked online what parvovirus is, and it’s not pretty. No cure for it but to treat the symptoms, try to keep the dog alive, and pray it makes it through.

“Yes, it is pretty bad,” Héctor sighs. “And they’re really tiny, the vet says they can’t be older than maybe five weeks. She doesn’t think their mother was vaccinated, so they got no antibodies.”

“And they’re too young to be away from her.”

“That too. They were probably dumped when they showed signs of being sick.”

“Can’t sell a sick puppy.” Imelda finds herself thinking that, somewhere, there is a still lactating bitch wondering where her pups went. It makes her unbelievably angry, and she looks down to see Pepita staring up at her from the worktable, yellow eyes wide open and knowing.

“Yes,” Héctor is saying, and there is a sharp edge of anger in his voice before he sighs. “Well, they’re in good hands and the vet will keep us posted. The odds aren’t good, but Ernesto wouldn’t hear of putting them to sleep.”

“Stubborn,” she mutters, like it’s not a trait they share. Héctor is quick to bring it up.

“Says the one who stayed up at night to bottle-feed a kitten. Am I hearing her just now?”

“Purring up a storm,” Imelda chuckles, and her hand goes back to scratching Pepita behind the ears. She found Pepita in a gutter as a kitten a couple of years ago, and in a bad way, with an eye infection, ticks and God knew what else.

She was a little fighter, and she pulled through, growing bigger and healthier before going back to her wandering ways - but when she feels like visiting she climbs on a tree nearby, and jumps in through the tiny window in the guest bathroom they always leave open for her. She is never gone for long without coming back for a cuddle, the occasional flea treatment or vaccination - she puts up a fight with everyone but her over those - and some food. Speaking of which…

“I’m done with the postage for today. I’ll get cooking something.”

“No, don’t bother, I’ll pick up something on our way back.”

“I said--”

“I’ll tell him it was my idea,” Héctor says quickly, and Imelda laughs.

All right, so maybe her denial is a little bit childish. Good thing she got herself a husband willing to cover for her. What a catch. “I love you,” she says, and Héctor sighs dramatically.

“Ay, mi vida,” he exclaims, and he seems about to add something else, but abruptly pauses. “Ah, Ernesto is coming back out. He looks okay… ish.”

It is a relief to hear, but Imelda sees no point in saying as much aloud. “If he looks like death--”

“Kinda.”

“--I won’t mention it.”

That gains her a chuckle and another whispered ‘love you’ before the call ends. Imelda puts down
the phone with a sigh, and glances at Pepita. “Well, let’s get you fed and the table set,” she mutters, deciding to bring up next month’s trip to Santa Cecilia at a better time.

Dinner is… grim.

Héctor isn’t new to stubborn silences and a good deal of pouting when Ernesto is not happy, but of course this is different. He’s sullen, hardly speaks, and seems to be eating his food without actually tasting one single bite.

Imelda was perfectly civil - worried, even, though Héctor can only tell because he knows her so well - and while he said nothing vitriolic, Ernesto seems to be hardly aware of her presence. Or his. Or that of Pepita glaring at him from a nearby chair, making it abundantly clear that she dislikes the guest. There is no love lost between them, and after a scratched-up arm Ernesto always makes sure to give her a white berth if she happens to be in the house when he visits.

Now, however, he only seems to pay attention to his phone, continuously glancing at the screen.

“... You know that no news is good news right now, don’t you?” Imelda finally speaks, breaking the silence. Ernesto shrugs.

“You don’t know that,” he replies, his voice hollow.

“It the vet said she’d call in the morning if they passed the night, the only reason for her to call any earlier would be that they didn’t make it.”

“Hmm.”

It’s an acknowledgment, at least. “Oh, we need to think up names!” Héctor exclaims, forcing himself to smile and slapping a hand on Ernesto’s shoulder. He doesn’t even react. “So that we’ll know how to call them when they recover.”

“If they recover,” Ernesto says glumly, only to recoil when Imelda suddenly slams an empty dish down.

“When,” she says, a sharp edge to her voice. “When they recover, they are going to need names - or are you making up excuses because you have the imagination of an empty piñata?”

That causes Ernesto to scowl, and oh, it is a relief. “I can think of plenty of names for dogs!”

“Such as…?” she prods. Ernesto’s scowl deepens, and he opens his mouth. She gets there first. “If you say ‘Imelda’, you’re in for a trip to the emergency room.”

Ernesto shuts his mouth so abruptly that his teeth click together, but Héctor thinks he can see something vaguely resembling a smile almost, almost curling his lips before he scoffs.

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Good,” Imelda smiles and puts the fork down, leaning her chin on her hand. “So, what is your suggestion for a name?”

He hesitates, eyes darting towards Héctor for help. “... Uh,” he finally says, and Imelda raises an eyebrow.

“Uh,” she repeats. “A bit short, but if they’re as tiny as you say…”
“They are!” Héctor says brightly, opening the bag with the desserts. “It’s two boys and two girls, right? So we need to pick two of both. For a boy, I’d say… Héctor!”

“No.”

“Teto?”

“Nice try. No.”

“How about Ernestito?”

“Héctor.”

“That’s what I suggested!”

“Wha-- no! I said--”

“Or Tito. Hey, remember when everyone called us ‘Tito and Teto’?”

“I’d really rather not.”

“Oh, I know! Chamaco!”

“Basura,” Imelda quips, gaining herself a supremely offended look.

“Hey!”

“You did find them among rubbish…”

“Stop!”

There are some more protests, laughter and outlandish suggestions, but that dreadful silence doesn’t fall on them again and Ernesto’s phone doesn’t ring until early the next morning - which is a very abrupt awakening for all three of them, with Héctor very nearly jumping five feet up in the air. From her chair at the end of the room Pepita, who graced them with one of her rare overnight stays, gives a yowl of protest.

“Yes, yes, it’s… ah. Yes, that’s… as good as it gets, right? For now?” Ernesto gives a long sigh of obvious relief, and his shoulders slump some as he sits back on the edge of the bed. Héctor lifts himself up on his elbows; beside him, Imelda is listening in silence, absentmindedly adjusting a strap of her nightgown.

“I see. Which one-- the brown one? Right. Fine. What time? All right. I’ll be there. Gracias.”

Ernesto ends the call and, with a long sigh, he lets himself drop back on the bed - and his head falls right across Héctor’s stomach.

“Oof!”

“Sorry.”

“So, good news,” Imelda says, leaning forward, and Ernesto smiles weakly up at her.

“Not bad. They passed the night and the vet is slightly more optimistic for three of them.”

“And the fourth?”
“He’s… not doing as well,” Ernesto says, and frowns. “But he’s hanging on. I can go and see them in a couple of hours.”

“Time for breakfast, then,” Imelda mutters, and pokes Héctor in the ribs. “Your turn to make it.”

“Anything for you, mi amor,” Héctor grins up at her, and ignores Ernesto’s childish, disgusted noise.

He slept with them.

Realization hits Imelda while she’s halfway through making the bed. Of course that’s stating the obvious, and it happened before - but each of those times, sleep was not the reason why he got into their bed in the first place. Then he just was there, she felt too sated to bother kicking him out, so they may as well let him stay.

This time, sex hadn’t crossed anyone’s mind. They simply let him stay for the night, sharing their bed rather than leaving him the couch, and none of them thought anything of it, like it was the perfectly logical thing to do. That, more than the fact itself, was what caused her to pause with a pillow in her hands - how natural it had been, simply letting him settle down in their bed for the night.

And she isn’t sure what to think of it, so she does the simplest thing and chooses not to think about it at all.

“Of course, I’m not going to keep them,” Ernesto says.

He’s sitting at Héctor and Imelda’s kitchen table, an empty cup in front of him and the phone in his hands, showing off a whole gallery of pictures of the pups - who are now all out of the woods, according to the vet, and should get the all-clear within a couple of days. They’re the most adorable thing he has ever seen in his life, and he may or may not have squealed while filming them squabbling over some food.

But no one was there to hear him, so it doesn’t count.

Unaware of his thoughts, Imelda shrugs. “Obviously, given what happened to the last potted plant left in your care,” she says, causing Ernesto to frown. Amazing, how she manages to grate his nerves even when they’re agreeing on something.

“I’d like to remind you that your husband managed to kill a cactus.”

“It was an accident, pendejo!” Héctor protests, jabbing al elbow against his ribs. Ernesto grins.

“Oh, sorry. You accidentally drowned a cactus.”

“And I felt guilty for a month, all right?”

There is laughter, and the conversation moves back to the pups. No, of course Ernesto isn’t going to keep them. It would be ridiculous, four dogs in his apartment. Sure, tiny dogs, but still… it is a commitment he doesn’t want, a responsibility he doesn’t need, and he’s not going to be the next cabrón to dump them somewhere in a box.

Maybe just one, the tan pup who was the sickest of all… no, no. Better not. He’ll take them home for a few days, just long enough to find them new homes. It won’t be hard, once he shares the video he’s playing just now; he and Héctor may not be proper famous yet, but they have quite a bit of following, a familia spreading across the country and beyond. He’s sure plenty of them will squabble
to adopt one of those puppies - he could even get some good publicity out of it.

Yes, they need to go to good homes. It is for the best, and he will not change his mind.

“Héctor?”

“Yes?”

“I changed my mind.”

“To absolutely no one’s surprise.”

Ernesto is sprawled on his couch with all four chihuahuas - Diablo, Clara, Lobo and Zita - napping across his chest. They are finally tired after scuffling, sniffing, bouncing, barking and running through the apartment, trying to eat furniture and all kinds of objects clearly too large for them to swallow.

“I can’t send them away,” he says. “When I was away a hour today, they barked and howled so much old Chicharrón threw a fit as soon as he saw me coming back. So, see, they need me.”

“Of course,” Héctor chuckles, taking a mental note to go and speak to Cheech about the situation, and reassure him the pups are going to settle and won’t, hopefully, stay this noisy. He knows him better than Ernesto and he knows he’s not a bad guy, just… a less than amicable neighbour. He’s one of those guy you need to know well before you learn to appreciate them, is all.

And at least, he keeps to himself. Gustavo, form the third floor, is the real ass - the one who just can’t resist pushing his stupid nose in everyone’s business. He’s not the apartment block’s administrator, but oh, does he like to act like he is.

“I need to get them more bowls,” Ernesto muses, and he reaches for his phone, careful not to disturb the napping pups on his chest. They all look different - one tan, one black, one white and one gray; are they even from the same litter? - but, Héctor has to admit, they are all awfully cute. “And they need collars. With tags.”

“Sounds about right,” Héctor says, leaning more comfortably against the chair. He’s got his guitar across his knees and they were supposed to play together, but right now the dogs have Ernesto’s undivided attention. “Maybe a dog bed?”

Ernesto nods. “A big one, yes. They’re never gonna sleep in a box again,” he mutters, and scowls, but it’s short lived when he glances back at his phone and scrolls some. “Oh, look at these shirts!”

“… Shirts?”

“For when they’re cold.”

“In Mexico City?”

“Oh, shut up. I’m getting them - Clara would look perfect in the pink one, and-- oh, look!” Ernesto exclaims, shoving his phone under Héctor’s nose. There is a picture of something that looks like... Héctor isn’t even sure what it looks like.

"What is it?"

"A spider costume!"
"It looks... tiny."

"They're for the dogs, pendejo."

"Aaah, right. Wait, are you seriously buying that?" Héctor asks, raising an eyebrow as Ernesto starts fumbling with his phone. It gets him a grin.

"Oh yes. Imagine, your wife looking down to see four giant black spiders bounding towards her. She's still afraid of them, isn't she? She was when we were kids."

A sigh. "Ernesto..."

"I'll take it as a yes."

"Ernesto. Is giving Imelda a scare really worth--"

"It is!"

"--the risk of have one or more of your dogs turned into a wet spot on the floor before she realizes they're not giant tarantulas?"

"Ah." Ernesto pauses, the grin disappearing like a lightbulb blowing out, phone still in his hands. He glances at the sleeping puppies on his chest. "I... guess not."

“See, you’re learning common sense,” Héctor says, and pulls back to avoid Ernesto’s half-hearted swipe.

Imelda always had a golden rule: no dogs in the house.

It used to be ‘no pets in the house’, really, until Pepita happened. However, Pepita is objectively the best cat there can be; clean, quiet, self-reliant. Aside from a couple of incidents when she brought in half a rat as a gift, she has never caused issues. She has Opinions, of course, and can be loud about them... but as long as you don't push her, she'll give you no issues whatsoever. So, the way she sees it, she didn't allow in pets: she just let in that one specific cat, and no others. Dogs are still very firmly on her Not Allowed list.

... Well. They were, at least. Damn Héctor's stupid grin, damn Ernesto's insistence, damn those huge puppy dog eyes... and damn Pepita, too, for apparently deciding to mother them.

Imelda has found herself completely, hopelessly outnumbered. Now three yapping pups are snuffling around her living room while the fourth - a little diva Ernesto called Clara - is very happily letting Pepita groom her, tail wagging. And, she has to admit, watching Ernesto downright cooing at dogs is amusing.

"If they even think of chewing a shoe, it's on your head," Imelda informed her husband before opening the door - and, at least, they haven't tried to chew anything yet. There is a moment of alarm when a couple of them jump on on the couch, right by the hand-stitched pillows her mother gave her when she married, but rather than biting them, or humping them or doing whatever dogs do, they just curl up next to Héctor.

"Hah! Do you want to listen too, perritos?" he asks, and strums his guitar, causing all tails to wag - well, Pepita's aside - and Imelda to chuckle, sitting down.

He's been working on his new song for a while, the one she and Ernesto are supposed to practise
singing as a duet - not something she especially looks forward to, but maybe it will be bearable - and now he decided to play and sing what he’s got so far. Apparently something is not working for him… and he cannot figure out what it is.

It’s not the first time it happens. Héctor is the best songwriter she’d ever known, but there is no telling how his songs will come to be. Some ideas hit him like a bolt of lighting and he gets scribbling in the middle of the night, a new song ready within a couple of hours; he then collapses, sleeps a few more hours, and pus in the final touches whenever he wakes up. Others can take weeks - in one memorable case, months - from conception to finished song.

This newest one definitely falls in the second category.

“You’ve got the best public. Doesn’t he? Oh yes, he does, he does,” Ernesto says in a ridiculously high-pitched voice, causing the dogs to wag their tails so hard it’s a wonder they don’t fall off. Imelda’s attempt at masking her laugh as a coughing fit is nowhere near believable - God, this man is ridiculous, but she finds it more bearable than his stupid machismo - but Ernesto doesn’t even seem to notice. He sits next to her with a wide grin.

“Come on, amigo, let us hear what you’ve come up with!”
The song does need work, but it’s not the cobbled-up mess that Héctor made it out to be; sometimes, Imelda could swear her husband can be almost as dramatic as his stupid friend. No wonder they always got on so well.

Soon enough, of course, she’s no longer focusing on the song as much as she should. Héctor’s voice, the sounds he coaxes out of guitar strings, the way he closes his eyes and loses himself to it when he’s singing something gentle - all of it is very distracting. He may very well start uttering a string of obscenities rather than lyrics any moment, she would be none the wiser.

And she's not the only one: that much becomes clear the moment she glances aside and catches sight of Ernesto, who's leaning his cheek on the palm of his hand. He's looking at Héctor with eyes half-lidded and a faint smile that's words apart from the wide - and often frankly annoying - grins that are often on his face, the ones that feel about as genuine as a three pesos coin. It's much quieter, real, with a fondness that is impossible to miss.
There is a pang of something in Imelda's chest, and she gets the bizarre feeling that she's looking at something she shouldn't see. She turns her gaze away quickly, before Ernesto can realize she's been looking at all, and once again focuses on nothing but the tune of Héctor's guitar.
I mean did anyone here really expect Ernesto and Imelda keep up the truce for long.

The shower in Ernesto’s small apartment is nowhere as large as his and Imelda’s own, so Héctor is rather glad they’re doing this at their place.

Not that he’s that picky, nor is the shower that small; it works perfectly for one person. Two people could fit in without too much trouble… but with three people, one of them being so ridiculously broad, it would be a very tight fit. Maybe someday they will give it a go, but for now, Héctor is pretty happy they’re using the big one.

He’s got to admit that maybe Ernesto has a point in life: there is a lot to be said for being the center of attention. Especially when - and maybe it’s just some wishful thinking, but maybe not - he’s got those two actually working together to get him over the edge, focusing on him rather than trying to best each other.

Or maybe just focusing more on him than they are on competing against each other. Either way, Héctor will take this as a victory… and it is a very, very sweet one.

Héctor draws in a sharp breath when a soapy hand grasps his cock firmly, giving it a squeeze, and some of the water running over him - it is hot enough to redden skin and yet now it barely feels lukewarm compared to skin against his own, the hand on his cock and the kisses Imelda is trailing across his chest - gets into his mouth. It causes his next moan to come out as almost a gargle; Imelda pulls back for a moment, and there is a chuckle against his ear.
"New song?" Ernesto asks, stroking him idly. Héctor doesn't have enough breath to reply, and he just tightens his own grip on Ernesto's drenched hair. He doesn't even seem to feel it; Héctor can feel him smirking again against his skin. There is water and steam everywhere, the touches on him are turning him into a quivering mess, it is hard to breathe and oh, he'd trade this for nothing else.

"You know he can sing better than this," Imelda speaks, her voice so dangerously, dangerously sweet. Héctor opens his eyes, squinting against the water, to see a smile curling her lips. She looks past him, right at Ernesto. "Better than you, for sure."

"Oh?" Ernesto asks, and there is challenge in his tone, but the amusement is not gone. He presses a finger against the slit of Héctor's cock, getting another moan out of him, a buckle of his hips. "Does he now?"

"Get your hand off my husband's dick," Imelda says, and her smile turns lopsided. "And I'll show you how to make him sing."

*Oh, God.*

Héctor gasps, shutting his eyes. There are a few moments of silence aside from the rush of water, and he breathes in the steam just as Ernesto speaks again.
"Very well." One more squeeze and he is letting go of him, his other hand still firmly grasping Héctor's hair. "Show me."

Héctor opens his mouth to say something - not that he has any idea what to say, or the capability to string together anything that makes sense anymore - but of course all that leaves him is a low moan. The sight alone of Imelda kneeling in front of him, hair and skin wet, is enough to make his head spin, no matter how familiar; her mouth on his cock a moment makes him cry out and shudder violently.

Normally he’d reach out to steady himself against the walls of the shower, because he’s never had such a great sense of balance, the floor is wet and collapsing on Imelda would be just about the worst way to interrupt a very pleasant start of the morning. But this time, there is no need: Ernesto is there, solid and steady as a wall, holding him tightly, chest to his back as Héctor buckles his hips, shuddering.

He leans his head on Héctor’s shoulder - something he started doing after a particularly powerful fit of pleasure caused Héctor to throw back his head with reckless abandon, which almost resulted in a broken nose - to gaze down at Imelda’s head, and chuckles.

“She got you good,” he murmurs against Héctor’s ear, getting a wordless groan as a response. Imelda is pulling back slowly, trailing a vein with her tongue, and lets her teeth scrape just slightly against the top in a way that never fails to turn Héctor into mush. He gasps, getting more water in his mouth just as Ernesto speaks again in his ear.

“... But I think two of us would get this over with quicker.”

Wait, what?

In the haze of pleasure, under the relentless cascade of water, Héctor can only blink when Ernesto’s steadying, reassuring grip faces. He glances back to see he’s kneeling down, feels his hands on his ass, prying the cheeks apart, and then something warm and wet--

“Ah!”
The startled cry leaves his mouth with no words, not one single coherent thought to it. Héctor finds himself reaching down, grasping Ernesto’s hair with one hand and Imelda’s with the other, holding on like a castaway to a piece of driftwood.
But that’s what you do, isn’t it, it’s what you’ve always been doing, clinging onto them to avoid drowning because you know you can’t make it on your own.

The thought is sudden as it is jarring, and Héctor is quick to chase it away because oh, Ernesto and Imelda are making it so easy now, to abandon all thought and just enjoy the feeling - their hands on him, and the heat of her mouth and the strokes of his tongue, the wet hair his fingers are tangled in and the hot water falling over them all, the steam he breathes in with each helpless gasp.

He lasts no more than two minutes, and he cannot even bring himself to feel sheepish: he’d dare anybody to last one moment longer than he did, he truly would. His legs give in - does he eve have bones anymore? - but Ernesto is there to hold him up, Imelda is turning off the water and reaching for a dry towel, and Héctor isn’t worried at all, safe in the certainty that neither of them is going to let him fall.

“Your parents sounded in a good mood.”

“Hmm.”

“Shame we didn’t catch your brothers home, but I bet they’ll call back. Hey, did you see the latest video on their channel?”

“For the sake of my sanity, I try not to look.”

“Heh. Good point.”

Silence.

“... Tell me it did not involve rockets.”

“Nope.”

“Oh, good.”

“There was a circular saw, though.”

“What??”

“But everything went fine! I mean, the experiment failed, but no limbs were lost and they walked out with ten fingers and toes. I’d count it as a success.”

“Ten fingers and toes each, or between the two of them?”

“Each.”

“Thank God for small miracles.”

“To be fair, this one wasn’t that small.”

“Aaaand this is why I make a point to never look at their channel. What kind of experiment was it, anyway?”

“Beats me. They didn’t make it very clear.” Héctor laughs, and leans his head on her shoulder, a hand reaching down to massage her lower belly to help her through the usual cramps that come with her period. They’re both in bed, and she’s reading a book Ceci recommended to her when she popped in to get some fabrics – which means she very nearly threw it at her head bellowing for her
It isn’t half bad, but it hasn’t really captured her yet. Then again, she’s only some thirty pages in... and she is getting distracted by thoughts of their trip to Santa Cecilia in about two weeks, to visit the grave of Héctor’s parents and attend to a special Mass in their memory.

It is mostly sorted, with the parish and with her parents, who are going to let them stay in the guest room as they always do, once Óscar and Felipe are done taking all of their clutter out of it. They have booked their train tickets, because both dislike long car rides, and she is well ahead with the orders, so that she can afford staying away three or four days.

Yes, everything’s in place, as per every year... but this year, for the first time, Imelda finds she’s bothered by the one absence she never gave any thought to before.

“Isn’t Ernesto coming?” she asks, closing the book. She glances at Héctor to see him pause, taken aback, before he shakes his head.

“No. He’s... busy.”

“Busy, every year?”

That causes Héctor to look away. “I can’t ask him that.”

“You can’t ask your best friend to be with you on the anniversary of your parents’ death?” Imelda asks, more harshly than she meant to. She shuts her mouth, already feeling guilty, when Héctor’s gaze grows distant... but only for a moment. Then he just shrugs, like it’s nothing.

“I can’t ask him to come to Santa Cecilia.”

“It’s his hometown.”

“He doesn’t like it.”

“We grew up there,” Imelda says, and has to make a conscious effort not to let anger show in her voice. “His family is there. Does he think he’s too good for it? For them?”

Héctor shakes his head. “It’s not that,” he says, a defensive note to his voice. Sometimes it frustrates her, it really does, how defensive he is of his best friend because that’s just how Ernesto is. Like it’s supposed to make everything he does right, or at least more bearable.

“What--”

“I promised not to tell,” he cuts her off, and he looks genuinely sorry. “I really can’t. Just believe me, it’s all right. He cared about my parents, you know that. He doesn’t need to come to Santa Cecilia to show it.”

Can’t tell her.

Somehow, the thought hurts. There are supposed to be no secrets between the two of them; that is something they established early on. She certainly keeps nothing secret from him, and this is the first time she realizes it’s not quite the same for him. It is fair, she cannot fault him for that – it’s nothing she has any business knowing, after all – but the sting is there anyway, impossible to ignore.

A cutting remark - “did he get some girl in trouble?” - almost makes it to her lips, but she manages to hold it back, and swallows it along with her annoyance. “I understand,” she says instead. It isn’t
the entire truth, because she can’t really understand what she’s not told, but it is the only right answer to give and the one Héctor needs right now, so she says it anyway.

And when he smiles at her, relief plain on his face, the smile she gives back is far more sincere than her words were.

Great as their teamwork can get in bed - and in the shower, and occasionally in the living room or the kitchen - Ernesto and Imelda’s first attempt at singing in a duet goes about as disastrously as Héctor expected it to.

He’s always been an optimist but, to be entirely honest, it would have taken a miracle for it to go down well... and miracles are hard to come by these days.

“If you could be bothered not to sing over me--”

“Well, I had to do something to fix the mess you were making!”

“Excuse me?”

“You were trying to breathe in and sing at the same time, don’t think I didn’t notice! Or are you always just this bad?”

“Says the one who keeps coming in at the wrong time! And why are you even wearing a charro now? We’re in my living room! Are you trying to impress the cat?” Imelda snaps. From the chair she’s curled on, Pepita chooses that moment to hiss in Ernesto’s general direction as though to point out that, if that was the intention, he’s entirely failed.

Ernesto scoffs, brushing his jacket in a somewhat defensive way. “Well, at least one of us needs to put in some effort! Either you’re not trying, or you couldn’t carry a note if it were stapled to your ba-”

All right, maybe it is time to say something. Héctor sighs, putting the guitar down on his knees. “Uh, guys--” he begins, but he has no time to say anything more. The next moment Ernesto scoffs dramatically, throws up his hands dramatically, and marches through the living room to the door. Dramatically.

“Fine! I’ll go find some company with those who appreciate my skills!”

“Hey now, you know we appreciate--”

“Your dogs?” Imelda asks, raising an eyebrow. The only reply she gets is a slammed door, and then a few moments of silence.


“It did not.”

“There was no blood.”

“And that’s enough to say it went well?”

“For a first attempt, yes. Like your brothers not losing any limbs is enough to call whatever they’re up to a success,” Héctor quips, and that gets a smile out of her before she frowns.

“The first attempt, and the last. He is insufferable, even without a public. I can’t begin to imagine
how you can share a stage with that self-centered drama queen and his inflated ego.”

He grins. “He doesn’t mind sharing with me,” he says, and is somewhat taken aback when Imelda gives him a look that is almost angry, and unexpectedly bitter.

“Oh, he would. But you’re his best friend, and I’m just your wife,” she huffs, and walks out towards her workroom, leaving a very confused Héctor behind. He blinks, not knowing what to say – not knowing what to think of her last words – as Pepita jumps off her chair to go after Imelda, silent as a ghost.

Ernesto doesn’t like Los Chachalacos.

All right, fine, so that is a lie: he likes them, if begrudgingly. Their music isn’t half bad, if nowhere near his--
their
-- own, and they are good fun. In the several occasions they found themselves playing at the same venues, they’ve always been good company for a drink or two.

Still, they are competition, as Ernesto has to nearly constantly remind Héctor. They’ll join them if they have to, laugh and swap jokes and some gossip about yet another producer who had to pay up to silence some scandal, but that doesn’t mean they have to like them. They shouldn’t.

If only they weren’t so insufferably likeable.

“Oye, look who’s there!”

“De la Cruz!”

“Ernesto!”

“Come over here!”

“Where’s Rivera?”

“Have a drink!”

Their voices were the first thing he heard as soon as he stepped in the cantina, and sure enough there they were, crowded around a table and with a glass each. He could tell Marta is already in the process of drinking the rest of the band under the table. He joined them gladly enough, anything to get the argument out of his mind - not even much of an argument, but she was the one who was trying to sing over him - and explained that Héctor couldn’t come out.

“The tragedy of married life,” he mutters now, a glass in his own hand, and there is laughter, which makes him feel better. That is the reaction his jokes should get, not the exasperated sighs and biting remarks Imelda keeps giving him. She got… better, for a while, but now there’s something wrong and he cannot tell what it is - but like hell he’s going to ask. It’s her problem, not his.

More drinks are ordered and soon enough everyone is singing, if somewhat drunkenly, and Ernesto joins in. They sing Los Chachalacos’ songs, Héctor’s own, popular ones, some unholy mixture of all of them - and no one complains about his voice being too loud, no one calls him an attention hog or complains about him at all, and that is precisely how Ernesto likes it. They see him, and like what they see. Listen to him, and love what they hear.

Before long, Ernesto is laughing hard enough to tear up and thinking that yes, Héctor is missing out,
stuck home with that *bore* of a wife. He pulls out his phone, calls everyone to move closer for a group picture, and sends it over to Héctor with a brief message.

*You’re missing out on life. Remember, divorce is an option!* ;)

> “*Divorce is an option.*”

“I-I’m sure he was just joking! You know, that’s what Ernesto is li--”

“No. Finish. That sentence.”

Héctor shuts his mouth so abruptly his teeth click together. He’s regretting dearly the moment he asked Imelda to check the phone in his place, since he was elbow-deep in water trying to unblock the sink. He expected her to read aloud whatever message he just got, and instead there had been silence… and he turned to see her absolutely **livid**.

*You’re in trouble, amigo. If she doesn’t strangle you, I will.*

There is a long sigh, then Imelda looks up and give the least reassuring smile she ever gave. Her frame relaxes, all tenseness gone, a glint in her eyes.

> “Héctor, mi amor,” she says, her voice rotting honey. “Let’s get in the bedroom.”

Ernesto is in the middle of a really funny joke involving a bellringer, a train and a nun when his phone bleeps. He grabs it, still talking and glass still in his other hand. Maybe it’s Sofía - he wrote her earlier to ask if she’s free tonight, because she’s good fun with no strings attached and no desire for any on either side - but it isn’t her. It is Imelda.

And she’s sent him **pictures**.
For a moment or two Ernesto stares down at the screen as though not comprehending, glass still at his mouth. He can see Héctor; he can see lingerie; his brain, however, is momentarily refusing to put the two things together into a single image for him to elaborate.

Then it _does_, and the beer he was about to swallow comes out of his nose in a sudden, foamy stream.
“Hey, Ernesto!”

“What is it?”

“Are you all right?”

“I-- ack! I--” Ernesto stands suddenly, dropping the glass, phone still held tightly in his hand. He coughs and wheezes, which doesn’t give the words he manages to choke out - I’m fine - the barest semblance of credibility. His head is reeling, he cannot breathe, he’s sticky with beer… and the images are still before his eyes, as though imprinted in his retinas.

“Whoa, easy there!” there is a relieved laugh, a hand on his shoulder. “Need a towel and some wat-

“Toilet,” Ernesto croaks. He must be growing redder by the second now, his face unberably hot… and not just his face. He’s got a problem there, one he needs to take care of before it becomes too obvious - which will likely happen any moment now, since he had the brilliant idea to put on such tight trousers. “L-lo siento, I need-- restroom-- just a minute.”

Thank God no one argues, and he’s able to stumble his way to the toilet. By the time he gets there he’s painfully hard, Christ, he can’t remember getting this hard so quickly since he was eighteen, but no one noticed the bulge at and so all is fine, he can take care of it and walk back out laughing with an excuse - maybe something about his last meal being just a bit more than a human being can handle.

Then he will march out of here, and he’ll strangle Imelda or die trying. For now he settles for gripping something else entirely, though not tight enough to cause harm, thank you so very much. With a grimace, Ernesto begins to stroke himself… and just then the phone bleeps again.

He shouldn’t look; it goes against his best judgment. But then again, what harm can it do him now? He’s already in a toilet stall, taking care of the problem - may as well see what else that bruja has sent him. So he grits his teeth, squeezes the head of his cock, and lifts the phone to his eyes.
From the screen, a scowling Imelda is staring straight at him, her middle finger raised. In the background, he can see Héctor sitting on the bed, taking off what looks like a pair of stockings, caught in mid-laugh. Below the pictures, there are only a few words.

*Who’s missing out now, pendejo?*

There is a rush of something that Ernesto mistakes for anger, and his grip on the phone tightens - as does that of his other hand on his cock. It was Héctor’s pictures to reduce him in this state but now, as he finishes, he’s scowling back at Imelda.
And telling himself that, somehow, he’ll make her pay.

“Let me get this straight. You called me to ask if I’m going to pose for pictures? And here I thought you were up for a fuck.”

“Well, that too.”

“What’s with the sudden interest in taking photos of women in lingerie?”

“You could say it’s an artistic pursuit.”

“Ernesto?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t bullshit me.”

All right, so maybe Sofía knows him too well by now. Ernesto sighs. “Well… uh…”

“… Wait a minute. Are you trying to make somebody jealous?”

“Wha-- no!”

“You are!”

“I am not!”

“And who is it? Was it the same one you wanted to impress with your absolutely non-existent culinary skills?”

“I wasn’t trying to impress anyone!”

“Oh, please. There is always someone you’re trying to impress. Fans, friends, flings, the old lady next door, the mirror…”

Ernesto snorts. “Fine, fine. Let’s say there is someone I’m trying to get back to--”

“Good luck.”

“I need your help.”

“You’re not seriously expecting me to-- I don’t even have much lingerie. I don’t see why anyone should bother. If someone gets to see my underwear at all, chances are it won’t stay on for another minute.”

All right, that is a logic Ernesto can’t really argue with. “Naked, then? You look great naked.”

“I’ve heard you bullshitting better compliments than this one, but nice try. I’m not posing naked for pictures you’re going to share with your crush. Are you drunk?”

“My wha-- I don’t have a-- all right, a little drunk, but that is entirely beside the point. Will you let me--”

Click.

“... I’ll take that as a no.”
“No.”

Of course, that is just about the answer Héctor was expecting - and the same he already got from Imelda, too. Neither of them has any interest in trying to sing in a duet again, and *maaaybe* that attempt has been just a bit too rash from Héctor’s part. He should have given it more time.

“Are you sure? I think you could sound great together, if you just work a little on--”

“I don’t need to work on *anything*. She’s the one who’s nowhere near my level!”

“-- on your teamwork.”

That causes Ernesto to scoff, glaring down at his phone. Throughout the whole lunch, he’s hardly looked up from it and hasn’t looked at him in the eye once. When Héctor glanced over, he seemed to be scrolling through some amazingly useless dog toys and gadgets; he’s not sure he wants to know how much money his best friend has been spending on the four pups who, after a few attempts at nipping the waiter’s ankles, are currently snoozing under the table.

“We are a team,” Ernesto is gritting out. “Me and you. A great team. She has no part in it.”

Héctor rolls his eyes, leaning his chin on the palm of his hand. “Still mad about those photos?”

Ernesto stiffens before shrugging. “What photos?” he asks, and he even sounds convincing.

Except that Héctor knows him too well. He grins. “I bet you didn’t delete them.”

“Shut up.”

“To be fair, you started it. Just admit we outdid you. If you’d like to be in the next photoshoot--”


“Oh, come on. I didn’t pout like that when you went wild with that vibrator.”

“I didn’t go wild,” Ernesto protests, but his scowl is fading into amusement. “My finger slipped on the remote a few more times than it was supposed to.”
“A few more times.”

“All right, a lot.”

“Slipped.”
Ernesto rolls his eyes. “Stop it. I showed your wife how it’s done. And you creamed your pants.”

“And so did you when you got those pics, I bet.”

“No.”

“Oh?”

“... I made it to a toilet,” Ernesto grumbles, then scowls again. “And anyway, that time you got your revenge the following week.”

“And you enjoyed it.”

He doesn’t argue that point. “I still think the handcuffs and costume were entirely unnecessary.”

“Are you kidding? Those were an integral part of the scene. And I’d been looking for an excuse to borrow it from Imelda.”
“Unnecessary. And so was your wife taking pictures!”

“Which you asked to be sent later,” Héctor reminds him. Ernesto has the good grace to blush.

“That is beside the-- the--” he sputters. “What point are you trying to make?”
Héctor shrugs, glancing around to make sure no one is close enough to listen, and reaches to play with an ice cub that was left in his glass. “Well, Imelda had an idea for something...”

He tells him what she has in mind, in good detail. Ernesto turns crimson, sputters indignantly, snaps that they must be out of their mind and that he’ll never submit to such indignity. Héctor smiles, shrugs, and says it’s all right, he’ll never bring it up again. And he doesn’t; he acts as normal, and waits.

Within a week, he gets exactly the text he’d been expecting.

“I’m not saying yes.”

“Of course.”

“We got it the first seven times.”

“Good, just so we’re clear. I’m-- enquiring.”

“Clearly,” Imelda says, sounding perfectly serious, and takes the coffee to her mouth. From his seat, Héctor can see her lips curling in a smirk behind the cup for just a moment. “So, enquire away. Which part of the whole scenario confuses you?”

“Well…” Ernesto starts, then pauses, clearly at a loss, before clearing his throat and letting his expression fall into indifference. He looks perfectly in control: his shirt is spotless, his hair carefully styled… but there are dark shadows under his eyes that bespoke of at least a couple of sleepless nights. Héctor wonders if he’s dreamed the scenario. They have tied him up on a couple of occasions, yes, but this would go quite a bit further.

“For one… er…” Ernesto is saying slowly. “The binds are going-- would be safe, right? Not that I can’t take it, of course, but I sort of needs these hands to play…” he says, glancing at Héctor. He shrugs and holds up his hands, flexing his fingers. “Perfectly safe. No damage to these hands, is there?” he says, and smiles. “Safe, sane and consensual, no?”

Ernesto stares at his hands for a couple of moments, maybe trying to imagine them bound, before looking away. “Right,” he mutters, and takes another sip of coffee, seemingly very interested in a specific spot on their kitchen table. “The ginger thing - what is it about?”

Imelda smiles a little. “Oh, that. It causes burning.”

“What?”

“With no damage. It’s perfectly safe. You’ll only feel the burn.”

“You mean I would feel the burn,” Ernesto corrects her quickly. “I’m not saying yes.”

“... Right. Anything else?”

“That with-- the rod, and--” he pauses, and swallows. His attempt of seeming at ease is less and less believable. “I’d be able to stop it any moment. Of course.” Another pause. “... Right?”

Imelda nods. “Of course. We’ll agree on a safeword. You say it, and everything stops,” she says, and tilts her head on one side. “You’ve never done anything like this, have you?”

There is no trace of mockery in her voice - this is too serious not to be perfectly straightforward
about; if this is to go on, they all need to be on the same page - but Ernesto seems to take it as such, and he suddenly seems flustered at the suggestion he has absolutely no experience while they do.

“Of course I have!” he protests. “I was just… making sure.”

Imelda raises an eyebrow. “So, you know how all of this works.”


It is a lie, one Ernesto will regret telling. Neither Héctor nor Imelda question it.

They will regret that, too.
Ernesto bit off more than he can chew. But then again he's been doing that since chapter one, let's be honest.

“The anniversary of your first date, are you serious?”

“Of course I am!”

“Who even keeps track of that crap?”

“I do!”

“Well, I don’t see you celebrating the anniversary of our first drink together!”

“I was fourteen, I got sick, and you laughed your ass off while I hurled my guts in the bushes.”

“Heh. Fun times.”

“I did not have fu--”

“Just try not to drink too much this evening, got to make a good impression. Put on your nice suit. We’re going at nine – bring the songbook, all right?”

“Ernesto, I told you, Imelda and I are going--”

“Sorry, I can’t hear you over the sound of us possibly getting a proper contract with a record label! It’s a huge leap forward, Héctor - we can’t just let this chance pass us by!” Ernesto argues, and now there is an edge of real frustration in his voice. “It’s what we’ve been working for the past-- I didn’t even keep track of the years. Our dream, amigo!”

Héctor bites his lower lip, already feeling guilty – but of course, the guilt doubles when he pictures himself telling Imelda their date night is cancelled. Same old, same old – the crippling fear of disappointing either, or both at once. “What if I give you the songbook?” he suggests. “You’re Mr. Charisma – I’m sure you’ll be fine on your own.”

A scoff. “Of course I could-- that’s not the point! Why am I always the one putting in the effort here?”

“Qué?”

“You know what I mean! You write the songs, fine. You play and sing – fine. But every time we need to get in touch with the right people, and sell what we’ve got for what we’re worth, I am the one doing all the legwork!”

“I...” Héctor begins, only to pause, passing his cell phone to his other hand to gain a few moments. That is true: Ernesto is the one to get them most of the work, and thank God he does. Héctor is perfectly happy writing songs and playing at home, singing with Imelda as they swirl around her
workshop or in the kitchen… but none of it would get him any money, none of it would pay any bills.

Where would he be without Ernesto by his side? Nowhere, that’s where. Probably still in Santa Cecilia, doing odd jobs. Without a family. Without Imelda – if Ernesto hadn’t convinced him to try their luck in Mexico City, they may have never met again there and clicked the way they had. He owes him everything, and he’s letting him down. Again.

When he shares such thoughts with Imelda – never all of it, of course; just musings on how he doesn’t feel he’s doing enough to work with Ernesto to build their success – she dismisses it all with a shrug,

“You write the songs,” she says. “Seems only fair he puts in the PR work.”

Maybe it is true, but still--

“Is Imelda there?” Ernesto’s voice cuts through his thoughts, and Héctor blinks.

“Huh?”

“Get your ridiculously big ears checked. I asked if Imelda is there.”

“She’s in the workshop.”

“Let me speak to her.”

“… Are you well?”

“If you can’t see reason, maybe she will. She’s more practical than you are when you get your head stuck in heart-shaped clouds. Let me speak to her,” Ernesto repeats. Héctor does as he says, walking in the workshop and handing his cell phone to Imelda with an apologetic look.

“Ernesto,” he says, and she raises an eyebrow at him before she takes the phone.

“Imelda speaking. Are you chickening out for Thursday? Not that surprising, truth be tol--” she trails off, and blinks as Ernesto starts speaking at the other side of the line. Her eyebrows go up almost to her hairline, and she glances at Héctor, but she listens quite intently, hardly interrupting. The anger Héctor feared fails to make an appearance.


Under Héctor’s slightly anxious gaze, she taps her fingers on the bench and keeps listening. “Watch your mouth there, you’re on thin ice,” she warns, and gives a faint smile. “That’s better. All, right, I guess… Yes. I see. No-- wait a minute there, I’m loaning you my husband-- why on Earth would I dogsit for you?” Imelda listens again, and sighs. “If you walk them first and if you can guarantee I won’t spend the night trying to clean up after some mess on my carpets. All right, give me a moment.”

Imelda covers the receiver, and looks at Héctor. “Do you want to go?”

Well, he’s not precisely dying to, but… “I think I ought to,” he admits. “But our date--”

“We’ll catch up. This is important for you, too,” she says, practical as always, and Héctor smiles.
Relief is like a weight lifted from his chest.

“Te amo.”

“Lo sé.” Imelda blows him a kiss, and brings the phone back to her ear. “All right, he’ll be there. Yes, the songbook – I’ll remind him. Don’t make him drink too much. Yes, you would – come on, we go way back.” She rolls her eyes, but her lips curl in a smile. “So… you’re confirming all will go ahead on Thursday. Hu-uh. We’ll see about that,” she adds, smile widening, and ends the call. “Believe it or not, he actually got you two a great chance for a contract. You’d be loco not to be there.”

Héctor smiles. “Oh, but you do make me un poco loco,” he says, gaining himself a tap on the nose.

“Good thing I’m here to bring you back down to Earth,” she mutters. “Come, we’re going out.”

“Are we?”

“We’ve got a date, remember? Since you’re taken this evening, it will have to be now.”

“What about those shoes?” Héctor asks, glancing at the workbench, but Imelda grabs his chin, turning his head back towards her.

“I’ll finish this evening, when we’ll both be in business,” she says, and smiles. “Ice cream?”

He smiles. “I wouldn’t mind eating mud, as long as you’re in the picture.”

“I know. I did get you to eat mud before.”

“I was four. And those mud cakes looked far to good,” Héctor points out, gaining himself a laugh and a kiss. They go out, have ice cream, and it is a lovely date – just the two of them, and the feeling of not being good enough doesn’t resurface once throughout it.

“Maybe they’re already there.”

“We’re forty minutes early, Ernesto.”

“Right, right,” Ernesto mutters, tapping his fingers on the car’s wheel. By some miracle, they were able to find a parking spot right across the cantina. All right, he had to steal it under the nose of another driver who’d yelled something about their family lines from mamá’s side that somehow involved goats, but he has no regrets. It isn’t the right time or place to be playing Mr. Nice Guy. “We should walk in at about the same time, no? So that we don’t seem desperate but also don’t make them wait.”

“… You’re overthinking this.”

“Someone has to, given that it’s the chance of a lifetime,” Ernesto grumbles, but the shove he gives Hector is lighthearted enough. His friend laughs.

“Relax, I’m sure we’ll be fine. And if it doesn’t go through--”

“It must.”

“-- There will be other chances, amigo,” Héctor adds, and Ernesto makes a face.

“Chances are scarcer than you think, and I’m not getting any younger.”
“… You’re not even thirty yet.”

“I will be next month, and I’m not famous yet,” he points out. They have a reasonably good following, and they make reasonably good money, but it’s not the fame he dreamed of, the fame he wants – must – achieve. The kind where people recognize you in the streets, and admire you and love you, and the whole world becomes your family – one that will never turn its back to you.

Héctor may have found his comfortable spot in life, one he’d be happy to settle in, but Ernesto has not. He needs more, and will not stop until he has it.

“We still have time,” Héctor is saying, and something about the good-natured patience in his tone grates his nerves.

“I found a white hair, Héctor!” he blurts out, causing him to blink, staring at his hair.

“Oh? I never noticed—”

“… Not on the head.”

“Ah.” There is a moment of silence before Héctor starts snickering, and soon enough so is Ernesto, leaning back against the driver’s set. They snicker and snicker like idiots, and when it finally dies down Héctor checks his watch.

“If it helps you relax we do, in theory, have enough time for a hand job,” he mutters, reaching to place a hand on Ernesto’s thigh. “So I can check out your white hair of doom.”

“Pfft. Hands off,” Ernesto mutters, trying to ignore the sense of heat in the pit of his stomach, and slaps Héctor’s hand off. “We must make a good impression, and we don’t want to make a mess of ourselves.”

A sigh. “Fair enough. I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Good. Don’t mess this up for us, and I promise I’ll give you the best blowjob of your life.”

Héctor grins. “I’ll remind you once we’re back. Don’t worry, it will be all right. They like our music, and as soon as they have taken a look at the new ones in my songbook—” he starts, only to trail off with a sudden look of dread, hands patting at his coat’s pockets. “… Uh-oh.”

Oh, Christ. “Héctor. You do have the songbook, right?”

“Well. Do you mean right now, or—”

“For fuck’s sake – you had one thing to remember!” Ernesto growls, dread turning into frustration, and he turns the key in the car’s ignition. “All right-- if we go fast and ignore a few red lights, we might be able to make it home by-- what’s so funny?” he snaps when Héctor laughs. And laughs. And laughs.

And holds up a very familiar red songbook.

“Hahahah! Your face-- you should have seen your face!”

With a groan, Ernesto turns off the engine and lets himself drop back against his seat. “Pinche cabrón,” he mutters, heart still stuck somewhere in his throat. “I’m going to fucking kill you someday.”

Héctor laughs again, and clicks his tongue in mock disapproval. “Language, Ernestito. Language.”
“You can forget that blowjob,” Ernesto grumbles, and gets a pat on the shoulder.

“You should relax,” Héctor says. “Come on, let’s get in and have a drink. I’m sure this… Antonio?”

“Armando Abascal. Please don’t call him the wrong name.”

“This Alejandro Pascal--”

“Pendejo.”

“-- Won’t be offended if we have a drink while we wait,” Héctor finishes, and gives his shoulder a squeeze. “Come on, stop worrying. I’m sure it will be fine.” He meets Ernesto’s scowl with a grin. “I feel it in my bones. All will go well.”

“I take it the meeting went well.”

“Pretty well. We won’t know-- ay, sí, like that-- for sure until next month, once the board has met, but-- ah!– he was… impressed,” Héctor gasps out, smiling at her. His face is all sweaty and he’s leaning back on the couch, shirt open and trousers to his ankles, with one had in Ernesto’s hair. He pulls it lightly. “Told you not to worry, didn’t I?”

On the floor in front of him, Ernesto hums around his cock before he resumes bobbing his head, a little faster now. Imelda chuckles, and sits on the couch next to Héctor, giving him a deep kiss.
"I knew you’d do well," she murmurs, pulling back just a little and cupping his cheek. His arm slips around her waist. “No one in their right mind would pass up the chance to have you under contract, mi amor.”

“Mmfph.”

“... And him too, I guess,” Imelda mutters, smiling a little. As annoyed as she still is at him, seeing him pleasure Héctor like that does something to mellow her. She has to admit he’s not bad company… as long as his mouth is otherwise occupied. Not a bad sight either, with his lips stretching over Héctor’s cock, his cheeks hollowing as he bobs his head.

It feels almost wrong to admit he’s good at anything – he’s not bad at all with the guitar, a good singer and an excellent dancer, though hell will freeze over before she says as much – but if the look on Héctor’s face is anything to go by, he’s got a real talent for blowjobs, too.

“Ah, damn-- I might-- not be able to hold back much… longer,” her husband gasps, and Imelda leans in to kiss him again, whispering against his mouth.

“Let go. He’ll swallow,” she says. Her hand sneaks down Héctor’s chest, over his thigh and then on his hand, resting on Ernesto’s head. Her own fingers slip in his hair; it isn’t as soft as Héctor’s, but
not unpleasant to the touch whenever it’s not coated with... whatever gels he keeps putting on it. “Won’t you?”

There is a muffled groan, almost covered by Héctor’s gasps, and Imelda pulls away from his mouth to lower her head on his thigh, her lips only centimeters away from Ernesto’s ear. “To the last drop,” she whispers. A moan and Ernesto’s head jerks forward, swallowing Héctor’s cock down to the base, cheeks hollowing and lips stretching, nose buried in his pubic hair. Imelda reaches beneath Héctor’s lifted thigh, cups his testicles and gives one single, gentle squeeze.

“Ay-- madre de Dios--!” Héctor chokes out, and his hips rise and fall in a few jerky motions, causing Ernesto to grunt – but not to pull back, on no. He doesn’t do that until Héctor has collapsed against the couch, hair disheveled and mouth hanging open, legs twitching; only then does Ernesto lift his head, letting his softening cock slip out of his mouth. He looks up, breathing fast, and wipes his lips with the back of his hand before smirking.

“Good, huh?” he asks, and looks at Imelda; his expression turns, if possible, even more smug. “Would you like to be next?”

That gets Imelda to raise a skeptical eyebrow. Last time he tried to eat her out at Héctor’s suggestion, he’d sucked – and not in the good way. It was painfully obvious he’d never in his life given a woman oral sex: it was dull at best and annoying at worst, with his tongue just all over the place as he lapped at random. In the end, she had to tell him to quit embarrassing himself and let Héctor do it properly.

“Wasn’t last time enough?”

“Don’t I get a rematch?” he challenges. Héctor’s arms lace themselves around her waist, and he nuzzles her neck.

“Let him give it a try,” he says. “If it’s still that bad, I’ll take over.”

“You know I can hear you, right?” Ernesto says drily while Imelda gets rid of her underwear, pulls her skirt up to her waist, and leans back against Héctor’s chest – legs spread and sex exposed, already wet.

“You know that wasn’t you, so don’t start,” Imelda says when Ernesto slips a finger inside, and he rolls his eyes – but, instead of giving some kind of remark, he just buries his face between her legs, closes his lips around her clit, and sucks.

“Ah--!” Imelda lets out a startled gasp, and her hips twitch at the sudden pleasure. She reaches to grasp Héctor’s hands around her, hard. All right, so that is a pretty good start, if she says so herself. There is surprise and maybe some annoyance – he wasn’t supposed to be good, what happened? - but it is mostly drowned out in pleasure while Ernesto presses his tongue against her clit, circling it, and slips a second finger in her at the same time, pressing down just in all the right spots.

“Shh, relax,” Héctor murmurs against her temple, kissing her hair. “Just enjoy.”

“Did you--?” Imelda manages, turning to press her face against his neck. Did you teach him, she means to ask, and he understands immediately.

“Just gave a few pointers,” Héctor replies, and he does sound surprised himself. There is a chuckle, the lightest scrape of teeth across her folds – he’s keeping them open with his thumbsd now, giving him full access – before Ernesto pulls back. The sudden lack of sensation in her sex – the lack of contact, of heat – nearly makes her whine. Her legs twitch and she almost, almost wraps them...
around Ernesto’s shoulders to pull him closer and make him continue.

And thank God she was able to hold back, or he’d never let her live it down.

“Oh, I got someone to show me the ropes,” he says, twisting his fingers briefly. “As it turns out there are better ways to teach a skill than calling someone a mindless hoover, would you believe it?”

He says that with such a supremely offended tone that Imelda can’t help herself: she burst laughing, causing Héctor to snicker and Ernesto to huff.

“What’s so funny now?” he demands to know.

Imelda glances down. He’s looking up at her in clear confusion from between her spread legs, and she smiles. He does look better like this, with his hair disheveled and the smugness gone from his features. “Not half bad, but wait until I come to brag,” she says. Somewhere in the back of her mind, there is something stirring at the thought he went to another woman to learn - that he has been doing this to someone else. It is none of her business, of course, and the sensation doesn’t quite border into annoyance, so he does her best to ignore it.

What he does and who he beds when not with her and Héctor is, after all, not her problem.

Unaware of her thoughts, Ernesto grins. “Not a long wait, then,” he says, and his tongue is on her the next moment-- in her-- and a finger is pressing firmly against her clit, making small circular movements. Soon enough he’s eating her out as though he’s been starving for the taste of her. It doesn’t drive her up the wall the way Héctor could, because he doesn’t known nearly as well what truly makes her lose control, but it is good.

He will be insufferably smug over it, no doubt, so Imelda figures she may as well let herself enjoy it. And she does, gasping and trembling, leaning back against Héctor while he whispers in her ear, kisses her neck, fondles her breasts. Orgams hits her like a wave, and she clings to her husband’s arms while her hips shudder, buckling against Ernesto’s face as he reaches beneath her, gripping her ass and lifting her up against his mouth. She knows better than to fight the tide, and so she does not - although she does muffle her moan against Héctor’s neck.

When she comes down from her high, Héctor’s mouth against her temple murmuring how beautiful she is, how much he adores her, Imelda feels too sated to be really bothered by Ernesto’s smug expression as he stands and looks down at her. He looks all the world like he’s scored some great victory, but her mind is somewhere where annoyance cannot reach, it seems. Imelda hardly notices the smirk: all she focuses on are her juices glistening on his face.

“Well?” Ernesto is saying, and she finds herself smirking back between pants.

“It’s nice to see… you can improve, after all,” she says, and lets go of Héctor’s arms with one hand to reach up and grasp Ernesto’s hair, pulling his face closer. He winces, taken aback, but doesn’t try to pull back. Her smile widens at his confusion. “You could use some more practice.”

Ernesto scowls. “Can you just admit it was good?” he very nearly whines.

“It was.” She lets go of his hair, and runs her hand down his cheek. “But it can be better.”

“And how?”

“... Do you want us to tell you, or you’d rather we show you?” she asks, letting her hand slips off his cheek in what’s almost a caress. “On Thursday, maybe. If you’re good.”
Oh, there is something there for a moment - a flicker of huger, naked desire in the midst of apprehension for what awaits him in two days’ time - but in the end, he hides it all and nods.

“On Thursday,” he says, and he almost manages to keep his voice firm.

“You will not speak unless spoken to.”

“… Right.”

“Repeat.”

“Come on, I got it--”

Whack.

“Ow!”

“Repeat.”

Somewhere on his right, he hears Héctor snickering. How can anyone find it in himself to be amused with a collar around his neck, he has no idea – but at the moment, his attention is entirely taken by Imelda. With her hair tied back and the jacket, she looks all the world like a teacher.

Except that his teachers back in school were more likely to carry around a stick then a riding crop, were usually well above the age of fifty and, did not, with one memorable exception, wear high-heeled, thigh-high black leather boots.

Plus, while some of them were a complete pain in the ass when it came to detention, Ernesto honestly cannot recall any of them ever using him as a footstool, least of all while he was naked from waist down. He glowers at her for a moment, but she returns his glare with steely eyes. There is a challenge in them, he can read it clear as day.

*If you don’t think you can handle it, you can say the safeword. Come on. Go ahead.*

*You wish,* Ernesto thinks, but bites back the retort. “… I will not speak unless spoken to,” he grits out. Imelda nods in approval, idly scratching Héctor under the chin with her free hand, and her gaze stays fixed on him. Her eyes look somewhat darer, more heated, the pupils wide. She shifts her feet just a little, and Ernesto can feel the hardness of the heel pressing against his spine. “You will do as I say.”
“I will do as you say,” Ernesto repeats, not quite as grudgingly, because hell knows how *distracting* she is. He briefly catches a glimpse of the look Héctor is giving him – *I know, right?* – before Imelda speaks again. She is holding the rod again, and letting the tip trail down his lower back, brushing just barely over the crack of his ass. There is a shudder he is unable to suppress entirely. If it makes her feel smug, she doesn’t show it and he is inwardly… well. Not *grateful*, but something not too far away either.

“In my absence, you’ll to as he says,” she adds, running a hand through Héctor’s hair. He grins at him, and Ernesto swallows. He’s been on his hands and knees for a few minutes now, and they have seen like this before, but somehow he just now starts to feel truly exposed in a way that is both exciting and somewhat frightening.

“I’ll do as he says,” he manages. Heat is pooling in his groin and it must show, because the next moment Imelda’s legs shift and one booted foot is beneath him, pressing his half-hard cock up against his belly. It makes him shudder.

“And do you know, why that is?” Imelda is saying, brushing the boot against his cock a few more time while the rod traces his ass. He shakes his head.

“Speak up.”

“No,” Ernesto says quickly, and dares peer up again. The pleased look is back on her face, and it’s a relief. He quickly tells himself it’s because he won’t be struck again.

“Because you have control over *nothing*, Ernesto,” she says. The words alone make him suddenly feel like he’s on fire, but then there is a sudden pressure against his cock from her booted foot, and Ernesto gasps.

“Oh, fu--”

*Whack.* The rod comes down across his ass, leaving a thin line of fire and tearing a cry from his throat. “AH!”

“You know what that was for,” Imelda says, her voice almost sweet. “Don’t you?”
“S-sí.”

“And what was it for?”

“I… misspoke.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“I-- no.”

“That,” Imelda says, running the rod down his back almost tenderly, “was not a question.”

Ernesto shuts his eyes, bracing himself for another blow, but none comes. She smiles at him – Christ, the way she smiles – and turns her attention on Héctor. She unclips the leash from the collar he’s wearing, runs a hand through his hair. “Mi amor.”

“Diosa,” he breathes, and for a moment they just stay still and say nothing more, gazing at each other in a way that makes Ernesto’s insides clench – with childish disgust, he will tell himself later, like he could ever hope to really fool himself into thinking what he felt was anything other than longing.

“… Get him ready,” she finally says, and gives him a kiss before standing, and looking down at Ernesto again. “One more thing,” she adds. She crouches, and lifts Ernesto’s chin with the tip of the rod. He stares at her with wide eyes, breathing already quickening, pulse racing. He is vaguely aware that this isn’t how he’d pictured himself reacting; he was supposed to resist, to make a point. But now… now he can’t even bring himself to remember what point he was supposed to make anymore.

“Tonight, you’re ours,” she says, and pulls the rod away.

Close to crying out for the sudden loss of contact – he’s already so painfully hard, he wants them, he wants so much and he wants it now – Ernesto chokes out, “I’m yours.”

He is rewarded with that pleased smile again, and the rod brushes over his throat in a caress before she stands. “Take off that undershirt and get down on your elbows. Forehead to the floor,” she orders, and he does; both actions make him feel even more exposed than before. “Now, mi amor. You have a minute,” she says, and he hears her heels clicking on the floor as she walks off – probably to get rid of the clothes. At least, Ernesto hopes it’s to get rid of that. He needs to see more of her skin than this.

“All right, amigo. Hope you’re ready.” Héctor’s voice reaches him as though from very far away, along with a pungent scent he recognizes immediately as that of fresh ginger. He peers up to see Héctor is holding it up in front of him: a peeled ginger root, carved to be roughly the size and shape of a cock. There is a notch near the widening base that, he was told, will keep it locked in place unless it’s pulled out.
He knows what is coming, they have talked it all through, but there is still a sense of utter unreality. Talking about figging and how it works is one thing; realizing your best friend is about to shove a ginger root up your ass is... quite another.

"Ready?" Héctor asks, brushing back his hair, and Ernesto finds it in himself to scoff.

"O-of course," he mutters, and leans his forehead on the floor again. The tiles are cool against his heated skin. He stays still as Héctor gets behind him, running a hand down his back and gentle fingers down the welts that, he knows, Imelda’s blows must have raised. They seem to burn even more at the touch, no matter how delicate.

“You’ll have a lot more of these by the time we’re done,” he muses aloud, the leans down to brush his lips across his lower back, causing Ernesto to shiver. “But don’t worry, I’ll be taking good care of you.”
Then start now, Ernesto almost says, but the words never make it past his lips: the next moment Héctor is running the fresh ginger root down the crack of his ass, presses its tip against the hole, and starts pushing it in, slow and steady. Ernesto’s cock twitches and he bites his lower lip, but he doesn’t make a noise. He refuses to.

And at first, there doesn’t seem to be much to make any noise about. The root goes in smoothly enough, if slowly - lube would lessen the sensation, apparently, hence the extra care - and for a few moments that’s it. Ernesto is about to scoff and ask if that’s all, but Héctor places a hand on his ass and chuckles.

“Give it another few moments,” he says, and goes to sit on the bed in front of him. He’s wearing the high-heeled red boots Imelda apparently made specifically for him, and slides a foot beneath his chin to get him to look up at him. He’s grinning from ear to ear, the pendejo.

“It should kick in just about now,” he says, just as a tingling sensation reaches Ernesto’s addled brain. And once the tingle starts, it doesn’t stay just that for long. It’s like tinders turning into a wildfire; suddenly it burns, and burns, and burns.

“A-ah-- shit--” Ernesto blurts out a few profanities, and clenches his hands into fists, bringing his head back down on the tiles – or rather, on Héctor’s boot. He instinctively clenches around the root, but it only makes the burning worse, so much so he cries out.

“No worries, It’s perfectly safe,” Héctor is saying in a somewhat sing-song voice, sounding like he’s having the time of his life. Ernesto takes a mental note to kick his ass at the first chance, possibly once his own has stopped feeling like someone shoved in a hot poker, and gives in to his next instinct – trying to push it out.

“You can’t get it out, but of course you’d try,” Imelda speaks up suddenly, and then her boot is resting against his ass, and something – the heel? – is pressing the ginger root deeper still. Ernesto hears her laughter over his own cry, and drops his head back down on the floor. “Didn’t you say you could take it?” Imelda muses aloud.
He can, of course, and he will. It is a relief, being able to think of it that way; it is purely a matter of pride now, of refusing to back down - not of arousal. Never mind he’d hard and panting and so, so desperate for more touch.

And he does get the touch, sort of; he feels the tip of the riding crop brushing up his spine and then back down, so slowly, raising goosebumps on his skin. He focuses on that, trying to ignore the burning sensation in his ass, the prickling in his eyes, the heat on his groin— and, then, suddenly, the rod is lifted and comes back down, hard.

He knew it was coming, but nothing would have prepared him for the intense burning when he instinctively clenches his ass at the blow. It gets a choking gasp out of him, and something spills down his face, but Christ, he’s still so hard. The part of his mind still capable of rational thought registers a pause, with no blow following the first, and suddenly Héctor is crouching next to his head and brushing back his hair. “The safeword—” he begins, and Ernesto shakes his head.

“I’m fine,” he gasps. _More_, he thinks, but the plea doesn’t leave his lips. He refuses to acknowledge it, let alone to utter it. “I don’t need it.” _Stop holding back._

“Yes, yes. But if it’s too much—”

“It’s not,” Ernesto snaps. _It's not enough_.

“All right,” Héctor says, and next thing Ernesto knows the blows have resumed - _whack, whack, whack_ - across his ass and thighs and lower back, and Héctor is pulling down his underwear with one hand, the other grasping his hair in a vicious grip. The tip of his cock is pressed against his lips, already wet, and Ernesto parts them to allow it in, let Héctor sink deep in his mouth, deep down his throat with a loud groan.

Well, not like he can say the safeword now, Ernesto thinks. Of course they agreed beforehand to other ways he can get them to stop immediately, but that’s a neglectable detail. His mind is a little too taken by the cock thrusting in and out of his mouth, the pull at his hair, the maddening burning sensation in his ass and where the blows have landed, how painfully hard he is.

Then the blows stop, the rod is thrown away - he hears it clatter somewhere on the floor - and he can’t hold back a whine in the back of his throat when the root is pulled, almost _yanked_ out of him. The burn is still there but oh God, he feels so empty.

“So you want it back?” The ginger is pressed back against him, barely slipping in before stopping. Ernesto whines again, trying to push back, to be stopped by Héctor’s grip in his hair. A sharp slap on his ass causes him to cry out around his dick, tears spilling down his cheeks.

“That was a question,” Imelda says coldly, and rakes her nails down his back, hard.

Héctor pulls back enough to slip out of Ernesto’s mouth, and he coughs, head spinning. “I-I…”

“So you want it back in you, or not?”

Ernesto swallows. He longs for Héctor’s taste, he longs to be filled again, he needs to come and he knows what he must to. When he speaks, his voice is a weak croaking sound. “Y-yes.”

Her nails sink into the sensitive skin of his ass. “Beg.”

“Por favor,” he blurts out. Normally he would be so embarrassed - _so ashamed_ - for giving in so easily, but right now he doesn't care. He needs more; shame can wait another day.
“Por favor what?”

“Put it back,” he chokes out, and sniffs, his chest seizing up in a sob. “Please.”

Imelda shoves the root back in him roughly, a hand suddenly tightening around his cock and giving it a squeeze, and that’s all it takes. Climax is like a blow, and the cry that leaves him fades into a sob, which he muffles against Héctor’s stomach. He slumps down, or at least so he thinks, because everything spins and suddenly he’s on his back, staring up as Héctor and Imelda tower over him. Héctor is still hard, a big stupid smile on his face, and Imelda looks impassable as always, holding up a pair of handcuffs.

“We’re not done yet,” she says, but there is a pause - a chance for him to say it is enough.

*Ah, but is it?*

Shuddering, lightheaded from his orgasm, ass and back on fire, Ernesto licks his lips and says nothing. Imelda smiles, and nudges at him with one booted foot. “Get up. On the bed.”

He does, barely able to stand on shaky limbs that feel like jelly. He’s turned on his back, cuffed to the bedpost; then Héctor is coating himself in lube, Imelda lowers herself on his face, and what follows is a whirlwind of pain and pleasure, moans and pleas, cold lubricant and heated skin. He loses himself to it. Imelda was right - tonight, he has no control. He gave it up willingly.

And he’s not scared.

“Now that wasn’t bad at all, was it, amigo? Just relax,” Héctor is saying, the first words his mind can truly register once he comes down from the high of another orgasm. The handcuffs are off, and his friend is massaging his wrists to restore circulation.

Ernesto can hardly feel his hands, and they will probably feel like pins and needles later, but he doesn’t care. He hums, face burrowed in the pillow, as Héctor lets go of his hand and speaks again. “I’ll get you something for those welts. And the bite marks. And… everything else.”

Ah, yes. those. Ernesto had forgotten about it all; the sting seems so very, very far away. He just nods and leans his head back down on the pillow, heart hammering in his chest and breathing fast. He hears footsteps, a drawer being opened and he knows Héctor must be getting some salve - but what does grab his attention is something else entirely: absence.

Imelda is not in the room anymore.

Somehow, that stings more than anything else did throughout the whole evening. Even as Héctor returns to the bed and starts spreading salve over his backside, Ernesto finds he cannot even enjoy the soothing coolness. He scowls and struggles to lift himself on his elbows.

“Where--” he starts, only to shut his mouth when there are more steps, Imelda’s own. He lets himself drop back - he won’t look at her now, he suddenly feels something will break if he does, he has never felt more fragile in his life - and shuts his eyes, trying to pretend he never looked around for her in the first place, expecting some sort of mockery.

“How are you?”

Her voice is quiet, and the mattress tips slightly as she sits right by his head. Eyes shut, Ernesto swallows before speaking. “Fine,” he rasps.
“Good,” Imelda is saying, and suddenly her hand is in his hair, brushing back the dishevelled locks. “You look fine, too,” she adds, a hint of humor in her voice that sounds nothing like mockery. All the retorts he thought up seem to vanish in his mind, and Ernesto can only blink in surprise just as she lifts his head and lets him lean it back down on her lap.

She is still naked, her skin is so warm, and she doesn’t stop stroking his hair. Ernesto closes his eyes, and lets out a long sigh. Above him Héctor is still spreading soothing salve, massaging it into the reddened skin with light touches, occasionally pausing to place a kiss on a welt.

“I’d be careful not to sit around too much for the next couple of days,” he murmurs against his skin, and gives a small laugh. “But it was worth it, wasn’t it?”

He could deny it. He would, if not for the fact his eyelids feel so heavy, their touches so soothing. He is so tired, and sated, and he finds an argument is the last thing he wants. So he just nods, and leans his head into Imelda’s touch. She cradles his head, and her thumb brushes across his cheek before she leans in and places a kiss against his temple.

“I’m running you a warm bath. Think you can stand up in about twenty minutes?”

Of course, he should say. I don’t need your help, he should sneer. But he could melt there and then, so he doesn’t. “If you help,” he murmurs, and feels her smile against his skin.

“We will,” Héctor says. His hands go up and down his back in long, soothing strokes. “Stay for the night.”

“My dogs--”

“I’ll walk them and get them here, once we’re done with you,” he reassures him and really, that’s all it takes. Ernesto closes his eyes again, sated and boneless, and rests there under their touch, their scent in his nostrils and hushed words in his ears. All is right in the world.

For a time.
Do you know what the sub drop is? No? Neither does Ernesto.

“I still have no idea why you insist on going by train.”

_I still have no idea why you insist on going at all_, is what Ernesto is really thinking. Héctor can tell. There is something gutting about the chasm between them, how the town they grew up in can hold so many fond memories for one of them and only bitterness for the other.

It is true that Héctor doesn’t need to go - he can honor his parents’ memory from here, too - but being there, and visiting their grave… it is different. Plus, there are faces he likes seeing again, from time to time. Unlike Ernesto, he did not cut all ties.

“It’s quicker,” he finally says, answering to the question Ernesto actually voiced. He puts another pair of trousers in the suitcase, and closes it before one of the chihuahuas can jump in. The little dog looks very displeased, and Héctor gives it an apologetic grin before turning back to Ernesto.

“Besides, Imelda’s brothers will pick us up at the station.”

“The Bobos?”

“The Bobos.”

“In a car.”

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t sound safe.”

“It probably isn’t,” Héctor concedes. “I think they have one license between the two of them.”

“And not an ounce of common sense. If you die in that hole, I won’t come to your funeral,” Ernesto mutters, but then he hesitates, and looks away. “... Tell your parents I said hi,” he adds, causing Héctor to smile a little. Ernesto was fond on them; their door had always been open to their son’s best friend, a home away from home when his own place got rowdy.

He remembers, distantly, a few times Ernesto actually referred to his mother as _Tía Emilia_. The memory causes something to grip his throat, tightly.

“I’ll make sure to tell them you’d come, too, if being anywhere near Santa Cecilia didn’t make you break out in hives,” he says in the end, and raises an eyebrow. Ernesto is standing by the door, leaning against the wall and right by an empty chair. “... Not sitting down?” he asks. Ernesto rolls his eyes, and throws him the closest thing he can grab - namely, a shirt he’d left on the chair. Héctor laughs, the lump in his throat gone. “Hah! But it was worth it. Admit it.”

“Never,” Ernesto says, but his lips are curled in a smile as well. With his clothes on, there is no telling what happened the previous night - and the marks it left on him. But they are there, and the
fact Ernesto bears them gladly is… a nice thought, he has to admit.

“Of course it was worth it,” Imelda’s voice comes from the next room over, sounding just a touch smug. She pops her head through the door, her purse in one hand and the train tickets in the other. Her suitcase is already at the entrance. “I’m calling the cab,” she tells Héctor before turning to Ernesto. “I think one of your dogs got stuck in the bathtub. No clue how it got in,” she adds, and reaches up to brush back his hair, which isn’t quite as tidy as usual.

It is a casual gesture, and Ernesto doesn’t seem to think anything of it - no whining about his hair, no surprise. Héctor allows himself a secret grin before smoothing his expression.

“I’m almost done here. Go rescue your dog, we’ll be off soon.”

As Ernesto leaves quickly - they can hear a dog yapping from the bathroom, like it’s actually in some sort of danger - Héctor and Imelda exchange a glance. “He looks fine,” he says.

“I do like him better without his hair all gelled up,” she concedes, and Héctor snorts a laugh.

“Hah! No, I mean-- he seems all right,” he says. To his amusement Imelda rears back, clearly embarrassed by the lapse, before regaining composure.

“Of course he’s all right. We made sure of that,” she says tightly, closing her purse. “We’re good to go,” she adds.

Neither of them can imagine how wrong they are.

“... And so he said, ‘please never return’, signed, and we got our driving licence!”

“Well, one of us got a licence.”

“Not telling who.”

“We’re not even sure.”

“Works for both, though.”

“Hey, Imelda, why is Héctor green?”

To be absolutely fair, Imelda thinks, Héctor is not quite green. Green-ish, maybe, by the time Óscar slams the brakes and brings the call to a stop - well, a stall, since he didn’t bother to put down the clutch - in front of their house. They jerk forward before being brought back on their seats by the belts. Clutching his suitcase to his chest for dear life, Héctor lets out a long sigh of relief before he smiles.

“That was-- fun,” he croaks, fake as a three pesos coin.

“You are not driving us back,” Imelda says, throwing the door open, and for a moment before she regains her balance she almost stumbles back. God, it feels like she went through a round or two in a washing machine. Héctor needs to lean on the car a little, but it looks like he won’t, after all, hurl his guts. Which is good, really: last thing she needs now is having to deal with her parents after her husband greets them by throwing up on their doorstep.

“Imelda!” As though summoned at the door by the screech of slamming brakes - Imelda thinks she can smell something burning - her mother is suddenly there, throwing her arms around her. “It’s good to see you, mija. How was the journey?”
“It was fine,” she says, deciding to bring up her concerns over her brothers driving anything at all, be it a car or a bike, later. “Where’s papá?”

“He went to the parish to make sure everything is ready for Emila and Ricardo’s function,” she says. “It will be tomorrow at ten.”

Of course, the function in their memory is what they’re there for; tomorrow will be the tenth anniversary of their death. Imelda glances back - Héctor has recovered enough to open the booth and pull out her luggage, too - before speaking quietly.

“Thanks for organising it. I brought some money, as an offering,” she says. It is not mandatory to give the parish money for the memorial service, but of course it’s expected.

As a response, her mother shakes her head. “No need. Your father will take care of it.”

Imelda frowns, and lifts her chin. “We can afford--” she begins, a defensive note to her voice, but her mother holds up a hand.

“We know you can. It’s just… a gift from our part. Emilia and Ricardo were our friends, too.”

Oh, Imelda thinks. Right. She is so used to expect seeing her choices and achievements dismissed or played down, maybe she gets defensive too quickly. To be fair, her parents did get better. Maybe it is time she starts to accept something from them without feeling like it means having to swallow her pride. “… Of course,” she says, and smiles. “Gracias.”

“De nada. Oh, Héctor! Here you are! You’re looking good, considering that Felipe drove.”

“I think it was Óscar,” Héctor laugs, and gives her a hug. “You look good, Milagros.”

“Oh, flatterer,” she mutters, giving his cheek a light smack before pulling back. She looks at them both. “You two are much too thin. Come in, I have only three days to get you to eat…”

Imelda bites back a retort - I cook plenty, too - and just follows her inside. Annoyance fades quickly at the familiar sights and smells; at Héctor’s obvious joy to be there and her mother’s pride when he samples her cooking and declares it to be ‘delicious as always, mamá Milagros’. It doesn’t take long for her to smile along, too.

It’s good to be home.

Ernesto is fine.

All right, so he can’t sit down. He can definitely feel the welts on his ass and lower back and the back of his thighs, he can feel the bruises and the soreness in his back, but… he is fine. Better than fine.

Before falling asleep the previous night - so sore and sated, so exhausted and satisfied, wrapped in a towel and resting between two warm bodies - Ernesto thought briefly that morning would bring a price to pay. Embarrassment, for sure, maybe some sort of mockery.

He was wrong. Embarrassment failed to make an appearance, and so did mockery. He awakened to the smell of coffee, alone on the bed, to be treated to breakfast on a tray less than a minute later. His stomach grumbling, he ate quickly and even enjoyed the small talk about the weather and the trip ahead; even the thought of Santa Cecilia failed to sour his mood.
All right, so there was a tug of something in his chest as Héctor and Imelda prepared to leave--
without me
--for their hometown, but it was easily dismissed.

They will be back soon, and he is fine.

“Hola, mamá. Papá. I, uh, brought flowers. I sat on them, sorry about that, but they’re still good - just
need some water. We’re holding the function tomorrow, but I figured I’d… come say hi first.”

There is no answer, of course, but… well, it would be pretty worrying if there were any. As he fills
up the vase, Héctor glances around. There are a few other visitors to the Santa Cecilia cemetery, but
most are well away, and no one can hear him talking to the grave. Even if they could, he he doubts
anyone would mind. A lot of people do that.

“Bet this place isn’t going to be so empty next time I visit,” Héctor says, placing down the vase and
putting the flowers in. Every year, on Día de los Muertos, the whole place is brimming with people,
flowers, candles and offerings. “I’ll get you the usual - oh, and I learned how to make Pan Dulce!
Without help. Well, minimal help. It’s good, honest. I’ll get you some so you can try it out.”

The flowers sorted, he sits cross-legged in front of the grave and picks at some weeds that had the
audacity to try growing right below the marble headstone. He glances at the single picture on it - his
parents, in each other’s arms and smiling at the camera.

It was taken only a few weeks after his mother had found out she was pregnant, or so he recalls
being told. They always wanted a big family, but that hadn’t happened: it had taken years of trying
for Héctor to be born, and then there had were no others.

“It’s all right, mamá,” Héctor remembers saying once, when he’d realized his excited talk about a
classmate’s baby sister saddened her. “I don’t need want one, anyway.”

“He’s already got me, Señora,” Ernesto, then ten years old, had declared. I made her mother laugh,
and ruffle both of their hair. Héctor often huffed when she did, but he never really minded. He would give anything now for her to be able to do that again.

He runs his hand through his hair, trying to pretend it’s her touch, and glances at his papá’s smiling face. “Looking good, both of you,” he finally tells the photo. It is one of the very few ones that escaped the complete destruction of their home, when a leaking gas pipe and a spark destroyed everything within seconds.

“It must have been quick,” someone - old Prospero, maybe? - told him, in a clumsy but well-meaning attempt to make him feel better. “They were gone before they knew it.”

It is a vague memory; looking back that entire week was shrouded in fog. He recalls being in the next town over with Ernesto for a gig when his phone had rung, only minutes before stepping on stage.
“You need to come back now. There has been an… an accident.”

From that moment on, there are only flashes. His phone hitting the ground, the way the room spun around him, Ernesto grasping his shoulders and asking what was wrong; the drive back to Santa Cecilia, with Ernesto pushing his father’s old car to the limit; the smoke in the distance where his house used to stand; the crowd of people in the street when the car came to a screeching halt, several hands reaching out for him, to hold him back, keep him away.

He doesn’t remember screaming but he must have, because his throat was sore for days; he could still hardly speak on the day of the funeral, as he stood before the black caskets, Ernesto’s arm around his shoulders. He remembers, vaguely, Imelda’s hand squeezing his own - but they weren’t that close, then. It was Ernesto to organize everything; Héctor had been so lost, so numb, entirely useless. If not for him… who knows where he’d even be now, a decade on.

Still wandering in that thick fog, maybe, hardly remembering how to breathe.

“All right. Maybe let’s… not tell them all of it.

“… Well, things are going well,” he finishes with a chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck. “Oh, and Imelda’s business has really picked up! I wish you had time to know her. I mean, you knew her, but- -really know her. She’s amazing and I am so lucky-- I wish you were there when--” his voice breaks and ay, maybe it wasn’t a good idea, insisting to visit them alone. With a sniffle, goes to wipe his eyes… only that he can’t. Something is holding his arm back, like he got his sleeve caught in something. “Wha--”

“Ruff!”

“… Huh. And how long have you been here?”
The hairless dog - a Xolo, not just a mangy stray - seems to grin at him through the mouthful of his sleeve, furiously wagging its tail. It makes Héctor laugh.

“Sorry, but I’ve got no snacks to share,” he says, pulling back his arm. The dog lets go of his sleeve and looks at him, tongue hanging almost to the ground, before shaking itself - causing droplets of drool to fly through the air, and that impossibly long tongue to wrap itself halfway around its muzzle.

“Hah! Come on, boy - go back home,” Héctor chuckles, knowing he’s probably looking at a stray, and picks up a stick from the ground. He throws it and the dog nearly flies after it, catching it in mid-air and starting to enthusiastically chew it up before even hitting the ground.

Héctor laughs again, feeling a little lighter, the urge to weep gone. He turns back to the grave to fill in his parents on what he’s been up to in the past few months - well, most of it - with a smile back on his face. When he finishes and stands, turning to leave the cemetery and head back, he doesn’t realize the dog is still there, staring at him from among the graves.

Maybe he’s… not as fine as he thought he was.

It is a thought Ernesto has been trying to chase away for a good few hours - trying to ignore the tightness in his chest, the shortness of breath despite just being out to walk his dogs at a leisure pace,
a knot in his stomach that seems to be getting tighter and tighter... and, most of all, a growing sense of dread that is all the more frightening as it is senseless.

This is stupid. He’s fine. There is no reason to feel like this, none whatsoever.

“I must be coming down with something,” he mutters to no one in particular, reaching up to rub his forehead as he walks through the entrance and towards his apartment, the dogs yapping and pulling. Yes, that must be it. He’ll get in bed and sleep it off, and then--

“Talking to yourself is the first sign of madness, did you know that?”

Oh, no. Not the old guy. With a snarl, Ernesto tears his hand off his forehead to glare. Old Chicharrón, who seems to like Héctor for some reason and dislike him intensely for some other reason Ernesto cannot begin to imagine, is standing on the stairs, glaring at him and at his dogs. He’s always been a grumpy pain in the ass, but he’s become even worse since Ernesto has taken in the chihuahuas, complaining endlessly about their yapping and clearly not realizing his grumbling is a lot more annoying than any noise a dog could make.

“Mind your own business,” he says… or at least, he tries to. The moment he tries to speak his voice is suddenly stuck in his throat, his chest is tight and-- why-- why is he glaring at him like that, like he did something wrong?

Because you did. You did everything wrong. Look at you, look what you let them do to you, and where are they now? They’re probably laughing at you, you know that?

“I--” Ernesto croaks, but he cannot force words out and oh, Christ, his eyes are burning.

Maybe he knows. He heard you, or they told him - told everyone. Half of Santa Cecilia is having a laugh at your expenses right now. Just wait until your parents get word of it. They won’t even be surprised, your old man was right about you. You’re a stain. Worthless. Did you really think a passable voice would make any difference? Change anyone’s minds?

“What, cat got your tongue?” the old man scoffs, and he seems about to add something, then he pauses and blinks. “Huh. You’re... not looking good. Drank too much again?”

No, no, no. What’s happening to me?

The dread gripping his throat turns into something close to panic because he can tell he’s about to cry and that is not, under any circumstances, happening in front of this cabrón. So Ernesto does the only thing he can do: he scoffs, lowers his head - he can’t look him in the eye, he will break if he does, like he could read what he let them do to him on his face and he’s never felt so ashamed before - and marches past the old man like an angry bull, almost knocking him over.

There are yells, but he hardly hears a word. He throws his door open, storms in, yanks his dogs’ leads to get them inside as well, slams the door shut… and then he freezes as the chihuahuas yelp. He looks down to see they’re huddled together, whining, cowering. They are so tiny, just how hard did he yank them?

“No,” he chokes out. “Don’t look at me like that, I didn’t-- didn’t mean--” he babbles, and that’s it. His voice breaks, his knees fail, and he sinks on the ground with his back to the door, crying his eyes out for no reason whatsoever. It’s infuriating and humiliating and confusing, and he cannot stop. He sits back, and the sting of the welts and bruises makes him weep harder, no matter how dulled it is. He hates it. He hates himself for allowing it.

“Lo siento,” he manages, and the dogs are all over him in moment, whining and pawing and trying
to lick his face. He holds them close, breath itching, and slowly quiets down - telling himself that he’s fine, once he stops weeping he’ll be all better.

But he isn’t.

It takes Héctor a very conscious effort not to bawl before, during, and after the function.

Not so much because of the function itself - although Padre Edmundo said several unexpected heartfelt things, a welcomed break from the usual droning - but because of the sheer amount of people who showed up: old childhood friends, friends of his parents, people they just used to buy their groceries from. They’re ten years dead, without relatives other than him, and the church is packed for them.

By the time he’s done shaking hands and giving his thanks to everyone as the church empties, Héctor is feeling a little light-headed; the steadiness of Imelda’s hand on his back is all that keeps him grounded.

“They sure are missed, huh?” he murmurs as they walk down the steps, finally alone.

Imelda smiles, and takes his hand. “Very much,” she says softly. “Do you want to visit--”

“... Héctor?”

The voice is one Héctor hasn’t heard in years, but he immediately recognizes it and can feel the faint smile freezing on his lips. Barely aware of Imelda’s perplexed gaze, he makes an effort to smooth his expression before turning.

Ernesto’s mother looks... older than last time he’s seen her, and by more a few years; it’s as though a decade or more was dropped on her shoulders. No only because there is more gray in her hair, deeper wrinkles around her eyes: there is something else, too, something hollow and desperate on her face as she stares at him.

“Señora de la Cruz,” he finds himself saying, his mouth dry. He hadn't seen her during the function. “This is a, er... you look good.”

What crosses her features is not a smile, but a rather brave attempt at one. “It’s good to see you. You too, Imelda,” she adds. Imelda, who doesn’t know Adela as well as Héctor does - who knows next to nothing of her past the fact Ernesto has cut her out of his life - makes an effort to smile back, but pity is painfully obvious in her gaze... even more so when Adela speaks again.

“How... How’s Ernesto?” Her voice shakes a little, and there is so much desperate love in the way she speaks his name alone that it makes Héctor’s heart ache.

“He-- he’s fine,” he finds himself saying, hoping for the ground to swallow him up, praying that she won’t ask him to tell her where he is, how to reach him. He promised Ernesto he would never tell either of his parents, if he met them, and he will keep that promise but ay, it would hurt. “We’ve had a few concerts, and... more are planned. Possibly a contract with a record company. It’s going well.”

For just a moment, her smile seems real; it makes the desperation when she speaks again all the more painful. “That’s... that’s good. It’s what he always wanted,” she manages. “Can you tell him that we’re-- if, he’d listen...”

“Señora de la Cruz--” Héctor begins, only to trail off when she pauses and reaches up to press a hand on her mouth, struggling to maintain composure. He is vaguely aware of Imelda’s fixed gaze, of the
thin line of her mouth; he knows this has to look really, really bad in her eyes. She doesn’t know why Ernesto has cut his parents off, and he… he cannot tell her. He promised his best friend he wouldn’t tell.

“My apologies,” Adela finally says, and draws in a deep breath before reaching into her purse and pulling something out - a sealed envelope. “I know he doesn’t want to speak to us. But if you could give him this, I-- we’d be so grateful.”

We. Her husband, too? It’s hard, to imagine that man anywhere near grateful, but it is not the moment to argue. Héctor swallows a lump in his throat. “Of course,” he says, and he really wants to add something reassuring, but he doesn’t know what to say. So in the end he just nods awkwardly, and takes the letter. “I’ll give it to him as soon as we go back.”

“Thank you,” she chokes out, and nods. “God bless you,” she adds before walking away quickly, before she can cry - so that if she does cry, it will be in private. Héctor watches her leave, his heart like lead in his chest, and glances at Imelda. Her gaze is hard as stone.

“I know this looks bad, but--”

“You don’t need to make excuses for him, and I don’t need to hear them,” she cuts him off, and that is all; she doesn’t bring the encounter up again, doesn’t ask any more questions. It is a relief, because he wouldn’t be able to answer… but at the same time he hates seeing that harshness in her eyes, even though it’s not for him.

For the rest of the stay, the letter stays in his coat’s pocket, and it seems to burn.

This is bad. This makes no sense. And, Jesus Christ, it hurts - something’s been hurting for two days and he has no idea why. He hates it. He hates himself.

Burrowed under the blankets, he feels as though he’s drowning in fog. With his TV going in the background and four dogs curled up against him, Ernesto squeezes his eyes shut and refuses, refuses to weep. He’s holding his cell phone in one hand, and part of him really wants to use it to call Héctor and Imelda, tell them something is wrong - something is horribly wrong, he needs them to get back, he needs them there, why have they left him alone?

But he doesn’t. He hurts but he’s also so, so ashamed. The mere idea of mockery--of course they’ll mock me after what happened, after what I let them do--makes him feel even worse, like he could shatter if he just hears their voices. In the end he throws the phone away, and curls up tighter. He just needs to sleep it off, he tells himself. He feels so empty and drained, surely sleep will come quickly if he just waits long enough.

But it doesn’t. He lays awake for what feels like a very long time, until his dogs are whining so loudly, so hungry, and he forces himself to sit upright on the couch to get up.

And, suddenly, the doorbell rings.

It’s fair to say Héctor has seen Ernesto looking a complete mess several times. It usually involves alcohol aside from the one occasion they never talk about, when he showed at his door sullen and bruised to ask if he could stay for the night.

Héctor thought that was the worst he’d ever see him; then he thought his near-breakdown at the vet's was it. Now, as the door opens to reveal a pale wreck of a man where his friend should be, he knows he was wrong.
“E-Ernesto?” he croaks, otherwise speechless. He doesn’t really want to say it out loud because he knows Ernesto would take it the wrong way, but he does look… pretty awful, really. It’s as though he hasn’t slept a minute since Friday, his skin an unhealthy ashen color, cheeks covered in stubble and hair unkempt. But his gaze is the worst thing, glassy and distant and haunted.

“What do you want?” Ernesto asks, and even the voice sounds wrong, so horribly hollow.

“I, uh… is. Is everything all right?” Héctor dares, gaining himself another sullen look.

“Yes,” he drones, avoiding his gaze. It’s as though he’s staring at something above Héctor’s right shoulder. “What do you want?”

“I… we, uh, were in Santa Cecilia--”

“I know,” Ernesto says coldly, and suddenly his eyes are on him, and he looks… angry is a strong word, but not pleased, either. When he speaks again, there is an accusing note to his voice. “Went off for the weekend and left me here.”

All right, so something is very wrong. Ernesto will occasional pout whenever he feels he’s being ignored, but this? This is too much. “Ernesto, what happened? You look--”

“I’m fine. Tell me what you want.”

Héctor hesitates a moment before he takes the sealed envelope from his pocket and hands it over to him. “We, uhm. We met your mother. She asked me to give you this,” he adds.

For several moments, Ernesto says nothing. He stares at the envelope in Héctor’s hands as though he’s handing him a live snake, and it is then that Héctor notices something else: his friend’s hands are shaking. “Madre de Dios, Ernesto, what--”

“Is this a joke?” His voice is like the crack of a whip, and it causes Héctor to trail off, wincing. Ernesto is staring at him with sudden fury, and his shaky hands clench into fists. “You know I never wanted to have anything to do with either of them!”

“I know, but she pleaded--”

“I don't care what she said! You promised me, Héctor!”

“I didn’t tell her anything! Not where you live, not your number. I only took the letter for you, but if you don’t want to open it, that’s fine - we'll just throw it away and--”

“You don’t give a damn, do you? You never gave a damn,” Ernesto snaps, and he takes an unsteady step forward, causing Héctor to back off. The door slams shut over the dogs’ frantic barking.

Something’s wrong. This isn’t right. He’s not well.

“Ernesto? Amigo, you’re not…” Héctor manages, taking another step back, and suddenly his back is against the wall, and there is nowhere he can go. Confusion begins to give way to fear - for the very first time, he is afraid of his best friend. “You need to--”

“I needed you, all right?” Ernesto cuts him off, and his features twist in a pained expression. “You and that… and her, and… you left me here, you never--”

“Enough.” Imelda’s voice causes him to trail off. She took the elevator to get home with the luggages as he went to Ernesto’s door, but she must have heard the commotion and suddenly she’s
between them. One shove and Ernesto is stumbling back, her hand is gripping Héctor’s own, and she’s getting him out of the corner Ernesto had driven him to, to the stairs leading up to their apartment.

_No, wait. Something’s wrong with Ernesto. We can’t leave him like this,_ Héctor thinks.

He almost says as much, but Imelda speaks first. “Look at you, you’re a mess,” she snaps, her voice cold. “Sort yourself out, for God’s sake. Pretend you’re an adult.”

For a moment, Ernesto looks hurt before he scowls again. “You left--”

“For three days, yes,” Imelda cuts him off. “We had a lovely time and we’re not going to let your stupid drama sour it. Whatever your problem is, and whatever reason you think you have not to speak to that poor soul unfortunate enough to be your mother--”

“Imelda…”

“You know nothing, you--”

“-- It’s none of our business,” Imelda snaps, ignoring both of them. Her grip on Héctor’s hand is warm, tight, protective. She turns to leave. “Grow up.”

It’s far from the worst thing Imelda has said to him, but somehow it seems to hit him harder than anything ever has. Under Héctor’s stunned gaze Ernesto takes a staggering step back, his shoulders hunch as though a weight was suddenly dropped on him, features twisting.

“Wait,” he chokes out. Suddenly there are _tears_ in his voice, and Imelda stops in her tracks, letting go of Héctor’s hand in her surprise. With both of their gazes on him, Ernesto seems to crumble: his back hits the wall, his knees give in, and then he’s on the ground. He burrows his face in his hands, lets out a keening noise. “Por favor.”

Héctor doesn’t remember moving, but the next moment he’s kneeling next to him, passing an arm over his shoulders. Ernesto is shaking and cold, he presses his face against his shirt and Héctor’s never seen him like this. It terrifies him, but he tries not to let it show.

“Hey, hey. It’s okay. We’re going nowhere,” he says, and looks up at Imelda.

She’s staring at Ernesto, and her expression has gone from stunned to attentive, and then - just as Ernesto mumbles that something hurts, _it really hurts, what’s happening to me -_ Héctor sees realization dawning in. Whatever is wrong with him, she seems to have an idea of what it is. “... Ernesto,” she calls out, crouching down as well, and puts a hand on his arm. Suddenly her voice is gentle, and her touch is light. “Come home with us. It will be fine.”
There is a sharp intake of breath, a shake of his head. “No. It won’t.”

“It isn’t going to last.”

“I’m going loco.”

“Nonsense. You just need to ride it out. It won’t-- Ernesto, look at me,” Imelda says, and grabs his chin to make him do just that. Her voice is firmer. “It won’t last. It’s just the drop.”

That causes Héctor to blink in confusion. Drop? What dro-- oh. Realization hits him suddenly, and he feels very, very stupid… and very guilty as well. They’ve given Ernesto aftercare on Friday, and he seemed fine, but he should have known this could happen. They hadn’t thought for a moment it would, not to Ernesto of all people… and they left him alone to deal with it.

“You need a bath,” Imelda is speaking again, practical as always. They help Ernesto on his feet and while it’s him he leans on he’s hanging to Imelda’s words, eyes wide. Héctor has never seen him this vulnerable, not even as kids. “And to eat, when was last time you ate?”

He blinks. “I… yesterday. I think.”

“Well, that won’t do at all. Come. Mind the steps, last thing you need is a literal drop…”

In the end, the letter from Ernesto’s mother goes back in Héctor’s pocket, and doesn’t come out for the rest of the evening. They get him into a hot bath and Héctor helps by washing his back and hair before he lends him his bathrobe. They give him a hot meal Imelda somehow put together in less than fifteen minutes, and Héctor manages to get him to have half a bar of dark chocolate too, as well as glass after glass of water.

Ernesto goes through the motions with hardly a word and without looking at them, so meek and quiet it’s more than slightly unsettling, but at least now Héctor knows what’s causing this and he
knows that Imelda is right - it won’t last. He just needs a bit of help as he recovers, that is all, until the adrenaline and endorphin go back to normal levels again.

Imelda explains him as much, tells him all about the drop, what causes it, how it’s not going to last. “You’ll be fine. Give it another day or two. You’ll stay with us meanwhile,” she says.

Ernesto listens, nods and says nothing, but he seems calmer and eventually settles down on their couch, a blanket around him, glancing listlessly at the TV. The dogs - Héctor brought them upstairs after a quick toilet break - are curled up on his lap, and it seems to help.

Héctor and Imelda settle down as well, at either side of him. Héctor passes an arm over his shoulders, and Imelda lets Ernesto lean on her - and takes his hand when he reaches out. She rubs her thumb over his palm in slow circular motions while Héctor runs his hand through damp hair and talks about a song he’s thinking of writing, about how much he needs a new guitar case, about their next performance in a couple of weeks, about the weather, about anything that crosses his mind. And finally, he can feel Ernesto beginning to relax.

He sighs and leans on him, his hand still in Imelda’s own. “Héctor, what I said--”

“It’s all right, amigo. Just rest.”

“I didn’t mean--”

“Sleep,” Imelda chides him, reaching to brush some hair out of his eyes with her free hand. There is another sigh, and Ernesto finally closes his eyes. Héctor and Imelda exchange a glance over him, and Imelda smiles a bit. He’ll be fine, she mouths, and Héctor smiles back.

Yes. He’ll be fine, and they will stay right there to make sure of it.
Steady

Chapter Notes

No smut in this chapter either because Some Shit Needed Sorting Out (and also Ernesto was definitely not in the right state of mind). Will make up for that in the next one, I promise!

The next morning, after they wake up on the couch - with an aching back, because sleeping huddled together on the couch does no favors to one’s spinal column - Ernesto claims he’s perfectly fine, which is an obvious lie.

Imelda only has to stare for three seconds and a half before he recants and says that he feels better, which seems closer to the truth. He’s functional, if nothing else, enough to take his yapping dogs down for a walk before returning, gaze still downcast. By the time he does, she’s made some breakfast for everyone.

“You're going to rub this in my face at every turn, aren't you.”

The accusation comes as soon as they're alone in the kitchen, with Héctor off to have his morning shower. Imelda pauses while pouring a cup of coffee, and realizes that part of her has been expecting to hear that.

Ernesto has a special knack for being constantly wrong.

“No,” she says quietly, and finishes pouring the coffee. She turns to put it down on the table in front of Ernesto. He’s sitting with an uncharacteristic hunch, gaze fixed on his hands on the table; he brushed his hair, but it’s not as nearly done as it usually is. He doesn't even glance at her, or the cup. “I am not.”

He scoffs, but it lacks the usual bite. He speaks flatly, gaze distant. “As if. The moment you decide to put me in my place, and you need something to hold against me, you will bring this u-”

“I won't. This was my fault.”

The reply causes Ernesto to finally look up at her, blinking, clearly taken aback. “What...?”

Imelda sighs, and pours a cup for herself as well before sitting. She places her hands around the cup, its warmth comforting against her palms. Across the table, Ernesto is doing the same.

“I owe you an apology,” she finally says. “I was the one with the rod. I should have handled it better instead of just assuming immediate aftercare was all you'd need,” she adds, and looks straight at Ernesto. He’s staring at her as though she’s grown antlers. “I knew Héctor and I would be going to Santa Cecilia the next day. We shouldn't have left you on your own. I... misjudged the situation.”

For a moment, Ernesto says nothing - then a bitter expression crosses his features. “You thought I could handle it and I should have. I should have dealt with it. I should have--”

“Ernesto,” she cuts him off, and reaches to put a hand on his arm without thinking. “Listen. That's where you're wrong, that's where we both were wrong. Anyone can experience a drop. Anyone. It
doesn't matter how manly you think you are. And I should have known better,” she added, giving his hand a squeeze. “I'm sorry.”

Ernesto stares at her hand on top of his own for several moments before he sniffs and abruptly reaches up to wipe this eyes with the heel of his other hand. “I hate it,” he chokes out. “I'm not supposed to be like… like this.”

“It's physiological. It's not a personal failing.”

There is another sniffle, then Ernesto looks back at her. His mouth is pulled in a tight line, but he’s already losing his battle for control. He’s more vulnerable than Imelda has ever seen him, it is because of her, and she gets absolutely no satisfaction from it; only a sense of shame because this could have been avoided, or softened, if only she hadn’t gone on assumptions.

This is not how she’d wanted to break him.

“You won’t tell anyone,” he chokes out, and Imelda shakes her head.

“No, no one.”

“You won’t bring this up again.”

She squeezes his hand. “Only if you decide to.”

Ernesto nods and, very slowly, he pulls his hand away from her grip. He rests both elbows on the table, burrows his face in his hands, and bursts in tears. The keening sound she heard before, the one he made while trying to hold back, is gone. Everything that comes with a bad drop - the hurt, the fear, the guilt and shame and the crushing sense of worthlessness - leaves him in broken, harsh sobs that shake his entire frame. Something drips down his face, into the cooling cup of coffee. His dogs, who were sitting under his chair, suddenly stand on their hind legs, whining, pawing at his shins to get his attention… or to snap him out of it.

Imelda won’t remember standing up later, but she must have, because the next moment she’s standing by his chair, and reaching to touch his head. Ernesto turns blindly and then he’s pressing his face against the apron, shaking, arms reaching around her waist to hold onto her.

She tries to think of something to say, but her mind draws a blank, and she just combs her fingers through his hair. In the end, she doesn’t need to speak: the next moment Héctor is in the kitchen, too, fresh out of the shower, one hand on Ernesto’s shuddering back and murmuring that it’s all right, he’s all right, give me a moment, amigo.

He does let it all out, or at least a good chunk of it, and in the end his sobs subside and turn into whimpers first, then shuddering breaths. By the time he falls quiet and pulls back, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand and mumbling that he’s fine, he’s all right, he’s all right, give me a moment, the coffee is hopelessly cold and Imelda pours it down the drain. She fills a glass with water instead, and puts it on the table without a word, along with a napkin. Ernesto blows his nose and takes the glass, just as silently, to drink in slow gulps.

“Gracias,” he rasps, putting it down, and Imelda nods.

“Don’t mention it,” she says, only realizing now that Héctor is nowhere to be seen. “Where…?”

A strumming noise causes her to pause and there he is, in the doorway, guitar in hand. He grins at them both, that boyish grin of his, like nothing at all is wrong. “I thought I’d heard a trumpet,” he says lightly, causing Ernesto to roll his eyes - a small, familiar gesture, and Héctor’s grin widens. “I
missed my guitar during the visit. How about a quick show for my favorite public?”

Maybe that’s something else they all need now, a bit of normalcy, and Ernesto nods immediately. Soon enough they’re on the couch, leaning against each other, watching Héctor play a soft tune, and another… and then that odd song he wrote to humor old Chicharrón, one day he’d accidentally locked himself out while Imelda was away and Ernesto wasn’t home.

The old grump had let him wait for either to return in his living room, which was more thoughtful than she’d thought him capable of. Imelda had invited him for dinner to return the favor, and while he had no accepted - he wanted to be on his own, apparently - from that day on he’d occasionally stop to talk with Héctor about music, and she was the only other person in the entire building he never failed to greet upon meeting. A real greeting, not a grunt.

Ernesto isn’t especially fond on the ending of that one - his deep and meaningful comment when he first heard it was something along the lines of ‘who’d want to fuck an ugly woman’, which almost resulted in impromptu castration and was never repeated in her presence again - but this time, he says nothing… and halfway through the song, he even hums along.

It’s progress and, really, his voice is nice to listen to when he’s not raising it to sing over hers.

“You lied about having done it before, didn’t you?”

Imelda’s question is spoken quietly, but it may very well be a gunshot: it causes Héctor to go very still, and Ernesto to recoil. When Héctor looks at his best friend, he sees him immediately looking down, shoulders tense - a reaction more telling than anything he may say.

And, to Héctor’s immense shame, it comes as no surprise at all.

Of course he lied, he just wouldn’t have admitted having no experience in something while we did. He’s always been like this, I should have known, should have guessed. I should have asked. Should have questioned.

But they hadn’t, not him and not Imelda - who, he can tell now, is thinking exactly the same thing: they should have known. It isn’t often he sees guilt on her face; he does now, and it is gutting.

Ernesto, however, doesn’t see it. His gaze is fixed on the snoozing chihuahua on his knees, snuggled up against the palm of his hand. He’s been getting… better throughout the day, but he has yet to return to his usual self. Right now, he makes Héctor think of an animal who just realized it set foot in a trap that will spring at the first movement.

“I…” he starts, and falls quiet. Normally, he would deny; now he doesn’t even try. Héctor wants to hug him, wants to strangle him, wants to cry and yell until his face turns blue. It was a stupid lie, damn it, almost as stupid as him for believing it… but he holds back from doing anything, and he lets his gaze shift to Imelda. Her eyes are fixed on Ernesto, her expression unreadable and her frame rigid.

Bad time to ask that question, he thinks. Just don’t get angry. Please, please, don’t get angry.

As though she just heard his mute plea, Imelda lifts her gaze a moment to look at him. Something in her eyes softens, and she gives a very small nod before putting a hand on Ernesto’s shoulder. It makes him wince, but then his frame relaxes, just a little.

“Ernesto,” she calls out. “That wasn’t the truth, was it? You had no experience at all.”
A moment of silence, a shaky intake of breath, and he speaks without looking up. "... Lo siento," he all but whispers. That is enough to make any desire Héctor may have to yell evaporate like a drop of water under the summer sun.

"We know that, amigo," he mutters, shifting close to put a hand on his other shoulder. "It’s all right, we’re not mad," he adds. Imelda gives him a look that spells out ‘speak for yourself’, but she doesn’t argue, so he doesn’t think she’s really angry.

"Of course you are,” Ernesto mutters. His thumb is rubbing Clara’s head in gentle strokes, and he doesn’t look up. His voice is not as desperately hollow as the previous evening, but still worryingly quiet. “I brought it on myself, didn't I?"

It sounds so wrong, hearing Ernesto blaming himself. Usually he will blame everything, and everyone, before he admits to a fault; it is an aspect of him that has always been there. Héctor no longer even noticed it, until Imelda pointed it out to him.

Imelda hesitates - hard to deal with Ernesto just admitting to being in the wrong; it is oddly unsettling - before she sighs. "I don't know if this could have been handled better if you'd told me the truth," she says. "Maybe. Maybe not. We shouldn't have left you alone either way, but we did. You shouldn't have lied to us, but you did. Maybe it wasn't the right time to go this far. You need to trust me, and I-- we need to be able to trust you."

Ernesto nods in silence; no argument, just that silent nod, gaze low. Imelda sighs again.

“... All right. We can talk about this another time. We’ll just put this thing on hold for a whi--”

“No,” Ernesto speaks suddenly, lifting his head. There is a note of desperation in his voice. “I told you, I’m sorry!”

“Hey, hey, we know,” Héctor says quickly, and his hand slides to rub his upper back. “It’s just--”

“And I’m fine, you said I’ll be fine!”

“Yes, but that’s not the point. It’s best to let some time pass before we consider giving it another go, if we do at all,” Imelda says, her voice sterner. “Last thing we need is for you to have another drop because we didn’t-- what is it?” she adds, her expression turning into a confused one.

Ernesto blinks at her. “Ah. You meant-- that. I thought--” he trails off, gaze shifting between the two of them, then he clears his throat and looks down again. “Uh, nevermind.”

Héctor and Imelda share a perplexed gaze. “You thought… what?” he asks. Ernesto shakes his head, and… is it him, or his friend seems to be actually turning red? He grins, leaning in to rest his head on his knee so that that he can peer up at him, legs against the couch’s backrest. The chihuahua on his other knee licks his hair, tail wagging, before jumping off to join the others at the other end of the room. “Oh, you thought we were gonna call the whole thing off?”

“Shut up,” Ernesto grunts, looking away. Ah, now that sounds more like him. Héctor’s grin gets, if possible, even wider.

“Thought we were gonna leave you out in the cold, mi amigo?”

“Another word and I’ll break that guitar over your head.”

“Oh, now you sound a lot better,” Héctor laughs, and gets upright again before he slaps a hand on his shoulder. “See, you’re almost you again.”
Ernesto scoffs, but he says nothing to protest, though he seems supremely offended by Imelda’s snicker. He leans back on the couch with a huff, crossing his arms. “Whatever,” he grumbles, but then Héctor leans in to kiss his temple and the scowl fades a little. He glances up at them, and seems to shrink a little. “It’s just… we’re having a good time,” he mutters.

“Most of the time,” Imelda agrees, and that simple remark feels like a victory to Héctor. She seems a little unsure for a moment, eyeing Ernesto like she’s just noticed something for the first time, but then she shakes her head and stands. “I think I’ll go fix some lunch. Are you going to help, Ernesto?”

“... Huh? Why me?”

“Why not? You’re such a fine cook,” she says, and suddenly smiles, reaching to tilt up his chin. She stares at him in the eye, smirking. “Or… may it be that that delicious dinner was actually take-away from a restaurant?”

“Wha-- it was not!” Ernesto protests, his voice a little too high to convey the sense of outrage he is probably trying to show. Imelda raises an eyebrow, and Héctor can see his shoulders dropping. “... I. I had it delivered,” he mumbles.

As Héctor sticks a fist directly in his mouth not to laugh too loudly, Imelda smirks. “I knew it,” she says lightly, and lets go of his chin. Héctor laughs as she leaves.

“Something you should have learned, amigo - you don’t get to keep secrets from her forever,” he tells him, leaning back and reaching for his guitar again. He tunes it a little better, gives it a strum. “Sooner or later, she finds out.”

“Hmph,” Ernesto mutters, frowning, but he says nothing for a few more minutes.

Héctor plays a song he knows well, and normally he would sing along, but this time he does not: he seems to be mulling over something not precisely pleasant. With a sigh, he stops playing and sets the guitar aside. “A peso for your thoughts.”

Ernesto shoots a quick glance towards the kitchen before replying. “Did she meet her?”

“Huh?”

“My mother.” He spits out that word like it’s something rotten, and Héctor shifts a little. It is hard not to think of the look on her face, of the desperation in her voice when she asked for news of her only son, and it makes the contempt in his voice even harder to stomach. Still, he has his reasons and it’s not his place to question it.

“Oh. Right. Yes, she-- we were together when she approached.”

“I bet she turned on the waterworks,” Ernesto mutters, an icy edge to his voice.

A sigh. “She did weep,” he admits, trying not to let pity show in his voice.

“Heh. Go figure. Easy to think I’m the ungrateful bastard, making my poor mamá cry.”

“Imelda doesn’t think that.”

“Of course she thinks that,” Ernesto snaps, and makes a face. “That poor soul unfortunate enough to be my mother,” has parrots her. “My old man would agree, if anything.”

“She doesn’t know. I never told her.”
“... I know.”

There is another brief silence, then Héctor sighs and reaches in his pocket. The envelope feels oddly heavy in his hand. “I mean, if you’re gonna throw it away, that’s... it’s up to you,” he adds, and holds it out. Ernesto stares at it for a few moments before taking it, and frowning at it. For a second he looks as though he’s about to crumple it, then he sets his jaw.

“I won’t open it,” he says, in a tone that challenges him to say otherwise. He doesn’t, and his glare fades into something so bitter before he sighs, looking away. “... How did she look?”

One word - fine - almost makes it to Héctor’s lips, but in the end he bites it back. No, she was not fine, and to say so would be a lie. He doesn’t want to guilt his best friend, but he doesn’t want to lie, either. “Older,” he finally says. Ernesto gives him a look that spells clearly ‘well, duh’, and he shrugs. “And... sad.”

“I see.” That cold voice, again, but not quite as firm as it should be. “She brought it on herself.”

“... Yes.”

“She had her chance. She blew it, and I--”

“Héctor!” Imelda’s voice comes from the kitchen, and it’s a relief, really. This is not a conversation he wants to keep up.

“Sí, mi amor?”

“Come over, my knight, I need help!”

“A jar you need to open?”

“A jar I need to reach .”

Ah, yes. He always puts things too high up when he tidies up the kitchen, and sometimes it’s a problem. Happens, when you’re ridiculously tall and the love of your life ridiculously tiny. “Help is coming!” he announces, and gives Ernesto a pat on the shoulder before he goes to help Imelda in the kitchen.

He doesn’t see his best friend looking down at the envelope in his hands, biting his lower lip before he scowls and forcefully shoves it down his pocket.

“When you said you were fixing lunch, I didn’t think you meant sandwiches.”

“Is that a complaint? You don’t have to eat that guajolota if it’s not good enough for you.”

“I’d be happy to eat it if you don’t want it…” Héctor mutters, and he reaches for it, only for Ernesto to scoff and slap his hand away.

“Hands off, pendejo. And that’s not what I meant! I just thought-- we could have bought this from any street vendor.”

Imelda shrugs, taking a bite of her guajolota. “I like it best homemade. It was too much of a nice day to stay cooped up in the apartment, with the park so close by,” she adds. It is a nice day, warm and sunny but not unbearably hot, with a mild breeze. Sitting in the shade on a bench, only a few steps away from a pond and with Ernesto’s dogs looking up at them with wagging tails - clearly hoping for a bite that they won’t be getting, oh no, not from her - Imelda knows coming here was a good
Ernesto looks better; not yet fine, precisely, but a world away from the wreck she and Héctor found the previous evening, and some sunlight and fresh air will help. She supposes the fact he’s squabbling with Héctor over whose sandwich is bigger is a good sign, too - so she leans back, looks at the sun’s rays on the surface of the pond, and finishes her lunch.

She’s just swallowed the last bite when Ernesto calls out suddenly.

“... Imelda?”

Hearing her name coming from him feels almost as foreign as his hesitant tone. Imelda tries to think of last time he addressed her like that, by her name, and on top of her mind she can’t think of any. It happened, it must have, but it’s a ridiculously rare occurrence. With that thought in mind, she turns to glance at Ernesto. He’s sitting at the other end of the bench, Héctor between them - as always - and staring down, like he suddenly finds his own knees extremely interesting.

“... Yes?”

“About, er…” he clears his throat. “About my mother.”

Oh. That.

Imelda is aware, vaguely, of how Héctor has stiffened. She puts a hand on his for just a moment, a gentle touch to reassure him. “... You don’t owe me an explanation,” she says. It is true that the sight had unsettled her, and it is true she cannot imagine cutting off one’s mother like that… she does not know the whole story. Not even half of it. She jumped to conclusions, based on assumptions.

It is a habit she thought she grew out of, but clearly she has not.

A nod, and Ernesto lets out a long breath. “No. I do not,” he agrees, and turns to look at her. He looks remarkably calm, but there is something else there just beneath the surface - something unpleasant like a headache that can be kept at bay, but never really goes away. “You don’t know what happened, right?”

Imelda shakes her head. “No. Héctor never mentioned a thing.”

“I promised not to,” her husband says, just a touch defensively.

Ernesto’s gaze shifts between them, and he finally shrugs. “I figure you’d rather know what my beef with her is, in case you run into her again. Or hell forbid, my old man,” he adds, and gives an odd laugh, like it’s the worst thing he can imagine happening to anyone. Imelda can’t say she thinks it is, but it likely wouldn’t be too pleasant either. From what she knows and has heard of Estéban de la Cruz, he is not the kind of person she would invite for dinner.

Or anywhere in the vicinity of her home, really.

“... Of course. I’m listening.”

There is a moment of hesitation before Ernesto speaks, glancing around to make sure no one is nearby. When he does, however, his voice is firm as always… and just a touch dramatic, but Imelda suppose some drama is just part of the package that is Ernesto de la Cruz.

“Well. As you might have noticed, I’m not entirely straight.”
Imelda looks at Héctor. Héctor glances at her. They both turn to stare at Ernesto, raising one eyebrow in near-perfect sync and causing him to roll his eyes.

“At least give me a surprised gasp. Anything.”

“What an astonishing turn of events,” Imelda says flatly.

“... You’re the worst public I’ve ever had.”

“Ay, Dios mío! How could you hide this from me all along?” Héctor exclaims, putting a hand over his heart for extra drama and managing to, somehow, not burst out laughing. Ernesto’s mouth twitches in what’s almost a smile before he catches himself and clears his throat.

“That’s better. Anyway, I… I couldn’t just be too in-your-face about it. You know.”

She does know. Santa Cecilia is a small town that, sometimes, seems a world away from life as they know it now in Mexico City. For all the many good things she loves about it, open-mindedness on such matters is not something to take for granted - not in older people especially. And not, for God’s sake, from Estéban de la Cruz.

All of a sudden, even though the sun is still shining, she feels like the temperature around her has dropped by several degrees. “Yes,” she finds herself saying. “I know.”

Ernesto nods. “So, I had to be careful.”

“I covered for him more times than I can count.” Héctor smiles a little. “As far as his parents were concerned, he stayed over a lot to sleep on weekends.”

That causes Ernesto to chuckle. “Heh, right. I showed up in the morning for coffee, maybe slept a hour on the couch, and then I was off to my place again. I never met any guy close to home - it was usually someplace around, like the next town over, or--”

“How did they find out?” Imelda blurts out. It seems the most logical conclusion, but Ernesto gives her a look that is almost offended.

“They didn’t find out! Give me some credit here! I was careful and I can act. They never suspected a thing,” he protests, and reaches to pick up one of the dogs, who’s been pawing at his shin. He sighs, placing her - Clara again, the little diva - on his lap. “... Well. They never would have found out if I hadn’t grown tired to hide. I shouldn’t have to. I was doing nothing wrong,” he adds. He’s stroking Clarita’s fur with a gentleness that is at odds with the vicious note in his voice.

Imelda nods, but her thoughts go to their family, what they would think of this… arrangement between the three of them. Óscar and Felipe are young, maybe they wouldn’t mind, but her parents… por Dios, they may very well have a stroke. They’re doing nothing wrong, they’re hurting no one, but they simply wouldn’t see it that way. Most people would at the very least raise an eyebrow, she is well aware of that.

The thought of it becoming known makes her uneasy, even though she cares little for anyone’s opinion of her. And Ernesto cares an awful lot what people think of him. “... Did you tell them?”

He sighs. “I had the bad idea of telling my mother.”

Oh, Imelda thinks. Oh. She can see where that is going. “... And she wasn’t pleased?”

Ernesto shrugs. “Well, no. Not angry, either. Disappointed, I guess, but not mad. I asked her to say
nothing to my father. Begged her not to,” he adds, and gives a rueful smile. “And guess what she did next.”

Imelda finds herself really thinking for the first time in years of Estéban de la Cruz and his nearly legendary bad temper, and suddenly it’s as though her blood has turned to ice in her veins.

“Oh, God,” she murmurs. Ernesto gives the emptiest, most joyless smile she has ever seen.

“Yes. It went down about as well as you can imagine.”

Imelda stares at him for a moment, then glances at Héctor. He’s been silent so far, but he returns her gaze before turning to Ernesto, as though to ask for permission. There is a nod, and he turns back to her. “He came to stay with me for a while. He, uh, came over one night and he didn’t look too good. It wasn’t long before we left, a little before Día de los Muertos…”

… Wait. Wait a minute, she remembers bruises on his face. Imelda looks straight at Ernesto, her eyes wide. “You told me - everyone - that you’d been in a brawl. Some drunk guys in San Luz.”

He gives her a forced smile. “I am a good actor. It was only half a lie. There was a brawl all right. But of two people, and not in San Luz. All thanks to my dear mamá and her stupid mouth. Bu hey, if you think I looked bad, you should have seen him. Pretty sure I broke his nose. No one noticed because he’s an anti-social asshole who never leaves the house unless forced,” he adds, and laughs.

For all of his acting skills, it is the fakest laugh she has ever heard.

That, Imelda thinks numbly, must have been nightmarish. As much as she occasionally butts heads with her parents, and despite knowing they would not approve of her current lifestyle if they knew the details, she knows they will have her back if needed - her brothers, too. She can trust them. Ernesto opened up once, to his mother, and was burned in the worst possible way.

“He doesn’t want me back in his household, I bet, which is just fine with me,” Ernesto is saying, and leans in to pick up another of the chihuahuas, letting her settle on his lap as well. “And what she wants doesn’t matter anymore.”

Imelda stares at him for a few moments, then nods. “I see. I’m… sorry for what I said.”

That causes Ernesto to shift, as though suddenly uncomfortable. “You didn’t know.”

“No, I did not. That’s why I had no place saying what I did.”

It is the second time she apologizes in a day, and the second time Ernesto does not take the chance to gloat. He was still too upset in the morning. Now he’s doing… better, she supposes, but there is still no gloating at all. “We can just… forget about it,” he finally says, and looks over at Héctor. “So, uh. How did it go? The ceremony.”

“Huh? Oh. It went really well. There were a lot of people,” he says, and drops a hand on Ernesto’s shoulder. “I told mamá and papá you said hi.”

“... Gracias,” Ernesto mutters. He pats his knee, causing the remaining two chihuahuas to jump on his lap. They’re tiny enough to fit comfortably, and Ernesto smiles a little. “I’d like to drop by and say hi myself. Someday. Hey, remember that time we tried to make our own smoke bomb effects in your room, and--

As they go on talking and laughing about the havok they wrecked - por Dios, she didn’t know half of it and Héctor’s parents were nothing short of saints - and eventually leave the park, none of them notices a hairless dog following them from a distance, tail wagging, occasionally falling behind to
chase a butterfly or a leaf.

Morning finds them in a pile on the bed, and Imelda is the first one to awaken. Again.

She was sitting against the headboard when she fell asleep, or at least she’s fairly sure she was. When she opens her eyes she’s on her back with Héctor snoring away by her side, face nestled in her hair. There is a weight on her, too, and she can guess who it is before she even glances down.

Ernesto is on top of them, head resting on Héctor’s chest but arms around them both, still deep in his sleep and silent. With a sigh, Imelda reaches to rest her only free hand on his head. Her fingers tangle in Ernesto’s hair, and he shifts just slightly, leaning into the touch. His grip on her - on them both - tightens a fraction, and Héctor mumbles in his sleep, nuzzling against her hair.

She should get up, she knows. Get up, take a shower, start making some breakfast, get to work; she has orders to keep up with… but she can do that later. It can wait a few more minutes, or an hour, or two.

Ernesto is heavy, Héctor keeps snoring, but she finds she doesn’t really mind.
All is well. For now.
Have some drunken sex agreed upon beforehand ‘cause consent is important, folks.

Héctor has no trouble admitting he’s missed this, in the… maybe two weeks they did not all share a bed. Truth be told, it’s the longest they’ve gone without since the whole affair began.

He’ll never not enjoy sleeping with Imelda, of course, but there were moments as they rested close, hearts still racing, when the bed felt too large and oddly cold where empty. I never felt like this before, until suddenly it did. Imelda said nothing, but Héctor is almost confident that she’s felt the same, too.

But things are back to normal, Ernesto fills that empty space in the bed so well and oh, that spot between them is the only place in the world where Héctor wants to be right now.
“Like it?”

“Nnnh…”

“I’ll take it as a yes.” There is a chuckle, a tilt of Ernesto’s hips and he drives in just a little deeper. Imelda’s lips are tracing his jaw, and only pause for a kiss when he Héctor tilts his head to capture her mouth with his own.

It is good and warm, Ernesto’s cock in him and Imelda’s sex around him, wet and slick and oh--!

Another thrust, and Ernesto’s mouth is against the back of his neck, hands gripping his waist, and and tilts his hips suddenly, sharply; the world seems to white out for a moment and when he comes to his sense again, gasping, Héctor realizes they have shifted - Imelda is beneath him and Ernesto is on top of them both, pounding away, pressing him down onto and into his wife.

Two warm bodies, the slickness, the scent and noises and oooh yes, he’s missed this.
With an effort - Christ Ernesto is heavy - he lifts himself on his elbows and looks down at Imelda, smiling breathlessly. She smiles back, panting, and tils up her face to kiss him just as Héctor feels Ernesto’s lips brushing the back of his neck. Tempting as it is to let it happen, an idea strikes him suddenly… and he acts on it almost without thought, suddenly tilting his head aside, out of the way as they move in.

And everything freezes.

He can see their surprised expressions, and very up close, as they stop suddenly, their faces a mere inch away. Close enough for a kiss, and Héctor would like to see that, very much. Ernesto and Imelda have shared many things in that bed, including him… but a kiss is not among them.

Hopefully, that’s about to change. Héctor holds his breath, and stares as Ernesto hesitates, opening his mouth as though to say something and then closing it.

“Oh, is all that leaves him. Imelda is still looking up at him, eyes wide and bewildered like she has no idea how he’s come to be there. They stare for a few more moments - it’s a little excruciating for Héctor, really, given how he’s sandwiched between and so damn aroused - until Ernesto moves his hand, brushing the back of his fingers over Imelda’s cheek. Her breath hitches a moment, but her gaze doesn’t waver, and she tilts her head just a little.

It is a nod - an invitation, and Ernesto takes it, leaning in for a kiss that is oddly soft, uncharacteristically slow. Héctor stares, feeling absurdly proud of them, as they break apart. They stare each other, as though stunned… and then Imelda bursts laughing, so does Ernesto, and both are turning to stare at him. He can feel their breath on his face, they’re that close.

“You little shit,” Ernesto mutters, and next thing Héctor knows is that Imelda has grasped his face to kiss him, that Ernesto is thrusting into him again with renewed strength as his wife whispers against his lips that they’re going to make him pay, clenching around him.

And Héctor has never been happier to pay the price for that sweet, sweet victory.

“Hey, I think we’re being followed.”

Héctor’s voice reaches Ernesto’s ears through his own wheezing breath and pounding heart, as he bends over to place his hands on his knees and draw in a few deep breaths. It feels like the air is burning his throat, sweat dripping down his forehead.

“Death,” he gasps. “Death is following my every step.”

A laugh, only slightly breathless. This whole jogging thing was Héctor’s idea, apparently to keep Ernesto’s mind off the contract they might be offered, but for which they have not received any phone call yet. If anything, it worked: Ernesto is too busy staring a heart attack in the face to think about much else.

“So dramatic!”

“This is bullshit. I’m built for speed, all right? Not endurace.”

“We’ve been running for ten minutes.”

“Twelve.”

Another laugh, and Héctor pats his back. “Exercise is good for you. It releases endorphins.”
“All it releases is me, from this mortal coil.”

“You’ll feel better soon, amigo. Endorphins, remember?”

“Who said that, anyway?”

“Doctors around the world,” Héctor says, and pauses. “... Plus Imelda.”

“I think she just wanted us out of the way to work.”

“No,” Héctor replies, with the certainty of a man telling you the sky is blue. “If she wanted us out of the way, she would have told us to get out of the way.”

“... Fair enough.” Ernesto gulps in some more air before straightening himself up, glancing ahead. His chihuahuas, have been trotting along as they ran, tiny legs moving ridiculously quickly; now they have stopped a few meters ahead and are sniffing around, tails wagging, barely even panting. Well, this is embarrassing.

“--the bushes, I think,” Héctor is saying behind him. Ernesto blinks, turning.

“Qué?”

“I said, I think there’s a dog following us. Behind those--”

“Yip! Yip! Yip!”

Before Héctor can finish the sentence, the chihuahuas are suddenly at Ernesto’s side, tails wagging furiously and barking at the bush - which rustles suddenly, and barks. “Ruff! Ruff!”

One more rustle, and an enormous beast with foam at its maw leaps out of it, teeth bared. It crouches down as though to leap, his chihuahuas bolt forward to meet it, and Ernesto acts out without thinking. With a yell - a shriek, Héctor will insist later - he grabs his dogs and snatches them up, holding them close to his chest as they wriggle. He holds tight, to keep them out of reach of the stray dog that… flops down on its back, tail wagging furiously, long tongue lolling.

… All right, so maybe it’s not that threatening. Or big. His perception of a dog’s average size might be getting slightly skewed.

“Wha-- hey, is that-- what are you doing here?” Héctor calls out, crouching by the hairless dog and giving it a belly rub. It causes it to wriggle in sheer joy, panting. “How did you make it all the way here, boy?”

Struggling to keep a hold of his chihuahuas - they’re yapping and trying to climb down - Ernesto frowns. “You know it?”

“I think I saw him in Santa Cecilia, on my last visit.”

“That’s impossible. It’s too far away.”

“I’m almost sure it’s him,” Héctor insists, like he really expects Ernesto to believe some random Xolo dog followed him specifically from Santa Cecilia to Mexico City, all four hundred-something miles. “Maybe he jumped on the train?”

“It’s not the same dog, Héctor.”

“I could swear--” he trails off with a laugh when the dog’s tongue lolls over his arm, leaving it
covered in drool. “Hey, I think he wants to play! Put your dogs down!”

“What? Forget it!” Ernesto protests, holding his pups tighter. “It’s stray! It will give them fleas!”

“... He has no hair.”

“Well, ticks, then! Or worms! Or other parasites! My dogs are delicate!”

“Come on now, they sent Gustavo screaming up the stairs just last wee--”

A sudden grito, coming from Ernesto’s right pocket, causes him to trail off and the dog to bolt off like it’s been stung by a wasp. One moment it’s there and the next it’s off, all flailing limbs and lolling tongue - across the path, over the grass, past the bushes and narrowly avoiding smacking into a tree. Héctor follows him with his gaze, concerned. "You think he has a home?"

"Huh? Maybe?" Ernesto mumbles. He has to shift the chihuahuas to one arm only to reach into his pocket, pulling out his cellphone to answer without checking the number. Shouldn't be dangerous to, he reasons: he hasn't been out with anyone he later dumped in... quite a while, really, and he blocked the number of anybody he dated prior to stopping. "Hello?"

"Señor de la Cruz? It's Armando Abascal."

Oh. Oh. “Ah,” he croaks, then clears his throat. He’s been expecting the call, of course - part hoping and part dreading it - and it still managed to catch him by surprise. To be fair, it does seem a bit early. Even though he’s been complaining for the wait, he was not actually expecting it until at least the following week. “I mean-- buenas tardes, señor Abascal. How are you?”

“Not bad at all, gracias,” is the affable reply. “Is this a good moment?”

“Absolutely,” Ernesto replies brightly, pushing his dogs in Héctor’s arms before they can wriggle out of his one-armed grip and fall. He takes them, holding them to his chest and looking at Ernesto with wide eyes, clearly having heard who’s on the other side. Ernesto passes the cell phone to his other hand, trying to ignore the weight in his stomach. “Tell me everything.”

“I wanted to be the first one to congratulate you on your contract with our label,” Abascal says, and oh, that is really music to Ernesto’s ears. “We were all rather impressed, and sped things up in a video conference this morning. So, congratulations.”

"Oh," Ernesto breathes, and he can feel a wide, dumb grin spreading across his face. He looks over to Héctor, who grins back and tries to give him thumbs up despite the chihuahuas squirming in his grip and trying to chew his fingers. "I mean-- gracias! You won't regret it!"

A laugh. "We're sure we won't. We would need to meet again in a week or two to talk about the finer points - I'll be back in touch."

The call ends, and within seconds an elderly lady feeding waterfowl and doves by the pond is startled by two sudden, loud gritos that cause most birds to abruptly fly away and her to spill most of the seeds. She has barely enough time to turn and no time to protest when two grown men suddenly run past her and out of the park, followed by yapping dogs, hollering and laughing like children.

Imelda can remember few times she ever saw Ernesto as happy as he was when she and Héctor burst in her workshop, sweating and panting, to announce that they made it, they really made it, they got a record deal.
He was all smiles and laughter, patting Héctor in the back and even picking her up to spin her around - something she protested, but not too vehemently; it can be hard to get angry at someone that ecstatic. He even tried to kiss Pepita, absolutely unfazed by the subsequent attempt at clawing his eyes out, before he loudly said they should go out and celebrate. They did.

And they kept celebrating as they returned, too.

“Completely knocked out,” Imelda mutters to no one in particular as she looks down sitting on the edge of Ernesto’s bed. They’re resting on top of each other in a tangle of limbs, snoring away like chainsaws, so deep on their sleep that she was able to untangle herself and slip away without either stirring. She smiles, brushing back a lock of hair from Héctor’s closed eyes before she takes her cellphone - she dropped it on the bed - and pads to the kitchen, avoiding to step on the heaps of clothing on the floor.

Ernesto’s kitchen is nowhere as clean as hers, but not incompatible with human life, she supposes. Imelda throws a chew toy at the dogs to keep them quiet, because she’s not that hungover but her head hurts just a bit, and puts the coffee pot on the stove. As she waits, she attaches her phone to the closest charger. It comes back to life, allowing Imelda to check through the emails. One glowing review, and three more orders. One of them has left a line of measurements blank, so she’ll have to get back to him to check, but it’s not bad. Not bad at all.

Imelda closes the email app and after a moment’s hesitation - plus a quick glance towards the kitchen door - she goes into her gallery, where if she recalls correctly… ah, yes. There is it.

Imelda’s thumb hovers over the thumbnail of the video, hesitating for a moment. She remembers bits and pieces of the previous night; maybe she did something embarrassing, and she’d rather not remember. On the other hand, it might be best to know.

And maybe it wasn’t her to do or say something embarrassing, in which case she definitely has to know.

Imelda smiles a little, ensures that the volume is low enough for no one to hear two rooms over, and presses play.

By the time they stumbled inside Ernesto’s bedroom - not their usual backdrop, but the elevator was broken and none of them wanted to climb the stairs up to their apartment - none of them was clothed and none of them was sober.

But then again that had sort of been the plan, because they always made sure to agree everything beforehand when alcohol was involved, to keep a lack of communication from burning any of them again. Go out, drink to celebrate, and get back to have the kind of drunk sex you feel for days afterwards along with the hangover. It had been their idea, really, but Imelda let herself be convinced more easily than she’d have liked to admit.

She was perhaps the least drunk among all of them; it didn’t say much, but left her enough presence of mind to take her cellphone out of her discarded purse before following Héctor and Ernesto to the bed. They were already on it, laughing like idiots and wrestling; that never lasted much - it was always over very fast, and always in Ernesto’s favor - but she didn’t mind watching for as long as it lasted, letting her gaze linger on Héctor’s sinewy frame and long limbs, and the working muscles of Ernesto’s back.

For a few moments his back was all she could see, because he’d pinned Héctor down and was kissing him like his life depended on it, but then he pulled back, letting his mouth trail lover, and
Héctor turned to her with a wide grin. As Ernesto slid off the bed to kneel, his mouth just above his belly button, Héctor sat up and held out a hand to beckon her closer… only to freeze and blink when Ernesto muttered something, and sniffled.

“… Pretty.”

“Huh?”

Both Imelda and Héctor broke eye contact to glance down. Ernesto was on his knees, head resting on Héctor’s thigh, gazing lovingly at his half-had cock and looking all the world like he was moments away from crying. “Er... are you--” Héctor began, slurring a bit, but trailed off when Ernesto sniffled again and went to run a finger over it.

“So pretty,” he repeated. Héctor let out a noise that was half a moan and half a chuckle, and Imelda knew - in one moment of clarity despite the alcohol - that it could only get better. Thanking God or whatever deity was in charge of good luck and fucks for giving her the idea of fetching her cell phone, she began fumbling with it to get the camera going.

It took a few moments more than it would have taken her when sober, but she did get it recording just moments before Ernesto gave a dreamy sigh and nuzzled his face against Héctor’s cock. “What’s a... hic. What’s a pretty girl like you doing in... in a place like this?”

It was too much for Héctor, who fell back on the mattress in a burst of giggles; Imelda had to slap a hand over her mouth - laughter still came out of her nose as a painful-sounding honk - but managed to keep the phone steady and recorded the deeply offended look Ernesto gave her before nuzzling Héctor’s hardening cock again.

“What?” he mumbled, almost pouting, and Imelda approached to get a better angle.

“If it’s so pretty, you should give it a kiss,” she said, crouching down next to him and reaching to run a hand through his hair, over his shoulder, down his back. Her head spun a little, and she had to lean on Ernesto not to fall back, struggling to keep the phone steady. She turned her head to press a kiss against Ernesto’s neck, barely resisting the temptation to get her mouth around her husband’s dick instead. “Come on,” she whispered against his skin, and placed another kiss against his shoulder. He was pleasantly warm. “Like this.”

Ernesto turned his head and caught her mouth with his, catching her by surprise and almost causing her to drop the phone. It was barely more than a brush, but then she parted her lips and Ernesto deepened it, his tongue briefly caressing hers - she could taste tequila - before he pulled back to stare at her. His face was flushed, his eyes wide, and his voice raspy.

“Like this?” he murmured, questioningly, and Imelda grinned, leaning over to place another kiss at the corner of his mouth.

“Yes,” she murmured back. “Like this.”

She felt his smile more than she saw it, and the next moment Ernesto had turned his full attention on Héctor’s cock, placing small kisses from the base and working his way up to the tip torturously slowly. Héctor’s giggles quickly turned into moans, and Imelda shakily rose to her feet to sit on the bed and turn the camera towards him. He was tossing his head back, trembling and biting onto his fist, skin flushed red. Imelda smirked and reached to take that hand off his mouth, holding it in her free one.

“Don’t muffle anything, mi amor,” she murmured, acutely aware of heat pooling down her groin as
well, tempted to get his hand between her legs right away. “Let us hear you.”

And he did let them hear him: just as Ernesto’s lips pressed against the tip of his cock he arched with a long moan, holding tightly onto her hand. He looked up at her, eyes clouded, and he choked out his next words. “Want to… need to taste you. Por favor.”

The heat that had been throbbing in her sex turned into desperate need right there and then, and Imelda straddled his face without a thought, without letting go of his hand, without letting go of her phone. She was so wet it took a few swipes of his tongue to get any real friction against her but when he did, she couldn’t hold back a moan.

She shifted her weight to give him more access and his tongue was in her, Héctor’s free hand pressing against the swell of her ass, and oh God, she was on fire. Pleasure was like a jolt, and Héctor moaned with her; the sound seemed to reverberate against her, but she knew that it wasn’t only because of her that he moaned. Lightheaded, Imelda licked her lips and opened her eyes to look down, where Ernesto knelt between her husband’s thighs.

He was swiping his tongue up Héctor’s now erect cock, over to the tip, and then kissing off beads of precum. Héctor had thrown both legs over his shoulders to give him better access, his hips shuddering, but Ernesto was still taking his sweet time. Imelda licked her lips again, pointed the camera towards him, and spoke as firmly as she could.

“You know it’s - ah, Héctor, por Dios - not nice to tease, don’t you?”

Ernesto pulled away from Héctor’s erection to look at her, tilting his head slightly; his skin was as flushed as hers had to be, lips glistening and partly open. His gaze roamed her body, pausing shamelessly on her chest. Imelda felt a sudden urge to kiss him again - unusual, that - but refrained; Héctor’s pleasure came first.

“Take him in your mouth,” she rasped, tilting her hips to let Héctor’s tongue reach her clit, and biting back a moan of delight when it did. “And look at the… look at me while you do it.”

He did, causing Héctor to groan against her and his hips to shudder; one of his legs came down hard against Ernesto’s back, his heel thudding against his spine, but he didn’t even seem to feel it. He just lowered his head to take more of his cock in his mouth, never breaking eye contact with Imelda. His eyes were half-lidded, searching her face, and she smiled at him breathlessly as Héctor suckled at her clit. “Good,” she rasped, hardly aware of what she was saying, not entirely sure who she was speaking to. “You’re so good at this.”

Ernesto let out a guttural groan, and closed his eyes. One of his hands gripped Héctor’s thigh and the other went beneath his ass, lifting his hips up towards his mouth; within moments, all of Héctor’s cock had disappeared down his throat.
Héctor groaned again, rubbing his face against her folds and holding tighter onto her hand, and Imelda half-moaned, half-laughed. “Do you like that?” she asked, and was delighted to capture Ernesto’s nod - barely noticeable with a cock down his throat, but a nod nonetheless - on camera. Tilting her hips to allow Héctor’s mouth a better access, breathing hard and feeling her orgasm beginning to coil up in her loins, she smiled. “Look at me, Ernesto.”

He did, blinking away a few tears, and she zoomed on his face, on the point where his lips stretched on Héctor’s cock. She found that was the best possible use to put his mouth to.

“You are going to swallow,” she managed to say, her voice almost firm. “To the last drop.”

Ernesto didn’t answer with a nod or otherwise: he just shut his eyes and resumed bobbing his head, the hand holding Héctor’s thigh disappearing to, she assumed, fondle his own cock. Héctor gasped once again against her folds, the hand holding her phone kept shaking and she didn’t even care. All she could feel was Héctor’s tongue in her, all she could see was his cock disappearing time and time again into Ernesto’s mouth.
Everything spun, the very air she breathed seemed to be scorching her throat and sweat slid down her neck, between her breasts; then Héctor’s tongue pressed deeper in her and his hand was on her clit, his fingers pressed against it, pinched and pulled and rubbed and yes, there, just there, right there--!

Climax hit her like a physical blow, and for a few moments the world blacked out, came to a standstill. She dropped the phone - later she would find it had landed with the camera up, filming her in the throes of orgasm, gasping and arching and reaching up to palm at her breasts with her now free hand - and heard, distantly, Héctor’s moan. She felt him shudder, heard Ernesto’s grunt, looked down on time to see his mouth wrapped around her husband’s cock, to see his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed just as she’d told him to do.

Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was the orgasm, but as she pulled away from Héctor’s face to let him breathe in long gasps, the sight made her feel oddly proud of that idiot.

She grinned lazily down at him as he finally let Héctor’s softening cock slip out of his mouth with a small pop, as she watched him wipe his hand on the bedsheets - he’d come, too, three satisfied customers and all that - before resting his head on Héctor’s thigh, panting.

Imelda pressed a kiss on the bridge of Héctor’s nose, getting a wide smile out of him despite the fact he was still gasping. “Love you,” she whispered, and the smile turned dreamy. He’d looked at her light that on their first date, when they’d first slept together, and almost every night ever since. Imelda knew she would never get tired of it.

“Love you too,” he whispered back. She kissed him, slow and lazy and content, before she reached to take her phone. She saved the video just before the phone turned off, and dropped it on the mattress before glancing back towards Ernesto. He was looking at them, still breathing heavily and resting his head on Héctor’s thigh. Perhaps it was the alcohol, but he wasn’t even trying to hide the longing anymore… and - maybe that was the alcohol, too - Imelda found she liked him a lot better like that, when he wasn’t trying to play a part.

She lifted one arm to beckon him closer. “Come here,” she called out, and she didn’t have to repeat it twice. Within moments Ernesto was on the mattress too, an arm around each of them, pinning them down - honestly, he seemed as broad as the two of them combined right now - and pressing his face against Héctor’s shoulder.

“Pretty,” he mumbled. Héctor burst laughing, so did Imelda, and Ernesto snickered in turn.

“Yes,” Imelda agreed, reaching to run a hand through Ernesto’s hair just as Héctor’s hand rested across his back. She liked resting like that, skin on skin. “Pretty good.”

More snickering, but this time it died down quickly, turning into a collective yawn; they were drunk, they were sated, they were tired, and sleep didn’t take long to claim them; Imelda closed her eyes and gave in within minutes. If either she or Héctor heard Ernesto’s mumbled words, neither remembered it the next morning. Nor Ernesto would remember uttering them.

And even if any of them did, he’d have blamed it on alcohol.

“Uuugh. I swear Ernesto tried to give me alcohol poisoning last night.”

Lost in his headache, Héctor doesn’t notice Imelda putting down her phone just a little too quickly as he shuffles into the kitchen, rubbing his head. It hurts, his mouth feels dry as a desert, and he probably has the puffiest eyes in the history of puffy eyes. Ernesto looks like death, too, and he
hardly mumbled when Héctor got up before burrowing his face into the pillow again.

Imelda got about as drunk as they did, but recovered much better. She doesn’t look nearly as bad as Héctor knows he does - when does she ever look awful? - but she’s… not at her best, either, with dark shadows under her eyes and hair dishevelled in a messy bun. Even so, she finds it in herself to raise an eyebrow at him. “Will teach you idiotas to quit trying to outdrink each other.”

“Hey now, you tried outdrinking us, too!” he protests.

The confused look that gains him tells him, loud and clear, that he’s not the only one for whom significant chunks of the evening are entirely blank spaces of nothingness. “Wait, what?”

Héctor grins. “You did! And you challenged both of us to arm wrestling. At the same time.”

“Ah,” Imelda mutters. She has the good grace to look a little embarrassed, and is very eager to turn her attention to the coffee on the stove. “… Did I win?”

“I don’t remember.” He grins, picking up a cup. “I remember you dancing on the table, though.”

Imelda’s face, already somewhat ashen, turns just a little paler. Her jaw drops. “What??”

“A great performance.”

“I did not!”

“I’m fairly sure there is a video.”

“Uuugh!” He laughs at Imelda’s groan, pouring some coffee for both of them. There is just enough left for Ernesto, if he gets up before it turns cold. Which is unlikely, really.

“You look beautiful. I don’t know what kept me from joining you on that table,” he says, then pauses. “Actually, I think I do. Someone held us back - Ernesto was in a dancing mood as well. But all three of us would have broken the table, I bet.”

Imelda makes a face, finally taking a sip of coffee. “We can never return to that cantina again.”

“Probably not. But it was a worthy way to celebrate,” he adds, almost as an afterthought. The reason why they were out to celebrate was banished somewhere in the back of his mind until now. He grins. “We… actually did it,” he mutters, getting a smile out of Imelda.

“Of course you did,” she says, reaching up to flick his nose. “I had no doubt. Your songs are something special.”

Ernesto did most of the work, Héctor almost says, but he doesn’t, because he knows she would chide him - tell him not to undersell himself, and that the best networking yields nothing without something good to back it up. And she is right, probably. He should think more like her… and besides, what matters who did what? He and Ernesto are a team, and a good one at that.

Héctor smiles, and Imelda raises an eyebrow again. “I know that look. Should I be worried?”

“Er… nothing. I mean, I was thinking we could use the extra money so you can open a real shop and hire people within the year,” he adds. Imelda’s business is thriving with online orders, but her long-term plan is to expand, and this could speed it up. And if all goes well, with his career launched and her business growing, maybe they may think about… well, they did make sure to get an apartment with enough space for three or four people, for when they’ll be ready--
Imelda smiles, flicks his nose again. “That’d be wonderful, but one step at time,” she tells him.

He smiles back. “Yes,” he agrees. “One step at time.”
Moments

Chapter Notes

A bit late, but here's an update!
Thanks for Senora_Luna for proofreading, because I wrote half this chapter while drunk off my ass.

Héctor is a serious cuddler, even in his sleep. Especially in his sleep.

Imelda found out as much pretty early on, and - especially warm nights aside - she doesn't mind at all. On cooler nights such as this one, she's actually rather grateful to have him draped around her like a human blanket. She gets to lie awake for a time, listening to his breathing, basking in the warmth of his skin against hers, feeling his heartbeat, and there is nowhere else she'd rather be. Come morning she'll wake up first, and poke him in the ribs to wake him up. It always works, and the resulting yelp as he's startled into awareness never fails to make her laugh. Or maybe she'll think of a more pleasant way to do so, with no nightclothes in the way and-

Clack.

The sound of the front door opening and then closing, quietly but not quietly enough, puts an end to that very pleasant thought. There are steps and those, too, are trying to be quiet - 'trying' being the key word.

He may come up with an excuse as to why he's there, but Imelda knows that the little photoshoot - 'Photoshoot Two', as Héctor called it - they sent him is the real reason why he's just come crawling back. He probably got in his car as soon as he could leave whatever toilet stall he'd managed to run to. Again.
Not that he'll get to have any tonight, though. She and Héctor already had their fun; he'll have to wait and, if he behaves, he might get to take part next time. Serves him right for trying to force them into going out for the fourth evening in a row.

“Come on, just a drink to celebrate.”

“We’ve been having drinks to celebrate for the past three nights, Ernesto.”

“So what’s one more?”

“I have a headache and work to get done in the morning.”

“Well, Héctor is coming. Right?”

“Uh, actually…”

“Come on!”

“I just need to rest a bit before our big day, you know. Have a quiet night in, and--”

“We can rest tomorrow!”
“I think I’ll pass. You go and have fun.”

“Ugh, fine. You to stay here and bore yourselves like an old couple!”

Clearly, he forgot what happened last time he accused them of being two bores aged before their time, so Imelda saw it fit to send him another reminder. Héctor was more than eager to help.

The steps come closer, and then stop at the bedroom door. Imelda stays still, eyes shut and cheek pressed against Héctor's hair. She half-expects Ernesto to come in and approach the bed, and she has a remark ready for that - "of all times to come late rather than early!" - but there are no more steps, no sound at all except for Héctor's steady breathing and her own, the faint noise of traffic in the distance.

Imelda opens her eyes to see he's standing in the doorway. They forgot to close the blinds again and, in the sharp light cast by a street light, she can see the look on his face as he stares at them. She'd expected lust, she'd expected disappointment; longing is not what she thought she'd see. She wonders how many people got that special Kicked Puppy look from him, but she knows deep down - and with no small amount of smugness - that this look is different. This one is reserved to them alone.

Are you going to gape for much longer?, she almost asks, but she knows that would wake Héctor up and really, she's had such a pleasant evening; every bone in her body feels like cooked asparagus and she has never felt less inclined to start a fight - especially since she knows her husband would be all for letting him in. So she just lifts her free arm in a mute invitation, and he takes it.

He’s walking quietly across the room the next moment, stripping as he walks and leaving his clothes to fall on the floor. He’d better pick them up in the morning, she thinks, and doesn’t say as much only not to disturb her husband’s sleep. Which is disturbed anyway, because the mattress tips and the springs creak when Ernesto slips under the covers, and it is enough for Héctor - who usually needs the aid of a trumpet to be awakened any time before dawn - to stir.

‘‘Nesto?’’ he mumbles. One arm tightens around Imelda, and the other stretches out for Ernesto. He grins against her skin when he grabs that hand and presses it against his cheek. “Liked the pictures?”

“You two are the worst thing that has ever happened to me,” Ernesto informs him, and the grin widens.

“How many visit to the toilet?”

“Chingate.”

“Imelda already did,” Héctor says innocently.

“I want to be in the next one,” Ernesto says. She can feel him pouting against her skin, and holds back a laugh. Instead, she yawns. “In the morning,” she mutters, and neither argues. She’s about to suggest they should shift - Héctor is usually in the middle, it feels wrong for him not to be and since he woke up he may as well move - but she has no time to say anything. Ernesto moves suddenly, and his arms are around both of them, his face pressing against their joined shoulders. Much like Héctor, he feels pleasantly warm.

“The worst thing that ever happened to you,” Héctor says aloud, grinning at Imelda over his head. She returns it with a smirk of her own while Ernesto heaves a long sigh.

“Shut up,” he mumbles, and for a time they do. There is some shifting around, and Imelda is soon half-asleep, not really caring which one of them is going to wind up in the middle.
In the end, no one does. Morning catches them in a messy pile, with Imelda awakening slowly to the sunlight. There is warmth and quiet breathing, the occasional snore and twitch, sleepy mumbles and fingers running over skin, through hair, and it isn’t a bad thing to wake up to - it isn’t too bad at all, and their bodies awaken before their minds entirely catch up.

Eyelids still heavy with sleep, Imelda can barely tell that it’s Ernesto’s chest beneath her head, and if it’s Héctor’s cock poking her. If she chose to focus, she would be able to tell whose hand is it on her breast and whose hand is resting on her thigh. But she’s still half-asleep and so are they, and she finds she likes it that way. After all, it’s Sunday; one lazy morning cannot hurt.

Imelda keeps her eyes closed, reaches for Héctor’s morning erection, and begins to lazily stroke its head with her thumb. There is a sigh, sleepy and yet shuddering, and Héctor’s cock twitches in her hand. He shifts closer but just barely, as sleepy as she is, and lets out an almost dreamy sigh. A thumb brushes over her nipple, and the hand on her thigh slips between her legs, to cup her mound. She tilts her head to kiss exposed skin - whose and where, it hardly matters. If she were to guess she’d say it might be Ernesto’s neck, but she won’t guess. She’s not awake enough to.

Another sigh from her husband, and her hand beings grow slick with precum. Another hardness is poking her, but she feels a hand - Héctor’s? Ernesto’s own? Does it matter? - reaching to grasp it, and Ernesto’s chest rises and falls in a long, content sigh. The hand between her legs - whose? Does she care? - parts her folds, and she feels gentle pressure on her clit, tiny circular movements that get a sigh out of her as well. It’s all very slow-- the touches, the build-up, even the orgasm coming in long, gentle waves.

Imelda doesn’t get many lazy mornings but, all things considered, she could do this more often.

“He’s about to say it.”

Imelda’s whisper is barely audible, for Héctor’s ears only. Leaning against the door with his arms crossed, he glances over to the bed. Ernesto has lain down every single charro he owns and is going over them all, walking back and forth like a general inspecting troops, his back to them.

“He’s not that bad,” Héctor whispers, gaining himself a look that clearly says ‘just wait’.

Ernesto pauses in front of a blue charro, shakes his head, then walks past it to a deep red one with golden stitching Pepita has chosen to lay onto. He reaches out as though to move her. Pepita flattens her ears and hisses. Ernesto pulls back his hand.

Smart choice, that: it’s hard to play guitar with a torn-up hand, and Ernesto wants to play at his very best tomorrow. It’s not every day you meet with your record label to sign the deal, give an interview to announce an album is officially in the pipeline, and perform on live TV right afterwards. He’s very obviously nervous, even if he tries to act like nothing worries him.

Héctor is… sort of nervous, too, but it’s easy to think everything will go smoothly with Imelda’s steady presence by his side, watching Ernesto try to pick an outfit for the following day. An exhausting process, truth be told, from the moment Ernesto walked in with armfuls of clothes asking for help.

They are now down to the last five suits and he has yet to make any decision other than ‘don’t bother the cat’. He finally sighs, and Héctor knows he’s about to lose a bet just a moment before he turns.

“I have nothing to wear,” Ernesto finally declares, and Imelda flashes Héctor a smug grin.

Told you he’d say it.
Héctor pretends not to have seen it. “You have plenty to wear.”

“Maybe I should go naked.”

“That’s unadvisable,” Héctor says.

“I look great naked.”

“That’s debatable,” Imelda speaks up.

Ernesto pouts. “Well, if your murderous cat wasn’t sitting on the charro I was thinking of wearin-”

“Afraid of a kitten now? You can try and move her.”

“If she’s such a nice kitty, why don’t you move her for me?”

“She’s comfy where she is,” Imelda says, and glances down at the charros. “Besides, I don’t think the red one does you any favors.”

He frowns. Héctor knows very well that the red charro is one of his favorites. “No?”

“Too aggressive. You’d look better in blue,” she adds, taking a step closer. “Or the white one, but Héctor will be wearing his white one. It goes well with his guitar.”

“We could both wear white.”

Héctor laughs. “If you want us to look like we’re trying to get into a church choir,” he says. “Or as angels in the church’s Nativity play, like that time when I was six. Remember how we used ropes to make me fly? I think we did pretty well.”
Imelda raises an eyebrow. “You knocked down the star and caused it to wreck Jesus’ cradle.”

That causes Héctor’s smile to fade a bit. “Ah. You remember that.”

“I played Mary. It nearly hit me,” she reminds him. “By the way, what were you thinking?”

Héctor shifts. “… Well, I guess it seemed seemed a good idea at the time.”

“You almost gave Sister Gregoria a stroke. And thank God Jesus wasn’t a real baby.”

“See? No one was hurt and it all worked out,” Ernesto points out as he picks up the blue charro, holding it up. Imelda rolls her eyes.

“Whose idea was it, anyway?”

“Ernest--”

“Héctor’s.”

“Hey!”

“It was absolutely your idea. My ideas tend to work.”

“You were the one who said everyone would be impressed if we actually flew across the stage!”

“Well, of course they would be. Angels fly. It’s what the wings are for,” Ernesto points out, carefully hanging the charro. “But you were the one who suggested we try it with ropes.”
“Well, your idea involved a trampoline hidden off stage! And-- and I didn’t see you stopping me after putting the idea in my head!”

“Why should I?”

“Because you were ten and I was six, for one.”

“Didn’t make me your babysitter.”

Héctor huffs, crossing his arms. “Some amigo,” he mutters, but truth be told he’s nowhere as mad as he pretends to be.

He has very fond memories of that day, despite the unmitigated disaster; of the look on his parents’ face as they seemed torn between red-faced embarrassment and the almost inhuman effort not to burst laughing in front of the rambling nun handing them back their child, covered in sawdust from head to toe, broken makeshift wings hanging sadly from his back. They had at least made it to the car before they’d both laughed, and the lecture that had followed had been more an afterthought than anything else.

The one who couldn’t keep himself from laughing, right there and then, had been Ernesto’s father, who’d been dragged there by his wife to watch a play he clearly gave no fucks about only because their son was in it. It was surreal, really: big, foul-tempered, scary Estéban de la Cruz roaring with laughter in the midst of a stunned silence.

He hadn’t even bothered to listen to a word of what Sister Gregoria was trying to say: he’d just kept laughing, picked up his stunned son with one arm, and walked right out with tears of mirth in his eyes - followed by a wife who looked embarrassed and relieved in equal measure.

“I wasn’t even sure he knew how to laugh,” Ernesto would tell him the next day, still in a sort of stunned awe. “He kept going until we were home and then some more. I think I heard him laughing in his sleep at night.”

Entirely unaware of his fond recollections, Ernesto is talking to Imelda - ignoring Héctor as he always does when he’s absolutely, disastrously in the wrong. “So, the blue one? You sure?”

Imelda shrugs. “It’s not bad,” she concedes. “I don’t think anyone will be focusing on your clothes only, anyway.”

“... Right. I need to make sure my hair is at its best, too,” Ernesto mutters, turning to glance at his reflection in the window nearby. Imelda is rolling her eyes hard enough to make Héctor think they must be close to falling out of her eye sockets.

“I assume they will have someone to fix you up before the interview.”

“Well, true,” Ernesto concedes. “At least they won’t have to work too much on me. I already look good.”

Imelda rolls her eyes. “Now that you’ve picked the outfit--”

“I need to pick the shoes.”

“No you don’t. I made you a pair.”

“You-- what?”
“She made us shoes for the occasion,” Héctor explains, a wide dumb grin spreading on his face. He hadn’t suspected a thing, because Imelda already had their measurements and didn’t need to ask for them again, and he’d believed her explanation of having orders to catch up when he’d noticed her working longer hours than usual in the past couple of weeks. She’d surprised him the previous day, and now it was Ernesto’s turn to be surprised.

As expected, he blinks at Imelda, entirely taken aback. “Ah. I… gracias,” he mutters, sounding somewhat awkward. It’s how he sounded when Héctor’s father gifted him a moño charro for his birthday - one he’d spent mostly at their place.

Imelda smiles. “Don’t thank me yet, we need to make sure they fit,” she says, like there is any chance at all she might have gotten the measures wrong. She might have mentioned something on how weirdly small Ernesto’s feet are, but now she spares his ego and doesn’t bring it up. As she steps out of the room - followed by Pepita, who seems to have decided Ernesto’s red charro is not comfortable enough - Héctor’s grin widens.

“Isn’t she amazing?”

Ernesto doesn’t reply, but neither does he scoff as Héctor expected him to. He turns to see his best friend brushing a hand across the charro he’ll wear tomorrow, slowly.

“... Maybe my parents will see the interview tomorrow,” he says, very quietly.

Oh.

It’s a possibility Héctor hadn’t thought of, but it’s far from impossible, given that by now news might have spread throughout Santa Cecilia; it’s not often that someone from their town is on national TV, let alone two people.

“I guess they might,” he says, slowly. Ernesto’s family was always an uncomfortable subject, and one they avoided entirely since that entire fiasco with the letter. Héctor has no idea what was written on it, if Ernesto read it at all or if he destroyed it as he said he would; it doesn’t seem wise to ask.

“I hope they do,” Ernesto mutters, brow furrowing. “I hope my old man chokes on that.”

Not a word of his mother, who could barely choke out her question - “How’s Ernesto?” - without crying. There is a sudden knot in Héctor’s stomach, and he ignores it. “Well, you sure showed him.”

A moment of silence, then a shrug. “He’ll probably just switch channels. It’s your family that should be here to watch us.”

It’s a thought that has crossed Héctor’s mind several times, with every milestone - they should be here to see me - and it stings every time. As Ernesto picks something up from the bed, he makes an effort to shrug, like it hasn’t hit him as hard as it did. “Well, guess it wasn’t to be, and-- what…”

Ernesto holds out his hand and there it is - the moño charro Héctor’s father gifted him, not long before he died. He wears it for all the important concerts, and Héctor is glad he does, but there is a tiny nagging voice in the back of its mind that sometimes reminds him that he has no gift left from his father, that their home was gutted by the explosion and fire and next to nothing could be salvaged. Other than some inheritance and a life insurance policy payout, he was only left memories and a few photos.

“I think you should wear this tomorrow.”

Wait, what?
“Wait, what?”

“Do you need your hearing checked? Not ideal before a musical performance on TV.”

“Oh, ha-ha.”

“I’m serious, Héctor!” Ernesto exclaims, seizing his shoulders. “Look at me in the eye and tell me your hearing is fine.”

“Really no--”

“Because if it isn’t and you mess something up on national TV, I will die.”

“Hey now--”

“I will literally drop dead.”

Ay, dramatic as always. Héctor laughs, slapping his arms off him. “My hearing is fine, pendejo. I just mean-- well, it’s yours.”

“And you’ll give it back after the performance,” Ernesto mutters, pushing the moño charro in his hands. “Come on.”

He does take it, and swallows back a lump in his throat. “... Gracias,” he murmurs. Before Ernesto can reply anything Imelda is back with the brand new shoes for them, and they let the matter drop. Still, later on - before he folds everything neatly on a chair for the next morning - Héctor stands in front of the mirror, tries it on, and stares at the reflection.

As he did in other times of his life - the day he moved to Mexico City, the day he got engaged, the moment he stood with Imelda before the altar - he tries to imagine what their parents would think of him, tries to imagine what they would say.

You did good.

We’re proud of you.

His vision goes blurry, and he reaches to wipe his eyes, but never does: Imelda’s arms are around him the next moment, her head pressing against his back, and his hand stays in mid-air. He blinks, tears fall, and then he smiles. “Te amo.”

“Lo sé,” she murmurs, and holds him a little tighter.

“... And you have quite a following on social media, too. What would you say is your secret?”

“My beautiful face.”

Ernesto’s quip makes Imelda roll her eyes, but her lips do curl into a smile and by the sound of it, the audience in the studio found it absolutely hilarious. The sound of laughter causes Pepita to lift her head and glance over at the TV screen, where Héctor and Ernesto are sitting on a sofa in front of the interviewer.

Héctor is a little hunched over and leaning forward, all wide grins and gangly limbs, while Ernesto is sitting back, one leg crossed easily over the other and a charming smile on his face. Laughing, Héctor elbows Ernesto in the ribs. It causes him to lift his hands.
“Just kidding, just kidding. Well, it did take quite a lot of networking, but I think music is what we really have going for us,” Ernesto says, the smile widening. He looks perfectly at ease, like he was born to be on camera. By looking at him now, it’s hard to guess how many sleepless nights he spent checking the hit count for their songs on Spotify, planning streaming events and networking with the nebulous bunch of people he refers to as ‘people who matter’. “It’s what it’s all about, our greatest passion, and I think that speaks to people.”

“And what good music it is,” the presenter says. “Here’s footage of your latest performance…”

The footage is shown, the interview continues, and Imelda finds herself frowning slightly. It’s going well, but she can’t help but notice that Ernesto is the one talking most of the time, with Héctor only replying to questions directed specifically at him. He can be as much as a charmer as Ernesto if he wishes, in his own cheeky way, but it’s obvious he’s leaving much of the spotlight to Ernesto.

And that… irks her. Not too much, because she knows Héctor cares very little for the fame and always happily left that aspect to Ernesto, but something still gnaws. They should come across as more of a team, not Wonderful Ernesto with a side dish of Héctor.

“Héctor writes all of their songs,” she tells Pepita, polishing the pair of shoes she just finished while still staring at the TV, Ernesto’s face filling the screen. He’s babbling something about believing in a dream and seizing his moment. “Should at least mention that.”

But Héctor looks happy and, well, her gaze pauses on the moño charro he is wearing. It was… nice of Ernesto to let him wear it for the occasion, and the pang of annoyance grows neglectable. Still there, but neglectable - and it helps that, when they move on to discuss the upcoming album, Ernesto does finally acknowledge Héctor’s role as the songwriter.

“So, will there be any songs that no one has heard yet?”

They share a glance, grinning. “Well, our agent said we can’t speak of such details,” Ernesto says, pride obvious on his face as he mentions they have an agent now. “But you never know with Héctor. I’ve had him waking up in the middle of the night during a hotel stay screaming before he grabbed a bunch of napkins, wrote a song on them, and passed out again.”

More laughter, including Imelda’s own, and Héctor slaps his arm. “It was one time,” he protests, but Imelda knows very well it happened at least on three occasions. By the time the interview ends and they prepare to play on stage for the audience, the earlier annoyance is gone.

“What song are we going to hear?” the presenter asks, and Héctor grins, picking up his guitar.

“Un Poco Loco,” he says, and glances at the camera. “I wrote it for my wife.”

Ay, mi amor.

It makes Imelda a little sorry that she’s not there in the studio - she was offered to come, but had too many orders to catch up with - but then again, she thinks, it doesn’t matter.

They will see plenty of each other that evening.

“... Then we had another bottle, I think Armando was moments away from rolling under the table by the time--”

“The counter on Spotify is going crazy!”
“That’s great, ‘Nesto. Anyway, it went really well-- I mean, you saw us, so you know it, but… it went really well.”

“You did wonderfully,” Imelda says, smiling back at him. Sitting at the desk before his laptop, Héctor wishes he could reach through the screen to kiss her just now. They will be back in Mexico City late the next morning, and it feels like an unbearable long time. “Now get your idiot friend to drop his phone.”

“Sure,” Héctor says lightly, and turns to glance at Ernesto over his shoulder. He’s pacing back and forth across their hotel room, eyes fixed on the screen of his cell phone. “Imelda says you should drop the pho--”

Thud.

As the phone falls on the ground, the rubber guard on it the only thing that keeps its screen from shattering, Héctor recoils. On the screen of his laptop, Imelda blinks.

“… I didn’t mean you should literally drop--”

“We’re trending on Twitter,” Ernesto announces, immediately picking up the phone again. He stares at the screen a few more moments, as if to double-check, then his expression breaks in a wide smile. “We’re trending on Twitter!” he repeats, like it’s the ultimate seal of approval, and leans in to kiss Héctor.

It feels good, deep and thorough and tasting like the tequila they both had, but it lasts too little. Just when Héctor is about to reach down for Ernesto’s belt and give Imelda something really fun to watch, his friend pulls back and holds up his phone again. “All right, just a quick photo for Instagram, okay? Smile at the cam--”

Oh no, not now. Héctor grabs his jacket and yanks his head back down into another kiss. “Forget about that,” he says, pulling back to grin and his widened eyes. “Best if this stays a private spectacle.”

“I’m recording, by the way,” Imelda speaks up. Both turn to the screen to see she’s resting her chin in her hand, looking awfully pleased, eyes half-lidded. “Feel free to go ahead.”

“Really no--”

“There may or may not be a surprise for you once you undress him.”

There is a sound that is part a scoff, part a laugh and part a groan, and then Ernesto is kissing him again, pulling him up on his feet, reaching to undo the buttons of his shirt.

“I want a copy,” he mutters against Héctor’s throat, only to get a sharp order out of Imelda.

“Then get on the bed,” she says, sounding all the world like a movie director, except for the curl of her lips and the glint in her eyes. “With him on your lap.”

Until not too long ago, Ernesto would have argued, snapping something on how he took no orders - but now, he clearly is beyond that. They’re on the bed the next moment, and good thing the laptop is already angled so that Imelda gets the full view. Héctor glances down at Ernesto’s flushed face and grins as Imelda speaks again.

“Undress.”
“Going to enjoy the spectacle?” Ernesto asks, but he does so without tearing his gaze from Héctor. He reaches to unbutton his jacket just as Héctor goes to unbutton his, fingers fumbling.

“Oh, I’m sure you’re not tired of performing yet,” Imelda says, amusement in her voice and something else that is well on the way to turn into arousal. And, well, Héctor’s duty as her husband is to help along, isn’t it?

With a smirk, Héctor leans in to undo Ernesto’s tie with his mouth, pushing the jacket off his shoulders before he pulls back with it still in his mouth. Their eyes meet, and Ernesto smiles back, slightly out of breath… and the reason why is obvious, already poking his thigh through his trousers. Best to take care of tha--

“Get his trousers off, Héctor,” Imelda’s voice comes again from the screen, soft as velvet. Well, great minds do think alike.

He drops the tie and slides down, until he’s kneeling between Ernesto’s legs. He glances up, grins, and takes the zipper in his teeth, pulling it down slowly and relieving some of the fabric’s pressure on his cock - which is fully hard at this point. He nuzzles it a moment, and Imelda speaks before he can pull down the underwear with his teeth as well.

“Get up.”

Imelda’s voice is like the crack of a whip but oh, is her breathing fast. Héctor glances towards the laptop to see she’s leaning against the backrest, lips parted and skin flushed. One hand is reaching beneath her blouse and the other is nowhere on screen, but he has a pretty good idea of where it is.

“Sí,” he rasps, and stands. Ernesto stays on the bed a few more moments, panting, until Imelda
speaks again and he recoils.

“Both of you. Come closer.”

They do, Ernesto almost stumbling over the trousers that have fallen around his ankles. Pushing off his jacket and getting the shirt off him takes little, leaving him down to his underwear. Ernesto steps out of his trousers and kisses Héctor’s neck, trailing down to nip at his collarbone. As he does, Héctor looks over his head towards Imelda.

She’s almost a vision like this, with her blouse open and a breast exposed, a nipple visible through her kneading fingers. Her lips are parted, pupils blown open, and by now she probably has several fingers in her. He smiles, breathless, and she smiles back before mouthing, ‘turn’.

Ah, right-- they planned this next bit. Héctor turns, unbuckling his belt and offering Ernesto his back. Within moments he’s pushing the shirt and jacket off him, kissing his neck and reaching into his trousers-- then he stills, and Héctor holds back a laugh.

“Wha-- is that lace?”

From the screen, Imelda laughs. “Get his trousers off,” she almost purrs, “and find out.”

Ernesto kneels and the trousers are pushed down almost before Imelda is done speaking, Héctor loses his struggle not to laugh, glancing at Ernesto over his shoulder has he cups his ass. He’s staring at the lace underwear Imelda picked for him with wide eyes, clearly speechless. “The moment?” he mutters, confused.

“For you to seize,” Héctor and Imelda say at exactly the same time, and Ernesto’s baffled expression
melts in a guwaffing laugh.

“Oh, you think you’re so clever,” he mutters, and yanks Héctor’s arm to make him turn to him.

He lets out a yelp, but truth be told he’s… not surprised when he sees Ernesto reaching for his tie on the bed, not really. He glances at Imelda, and she nods, licking her lips.

Let him.

He does let Ernesto tie his hands, biting his lower lips. Ernesto rolls his eyes, face flushed and really hard in his underwear. “Was the fake tattoo really necessary?”

“Who says it’s fake?”

“Your fear of needles, that’s what.”

“Oh, sure, what about yours and that time in Oaxaca--” Héctor trails off with a yelp when Ernesto tightens the knot just a little too much.

“We’re not discussing that now,” he snarls, and physically throws him face down onto the bed.

“Hey now--” Héctor begins, starting to lift himself up on his elbows - but suddenly Ernesto’s hands are back on his ass, his mouth his brushing over it through the lace, and he finds he doesn’t really want to protest. A glance at the screen confirms that Imelda is very much enjoying the scene, too, and that settles it: Héctor drops his head back on the mattress, and lets Ernesto do as he will.

And what he does is tease an awful lot, all small kisses and nuzzling as though Héctor’s cock isn’t hard as stone and straining against the lingerie. He lets out a low whine, trying to buckle his hips,
pressing his ass more firmly against Ernesto’s lips and warm, warm hands. He feels him smile against his skin just as Imelda lets out a hum.

“Well, are you going to seize your moment, or not?”

A growl, and the lingerie is pulled down roughly, the brush against his erection almost making Héctor cry out. Through half-lidded eyes, he can see Imelda leaning closer to the screen. Her skin is flushed, some hair sticking to her sweaty forehead.

“Now get yours off.”

Again, no protest or retort: Ernesto’s hands fly to do just that. A bit too quickly, really, because at the first attempt the elastic band of his boxers slips from his fumbling fingers and hits his skin again in a resounding smack, followed by a less than dignified yelp and laughter from both Héctor and Imelda. “Nice grito,” he compliments him.

“Pretend it’s from me,” Imelda adds.

“Very funny,” Ernesto grumbles, and takes off his boxers, letting it drop on the ground. With a chuckle, Imelda waits a moment - wait, is she having a drink? Was that glass there all along? - before leaning back. One of her hands is still off camera and very likely in her own underwear, if she has any on at all.

“Sit back on the bed,” she instructs, and turns her gaze to Héctor, who feels a shiver going down his spine. “And you get on his lap.”

He does and, before long, everything is drowned out by pleasure as he straddles Ernesto’s legs, bound arms over his neck, thrusting his hips up into his friend’s fist - against his cock, it’s such a tight fit, so warm and hard and he can feel every vein and twitch, every grumble in Ernesto’s chest and the puffs of breath against his face. He could come from just this, but oh, when Imelda orders Ernesto to turn him around, lube up and fuck him, Héctor nearly sobs with relief.
“Fuck-- fuck, fuck--” Ernesto groans against the nape of his neck, canting up his hips to push into him deeper, stroking him at the same steady rhythm. Through a veil of tears, he can see Imelda panting, too, head tilted back and mouth open as both of her hands disappear under her skirt. Their gazed meet, she smiles, and he smiles back breathlessly - so lost in the moment that he’s entirely lost track of time, and it doesn’t matter at all.

He could keep this up for his entire life, and he’d die without a single regret.

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