family matters
by Lady_Kaos

Summary

Miguel and Tulio are partners. Family, even. And they go way, way back.

Companion one-shot series to if they say i'm a god (that's what i am.) Set before, during, and after the story. Spoilers abound.

Notes

Some of these one-shots can stand on their own, but I recommend checking out the original story first or else you might get very confused.

See the end of the work for more notes.
"Well?" Nimble fingers proudly comb through the brand new beard on a brand new chin. "Don't I look dashing with some facial hair? More distinguished?"

He scoffs, leaning further against the alley wall. His partner ignores him, never looking up from his reflection in the fountain as he starts grooming his golden hair instead. "More like vainer than ever before. And shorter."

His partner huffs. "Excuse me for still taking pride in my appearance even when we squatted with sheep and peasants." He looks up from his reflection just long enough to scowl back at him. "And at least I picked a side. Beard. No beard. Just shave or let it grow out already!"

"Hey!" He fiddles with his dice to keep from reaching to his own chin. "Don't mock the scruff! I'm going for roguish here, remember? Irresistible to the ladies?"

And it's not his fault people still recognize him with and without the beard. The middle ground's his safest bet.

After a moment his partner stops scowling to quirk an intrigued brow. "Well, I do like the hair. It's very... luscious."

He smirks mischievously, curling the tip of his raven locks around a finger. Even tied neatly back it still reaches near the small of his back. "Hey, someone has have to hair enough for the two of us."

It takes extra effort to keep his tone light and suggestive, without the slightest suggestion of malice. Though his partner's hair still reaches down to his chin it's a sad shadow of the golden cascade that once floated around his feet when unbound. He mourns its loss even more than his partner does.

His gamble is just right, for his partner beams back at him before settling comfortably in at his side. His partner takes his instrument in hand. A pandura, mind you, not a lyre. Because they're not stupidly obvious.

Not too long ago his partner's melodies could exalt the human spirit to dizzying heights or plunge them into raving madness. There's still magic enough in his song to whittle away at inhibition, to draw a few curious ears away from the bustling docks to investigate further.

There's three of them to start; a wondrous boy fresh from his first voyage, the leathery veteran looking for an excuse to throw away his troubles, and the sharp-eyed hard-ass that's gonna make or break this operation.

"What are you supposed to be?" demands the hardass.

The grizzled sailor appraises their rustic dress. "Shepherds, it looks like."

"Something like that," his partner agrees amiably, not skipping a beat in his song.

"A little of this, a little of that," he continues smoothly. "You know how it is, these days."

The grizzled one nods sympathetically. "Yeah, I hear you. Barbarians to the north, fucking chaos in
Rome. And... the rest of it."

The temple closings. And burnings. The violent property seizures. And, when folks in the city got particularly drunk or fearful or zealous, the occasional beating to death in the streets.

"Not in the cities, though," the boy foolishly asserts. "The only pagans left are those in the countryside, and they'll be gone soon enough."

The hard-ass narrows his eyes. "You two Christian?"

His partner splutters at that, his song faltering with what could be either laughter or outrage. "Well, there's only one God around now that matters, isn't there?"

He compensates for the slip-up by tilting his head proudly, with enough 'genuine' indignity for the both of them. "Of course we are. Proper, Nicene Christians. None of that Arius horseshit."

The boy buys it. The old-timer is willing to let it slide.

The hard-ass stares long and hard at them. He looks beyond the beard and the bald-faced lies. He knows them. Of course he must. He's the sort of man that smashed their last statues and tore down their last sanctuaries in this city.

"Your names," the hard-ass demands harshly. "How do you expect us to gamble with total strangers?"

"Tullius," he answers easily, as if he's answered to it all his life. It's a good name. A safe name, one that could belong to either patrician or peasant. "I'm Tullius."

"I," his partner proclaims grandly, "am Miguel."

Not Michael, like the archangel and the saint. Not even in proper, urbane Latin, but in the exaggerated pronunciation of the plebeians bringing the language of this land further and further away from Rome.

And Miguel owns himself so grandly that the hard-ass finally shuts up and lays down his first bet.

Tullius and Miguel. Miguel and Tullius. Humble country peasants. Or, as the dismayed sailors quickly come to realize, ruthless con artists.

Not exactly as awe-inspiring as Mercury and Apollo, of course, but it's because of men like Pius that there's no room for any other gods but God anymore.

Before they make their escape, Tullius takes savage pleasure in getting Pius to part with his precious little silver cross.

One day, he hopes, he'll be able to thoughtlessly pawn off the tribute to another God as just more loot to be won from the suckers of the world.

Today, however, Tullius settles for chucking it into the river. For just a moment the cross flies twinkling into the sun, reaching heights that make his heart soar with envy. Then it's gone, gone forever, lost to the silt and the shit. Gone like he and Miguel will one day be.

Tonight, however, is the wine and the women and song their ill-gotten gains will pay for. And, tomorrow, maybe Tarraco.
Maia bares her son at the dawning. Gazing upon his adorable, impish little face for the first time, she loves him immediately, no matter the grief he's going to bring down upon their heads. And, from the twinkle in his eyes, knows it's going to happen before the day is even out.

"Hermes," she names him. Let's call him that at this stage, for simplicity's sake.

Maia will not have to teach him much. Beings like them are born knowing their place in the world, all serving beneath wide-ruling Zeus in some capacity. Even if Maia also knows her son's place will be stepping all over the toes of his big brothers and sisters.

There is one matter, however, Maia wants her son to know above everything else, for even gods must heed the way of the world.

Her babe paws at her breast. She gently bats his grasping hands away. "No, my son," she chides gently.

Not even the greatest goddesses, formidable Hera among them, deign nurse their children. And Maia is but a mere nymph, hiding away in the vain hope she won't soon be discovered and smote by the queen of the heavens.

Hermes whines in protest. Maia, humble in her station, is still not without offerings, not when the gods of these mountains know all too well she nurses a son of thundering Zeus. So she reaches into the bowl at her side for a slice of something a mortal might call honeycomb. Deftly she dribbles its contents into her son's mouth; rosy-red nectar and ethereal ambrosia, sweet as mead and sweet as song. Sweet as blood.

Hermes smacks his lips in appreciation before he snatches the offering from her hands to devour it all. Already he has his father's appetites.

"Nectar and ambrosia," Maia informs him sternly. "The food of the gods. Our only food."

"Why?" he asks, not yet an hour old. "There's so much more out there! I'll take it from the mortals if they won't give it to me."

Maia knows in the core of being her son shall soon be able to weasel his way out of near anything. But never this. "The smoke and the savor," she declares, immutable as her star. "What they burn in your name, you shall only enjoy what wafts up to your hall. Such is the way of the gods."

It has always been so, since before even guileful Prometheus cheated Zeus out of the best portions
of the sacrifice and whole cattle were burned in their name.

Hermes' face crinkles in childish defiance. "I--"

"No," Maia grinds out. "You are a god. Or you are not."

Weary Maia, born of the evening darkness, soon falls into deep slumber. Hermes wastes no time in abandoning his cradle.

Hours pass. In his first day alive Hermes invents the lyre, weaves fine sandals of tamarisk and myrtle, first sparks flame from a fire-stick, and decides on a whim to make off with Apollo's cattle. He knows the god is his brother, maybe, and also great and terrible in his wrath.

Killing any of the cows was not part of the plan, but the nectar and ambrosia is a distant memory now. The deep lowing of Apollo's cows, whiter than snow, kindles new hunger, deep and dark, in his gut.

Hermes is only an infant, but the cows graze with their heads close to the ground. He seizes one by its golden horns and easily flips it onto its back. Its fearful bellows instinctively make him drive a sharpened stake through its throat.

With a final, gurgled cry the cow falls silent. Its snow white flanks are now stained bright, vivid red.

Hermes is so excited by the sight he drags down a second cow to pierce its throat. His heart thrums with pride and slobber runs freely down his baby chin.

The rest of the herd regards him placidly. Even with two members dead by his hand they still do not know fear. They are Apollo's sacred cattle, the property of the far-shooting archer. Only the recklessly stupid rouse his wrath. None have ever yet been hubristic enough to steal his prized herd.

With careful precision Hermes butchers his kills. He divides the meats into twelve portions by lot, all honorable. Eleven are the great gods of Olympus, Apollo included, and he shall soon make their number twelve.

One lot at a time, Hermes offers his sacrifices to the pyre. He salivates at the raw meat in his hands, redder than nectar and more solid than ambrosia shall ever be. His pudgy little hands, bloody from the butchery, shake as they drop his portion, the twelfth and final, into the flame.

The smoke makes him lightheaded and weary. The aroma of cooking flesh makes him only want to throw his hands into the pile and yank the meat out, to tear into it with toothless gums.

Even at this young age, a thief with little impulse, Hermes is proud enough to let his sacrifice burn all the way through.

He is a god. He shall prove to Apollo and their high father in his lofty halls.

Hermes carefully stows away the meat of the second cow before vehemently disposing all other evidence of his act. None need ever know how close he has come toward almost proving himself less than what he truly is.

Soon after the hills of Arcadia echo with his name. From their peaks fires by the dozens carry their tribute high into his halls. New strength and new power flow into him.
Hermes is a god. He partakes only nectar and ambrosia. He bleeds only ichor, light and ethereal, when he bleeds at all.

The fires kindled and blood spilled on his behalf is not enough to sate all his appetites, nor quell the envy that eats away more than the hunger. Hermes is lord of thieves, after all. It is simply his nature to covet what he cannot have, and loathe all the harder for it.

Both the moon and stars are shrouded by clouds, concealing his crime and his shame. At least whatever faint ghost remains of his mother will not have to witness her son sink so low, to break the one order she had ever forced upon him.

The wolves at his side whine beseechingly. They pace anxious circles at his side. Their golden eyes never leave the sheep-fold below.

At such a close distance the sheep should be bleating nervously at the smell of wolf on the wind. Their guardian dogs should have roused themselves in a frothing, barking frenzy. Not tonight, when he grits his teeth to keep his flock docile and the dogs asleep.

One bold bitch tries to break away from his side. He grabs the she-wolf by the tail and yanks her back with a startled yelp.

It's been hard to hold even his beasts, as of late, and harder by the day. Perhaps it would have been easier to make them listen with a lupine shape, to bare fangs of his own for tucked tails and exposed bellies and utmost obedience.

Mercury, still stubbornly clinging to the name, dares not to. Not when he can so easily lose himself to animal instinct and slip away entirely.

Besides, if he makes this kill as a wolf, then that means devouring it like a wolf. But this sacrifice is not for himself.

Despite his human shape, Mercury still growls a warning to the wolves. He glides down the slope alone, the pack pacing the forest shadows in his wake.

Mercury's eye falls on the largest, fattest ram in the flock. He leaps the fence and winds his way through the flock. His knife finds its throat. One deft twist and it's all over.

Mercury grunts with the effort of slinging the stolen sheep over his shoulder. He exits the fold through the gate, leaving it wide open.

For a moment he glances at the dogs, asleep by their shepherd's hut, and hesitates. Still he is both predator and protector of the flock. He knows these dogs are devoted guardians, true and loyal. It is not their fault their master is a man who has not sacrificed to Mercury since his boyhood, now a zealous Christian that has helped put an end to all such sacrifices near this valley.

He will give them a fighting chance.

The dogs, that is.

When he reaches the wolves Mercury breaks his spell of sleep. The bleating cries of the flock erupt as the ravenous pack descends. So does the deep, thunderous barking of their protectors.

For just the moment the shepherd's furious shouting joins the furor.
His final scream, high and reedy, ends as the bitch from before sinks her fangs into a throat.

Mercury bares his teeth in what cannot be called a smirk. Then he breaks into a run, fast as he can muster, and leaves the beasts to fight and die as they would.

For one terrible moment he fears to arrive to a deserted campsite. He nearly falls to his knees and utters a prayer to relief to thankless fates that his partner is still holding on. Transparent and fading by the minute, but still here. Not dead. Not yet.

"Apollo," he murmurs, the name a prayer unto itself as he rips into the ram's fleece. "Alexicacus. Averruncus. Paean. I'm here, I'm here."

When his panicked mind runs out of Latin epithets, he defaults for Greek and older tongues, any and every name he knows for the knows for the glorious being at his side.

The fire burns bright and desperate for any soul to see, but Mercury cares only for the smoke that billows from the fire in noxious clouds. Once the savor brought strength. Now it only chokes his throat and makes his eyes water.

This is not tribute willingly offered by a devoted follower, or at least one that cared enough for tradition to carry out the proper rituals. This is a stolen sacrifice, prepared by the paradox of god offering to god. Its vapors are empty as air.

Mercury casts his hand into the fire and yanks out a barely-cooked cut of meat. He hesitates only a heartbeat before wolfing it down.

The blood sits heavy on his tongue while the flesh drops to his stomach like a stone. For a moment he feels as damned as Lycaon, caught by the eyes of the gods cannibalizing his own son.

The dread passes. He is left lesser than before, trembling and cut off forever from parts he once thought forever part of him. But more solid, somehow, rooted to this world he has never been before. With substance in his stomach it will not be so easy to fade away into nothing.

He still weeps when he forces the same forbidden flesh down Apollo's throat and hopes him solid enough to swallow. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I-I'm s-s-sorry!"

For a moment, his partner wavers out of reality completely, and he fears he's killed him forever. And then his partner is here, warm and solid and here. Greedily, desperately he consumes every piece of ram passed into his hands. Eating like he hasn't in years. Eating like they have never truly eaten before.

His partner out of harm's way, he remembers his own hunger, and starts stealing his own shares from it. They devour every last morsel until only charred bones, cracked and sucked for their marrow, remain over a dying fire.

At last, the fog clears from his partner's eyes. Those brilliant green eyes light up at the sun as he gazes clearly upon him for the first time in days. "Mer..."

And then that joy dies, as his partner realizes the lie of that name, of how completely he has disowned himself from the very core of their being. He is nameless, and shameless, so long as his partner survives to be horrified at what he has done to keep them both alive.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs again, as his partner's horrified gaze flickers from his face to the fire and his own grease-stained hands.
"No," his partner whispers, small and weak as a child.

His partner's chest flutters with rapid, desperate breathes that deepen into heaves as if to either sob or outright reject the bitter mortality forced down his gullet. As if rejecting it now is enough to undo what can never be unwrought.

He hangs warily back. There is nothing he can do or say but wait for the hysterical denial to run its course.

Spent, his partner finally crumbles into a ball, in a way smaller and weaker than he'd been when first born into this world.

Broken, yes. Likely to loathe him forever, maybe. But not dead. Not yet.

So he waits for his partner's grief to run its course, if it ever will. As the hours crawl by he cleans his knife just to slice it across his palm in morbid curiosity.

At the peak of his power he bled true ichor, gleaming and ethereal. Hours ago he was scarcely solid for anything but vapor. Now something like mortal blood, red and sluggish, blossoms on his palm before the wound weaves itself closed.

They're not mortal. They'll never be. But the divide between them is no longer like that between heaven and earth. It will never be again.

Dawn is breaking when his partner finally stirs from his stupor. How bitterly ironic.

Emerald eyes focus on him. "Well, don't--"

"It's all my fault," he blurs out immediately. "I know. But I don't regret it. Not when you're still here, even if you hate me for all the time we have left now."


"A good lamb," he adds in. "That ram was kind of chewy."

"A whole roasted swan!"

"Honey cakes. Dozens of honey cakes."

"Blood." His partner blinks at his incredulous stare. And then sheepishly chuckles. "Ah. Right. Not exactly the... time and place for that anymore, is it? Unless it's wine that also happens to be the blood of a God."

Their noses simultaneously crinkle in disgust. And people thought their cults were the wrong ones!

"You know," he admits, "I still really wanna try cow."

His partner glowers at him before slumping in defeat. "Yeah. I know. If only mine still existed. You just don't see cattle like that anymore, do you? Hides whiter than snow, and horns like..."

"Gold," they utter as one.

Oh, they've had idols and temples adorned in gold and gold leaf before, but in their lessened states suddenly the concept captivates them anew. If there's still something the people of this land love almost as much (if not more so) than their new God, it's their gold and all the wealth they pour
their times and toil into.

Certainly nothing devoted to their names, but those are lost now. And not quite an offering, but close enough, to help sate the needs stolen food and wine will never nourish.

His partner appraises him. "You're still a thief, aren't you?"

"'Til the day I die," he shoots back easily. Because, if there's anything these times have taught them, it's that even their kind dies. And they aren't even gods anymore.

"And I'm..." His partner slumps, before grinning with an inherent sunny optimism that still spring so easily. "Well, I'm open to instruction."

It's something to keep them going.

It's something to keep the guilt from eating him alive that he's only prolonged his partner's suffering, to silence the vicious whispers he is too selfish to have let the most precious thing in this world drift off so easily.

Chapter End Notes

And hopefully some more of Tulio's crippling guilt complex from the full series makes a bit more sense here : (

Mama Maia is a minor nymph, without any real worship of her own outside reference to her son Hermes. She's connected to the stars of the Pleiades.

In Ancient Greece, gods were believed to not actually eat their offerings, but to subsist on the smoke and smell of what was burned on the sacrificial altars. A myth further states that Prometheus tricked the gods into giving up the good parts of the sacrifice to the mortals, so they only took the inedible bones and fat. In the large state sacrifices, the leftover meat from the meat was distributed to the people of the city to eat instead.

Yes, Hermes had a really eventful first day alive. And even he, arrogant little shit that he is, knows better to eat what gods are forbidden from in the Homeric hymn recounting of the myth. In the same version Apollo also threatens a fate that would have left his baby brother an eternal baby leading ghost babies throughout the underworld, because Greek gods are horrifying and Hermes has no shits to give.

Sheep were sacred to Mercury and Apollo in their role as shepherd gods. Mercury/Hermes was both predator and protector of the flock, with all creatures that apply. Swans are sacred to Apollo.

Alexicacus - warder from evil
Averruncus - averter (as in, averter of bad fate)
Paean - healer
All good epithets to invoke when you really, really want your partner to see the sunrise : (
complex

Chapter Notes

Because Miguel latched quickly onto Chief Tannabok and Apollo has a... history.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Four of my finest Cyclopes, dead by your bow." His sire's voice is deep and rumbling, the thunder of a storm about to strike. "What have you to say for yourself?"

Apollo meets his gaze defiantly. He is punisher of the wicked and overbearing, and he has acted in his just rights. "A son for a son."

Those lesser Cyclopes, not quite their divine sires, had forged the thunderbolt that had slain his beloved Asclepius, brilliant and bold.

It is Zeus that had wielded the bolt, who has struck down his own grandson for daring to raise the dead. But Apollo certainly can't harm him, so he has inflicted punishment on the next best target.

"Four of my most promising smiths dead, to avenge one hubristic mortal that dared defy death. My sentence, delivered by my hand." The clouds surrounding his father's throne, already churning ominously, darken to the iron gray. "Do you DARE defy my judgement?"

Apollo bows easily before the only being he shall ever accept as his greater. "Of course not, father. I could never do such a thing." Apollo delights in law and civil constitution and Zeus, for all his flaws, is king of these skies and all beneath it. "My quarrel was with those who dared forge the weapon that struck down my son. And I have had my vengeance."

"Weasel words," his sire rumbles. "Not the words of a poet. That is the answer of a liar, a con artist, who thinks himself capable of subverting ME."

Apollo sinks deeper into his bow, his unbound hair falling in a golden curtain around his face. His aura still dampens with utter terror. "Father, it was my idea, and mine alone. Please do not--"

"Whether Hermes helped with this or has simply tainted you with his brand of wiles, it is you that have defied me, Apollo. And you that shall face the punishment."

The god proudly raises his head to meet his sentence face on. Apollo is lord of the sun and speaker of prophecy, healer and averter of evil. Not even Zeus can afford to cast him down into Tartarus or shackle him to a mountain in the Zagros like Prometheus. Apollo is just too vital to be locked away from the world.

"Servitude," Zeus commands. "A year as bondsman, with your powers muted accordingly."

Apollo cannot conceal his smirk from all-knowing Zeus and so does not bother trying. To them a year can pass by like the blink of an eye. "To what god or goddess am I sworn to, father?"

Zeus is a stoic statue on his throne, where his wife Hera might have smiled in glee. "To no god at all. A mortal." Apollo's smirk freezes and cracks. "You have until sunset to decide your master."
Despite the privacy of their audience words are wind in Olympus. Gossip and rumor spread like wildfire among eager ears who delight at the shining sun brought low by his own arrogance.

Hermes, however, does not come to gloat. "Do you know how much leeway you have here? Let me find you a senile old man that can't even order his children around anymore. Or a besotted boy or maid you can wrap around your little finger!"

"No," Apollo says succinctly. Even he doesn't have to gaze far into the future to see how those will pan out. "Someone old, they die early on and I get inherited by their ambitious offspring. And the lovestruck child will want to marry me, Hermes, and order me to be by their side forever."

"Then---"

"No. There's no weaseling out of this one. I'm doing this my way this time."

Hermes snarls at him. "Really? Because your way of vengeance for your son would have had Dad SMITE YOU FOR HUBRIS!"

Apollo ignores him. He casts out the threads of fate far and wide for the pattern that will simply cause the least amount of grief for him.

And knows the name of his master like he knows the sunrise. He smiles to himself, wide and hopeful, when his little brother flies off in a huff.

Admetus is the young King of Pherae, unmatched in his hospitality and justice. When a chastened god manifests before him to pledge himself to a year of servitude, the young king offers up his richest food and softest bed. Master though he is, he grants Apollo his choice of how he will contribute to the household.

Apollo gratefully chooses the isolation of the fields. As Admetus' herdsman he can peacefully hide himself away in the hills with only the cattle to judge.

During his year of bond the sun still rises and the oracles voice his prophecies. Cut off from the wider sum of himself, Apollo is still a god, even if those numbed and distant parts carry on unconsciously as a mortal's heartbeat and other involuntary body functions. He braces himself for the mockery of his fellow gods, but not even Hermes comes to him in that year. Perhaps they are wary of a paradox like himself, trapped between godhood and powerlessness. More likely, Zeus has ordered them away.

Apollo refuses the guise of pretending to be mortal. He ties up his hair and dons duller garb, but he draws the line at a false face or name that is not his own. Admetus is certainly not the type of man to boast he has a god in his service and Apollo's servants are not about to ask their king's strange new herdsman his name if they can avoid him altogether.

After a while, the sting of his punishment fades, and Apollo finds himself enjoying quiet days in the fields with only the lowing cattle and strum of his lyre to fill the silence.

The year Apollo serves as herdsman, all cows bare twins, and not a single calf is lost to sickness or predator.

Pride keeps him from seeking out Admetus' bed in such a weakened state. Instead he resolves to not come before his king in such a state until his true glory is restored.

Apollo's year of servitude is in its final weeks when Admetus comes to him on his hands and knees
to beg not for his love, but the love of fair Alcestis. Her father, proud King Pelias, has decreed only the first man to yoke a boar and a lion to a chariot shall be worthy of her hand. Those suitors that escape the task alive do so with lost limbs and gruesome scarring.

Apollo does as his king commands. King Pelias considers Admetus' request to bring his herdsman along without thinking nothing of it.

Beneath Apollo's gaze the lion and boar are placid as lambs when Admetus hitches them to the chariot and drives it once around the palace grounds for good measure. Nervously eyeing Apollo out of the corner of his eye, King Pelias swiftly agrees to the match.

Satisfied, Apollo retreats to his herd and wiles away the remaining days in glum silence.

His final day of servitude dawns with Admetus, disheveled and wild-eyed, running desperately through the hills and shouting his name.

Apollo's face stretches into an easy, confident grin as he swings his shepherd's staff over his shoulders. And tilts himself just so the loose neck slides invitingly over his shoulder. "Good morning, my king. Was your wedding night all you'd thought it would be?"

"Snakes!" Admetus cries. "I-I-I tried to take Alcestis to bed a-and the bridal chamber was crawling with snakes! I-I don't know what..."

His friend ends with increasingly hysterical stammering. Apollo wishes he could declare himself the solution to this problem, that the bridal chamber needed only the proper... consecration first.

But no. Because he already knows what this adorable idiot's done wrong.

"You remembered my sister, right?"

"...What?"

"Artemis," Apollo prompts. "My twin? Virgin goddess, remember? And very, very protective of her maidens? Like the one you were about to passionately ravish?"

Admetus' eyes clear with understanding. And then widen in dread. "B-But Alcestis is my wife."

"Really?" Apollo groans. "You, of all people, forgot that maybe my sister appreciates a sacrifice before her maids are made brides?" He buries his head in his hands at Admetus' look of sheepish acknowledgement. "Just go. Be generous with your offering. And no more snakes."

With a trembling, eager laugh, Admetus envelops him into a crushing hug and races back down the hillside. Apollo is left gaping stupidly after him.

Perhaps Admetus was too caught up in his relief to realize he just near squeezed the breath out of a god. Or perhaps, after a year with no overt power from his herdsman, Admetus has simply forgotten the true extent of his name altogether.

"Really?" he grouses as Admetus vanishes from sight.

A year ago, his fury would have at the very least left Alcestis stricken dead from a horrible plague and Admetus twisted into something bestial, if noble in its shape. Now Apollo can only muster up enough wrath to be mildly disgruntled.

As the sun sets on his final day of servitude, and his power surges back in a golden wave, the rage
still does not come. Even when his foresight lets him know, in no uncertain terms, that the sacrifice to Artemis worked wonders for that snake-free bridal chamber.

Years fly by in the blink of an eye. Apollo can't bring himself to stay away from Pherae and its earnest king any more than he can bring himself to hate Alcestis. Especially when she bravely offers up her own life so that Admetus need not die on the day he is destined to.

Not even Apollo's presence can keep Admetus from withering away in grieving guilt over the wife her sacrificed herself in his stead.

Apollo at least wants to claim working the miracle his son once did, that he was the one to restore Alcestis to life and Admetus his heart. Instead he curses the cruel irony that it is Heracles, of all his half-brothers, to go into the underworld for her!

Apollo keeps his distance after that. He tells himself it's because Admetus is too old and repulsive, closer to death now than ever before, to be worth the visits anymore.

Miguel has a new spring in his step when they depart Chief Tannabok's palace. Not only has his words saved him and Tulio from being stuck in this place until their ruse was caught, but he's just bought them an extra three days in paradise.

He grins victoriously at Tulio, hoping for one of those secret, special smiles they share only when they get away clean with a con.

His partner's eyes, though, are narrowed with in a deep thought edging on suspicion.

"Oh, for the love of--" Miguel sputters indignantly. "What is it now, Tulio?"

"Hm?" Tulio says innocently. "Oh, nothing. Just thinking how lucky we are the chief of this place is such a good host. Just, even. Like he really cares for these people."

Miguel bristles. "So? What's wrong with actually caring for the people you're in charge of?"

"Nothing!" Tulio blurs out. "I'm glad this place has at least one person in charge that isn't nuts like Tzekel-Kan, but..." He rubs his neck awkwardly. "Come on, Miguel. We both know you have a... type."

"Excuse me?" Miguel scoffs. "I also have standards, thank you."

Because Chief Tannabok is old. No deep, reassuring voice or warm dark eyes change the lines on his face or the gray creeping at his temples. And happily married. Miguel sees pride in the chief's eyes for his brood of his children and nothing less than utter devotion for his wife, Miya.

Maybe, if Tannabok was twenty years younger, and six kids less.... But hypotheticals don't change the facts of the here and now. Miguel learned that a long time ago.

"I didn't mean it like that," Tulio murmurs, soft and contrite. "It's... just..."

"Yeah," Miguel huffs. "I know."

Because Tulio was once the happy black sheep of their big, unhappy family. And Miguel had been practically made to answer their father's beck and call, god of fate and justice and civil law on his behalf.

But their dad is dead now. Dead as Admetus. Dead and gone and a world away from shining
Manoa.

Rare is the mortal man that can make their damned, departed dad absolutely pathetic in comparison. He hopes, for this city's sake, the gods who rule Manoa are half as merciful as Chief Tannabok. Because even the rare sort of men like him can't stick around forever.

Chapter End Notes

Scholars have noted a lot of Apollo's powers and overlapping domains often make him an extension of Zeus or at the very least more dependent on his good will than a lot of the other gods are.

Yes, Apollo really did spend a year in servitude to a mortal king named Admetus. In one version, it's for killing Cyclopes for making the thunderbolts that killed his son Asclepius. Because the actual killer happens to be Zeus, his father and king of the cosmos.

A lot of versions of the myth do make Admetus Apollo's lover in some regard. The idea of Apollo!Miguel banging his head on a tree in frustration over not being properly understood was more hilarious to me XD

Of course, where Apollo remains eternally young and youthful, Admetus grew into an old, bearded king that ultimately loved his wife and kids in a way Zeus never could.

Poor Tulio doesn't mind most of Miguel's lovers, because he gets over most of them rapidly when they get old and icky. The people he latches onto as surrogate father figures, however...
dolphins

Chapter Summary

Or in which my muse finally manages a fluffy one-shot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Tulio!" Miguel cries in delight. "Tulio, look!"

Tulio sighs. "Miguel, I swear if it's another pretty flower I'm gonna..."

Tulio looks toward the river and immediately fixates on beady black eyes and the long snout of teeth. With a squeal he leaps back from the riverbank as if still wearing winged sandals.

Altivo's whinnying laughter follows him into the trees. So does the high-pitched chatter he never would have expected to ever hear so deep in this god forsaken jungle.

Tulio makes his way back to the river and confirms his ears are not deceiving him. Three long, blubbery shapes bob in the water. "Dolphins?" he squawks indignantly.

"Dolphins!" Miguel squeals, his pitch soaring so high surely only the dolphins can hear him.

There's no denying they're dolphins, even if they're blobby and with stubby little dorsal fins. And mottled gray and pink.

Tulio sputters again. "B-But we're days from the ocean and t-they're pink!"

"Oh, Tulio," his partner chides with a laugh. "That's because they're river dolphins, not marine dolphins. I haven't seen any like them since India."

Miguel strides right past him, plopping fearlessly down right next to the water Tulio has literally just painfully proven to be leech-infested. The dolphins, just as stupidly bold, swim right up to the riverbank.

Tulio glowers at them and their chattering laughter even as he starts looking around for a really big branch or rock. Because if these glorified fish try to drag Miguel off, first he's gonna brain some fish, and then he's gonna strangle the life out of his partner first!

The dolphins really press in when Miguel starts chattering as best he can back to them. Tulio's palm flies to his forehead at the absurdity of it all.

He knows from secondhand experience that dolphins are actually one of the few animals out there smart enough to hold a decent conversation with, but Tulio is not and will never be an ocean expert. Interpret languages from across countries and centuries in a way he can understand? Sure. Sink to gossiping with fish? Absolutely not.

As the tentative introductions blossom into what is obviously an animated discussion between Miguel and a pod of pink dolphins, Tulio can't help a dumb, wistful smile. They are locked to these
Altivo is not so charismatic. Intrigued by the dolphins, the stallion creeps closer to the water. And bolts off with a startled whinny when one sprays him right in the face.

The entire pod of dolphins chatter after him. Tulio laughs too, before Altivo retaliates with a slobbering lick that leaves him more horse slobber than hair.

Miguel finally sees the dolphins off with a cheerful wave.

"Well?" Tulio prompts dryly. "Did you at least learn anything useful from the fish?"

"Dolphins, Tulio," Miguel corrects gently. "Dolphins breathe air. Admittedly, there was a bit of a language barrier between us, and some bits lost in translation on my end. But I was able to learn more about the fish monster coming up."

Apparently the dolphins have helpfully informed him the fanged fish are feisty, but small and delicious. And capable of swarming slow, clumsy swimmers like them to strip all the flesh from their bones.

"How lovely," Tulio drawls. "Because it's not like the blood-sucking leeches taught us to stay out of the water."

Not that caution keeps a fish from leaping out of the water to bite his ass anyway. He doesn't even get to see if it's tasty, because the stupid little armored thing that's been stalking them their entire journey steals it first.

Chel has only glimpsed dolphins from a distance before, and not only because they are crafty shape-shifters that might try dragging an inattentive person by the river down to their deaths. Dolphins do not enter Lake Parime and her past status rarely allowed her beyond the city limits.

Now she lounges on the shore of Lake Parime, close enough to have the droplets spray her face when a dolphin erupts from the depths in a spinning leap. This dolphin is sleeker than the river dolphins, with an elegant dorsal fin. Instead of being mottled pink and gray, he is adorned in shimmering streaks of silver and gold. He grins and waves a flipper at them on his way down.

"Show off," Tulio grumbles good-naturedly.

He yelps when Chel nudges him in the ribs. "Oh, like you're one to talk."

Miguel surfaces again to soar over one of the giant turtles, which placidly continues along its course despite the passengers whooping from its back.

Chel gets it, sort of. Miguel is as unwaveringly optimistic as they come and not afraid to let everyone know it. But considering what she knows of their past...

"He's an adorable dolphin. But, y'know, I still don't get it."

"Eh." Tulio shrugs. "It's an old cult thing. Delphinius. He of the Dolphins. Back when his cult was still getting off the ground he turned into a dolphin and dragged a boatful of colonists to where his oracle was. Or maybe a bunch of old sailors looked at the dolphins following their boats and thought one of their gods followed in their wake. It's..."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. It's complicated." Tulio stares wistfully after the dolphin when he gracefully
clears another turtle, even bigger than the last. "Why aren't you joining him? Miguel's having in the time of his life in there."

Miguel erupts from the water again, this time trailing by the snapping jaws of a massive kingfish. He whistles in mockery when the beast's jaws snap shut on nothing. Chel and Tulio both wince.

Oh. Right.

"That's why," Tulio says flatly. "I've never been a boat god. Or a water god. Even before Xarayes tried to eat me."

Because even though Grandmother Turtle isn't batting an eyelash at the flippant young god frolicking around her lake, Lord Xarayes sure as hell isn't having it. Not that Chel or Miguel care what he thinks.

"You could, you know." Tulio nods awkwardly to the water. "If you wanted to."

Chel snorts. "Just because I ride Altivo around all the time doesn't mean I'd do the same to Miguel in... public..." She trails off, because that's not what Tulio means. Not at all.

Because even she likes to forget that Manoa does not see her as a priestess or speaker of the gods. No. She herself is now called goddess, even if her divinity not even a week old yet. Unless someone really needs her, or she wants her boys to exalt her to ridiculous new heights, it's very easy to shove all of the messy prayers and powers to the back of her head.

Tulio and Miguel slip into new forms as easily as some people change cloaks. Even Altivo, for all he is stubbornly a horse, is the wind whenever it pleases him.

Chel is... Chel. Why does she need to be anything else, if she can appear before a needy soul quick as a thought? Or when the wind himself is her steed?

Sure. She doesn't need to? Does she want to? Chel thinks long and hard. She bites her lip when Miguel clears another jump that leaves her breathless in envied awe.

"I don't know how," she mumbles at last. "Sure, maybe it comes naturally to natural gods, but for all these years I've just been... me. Chel."

With a wry grin Tulio nods after the sleek dolphin harassing the hell out of the kingfish. "Well, speaking from experience, let me tell you the definition of 'you' can be as broad you want it to be."

The dolphin erupts inches from the dock. Chel and Tulio both close their eyes against the wall of water thrown over them. They open their eyes to Miguel as they know him best, sopping wet and his arms slung around their shoulders.

"What happened to making peace with the new family?" Tulio gripes.

Miguel grins innocently. "Oh, I'm just tweaking the old boy's nose. It's all in good fun."

He waggles his brows at them both. "Sure you don't want to join in? It feels splendid working all the old kinks out of the system. Especially when you didn't realize you could even bend that way before."

Chel can't help but laugh, because his blatant innuendo crossed the line from arousing into downright dorky. "Well..."

Miguel gallantly offers his hand. She accepts it even as Tulio smiles reassuringly and dips back.
Chel follows Miguel into the water. Lady Eupana's domain is a blur of colors before her untrained human eyes.

Then Miguel tugs her further, and Lake Parime explodes into mesmerizing clarity around them. For a moment Chel simply floats in something heavier than air as she tries to take it all in.

Whatever awkwardness she feels in this form melts away when Miguel invitingly dives and loops around him. Instinctively she joins him in his dance and finds the invisible song within her as well.

Laughing in a language only they can understand, they soar above Grandmother Turtle's domain, and higher still.

Side by side, two dolphins erupt from Lake Parime. One he immediately knows as the common dolphins that once followed ships across the Mediterranean. The other is smaller and slighter, but more gracile than the river dolphins Tulio remembers from earlier.

It takes him a moment longer to realize he knows this second dolphin too. Dolphins like her are not restricted to the rivers, but roam out of the estuaries and into the open ocean when they please.

Tulio's wistful smile widens into a grin like that. Of course Chel isn't the type to be confined to either domain. Without a shred of bitterness in his heart, he settles back to watch them swim circles around the disgruntled kingfish and raise merry hell along Lake Parime's quiet shores.

The wind stirs at his hair and hot horse breath puffs into his face. Tulio tears his gaze away from his partner to roll his eyes up at Altivo. "What?"

Still not bothering with words, the stallion god jerks his head emphatically to the two dolphins frolicking down at the water before looking sternly back down at Tulio.

Tulio dares lean forward to dip a single toe in the water. He shudders and lurches back, heart pounding. He focuses very, very hard on the dolphins in front of him and not of how he was nearly lost forever to the waters of Xibalba.

"Not today," he croaks out at last.

Altivo, sensing the line crossed, nudges his shoulder in concern. Tulio manages an earnest smile at that and as he pats the horse god's muzzle.

"No," he says again, voice calm again. "Not today." Tulio eases back against the steps of their temple, half-closing his eyes. "Besides, it's not like we don't have all the time in the world."

One day, he will be dancing with them every leap and spin of the way.

For today, however, Tulio phases out all but the warm sun overhead and the high, whistling laughter of the dolphins. He basks in their laughter and drifts off in their bliss, utterly content.

Chapter End Notes

The river dolphins Miguel and Tulio encounter at the beginning are probably intended to be Amazon river dolphins (which are also legit called pink river dolphins 'cause they're pink and adorable.) I'm trying to avoid pinning Manoa down to a solid location
that goes with the wide breadth of El Dorado mystique, but considering the area the 'real' El Dorado was probably in it's the dolphin species native to the area. Amazonian myth also states these river dolphins are shape-shifters called 'encantados.' You can tell a dolphin in disguise by the hole they hide under their hats.

Apollo Phoebus was believed to have once resided in (the Ancient Greek approximation of) India, where in the earliest age the sun was believed to have set for the day. Greek colonies expanded into India too. The Indus river dolphin's range intersects with those and Apollo has a historical connection to dolphins.

Going off a famous fresco called 'Apollo's dolphins,' I'm going with the form Miguel took here was a common dolphin (as he likely took in the Cretan myth), an athletic and charismatic species the sailors of the Mediterranean were well-acquainted with. Chel's form is something like a tucuxi, which thrives in both the Amazon river basin and into the saltwater coasts.
lord of horses (lord of winds)

Chapter Summary

How about a horse instead?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Drifting far back, to tongues and peoples long forgotten, he thinks his misty origins to have been in the deep caves of the mountains, where his visage was painted alongside thundering aurochs and lumbering mammoths, swiftest of the herds hunted. Perhaps he misremembers, or has been conflated into the half-forgotten tales of those who came before.

Glaciers retreat and the land truly remembers warmth again. With the winters die all the great beasts, slow and lumbering and no match for tenacious human hunters. Their gods wither not long after, as their caves are abandoned and forms forgotten. What use have children for the bones of the beasts, old and dead, their grandfathers and grandfathers' grandfathers have driven from the earth?

Yet his herds persist, swift and tenacious, where the other great game of lore fades beyond myth and memory. He runs alongside them, the great catch almost made and the blessed kill that will see a desperate family through the last dregs of winter.

In time new lands and new ideas drift in the world outside. Their horses and his learn to accept the bit and bridle, yoke and harness, to serve purpose beyond meat and leather.

Such progress does not come without sacrifice. Nascent trainers suffer broken bones and broken lives. They are kicked in the head and thrown from saddles to break their necks. Their horses are ridden until their hearts give out or until they are unceremoniously killed for no longer being to pull their weight.

No matter his face or name, all know him as the lord of horses. He is the force that tames the wildest stallion, the embodiment of the most fearless warhorse and swiftest racer. His people come to be renowned for both their herds and their horsemanship.

At times he is worshiped in his own right and other times as mere mount to another. He carries gods and heroes, commanders and kings, great riders and great warriors.

Gods come and gods go. Iberian, Greek, Roman. He watches them come one after another. Conquest kills some and others are swallowed entirely by greater cults. He carries but the victors.

But not the lord of horses. Even when great Neptune and Epona take their turns astride him, he remains his own.

Then comes the God to end all gods.

One by one, the lord of horses watches their stars flicker out like the beast gods of his distant youth. His temples are torn down and his altars desecrated. He too awaits the end.
Yet the lord of horses does not fade like the others do. His herds are prized by counts and kings. They war for him and spent vast fortunes of gold to obtain him, the height of equine glory.

The arrival of the Umayyads from the south reignites the fervor of centuries earlier from all sides. Virtually all traces of the gods before are burned out in the rural hills as the hysterical preach of blasphemers and infidels and a thousand other faceless foes.

The lord of horses has endured such cultural shifts before. Alongside their interpretation of God and his Prophet, with them they bring their own herds, swift as the desert wind and able to run for hours beneath the scorching sun. He takes their strength into his own, the paragon of horses, unmatched in speed and spirit.

As the winds shift he turns with them. Over the ensuing centuries he bears Christian lords and Muslim emirs, kings and caliphs. They do not worship him as their ancestors once did, but revere him all the same. Before him men die by the hundreds, the thousands, trampled by his hooves and cut low by the swords of his knights.

Sidi, some call him. And others Senor. Lord. His names are endless over the centuries - King, Lord, Treasure, Pride.

España the united kingdom is different than even the separate Christian kingdoms it was formed from not so long ago. Their will guides him as it has since before man first bound him with bit and bridle.

It is not to king and kingdom he falls to, but conquistador and conquest.

Hernan Cortes dubs him Altivo. Lordly, yes. But also Haughty. Overbearing, for all that Cortes prizes the spirit in his blood he loathes any display of independent thought that breaks his illusion of control.

So Altivo stands, silent and stoic as a statue as Cortes preaches of gold and glory to lead his men into the New World. Altivo care not they take him from the land of his birth, for from upon his back they shall remake Spain anew upon that foreign shore. He bears even the water carelessly splattered on his head from his master's grandiose gestures, for Altivo is a disciplined warhorse, the pride of Spain's stables.

Yet even the eruption of celebratory gunfire makes Altivo momentarily startle in the same reflexes that once saved his herds from certain death.

"Altivo!" Cortes snarls as he wrenches upon his reins, dripping from his spilled toast. "Eyes forward!"

The stallion once revered as a god casts his gaze downward, for such is expected of him. He has endured millennium by bearing kings and caliphs upon his back, but now is the age of the conqueror.

Long weeks are spent with free range of Cortes' flagship. Altivo supposes it is not so bad, even as he still bears the indignity of the bridle and half-rations. He has the freedom of the open skies and the sea wind. He could be like the poor souls imprisoned beneath decks, bound for slowly fading away in the New World where Altivo shall help usher in conquest.

He is content.

Until he is not.
"Altivo! Hey, Altivo!"

Against his better instinct Altivo looks toward the sad little soul below deck. And fixates on the glistening red apple in his hands. He cannot help but venture forward, like some stupid foal away from his mother's side. An offering is an offering, after all, and Cortes is not generous with his patronage.

He gets close enough to recognize the sunny face grinning from him behind bars. Perhaps some of Altivo's horses were once sacrificed on his name. Or maybe he even once helped pull the quadrigas raced in his honor.

"All you have to do is find a pry bar."

Altivo initially snorts and turns his head up at such a trade, but the little golden bastard waves that enticing apple again.

He's starving. Oh, and he supposes it's vaguely refreshing to be addressed like an equal again, as if he's at least capable of a trade.

The other pathetic little shadow below deck does not believe him still capable of true intelligence. And doesn't even even bother dampening his ranting all that much.

Of course, his golden partner has also forgotten Altivo still damn well knows what keys are, even if it's been centuries since he's had a need to actually use them. So he pulls the keys straight from their hook and drops them down. He still whinnies a condescending laugh even if he can't see the flabbergasted looks on their faces.

There's a strange wind blowing that night. Altivo doesn't know what it means anymore, but he hopes it'll safely see Miguel back to Spain. 'Tulio' might be an ass, but Miguel has a shred of decency and horsemanship in him still.

Even if Miguel is both stupidly forgetful and has terrible aim.

Desperate for that last earnest shred of sacrifice, Altivo leaps after it and remembers too late he is neither the wind nor the cresting wave. He is a horse, drowning in the sea.

And then a horse stranded on a boat with two idiot has-beens even further gone than he is.

The people of Manoa have never seen a horse before. Still they manage to know Altivo on sight, to bow before him and address him as god.

"Lord Altivo," they call him, even the fearless little children he deign lets twine around his legs and clamber upon his back.

Their first and greatest tributes are bushels and bushels of golden apples. He devours them by the dozens, a hunger left to eat away at him for a thousand years. Only when that pit is sated does he remember pickier appetites and that is now well within his purview to demand them.

His acolytes offer up the bounty of their harvest on golden platters, from bitter cactus to succulent melon. He guzzles their strongest wines by the casket. Beautiful maidens weave flowers into his mane and smiths adorn his hooves in golden shoes.

It takes no time at all for his old strengths to return, to once more gallop on the wind and as the wind itself. He spreads himself far and wide among his new followers, to hear what they say of
him.

"Is Lord Altivo a manifestation of the Feathered Serpent?" some priests whisper in their halls.

"Shush!" hiss the others, wringing their hands as if they know he ears all the words upon his wind. "It is not for us to speculate. Lord Altivo comes before us as he is, and so he is Lord Altivo."

The Feathered Serpent is the messenger of the gods, bringer of the heavenly winds, the storms and clouds that foretell the greatest portents.

Lord Altivo is comfortably affixed to the earth. He is the breeze through the trees, the earthly herald that carries mortal words far and wide for all to hear. He is the speed behind the fastest runners and the gust in their sails.

When the Feathered Serpent next swoops in from the sea, bringing with him the warm, wet winds that herald Lord Cassipa's rain, Altivo races him not for competition, but for the sheer hell of it.

He keeps pace with the Serpent's monstrous shadow up until Manoa's border. There Altivo pauses to rear, calling up to his heavenly counterpart to a race well-run.

The Feathered Serpent, plumage shimmering every color of the rainbow, gracefully loops back for a single hiss of acknowledgement that shoots a rainbow in his wake. He and Lord Cassipa's rain sweep out to the west.

Altivo is unbothered to watch them go. For all he is Lord of the Winds, it is the Feathered Serpent Manoa hails as Lord of the Skies.

Chapter End Notes

Cave paintings of wild horses on the Iberian peninsula go back tens of thousands of years. Unlike other Ice Age megafauna like the mammoths and the aurochs, wild horses hung on a LOT longer. Or maybe even continue to live on in modern primitive Spanish horse breeds like the Sorraia. The genetic study is still out on them :p Because we’re still very vague on the exact domestication of the horse or how much true European wild horses continued to it before blending into feral populations that also still continue on the peninsula.

The pre-Roman Iberians prized their horses, had at least one horse cult, and were renowned for their hoses and horsemanship. It’s a practice that carried on into the Roman period and then on to some degree into the later periods. Even a few Christian monasteries, for example, have helped create and refine bloodlines of horses over the centuries.

Altivo is obviously an Andalusian, which owes its existence to the 'hotblooded' horses brought over from North Africa after the Muslim conquests, lending their speed and stamina to the size and steady nature of indigenous stock. I reference to two of Altivo's names being different names for 'lord' - the first in Mozarabic and the second in Castilian.

Apollo had a minor sphere with horses - as a patron of all herds and inventor of the quadriga, the four-horse chariot. Horses were sacrificed to him.
The Feathered Serpent is ubiquitous in Meso-American and South American lore. To Manoa he is clearly of the heavenly sphere; rainbows, storms, and high-atmosphere phenomena like that. Altivo is strictly the god of more earthly winds to Manoa, the earth-bound messenger to counter the heaven-bound Serpent. Kind of like Sekhmet and Hathor from Egyptian mythology, Altivo and the Feathered Serpent can tentatively be called two sides of the same coin. The Manoan priests really don't want to draw any conclusions unless the Feathered Serpent or Altivo come out and say so first. And considering they aren't exactly big conversationalists... ; )
Some gods go out with nary a whimper. Diana goes down fighting.

She and her brother are born together, one after another. She is the firstborn, helping their mother bare her shining twin into the world. Together they are unmatched archers, patrons of the wild beasts and precious herds, the moon and sun, hunter and herder. Where her worshipers go, his follow. Where he goes, so does she.

Like their moon and sun, they rise in the east and are borne west over the long course of their lives. It is in the west they shall set.

When the first haggard, hidden followers of Christ start creeping in the shadows of their temples, she turns her nose up with the rest of her powerful pantheon. They are eternal and undying, symbols of the state itself. What they have they to fear from a singular God who may or may not have a singular Son?

Even as the balance of power starts to shift, and her own brother starts to foretell more drastic measures must be taken, she does not think to heed him. Her little brother has always been overly dramatic.

Fate deferred is fate denied. So their sire proved when he swallowed his first wife, destined to birth the son that shall at last cast him down, and holds her there still.

Yet, the harder they come down, the more these Christians push back.

Until the tide shifts and it is not the Christian churches being shut down and their followers being forced to pledge their allegiance to the state. No. It is her altars defiled, her ceremonies ignored, and her followers deserting in droves.

She retaliates with her beasts, fearsome wolves and bears that prey on the flocks, and birds that plunder the fields. She dries up her sacred springs and pulls back her game. Prized hounds and gentle companions turn rabid without warning, tearing into their human masters. When even more followers flee she looses a quiver of plagues. Nursing mothers and little children, her patron charges, are most vulnerable. Her frost devastates entire harvests.

It is not enough. Her groves are burned and idols smashed and maidens carried off. As the prayers in the back of her head fade one by one, so does the breadth of her powers.

She retreats into her first and greatest dominion, the wild woods, where the small shrines and old rituals hang on best. Her beasts still heed her. She sets them on the flocks and the herds and errant little Christians that shouldn't be out wandering her woods alone.

She fights with every bit of prayer and power in her. As her domain continues to shrink, and the prayers grow quieter, she knows she stands on the precipice.
Like so many of her beasts who know their encroaching end, she can quietly retreat to fade away like so many lesser deities of her pantheon have already done.

But she has never been one for quiet surrender. She is revered virgin and lady of clamors, the far-shooting huntress of the first throne, and she will not go quietly into the night.

"Brother!" she calls across the wild hills, raising her voice into song and rage and sorrow.

They have come into this world together. Together they have rained down death and disease upon those who angered them. Let them leave it together, as Lycius and Lycaea, the man-eating pack that shall echo through these hills long after they are stricken from this earth, and drag down as many Christian lives as they can with them.

Her cries go unheeded. Her brother, her twin, turns his back on her. She has helped bring him into the world. Now he hides away with that pathetic, cowardly little thief.

Rage consumes what is left of her trepidation.

The queen of beasts pours her fury into the largest, fiercest form left to her, and burns away all else.

Wolves do not hunt alone. For every one sighted, there might be another of their pack lurking in the shadows, ready to fall upon their prey the moment their back is turned.

The beast of the northern mountains, however, hunts alone. It slaughters entire flocks and their shepherds. In broad daylight it will storm right into a cottage to slaughter a family down to the last babe. Later, the beast is bolder still, and drags off victims screaming from villages instead of isolated farmsteads.

Whole hunting parties and entire villages go out to slaughter it. The beast retains enough raw cunning to avoid every trap and snare set out for it. Its uncanny intelligence is paired with supernatural senses. It can never be caught sleeping or by surprise. Despite its size, the beast can vanish into the wood like a ghost, only to appear from the shadows to snatch another victim.

Its hunters become the hunted. Those that limp home do so with missing limbs and raw, bloody gashes that will never scar over.

As the bodies and disappearances mount, the desperate villages band together. They send out men with blades and bows and pitchforks, and with them tenacious hounds and burning brands. They are led by a priest sick of the slaughter, to put down this scourge once and for all.

After weary days and terrible nights, the beast is at last cornered in a grove once hailed as a place of the gods, and now avoided as a haunt of demons.

Good, brave men die by the dozens in their attempts to slay it. It is the priest that deals the final, fatal blow. The beast's final act of vengeance is ripping his arm off so that the holy man shall bleed out and die before he ever reaches help.

The religious fall to their knees to thank God, for they have laid a demon low.

The old, seasoned hunters shake their heads. They have felled a she-bear, near twice the size of the largest male they have ever seen. Her pale, grizzled hide is marred by the scars of a thousand fights. The shafts of old spears and arrows hang heavy from her shoulders. Her eyes, glazed over in death, are pale as the moon.
Some say she was a scourge sent by God, to test their faith, or that past injury made her fearless and vengeful toward humans. Perhaps she was even one last, wrathful act set upon them by the fading spirits of these hills.

It doesn't matter, in the end. The surviving hunters claim her claws and fangs and hide as trophies. Her meat feeds their families and their recollections, increasingly exaggerated, their imaginations.

Her tale is not eternal. In time new invaders creep in from the north, and then from the south. The more the folk encroach upon the hills, the more beasts resort to praying on their livestock or even upon themselves. Their reigns of terror are far briefer and smaller, but more recent, and captivate audiences like no long dead bear can.

The last scrap of her pelt ends up as a doormat, before it is deemed too worn by one old wife and thrown out.

Not long after, the last words behind it die with the last words of the last elders of that age.

They both feel it, when the last great rage of Diana is laid low.

Mercury stops as if sucker-punched in the gut. Apollo screams his grief, hands over his heart as if he were the one pierced, and falls to the ground. For a moment his being flickers as if he too is about to gutter out forever.

"Apollo!" Mercury shouts, desperately falling to his side.

His partner eventually stabilizes, pale and shuddering in his arms. And thin enough to see through. Mercury cradles him close, waiting for his shuddering gasps and sobs to subside.

"I'm sorry," Mercury says at last, when Apollo's torrent of grief has somewhat subsided.

He doesn't mean it. Not really. Diana died a long time ago. All that remained was her destruction and her hatred, a sense of mind that only focused on passing her pain onto others. She is like one of her rabid dogs, finally put out of its misery.

Mercury is relieved that self-destruction will no longer be gnawing away at Apollo.

Apollo says nothing, for they both know how hollow Mercury's condolences ring. His form remains transparent, delicate and fleeting as a soap bubble.

Neither of them has the power left to go down in a blaze of glory like Diana. Only enough to cling to this world, as their grips slip a little each day.

Mercury strokes Apollo's unbound hair, pale and brittle as straw. Pride and primal hatred are not enough to keep them alive. Neither can they cling to their shrinking wells of residual faith.

Mercury's face settles, grim and resolute. They must sacrifice more than Diana was ever prepared to, to abandon pure power in favor of clear consciousness and higher thinking.

He'll have to convince Apollo to take the plunge with him.

Soon.
Artemis/Diana's spheres of influence included the following: the wilderness, hunting, archery, wild beasts, childbirth, maidenhood, protection of the mothers and the young, disease, and... rabies in dogs. In her rage Diana only turned away a lot of her sympathetic followers, cutting off her nose to spite her face.

Lycius and Lycaea - matching epithets for Apollo and Diana, both meaning 'of the wolves.' Both had loose associations with wolves (Apollo through the depredation of livestock and Diana as a general goddess of wild beasts.) Bears, however, were especially sacred to Artemis.

I looked into historical animal attacks. Details of her actions were inspired by a brown bear in Japan that broke into homes, in one attack slaughtering a young child, a pregnant woman, and her unborn child. And one man-eating wolf pack that had one member last recorded as a doormat.
lord of tricksters (lord of change)

Chapter Summary

Or the lengths to which an armadillo will go to keep our intrepid idiots from getting smote on the spot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night the Feathered Serpent ushers in a tree-shaking storm that serves as harbinger to great change, the like of which not even their city has seen before, the golden gods of Manoa erupt into chaos.

With Lord Kinich currently serving his stint in Xibalba for the night, the gods instead gather in Lady Eupana's halls. Grandmother Turtle, deep and placid as her lake, quietly sits on as moderate, only raising her voice when one of their numerous children or grandchildren gets a little too loud about exactly how this new change should be stricken from their lands.

Urging their people behind their city walls until the storm passes through? Or send signs to rally their armies to eradicate all intrusions by force?

After a while of enjoying the chaos even Bibi grows bored and rolls his eyes. "It's almost like they've all conveniently forgotten that most of us has survived cultural upheaval at least once or twice before."

Xarayes glares at him from the corner of his eye, but their mutual wife (well, ex-wife in Bibi's case) is neutral between them. Eupana calmly fixates her gaze upon not her second husband, but her first. They are both veterans of the First World, after all, oldest of the gods here. "What are you proposing, you old scoundrel?"

Bibi offers his best, most charming grin. "Instead of allowing our daughter to throw a tantrum and level anything new that comes our way, why not actually see first if anything that's new is worth keeping?"

Their eyes both drift to Paquini, newest member of their family. The Lady of the Vine stays out of the debate. She and her bounty were the only ideas the people of Manoa had been willing to adopt into their own. With a serene smile she calmly hands out golden goblets of precious wine. Even the most passionate deity pauses to tip back a draught, easing the tension in the court by just the slightest bit.

Eupana frowns solemnly back at him. "You know it is not me you must ultimately convince. Nor them."

Bibi smirks. "Of course not, my love. But I shall do so all the same."

Few gods but the Lords of Xibalba stray from the haven of Manoa's skies. Bibi fearlessly journeys right to the outermost boundaries of the trail to the city, nimbly dodging Balam Qoxtok's ravenous jaws and Tzinacon's swooping dives. He is their oldest and boldest enemy, after all.
Despite the best efforts of Manoa's guards to keep its exact location secret at least one accurate map has slipped into the outside world. When change inevitably makes its way to Manoa, it shall do so by the main road. So Bibi comfortably settles himself down by the eagle rock and waits.

Change finds him sooner than expected. It washes up on the tide in the most pathetic, worn little boat imaginable. They are not mortal.

Bibi retreats back into the jungle, repulsed and morbidly curious. He has seen new gods arrive with conquerors and conquered peoples alike. Never before has he seen three wash up without a follower or idol to be seen.

He can't even call them proper gods, for all three are sad little shadows not long for this world. Stirred by pity and disgust, Bibi paces the jungle edge, torn between skittering closer or leaving the poor bastards to a quiet end.

Yet, when their fingers drift down to brush the golden sand, new life flows into all three of them. With whooping cheers they spring up from their tomb to kiss new ground.

It does not take them long to discover the bones and golden blade purposefully displayed on the beach as warning to all intruders who dare of breaching Manoa.

Two immediately flee for their boat, preferring death upon the sea to the perils await.

The little golden one, however, pauses. From his self he pulls out a map Bibi recognizes as one of Manoa's. His face lights up in earnest delight and awe.

"Tulio! We've done it!"

Of course Bibi understands them. How can he not when one believes in Manoa, golden king of cities, so strongly? And one of his kind, at that? If such beings can be lumped in with true divinity like himself.

Miguel's earnest faith is still not enough to sway his companions, the human-shaped Tulio and the... one that looks like a fat deer.

"I wouldn't set foot in that jungle for a million reales!"

"...How about a hundred million?"

Bibi's fondness for little Miguel curdles a bit at that. Especially when the blatant ploy on their greed works. They would not be the first, man or god, to die in the futile quest for Lake Parime's golden shores.

Yet Miguel's enthusiasm is grudgingly endearing... And Bibi supposes he owes the little shit for unwittingly saving his tail from one of Itzli's ravenous children.

Miguel is so caught up in his quest he is blind to Bibi's presence. Tulio spares his armadillo form only a cursory, sneering glance.

The last one, the fat deer, is not so caught up in himself or willfully blind to the world around him. He looks upon Bibi and knows him immediately. His eyes widen comically.

Bibi blinks innocently back. If the fat deer won't say anything then he sure as hell isn't.

And the fat deer never does. Even when his companions start to catch on.
"Someone's spying on us, Miguel," Tulio mutters, glowering suspiciously at Bibi.

The armadillo happily takes another bite out of Xarayes' crispy little offspring, and says nothing. It's not his fault the bite-happy little bastards are so delicious.

Miguel grins good-naturedly at Bibi. "Are you sure he doesn't just like us? Animals used to follow me all the time, if you can recall."

Tulio rolls his eyes. "Please, Miguel. This armored little rat is a messenger if I've ever seen one."

Altivo snorts in disbelief at them both. They ignore him.

Bibi, safe in his charade, enjoys the rest of his unwitting offering.

Two out of three are promising, so he sticks around to see if the third can ever change his mind. Tulio grows on him, slowly. It's soon blindingly obvious to Bibi how much Tulio loves Miguel, how he puts him above even his own cynicism.

The closer they grow to Manoa, the more Tulio's bitter armor falls away, and more he too comes to earnestly believe in the dream beyond fantasies of gold.

The Lord of Cunning sees their potential... and grins.

Chel has been plotting her escape for months now. Bibi is a constant fixture in her thoughts and prayers as she devises one plan before scrapping it for another.

As change draws nearer, her eye at last flits up to the temple of the Dual Gods, grandest in all of Manoa. Their chambers are rich and sumptuous, suitable for only the gods or their chosen sacrifices. Yet, for all the slaves and acolytes toil to keep their sacred quarters ready for an impending arrival a thousand years in the making, the temple lacks true priests. The Dual Gods have yet to show themselves, after all, and the lesser acolytes are permitted access for purification only at one specific time in the morning.

Chel helps cleanse the temple herself. It would not be out of place for her to be seen there, polishing the endless idols and offerings...

For a moment a determined scowl furrows her brows before she forces her expression back into harmless neutrality. The guards escorting her from one temple to the next, staring stubbornly ahead or at the swinging of her hips, don't notice.

Behind her facade Chel hastily devices a new escape plan. And ups her date for making it happen, because she really doesn't like how Tzekel-Kan is looking at her like she's the next person to get their heart carved out when a god next grows dissatisfied.

The Lord of Tricksters smirks.

By the time the gods-who-are-not actually enter Manoa, Lady Raima is simmering dangerously.

Most of the pantheon holds back, uncertain. Their trepidation descends into irritation as the gods-who-are-not start falsely claiming they are. Paquini grins at their pluck and how swiftly they move to save Chel, one of her daughters, from sacrifice.

Raima, unable to take their dithering, finally erupts.
Manoa gapes up at her volcano in horrified panic, for it is far too late to run from her wrath. The gods-who-are-not, except for Altivo, are too caught up in their panic to realize their peril.

Bibi does not flee or beseech his daughter. Direct intervention only makes her angrier. Instead, he frolics carelessly after a butterfly as the united prayers and fears of the people shift against her.

"STOP!"

Inadvertently, Tulio commands the people's will, and they speak through him.

Raima, miracle of miracles, is so shocked she actually obeys. Even Bibi blinks when she inhales her entire eruption back up and dies down completely.

Maybe Tulio is just really that persuasive. Or pitiful. Perhaps it was true power, a flash of what could be.

Between Bibi serving adorable antics and Paquini cup after cup of wine, they keep the angrier gods distracted and drunk enough to buy this fledgling cult time.

Not that they need much time at all. Upon their first dawning in Manoa they gracefully turn aside a human sacrifice, showing the people and their pantheon the world that could be.

Bibi swears to himself when they take the coward's way out by diplomatically postponing the possibility of human sacrifice, not doing away with it entirely.

Oh, commit already, you gutless cowards!

Tzekel-Kan's zeal for Miguel and Tulio to be all they are not actually forces them to take a stand. Even if Bibi still has to answer Chel's desperate prayer for a miracle to turn the disastrous first half of the game around.

Really? Because Bibi's eavesdropped around these idiots enough to know they are not helpless little babies. There is more than enough fledgling belief in this crowd for them to run circles around their mortal competition.

Belatedly he realizes from their terrible display of athleticism they have forgotten to tap into their own strengths. How long have they been locked in those deceptively human shapes, to have utterly lost all faith in themselves?

So of course he answers Chel's desperate prayer and works one last miracle.

The crowd gasp and cheer at Bibi's power, power they mistakenly ascribe to Tulio and Miguel. But Bibi's a big god, old and secure in his power, and with more than enough good humor to let it slide just this once. Because that's all they need.

Tulio and Miguel finally warm up enough to the game to start taking active control of the field. They move in a beautiful dance, passing Bibi back and forth between them with skill that quickly crosses from skilled athlete into a different realm entirely.

When the mortal ballplayers actually try to join in, all they succeed in doing is knocking Bibi out of play.

Halfway through the game, the trickster god pulls back, and allows a mundane ball to be swapped into his place. Chel gasps in horror.
Utterly unaware of the switch, the gods on the court continue an increasingly grand spectacle, so bombastic Bibi peaks other gods even sneaking glimpses onto the game.

Even a last second bit of shaken confidence on Tulio's part cannot stop Miguel from sealing the deal. The crowd erupts into applause.

Bibi, however, waits with bated breath for the real miracle.

"There will be no sacrifices! Not now, not ever!"

The Lord of Change releases his sigh of relief... and smiles. Because there's no going back for now. Not for Manoa, and not for their gods.

Especially its newest ones.

Chapter End Notes

Going off of canon attitudes in the movie, the people of El Dorado seemed really done with human sacrifice (with the exception of crazy Tzekel-Kan.) They were ready for change, and it would have happened sooner rather than later if our intrepid idiots hadn't come along first.

Bibi - armadillo trickster god with a soft spot for humanity and lovable idiots  
Eupana - really old turtle goddess of Lake Parime, matriarch of this mess  
Xarayes - touchy fish god and THE Lord of Xibalba  
Paquini - goddess of the harvest, grape vine, wine, and drinking  
Itzli - Lady of the Liquid flame, touchy snake goddess and lesser Lord of Xibalba  
Kinich - sun god; forced to spend his nights in the underworld after getting killed that one time  
Munah - hero god, invented the ball game  
Raima - touchy volcano goddess; Eupana and Bibi's daughter from their mess of a first marriage
healer (avertor of evil)

Chapter Summary

Miguel gets a rematch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Valentia, 542

Healer, they once called him, for all he has rained down pestilence he is also bringer of sound health and averter of evil.

It’s a title Miguel stubbornly clings to after forsaking his foremost of names. There are still old groves and sacred springs hidden in the countryside, folded into rituals that can be called old-fashioned at best and heathenish at worst by Christians of the city.

If one still knows where to look, and shows proper respect if not proper reverence, then there is a bright-eyed healer that can heal man and livestock alike.

But those little wells of power only ever shrink if not dry up entirely. What Miguel once casts down or called off with nary a thought takes real, concentrated effort. Even a stubborn cough has to be wrestled into submission now.

When the task grows too tiring or tedious, Miguel allows Tullius to haul him into the city for some good, old-fashioned thieving and conning.

However, Miguel’s sunny grin falls from his face when he spots more than sailors upon Valentia’s docks. More than one is shadowed by rats the size of wolves, their lymph nodes swollen and bodies bulging with sores. Their victims, still blissfully oblivious or in denial, only cough and shiver with the first onset of symptoms.

Miguel stops dead in the street, fists curling around his pandura in a stranglehold. Tullius stops with him, uncaring of the crowd glaring at them, and puts a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Miguel," he murmurs. "Please, just let it go."

One of the plagues notices them staring. It fixates on them with watery black eyes and bares its yellowed teeth in a smirk.

Miguel shakes off Tullius’ hand and glares right back.

He has helped his priests and physicians endure and conquer pandemic before. This one is still festering in Valentia’s port. He can handle it this on his own. He can. He must.

Three hundred years ago, when the last great plague burned through these lands, Miguel had still commanded followers. Now the afflicted pray to but a single God for deliverance. They put faith in their humors and 'saint-blessed' powders and holy amulets.
The rat demons mutate into the size of lions. And multiply. They gorge upon the living and the corpses that begin to pile up as Valentia's workers are overwhelmed.

As the hysteria mounts with the death toll, and fearful and vengeful eyes start searching for demons and scapegoats, Tullius finally hauls Miguel out of the city. He has not slain the plague nor saved a single victim. His skin bares battle scars of sores and scratch marks that are reluctant to fade.

Miguel, once hailed as the foreseeing and shooter from afar, goes willfully blind after that. The pleas of the people and the mocking smirks of their ailments prove too much to bear.

Justinian's Plague is not the first to ravage to their lands. It is far from the last.

Eight hundred years later, when the distant cousins of Justinian's Plague scurry out of holds as the Black Death, Miguel does not put up a fight when Tulio promptly drags him to their hideouts in the highest, most isolated villages.

Manoa, 15XX

Like the parasites they are the plagues of the Old World steal into the New, hidden in cargo holds and incubating in clueless sailors. Death gains new forms and faces, each more terrible than the last; measles, malaria, yellow fever, influenza, typhus, smallpox, and his old nemesis, bubonic plague.

In the virgin populations of the New World, disease finds new and fertile breeding ground. They grow and mutate from mere pestilence into enders of cities and civilizations. They claim lives in the tens of thousands and, eventually, the millions.

Eventually and inevitably, they find the road to Manoa, burning their way through the surrounding villages and following gaunt and desperate waves of refugees. To them, the shining city is a beacon of hope, one last refuge the sickness shall never conquer.

With faith in their hearts, the desperate and dying are received upon the border by the Ready-Helper and Lady of Hope. And find salvation and healing touch of the Lord of Healing.

The plagues that follow in their wake, however, know only the lethal arrows of the Shooter From Afar and the ruthless talons of the Averter of Evil.

Chapter End Notes

Valentia - the eastern Iberian port that became Valencia

The Justinian Plague of 542 devastated port cities along the Mediterranean. The source was a relative of the later strain that caused the Black Death. The last major plague to have hit Iberia was probably the Plague of Cyprian three hundred years before that - when Apollo still had a functioning (if declining) cult.

Pandemics in North and South America ultimately killed millions and, in some cases, up to 90% of a region.
Chapter Summary

Chel and the boys get ready for a rather important morning. And talk about clothes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

However the night before ended (if it ever actually did), the morning begins with the warmest member of their huddle gently extricating himself from him. Chel and Tulio both whine in protest, reaching after the embodied sunlight that is Miguel.

"C'mon," Chel mutters groggily. "Just... five more minutes..."

"Chel," Miguel murmurs. "It's been days."

This actually startles her into sitting up, despite Tulio drowsily pawing after her. She wants to protest it's only been one day, at the very most, because she couldn't have gone that long without eating, or drinking, or needing to pee or sleep... In the other sense of the word.

"Oh, days aren't enough!" Tulio protests.

"It's not like we don't have the rest of eternity," Miguel retorts patiently. "But the least we could do is give our people a token appearance. Just to show we are still more than capable of... Well, fertility things."

Chel blinks as something hits her. She doesn't need to worry about human bodily functions anymore because she's not technically human. Not since being associated with her two idiots got her lumped into the same divine huddle with them.

So she sits like a statue, as Tulio rolls out of it to pick at offerings of grapes and cakes some brave acolyte sneaked into their chambers between bouts of post-coital bliss. And stares at the two gods casually dressing and preening in front of their golden reflections.

"Should I grow it out?"

"Your hair?"

"Don't be silly, Tulio! I can't remember how I ever got on with it that long, anyway! I meant my beard! You know, go for that proper wise and kingly look?"

"You want to try pulling off old and distinguished? You, Mr. Paradigm of Youth?"

Miguel's reflection crinkles its nose. "Yeah. True. And then there's certain... resemblance to those best left dead and forgotten to consider."

They both shudder at that. Chel opens her mouth, decides that's really something she doesn't want to know, and settles for clearing her throat. Her boys turn to blink innocently at her.
Miguel beams. "Oh, are you all set then? Just going as you are to make an honest impression?"

Tulio winces. "Er, from personal experience I'd recommend at least a cape to go along with it. Eve the slightest thing to remove you from total nudity cuts down on the poor, unassuming mortals you might accidentally blind. Or drive mad."

Because Chel is wearing only the gold on her ears. And doesn't even have a blanket to cover her modesty, because that blew away days ago.

Some small part tells Chel to cover her shame, to at least drape her hair over breasts, but she settles for only crossing her arms sternly. Because her boys know and worship every inch of her. And know, on pain of her attaching something embarrassment to their cult, to never, ever use 'Chel Dorado' outside the four sacred walls of their temple.

"I'm not facing the city like this," she says flatly, "and because of you two I've got nothing to wear."

Because her garments hadn't lasted the first five seconds of private time.

Her boys look at her, then at each other, and then at the pile of garments that hadn't been there... Well, since before sex impossible for a mortal mind to comprehend had entered the equation.

Oh.

Because the status Chel last held four day ago allowed her only a loincloth and a top to cover her breasts, white to mark her as sworn to serve the gods until one of their priests called upon her to serve them forever. She had worn bracelets and earrings of imitation jade, material visually pleasing to the gods but holding no true value.

Sure, in the last three days she had technically between priestess of three new gods, but of a brand cult that had no set traditions. The first morning Tzekel-Kan had 'suggested' more appropriate attire, but Chel had refused him. Because she had the power to do so. Because she'd rather rub of her former status in his face then ever wear the garb of Balam Qoxtok's priestess.

And now she's gone and left mortality behind altogether.

"I..." For a moment Chel frantically tries to recall what the real goddesses wear. No. She's no one but herself. "Whatever I want?"

"Whatever you want." Tulio clears his throat, while Miguel gives them his bedroom eyes. "Or nothing, if that's what you want."

Chel chooses a true dress, rich red and with an elaborate white pattern etched at its hems. Her figure isn't exactly disguised by it, but she doesn't bother with an outer cloak or shawl. Instead she dons gold on her arms and legs, to match both her boys. The heavy metal should be a mild drain on her limbs. She scarcely feels the weight.

Well, it's a start. Miguel and Tulio at her side, she cocks her head and studies their reflection, two golden gods and their goddess. They both look much like the night she first frantically threw vaguely appropriate clothing at them; though have added on their own touches.

Miguel's hips and shoulders are wrapped in vivid green that bring out the rich color of his eyes, helped along by the emerald studs in his earrings. An emerald cape hangs from his shoulders and a golden head dress of quetzal feathers crowns his head. From his neck dangles a stylized golden pendant of a hawk's head.
In most regards Tulio is his darker twin, clad in rich blues instead and with a longer cloak that trails to his feet. Set within his golden earrings is black obsidian, and his head dress plumed instead with shorter, darker feathers Chel recognizes from the laughing owl. His medallion is vaguely canid, a beast that could be coyote or xolo dog.

Their hair styles and faces are as unapologetically foreign as that first night. Chel wouldn't have them any other way.

Chel crinkles her nose at her own reflection. Something is still unfinished, but she can't put her finger on what.

Tulio squeezes her shoulder sympathetically. "Hey. Your cult's not even a week old yet. Give yourself time to get established. To let the people know you more."

Miguel smiles enigmatically. From behind his back he produces a crown that makes Tulio splutter and Chel squeal in delight. Rightness settles in her bones as he deftly places it atop her head.

"H-Hey!" Tulio scowls at him suspiciously. "Did you peak into the future for that?"

"Well, that's kind of what I do." Miguel smirks smugly back at their partner. "Besides, there's nothing that says you can't help nudge public perception along a little."

"It's perfect!" Chel declares gleefully, because it is, and now she has a gift from both of them. She runs her fingers up one of the long, cloud-white feathers that crest the crown. She feels like she should know what bird she comes from, but she can't quite say what it is. "But I don't know what these stand for."

"It'll come," Miguel promises. "Eventually."

He and Tulio gallantly offer their arms. Chel takes them both.

Arm and arm, they stride out to greet their adoring public.

Chapter End Notes

There's a lot of images of Hermes/Mercury casually depicted with everything out, but gods forbid he doesn't always have a little cloak shrouded somewhere on his person to make him not technically totally nude XD

Based on references other observers noticed in the movie, white clothing is connected to knowledge of the gods (Tzekel-Kan and Chel are the only ones to wear it) and gold earrings are more desirable than Chel's original green earrings (see the scene where Tulio helps her find a good pair to wear.)

Chel's movie outfit (aside from offering pure fan service), lets her hold to a basic standard of modesty while also flagrantly showing how her status affords her little else. Of course, considering Chel's incredibly vague and newborn cult here, other touches will come on their own time ; )

The black laughing owl is one of those other fictional, fantastical beasts found only in Manoa. It's associated with death and, depending on the sighting, can be either a good or bad omen to them.
lady of the moon (lady of sorrows)

Chapter Summary

Tulio accidentally runs into a spooky moon goddess right when a young life is thrown into the balance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's late. Too late. All Tulio wants to do is stay wedged between his nice, warm partners. But no. Because duty calls, and even if he tries to ignore the anxious tingling, his dreams only stalk him with further omen.

(It's late and there's no one around to play with. Mama would be angry if he tried waking anyone up, so Toni decides to try his luck in the streets. Maybe one of his friends is out to play.)

Grumbling, Tulio extracts himself from their bed. He grudgingly considers waking Miguel too before deciding to let him sleep. Miguel has never been a night owl, it's Tulio's star out bright tonight, and the impending intruder into their city is probably a Lord of Xibalba. And it is Tulio's own damn fault they've especially hated humanity as of late.

Because it's near a full moon out tonight. Beneath Lady Kama's watchful eye, demons should be at their bare minimum.

(Mama warns him not to go out when Lady Kama is with Lord Kinich for the night, but the moon is big and bright tonight. Toni's not afraid, because the Jaguar God can't take him away. Besides, the Golden Gods have chased him off forever.)

Chel and Miguel scoot closer to each other. Tulio gives them one last longing glance before gliding out into the night.

His senses rise into a clamor the more he closes in on his target, sickly pale in the moonlight.

_Lamia_, his instinct whispers, or something so close it makes no difference.

He dives down, lashing out with his blazing torch as he reaches for his golden blade--

She shies away from the torchlight as if burned by the brightness. Tulio clearly glimpses her face and freezes in dread, because he's just nearly missed striking the _moon goddess!_

"Lady Kama," he squeaks, high and shrill, as he plasters a smile on his face. "Fancy meeting you here."

Huddling further into her yellowed shawl, Lady Kama shies away as if the very light burns her. She has a beaked nose and a round face pockmarked by scars. She glows with a wan light. Eyes black as obsidian appraise him warily.

"It is my time," the Lady of the Moon whispers in a high, hoarse voice. "My turn to protect the children." Her head swings in the direction of the city, head tilting toward cries only her sensitive
ears can detect. "They are lonely in the dark, without my husband's light to guide them."

(There's no one out to play. So Toni wanders on, past the streets he knows.)

A very small, ancient part of Tulio shudders in revulsion at her scarred voice and rasping voice. The rest of him savagely beats it down. He is better than his bitch of a stepmother, who threw her son from Mount Olympus for having the gall to be born less than physically perfect. Lady Kama certainly can’t help being one of the Two Suns that vengeful Crocodile God mauled, any more so than Lord Kinich could help being half-killed by him.

Why couldn't she have found Miguel! He's experienced with handling moon goddesses!

But calling for Miguel to break out the welcome wagon isn't an option. So Tulio dredges up all his sincerity and silver tongue to say, "How can anyone be afraid of the dark when you are there to light the way?"

"The children. They need me. Who else can keep them safe?"

(Toni's mother rises to check on her mischievous little boy, and finds his bed empty. Her horrified scream rallies the family and their neighbors. They spill into the streets with shouts and torches.)

(They'll never find him in time.)

Tulio can't help but bristle at that. "Well, Mi-- Lord Miguel, Lady Chel, and I have been watching over them where we can. And the hor-- Lord Altivo helps." Sort of. The wind tends to blow where it wills.

Lady Kama tilts her head at an angle that would have snapped a mortal neck as her gaze pierces him layer by layer. Her shawl cannot fully disguise just the... slight inhumanities of an otherwise human form.

"I have watched gods come and gods go," she intones. "And most, all younger than you. For you all traipse around like a shameless child, you are... deep. So deep it drowns."

(Past the last houses the jungle looms, like a giant black mouth even beneath the moon. Last week Toni's big brothers took him out to sneak looks at the birds and the monkeys. Maybe there's some more to see at night?)

"Yeah," Tulio snorts flippantly. "Because I'm old. As in, old enough to remember tortoises without their shells."

"Ah." Lady Kama straightens her head slightly, more like an interested audience than an owl about to swallow him whole. "That time is hazy to me."

"There was a wedding," Tulio says quickly, because technically he shouldn't have even been alive to witness that story. "A wedding between a great god and goddess. Everyone in the world was invited. Everyone showed up, except for a tortoise, so the gods tracked her down to ask why she had not shown up. She had liked her home too much to leave it for even a wedding between the gods, and so was made by them to always carry home with her wherever she went."

"Oh," Lady Kama answers dreamily. "Not for my wedding. Perhaps between Lord Xarayes and Lady Eupana. He never had a sense of humor. Not like my Kinich does." Her obsidian gaze once more fixates on the city beyond Tulio. "I must keep this world safe while he's gone. I promised."

The multitude in Tulio's head murmur ominously. He doesn't need to check the stars overhead to
realize the Lady of Owls should definitely not be around the unsuspecting populace of Manoa tonight.

(Toni’s brothers tell him not to go near the jungle alone because then the Jaguar God would eat him. But Toni’s not a baby afraid of the Jaguar God anymore. He’s not!)

"Of course. You keep your promises. Just like the first true dog. I still remember him like it was yesterday."

(Toni jumps around and nearly screams at the sound from behind.)

(But he doesn’t. Because it's just a skinny little xolo dog, and he's not a baby. The dog stops trying to eat trash as it cocks his head at him and whimpers like his baby sister does.)

(Toni has a bit of food on him, a midnight snack he stole out from the kitchen. So he squats down and holds out his hand.)

So begins a night of storytelling, to keep the moon goddess at bay. At first Tulio falls back on the fables of his youth, told time and time again around the hearth, parables on beast and human nature that in some effect endure still in the lands of his birth. As the night drags on, and he exhausts even the less controversial fables of his youth, Tulio increasingly resorts to pulling stories out of his ass. Lady Kama hangs on to every word, nodding sagely as if she can actually remember when Lord Bibi gave the armadillo its shell and the dolphins pissed off Xarayes so much they became the fish banned from breathing water.

Sometimes Tulio catching his tales contradicting themselves. Lady Kama wholeheartedly accepts them all, for such paradox is the nature of their kind. It helps that Tulio is god of storytellers and bullshit artists alike.

By the time Tulio wraps up his final fable the moon is sinking low and a faint tinge of pink on the horizon. Lady Kama yawns, wide and cavernous.

"For such a tiny little god," she remarks, "you are very tiring."

"Thanks," Tulio says archly.

Lady Kama swivels her head to the west. Tulio dives out of the way as the Owl Goddess spreads her far-reaching wings, nearly knocking him over, and swoops after the setting moon.

(The night’s nearly over, and there’s no sign of Toni. Their burning desperation is on the verge of giving out, their prayers shifting from his safe return to only that he is safe. No matter where he is.)

So Tulio turns and hauls himself back into bed. No sooner does he lay his head down does Miguel, insufferable morning god, sits up to greet the dawning.

"Good morning!" he calls brightly, and wakes Chel up too.

Tulio groans into his pillow.

"Rough night?" Chel asks drily.

"I spent the whole night with the moon goddess," Tulio says wearily. He falls back into the pillow, before his frazzled brain reminds him to add, "Not with the moon goddess. Just with her. Telling her stories so she wouldn't... I don't know. It was just a feeling."
Miguel prods him with an elbow. "Feeling how? Because--"

"Yeah, yeah, I know!" Tulio mutters, because after centuries of the fates being silent they have started creeping back to him. Because even the mortals of Manoa have tacked on prophetic powers to his repertoire. "Like... a Lamia feeling. Almost, but not quite."

Miguel frowns, even the newborn light in their temple dimming with him, because children have always been among his special charges.

(He is with Lady Kama now, start thinking Toni's parents, though none dare say so aloud. He must be.)

Chel, who has been biting her lip since 'moon goddess' first came up, finally asks, "And Lamia is...?"

"Was," Miguel corrects grimly.

"Dad was an asshole," Tulio adds wearily. "Our stepmom, even more so. Our whoremonger dad had an affair with this queen, Lamia, and gives her a few kids. So our stepmom thought the proper response was to steal her children like Lamia had 'stolen' our dad. And Lamia took her vengeance by in turn snatching up the children of others to murder them, so that other women would forever feel as she did." He sighs and rolls his eyes. "But our dad still took pity on her. Even after she turned herself into a monster, he gave her other... powers. Powers that made it easier for her to kill yet more kids."

For lamia was also once the name of the large, lone sharks that stalked the coast of their ancestral homeland. So had Lamia once taken lives, devouring children and disappearing back into the deep darkness.

"Tulio, Lady Kamia is a moon goddess," Miguel corrects gently, with a hopeful tone that this is all one big misunderstanding. "Lights the night to ward off demons? Keeps children safe?"


Her partners both tense, exchanging a dark glance. "Does she...?"

"Lady Kama gets lonely sometimes, in her big pale palace in Xibalba," Chel continues. "So sometimes she comes down to find children that look like they need her. And never brings them back."

Tulio gets it. He was a father, once upon a time.

Having an adult parent or sibling snatched by a jaguar in the dead of night is one thing. To lose a child to the Lords of Xibalba? If no body could ever be definitively found, why not believe them instead safely spirited away to Lady Kama's palace for an eternal, blissful childhood?

"No one's getting taken," Miguel vows ominously. "Not on my watch."

(The jaguar has prowled the city limits for hours now, drawn by the tantalizing scent of prey for her cubs. The growing light on the horizon, and the smell of smoke and man on the wind, make her turn tail and retreat into the jungle.)

Tulio smiles reassuringly and slings an arm across both their shoulders. "Good thing one of us has a little charm, then."
Chel can't help but crack a grin. "Yeah. And enough stories to put even a moon goddess to sleep."

"And an utter inability to not talk about himself," Miguel adds.

Tulio takes the lip in stride. Better waste the occasional night talking Lady Kama's ear off than ever lash out at a goddess who acted out of mercy.

*(Toni’s family find him in an alley just after dawn, right on the edge of Manoa. Tuckered out from a long night of playing, he sleeps with a skinny xolo dog curled protectively in his lap.)*

*(After much crying, yelling, and desperate hugging, Toni is dragged home for a very long grounding. His new protector comes with him.)*

*(But, first, the family heads to the altars. They first thank Lady Kama, for keeping their son safe beneath her light, and deigning to spare him an eternal lifetime in her palace. And they pray before the Golden Gods, most especially Lord Tulio, for shepherding their son back home.)*

Chapter End Notes

Hermes/Mercury happens to be also god of bringing peace, guile, crafty wiles, memory, learning, guard dogs, protection of the home, protection of the boundaries, and animal fables. And, yes, has a prophetic side - through the divination of birds of omen and throwing pebbles, a gift particularly picked up from Apollo. Connected to the stars through his mother and grandfather, Hermes/Mercury was also a god of astronomy and astrology.

Kama happens to be variously goddess of the moon, nocturnal light and protection, the dew, the tides, owls, and protection of the young. Her role here was inspired by various universal tales of spirits and fairies making off with children, or sometimes swapping them for their own. She is thus ultimately a goddess of ‘gentle death’ - for parents that would like to believe their children are safe and sound her palace for eternity, instead of carried off by an animal or swept off by the river.

Lamia - literally Greek for 'large shark,' and sometimes linked to the sea monster goddess Ceto. In some versions of the myth she gouges out her own eyes in her grief, or else gets the ability to remove her eyes from Zeus. Sometimes she's a pale and beautiful woman, which must make finding victims easier. Other times she's a monster. Either way, she was blamed for child death, and in a way comes off a lot like a proto-vampire.
Chapter Summary

There's an emotional eruption. And it's not the volcano goddess.

Or: Miguel is both genuinely sincere and a red hot mess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Chel. Pst, Chel. Are you still awake?"

Chel grumbles blearily into Tulio's chest. When Miguel resorts to gently shaking her shoulder, she grumpily raises her head to face him. Any irritation she feels evaporates the moment she catches Miguel's wide, anxious eyes.

"Hm?" she mumbles.

And then of course Tulio wakes up too. He jerks awake mid-snore, trying to sit up as much he can with two gods spooning him. His glaze flicks from her to Miguel.

"Is there a plague?"

"No."

"Is anyone in immediate danger?"

"Well, not exactly..."

"Are all the people still people?"

"As far I can tell, but--"

"Then it can wait 'til morning," Tulio declares resolutely, and drags them back down into bed with him. Miguel grows only more dejected and Chel's heart melts. Tulio only rolls his eyes. "Oh, come on, not with the-- Hey!" Chel elbows him in the ribs. "Okay, okay. What's wrong, Miguel?"

"I can't stop thinking about how... certain first impressions of ours... weren't the most ideal," Miguel says at last. "If we're sticking around here for a thousand years at the minimum, we can't exactly start off on the wrong foot." His gaze flickers nervously to the window. "Or... let certain pressures build."

Chel follows her gaze and stops cold. Because Miguel is looking right at Lady Raima's slumbering peak. The same that had been smoking when they had first stepped foot in the city and came damn near close to erupting after they had first started insisting they were gods.

Tulio falls limply back onto their bed. "Oh."

Yeah. Oh.
"It can't be that bad," she consoles. "Lady Raima's been pretty quiet ever since..."

"I basically told her to shut up?" Tulio finishes dryly. "And shocked her into listening even though the odds said she just should have been her top off?"

"It worked, didn't it?" Chel retorts. "Besides, Lords of Xibalba aside, you two have been pretty considerate to the other gods ever since." Her stomach flutters when Miguel's face falls even further. "Right?"

Tulio's hogging all the pillows, so Miguel settles for falling face-first onto his stomach. "I dropped Tzekal-Kan's giant jaguar into her magma chamber."

So that's what had happened to the Jaguar God's idol.

Chel ignores the urge to face-palm and instead gropes for something positive. "I mean, that idol was solid jade. So you did offer up some pretty nice tribute."

"No," Miguel moans. "Because it leaped back out, and then I dropped it into Xibalba. After it tore up the caldera."

This time Chel goes for the full face-palm.

"Little voice, Miguel," Tulio grinds out near incomprehensibly. "You really don't have one." He inhales sharply, holds his breath for an inhumanly long time, and exhales slowly. Finally he turns to ask Chel in a much calmer tone, "So, how do we fix this?"

"You can't tell Lady Raima what to do," Chel says flatly. "Ever. Or just make the explosion worse. You have to trick her into thinking she really doesn't want to go off. Or find something to distract her and take off the pressure."

Lady Raima has a thing for young, strapping warriors. In the past she had been more frequently honored with enemy warriors captured in battle and in more recent decades by handsome noble-born sacrifices in the very rare times eruption seemed imminent. That is obviously no longer on the table.

She bites her lip and considers her boys. They're handsome, sure, lithe and nimble and graceful... But Lady Raima likes them meaty. And Chel is secretly glad for that.

"You know," she points out instead, "Lady Raima is still an earth goddess. We mostly just honor her for the powers that can't kill us all in a fiery wrath."

They prick up at that. "Agricultural?" Tulio asks keenly. "Or more general fruits of the earth?"

Chel shrugs. "There are more specific gods of the harvest, so more fertile earth in general."

Tulio considers this before nodding. "Sure. We can work with that." Miguel opens his mouth to say something, but their partner shushes him with a finger. "And you're going first, so bring your best."

Miguel likes volcanoes. He does. Those of his youth had been mostly dormant, usually only throwing up rocks and gas when angered, and only on very rare occasions releasing all-out devastation. Mostly their springs had been connected to his healing sites and vapors to the prophetic visions of his oracles.

But very few of those peaks had been personified in their own right. And none had been full-blown
divinities. Lady Raima is not only a great goddess of Manoa, but once ruled the Second World.

Miguel retraces the path he led Tzekel-Kan's avatar down. In the naked daylight the shattered trees and massive paw prints gouged into the earth are plainly visible. Acolytes of the goddess diligently clean up the damage.

Wincing guiltily, Miguel continues onward, invisible to mortal sight. He wears only the bare minimum of his full regalia, for any less would be disrespectful and any more overreaching. There is no ornate head-dress crowning his head, only a wreath of green he has not openly sported in nigh over a millennium.

He respectfully stops at the edge of the caldera, the border of Lady Raima's true domain.

The damage wrought by the jaguar is still clearly visible. There is a thin layer of new rock cooling over the magma, though molten rock still glares through like a freshly healing wound. The magma glows brighter at his presence, churning ominously. Even the heat, normally so soothing to him, blisters his skin.

He deeply inhales air noxious to mortal lungs, puts on his brightest smile, and calls his peace offering out into the morning. "Excuse me, Lady Raima, might I--"

The Lady of the Peak manifests in a burst of magma and a cloud of volcanic gas. She towers heads and shoulders above him, with calloused hands and broad shoulders that could bare a mountain across her back. From a face craggy as her mountainside burn eyes of brimstone.

Miguel clamps down hard on his aroused purr.

"Why are you here?" the volcano goddess demands in a voice deep and rumbling, that shakes the very earth beneath their feet.

"To say I'm sorry," Miguel says succinctly. The ground stops quivering as Lady Raima arches one sharp brow. "Lord Tulio and I got off on the wrong foot with you. We took advantage of your people and your hospitality."

Altivo owes no one an apology, because he'd had the damn good sense to keep his mouth shut and the city decide as they willed.

Lady Raima exhales steam and smoke. "And yet you apologize alone, for the damned coward that humiliated my baby brother."

Miguel squares his shoulders proudly. "I come alone to apologize for myself alone, thank you. Because I'm the interloper that traipsed all over your sacred peak, dropped a stone jaguar in it, and then didn't even leave you the jade when all was said and done."

"And yet I see no jade from you." The volcano goddess curls her lip. "Do you expect me to take your gold?"

Miguel silently lifts the laurel crown from his head and offers it to Lady Raima peaks. He does not bow, for they are both proud gods, but turns his gaze downward.

His bay laurel is aromatic and hard to burn. It has soothed in salves and warded off fire when worn. It has crowned the heads of triumphant athletes and triumphant emperors.

Miguel thinks only of Daphne, who forever transformed herself to avoid his lustful grip, and shook some branches from her tree only out of scornful pity.
Lady Raima takes the laurel wreath. She crowns herself in his shame and his victory, open admission and open surrender.

Miguel still owes her two more, for three are the grave wrongs he dealt to her.

So he holds out an open palm. The golden tears he cries freeze and harden on his cheeks before falling into his hand.

One might recognize them as amber. He sees only the tears of his daughters, turned into black poplar trees on the banks of the Eridanus and forever weeping for their lost brother.

Lady Raima weaves them into the laurel, a crown of sorrow and shame. Her molten eyes had dimmed and the raw caldera scabbed over with a new crust. Her gaze is soft but still expectant.

Miguel considers the last; thorny acanthus, mournful cypress, forlorn heliotrope, countless others. Many are his gifts and many are his sins.

Instead Miguel raises his hands before his mouth and screams a high, forlorn scream last uttered when Hyacinthus died in his arms.

He looks Lady Raima straight in the eye when he presents his final tribute. Delicately the Lady of the Earth takes the single bloom from him. One finger gently caresses the deep blue-violet petals before tracing the two white letters etched into it as an eternal sign of his sorrow. In her fertile hands the flower blossoms into a cluster, their curled petals like his lost love's curly hair.

"Your gifts," she rumbles in a deep, steady voice. "Name them."

"Amber, laurel, and larkspur." Miguel smiles wanly, for in those long centuries something has been lost in translation when it had come to the exact flower identified with his Hyacinthus.

Lady Raima stares long and hard at the larkspur. As Miguel knows the fates so too must she knew everything that roots in her soil. He wonders if she can even hear that lost lament to Hyacinthus, how Miguel had once wished to be mortal if only to die beside him.

There is no excuse in his apology, only an attempt at explanation. Maybe know she understands why and Tulio went to the desperate lengths they did.

At last Lady Raima adds the larkspur to her crown, and so accepts Miguel as he is and as he was.

"You have settled your debt," she proclaims at last. "Let there be no more enmity between us."

Miguel bows his head deeply and retreats to a quiet place on the city outskirts, far from any temples or mortal eyes.

Chel finds him eventually. She holds him close as he spews out every last rape and revenge between his sobs, for the scars long healed over have been ripped open anew. The atrocities of Apollo are Miguel's to shoulder.

Chel listens, as she must, and does not pull away. When the last of his sobs subside, her eyes are bright and burning.

"Lady Raima had no right to do this to you," she murmurs at last, soft and deadly as a viper. "I, I'll..."

"Chel," Miguel interjects, "I did this to myself." He tries for a smile and gets a grimace. "Volcano
goddess, remember? Really only knows emotional extremes? I had to get on a level she could understand... and she and the other gods really deserve to know the two screw-ups they're taking in."

"You aren't a screw-up," Chel states matter-of-factly, because from her it is. She scowls back at the temple and the conspicuously empty space beside them. "Tulio, on the other hand..."

Miguel gives her the face. "Oh, please don't get mad at him for this! I'd be the same the way if Tulio... Well, that one is not really my story to tell." He bites his lip and stares long and hard at Chel before giving in. If she's their partner then she's their partner all the way. "Do you know about the vows Tulio and I once made to each other, right when we agreed to get along?"

She nods. "Tulio promised to never steal from you." She snorts a laugh at how quickly that vow had lasted. "And you... Oh."

"Yeah. Oh. Because I promised to never love any one above him." Miguel grimaces, because gods know even the demons down in Xibalba heard even that stifled scream of his. "And guess what unfortunate reminder got dragged up today."

Chel says nothing, but Miguel still feels her flinch back ever so slightly. He can't help but laugh at her concern and draw her into a crushing hug.

"Chel," he whispers into her ear. "That vow doesn't me from loving you just as much."

Before the amazed eyes of Lady Raima's acolytes the trail of devastation wrought by the Jaguar God's avatar weaves itself closed. Their Lady of the Earth sends up new branches of a fragrant laurel strange to Lake Parime's shores to close in the gaps in the trees. Every tree weeps tears of amber as their broken branches heal. From the jade idol's massive paw prints bloom a new flower, bright blue and etched with anguish.

Her priests give thanks to both Lady Raima and Lord Miguel, for they know the two must have surely reconciled.

At dusk even more wonders bloom in Lady Raima's slopes. The priests sigh in relief, for Lord Tulio has also given his patronage.

Now if only they know what to call them all.

Chapter End Notes

Because love is not a competition :p

Apollo is loosely connected to volcanic activity, as he is linked to several healing mineral springs near them, and more widely with volcanic gases and vapors that helped inspire visions in his oracles. The closest thing to a volcanic deity in the Greco-Roman tradition is Aetna and the Palikoi of the highly volcanic Sicily, but were both regional deities at best. The giant Enceladus or else Typhoeus, both imprisoned beneath the earth, were more widely believed responsible for earthquakes and lava-flows.

Apollo has so many plant myths linked to him it's insane. Daphne the Laurel is a pretty
common myth. Apollo is conflated with Helios and so the Heliades become his daughters too. They were the sisters of the guy that tried to drive their dad's sun chariot and got smote after nearly setting the world on fire. In their grief they got turned into poplar trees that wept amber into the Eridanus, a river known for its amber.

Hyacinthus' flower, interestingly enough, is most likely the flower known as the larkspur in modern English. Its curled petals and 'A I' inscribed on its petals as Apollo's mourning cry more fit the larkspur than the hyacinth.

Other fun plant myths where Apollo is to blame: acanthus (Acantha), cypress (Cyparissus), and heliotrope (Clytie). And that's not even counting various animal myths.

Yes, Tulio will get his turn another time ; )
lord of sorrows (lord of tears)

Chapter Summary

A look into Chel's early years, and if any closure can be had.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lord Cassipa won't stop crying.

Chel's bored of the rain. It was fun when it first started, when she and Mari and all the other kids could splash around in the muddy puddles. But it hasn't stopped in days. Chel's tired of the leaky roof and never feeling dry because the air's so wet. She's tired of her dad carrying her through the streets because he doesn't want her stepping on anything that might be swimming in them. She's lucky her family lives a little bit higher on the hill, but Mari just wants to go home. But Mari can't, because she lives at the bottom and her house is all flooded, so her family is still stuck with Chel's.

"I don't get it," she groans in boredom, staring out at the pouring rain and hoping for Lord Kinich to miraculously shine through. "First Lord Cassipa won't cry, and now he can't stop! What's he even so sad about?"

"Lady Kama," Mari says dutifully. "She's his daughter, and he misses her."

Chel rolls her eyes. She knows that. The priests sacrificed that pretty noble girl before Lord Cassipa's cenote just later year, to make him remember Lady Kama and bring back his tears.

"But she's not even dead! She's just--"

"Scarred," Xaya interrupts bluntly. "And so ugly she has to hide her face away in the daytime."

Mari gasps scandalously, clapping her hands over Himi's imaginary ears as if her doll cares about blasphemy. "Xaya, you can't call Lady Kama ugly. She's--"

"She is," Xaya states matter-of-factly. "'Cause the Crocodile God got her. And Lord Cassipa hasn't seen her in like a thousand years, 'cause she hides away her ugly face."

Mari immediately scrambles up and rushes downstairs, yelling for their parents. Xaya yelps and grabs for her foot. But misses, because Chel elbows him in the ribs first.

"Nice going," she hisses to her boneheaded big brother before dashing after her friend. If Mari's bored enough to kick up drama with the whole house, then Chel's gonna be watching from the sidelines, and not on the receiving end of it.

All the parents and grandparents are huddled downstairs, whispering to themselves. Their faces look so scary Chel's sure it's a secret she doesn't want to know.

"Mama!" Mari calls, for her parents don't seem to hear her at first. "Xaya called Lady Kama ugly, and then he--"
Mari's mom turns. She grabs her daughter close and hugs her, crying like Lord Cassipa. Mari's dad and grandma sit her side, faces like stone.

Chel freezes on the stairway. Xaya halts right behind her, the shout that she had hit him first dying on his lips.

Their grandpa and grandma sit like statues. Dad looks like he wants to punch something and Mom's eyes are red because she holds her tears better than Mari's mom can.

Chel gulps, because all their eyes are for her.

Sometimes Chel likes to play dress-up with Mari and pretend their dolls are little noble girls. Now they are the dolls, forced to stand still and not talk as their moms and grandmothers fret over them. Chel bites her lip when her grandma combs all the hard knots out of her hair and she's dressed in a bright white dress. She didn't even know their family owned something that nice! It's a little big on her, the skirt long enough to nearly trip over, but Mom helps pin up the hem.

"This used to be mine, you know," she whispers to Chel with a small, sad smile. "And then I got too big to wear it. But it should last you for years."


Because Mom is not the last to have worn this dress. Auntie Altia and Auntie Ameya wore it too, when their big sister had outgrown it.

The finishing touch is the piercing. Chel squeezes her mother's hand in a death-grip while her grandmother stabs her needle through one ear, then the other. Chel tries her best not to cry, because she's not a baby anymore, but some tears slip out anyway. Mom smiles that sad smile and wipes them away.

The earrings look like jade, but Chel knows now that they're not. People of the Vine don't get to wear real jade, only the stones that look enough like it to look better to the gods. They're a painful, tugging weight on her earlobes.

Mom tells Chel she looks pretty, but Chel looks over at Mari and thinks she looks better than a princess. She looks like her aunties, Altia and Ameya and Acheli, before they went away for the last time.

Chel must look her best before the priestess, so her father bundles her up in a big cloak and carries her there in his arms, to not muddy her feet or her dress. Mari's dad does the same to her.

Wrapped up in her father's cloak, Chel knows better than to talk. She can't really see well through the cloak. For a while all she can hear is splashing water as her father wades through the streets, and his murmured prayers to more gods than even Chel can name.

Chel next sees the light of day in Lord Cassipa's temple. For a moment she gapes at his great stone idol, for here the Lord of Tears is in the shape of a crane, and looks down his beak like she's a big fat frog. Then Chel and Mari are hustled into line by several stoic acolytes.

Some of the girls Chel knows. Most she doesn't. She and Mari are two of the youngest and shortest there. The largest girls are more than twice their size, more maiden than not, but still girls by the priestess' reckoning. All are girls of the Vine, without a single speck of gold to their names.

Chel nearly screams when Mari clutches her hand in a death grip. After a shaky breath she
squeezes right back.

Lord Cassipa's high priestess strides down the line. With her tall, gangly body and beaky nose she looks like a crane even without the tall, stupid-looking head-dress. The sight is almost funny enough to make Chel laugh, but the cold chill in her blood keeps the humor down. Because beneath the stupid head-dress the high priestess eyes each girl like a hungry crane trying to pick out the juiciest frogs from the pond.

Five is a good number, a holy number. Ten is even more so. The high priestess has chosen nine when she reaches the end of the line.

Chel freezes like a statue when the high priestess stops before her. She keeps her eyes fixated on her own bare feet, to ignore the crane woman sizing her up from her front and the Crane God looming behind her.

Chel's lungs are burning the air when the priestess moves on. She releases a soft sigh of relief through her nose.

The priestess stops again. This time the pause is much shorter. She chooses Mari, pretty as a princess.

Chel's hand clenches around her friend's, but Mari's hand has gone slack in surprise. Her friend is ushered out of line. Chel refuses to let go. For a moment she is almost tugged into the procession too, before the priestess fixates her terrible stare upon her.

Chel goes limp, and Mari is carried away.

Chel gets to go home that night. She is hastened upstairs. Her big brother holds her until she cries enough tears to rival Lord Cassipa. When she sobs hard enough to vomit, Xaya doesn't even make a face. He only cleans her up and helps her into bed. A bed she had shared with Mari just this morning.

Chel doesn't sleep that night, and not just because of the pounding rain that leaks through the roof. Or because the loud, sobbing prayers of Mari's mom carries all the way upstairs.

Mari and the nine other chosen girls spend the night in Lord Cassipa's quarters. They want for nothing, food or toy or dress. Grandma consoles Chel that they're treating Mari and the others like little goddesses. They play and pray before Lord Cassipa's statue, in hopes their laughter will float up into the clouds and make him a little less sad.

It works sometimes, Grandma says. Sometimes Lord Cassipa is so happy by the sight of them he stops crying and all the girls get to go home. It worked for Chel's great-grandma, her Grandma's mom, the last time the Lord of Tears was so distraught. That's how Mom and Chel and Xaya and their aunties got to be born.

But the rain doesn't let up all night. It pours even harder the next morning.

It's still pouring when Mari and her nine other new companions are paraded out to Lord Cassipa's cenote, for the god dwells both in the sky and in a palace at the cenote's fathomless bottom. Manoa cannot give Lady Kama back to Lord Cassipa, but they can offer him new girls to fill up the halls of his palace with his laughter, and make him forget he was ever sad.

For a long time Chel just pictures her friend being pushed over the edge of the limestone cliff to fall all the way into the sky. She's years older when she discovers Mari was first smashed over the back of the skull with a wooden cudgel. After all, a surrogate daughter that screams on her way down, or
swims until she sinks, only makes the Lord of Sorrows sadder.

Despite ten new girls for his hall, Lord Cassipa cries a whole two days more. There's talk of yet another sacrifice before the Feathered Serpent at last ushers out the final rain clouds, and the One Sun graces the day once more.

Chel thanks Mari, because no one can wheedle a dad like her friend can.

Mari's left her doll behind, so Chel ties a rock to it and chucks it down Lord Cassipa's cenote when no one's looking. She manages to get away before the acolytes hear the splash.

Since the day Tulio and Miguel arrived, Manoa has known nothing but clear skies and dry, sunny weather. That was a good thing. For a while.

Now Chel's mind has started to murmur with the concerns of farmers and fishermen who note the slowly sinking water levels.

The usual measures to Lord Cassipa have already been made. Before his idol dry, pungeant wood has been smoked to make his eyes water. Upon the flames salt and even headier incense were sent up. Into his cenote have been thrown cooked fish and frogs and waterfowl to remind him of his earthly duties. Brave travelers have ventured to the sea to bring back tribute of shells and pearls, all potent in his tears.

Miguel and Tulio have noticed, of course, but have shared only worried looks and otherwise tried to ignore it. They're Golden Gods, not rain gods. They have no more domain over the rain than they do over Xibalba.

Neither does Chel.

Then she receives a prayer that makes her spew wine down to the temple steps.

Her boys turn her way in morbid fascination. "What is it this time?" Miguel asks.

Tulio groans. "Does it matter? Just another stupid mortal making another dumb request."

Most of Manoa is mindful of what they pray for or at least tactful enough to not try cornering their gods out on the street. Some forget that a god that chooses to live amongst them is still very much a god.

"Well, it might be funny."

Tulio rolls his eyes and slouches against his throne. "Please. Mortals never use to bother us with this crap back in the old days."

Miguel swirls his cup of wine. "Yes. Because they were too afraid to approach us."

"You say that like it was always a bad thing."

"Asa wants me," Chel says blankly. "Lord Cassipa's high priestess. The same old scare crow that came this close to sacrificing me when I was little."

"And look where you are now!" Tulio grandly motions to an opulent temple and three golden thrones, side by side. "You can always go and laugh at her. Or demand an impossible task that she can never hope to finish."
"Or you can just make her grovel and beg your forgiveness before maybe trying to help her,"
Miguel chimes in. "Because..." From a bowl of fruit he plucks an errant leaf and crushes it. They
all wince at its dry crackle.

"She skipped over me to sacrifice my best friend. Mari. Who had just turned five."

That flips the switch from playful partners to vengeful vindicators. Shadows gather around Tulio
while the air around Miguel burns hot enough to scorch a mortal. Their faces twist.

"What part of what we commanded is so hard to understand?" Tulio hisses.

"No more sacrifices," Miguel intones ominously. "Not now, not ever."

Chel sticks out her tongue and turns the prayer over again in her head. Or whatever it is these
things resonate from. "Yeah. I think she's praying to help avoid that."

Which takes the wind from their sails. They slouch back against their thrones, still holding on to
enough ire to make an errant worshiper wet themselves.

Chel thinks she understands why Asa prayed to her, of all possible gods. Because Lord Cassipa's
head priestess has just witnessed what wrath Miguel and Tulio brought down upon Tzekel-Kan and
his Jaguar God when they grew too impertinent.

"Oh." Tulio blinks. "All right, then."

Miguel smiles that secret, knowing smile that makes Chel want to both slap him and screw him.

"Oh, come on! Will you stop peeking into her future already?"

And the smile widens into a smirk. "Well, it's my duty."

"Sure it is, like it was your duty to..."

Chel rises from her throne to pull on every last bit of finery. She briefly interrupts their bickering
from a kiss from each and calls for her ride.

She's got this.

Asa is summoned from her chambers when the first child arrives. Despite the gold that now
proudly hangs from the ears of every person in Manoa she knows this girl to have been born a
peasant from the natty old doll she carries at her side.

Asa's first instinct is to sneer and chide the girl from so boldly demanding her audience, to having
the gall to stare fearlessly up into the face of a high priestess like they equals.

But holds back her initial scorn and rides it through a wave of mortal terror. For this girl is Canah,
who the Lady of Faith and Lord of Winds have beckoned through the streets to carry her vision of
Lord Tulio's great deeds down in Xibalba.

"Little Cera," Asa acknowledges with the warmth of a grandmother. As best as she can manage
through a bright, strained smile. "What vision has sent you before the Lord of Rain?"

"Not Lord Cassipa." Canah holds up her doll. Asa's smile freezes. "His daughters."

Asa steps mutely aside. One sharp look to her acolytes has them let the little girl go.
Canah is but the first of many. She is followed by yet another former urchin, dragging his smiling mother behind him with one hand and clutching a weathered wooden toy in the other. Then by a flood of children, noble and common, dragging along parents and grandparents and older siblings. Even Chieftess Miya comes, with all six of Chief Tannabok's sons.

One by one, every child throws some toy or trinket, all precious in their own way, into Lord Cassipa's cenote. Some are weighted down or sink on their own, to rest amid the bones of so many little girls.

The Lady of Faith rides up to the Lord of Sorrow's heavenly halls upon the wind himself. It is not hard to miss the palace built of churning thunderheads and pounding waterfalls.

Altivo's mane and tail are woven with priceless gemstones. His shoes and bridle are solid gold. He bares them like a crown as he trots right up the palace steps. Lord Cassipa's daughters hasten to open the door just before he prances in.

Lord Cassipa's daughters are forever young, garbed in the rich indigo and sapphires they entered their father's halls with. Chel fights very hard to keep her regal air when they cluster around Altivo with squeals of delight, because the bunch is adorable enough to coo over. The stallion god bends down to snuffle at their hair. He is soon surrounded by a crowd of admirers that fight to feed him apples, give him pets, and weave flowers into his tail.

The smallest, however, has eyes only for Chel.

"Mari," Chel whispers.

"Hey, Chel." Mari grins, clutching the doll Chel last threw into the cenote to her chest. "Thanks for giving Himi back to me."

Chel can only bend down and squeeze her in a hug that could have lasted eternity. Then Mari grins and leads her onward, with Himi dangling from the other hand. In the opposite direction stampede a hoard of girls with toy bows and spears

Lord Cassipa looms, eyes dry and disdainful, upon his throne with storm clouds brewing at his feet. Were it not for the giggling girls hosting a party of dolls at his feet, the sight would have been quite intimidating.

"It's Lady Chel, Daddy," Mari introduces before plopping down to introduce Himi to one well-worn and well-loved newcomer to the doll party.

"Lady Chel," Lord Cassipa says with only the faintest hint of a sneer. That lessens even as several of his daughters shoot purposeful looks at him. "The mortal that became a goddess."

Chel smiles gracefully. "No stranger than the mortals adopted by a god."

Lord Cassipa considers his brood with exasperated fondness before his walls close down again. "They are the only balm I have, to ease the ache of losing my firstborn. And now your... partners seek to forever deny them from me."

Chel considers the brood she's seen so far. "Lord Cassipa, I think even you have enough children to last eternity." His storm clouds churn and darken, but she smoothly continues with, "Besides, isn't it time they meet their oldest sister?"

Lord Cassipa sits back in his throne, stunned. "Kama has spoken to you?"
"Not to me," Chel admits. "But I know someone whose stories she likes. And who can make sure you two cross paths at the fateful time."

She has faith, in herself and her partners and Lady Kama, and so does he.

The Lord of Sorrows weeps tears of hope and joy.

Chapter End Notes

Briefly in the original story I mentioned what became of Chel's family. At the beginning things are still mostly... put together : (  

A cenote - a natural pit or sinkhole, resulting from a collapse of limestone bedrock revealing the groundwater beneath. Traditionally held as a shrine to various rain and water gods and where such sacrifices were hosted. Aka, the hole Miguel and Hector got thrown into in Coco XD  

Peru grew a native species of indigo that spread around through trade and such.

EDIT: Made some switches to phrasing and all the typos I could see. Most importantly, switched Cera's name to Canah, because she is the twin that is still in the physical world.
sun showers

Chapter Summary

Even across continents, a sun shower usually means only one thing...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It begins with a sun shower.

The sky shines bright and blue overhead, yet laughing children race through the raindrops and splash through muddy puddles all the same. Young and innocent, they know it only as a gift from the gods.

Their parents, much more worldly, keep a fair distance from the temple of their newest gods. They know the signs, just as sure as they know when Lord Cassipa rains down upon Lady Raima's smoking peak, or on the moonless nights when Lady Kama steals away to Lord Kinich's side down in Xibalba.

Brand new flowers bloom overnight and birds start with their courtship songs months out of season. Despite the constant sun showers, the day seems brighter and lasts longer than ever before. Every night the stars seem to dance and whisper secrets to themselves upon the night wind. Wine and pulque flow like water, for the stores never seem to reach their bottom.

Lord Altivo and his wind are suspiciously absent during this time. Those that do spot him do so on the borders of Manoa, rolling his eyes impatiently as he waits for it all to be over.

Miraculous weather aside, the people of Manoa are caught up in the wave of it. On the streets even old, bitter elders will suddenly break out into song or fall into the impromptu dances that consume entire crowds.

Couples seized with sudden courage will upon their knees to pledge upon their love to one another. Or be caught pledging their love where they should not be. Even Chief Tannabok and his wife swagger about their palace, exchanging glances as if the past twenty years and six songs have never happened.

Priests report record marriages and betrothals, all spontaneous and pushed ahead months of schedule, without care of dowries and decorum. The more foresighted, with a sudden wave of exhilarated panic, start planning for a sure population boom in nine months’ time.

The frenzy stretches out days. Days!

"Even they have to get tired sooner or later," Miya murmurs one night, when they're too tired to remain caught up in the spell.

"Of course they don't," Tannabok groans. "They're gods."

Eventually, the furor does indeed die down, much to Manoa's overwhelming relief and overwhelming disappointment. Once more the golden gods show themselves to their people and
the city resumes a state almost like normalcy.

None dare presume it a wedding, not when the gods have made no such calls for the grand ceremony such an event would entail. It is not their place to question the gods, who are all so brand new to their hearts and to each other's.

Life goes on. Albeit with much more sun showers and spontaneous singing.

Chapter End Notes

sun shower - rain that falls when the sun is shining; almost always attached to folklore when a clever animal or trickster marries.... or 'marries' ; )
lord of plague (lord of rats)

Chapter Summary

Lord Hueza isn't having a very good day. Or night.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the Fifth World, Lord Hueza is easily avoided. He is a cowardly little god, you see, the lowest of the Nine Lords of Xibalba. He likes to hide in the dark, dirty places. Except when he is feeling unusually brave, he will seek out only the young and old and the weak, for they cannot so easily chase him away.

Lord Hueza is repulsed by clean things. Clean away the trash so he has nowhere to hide, for the hawks and dogs and all the other beasts find him very tasty to eat. Burn incense, to drive him back into the dark. Avoid food and water contaminated by his paws, my child, and all will be well.

The Golden People have their priests and physicians to drive the Lord of Plague away. All we have are the gifts granted to us by Lady Paquini and Lord Bibi, our herbs and our wits. So use yours widely.

In Xibalba, you must first pass the Plague House. It is as nasty as you would expect for the home of the Rat God.

Even the other Lords of Xibalba do not like Lord Hueza much. The big and strong can kick him away or chase him off with a laugh. They give Lord Hueza nothing, for he deserves nothing.

You, little Chel, are not big and strong. Not yet. Should you find yourself in Xibalba, we will give you something small to give him.

Never, ever let Lord Hueza take what is not, for he will gobble up all the gifts meant for the greater Lords of Xibalba, and leave nothing for them.

And then he will gobble you up too.

Oh, little Chel, don't cry. We will never let the Rat God get you.

Before we see you off to Xibalba, first we shall find you a dog, the biggest and scariest we can find. With a dog you'll never be lost, and the little monsters won't look twice at you.

There are no souls that are his. Not anymore. Not with the far-seeing hunter to kick him dead or sink his talons into his back every time he tries sneaking into the Fifth World. Even under cover of darkness, the owls find him anyway.

Yet he is also a thief and will readily steal the young and the weak from his big brothers and sisters.

He is eternally hopeful, every time he catches scent of some newborn or elderly soul on the
infernal current. He creeps forward, to see if tonight is the night he will steal from the lord of thieves.

No soul ever walks alone. They come with a torchbearer or diligent dog at their side. Some even come in the arms of their shepherd or slung over his back.

Instinct warns the Rat God. But he is also Lord Hueza, proud and greedy, and so must always steal forward to try his luck.

Sometimes he escapes back into the shadows. Often with a missing tail or burn mark scorching his back, but alive all the same.

Other times a shoe or staff stomp him flat. Or a torch burns him to a blackened husk. Most unpleasant are the times a dog's fangs sink into his back and shake until there's no life left in him.

So dies Lord Hueza, until a fresh soul lures him back to try the impossible odds once more.

Chapter End Notes

Remember that rat god Miguel beat up? Yeah, he ain't doing so hot these days.

Inspired by the 'Houses' in Mesoamerican and South American mythology, the horrible obstacles a god or soul must get through in various versions Xibalba.
lady of flame (the fire house)

Chapter Summary

Chel has a history with the Snake Goddess. And old habits die hard for her partners.

Or: the second part in what has literally become a series within a series.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lady of the Liquid Flame.

Chel can't picture what a 'liquid flame' is. She imagines something like the lava Lady Raima will spew when she's really angry. And so comes to believe Lady Itzli's snakes breathe magma. The Lady of Liquid Flame does live in the Fire House, after all. Though Chel doesn't know how comfortable it is to live in a house that's constantly on fire.

Her grandpa is a good and godly man. He always watches his steps outside. Some of Lady Itzli's children hiss their displeasure, but most are silent and like to hide. Her grandpa has always helped point out their hiding places to Chel, has taught her and her brother how to grand each child of Lady Itzli a wide berth. They must never turn their backs to a snake, must never run, must always show the proper eye contact and walk away with all the calm they can fake.

But Lady Itzli doesn't always obey the rules the makes the mortals stand by. Her children don't always stay outside, to the places in the world meant for them.

Her grandpa's eyes aren't what they used to be. He thinks the little shape on their cooling hearth a shadow, until it lunges up to seize him by the knee.

Chel learns what liquid flame is when her grandfather screams in agony as the venom in his veins turns his blood to fire. It burns him from the inside out, as his leg turns black and dead and scorched.

The healer takes his leg, in the end. It is not sacrifice enough to save his life.

The fire has reached his brain and rage as fever. His very blood turns to poison.

Chel's prayers are all for nothing. Her grandpa never really wakes up again. Lady Itzli does not even grant him the mercy of a quiet death. His final days are long and torturous, filled with only fire and liquid flame.

In the end they give her grandfather to the pyre too, so he can travel to Xibalba. They send him with all the gifts he needs for a safe crossing. Grandma even sells off her finest dress, so they scrimp enough for a half-grown puppy to burn with him.

Chel's tears are hot, angry flames down her cheeks.

She knows like the sky is blue that her grandpa will never make it to Lady Eupana's paradise.
The Lady of the Liquid Flame already has him. She will never let him go.

The blazing afternoon sun is scorching on Achi's back. All he feels is the ache in his shoulders and the ache in his back. Worse yet is Elo, because even after hours of clearing the fields Elo can't shut up about whatever inane subjects cross his mind.

So Achi drowns out Elo's yammering with his own irritable thoughts. Elo might make time pass quicker for himself, but he only drags Achi into the afternoon that will never end.

Too late does Achi hear that telltale, angry rattling and freeze. Too late, because it's right by his feet and there's no time to move away...

A high-pitched shriek splits the air. Achi thinks it's his own, as he falls back and darkness swoops in to claim its prey.

He blinks, dazedly. Sprawled on his back, he has a cleared view of the golden hawk that beats its wings and rises back into the sky with a rattlesnake dangling from its talons.

Elo helps him up, frantically checking his body for signs of snakebite. Then he laughs and slaps Achi on the back.

"You lucky bastard! Good thing Lord Miguel was looking out for you!"

Achi snaps out of it to give Elo a smack of his own, because the bastard's big mouth had near damn well been the death of him.

Lady Itzli hisses and bites and writhes. She sheds one serpentine skin to slide into the next.

No matter her shape, Miguel holds her firm with hands and talons. Even snakes have their predators, after all, and Lady Itzli has made them miss lunch.

"Call him off! Call him off!"

Chel rolls her eyes. "Please. There's nothing I can make him do."

Miguel smirks, brilliant and terrible.

"Persssuade him, pleasse!"

Chel makes a show of buffing her fingernails. "Well, there's something that might persuade me to persuade him."

Snakes cannot blink or weep in fear, but Lady Itzli shivers in their fatal hold. "I don't have the ssstupid old man. Not anymore."

Chel and Miguel freeze. A soul's destination in Xibalba should be permanent. A soul condemned to burn in the Fire House should still be burning the Fire House.

Chel snarls and Miguel tightens his hold. "Well, where is he!??"

"I-I don't know," the Serpent Goddess rasps. "Wherever sssouls go!"

The Lady of Faith turns away.
For daring to prey upon their people, the Averter of Evil brings down the killing blow.

It won't do much, anyway, when the Lady of Liquid Flame will slither back into this world in some shape or another.

When Tulio descends into the spirit world that night, Chel is at his side.

Serpents are born liars. Even beneath Miguel's talons, Lady Itzli might have been too proud to surrender one of her own, for death cannot hold a goddess long.

Silent as shadows Chel and Tulio swoop over the world. The Rat God scurries amongst his garbage heaps without even recognizing their presence. Perhaps Tzinacon, Lord of the Night Air, might sense them, but tonight they don't intend to fly so far. It's not his house they intend to burglarize.

The Fire House is as bright and terrible as Chel always imagined it to be. She might bask in Miguel's radiance, but the heat of the Fire House only blisters. Tulio protectively drapes his cloak over her and together they shelter in its cool darkness.

Once inside, Chel claps her hands over her mouth to hide her horror. Blackened and burnt, a thousand tortured souls writhe upon the floors in agony, forever ravaged by burning venom and burning fever.

Lady Itzli basks in their screams and suffering as her children do sunlight. Still stewing over the humiliation of her daytime defeat, she is oblivious to the thieves in her house.

Her prisoners are not. Though their eyes have been seared from their sockets they turn towards Chel and Tulio all the same. With low, tortured moans they drag themselves across the floors, and grasp for unreachable salvation.

With Tulio to muffle her sobs, Chel weeps freely.

These are souls snapped up by the Snake Goddess long before her time. They are not her people. She has no claim over them, no cause to disturb the order of what was before she had been, and so must walk on.

There is no faith here, for those long past it.

She searches all their faces, for one she might call her own.

It's in vain. Her grandpa isn't here.

Chel squeezes Tulio's hand in a death grip. He squeezes back.

Then he bends down to grasp the hands of the closest smoking soul.

There is no faith here. There is none they have legitimate claim over. But Tulio is lord of thieves and shepherd of souls, and he has always been a greedy god.

The darkness of his cloak smothers the flames. Her tears wash away burns and blisters until together she and Tulio hold a weeping girl between them. She is no older than thirteen. They silence her tears and motion for her to make room, when they bend to help to steal the second soul. And the third and the fourth and the tenth.

Chel loses count, for Tulio's bottomless greed and bottomless cloak always leave room for just one more and then another after that.
Lady Itzli hisses in outrage, as the chorus of screams die down, and the flames she basks in die down the slightest. She hones in on the sudden absence of heat, and strikes.

They are already racing for the window, snatching up every soul in their way.

They spread their wings and fly.

The Snake Goddess snaps her jaws on empty air.

The dawn brings butterflies. Hundreds of them, alongside flocks of hummingbirds. Their wings are brilliant reds and golds and oranges. The color of dawning. The color of fire.

Their wings flashing in the sunlight, they dissipate over the skies of Manoa and into its streets. They alight on windowsills and in gardens and temples they know still.

And their loved ones know them. Spouses and siblings, children and grandparents, fall to their knees in tears of grief and tears of joy.

Then the radiant flocks leave the earth behind. As one they surge for the peak of the highest temple in the city. They swirl around the gods there, brushing their wings against faces and perching on outstretched fingers.

Chel watches until the very last one vanishes into the sunrise. She turns to steal a glance at her partners.

Tulio's face is proud but shrouded. Miguel smiles wistfully. They say nothing.

"Where did they go?" she ventures at last.

Together they draw her into an embrace.

"Have faith," they tell her.

So she does.

Chapter End Notes

Bothrops asper likes to live near people. They are unpredictable when threatened and tends to raise its head high when biting, granting very high snakebites on the leg. Their venom can kill through sepsis and hemorrhage and all sorts of unpleasant ways. Do NOT look up the Wikipedia article unless you want a very vivid picture of how the Lady of Liquid Flame came to earn her name.

The snake that nearly got our poor maize farmer is something like a South American rattlesnake. Or is one. Because intentional vagueness on a definite location for Manoa, because it just plain doesn't have one.
lord of blood (and those that were never his)

Chapter Summary

Where Chel gets it from.

Or: the third part of what has literally become a series within a series.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sija's first action in the spirit world is to wrinkle her nose. She is dead and still she must deal with smells, with the dirty rat god and his dirty home.

That, and the ache in her lungs.

Her second is to take stock of what her family has given her because, oh, she will find a way to haunt them if they did not. Grief over her is no excuse. Not when she herself kept her head in seeing her own husband off into Xibalba just the year before.

She hums in approval to discover all the proper offerings accounted for. Her daughter, or perhaps her dear little granddaughter, have remembered to put her in her favorite dress. They have even remembered her walking stick. It doesn't matter if Sija is dead and should be beyond her walking stick. It is hers, and its damn well coming with her.

With some distaste Sija considers the ugly little mutt her best dress should have paid for. It whines expectantly up at her.

She clucks her tongue. "Come along, dog."

It is not a trusted family pet, for their family has certainly never been in a position to throw away food in caring for a dog. Still the dog is a dog and leads her onward all the same.

Lord Hueza is as small and pathetic as she has always known him to be. He thinks her old and weak, when he creeps close to steal all that is not his.

The dog growls. The Rat God turns to scurry away.

Sija still pointedly sweeps her walking stick to slap him away, for daring to go after her.

Leaving the dirty stink of the Plague House behind is a relief, even if she must then walk into the sweltering heat of the Fire House.

Lady Itzli lounges in the light of the threshold. Her unblinking eyes fixate upon Sija, who stands taller and never looks away. The mutt whimpers.

"Hello, old woman," the Snake Goddess rasps. "Care to ssstay a while and warm your old bonesss before my hearth?"

"I'm sorry, Lady Itzli, but your offer comes far too late," Sija retorts with only the slightest
"My bones are already burning."

"So doesss your husssband," answers the Snake Goddess. "He callssss for you."

Sija purses her lips at her worst fears confirmed but shows nothing further. There is no ache when she reaches into her bag to swiftly place down the bowl of sliced chili peppers. "I'm sorry, Lady Itzli, but tell my Koli I must meet him elsewhere."

"There isss only me," the Lady of the Liquid Flame hisses. "And my fire. Forever."

Sija retreats backwards, never staring away from the Snake Goddess until the Fire House and its inferno slide back into the darkness.

Next she shivers with the chill of the Night House. Now there is no fever to burn away the icy hooks in her ribs and her lungs.

Sija has known Lord Tzinacon as the night air that snuck into her home and her bed and her lungs to grow as sickness. Now the Lord of the Night Air looms from the rooftop of his home as the biggest, ugliest bat she has ever laid eyes upon. Her mutt snarls.


Sija dares not cast her eyes down. She raises her chin against the ache in her chest and goes not give in to the wracking cough that claimed her life.

"Lord Tzinacon, what place could there be for an old, used-up woman such as myself in your resplendent palace?" The Night House around her is a desolate ruin. "My blood is ash and flame by now."

The Bat God looms, slavering. "Your blood, I smell it!"

Her mongrel presses close and bares its fangs in a fearful snarl. Not that it has anything to worry about, when it's as burned and bloodless as she.

"Not my blood, my lord."

From her satchel Sija produces the gourd of mongrel's blood, collected when its throat had been slit. She places it upon the ground, hastening away with speed she has not had in decades with the dog at her side.

Lord Tzinacon ravenously descends, shredding the gourd open with jagged fangs.

Sija is nearly out of his territory when the frigid air around her stirs. She turns to see the Bat God fixated upon her, blood dripping from his maw. His shriek is the gale.

"You're still mine!"

"And then Grandma would be like, swoosh!" Xaya swings his empty arms with all his strength. "She'd get the Bat God right on the nose a-and make his squashed face even more squashed!"

Chel bites her lip. "B-But he got her the first time."

"Well, yeah, because he was a coward that sneaked in as the night air so she couldn't hit him. In Xibalba, he gets cocky." Her big brother rubs his ears out of habit. "And you know what Grandma
does to people that get cocky."

"W-What about Lady Ayin? Grandma can't swim."

"Well, duh. Grandma just walks onto a crocodile like she would a turtle and orders it to carry her across. And whack it with her stick if it won't."

Despite the snot and tears running down her face, Chel can't help but giggle at the picture of her Grandma casually riding one of Lady Ayin's children across Xibalba. So she believes Xaya about Grandma striding right past Lord Tlilihui and Lady Iztaya.

The Jaguar God, however....

Even Xaya is stumped by this one. Chel's heart sinks at the silence. Then his dark eyes flash and his fists curl. "The Jaguar God wouldn't even dare come out to fight her. Because she'd whack him good for taking Auntie Altia and Auntie Ameya."

"D-Do you think Grandma made it to Grandma Turtle's?"

"Chel, I know she did. Because she's Grandma and Grandma Turtle respects her so much she came to her first."

Boys are dumb about crying and Xaya's trying to hide his tears, so Chel throws herself into his big brother's arms and they can cry without the other seeing.

---

Tonight the gods dine in Xibalba. Most of them, anyway.

Sija is not one of the newcomers that like to gawk at every glimpse of divinity. Hell, she was too old and tired when she got to Eupana's paradise to care all that much. And her soul is still sickened to gaze upon the other Lords of Xibalba, who feast so sumptuously in the same heaven they deny their prisoners.

Yet not even Sija can ignore the changes in the world. Every soul since little Cera, even the damned dogs, make it to Lady Eupana. One of those new-fangled gods personally guides each and every soul to Grandmother Turtle's shores without entering himself.

Until tonight, that is.

There are many more souls older and grander than her. With dignity befitting a queen Sija still strolls to the front of the crowd, proudly sporting the same gray hair and weathered face she last did in life. She is surrounded by a sea of fresh faces, who prefer to be eternally youthful and eternally silly.

Sija cares little for these haughty gods beyond the good they bring her people. Her gaze skips over Lord Miguel and Lord Tulio and Lord Altivo.

It is the goddess she fixates on, beautiful and sure of herself, dressed in resplendent reds and a crown of cloud-white feathers. The goddess who was not born a goddess, who proved her godhood through spiting the Jaguar God himself.

Sija does not see the Lady of Faith or the Golden Goddess. She sees only Pana's little girl, sure and strong.

"Chel," she whispers, hope and prayer realized.
Chel stares across a sea of countless and sees her.

The crowd parts for their goddess. It is not a goddess who crashes into Sija's eyes, but the bawling little girl she last bid not to mourn her a lifetime ago.

Chel's new-fangled... consorts have the common decency to draw all spectacle upon themselves, and draw the crowd away.

Hmph. At least Chel has made a decent choice in her suitors.

After an eternity in each other's arms, Chel dares to ask in a small, wavering voice where the others are.

Her granddaughter's joyful tears become those of sorrow when Sija answers she is the only family Chel would have known in life.

Sija lets her weep. Then she wipes the tears from her cheeks. "Chel, do not cry for them. Find them, and bring them back to us."

Chel sniffs in bewilderment. "B-But they aren't Eupana's."

"No more than you were Balam Qoxtok's," Sija retorts bluntly. "Or I belonged to Tzinacon. They are mine, Chel. Mine, and yours. Believe in them, like I believe in you."

Purposefully, she steps away, for she is but an old soul and Chel once more a goddess, grown and glorious.

"They aren't mine to take." Chel snorts. "Like that ever stopped me anyway."

"You shall find your family and bring them back to us," Sija states. "For they are yours, like your... boys."

So Sija believes in her granddaughter, and so it shall be.

Chapter End Notes

Lord Tzinacon: god of bats, mosquitoes, the nocturnal blood-drinkers, the night air, miasma, airborne disease, blood, and the cold of the night
goddess of greed (a goddess spurned)

Chapter Summary

What happens to a goddess fallen, but not forgotten.

Or, the fifth part of what has literally become a series within a series.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. All Chel can do is sit helplessly on her bed, biting her lip until it bleeds, and listens to the thunderous voice that shakes the very house to its foundations. Soon the storm will fall upon her.

When her dad's frame, large and hulking, dominates the doorway, Chel swallows her fear and tilts her chin up high. "It was my fault," she blurs out.

Her dad, who is already staring at her, sags in the doorway. Chel crosses her arms.

"It was my fault," she repeats. "Not Xaya's. It doesn't matter that he's the big brother and 'should have known better.' I made him do it, 'cause I wanted to see, even though Xaya said it was a stupid idea and that I was stupid and--"

Chel can't say anything else, because her dad picks her up from the bed like she's nothing and holds her close. His chest shakes like Mari's does... used to do... when she tried very hard to keep him crying.

She's never seen her dad cry before. She's terrified to see it happen. So she falls quiet and waits out the storm.

"What," her dad finally croaks at last, "in all the Nine Lords were you thinking?"

"I wanted to see," she mumbles into his chest.

"The temple?"

The temples to the Sun God and the Jaguar God are two of the tallest in all the city, only outshone by the one dedicated to the Dual Gods. There is only one other temple that could have rivaled it in size and grandness... if it is not already half-sunk and fallen into ruin, because it's left over from the world before.

"No," Chel mutters. "The caimans."

Her dad pulls away, though he's utterly stupefied instead of utterly enraged. "W-W-Why?"

Chel impatiently rolls her eyes up at him. "Well, how else would I know if they were caimans or baby crocodiles? Xaya says caimans are just like little crocodiles. But, dad, if caimans are just little crocodiles, how can Lady Ayin be the Caiman Goddess and not the Little Crocodile Goddess?"
Chel's dad gapes. Then his brow comes down as if he's finally about to yell at her too. All that comes out is a long, long sigh before he hugs her close again.

"Chel," he finally says. "Most, most, of Lady Ayin's children are smaller than Lord Youalan's. That does not stop you, and Xaya too, from also being small."

She shivers. Once there had been a world with Two Suns, before the Crocodile God had eaten one and near killed the other. For a whole world Lord Youalan and Lady Ayin had ruled as its king and queen. They had ruled from a mighty temple and devoured people in droves. They were wicked and greedy gods, so no others helped them when the Jaguar God came to steal their world from them.

The Age of the Crocodile died in the great floods and earthquakes and wars brought by the Jaguar God. The Crocodile God is dead now, dead as a god can be, his temple torn down and priests sacrificed before the Jaguar God's altars.

The Caiman Goddess, banished to Xibalba, hates and hungers. Without sacrifices to appease her, she takes all who stray too close to her waters. She is especially fond of children, their flesh tender and supple.

But, still...

"And a caiman is a caiman because...?"

Her dad huffs what might either be a sigh or a laugh, and tells her.

The swamp is stinking and treacherous. A poor mortal soul would be left stranded in the mire, wading through way through mud and water, too slow to run and too trapped to swim from the death that lurks below and creeps relentlessly forward.

Tulio, however, glides above the mire. He comes without his cloak, for he has no need to hide when he must walk proudly and freely. He pulls faces at the large, ugly lizards that swim atop the muck and kick away the stupid ones that lurk too close.

Some are crocodiles and others caimans. The caimans have no bony septums between their nostrils, longer and thinner teeth, and stiffer hides that make them less valuable. Tulio doesn't really care enough to look that close.

Crocodile or caiman, they are the stillness by the water's edge and the sudden eruption of claws and teeth that drag errant flocks and wayward children down to a watery grave. Tulio's known it before, in those distant days in distant Egypt, and has no desire to know it again.

Lady Ayin's palace is a sprawling, half-drowned ruin. She is attended only by her children and the bones of their victims. Tulio still respectfully stops at the palace threshold, plastering a gallant smile on his face even as the colossal caiman basking in the throne-room rumbles her displeasure.

"Please, Lady Ayin," he wheedles. "There is no need for hostility."

"Thief," she growls in a voice that shakes the swamp.

Tulio haughtily raises his chin. "Excuse me, I am a Lord of the Golden World. What would I ever want from you?"

The Caiman Goddess hisses. "Balam Qoxtok's world, little thief. He killed my husband for it and
you stole it from beneath his very nose."

Tulio smiles gallantly. "Not my fault he was too focused on tearing things down instead of building
to back up. He might have the fury to cast down a world, but never the strength to raise one. Not
like you or I could."

Lady Ayin sneers in disdainful agreement. "Jealous little cub, he is. Made a fool by the likes of
fools."

Tulio agrees with her on that one, for the most part. He and Miguel are many things, fools among
them. Chel, on the other hand, can be called anything but.

"I'm not here to steal from you," he vows solemnly as if he swears upon the Styx. "One ruler to
another, I'm here to pay my respects to one who came before, to let bygones be bygones." He grins
enticingly. "I come bearing gifts."

Lady Ayin, eyes dark and hungry, greedily invites him onward. Her children eagerly creep close
before they are frightened back by her growl.

The mortal souls that stop before the Water Palace know to prevail upon the Caiman Goddess
directly, for so great is her greed she will force her children away from them so that they might
present their tribute in person. If the offering of fish or meat is large enough, Lady Ayin will take
her sweet time devouring it, and allow the soul a chance to escape her jaws too.

Lady Ayin, however, is a greedy goddess. Her treacherous swamps and treacherous children claim
their fair share of souls. However, she always hungers for more. So many souls that survive the
Plague House and the Fire House and the Night House never see it past her domain. Their bones
now float in her ruined court.

But Tulio is a generous guest. From thin air he pulls the fruit of his flocks, tender goats and
succulent sheep and fattened cattle. It does not matter that Manoa has never known these beats, for
they are his all the same.

He is comrade of the feast and giver of good things. There is feast enough for not only Lady Ayin
and her insatiable stomach, but for her myriad of monsters. They gorge themselves and gorge
again. Off they drift into satisfied slumber and sluggish torpor.

*Beware of Greeks bearing gifts*, the wise once warned. Or Spaniards. Whatever.

Tulio is a guest here. He remains honest in his vow and strides out of the Water Palace without
stealing a single soul.

Chel, shrouded beneath his cloak, has made no such promises. She snatches souls floating right
before the sleeping noses of the Caiman Goddess and her children.

In time, Lady Ayin will awaken to a palace empty of suffering, and rumble her fury.

Her children scatter from her hall and return to their swamps. They will placidly bask and let all
prey pass them by for weeks after, for their bellies are already full to burst.

For the third time, the people of Manoa witness the souls of their loved ones return to their en
masse. First they came upon the dawn in the shades of flame and secondly at the cusp of dusk in
the rich blues and blacks and violets of the night. Now the birds and butterflies rise from the
swamps. Those few bold enough to dare venture near the ruined temple of the Crocodile God and
the Caiman Goddess spot them dancing in defiant circles above it.

Chel cannot help her sad, satisfied smile when the souls liberated from Lady Ayin once more spiral around her and soar into the horizon. The victory is tempered by the bitter knowledge she has found no family in those sunken halls.

Lord Hueza is too greedy to keep the few souls he gets for long. Yet Itzli and Tzinacon and Ayin have all jealously hoarded them away. Still, Chel has not found any she can call her own.

Chel still doesn't know where the freed souls fly, only that it has to be better than with the Lords of Xibalba.

"Are my family already there?" she murmurs.

Miguel cocks his head in confusion. "Where?"

Chel dully nods after the last hummingbirds vanishing into the distance. "There."

"No," Miguel states with iron certainty. When she presses him for more, the prophetic surety falls from his face as he rubs his neck awkwardly. "Chel, I've... never been the best at... what comes after... this. But I can tell you they're not there."

She turns to Tulio. Normally she can read her boys like open books, but the shadow has fallen over his face again, and that's not entirely his fault.

"Chel, do you have faith you'll find them? All of them, as you know them?"

There's no challenge to his words, but Chel still bristles all the same. "Always."

Miguel squeezes her shoulder and she leans into the certainty of warmth and life and sunshine. Tulio hangs back, though they know how much he aches for them. Chel rolls her eyes and Miguel sighs of weary affection and they draw him in all the same.

"Have faith," he murmurs helplessly.

Chel does. She knows where they are not, for if they were... there, then they are somewhere she can never follow, not as she is now. Therefore, she knows where they are.

Nine are the Lords of Xibalba. She has faced down the Rat God and the Bat God, has plundered from the Snake Goddess and the Caiman Goddess. She has skipped to the very end, to behold her grandma safe and sound in Eupana's paradise.

Four more Lords to defy. Four more Lords that may hold her family.

Four more Lords, to unite them all again.

Chapter End Notes

Ayin - goddess of caimans, demons, monsters, swamps, mud, mire, greed, mass sacrifice, water-borne disease, foot rot (and other rots from excessive moisture)

Manoa has five worlds or ages. The fourth one, ruled by the Crocodile God and
Crocodile Goddess, came with a violent overthrow of the Two Suns (now the sole sun god and moon goddess). It was the world of wild, unchecked human sacrifice, the world destroyed by war when Youalan and the Jaguar God really got into who should rule the world came after it.

Of course, both lose out in the end, because certain other gods stole the next world for themselves, and made the Age of the Serpent a golden world instead ; )
the face(s) of death

Chapter Summary

Chel faces some realities about death, first as a mortal and then as a goddess.

Or: Dinner plans in Xibalba - about as smelly as it sounds, with food that may be as rotten as their host. Maybe.

Or: the fifth part of what has literally become a series within a series.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chel and Mari stumble into Chel's house soaked in sweat and gasping for their lives. Mari, upon reaching relative safety, falls to the floor and bawls. Chel, a little more put together, nearly trips over her feet to get to her grandpa.

"Good gods, girls!" he exclaims. "What's--"

"M-Monster!" she gets out. "A huge fly monster that spat little flies! I-It was big, and stunk, and fat from all the kids it ate! Xaya says it pretends to be asleep to dumb little girls like us into getting close, but we're not dumb, so we ran right back here to get you."

Her grandpa calmly finishes chewing his tobacco leaf. "I see. And did this fly monster look like a fly?"

Chel tries very hard not to roll her eyes. Of course she and Mari get stuck with her grandpa when there's a monster on the loose. Her mom or dad would be better, but they're out in the fields. Her grandma would be best of all, because even if her glare didn't scare the monster away she would whack it with her walking stick, but she's taking care of a friend who's even older than she is. Maybe they should have run all the way to Mari's house after all.

"No," she answers. "Cause it made itself look like a dog. Only it was too fat and it stunk. Like... like bad food!"

"Do you remember where it was sleeping?" Chel nods firmly. "Can you show me, Chel?"

Chel nods. She doesn't hold her grandpa's hand because she's scared, but because he's old, and takes too long to go anywhere.

Mari insists on going too, if only because she can scream louder and get the real warriors to help when the monster tries to eat them all. Of course Himi goes with her, the doll never leaving the hand that doesn't clutch at Chel like a life-line.

The monster is sleeping still right at the back of the alley. Chel can hear the flies buzzing from all the way on the street now. Somehow the smell is even worse. Her nose wrinkles in disgust.

"Why does it look like a dog?" she can't help but ask. A really fat and smelly dog covered in flies, but still a dog.
"Because it was a dog, Chel, before it died."

Chel and Mari eye the former dog dubiously. They've heard of people becoming ghosts or spirits or butterflies after they die, but never dogs turning into demons.

"Is it actually asleep?" Mari whispers, on the off-chance it is. "Or just pretending to be?"

"No," Chel's grandpa states matter-of-factly, like when he tells them the volcano smoking is Lady Raima's anger or the rain Lord Cassipa's tears. "It was a dog. Now it's only dead and rotting."

The girls cock their head in confusion. They know what rot is, because they aren't dumb little babies anymore, no matter what Xaya says. Fruit and vegetables go bad. So does meat. Lord Tlilihui makes it happen. Chel's grandma curses him whenever the food spoils.

"Do all dead things rot?" Chel asks.

Her grandpa nods.

"Even people?" Mari whispers, pale and sick. She must be thinking of her own grandpa, who went to Xibalba just a few months ago.

"If their friends and family are careless, to just leave them in the dirt or somewhere to know all Lord Tlilihui inflicts." Chel's grandpa pats Mari on the head. "That is why we are good to our loved ones, why we give them their rites and their pyre. We purify what remains of them in this world, so they can move onto the next without ever knowing the Black Lord or the White Lady."

Chel and Mari shudder. First Lord Tlilihui eats all there is to eat and Lady Iztaya is left the bones. The masks of the Jaguar God's acolytes and the dancing puppets that come out on the big holiday nights are all the skeletons they ever need to see.

Tulio is not only a master thief. He is the god of thieves, the same that swiped an entire herd of sacred cattle from one all-seeing sun god. Shrouded in shadow and just as silent, he should be able to steal in and out of the underworld as he damn well pleases. He's even stepping especially light tonight, because... urgh. Whatever isn't nasty, fetid swamp is infested with squirming maggots and rotting corpses.

Corpses that, one by one, swivel in his and Chel's direction before lurching after them on rotted limbs. Most don't even have eyes or noses, let alone the need to breathe. Still they congregate upon them, inhaling deeply and greedily.

Hidden beneath his cloak, he and Chel exchange a bewildered glance. Even concealed, souls screaming for salvation tend to reach out for them.

Yet, despite the flesh sloughing off their bones, these souls clamber close enough to...sniff them.

As the most terrible and decayed corpse advances upon them, Tulio throws off the useless cloak in favor of his most dashing smile. A quick elbow to the ribs has Chel doing the same.

"Lord Tulio!" Lord Tlilihui croaks in delight. "What a delight to have you back so soon, and with Lady Chel no less!"

"The pleasure is all ours!" Tulio interjects gallantly. "Though I do hope we're not intruding on any... important business!"
"As a matter of fact, we were just about to sit down for dinner." The Black Lord's grin is wide and earnest, for portions of his face have fallen away to reveal nothing but the grinning skull. He leans forward. "Did you bring any more of the good stuff?"

"Of course!" Chel, who is still getting the hang of divinity, suddenly has no trouble conjuring up the finest incense from their altars. From nowhere Tulio pulls a lit torch upon which to burn it. "Only the finest white copal."

One burning torch becomes many as the corpses distribute them, leaning in to the perfumed smoke as Tulio once relished the savor of what was sacrificed upon his burning altars.

Lord Tlilihui escorts them into his grand palace to a sumptuous feasting hall. Inside the incense hangs so heavy it almost disguises the overwhelming cloud of decay. Tulio's quick and clever hand deftly smears the tiniest of resin beneath his nostrils to block out the odor. He just catches Chel doing the same.

The Black Palace befits any great god, only the spoils of Lord Tlilihui's tribute are... literal spoils. Platters upon heaping platters of rotten and curdled foods, other plates just of writhing maggots. Lord Tlilihui has exchanged his corpse form for one with a cloak of rich black plumage. Too bad his bald, hideous head is a vulture's, that scarfs down the rotten feast with aplomb.

Tulio glimpses Chel politely picking at her food or just outright vanishing pieces. The old, proper part of him hisses they are guests and their host a generous one.

Tulio is a god of animal husbandry. Slaughter and butchery comes with the territory. So too is he patron of the poor and the predators, who when on the edge will scavenge any meal that might let them not starve to death in the night. Even as a part of him will forever shudder in revulsion at such blatant displays of death, he gets it. More so than almost any other god will.

Miguel, who has known death a little more than most gods, avoids Xibalba except for Eupana's paradise for damn good reason. Tulio doesn't blame him in the slightest. Neither does Chel, when she learns at least part of Miguel once spent torturous nights dead on a barge in a desperate hope to see a new sunrise.

Tulio contents himself to the drinks. Wine and agave and beer are just different plants left to ferment, after all.

Drunk on the heady incense and actual alcohol, Tulio remembers himself as comrade of the feast and giver of joy. The Vulture God devours freshly slaughtered lamb alongside half-rotted dog and deer. He produces the same frankincense and myrrh that once burned on his oldest altars, cassia and bdellium and other treasures from routes so far east his worshipers had no proper names for them.

"I can see how you found us so quickly," he catches himself babbling later on. He raises his agave glass in Chel's direction. "I mean, smell me, Chel. I'm pretty damn delic--"

Smiling serenely, Chel elbows him somewhere sacred and sensitive. Tulio lifts his goblet, disguising his whimper of pain as a hearty sip, and comes back to himself.

Even in the heart of the Black Palace, what should be the heart of suffering for Lord Tlilihui's victims, there are only rotting corpses. Rotting corpses currently partaking in the same feast as everyone else, even when some food slops right back down onto the floor or the maggots take to feasting on them instead.
Tulio studies their faces long and hard. Some are familiar from previous nights he escorted souls to paradise, breezing through what were once dauntless obstacles. He can barely identify them through their increasing decay. Most worrying are the new faces, still early in the stages to be pity-invoking instead of terrifying or revolting.

He catches Chel's eye. She shrugs back.

The souls of Manoa's dead are his to shepherd, as Chel is the bastion of their hearts. These are not souls of the Manoa before their arrival, but rather souls of elsewhere.

Chel catches the eye of the corpse across from her and makes small talk with the corpse across from her. Her name is Tira and she is a chieftess' mother.

Not *Miya*'s mother, of course, because Tira and her family do not hail from Manoa. They are from one of the outermost settlements that sees direct trade from the city, even if they will never be permitted to gaze upon its golden temples themselves.

Through their trade they share an understandable dialect and many common traditions. Cremation is not one of them.

Chel smiles so that only Tulio can see how tense she is. "I see." Eyeing the Vulture God out of the corner of her eye, she presses on. "Do people in your village hope to reach Lady Eupana as Manoans do?"

"Eventually, of course." Tira lifts a demure hand to her rotting cheek. "But look at me now, my lady. I have *months* before I can even hope to face Lady Iztaya."

"Weeks, my dear, at the rate you're being cleansed," Lord Tlilihui corrects calmly.

Tulio meets his eye, one scavenger to another, and understands.

There is death and then there is *death*, with all that entails afterwards. What a terrible world it would be, for the dead to lay in their graves for all eternity, to never return to the earth so that new life could spring up anew. Where would the living be, if drowning in the dead?

There is no prison here, only souls undergoing transition and transformation natural as death itself.

Chel squeezes Tulio's hand. If her family was ever here, then they've long moved past it.

"Thank you for the feast," she says softly.

"Thank you for the company," Lord Tlilihui returns. "Please, stop by again, and bring the good stuff with you."

Tulio promises.

The corpses wave farewell. One by one, he'll see them gone from the Black Palace and all its rot, on to somewhere else entirely.

He knows, now, where to find Chel's family.

He hopes the Skeleton Goddess is as amiable as the Vulture God.
Tlilihui - god of decay, decomposition, the process of turning from flesh to bone, scavengers, corpses, corpse-eaters, scourging, purification, and cleansing

With polytheism in particular there is a LOT of variation in belief that can happen from place to place, especially in areas on the periphery where they become mixed and blended with neighboring faiths. Miguel is at least a tiny part Ra Horakhty due to constant conflation between the Egyptian and Greco-Roman religions, and so spent at least part of his existence dead or dying on a boat every night while trying to avoid getting eaten by a giant snake. Villages in Manoa's sphere of influence, connected to their ideas but not under the control of the high priests that enforce orthodox practices, can put their own spin on things.

A lot of cultures demonize decay and its symbols because of death and how decay often brings about disease, filth, and creatures associated with both. It's... also a totally natural and necessary process that prevents the horror of what is a world where the dead overwhelm the living, which is the doomsday scenario of more than one mythos out there.

Tlilihui/the Black Lord/the Vulture God was inspired at least in part by Eurynomos (the Wide-Ruling), a Greek flesh-devouring demon that stripped flesh from the corpses of the dead. He's associated with carrion-eaters, and is depicted as blue-black, like the skin of an adult fly. Terrifying and revolting, yes, but also a vital part of the functioning of the world.
the white lady (lady of bones)

Chapter Summary

What happens to the souls that have nothing left to strip away?

Or: the sixth part of what has literally become a series within a series.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The streets leading up to the home of the Skeleton Goddess are cold and bleak, empty of light and life. Where the realms of the prior Lords of Xibalba were fetid with filth and rot, Lady Iztaya's domain is starkly clean. There is nothing left here that can be stripped away.

Chel wonders why such streets, otherwise pristine, are strewn with bones. Up until the bones start to stir on their own. Hopping skulls join with arms that let them crawl and grasp at her dress or lurch up onto legs to lock eyes with her and--

Tulio lashes out with his torch and the skeletons and their creeping cold shrink back into the night. They are not like the captives of Lord Tzinacon and Lady Ayin, who so desperately reached for the light after so long in the darkness.

Chel is beyond the cold of the grave now. Still she shudders at their chill and draws new strength from the torchlight.

Tulio's face is grim. "Chel, I don't think there's anyone out here worth keeping."

Chel stares into their empty eye sockets. In so many souls she has seen their prayers for succor and salvation. Within the rotting corpses beneath the Black Lord she has seen only patience and quiet contentment. In these sockets she sees only hunger - hunger for the gold on her wrists, the curves beneath her dress, the life's blood that flows within her divine flesh.

She turns up her nose and presses onward.

The skeletons stalk their every step, for their greed spurs them past their fear of the light. Tulio swats the persistent away with his torch. When they refuse to relent, his free hand reaches for the golden blade suddenly at his side.

Chel just aims a foot and kicks. The skull of the skeleton grasping at her golden anklets goes flying, its body desperately chasing after it.

The Water Palace was a half-drowned ruin and the Black Palace still grand despite its rotten court. The White Palace is, true its name, the cold, clean white of alabaster, of polished bone, largest and grandest of the three. From inside radiates a warm, red glow that at last sends their shadows skittering back into the dark, never to return.

Lady Iztaya waits upon the steps, richly garbed in red and gold. Beneath her ornate golden head-dress her long black hair hangs freely. Her bare skull gleams pale and pristine as starlight.
"Lord Tulio," the Skeleton Goddess acknowledges in a voice rich and deep. "Lady Chel. I trust the rabble gave you no trouble."

"Of course not," Tulio answers flippantly.

"How fortunate that they did not actually succeed in carrying off one of your charges." Lady Iztaya looms. "Then this marks the first time you deign darken my doorstep without a soul to spirit past me. What is it you will steal from me tonight?"

"Nothing, of course," Chel cuts in sweetly. She evenly meets Lady Iztaya's eye sockets, alight with a warm golden glow so unlike the empty darkness of the insatiable souls outside. "We come only to claim what is ours, and to offer up a libation for all this time and trouble."

The White Lady only holds out a demanding hand. With two full hands, Chel offers up an entire golden bowl of the finest pulque, white and rich. Lady Iztaya's grinning, unchanging skull still manages a critical look.

"Pulque, from a daughter of the Vine?"

Chel smiles earnestly. "The best pulque. It's always been my favorite."

Her people might be called the People of the Vine for the grapes they once cultivated, but among the Golden People wine was up until very recently a spoil for the victors, with only the gods and their destined sacrifices allowed the libation undiluted.

Chel's rare treat, during the holy days, was the rough quality pulque allowed to a family of her station. It is the same she offers up to Lady Iztaya, rare and rich, sour with sorrow and heady with the recollection of better, far-off days balanced on her dad's shoulders to better watch the dancers and listening with rapture as her grandma spins stories that brings the gods to life.

Lady Iztaya downs the entire bowl. "The best," she concedes. Her expectant gaze turns to Tulio.

Tulio bites his lip, gaze faraway. Chel has seen him and Miguel down dozens of golden goblets filled to the brim with the finest wine sanctified in all of Manoa. They were the first libations that helped bring them and Altivo into the hearts of the city. She expects him to bring forth such one now.

After a lifetime of thought, Tulio offers up his tribute. It comes not in a golden goblet, but a wooden, rough-hewn bowl only the size of a hand. Chel hides a wince at the contents. Even she can tell the wine is bad quality, more vinegar than not, and mixed with... things wine should not be mixed with.

She braces for Lady Iztaya to disdainfully knock the bowl out of Tulio's hand. After a pause the Skeleton Goddess takes it all the same.

Tulio takes her hand in his when the White Lady drinks. Chel's own mouth grows heavy with the very last wine in her stores, heady with the milk that nursed her first lambs, sharp with the blood of the first one successfully raised to slaughter, and intoxicating in its gratitude.

Chel suddenly knows what is to be to a pile of rocks, still and silent amidst the rural hills. She feels that first libation trickle through her stones and down to the roots below. To the nascent divinity within, the offering is nourishing as mother's milk.

"Hermāhās," she mouths in reverence, and understands.
Lady Iztaya concedes only a silent bow of her head and sweeps them into her hall.

Cold and dead as the White Lady's domain is outside, inside the White Palace is alive with festivity. The tables stretch on and on to accommodate the infinite multitude. The party is eternal, for the guests are beyond exhaustion and have no bellies that can ever be filled. Unlike the naked skeletons outside, Lady Iztaya's court are as richly garbed as she, with elaborate hair styles and etches on their bones to make up for their lack of skin.

Tulio's smile is wide and frantic, for he still shies away from such a blatant, shameless display of death. Chel laughs at his ridiculousness and leads him onward, for here is nothing to fear. Not anymore.

Despite being unapologetically dead Lady Iztaya's court is animated in the japing conversations Chel overhears as they stride down the center table. She and Tulio are constantly stopped by souls that eagerly urge them to sample the food and to pass on news from the world outside. Their questions run the gambit of who won the lost ballgame to if Tzekel-kan is rotting with his god yet.

Chel's eye falls upon a cluster of men heatedly debating over which one won the last round of patolli. Immediately she knows one, sees right past his naked skull to the wrinkles and grumpy scowl she knows like her own.

"Grandpa!"

She vaults right over the table and several bewildered old men, wrapping her arms around him in a flying tackle. It doesn't matter how his ribcage pokes into her chest or the boney arms that return her embrace after a moment of shocked spluttering. He still smells like tobacco and sweet potato. All that matters is that he is her grandpa, and that he is here, forever and always.

As she sobs into his arms she's vaguely aware of Tulio trying to give them some space. The crowd, who all pretty much simultaneously coo 'aww,' eventually listen.

"Oh, Chel. My little girl, a goddess." Her grandpa laughs in disbelief and squeezes her tighter. "You always were, to me. You were too bold to be anything but. Dragging Xaya off to see caimans. Running off from Tzekel-Kan and coming back to spark up a rival cult beneath his very nose. It only took impaling that bastard Jaguar God through the eye to prove it to others."

"H-How?" is all she can ask. "The Snake Goddess said she had you. We stole every last soul from her, eventually, and you still weren't there."

"Yes, Chel," he agrees gently. "She had me and used me. She burned up all of my pain and suffering, until there was nothing left to burn away, and nothing bad left to feel."

Her grandpa nods to his leg, the same where the snake had delivered its fatal bite. Chel last remembers it black and bloated from sepsis, severed from her grandpa in a last ditch effort to save his life. In Xibalba the bones are as clean and white as those in the other leg.

With new eyes Chel sweeps over the White Palace. In the multitude she suddenly sees former victims of the Snake Goddess and Caiman Goddess, the Rat God and Bat God. For endless years, they suffered all there is to suffer, until their flesh and pains and suffering were all eaten away.

Predators have no time to worry over the bones of the devoured, when there is new prey always stumbling in their lair. Why would they notice when the souls, stripped bare of every last sorrow and suffering, slip free of them entirely?

"How long have you been here?" she wonders, before her awed curiosity starts bubbling over into
annoyance. "Grandma is waiting for you, grandpa. Why would you stay here... when..."

The warm glow in her grandpa's eye sockets dim as he gazes beyond the rosy interior of the White Palace to the dark, silent jungle beyond.

Chel swallows thickly, and understands. She fiercely pulls her grandpa back into a hug, though her hands curl into fists.

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Grandma waits on the verdant shores of Lady Eupana's paradise. She's been waiting ever since she charged Chel with collecting every last member of their wayward family. She falls down upon them the moment Tulio alights them upon the shore.

Chel's grandpa flexes one full, fleshy hand in bemusement before his gaze falls upon his wife. Their eyes lock in a moment that could have lasted eternity.

Then Sija brings up one hand to box his ears as she once did to their naughty grandchildren. "Koli, you complete and utter idiot! Getting yourself bitten by a snake in our own home! And then taken by that sleazy excuse of a goddess! And--"

Chel and Tulio can only watch in spellbound awe as Sija delivers the rant to end all rants, one brewing in her head for nigh over two decades now. Koli weathers the storm without even a wince of pain, his gaze utterly for his wife.

When Sija's rage gives out, a new dam breaks. She and Koli collapse in each other's arms, weeping upon the shore of paradise. Chel eagerly throws herself into the pile, happily enduring a torrent of kisses, smothering hugs, and above all endless chants of how very, very proud her grandparents are in her.

Sometime in the bliss of their reunion, Tulio is remembered. Chel grins in apology, for she is now trapped within the protective huddle of her grandparents, who have now both fixed him with twin stares of disapproval. Tulio manages an awkward smile as he clamps down the horrified realization that it is perhaps not the best idea to have given Chel's grandma reinforcements.

"Um, hey," says the god.

"Young man," Chel's grandpa says sternly. "While your assistance across the jungle was very much appreciated, I do not believe I ever heard an earnest request out of you to court our granddaughter properly."

"Neither have I," Chel's grandma adds with the solemnity of a judge delivering the death sentence.

"Grandma, grandpa," Chel corrects gently. "You're dead."

Sija sniffs. "A young man, god or not, should still have proper manners, if he expects the blessings of his eldes."

Koli eyes Tulio critically. "Is the other suitor quite so... unorthodox?"

"Unfortunately so," Sija sighs. "Our Chel certainly couldn't settle for either one alone, goddess or not. At least together the two of them... approach acceptable."

"I see. Well, young man? Where is your partner? You certainly can't expect to ask for our blessing on his behalf too. I haven't even properly met you yet, let alone this Lord Miguel."
Chel and Tulio attempts to interject are breezed over and they can only listen in horrified fascination as her grandparents increasingly ramp up the demands of what they see as a proper dowry, for two gods seeking a goddess, greatest of them all.

Unable to take it anymore, Chel wrests herself from their grip. "Grandma and grandpa, I love you so very, very much. I'm also a grown woman, and a goddess, and I'll do what I want with who I want, your blessing be damned." Koli pouts and Sija nods with fierce, firm pride before Chel's gaze casts west, beyond the primordial waters to the foreboding shore beyond. "Besides, Miguel and Tulio can hardly meet my family when most are still..."

Most of the Lords of Xibalba are petty and short-sighted, greedily grasping for new souls and new power even if it means letting older victims slip forgotten through their fingers.

Yet there is one god, greedy and jealous above all others. One who never, ever lets his dead go.

He holds all three of Chel's aunts, whose bled flooded his temples on the Dark Days. He holds Chel's father, snatched from the fields. He holds Xaya, sacrificed before his altars for the charge of daring to escape his domain.

Tulio wordlessly offers her a spear, the very same she last stuck through his eye. Chel bares her teeth in something that cannot be called a smile, and takes up the spear again.

This time she'll take the Jaguar God's other eye, alongside all the bones of his endless victims, stretching back far beyond Chel's time and into murky history only the jungle remembers.

Miguel loves leading monsters on a merry chase almost as much as he loves hunting him.

For him, Chel and Tulio have the hunt to end all hunts, one that will have him charging, bright and blazing, into the darkest depths of Xibalba.

Chapter End Notes

Iztaya - goddess of skeletons, bones, the final process of rot, the endless feast, and release of suffering

Hermahas - the earliest known name of Hermes - Tulio in his earliest attested manifestation.

The White Palace is essentially a safe haven for all of Xibalba, whether it's the souls that endured earlier Lords of Xibalba or who just don't want to chance eternal suffering with the Jaguar God. Endless hunger is fine, because it's the feast that never ends, and no more nerves means there's nothing left to hurt you.
the lord of conquest (and those who conquered)

Chapter Summary

Spitting in the eye of fate was a family trait, though some take it more literally than others.

So is making the Jaguar God's day as miserable as possible.

Or: the seventh part of what has literally become a series within a series.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Every child in Manoa knows the sunrise is never certain. Lord Kinich was killed by the jealous Crocodile God, after all, and Lady Kama too injured to shine again as the Second Sun. It doesn't matter that Munah, the Hero God, rescued Lord Kinich from the Lords of Xibalba. Every night, he still must die again, and rise anew with the dawning.

Even for a god, this is difficult, especially when so many gods desire to kill Lord Kinich again, so they might kill the Fifth Age with it and build a new world to rule over.

When the count of years winds down, the world falls into the Dark Days, when the age is in most peril. All gods grow weak and the demons they hold back all the more desperate. These are the nights Manoa most fears to never see the dawning, when perhaps Lady Kama will not rise at all and leave the night without even the pale glow of moonlight. These are the nights the Jaguar God might stalk forth from Xibalba, to cast down the Fifth Age in blood and conquest so as to raise up his own.

For five frantic days, Manoa cleanses itself. There must be no unnecessary work, no unnecessary talk to disturb mortals from their prayer and devotion when their gods demand it most. Their homes and bodies must be purified, through fasts and prayer and cleansings.

Above all, the gods demand blood, for the gods are bloodless and need the strength of life and devotion. For them it must flow like water. Five days of mass sacrifice to the gods that demand it most.

Lady Raima is a goddess most fickle, and much be appeased first, lest she rain down fire from her volcano and plunge her earth into famine. In prior cycles, the bravest warriors captured in battle were thrown into her fiery heart. In an age of peace she takes the champion athletes, the agile dancers, the fiercest of the city's own hunters and warriors.

Lord Cassipa is appeased second, for his rains nourish Lady Raima's earth. He takes the fewest sacrifices in the Dark Days, for he needs only a few daughters to brighten his hall, and temporary make him forget his grieving for Kama.

It is said Lady Eupana was once honored on the third day, but she long ago ceded her share of sacrifice to her second husband. Lady Eupana rules Lake Parime and its sacred shores, but Xarayes is Lord of the Wide Waters. He rules Xibalba itself, source of all the waters of the world. His
tribute is sent to Xibalba through the whirlpool, so that he might hold back his children, the lesser Lords of Xibalba, from venturing beyond his domain to devour the wider world.

On the fifth and final day, Lord Kinich himself takes his share. Every fire in Manoa is doused that morning and the heart of every sacrifice held up before his glowing eye, so that he will know of Manoa's devotion. Every heart is given to the pyre. When the last heart is burned, the flames of that first fire shall be used to light every home in the city, and grant Lord Kinich the strength of every hearth and home.

But today is the fourth day, and Balam Qoxtok demands his share, blood enough to sate his thirst without plunging the world back into war.

His victims are not granted an easy death like a cudgel to the head or being forced to drop into the volcano's molten heart. No. To the Jaguar God, the screams are sweet as the blood spilled before his altars.

Ameya started the morning off at the temple's base, too far down to hear anything beyond an occasional faint shriek beneath the reverent chants of the acolytes. Now she stands on some of the topmost steps, the hem of her white gown stained red from the blood that flows like a river. She is close enough to hear every cracked bone and ragged gasp as the high priestess carves out every heart to present to the Jaguar God's jade idol.

Ameya is a mere sacrifice, one of fifty two. She certainly can't break the sacred silence. The last girl to collapse, sobbing and shrieking hysterical pleas, was dragged out of line to a fate worse than even having her heart cut out. When Yura from just down the street screams high and shrill, Ameya doesn't scream. She only squeezes Altia's hand harder.

Behind them, Acheli lets out a shuddering sigh dangerously close to a sigh.

Ameya's heart stutters, because that awful acolyte named Tzekel-Kan is dangerously nearby now, and he just loves sniffing out the 'difficult' sacrifices for some extra treatment.

Acheli doesn't have a big sister to cling to like Ameya does. She has only her big brother, Theo, and three girls she's only called sister-in-law for a few months. Chila and Tontli, their parents, have been gone for years. It was Ameya's own parents and eldest sister, Pana, that had to ready Acheli for today.

Ameya is the baby of her family, but Acheli's even younger than her, and now her little sister-in-law. So she reaches out with her free hand. Acheli takes it in a death grip hard enough to crush bones. But that's okay, because Ameya's bones won't be hers for much longer anyway.

Acheli's shuddering gasps even out. By the time Tzekel-Kan's critical eye falls upon her, she returns his gaze evenly, and he moves on down the ever-shrinking line without calling her out.

Then they reach the top of the stairs. Ameya clings to Altia when the priests move to take her big sister away. She only lets go beneath Altia's warning glare. They'll be united soon enough.

To avoid the sight of the high priestess bringing down her obsidian knife, Ameya stubbornly concentrates on the stele of the Dual Gods, smiling and benevolent upon their heavenly steed. It is they that denied the Jaguar God the Fifth World to rule. Because of them blood need flow like this only once every fifty two years, instead of day and night until all the world is bled away.

With Acheli's sweaty palm in hers, Ameya prays loudly and desperately in her head, to drive out her sister's dying screams, that this Dark Day is the very last the Jaguar God.
And then it is her turn.

Teo hates a silent home. He has ever since those brief, dragging days before he married Pana and entered her home, when it was just him and Acheli alone in the half-ruined hovel their parents left to them.

At least Acheli had known life and laughter in those last few months, with Sija and Koli, with Pana and Altia and Ameya. Even when the Jaguar God had stolen her and Pana's baby sisters all away, their home had been swiftly blessed with Xaya, and then Chel, to fill the silence.

Sija had defiantly held the silence back when the Snake Goddess claimed her Koli. When the Bat God had later taken her in a terrible cough, Pana had valiantly taken up her role as matriarch and the very glue that held her glue.

But his Pana is gone now. When the kingfish started dying in droves, her life had been the life Lord Xarayes had demanded as sacrifice, a respectable wife of the Vine People to serve in his household.

The home she left behind is silent, no matter Chel's valiant attempts to fill it. Xaya has grown beyond grief, into a silent and bitter youth on the urge of bitter manhood. Teo has no strength left to fake smiles anymore. Everything left in his aching arms must be for the fields, to toil away what is left of his life so that his and Pana's children might keep the roof above their heads.

The difficult task of clearing away the stubborn jungle for more fields is back-breaking work, a young man's work, but allows Teo compensation most other men his age are now too old or too proud to take. So take it he does.

Teo is tired. Too tired to cut away the stinging undergrowth before his very eyes. Too tired to raise his arms against the sudden flash of spotted gold to his left, or the fangs in his throat.

Then Teo knows blackness. It is not a restful one.

"Traitor!" Tzekel-Kan decrees. "A treacherous little weed of a Vine person, trying to sneak off and lead back all the evils of the outside world into our sacred city!" The high priest leers down into his face again. "Unless you wish to deny it again?"

Beaten near to a pulp by Chima and his stooges, Xaya is too winded for a proper witty comeback. His baby sister's always been better at them, anyway. So he settles for spitting a mouthful of blood right into the high priest's sneering face.

For a moment Tzekal-Kan sputters like an ocelot cub dropped in water. Then his masked face twists into a snarl more befitting his god. A traitor's death it is. As if Xaya would have gotten away with anything less, regardless of whether or not he's actually done.

The typical sacrifices to Balam Qoxtok start with the knife to the heart. Tzekel-Kan starts with his fingers, for every bit of bone and blood he can milk for him.

Xaya clamps back his screams. Not to see Tzekal-Kan growl in frustration at the terror denied him, but for the sake of Chel, watching horrified from the ranks of those destined to 'serve' the gods.

Xaya bites back scream after scream until he's drowning in blood. When he opens his mouth, it's to spit up at the Jaguar God's jade idol. By a miracle, his shot lands straight in the god's eye.
Tzekal-Kan is wrathful enough to bring his knife down just so, and cut Xaya's suffering short.

Too bad for him the Jaguar God is even worse, and pissed off to boot.

Xaya laughs at the bloody loogie still staining his obsidian hide, laughs until he screams.

Compared to the material world, wracked by war and the ever-turning seasons, Xibalba is almost comforting in its constancy. There is no moon or sun to tell the passage of time, for Xibalba is forever and always, no great winds or rains to stir the silence. There have been Five Ages in the world above, but there is forever and always one spirit world, the Nine Lords in their Nine Houses.

Then comes the wind. Not Lord Tzinacon's chilled and diseased night air, but the force that drives the storms and rattles the trees. It starts as an ominous breeze that has the Snake Goddess huddle into the warmth of her Fire House and the Caiman Goddess hunker down into her rotted swamp. It stirs gentle waves onto Eupana's verdant paradise, that draws curious souls in to watch the spectacle.

Then the full force of the gale gallops down into Xibalba on thunder hooves. His call is the shrieking wind and the warhorse's bugle.

Xibalba's eternal night burns away before a blazing dawn where dawn has never shone before. Demons shriek and skitter away to their hidey holes. The souls sheltered on Eupana's shores grin at the memory of sunlit days.

The light laughs in joyous, vicious anticipation. The shadows smirk. Faith sings triumphant exaltation, as the Golden Gods bear down upon the eternal jungle of the Jaguar God.

Balam Qoxtok remembers the burn of a torch, the swat of a staff, the humiliating agony of a spear through the eye. In the haven of his own domain, the Lord of War snarls at the oncoming storm and slinks into the shadows. Jaguars may be hunters, but they are also intelligent enough to cut their losses and save their strength to hunt another day.

His hunters offer no respite. Sunlight burns away the shade and the torchlight every last lingering shelter. With the speed of the wind and unwavering resolve, they fall upon him.

Cornered, Balam Qoxtok lashes out with all his might. He is the Lord of Conquest who calls up every obsidian blade and poison-tipped arrow that ever spilt blood in his name. He is the warrior's last gasp and the slave's tortured wail. He is the Lord of the Primal Dark, the jungle in all its dark and drowning danger.

The Lord of Winds brings his heavy, gold-shod hooves down upon his chest, again and again, while his gales threaten to blow him away. From his back the Lady of Faith impales her spear through every chink in his obsidian hide, every hit sapping his will to fight. The Lord of Morning's relentless rain of arrows burn almost as much as his radiance. The Lord of Evening, many-turning, strikes out with burning torch and swinging staff and golden blade.

Burned and disgraced, Balam Qoxtok is chased through his own jungle, to the very ends of the earth. He, the silent shadow, sounds like cracked glass with every frantic movement.

Leaving chunks of shattered stone in his wake, the Jaguar God throws himself into the safety of his sire's waters with a final, forsaken wail. And does not rise again.

The Golden Gods chase him no further. Beneath the Lord of Morning, the endless multitude of bones hoarded away are laid bare in his light, for the Lady of Faith and the Shepherd of Souls to
carefully pick up. Not a single one is missed.

Where the waters of Lake Parime sparkle in the sunlight, the waters of Lord Xarayes only swallow it, and leave abyssal fathoms. The primordial waters are not stirred by the wind, but still in frigid calm, smooth and black as obsidian.

The Lord of Winds bears every last soul far and high above the God of Xibalba. Every last soul alights safely down upon the shores of paradise.

Eupana’s many souls joyously surge out to meet them. There are so many now, with all but one of the eight other Lords raided of their souls, but Grandmother Turtle is all-welcoming and all-encompassing. Her haven only grows with her children.

Countless are the exuberant reunions. None are more so of the family that proudly claims relation to a goddess. Three aunts give their niece a three-fold squeeze and weep tears enough to drown the world. Teo, with strength in him once more, laughs and lifts all of them up into a hug of his own.

Xaya embraces Chel too, before he remembers himself. The years fall away between them when he puts a golden goddess beneath his arm to give her the noogie to end all noogies.

He laughs when Sija boxes his ears like a naughty boy, for their grandma's sternness will never again hold pain.

Tulio and Miguel tactfully hang back, even as they lean upon each other, basking in Chel's joy and their own bittersweet reflection that they are all the family the other will have from the times before, that there is no miracle to bring back those lost to the human heart long before they stepped foot in Manoa.

Altivo butts way between them, with a snort and lick for them both, and drives some of the heaviness from their hearts.

It's Xaya who notices them first. He rolls his eyes and hauls them forward, even the horse, as if they're his dumb little brothers. "If you're family to Chel, then you're family to us."

Tulio and Miguel splutter before sagging in bliss and accepting the inevitable. Altivo, always the sensible one, needs no time to laugh and envelop them into a hug wide as the wind, because he's seen this coming from miles off, and he's not too proud to actually get up on two legs when their are hugs to be hugged.

It is not a reunion that could last eternity. Their joy cannot yet shine from Xibalba all the way into the world above, for their hearts are not yet whole.

Chel drifts beyond her brother and her boys and all else to stare at the dark, dark waters that swallowed up her mother long ago.

She's not putting this off any longer, not when she's so close.

Resolved, she slips her way free of arms that can never hold her when she does not wish to be held and strides alone down from the shore and into the depths.

Her family notices too late. Altivo throws out his arms - not to stop her, but to hold back the hard-won souls of her loved ones from being swallowed by the abyss that, twice now, has snapped up those closest to her.

Miguel and Tulio frantically chase after her. They're too late. Both shy away from the water that
lurches hungrily after them, for their base fears and simple natures turn them away from oblivion incarnate.

Miguel keens, high and mournful, as he did when Tulio was swallowed by Xibalba. Tulio gapes, dumbstruck and despairing as Chel herself had been when he had vanished into the dark.

There's no time for words, so Chel shoots them her brightest smile before her head dips below the waves.

She's not endangering her boys over one old, grumpy, grudging Fish God. Not now, not ever.

She's got this.

Chapter End Notes

The 'Dark Days' are based on the five days at the end of the Aztec fifty-two year calendar, where many purification rituals happened to see the sun god last another count of years. It's the one (or two) times a century Manoa really breaks it out with the mass sacrifice - with sacrifices of up to fifty-two happening once a day for five days, depending on the patron god and how typically picky they tend to be.

This is actually the second time our trio have seen deign Altivo take human form, so it's not that too big a deal, and they're kinda preoccupied for the moment :p The reveal that the horse god can, yes, be things other than strictly a horse is a one-shot for another day.
lord of the waters (lord of oblivion)

Chapter Summary

He's the primordial god of forgetfulness and oblivion. She's a goddess of faith and with a cult not even a month old.

Chel's got this.

Or the eighth part in what has literally become a series within a series.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grandmother Turtle has two husbands. Every child in Manoa knows her first one was Lord Bibi. Lord Bibi is humanity's grandfather, who has doted upon them and shielded them from the wrath of greater gods, who has taught them the appeasements and clever tricks to fend for themselves in a ruthless world. Yet Lord Bibi is not only Lord of Ingenuity, but the Trickster God. When the world was still new, and Eupana with it, she delighted in his tricks and clever hands. As time passed, the goddess tired of her husband's wandering eye and the troubles he brought down upon himself.

Exactly what made the Turtle Goddess and Armadillo God divorce is now known only to the gods. Manoa remembers only that it happened between the death of one Age and the birth of another, when humanity clung to their own existence, and must have been bitter indeed. Children that pester their parents for why are only scolded it is rude to ask mortals why they are divorced. Mortals, of course, never ask the gods for why. It is not their place. If Bibi and Eupana are no longer married, then they are no longer married.

When Lady Eupana set her first husband aside, few gods in the world were old or grand enough to dare seek out her hand.

Lady Eupana created the very first world. Yet Lord Xarayes is even older, for his Lord of the Wide Waters, god of the same primordial abyss the Turtle Goddess raised the earth from. He is God of Xibalba, from where all the water in the world flows, the nourishment of Lake Parime.

Eupana is Lady of the Lake and Xarayes Lord of the Waters. They are a good match, the goddess of Lake Parime and the great water god, the Fish God and Turtle Goddess. So Eupana wed Xarayes in her great palace at the bottom of the lake.

Xarayes is a doting and devoted husband. Even when Lord Cassipa withholds his rains Lake Parime shall never run dry. His kingfish, grand and shimmering, swim harmoniously alongside her great turtles.

Yet Xarayes has no love for his stepchildren, for humanity are Bibi's prized creations. Humanity eat the Fish God's children and use his waters for foul purposes. Worse yet, the souls of humans sink down to his realm after death, to make Xibalba as crowded and noisy as the world above.

There is no tribute out there great enough to win the favor of Lord Xarayes. At best, he is an
apathetic god, who will simply shrug his shoulders and hold his children back from eating the world.

Worse than indifference, is his wrath, for Lord Xarayes can carry a grudge ancient and fathomless.

Lake Parime is unlike any other in the world. Across its clear surface Grandmother Turtle's children deign ferry passengers in exchange for food and protection of their eggs. Beneath the waters shimmer the radiant kingfish, the largest dwarfing entire ships.

Yet now the kingfish die in droves. Their corpses float at Lake Parime's surface or wash up dead upon the shore. The eagles and stray dogs foolish enough to feast on the tainted flesh are found dead not far from it. Humans wisely stay clear of them, except for those acolytes that wave incense to hold back the smell and decay, and those charged with hauling the fish to where their purities can be burned or cast back into the earth.

Lord Xarayes is not merely displeased. He is furious, to let his children die like that, to taint even the sacred waters of his wife's domain.

No one knows why. No one ever knows why. All other gods will send out omens and visions for the chief and priests. Even elusive Balam Qoxtok can be reached through the right smokes and brews and rituals. Not Lord Xarayes, silent and fathomless as his waters.

There must be a sacrifice. Someone to sate the Fish God's blood thirst, a soul that can move him to withdraw his wrath.

It must be a Vine person, to start with. The priests shall always first choose one of the Vine People, if the gods do not explicitly demand one with gold in their ears.

She must be a woman. Female sacrifices always seem to yield more immediate results with Lord Xarayes. Perhaps they appeal to him for his fondness for Eupana. It is not a mortal's place to speculate.

Pana has long been a married mother, but there is still beauty enough in her for the acolytes to haul her out for further consideration.

They also take Chel, her little Chel, who they deem more woman than not.

Pana helps ready her daughter in silence. There is no Sija here to help them. As they walk hand in hand with the rest of their street, she remembers her fervent prayers, all those years ago, when she had begged Lord Cassipa to take any little girl but her own.

Pana is allowed to stand side by side with her daughter as Xarayes' acolytes sweep up and down the lines. So great is the line of possible tribute that they are joined by the followers of Eupana and Balam Qoxtok, for Xarayes is wed to Grandmother Turtle and sire of the Jaguar God.

Chel, who tries so hard to be brave, finally reaches for her hand when young, ambitious Tzekel-Kan swaggers past. Her hand starts to sweat against Pana's when he takes his second pass down their line. Her hold tightens into a death-grip when Tzekal-Kan turns back early to once more stalk towards them.

Pana remembers her fervent pleas to Lord Cassipa, to take any girl but her Chel.

She remembers her shameful relief, and silent prayer of gratitude, that it was Yita's darling Mari chosen over her Chel.
Before Tzekal-Kan can stand before her daughter, Pana thrusts herself out of line, and into his path. She falls to her hands and knees, in full supplication, even though her gaze pierces his and refuses to let go.

"The gods have come to me!" she shouts at the top of her lungs, in the same tone that once demanded her children home for dinner no later than nightfall. "Lady Eupana bids me to serve her blessed husband into eternity, and serve him I shall. Let the gods do with me as they see fit."

Tzekal-Kan sputters in an astonishment mounting to outrage, but the murmurs of the crowd steal the fire from him.

There is unspeakable power in human sacrifice. There is even more so in a willing sacrifice, who goes to the gods un-drugged and unbound.

Chel gasps and moves to grab her when the crowd closes in. Pana's scowl stops her cold, as the hands of hundreds sweep her away. Best her daughter live to curse her name, then be silenced forever by oblivion.

A self-sacrifice must be made quickly, lest the soul have time to know fear and reconsider their selflessness. There is no time for goodbyes or further consecrations before Pana is hauled up onto the altar of Lord Xarayes.

Below the waters roar in their fall to the underworld. The abyss swallows up the sunlight.

Pana has no time to regret, before the cudgel is brought down upon her head, for her last thoughts in the world above are for her daughter.

Nine are the Lords of Xibalba, yet every soul sent to the spirit world are given no more than six or seven offerings.

Lord Hueza is a small and distasteful god. Only the young and elderly must trouble themselves to appease such a rat. Even they offer him a small morsel before shooing him away, for the Rat God is a greedy god and will devour all sacrifices not made in his name if allowed.

The Snake God is the Lady of Liquid Flame and must be appeased with some just as hot, be it an elaborate chili or simple bowl of sliced peppers. The Bat God will take only blood, no matter the animal, while the Caiman Goddess must be thrown the largest meat a soul can bring to them. The Black Lord demands incense for his decay and the White Lady alcohol to quench her insatiable thirst.

The Jaguar God is a greedy god, but a stupid god. While he hungers for humans, sometimes he can be tricked into accepting a substitute. In the earliest age, the great nobles even had slaves killed and burned with them, so they had a whole human soul to offer in exchange for their own. Yet, after the Crocodile God's tyranny showed human life can never be paid for by human life, many instead offer clay dolls shaped like themselves or entire dogs.

Grandmother Turtle needs no sacrifices, for she generously welcomes all who make it to her blessed shores.

Between the Jaguar God's jungle and Lady Eupana's paradise, however, lie the black waters of Lord Xarayes. He is prouder than even his son, and will accept no tribute in exchange for a soul. Unlike his son Balam Qoxtok, Lord Xarayes is too wise to be tricked through a substitute.

Every soul must swim his waters. The fortunate shall be washed up clean on the shores of paradise.
The unfortunate shall be swept away by the waters or swallowed by a voracious kingfish, to never be seen again. Young or old, rich or poor, pure of heart or steeped in sin, Lord Xarayes and his children take as they will.

Chel will not let them take her. No matter what. She has places to be and people to see.

When the water closes over her eyes and ears, the surface world no longer matters, and even Miguel’s piercing scream falls away. There are only the depths, a darkness endless and eternal.

Chel is vaguely aware of an icy numbness that tries to dead her limbs, her very will to fight, just as she is aware of a thousand little currents that try stealing her thought and memory away scrap by scrap. Were she mortal, she would dissolve in these waters like sea foam.

But she is not mortal. She is so much more than Chel, lost in the waters of oblivion. She is every wisp of prayer and spark of belief that Manoa has in their Golden Gods. They will her among them, and to them she shall return.

First, however, is Lord Xarayes. So she slaps the thieving little eddies away, burns even brighter against the endless void, and continues on her way.

Goddesses in Xibalba have no reason to breathe, so Chel doesn't. Trying to breathe icy oblivion is far less pleasant in comparison.

Yet progress is still painfully slow, if she's making any progress at all. There's no bottom to these waters, no palace shining through the dark, only the quiet whispers to give up and drift into peace everlasting.

Screw that.

Human arms and legs suck for swimming, so Chel twists just so, in a way she's done only once before.

Tulio and Miguel change shapes easy as switching cloaks. After a millennium locked to one small part of their being, sometimes they shift it just for the sheer joy of it. Just once, Chel let Miguel talk her into it, and let Lord Xarayes' kingfish chase her around Lake Parime.

With only one other known shape to fall back on, one already suited for a watery world, she defaults to that same dolphin shape.

Dolphins breathe air over water, but Chel still has no need to breathe. Dolphin eyes see no better in the darkness without a light source, but dolphins need no eyes at all to see.

Chel sings in the high, clicking tone Miguel taught her. Her song echoes back to her and suddenly the vastness is no longer so empty. The path clear as day, sweet as song, Chel swims onward. Her sleek shape cuts through water like a knife through flesh.

No longer is Chel alone, or at least no longer ignored. Now that she's not blundering aimlessly through oblivion, but instead blazing through it with her song, the children of Lord Xarayes fixate upon her.

In the world above, they are the blessed kingfish, vibrant with every color of the rainbow, and a staple of the people. In the world below, they are black and vicious, and they devour the human souls that feasted upon them in life. Out of the depths they loom, snapping after her to silence her song forever and douse her faith forever.
Too bad for them Chel is eternal. Not in the mood for swimming directly through the kingfish, gullets and all, she deftly weaves around them. Even as a dolphin she's only as long as her human shape. The leviathans are large and lumbering might as well be crocodiles snapping after dragonflies.

The lesser Lords of Xibalba have only humble houses. The Black Lord and White Lady have entire palaces, while the Jaguar God calls his entire jungle home. Lord Xarayes simply rules from the Home of the Waters, too vast to be qualified further.

Chel swims all the way down, to the bottom of what spirals from the world above in the great whirlpool. Even to her the song is muddled; a grand palace above utter oblivion, a palace wrought by the waters themselves, an infinite expanse. Manoa can never agree on what the Home of the Waters is, for only those sent to serve Lord Xarayes directly ever lay eyes upon it.

What matters most is the entrance. Chel strides right in, exchanging a dolphin's sleekness for the goddess in all her finery. There are no servants to receive her, only a long, empty hall. Lord Xarayes, silent and stoic as a statue, looms high from an obsidian throne. Here there is no light to give his robes color, and so they remain dark and deep as his eyes.

"Lord Xarayes," she intones bluntly, "you have someone that belongs to me."

The oblivion around her grows colder, heavier. Instinctively she burns all the brighter against it. "You dare to demand ME?"

"Pana," Chel continues, "daughter of Sila and Koli, sister of Altia and Ameya. Wife of Teo. Mother of Xaya, and a little girl named Chel who now also happens to be a goddess. She's ours, forever and always."

"Gone." Lord Xarayes' voices echoes in the desolate dark. "Gone to the waters. Gone from the world, forever and always."

Chel smiles. "Don't be silly, Lord Xarayes. My mother went to serve you. She can't serve you if she's not here, so she's here. Now, where is she?"

"Little spark, little whisper, you are not even a month old. I am older than war, older than the First World. I am the endless water and the endless dark. All flow into me, to never return." Lord Xarayes' unblinking eyes, fish eyes, bore into her own. "So shall you, in time, where the years have ground your stories down to wisps and your worshipers to dust. So shall shattered stories you call your gods. I shall take you all, and there shall be no escape. Only darkness."

For an eternity, Chel is lost in his gaze. Her lip twitches.

Finally she laughs, and laughs, and laughs.

Because Chel sees. She knows the scattered songs and stories, and bitter centuries, that came together to shape the ones she knows and loves as Miguel and Tulio. She knows the whispers and stubborn disbelief to see the gods consider a mortal their equal lift her into divinity. So too does she know Lord Xarayes.

They're not so different, him and her, when you boil them down to their bare essence. By the human heart they're born and by the human heart they die.

Lord Xarayes is old. His murky origins lie in a language long dead, in the infinite grandmothers of her grandmothers, those that first gaped down into a bottomless cenote or yawning cavern to know true darkness, the womb of the world and its hungry maw. So long as there is a Xibalba, Lord
Xarayes shall be. In him, Chel sees those primal fears embodied, darkness and drowning and the fearful unknown after death.

If she squints, Chel also glimpses the girl. She's a little slip, not even ten years old, when she dashes into the dark. Darkness is better than the monsters at her back. She never hopes to see the sun again, only that she'll never see those that slaughtered her family again. She's ready to wander the void for eternity, or at least until she drops dead of starvation.

Until she stumbles upon the end of the cave, and hidden valley beyond. By the lush lake she shall make her home and then venture forth back into the darkness to gather what remains of her people. To her children's children's children, that lake shore remains their paradise.

Nine are the Lords of Xibalba. Xarayes is only the eighth.

"You depend on faith, and somehow you're an even more antisocial god than Balam Qoxtok." Chel giggles again and shakes her head. "No wonder your wife keeps pushing you into taking human company."

The Water God's empty expression cracks. Suddenly Chel is reminded of her grandpa, after her grandma has been particularly demanding, exhausted by a loving wife who knows damn well what's best for him. Her grandpa's only had decades of marriage. Lord Xarayes and Lady Eupana have been married for untold millennium.

"Your mother is--"

"It's okay to hate people and still get lonely sometimes, Lord Xarayes," Chel says gently. She smiles. "That's why I'll stay here, with my mother, so you'll never get lonely again."

The Fish God gapes at her. He is just puffing up with fury when the silence is once more disturbed.

Chel grins, joyous and triumphant, when her solo becomes a trio. One black eye of Lord Xarayes twitches, as the song around them grows louder and louder.

She doesn't need a rescue. She's still delighted to see her boys charge in anyway. She wonders which one bolted into the water first, or if their courage kicked in simultaneously.

Miguel is once more the dolphin, sleek and shining and so bright Lord Xarayes shrinks back against his throne. Tulio's still a dolphin, technically, but *big*. Parts of him are black as the night, others white as bone. Chel is at first amazed by the size of his eyes, before she realizes they're just white patches, and his blue eyes are hidden below them.

Chel beams at them. They glance to her, then to Lord Xarayes, and back again.

Finally, they beam with her, with so many rows of pointy, fish-rending teeth.

"Look, Lord Xarayes," she says in excitement. "Lord Miguel has the *best* songs.."

"The best!" Miguel chirps.

"...And Lord Tulio tells stories that leave you hanging over the edge of your throne..."

"If you don't fall off entirely," Lord Tulio happily informs the god that just so recently tried to eat him.

"And we can stay here forever and ever, just like you--"
"Enough!" Lord Xarayes pinches the bridge of his nose, to hold back the eternal headache. "Pana!"

At the Lord of Oblivion's call, the darkness lifts, and his hall is clearly visible. So is the woman who stands at the base of his throne, head bowed and shoulders taught with anticipation. Chel's heart aches.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Just... go," Lord Xarayes orders wearily. "Go with them, and don't come back."

No longer the gracious servant or the goddess on the warpath, mother and daughter throw themselves into each other's arms. Neither one moves except to snag Tulio into the huddle when he becomes to bundle the off.

"Oh." With a little dolphin twirl, Miguel turns to give Lord Xarayes his brightest, sharpest smile. "Grandmother Turtle wants you to know she has a feast happening at dusk tomorrow, and she wants the whole family to make it."

Lord Xarayes glowers back.

He's still there next evening, brooding beside Lady Eupana, because no one denies the family matriarch. Lord Kinich and Lady Kama are both in attendance, in the time sunset and moonrise, cleaving to each other's side as Lord Munah gamely keeps them involved in the conversation. Even Balam Qoxtok is there at the far, far, end of the table, glumly picking at his food and snarling at the Rat God when he moves to snatch food from his plate.

Shrouded in all the colors of the rainbow, Lord Xarayes is unfazed by the joyful chaos and stares stoically ahead unless his wife turns in his direction.

He never, ever glances at the four particular deities seated directly to his left, or the extended mortal family beside them.

Chel's not fooled, and sends him a quick smile anyway.

His scowl is sweet as her mother's laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Tulio and Miguel were originally not going to show up for a rescue, but then character growth and idiotic heroics had their way with me :p

Orcas are the biggest species of dolphin and well-known to the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean :P They are also a species that will gladly slaughter full-grown great whites just to eat their livers. Their genius name (Orcinus) literally means 'of the kingdom of the dead' or 'belonging to Orcus' - a Roman underworld god primarily worshiped in rural areas.

Xarayes - god of the waters, the cycle of the waters, the subterranean world (caverns and cenotes), Xibalba, oblivion, the primordial deep, cleansing, purification, and forgetfulness

The movie El Dorado is situated in a valley accessible through a hidden cave system,
next to a whirlpool that at least occasionally spits people out alive. Of course things like that inspire a major figure in the pantheon, albeit one with an unexpected, literal light at the end of the tunnel (for a lucky few, at least.)

Xarayes is an old god. Probably the damned oldest in Manoa. He is still ultimately born from human faith and belief, same as any god, and dependent on them (and his wife) in ways he really, REALLY doesn't like to acknowledge.

There's probably gonna be a ninth part to this, for thematic reasons. Because while we've met all the gods of the dead, we haven't actually met... y'know, Death. Shenanigans ensue.
grandmother turtle (lady of the lake)

Chapter Summary

It doesn't matter where or when they came from them. They're all Eupana's family, in the end.

Or the ninth part... of ten... of what has literally become a series within a series.

Or our golden gods get a taste of their own medicine, before it somehow gets even worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eupana is Lady of the Lake, goddess of all Lake Parime. It is her valley that shelters Manoa and her shores that nourish them. She is one of the oldest goddesses in all of creation, maker and ruler of the First World.

She is Grandmother Turtle to every mortal and most every god by their shores. They are all her children's children in some form of another, be they born of human wombs or human minds.

Her family is a large one, a chaotic one. Eupana can't blame poor Xarayes for washing his hands of most of them, hiding away in Xibalba. Humanity are his stepchildren, and they are as naughty and mischievous as Bibi, that old scoundrel. But they are all hers, mortal and divine. Even Balam Qoxtok, her proud little problem child, knows how to get along with family in her presence. She is mother and grandmother to them all, after all, and takes no favorites.

When three new children tumble to her shores, and inadvertently bring a fourth with them, Eupana is secretly delighted at the thought of expanding the family. Not since lovely Paquini has Manoa known a new face for the world.

Altivo is the oldest, perhaps even older than herself in his oldest echoes, for all he is a newborn in these lands. He is not and will never be one for talking, but Eupana does not mind. So long as he remembers hands, and not hooves, are proper dining etiquette, he is always welcome at her table.

Old as he is, Altivo has lost none of his spirit. He is proud and swift, galloping her shores and stirring the still shores of her lake, though he never dares the water.

For all Eupana is concerned, Miguel and Tulio have entered the world together. She cannot envision one without the other. Manoa murmurs they must be the Dual Gods somehow, that they have created this golden world and redeemed it from Balam Qoxtok. They most certainly did one thing and she can easily delude herself into believing them the other. Perhaps she has always known them. Perhaps she has always consciously kept a place open for them at her table, when the Dual Gods first neglected to fill it. None of her children can say for certain, and neither can she.

For all the millennium her grandsons might have known in the east, Chel is in a way eldest of them all. It does not matter the Golden People once stubbornly insisted Chel is one of the Vine People, forever and always servants of the city rather than citizens, that the descendants of the conquered shall always be other. Eupana knows the truth. Paquini is her child, no matter when she was
adopted in the family. Chel, and her mother and mother's mother, have all been born upon her shores. They have known only the rise of her mountains and the crops nourished by her lake. They are all their grandchildren, for all they are Paquini's daughters.

It does not matter where they came from or when they were birthed. They are hers now, forever and always.

Lake Parime is as it was. Eupana's turtles, large and docile, still ferry passengers across the water in exchange for food and tending. Her husband's vivid kingfish still swim her waters in a living rainbow. Her people and their golden city continue to thrive by her shores, never faltering in their prayers and tribute.

The dolphins of the jungle rivers have never dared her waters before. The dark caverns of Xibalba deter all but the boldest pods, and the ravenous mouths of the adult kingfish devour those.

Yet now, when the surface is calm and the traffic not particularly busy, Lake Parime has a pod of three. Boldest and brightest is the silver male streaked gold, who prides himself on his spinning leaps and squirting flabbergasted fishermen. The black-and-white male dwarfs his companions, yet is stealthiest of them all. Fishermen that do not remember to throw him a fish are less than pleased to find their nets chewed out beneath the waters, and all their catch stolen by him. The dark female is smallest of them all, seemingly sweet and innocent. She doesn't need to steal a fisherman's lunch or shiny trinket when most will just outright give them to her. Only the miserly know her as a fellow thief, for she will douse them in water. Then chattering laughter of her partners will let all the lake know which stingy fisherman got humiliated by a dolphin.

Unmoved by their antics, Eupana's turtles swim placidly on, despite the dolphins frolicking in their wake and launching themselves over their shells.

Xarayes' kingfish swim themselves ragged trying to catch and eat the trolling little bastards. Everyone in Manoa knows they never will.

Deep in the waters of Lake Parime, Lord Xarayes glares up at the palace ceiling and the chattering laughter from the waters above. "Immature, brazen, thieving little--"


"Because these are my waters and my grandchildren," Eupana answers, deep and mild as her lake. "So long as they mind their manners, they are free to swim my lake all they like."

"By harassing our eldest?"

She shrugs with the absent fondness of a mother who will never favor one child above the other. "They're alpha predators. If they cannot catch a scrawny little dolphin, then they deserve the frustration." One flick of her fingers send her fry back to scavenging the lake bottom. "If you are so determined to lay down the law, how goes keeping them out of your waters?"

Xarayes falls into brooding silence. Long past the point of rolling her eyes, Eupana pats his hand in fond exasperation. "Cheer up, dear. They'll get bored of bothering you eventually, when they
realize you have nothing left to give them."

"They think me a liar," he growls. "Gone from the waters. Gone from the world. *I do not lie.*"

Of course he doesn't. Xarayes is too old and stubborn for lies. All deception on his part is unwitting. It is not his fault even godly eyes, born of mortal hearts, find it so hard to peer into the dark.

"Chel is a faith goddess," Eupana consoles, "and Pana her mother. Of course she was going to find one of the first souls you stowed away in that big, dark hall of yours."

Xarayes does not know mercy, but he has patience aplenty. Pana, after all, had gone to him willingly. No wonder he had held onto her longer than most, to bring a bit of brightness to a void Eupana entered once, and will never enter again.

Her husband's fathomless eyes close in quiet surrender. He leans his head against her shoulder. "She cannot fight me for those that have come and gone, no matter how much she may hate me. Her... *partners* must know this. I see it in their eyes."

"Miguel and Tulio are old," Eupana acknowledges. "They have walked roads like yours before, though they might not know the destination."

Xarayes shudders against her. "They'll annoy for eternity over it."

"They're still invited for dinner tonight, dear."

Down in Xibalba, of course. Her halls have never been more crowded.

"Must you, love?"

Eupana knows she'll tired of the chaos eventually, retreat to her palace in Lake Parime for more intimate times with her husband. Now is not that time, not when she must stress the importance of family. The Lords of Xibalba must learn to tolerate the Golden Gods, if only in her presence, just as they must stop making sour faces at all the souls stolen from their homes.

"I must," Eupana states. She smiles up at the sunlight sparkling on the surface. "But we have hours yet to kill."

Xarayes arches his brow...

And smiles.

No sooner do they sense the currents turning is it already too late. Three dolphins freeze in bewilderment when the wave rushes over them. They exchange looks of horror when realization hits. With three high-pitched shrieks they go flying from the lake, and the sanctuary of their own damned temple.

Miguel starts frantically scrubbing himself with wine, because it's the closest thing on hand that isn't water. "Gross," he jibbers. "Gross, gross, grossgrossgros--"

Tulio fights him for the wine, to drown out the horror rather than scrub it away. One failed squabble later, he grabs Chel's shoulders and hysterically cries, "But t-they're so *o-old* and Xarayes
is Xarayes and a Fish God and--"

Chel mutters something about spawning season and Lake Parime's eternal fertility. Then she says nothing more, for she throws herself into a pile of gold and refuses to emerge.

Other gods damn it all, they still have to dinner in Lady Eupana's paradise that night, because Grandmother Turtle asked it of them.

They plaster on their brightest smiles and heroically brave their worst struggle since Chel's family at last stopped pestering them about their courtship.

Lady Eupana is as matronly and serene as ever, though her smiles come more easily. Lord Xarayes, who looks almost pleasant, has a gods damned twinkle in his fathomless eyes.

So eager are Miguel and Tulio to look somewhere, anywhere else than Manoa's oldest example of post-coital bliss, that for the first time their eyes see beyond the endless multitude of gods and spirits and human souls to the opposite end of the table, past the Lords of Xibalba. There is another seat of honor reserved at its head, empty even as all the gods of the worlds above and below happily tuck in.

Tulio shivers at the ominous sight, because he knows everyone else at this damned table is where they should be. "Uh, Chel, who's supposed to be sitting there?"

Chel's mouth opens and closes. She shakes her head.

Miguel laughs a giddy, hysterical laugh as he ignores his goblet in favor of downing the whole damn pitcher of pulque. "Why, isn't it obvious, Tulio? Before us are all the powers in the world, save the last of all."

Tulio's face scrunches at the riddle. Then he groans and bury his head in his hands. "Death," he hisses. "We're missing Death."

Xaya reaches over Chel to slap him hopefully on the back. "Good thing you're all deathless and we're already dead, huh? Even you can't get on their bad side."

Chel punches her brother in the shoulder, because the bastard is dead and he can take a goddess' hit. From Miguel's shudder, Tulio knows it's already too late. You don't have to be a gods damned oracle to figure that out.

"Great. You jinxed it."

Chapter End Notes

I have given you all nine Lords of the Dead... but not Death ; )

Xarayes does not lie, even if he's a melodramatic old fart. Which leaves one big gaping question: where are all those butterflies getting off too?

My muse was going for a nice, mellow end for Eupana and Xarayes. Then somehow the two old grandparent gods ended showing up why Manoa is still a fruitful, prosperous civilization. And gave the horny younger gods a taste of their own medicine :p
Miguel needs no heaven - he's living in it.

Mere weeks ago he was a starving shadow in Spain, a breath away from being dead words in a dusty book. And then, more recently, starving away to nothing upon apathetic seas.

Now he and Tulio live, in a way they hadn't lived in centuries, since long before the decline of their Roman cults. They aren't fledgling faiths starting from the ground up, either, as they've done time and time again in their journeys west. No. Already Manoa holds them high in their hearts, with unfaltering faith that makes them high and giddy, like two men on the desert that have stumbled upon the fruits of an oasis.

Once Miguel could not imagine holding any one in his heart as high as Tulio. Back east they were a duo, the lone song after all the voices of their brothers and sisters and distant kin faded into the night. In the west, in this new life, they are a trio. Miguel cannot remember how they ever got along with Chel, her sass and quick mind and quicker fingers. He doesn't want to remember the dull, dark days of before. Not when he has an eternity in paradise, with those he loves most, to look forward to.

Giddy in newfound power, Miguel feels himself sliding back into arrogance, the same sort of callous thoughts that defined him before his humbling year of servitude under Admetus. Part of him accepts it. He's a god, after all, a proper one again. His natural place is above humanity, as a protector and provider. Besides, Tulio's kept him alive for centuries now, and Chel has more sense than both of them put together. He trusts them to keep him grounded.

So Miguel spends his days basking - soaking up the love of his partners and the faith of his followers and the shine of their tribute. He strolls the streets like a lord surveying his domain, singing a lazy song under his breath that makes the lively shouts of the stall-keepers peter out as they succumb to his spell and doze under the warm noonday sun.

Down the street, his sharp eyes spot the heavy roof of a stall collapse. With the shopkeeper still inside.

Miguel blinks, stunned out of complacency, for the fates have not whispered a single word of this accident.

A shadow flickers across his vision. He shivers as obsidian wings blink out the sun, and a cold steals his breath and the noonday warmth.

Miguel flies before the first scream even sounds. With superhuman strength he throws off heavy lumber like they're twigs.
The man beneath is broken. His neck is at an impossible angle, and his skin already growing cold. Silent scream building in his throat, Miguel shakes his head and backs away. The stares of the crowd bore into his being, as shock and disbelief give way to expectancy.

Before the first wail of grief pierces the stillness, Miguel flies, and doesn't look back.

Tulio is god of boundaries. Of course he senses when the first soul since Cera passes that final threshold, when the breath goes from his lungs and a bowl of fruit slides from leaden fingers. So does Chel spew wine all over her shiny new throne, when she feels the thriving faith of their people falter the slightest.

"Oh, no," Tulio moans, even as Chel frantically shakes his shoulders and demands if Miguel's okay. "He will be," Tulio finally grits out. "Eventually. But right now, for the first time since we really belonged to this place, someone just..."

"Oh," Chel mumbles. For a heartbeat she clings to him, before hesitantly pulling away. "Don't you have to go and.. you know?"

"Not for a while," Tulio sighs. The poor guy's just been thrown from one world into the next. His family need time for the grief to sink in, to speak his rites and gather his tribute and light his pyre. It might be hours before he finally sinks from this sunny world into the cold dark of Xibalba. "Let's try to find Miguel first. He's brooding."

Chel glances around at the golden warmth of their temple, their first and greatest sanctuary. "Shouldn't he be flying into our arms? That's where I'd immediately go."

Tulio winces. If it was still just him in the picture, Miguel would have done just that. Chel, however... "You're a faith goddess. I don't think he wants to... you know."

Chel crosses her arms. "$\text{What? For me to tell him I don't have faith in him anymore? Because sometimes shit just happens, and not even the gods can always protect us from it. I know that Tulio, almost better than anyone alive in Manoa right now. My family is...}"

They shudder and press closer to another. Chel's family are gone, all swallowed by the Lords of Xibalba. Out of a seemingly infinite pantheon, parents and siblings and children and endless cousins, Miguel is all Tulio has left.

"Miguel has a... history with death. And don't let the puppy dog eyes fool you. He can be proud even by god standards. Failure doesn't sit well with him. Especially when he lets his people down."

Just in case, they check every inch of their temple. Miguel does small forms when he's feeling small, and Tulio's not flying around the city if there's a little mouse gold curled up in a pot right beneath his nose. But all possible hiding places are empty, so they head out.

Chief Tannabok's palace is a natural second stop, but there's no Miguel there either. Reminders of mortality are probably the last things he wants right now, but his partners check all the human places he loves. First they check the palace, but Chief Tannabok and his wife and sons blissfully ignorant. They sweep the training grounds and the ball court, the square where the thoughtful build up bonesticks and where Manoa's first lute players are trying to build up their own songs on makeshift instruments. They check with sculptors and singers, dancers and dreamers.

"Altivo!" Chel calls, the stallion manifesting in a gust of wind. "Have you seen Miguel?"
The horse god glances purposefully up. Tulio groans at the endless expanse of blue. "Fine," he sighs. "Fine. He wants to sulk in peace, he sulks in peace."

He and Chel try to wile away the hours together, but neither can manage the cheer, and wind up checking and rechecking all the old hiding places anyway. Tulio gets twitchy as the sun goes down. That stall-keeper's final rites are being chanted, and his pyre is being laid out. Soon he'll have more pressing obligations than Miguel's eternal angst.

The wind thrums with the tell-tale beat of rainbow wings. Tulio and Chel's gazes immediately snap back to their temple. They're there in a heartbeat.

Their shoulders slump in relief when they find Miguel curled up at the foot of their bed. He's still down, but Tulio knows he's weathered the worst of it.

Part of him wants to shake Miguel for making them worry and another wants to shout. Tulio settles for the part that makes him sit down beside him, as Chel takes the other.

"I couldn't heal him," Miguel murmurs into his knees. "It was too late."

*Dead*, remains unspoken. *Not dying.*

Tulio sighs. "I know it sucks, Miguel. It always sucks. At least he's going to a place better than the Fields of Asphodel, right? He's got nothing to be afraid of in Xibalba, not while I'm there."

Miguel, who has not yet seen Eupana's verdant paradise for himself, shrugs halfheartedly. "Oh, yes, Tulio. I'm sure that's exactly what his loved ones want to hear right now."

"Not right now," Chel amends. "But later, when the worst of the shock wears off. It helps, knowing that they're somewhere better than where they could be." Her own family, claimed by the Lords of Xibalba, go unsaid. "They don't blame you Miguel. Even gods can't fight off the Lady, when she comes for a soul."

Miguel and Tulio shiver at the sudden vision of something like a monstrous butterfly. Her black wings are obsidian, with edges just as sharp to sever the threads of life and the soul from the body. *Lady Mikistli* goes unsaid by them both. Even the deathless gods know better to invoke Death when she is uninvited.

They're bound to meet her sooner or later. Tulio is Shepherd of Souls and Miguel the Averter of Evil, who fights tooth and nail against sickness and all that could take a healthy life.

Later is always good. Miguel will fight for a soul until their last breath, vanishing like a daydream before they gasp out their death rattle, before their heart forces out its last beat. Tulio comes to his wayward souls hours after their passing, when their funeral rites have been granted and long after they descended into the spirit world. There's no need for either of them to give anymore than that.

Somewhere beyond death and dream, a butterfly with wings clear and colorless as glass alights upon an outstretched finger. A face curves into a fond smile. It is not a grinning skull, or the face of a haggard old woman, or carved in cold obsidian. Hers is the last face a soul shall ever see in their life. No matter how soon or unwanted she comes, her face is always beautiful, to bear them away from one world into the next.

*Lady Mikistli* does not know where this soul has come from, nor how virtuous a life it lived. It is
not Death's place to judge or punish. Wherever this wayward soul has returned from, its sins and memories have been stripped bare, its old life long ended.

The ending has come and gone. Now is the time for beginnings.

So Lady Miskitli breathes it a new name, a new life, all that might be and might never come to pass. On her breath the butterfly flutters away, from this place into the next.

Perhaps she'll see it again in tomorrow or in a hundred years or a thousand. However, now is the time for beginnings, and that is all that matters.

Where Lord Kinich is about to breach the horizon and be reborn with the day, a black and ragged horde blots out the growing light. They fixate upon her.

"No," she groans, voice rising into an irritated shout. "No! No! All of you are early!"

The flock keep coming. Fearlessly dark and tattered butterflies touch down by the thousands on her obsidian wings and flicking antennae. Upon all six of her outstretched arms ragged little hummingbirds land, ruffling patchy feathers and twittering in consternation. They're black, mottled white and yellow from where the Jaguar God gnawed at the cores of their being.

Lady Mikistli snarls wordlessly. There's so many new-fangled gods to curse for the sudden heaviness of her workload, after all. Calling out one of them first would somehow imply the others have a lesser share of the blame.

"There's no room for you all!" she scolds. "Not for centuries!"

Soon, so very soon, she'll be descending to claim her lot by the hundreds, the thousands, the tens of thousands. What soul would want to be thrown back into that, when she could so easily spin a new one to fill an empty vessel?

These souls are well-entitled to a respite in Eupana's paradise, a rest that could last decades or even centuries. Some have suffered untold years eaten away by war and conquest and all their untold ilk. Perhaps they have dwelt so long in the dark they are afraid of the lives that could be, and wish only to plunge back into a world about to be consumed by chaos. Perhaps they've imprinted on those feckless Golden Gods, and wish to once more try for a life in that golden paradise, one about to slip so much of the suffering by.

Or, most simply, these are the souls of a race that has never been able to settle for what is before them when there is always a new horizon to breach, an itch in their souls to reach beyond and further still.

It is not Miskitli's role to strip the old weights away. That is the place of time and distance and forgetfulness, the domains of her son. Still does she best to pluck the odd feathers from wings, to wipe away dark splotches of color. Sometimes it's enough. Other times a soul shall carry old grudges or lingering quirks that should never follow from one life into the next.

But these souls crave beginnings, and beginnings she grants. Almost always their lives shall be wrought by war and grief and horrors the past generations could never conceive. Some will be human, others not. Some vessels fit just right, others will never quite be comfortable. There's so many souls, after all, and Miskitli is just a one goddess, with so many demanding charges.

Now is not yet the time for endings. So the Lady of Souls breathes new life and new hope, no matter how brief both may be, and on her breath send so many souls from her story into another's.
Chapter End Notes

For all the gods might be deathless, death is still very much a part of the human condition. So is humanity's collective inability to be satisfied with ANYTHING for too long. You give us 'perfect,' there's always gonna be someone pushing for the next level. And so the wheel keeps turning.

I struggled long and hard with Death's identity here, although they always were a life-death-rebirth deity. The Obsidian Butterfly of Aztec mythology was so bad-ass that Lady Miskitli wound up heavily influenced by Ítzpāpālōtl.

Miguel's holding something back here. That's a story for another time ; )
lord of the sun (the eagle god)

Chapter Summary

Two birds have a heart to heart.
Or: two old suns meet.

Chapter Notes

What Miguel was up to last chapter, while Chel and Tulio worried themselves sick.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The problem with ripping old scars off? Realizing how very, very painful failure and a loss of faith can be.

It doesn't matter how many centuries, even millennium, Miguel has weathered across the sea. In Manoa his cult, for all its fervor, is still so very young. The death beneath his nose almost aches as if he died himself.

Uprooted and hurting, Miguel almost instinctively flies for Tulio, before he stops himself. It's not just Miguel and Tulio, partners in crime anymore. They're Lord Miguel, Lord Tulio, and Lady Chel now.

Miguel's not jealous, he's not. How could he be, when they are the two beings he loves above all else? Yet Chel is a goddess of faith, the very embodiment of the belief that granted them a new life among the hearts of Manoa's people. How can he bear to see their despair reflected in her eyes, and remember all he was not and never will be?

His second impulse is for Chief Tanni's palace. He's a good man, a grounded man, one wise enough to help even a god see sense. Miguel's pride shies away from the thought, and he sharply wrenches away from his desperate course. He's not gonna offload his problems on a mortal, again, when poor Chief Tanni has family and royal responsibilities all his own.

Back in Spain Tulio knew all his old hiding places, the dark caves and once-sacred groves he called sanctuary, to lick old wounds and old pride.

But this isn't Spain, and Miguel is grounded no more. He shrugs off human shape for the hawk's. His plumage is verdant emerald, but his flight feathers shine every color of the rainbow. Off he flies for skies he and Tulio have scarce explored. He soars where only suns have dared, where neither intrepid messengers or human faith have ever reached, beyond all earthly matters like death and despair. He alights down upon a quiet cloud and huddles into himself, to brood as only one of his old family could brood.

Belatedly he realizes he is not alone. It is so easy to imagine these skies are his, and his alone, when the true gods of Manoa are so eager to avoid him and his fellows.
Now he's in another god's domain, gawking up at an eagle whose wide wings are the vault of the sky, and shining eye the sun.

Miguel, already a puny little hawk, shrinks as only a bird can as his feathers fall back against his body. Distantly he remembers what it was like to be such a great god, all-seeing and all-powerful, and is suddenly sorry all over again. "Lord Kinich," he says, mustering up every jot of his own brightness. "What a fine afternoon you have up here!"

The Eagle God cocks his head and Miguel falters even further. Then Lord Kinich angles his gaze further down. "Weather-wise, yes, but quite an unfortunate accident down below."

Miguel shuffles his talons and wishes to sink into the cloud, but there's no hiding from the sun in broad daylight. "Yes," he says softly. "It is."

"You are Lord Miguel, are you not?"

"Yes," Miguel answers. "I was told you... already met my partners."

The Lord of the Sun ruffles his feathers, sending cirrus clouds winding across the sky. "According to Lord Munah I observed Lord Tulio give Balam Qoxtok a well-deserved thrashing, and then Lady Chel make a fool out of him before she even came fully into her divinity. As I happened to be dead at the time, I unfortunately remember none of it, or had the honor of greeting your partners afterward."

"Ah," is all even Miguel has to say to that.

The birds of prey fall silent, their all-seeing eyes fixated upon one body fished from the rubble of a fallen market stall and carried away for mourning.

"You and your partners have been with us for some weeks now, have you not?" Miguel nods. "And yet, Lord Miguel, this is the first death we've suffered since your arrival, and the first opportunity I have to meet one of you directly." The hawk-shaped god braces for punishment for such insolence, but Lord Kinich's tone remains calm and even, with an echo of Chief Tannabok's deepness to him. "You've all done a very good job protecting our people."

"Not from something I should have seen coming," Miguel can't help but mutter, until he remembers who he's speaking with.

Lord Kinich's radiant gaze searches him. "Was this your first death?"

"Far from it, but..." Miguel swallows. "You recall how Lord Tulio and Lord Altivo and I all were, when we first came to this land?"

"Of course I do. I burned the clouds away, to see you all the better. I saw how my people, our people, looked to you, and smiled down upon you all the same."

"We were dying, back in our homeland," Miguel choked out, his rainbow wings dull and limp. "Our first followers were a thousand years dead, before Manoa welcomed us into their hearts. To fail them now, when we protected them from Tzekel-Kan, from the Jaguar God, from gods damned Cortes, it's..."

"It's enough to make you wish you were dead, for failing those beneath your wings."

Miguel blinks in surprise, before he realizes it's barely past noon. Of course the Sun God is full in his prime. Only does sunset reveal how far Lord Kinich has fallen from his zenith, when the sun is
dead and the moon a pale shadow of her former self. "Yes," Miguel says quietly. "That's exactly how it feels."

"There was an earthquake, so very long ago," Lord Kinich murmurs. "It leveled the city to the ground. The temples fell with my priests inside. Wars waged and children starved. We are what they make us, and their savior I was not."

The Third World of Manoa had enjoyed Two Suns, before the jealous Crocodile God had sundered the earth, devouring one sun and disfiguring the second. Lord Munah, the Hero God, invented the ballgame and won Lord Kinich's life back from the Lords of Xibalba, of course, but at a terrible cost. There is a reason why the world must know night, why Lady Kama can never shine as brightly as she once did.

Lord Kinich had died, in a way most gods never do, until a later, more prosperous generation had brought him back, born of the same first chief had that founded Chief Tanni's line. Still great, yes, but nowhere near the grand deity he had been before.

Miguel sucks in a breath and offers a story of his own. "Once upon a time, there was a god that ruled a world. He didn't speak through the kings; he was the king, because he couldn't bear the thought of turning over his creation to someone beneath him. So he stayed, even long after the gods departed for the heavens and called him after them. Even when he started to age, and grew old, and senile. Because he was too arrogant to trust his work to someone else."

Lord Kinich chuckles and the day grows a little brighter. "He sounds like quite the braggart."

Miguel smiles ruefully, leaning back against the cloud, for someone where down the line man has seemed better than hawk. "Oh, he was. Believe me."

"How ever did he learn to let go?"

"A much cleverer goddess tricked him into admitting his weakness, and letting go of those who'd outgrown him, because he'd never do so of his own free will. Thanks to her, he regained part of himself. " Miguel's grin dims. "For a while, anyway."

Sometimes he remembers that goddess being his mother, for she tricked that fusty old god into letting his destined successor be born. Other times it's him dying with the sunset, drifting through a watery underworld withered or just dead until the next uncertain sunrise. Maybe he was never either of them, and the only stories only blurred into his through time and muddling of the old ways. There's no one left to say for certain, just as there are known that can call Lord Kinich a dead god restored or a newer god that inherited the name.

Lord Kinich leans casually against a throne of clouds. He's tall and mighty as Chief Tanni must have been in his prime, though his robe is a rich blue, and his head still the eagle's. "Quite the story, Lord Miguel. I hope that old braggart found his happiness."

Miguel spares him a final smile. "I'd like to think he did, with those who aren't unafraid to snap him out of his old melodramatics."

The sun god nods sagely. "Of course, Lord Miguel. When the time is right, please do stop on by with Lady Chel and Lord Tulio one morning. It would be nice for proper introductions."

Miguel diligently agrees, but cocks his head at the one missing name. "Is Lord Altivo not extended the same courtesy?"

"Lord Altivo is at least a weekly guest up here." Lord Kinich's beak curves into an incongruous
grin. "Or did he not tell you?"

The Eagle God exchanges arms for wings as he continues on his daily course to his own demise, the same path Miguel was once bound to.

With a sigh, he unfurls his own wings, and descends for home. He craves his partners the way the sun does the moon. At least he can be by their sides, for the dual scoldings they're about to unleash on him.

He doesn't want it any other way.

Chapter End Notes

The difference between a hawk and an eagle? (copy and paste: https://www.flickr.com/photos/keithhuang88/27095451075)

In a way, Manoa has known Five Worlds beneath different patron gods, just as their civilization has at times known near absolute-collapse and the need to rebuild their faith and society. Both are true, depending on how you look at it ; )

Following the demise of the Third World and the Two Suns, the world knew chaos and calamity before a world ruled by the bloodthirsty Crocodile God, Lord of Earthquakes. Before then he happened to eat one sun and disfigure the other. Modern Manoans contend Munah, the Hero God, went into Xibalba and invented the ballgame to win at least part of Kinich's life back. Kama becomes the Moon Goddess, lighting the world where her husband cannot, except on the nights she can't bare being away from his side.

...Or maybe the guy that founded Chief Tannabok's line brought his own sun god with him and the name of a dead god from a prior era of peace and prosperity god pasted over it.

Likewise, Miguel is formerly Apollo, who may or may not be part of Ra or Horus depending on what cults were bouncing around the Mediterranean basin in the last few centuries of widespread paganism. Or was at least close enough to their spheres to pick up some of the lore, such the story of how Ra let himself into a drooling old mess until Isis created the cobra to coerce him into giving up his true name and his hold on the world... or how Thoth (whom the Greeks identified as Hermes) gambled away enough light from the moon to create five extra days in creation to allow Horus to eventually be born, because Ra was that against his destined successors being born. Believe what you want ; )
etiquette lessons

Chapter Summary

Manners maketh man. Or horse god. Whatever.

Chapter Notes

Something to lighten up a rather intense arc in what should have been a bunch of loose one shots.

Tulio's not quite sure what he expected when they accepted Lady Eupana's invitation to a feast, and still not sure what to think of them now.

Chel's overjoyed at finding her grandmother. Sija radiates a more dignified happiness, even as she keeps eyeing Tulio and Miguel when her granddaughter isn't looking. When they, as the godly guests, are granted seats of honor at the head of the table, Sija claims one right beside Chel, minor deity about to take it be damned. The parrot-headed god takes one look at Sija and wisely troops further down the table. Miguel, without the same sense of survival, plops down beside Chel while Tulio uneasily settles in beside him.

Chel and Sija try to fill in nigh over two decades' worth of time apart, with Miguel cheerfully chiming in where he can. He deflects Sija's pointed questions about his prospects to ask about Chel's childhood. When it quickly becomes apparent how many relatives are held by the Lords of Xibalba, Miguel gracefully allows the conversation to be diverted, even as Sija once more asks exactly what he and Tulio can give her goddess of a granddaughter.

Tulio's silver tongue fails beneath Sija's no-nonsense eye. Great. Stupid canny old ladies, always seeing through him like he's Miguel. Not wanting to make the woman even further displeased that Chel is indeed shacking up with the god of bullshit artists, he sips his wine, keeps his own answers brief, and lets Miguel's earnestness maybe soften Sija's heart a little.

Idly answering a few vague questions from the minor deities and old royalty across from him, Tulio does his best to settle in, and not keep glancing at the suspiciously empty seat left on his other side.

His eye twitches at the tell-tale clop of Altivo's golden horseshoes, coming in his direction, because of course the horse has a seat at the table.

A small part of Tulio, old and damnably proud, sneers at the thought of Altivo sitting closer to Lady Eupana than he is. It doesn't matter how old the stallion's origins are. Even by their standards he's a relic, a bygone of the old Iberian gods subsumed so entirely by the Roman their names and likenesses were all but forgotten. When the days Tulio was a true god by a different name, Altivo was still a beast of burden, mount and companion of greater powers.
Tulio sneaks a glance at Lady Eupana. He already knows how shamelessly messy an eater Altivo is. The both of them are going to be spattered in apple bits and horse saliva. Grandmother Turtle’s fathomless dark eyes are neutral. She raises an expectant brow.

The silver chair beside Tulio’s slides back. A strong, calloused hand reaches past him to snag a golden apple from its bowl.

Tulio splutters at the hand, at the golden horseshoe wrapped snug around a muscled arm, and then at a shoulder garbed in rich gray, Beneath a horse-shaped headdress, with horse hair pooling down the back, dark eyes stare out from a long, noble face.

"B-B-But why..."

Altivo rolls his eyes, taking a delicate bite from his apple. "No hooves at the feasting table."

Lady Eupana smiles approvingly. Sija scowls at Tulio as if this common dining etiquette he should have learned as a child on the knee.

He stifles his groan in his goblet of wine. And again when Altivo politely asks for him to please pass the pulque.

Chapter End Notes

Altivo can be polite, when he wants to be ; )
Chapter Summary

It's tough to be a god. Especially a minor one. You're more vulnerable, that way.

Or: why Miguel prefers thinking about today, and not his past. Or pasts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**syncretism (n.)** - the amalgamation (or attempted amalgamation) of different cultures, schools of thought,... or religions

He is born in rugged Arcadia to wild places and the boundary stones. He guards between the boundaries between one world and the next, the roads and thresholds and thin places, where travelers and shepherds and wayward souls have need of guidance. He is a pile of stones before they grant him a name and face.

There is no Greece, yet, in that misty, mythic beginning. His name is first uttered in the tongues that birthed Greek and those lost to it. In the beginning he has no need of temples, only the caves and groves and grottoes. He is older than Olympus, old as the herds and the hills.

Early on, his name is something like *Hermāhās*. Earlier still, it might be even something like *Pēhusōn* or what later Greeks might instead interpret as *Pan Hermes*, for he is the great god of the herms, born of the boundary stones that have been given faces and names of their own.

Eventually, he might get split in two, with the bolder travelers taking one name and likeness down the roads, to new towns and countries, while an older part of him refuses to descend from his wild refuges. Sometimes that split makes him both old enough to have taught Apollo the secrets of prophecy and technically father to himself, but that's okay. Even to him those early days are hazy history, somewhere between memory and dream. Maybe he's one god, all-encompassing, or else regrown again out of a smaller half. Distinction didn't matter much in those distant, dreamy days, where every soul might have their own name and face for a deity, each as valid as the last.

West he goes from his cradle, leaving the wild hills behind for great cities and unknown frontiers. He smoothly flows from Hermes to Turms to Mercury. They are simply new names, interpretations of his original titles better suited to their languages.

Sometimes there are... bumps in the road. He hits a lot in Iberia, where the peoples of the rugged interior have little interest in what the coastal colonies bring to their shore. They have held onto their own pantheons for countless centuries, and their gods are as hostile as they are in letting foreign hearts and minds in.

His cult swallows them all, as his Romans dominate and displace those there before them. Their shrines are his. Their names become yet more minor epithets, their faces absorbed into his.

It's almost a straight line, from that primal god to Hermes to Mercury, and then what circumstances make him after. He's easy, that way.
Just the way he likes it.

He is old, older than the labyrinthine palace at Knossos, older than the first palace and the first wanax. Before his people rose palaces above them, they lived in their houses and before that their dry stone caves.

He is older than them all. He is old as song, old as hope, old as fear and defiance against an ailing body.

In the beginning, that's all he is. Song. Hope. Desperate distractions against the raging fever and the chill in the bones. At first he is only the gentle guide, at a patient's side until their fever breaks or they rasp out a death rattle. Only later do his singers realize his words are magic. With the right words, the right melody, they're are healing songs, magic that can ward off an ailment or grant the soul new strength to fight. He is their Pa-ja-wo, their song of triumph.

Later still, his priests discover some of his other magics, herbs and potions and secrets most jealously guarded. Only then do they become physicians and he their Paieon, their Healer.

He is born in the northwest, beyond the civilized borders. In the stone squares of towns hair and hearts are devoted to him, as fathers introduce young children and new-grown men and newly-wed wives. To the Dori...
muddy walls.

The newer gods call him terrible, for he rains down death and disease like arrows on the battlefield. His hordes strip whole fields bare, to plunge whole civilizations into famine. It is in starvation sickness festers and his power is at its highest, for only in the plague years do the faithful call out his name.

Yet, so too does he have the powers to banish. If evoked right, his name shall drive the rights away from the fields rather than beckon them to feast. With prayer and sacrifice, he can turn back his plagues, and perform an art no other god can. Healing is his domain, and his alone.

Whether uttered in Babylonian or Assyrian or ancient Sumerian, that dates to the dawn of days, his true name is no less true. And no less feared.

The Hittites and Hurrians are a little humbler than most. To them, he is Aplu and Apeljōn, The Son of the Wind, for they dare not name him directly.

He is brave Heru and kingly Re, before he is Ra Horakhty and later still Harpokrates.

He is Helios, the shining sun of Rhodes.

He is Sol Indiges, the native sun of the Tiber and to the empire the conquering Sol Invictus.

He's just Miguel, okay! That's all there is to it.

End of story.

After a great war, the Fourth World lays in blood and rubble when wrathful Balam Qoxtok at last laid the Crocodile God low. Lord Youalan is in his death throes still. Every drop he bleeds is another hungry child for the waters, every thrash of his tail another earthquake to shake the foundations of creation.

But never mind the Crocodile God, for he is dead and his reign over. Never more will we shed a single drop for his sacrifices, when he once near devoured mankind to extinction. It is Balam Qoxtok, the Jaguar God, who stands proud over his body to gloat his victory. And gloat he does, for the Jaguar God's pride runs deep as Xibalba.

Balam Qoxtok is no true ruler, not yet, for he refuses to rule a world of ruins. First he tries to raise a new world, one all his own, but he is Lord of War and Lord of Conquest. His attempts all fail, for the only ground he can raise is obsidian, cold and black. His creatures devour each other or the Jaguar God, hungry and frustrated, devours them first. Such it goes again and again, until several other gods decide to offer help. But the Jaguar God is arrogant and spiteful, so he refuses them all.

Humanity is near extinct at this point, for none of Lord Bibi's wiles can help them in such disorder. All they can do is starve away in the dark and despair.

When all seems lost, a storm blows in from the east, and it shakes the ruins of the world unlike any storm since. With a new dawning descends the Feathered Serpent, Lord of the Skies, and upon him the Dual Gods. Together they raise a new world, green and lush, for humanity to inherit. On the shores of sacred Lake Parime they raise a new city, one of strong stone and rich red brick and gold. Pure, eternal gold.

Gold is the gift of the gods. Even in the old days it was recognized as precious tribute, second only
to blood sacrifice. Where humanity had sacrificed their loved ones by the thousands to the greedy Crocodile God, this new gift allowed them to save even the loss of a single human life for all but the direst of circumstances.

So dawns the Age of the Serpent, but of course the Dual Gods do not stay to admire their creation. Once more they ascend upon the Feathered Serpent and depart into the sunrise, to dwell among the gods there. Their world is golden, but Balam Qoxtok is a greedy god, and lurks at the shadows. As days turn into decades into centuries, and the Dual Gods still do not come, the Jaguar God sidles into their place. Manoa once more knows war, as we conquered and were near conquered in turn.

Beneath the Jaguar God's usurpation, Manoa was not one. While the Golden People wore gold in their ears to boast of their connection to the Dual Gods, to the peoples they conquered they granted green stones or no adornments at all, for they were natural servants born to captured slaves.

A thousand years later, a storm unlike one before or since once more raged across Manoa. The priests and common peoples whispered of the omen, but beneath the Jaguar God's jealous shadow none could divine the truth.

Only one woman, clever as the gods and just as wise, could see what all of Manoa could not. She alone hears the calling for their people and she alone ventures out to bring them home.

They return upon the proud Horse God, the two we call Who Is Like God and He of the People, for though it is not our place to question them they are here for us all the same. There is Altivo, Lord of the Winds, who carries our prayers and cools our homes and goes where he wills. So too is there Miguel, Lord of the Morning, and Tulio, Lord of the Evening. As far-seeing Lord Miguel watches over our fates and heals the living, so does Lord Tulio guard the boundaries and guide us into the next world.

And they are not alone. Their priestess is a woman beyond compare, one born to be a goddess, and so that is what she is. She is Chel, Lady of Faith. On our behalf she sways the greatest gods and moves mountains. So long as we remember Lady Chel, then our sacrifices never be in vain, or our prayers cast out into empty air.

Together they cast out the Jaguar God and tear down his temple. There is no place for him in society, only in the savage jungles where death and slavers stalk--

--Child, it's rude to interrupt. And with so rude a question at that!

Our gods are who they are. They are unless they say otherwise. If they are the Golden Gods and not the Dual Gods in these incarnations, then that is who they are. It is they who brought an end to offering even rude little children like you up as tribute. It is they who keep our fair city hidden from all but they deem worthy. It is they who walk among us.

What they were called or looked like before they came home to us is immaterial. They are ours, now, and we are theirs.

That's all that matters.
personified concept.

From what we currently know about the REAL ancient lore, Hermes has a relatively straight-forward trajectory from primal god to his current incarnation. Excepting, you know, the one time his wilderness part got split up and he became his own father before cult re-absorption. While some Latin gods had distinct, pre-Hellenic identities of their own, Mercury is one of the cases that's just a straight up transplant from Greek!Hermes. The Etruscan Turms might have been more distinct at one point, but from pretty early on his known iconography was just basically Hermes' too.

Apollo, on the other hand...

Woof.

Ancient Greeks drew a clear distinction between Pythian and Delian Apollo - that is the Apollo of Delphi and the Apollo of the Cretan complex. In the Iliad, one of the earliest fully recorded myths, Apollo is only a plague and prophecy. At this point Paean the healing god is still mentioned as a unique entity and Helios will be for the next few centuries or so.

Big interpretations of Apollo's origins are broken down as follows:
1. Mycenaean Greece, where pre-Poseidon the Earthshaker ruled as the supreme chthonic deity. Closest approximation to Apollo's name and role is with pseudo-Paeon, who was strongly connected to the power of healing songs.
2. With the Delians from Epirus/Macedonia/northwest Greece. A lot of Apollo's institutional and foundational aspects seemed to have come from them. Before they conquered Delphi and installed him there in place of Rhea/an earth goddess instead.
3. From within western Anatolia, same place as where Apollo's mother Leto came from. Seems to have strong connotations with prophecy, omens, purification, and the Luwian city that's probably historical Troy.
4. A Mesopotamian plague deity that gave rise to Nergal and Shamash. One that is ultimately called Utu and predates friggin' Sargon of Akkad.
5. Various others that got sucked into the Apollo cult. The relatively minor sun god Helios who was biggest on Rhodes. The god Homer distinctly identifies as Paieon. Ra and Horus, who got smashed into one god by followers and Horus' Greek child aspect and all sorta linked to Phoebus Apollo/the sun god by Greeks. A very minor Latin agrarian solar god named Sol Indiges that may or may not have inspired the later Sol Invictus cult.
Chapter Summary

We all come from somewhere. Even gods.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the misty beginning, he has no mother. Perhaps he has mothers, dams who nicker after wayward colts before they are slain by the spear and mothers who bid their hunters home before they are trampled by hooves. Perhaps he is born on the breath of the wizened crones who chant prayers and omens over his bones and paint his image to the cavern walls. At that point it matters little to him, if he yet exists at all, for he is every foal trailing after its mother's heels and every boy who races from their mother's side to ride their first stallion.

And then, there is her. Perhaps she finds him after centuries and millennium of separation. Perhaps they're simply filling the voids of the other. None of it matters, save for her.

She is tamer of horses and protector of the herds. She is carried by the cavalries and enshrined in their stables. Where he is, she is. Where she goes, he follows. He is the foal trotting diligently at the mare's side. He is the loyal mount that bears her into battle. Astride or beside him, they are together. She is the horse goddess and powerful mistress, the good goddess and the lady of battle. She is Epona, the Great Mare. His mother.

She hangs on longer than most, but even the Gauls are converting now.

When the end is near, and they can deny it no longer, she strokes his muzzle and squeezes his hands a final time. Human hands cling to this world better than mare's hooves.


Then she lets go. There is room for only one of them in this godless world. He was here first. She loves him too much to let him fade away like the rest of her children.

And he is alone, forever and always, a horse without a herd and a mount without a mistress.

Until he is not.

She is a great goddess in her own right, enshrined in a golden throne with the spindle as her scepter, long before that foul sky god touches her. It is she who brings darkness into light as she brings new life into the world. The Lycians know her rightly, whether as Eni Mahanahi or Lato. Beneath her veil and modest clothes is not only great beauty, but the great goddess, the Great Mother. Even the Egyptians know her. To them she is Wadjet, who protects her son as the king cobra, just as she does the whole kingdom.

Her children are well-received among the Greeks. Of course she is born west with them. In these
new lands she is Leto, a minor goddess, one consort of many. There are foul giants that wish to
carry her off as bride and mortals that wish to ignore her worship entirely. Those that see her as
only the demure and modest mother, a prize ripe for the taking, remember too late her twins are her
wrath given form. Where Apollo and Artemis are worshiped, so is she in the sacred trinity, for
without her there would be no sun and moon to light the world.

Yet her children are not content with Greece. Further west they are borne. Of course she goes with
them too, further away from her sanctuaries in Crete and Lycia. Without her they would not be.

As Latona she is diminished still. In Greece she had altars of her own, though always in the sacred
grounds of her children. The Romans pay her no such regard. Her name is invoked only with
Apollo's or Diana's, if it is invoked at all. She stands as mostly placeholder, for someone had to
bare great Jupiter his shining twins. And burns at the disgrace.

In Lycia she would have struck the fools down herself. In Greece her children would have obeyed
her orders to do so on her behalf. In distant Iberia, so far removed from her cradle, she is distantly
loved and acknowledged, but not revered. Even her twins will not heed her, save for absent kisses
on the cheek and murmured platitudes against her plight. They stand as great gods, too great to
heed even she that birthed them.

When the tide truly begins to turn, and all gods must make way for God, it is the minutiae that are
first lost, as the priests stop caring about the little details of the world and only the oldest, greatest
rites hang on. There is no room in their hearts and minds for Latona, when even their
acknowledgement for her children shrink by the day.

Proud and resigned, Latona does not rage against the end. Such melodramatics are beneath her
dignity. She fades without so much as a whisper, for her twins need no further grief when even
their greatest sanctuaries are assailed.

It is Apollo, her far-sighted shooter, her baby, first suckered by the silence. He cries out for his
mother.

His cries go unheeded, for he has none.

He weeps his grief and his rage into Mercury's shoulder.

She is the eldest of her sisters, brightest and most beautiful. She hides away in the grottoes of
Mount Cyllene and avoids the great gods, but Zeus finds her anyway. He takes several of her
sisters, but she alone bears an Olympian.

She is mother and midwife, blood mother of wily Hermes and surrogate of heroes, but almost never
goddess. She is a mere nymph, immortal by association, bound to the invocations to her guileful
son. After all, it is his bombastic entrance into the world that catapults himself into divinity, and
her into scrutiny.

Yet that is not true either. She shines bold and bright for any soul to see, so long as the night is
right. Her rising marks the start of sailing season and her descent bids all ships home. So long as
she shines with her sisters, then the seas are safe as they ever are. Without her light, the sailors
pray themselves at home, to reunite with their families for the plowing season. Even without her
little thief, she would shine as bright. She is no Merope, to hide her face from the shame of her
husband and fade away with her star.

As her son travels west, she is borne with him. He loves his mother so, and cannot walk without
her. So long as the Pleiades shine, and even distant Italia and Iberia depend upon the Mediterranean, she shall always have a place of her own.

Though her original Arcadian cult has long faded into obscurity, and near killed her with it, the Romans see her better than the Greeks ever could. In their tongue her very name means greater, and they hail her as such. She is Good Goddess and Great Goddess, to those who love her best. Even the month of Maius is named for her, for upon the first day the priest of Vulcan sacrifices as pregnant sow in her honor alone. She is something of the earth and something of growth, which suits the patrons of mercantile Mercury just fine.

In distant Iberia, removed by miles and centuries from any that first hailed her as goddess, her star shines no less bright. It bears her name even as the sailors stop believing in even her son, let alone a minor thing like herself.

Maia has never been one for fuss. Her final night, she bids her son to her. She holds him as he weeps, as he weeps for only one other, and orders him not to mourn her. He is forever and always her cunning boy, be his name Hermes or Turms or Mercury. As he once demanded his place upon Olympus, so does she expect him to find his place in a strange new order that increasingly sees one God and one God alone.

At first he refuses to speak. Then he murmurs empty promises. Only when light is on the horizon does she demand him to swear upon the Styx, to do all in his power to stay himself.

He does so. It is only the second thing she has ever ordered of him, after all.

Satisfied, Maia sets with her star.

The following dusk, when the Pleiades rise once more, her bones shine cold and empty above, without warmth and faith to give them life.

Mercury weeps into Apollo's arms, until he has no more tears to weep.

He never fades, even when it means abandoning his very name and role as a god, to consume mortal flesh and break his mother's first commandment.

He never hates the mortals more, for clinging to her name and those of his aunts long after their faith runs dry.

She is born the oldest of three girls to a loving and no nonsense couple. She is beautiful enough to serve among the acolytes, to perhaps snag a minor priest or courtier as husband. She loves her parents, her little sisters, too much to ever abandon them like that for a greater household. She loves Teo from girlhood, long before either of them realize how deep the depths of their devotion go.

She knows she would have married him, no matter what. She's still a bit bitter over rushing into it, that they had more time to enjoy the full courtship, until the looming calendar urged them forward. The Dark Days had no appetite for newly-wed wives, when were so many pure young maidens to choose from.

Altia and Ameya, with only tentative suitors and no betrotheds, are not so fortunate. Even as they weep into her arms, they beg her to rush the marriage. One of them must survive, to care for Mother and Father where the other two cannot.
Her sisters still stalk her nightmares. She dreams of their screams and their blood and the Jaguar God's snarls, before she awakes gasping in Teo's arms. Even when Xaya and Chel are born, the dreams never go away. Her children merely join their aunts upon the altars.

Pana is selfish once more, when she prays for Lord Cassipa to take any but her daughter. He listens, and claims Chel's best friend Mari instead. One more face for her nightmares. One more leaden secret to atone for.

Fate deferred is never fate denied. When Tzekal-Kan's dark eye falls upon her Chel, Pana will not deny destiny a third time. She falls forward and offers herself as sacrifice, a truer tribute than any then could be found among that crowd.

Pana does not remember the fall into Xibalba. She recalls only looming over the edge and the roar of the waters, before Tzekal-Kan brought his cudgel down.

Her time serving Lord Xarayes bears little remembering. His halls are dark and dreary, forming only around her presence and dissolving as she passes. She is almost always alone, for souls flow through like water. When they reach the House of the Waters, they are already misty around the edges and forgetting themselves. As their forget their names and their faces, more and more of their souls fade away, until they pass on altogether.

Pana does not know why Lord Xarayes clings to her. Perhaps it's because she directly offered herself up to him, even if it was for Chel's sake. Maybe he just likes having another soul around. Her lord does like complaining about the brevity of life and the futile struggle against oblivion. An oblivion that prefers to nag about her cleaning skills than claim her.

It matters little, in the end, when Chel strides in to claim her.

Pana is proud, proud as a mother can be. Only her little girl could sneer at a fate hungry to claim her as sacrifice, and lift herself into divinity instead.

So too is she proud of Chel's partners, who followed her into oblivion despite their own obvious terror. Their love for her, for each other, is miracle itself to witness. It is the sort of love to raise mountains, to deliver the dead, to shake the very foundations of creation.

What great mothers they must have had, to have raised such selfless sons.

Chapter End Notes

Epona is ultimately a Gaulish goddess from the Lower Danube. She is a fertility goddess, protector of horses, a goddess of cavalries and stables and battle. She was one of the few non-Greek gods to gain a considerable following in the Roman pantheon.

Leto ultimately appears to be a goddess of Asia Minor, particularly from Lycia, where some of her only independent shrines are found. In Greece she was worshiped in conjunction with her children, and appears to be even more rarely acknowledged in Rome. Her original spheres of influence are super vague - she's a mother goddess connecting to demureness and maternity, and often with the bringing of light into darkness, and that's pretty much it.
Maia is even vaguer. In her 'purest' Greek incarnation she's one of the Pleiades, one of the constellation that marked the time of year for sailing, with the setting demarcating the end of sailing season and start of the farming. She's mother to Hermes and foster mother to Arcas and some other minor Greek heroes. She has some vague connections to Gaia, but has stronger connections to an earth goddess in the Roman tradition. There she's traditionally paired with Vulcan, granted a sacrifice that links her as an earth goddess, and is more related to general promotion of growth.
stories (and gaps)

Chapter Summary

Tannabok's children adore the gods as much as they do their stories. This a good thing.

Until, inevitably, someone gets too curious.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tannabok has dined with gods before. In theory. Sure, the gods get the life and the life's blood in every animal sacrifice, but the meat is distributed out to the people for a larger offering. As chief Tannabok always gets the first serving, even of something small.

But there's dining with the gods and dining with the gods.

There they are, all four of them that deign walk among the mortals in physical form. He's shocked at how mundane dinner's been so far, aside from the pitchers and serving plates never running empty. That's a good thing. A god's insatiable appetites could eat him out of house and home eventually.

Lord Altivo actually has taken his seat, which is unusual because he almost always favors the large form with four golden hooves. Of course the boys pestered him with questions over this. Despite his human mouth, all he's done is say it's poor manners to have hooves at the feasting table. Tannabok's sons have interpreted this vague answer for themselves to try eating neatly as possible. Even neater then they do with their mother's sweet smile bearing into each one old enough to eat for himself. Even shaped like this Lord Altivo still favors apples, though his plate is at least more diverse.

Unsurprisingly, Lady Chel is the most normal out of all of them. She used to be mortal herself until not too long ago. Her conversations have been almost mundane, if one ignores the messages she passes on from Tannabok's mother and Miya's grandparents. She bounces little Kuili on her lap. Normally the most surly of the six, the toddler gurgles with joy around the doll Lord Tulio pulled out of thin air for him.

Also unsurprisingly, most of the conversation revolves around Lord Miguel and Lord Tulio. Mostly because their egos fit their stature.

Not that Tannabok minds much. His boys clamor for stories and the gods are eager to oblige.

"You see, there was a time when all us gods kept arguing over the stupidest things - who could throw a spear furthest, who could run the fastest, silly things like that. Eventually one of us got so fed up that they proposed a competition to settle the matter once and for all."

"Was it Lord Munah?" Yei pipes up, despite Naui shushing him.

"Yes," Lord Miguel agrees gamely. "So-"

Lord Tulio groans into his palm. "Really, Miguel, really? You're going there, again?"
Lord Miguel's eyes twinkle. "Of course, Tulio. It's a story that should never be forgotten."

"What story?" Ome demands.

"Tulio liked to think he was the fastest god there was and-"

"Because I was," Lord Tulio asserts. "I had to be, with my old job. And I was the champion, the literal god of the games."

Matla, the oldest, frowns. "But isn't Lord Munah the creator of contests?"

Lord Tulio rolls his eyes. "The ballgame, sure, and contests like that. That's where he takes over, because I had way too many roles as it was. But that hadn't happened yet. Besides, the race should be my game, almost as much as wrestling is. I was the fastest god alive-"

Lord Altivo calmly sips his pulque. "He wasn't. Ever."


He rolls his eyes. "Such silly contests are beneath our dignity and we had nothing to prove."

All eyes turn to Lord Miguel. His smug smirk and Lord Tulio's sullen glower are answer enough. Tannabok sighs and braces for another squabble. The last one had ended with mice squirming out of Lord Tulio's goblet, and Lord Miguel's plate growing wings. It still flutters around the kitchen during hectic times, because no one has the heart to pinion it.

"One can call it payback," Lady Chel interjects calmly. "From what I heard about your childhoods, Tulio, almost all the pranks were yours. And Miguel took the worst of them."

Lord Miguel's smirk gentles into a wistful smile. "Boy, did I ever. Your first day on earth, and you took my cattle."

"What are cattle?" Naui asks quietly.

"Animals like Lord Altivo's horse form," Lord Tulio explains. "Only fatter. And slower and smellier, but way more delicious."

One twitch of his hand and the shadows on the wall shift, because Miya put her foot down last time about actual animals being manifested in her hall. Or gods running about as animals, when Lord Miguel tried to relay the time he slew that giant python. The silhouette is of a heavy-set beast, large and lumbering. All of Tannabok's boys giggle at its moo, which draws in a whole shadowy herd of them.

"Not that anyone should have been eating them," Lord Miguel grouses. "Because they were mine."

Lord Tulio grins, as a little shadow no larger than baby Kuili slips into the scene. "Well, I had to get the other gods' attention somehow, for my sake and.... And you were so easy to rile up."

Tannabok sits back, enraptured by the shadows even as the storytellers more often than not dissolve into fond bickering. It's tale of theft and trickery and promises that somehow explains everything about the two.

When the tale is told and the evening winds down, the gods make their goodbyes and depart in a gust of Lord Altivo's wind. Most of Tannabok's boys are still spellbound by the last story and chattering excitedly to each other in their speculation over all the other naughty things a child god
could get away with.

Except keen little Naui, frowning in serious concentration and too polite to bring it up.

Only hours later, when Tannabok is seeing the most stubborn of his boys finally off to bed, can he see Naui finally ready to break his silence. Despite his endless curiosity, Naui is also the most godly of his boys, and almost never asks anything of divinity where his big brothers shower them in endless questions.

"Daddy?" Naui whispers softly. He only shares the nursery with little Kuili and baby Chiku now, and both are fast asleep.

His father smiles fondly, though his eyes briefly meet those of his wife watching from the threshold. He lowers his voice to the same conspiratorial tone to ask, "Yes, Naui?"

"Where do gods come from?"

"From where they're needed," Tannabok answers patiently but firmly, for he has already forded this question four times before recently. "Sometimes we need a god to be the sun or the rain. Other times we need ones capable of making us laugh the Jaguar God out of our lives and our temples."

"What about their mommies?"

Tannabok's smile freezes. Of course Naui knows why Lady Eupana is called Grandmother Turtle and that some of the great gods like Lady Raima are her children. Naui does not know such family relations can only be guessed at by the priests, if such relations exist at all. Connections are divined by reasonable assumption, such as Lord Xarayes, God of Oblivion, being the son of Death and the Lords of Xibalba almost all his children in turn. And the tendency of those who make too bold statements to be struck by lightning, stung by hornets, or otherwise punished for assuming beyond their purview.

"Not every god has one," Tannabok says honestly. "Some gods just are."

He knows, however, that Lord Tulio is not. As seems to be the case with the gods he fills in the gaps too late.

Lord Tulio taking two cattle, not one. Lord Miguel's angry demands made to empty air. The cradle by the empty bed where an unwitting mother should have slept.

"Well, I had to get the other gods' attention somehow, for my sake... and hers."

Naui was keen enough to spot the glaring omissions. Of course his brow furrows now, when he senses all his father holds back.

Tannabok still bids him sweet dreams, kisses him on the forehead, and makes his escape.

Miya sighs as they walk to their personal quarters together. "You know he's just waiting for us to go before he sneaks into his brothers' room and spend all night making up their own wild stories."

He sighs. "Yes, I know."

Royal or godly, children will be children.

How fortunate the Golden Gods are so fond of them.
Chapter End Notes


Stories mentioned are remixes of old Greek myths repackaged for the Manoan pantheon - Lord Miguel slaying a monstrous python instead of Apollo slaying Python, Lord Miguel whooping Lord Tulio's butt in a race instead of Hermes', and Lord Tulio's first day alive mirrors Hermes' except for one glaring omission.

Yes, I am sure engaging with the imaginations of excited children will have no consequences whatsoever ; )
the hero god (and the come on that wasn't)

Chapter Summary

Not even three days into his stay in Manoa, Miguel runs into the first true god in the city. And overestimates the universality of his sex appeal.

Or maybe that's just the jealousy talking.

Chapter Notes

This is one of the few one-shots so far set during the story proper - between Miguel showing off on the archery field and the farewell feast later that night.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crowd cheers his name nearly in time to the beats of his arrows striking their targets, and Miguel's being sings with the rightness of it all. He's forgotten how easy archery should come, how to be hailed as a paragon humans can only aspire to. It's a reunion nearly as sweet as finding his lost twin would be.

For over a thousand years he's been stranded in a human form. Now, as he aims with impossible eyes and stretch his muscles to impossible strain to reach his targets, he feels his constraints loosen.

Miguel speeds ahead of the crowd of adoring young warriors at his heels. In his zeal he's left them in the dust, because his feet have led him to the same empty arena that has helped affirm his and T-his nascent divinity. But the ballgame court is empty now.

Nearly so, at least. Except for the richly-dressed young warrior casually lounging on the golden hoop dozens of feet above Miguel's head. He reaches down to pluck the arrow that struck its target from half a mile across the city, impaling through gild into the stone beneath.

"Quite the eye, you have," he calls down conversationally.

Miguel returns it with a beaming smile of his own. No longer is he a mere groveling guest here. He can feel it, for Chief Tannabok has extended his earnest invitation. His pride refuses him to meet the god above as anything but an equal.

"For archery," he allows jovially.

The god arches a brow. The look only accentuates his handsome features. "But not for my spear-thrower? I thrashed the Crocodile God with it, I'll have you know."

"Some of us are made for the bow, and others the spear-thrower."

"And usurping the places of other gods?" The god idly twirls the arrow in his hand. "Lord Eytama was not pleased to find your eye extended toward all those little pests last night. In fact, he's
Miguel smiles back, because he doesn't need Tulio to charm his way into a pantheon. He's done many times before. Hell, he even managed to get the later Greeks to uphold him as the paragon of Greek youths when those of Homer's age still mistrusted him as more outsider than not. "Well, it's not like little chills and such are worth his time."

"So Lord Eytama says of the Vine People themselves. Why, just a hundred years ago they were brand new spoils of war."

"How fortunate, then, I don't belong to the People of Gold alone."

At this they both share a grim smile. It's one of the oldest stories ever told. Of course the Aragonese are less Spanish than the Castilians, like the conversos can never be trusted as true Christians or the newly-conquered Greeks and Iberians as proper citizens of the Roman Empire. And on and on.

Being god of foreigners has always been part of the job description.

"It's Lord Miguel, right? So I've heard from all those little plagues you ran back to Xibalba."

"The one and only," he agrees. He sizes up the young warrior god and his lithe muscles, aware he's being mentally undressed in turn. "I take it you're Lord Munah, then? Lord of the Games?"

"Eh." Lord Munah shrug. "I much prefer 'Hero God.' But then again, you were honing on two of my big things pretty hard yesterday. Even if you and your Lord Tulio made it all damn entertaining to watch."

Miguel narrows his eyes, one hand creeping toward his bow. "I promise I was never playing around yesterday. My commandment was just that - no sacrifices. Not now, not ever. Or you'll hear from me about it."

Lord Munah smiles. "I take it you're truly staying then? Good. Your partner has his head too far up his ass to deserve him following you back into petty obscurity."

He grips his bow tighter and spitefully doesn't give a solid answer on anything. He knows quite well what the Hero God is getting at, thank you very much. It's a bit of a nasty habit for him and Tulio both, spitefully fucking princes and noble women behind each other's backs when they're feeling particularly infuriated or betrayed. And an actual god isn't the sort of conquest Miguel has had in a very, very long time.

It's also high time for a fresh start. He's on the cusp of one already.

"Perhaps later," he responds coyly. "Some other time, some other place, when neither of us are quite so busy."

Lord Munah stares blankly for him. Then his sides violently shake with what can only be a heroically suppressed guffaw. Miguel refuses to scowl. It's not just the old vanity talking - he's still plenty attractive for other divinities to come onto, thank you very much. The beard only adds to his charm.

"Sure," the Hero God says absently. There is a very real flicker of worry when he glances up, where the sun now sails low in his terminal course for the horizon. "Some other time, some other place, when my very best partner isn't about to die for the day. Or needs a bodyguard to keep him from getting eaten, again, for the night."
Miguel winces guiltily, an apology on his lips, but Lord Munah is already gone.

He rests his bow beneath the golden hoop in atonement, because it's the least he can do right now, and there a hundred other warriors back there ready to fight over whose bow he's using next.

...He thinks he's had enough of archery, for the day. Perhaps it's time to go see what surprises Manoa has prepared for the farewell feast.

It might still be his last great celebration here.

Depending on if Tulio's finally come around and pulled his head out of his ass yet.

Chapter End Notes

Lord Munah is a loose expy of the Mayan Hero Twins that whooped the gods of the underworld in a ballgame. Here Lord Munah does it to win the Sun God back from his death in Xibalba, if only for half the day. His domain includes young warriors, athletics, general heroics and showmanship, and yes, ballgames.

...He may also happen to be the Sun God's and Moon Goddess' husband, because our angsty star-crossed tragic couple might or might need a little humor in their lives.
Chapter Summary

A goddess in four parts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

...Then even Tulio's near infallible memory fails some time after that voluptuous woman, her bosom pressing against his back and her long hair tickling his bare torso, dips his head backward to pour wine directly into his mouth.

Did they stand on a spinning stone head or is it just their own dizziness? The night and their imaginations explode into a spectrum of color. In the darkness demons and puppets dance. They glimpse gods in the skies and the shadows and the pulsing multitude.

He certainly remembers the pounding hangover the morning after.

Before there is the world, there is the barren wastes, an endless expanse of rock and sand, dead and sand. Only there is no death yet, for there is not yet life - there is only the absence of either.

Of course, this is an empty and ugly existence. Our Lady hates it the moment she lays eyes upon it. Tired of all the flatness, first she makes it interesting. Her feet carve riverbeds and her arms gouge out the ocean basins to raise up the mighty mountains, if only to have something more than flatness to look at it. Last of all she carves out the valleys. Our Lady is the Great Goddess, after all, greatest of all the gods. To her all the world is her field, and its valleys her planting beds.

Yet life cannot take root without nourishment. She fertilizes the ground with her own self and so forms the topsoil. As she toils away at her creation, Our Lady sweats and sweats until she fills up the seas. But this water is much too salty. All the seeds she plants wither in the salted ground, and turns all her failed attempts at planting to desert. Our Lady grows so frustrated she weeps. Her tears are clear and pure. She weeps the rains and the lakes and the rivers, to water her garden unto perpetuity.

With fertile ground, her seeds at last take root. Soon all her earth is green with grass and trees and bushes. For a time, Our Lady is content.

Until she grows bored. Then she makes the beasts. She plants her fingernails to make the scaled beasts of the earth or tosses them into the sea to make the fish. Her hair makes the furred beast and her breath the feathered. Though their minds are primitive, at least they can move and think in ways more interesting than plants. For a time, Our Lady is content.

Then she once more grows bored. After countless generations she realizes all the beasts are guided by their same dependable instincts. Once she learns what drives them, they hold no more secrets, nothing more to keep her interest.

Our Lady once more sets to work at her garden, to create a crop unlike any before or since. She plants her flesh and bone, her hair and her hopes, a bit of her heart and a bit of her mind. Such a
masterpiece deserves more than common rainwater. So Our Lady draws out her knife, and waters the fields not with her tears, but with her blood. The vines grow and spread out across the world. When Our Lady finally harvests their fruit, the first men and women drop down all over the mountains and valleys, and so form their own peoples. This is why there are so many tongues and peoples today, because we are the most successful crop of all.

Our Lady loves her children immediately, and they her. She loves us still, no matter how much we grate her nerves at times. We alone muck about with her creation to till fields and plant gardens of our own. We are not beasts, for we alone can contemplate her role in our lives.

Like all gardens, Our Lady's world is rife with pests of all sorts, chaos and pestilence and other such things most displeasing. Some have always been there, gnawing at her roots and her beasts. Some, like greed and war, simply fester in every human heart.

Somewhere in between are the other gods, sprung themselves from the earth or just having settled down somewhere they find pleasant. They grant our world useful things, like storms and fire, or take over things Our Lady is now much to busy to attend for herself. Still, they are all subservient to Our Lady, for without her they would have no worshipers or world at all.

And the gods can be most jealous beings. They crave the secrets of creation. Instead Our Lady grants them a consolation prize, maize beer and silky pulque. For a while, the gods are content to drink and feast with her, and ask no further questions.

Until the gods once more grow bitter. None of them were planted with Our Lady's brains, of course. Only humanity has that privilege. We alone are entrusted with knowledge of tilling fields and water fields until our harvests grow. It is the oldest magic in all the world, it is like life itself, and the one secret she asks to never share with the other gods.

For a while, all peoples of the world keep that promise. Humans are stubborn creatures, the stubbornerest of all. We do not take kindly to those that force things from us, especially from those that think themselves so high above us.

Eventually some gods grow clever. When they realize brute force will not work, they offer sweeter enticements. They tempt humanity with useless, shiny things like silver and emeralds, jade and gold. All are pretty, and only pretty.

In time one person after the next divulges the sacred secret of planting, until it is no longer secret. Our Lady is not surprised by this betrayal - she grew us herself after all, and knows our hearts as well as we do. That does not stop her from being rightfully peeved by such treachery, or from rewarding the one village in the world with the decency to keep their mouths shut, no matter the temptations thrown their way.

For them Our Lady plants new wonders, unlike those seen anywhere else in the world, the ripest melons and hottest peppers. We alone have apples radiant as the gold our ancestors spurned. We alone were entrusted with the grape vine and the secret of how to distill its rich red wine. So we become the People of the Vine, keepers of the one vintage men and gods alike prize above all others. This is a sacred we keep safe, for only our highest priests and priestesses are entrusted the precise instructions.

That does not stop jealous gods and jealous men from trying to distill their own, for it is the greatest tribute one can offer. They manage only sour vinegar not fit for flies, and so must depend on the weather and our own graces to trade it from us.

Our Lady is a generous goddess, when she's in the mind to be. On the feasting days all the altars
and idols may be doused in undiluted wine, like Our Lady shares in her subterranean halls.

For those gods that are courteous guests, of course. Those who are being uncooperative, who inflict plague or war or drought for their own petty reasons, are denied their share for the year. Humans are stubborn creatures, after all, and the People of the Vine stubbornest of all. We will not bow to the tantrums of greedy gods, not with our most sacred of tributes.

They can wait until the year after for their share, so long as they're behaving.

Though the Dual Gods had long departed the world, the Sun God shined down on the prosperous, golden city they had left behind. With their city the People of Gold prospered too, building to the brim of their valley. As the mountain walls became obstacles instead of protectors, and the people threatened to turn upon each other, Balam Qoxtok walked in the visions of his priests. Once more the time had come for war and conquest, so Manoa itself would not be consumed by them.

Mightiest of Manoa's neighbors were the People of the Vine, proud and haughty. Long had they refused to bow to Manoa's hegemony, jealously hoarding away the seeds and secrets of their crops, unlike any other in all of creation. They were a well-fed people, for what they lacked in gold they more than made up for in natural abundance.

It was upon the flesh of the Vine People the Jaguar God fed. He was honored with their warriors and their nobles. Before his altar, for all the city to see, the chief and chieftess of the Vine People had their hearts carved out. The city ran red with royal blood, those of their children and all their distant relations, to end the Vine People's power and satiate the thirst of Balam Qoxtok.

The common people and the craftsmen were marched to Manoa in chains, to work the fields with their knowledge and put down the roots of their own crops. And so their bounty became Lady Raima's, and their harvest Lady Tlaxipeua's. The people became the greatest crop of all, the first of offerings for the direst circumstances, so that a child of Gold need not die in their stead.

In chains with them marched their gods. They were petty things, beaten down by the Manoan gods, their temples desecrated and their idols melted down for their valuables. They had no place in the hearts of the victors, and were bitterly rejected by their own followers for their humiliating defeat. Soon they all passed into oblivion.

All, but Lady Paquini. She was most beautiful of the Vine People's gods, and still one of the most beautiful of ours. She is as voluptuous as the curves of the mountains and valleys, with eyes rich as grapes and tresses of wine-dark hair. She came to our city in high spirits, even bound and captive, for even then she was of madness and merriment. It did not take her long to charm Lord Bibi, that old scoundrel, with winks and wit. So he set her free, to see what she might do next.

The Lady of the Vine did not disappoint. To celebrate the victory of Manoa Lady Paquini threw the greatest party in all of creation. Her dance mesmerized the gods and her songs were so enthralling they all moved in time to her. Only then did she slit her own wrists, and offer the spice of her veins to the assembly. Gods do not bleed. That is why we shed blood before their altars, to grant them strength and vitality in the mortal plane. Yet the Vine People do not sacrifice man or beast before her altars. No, they offer grapes and fruits and spices. So Lady Paquini sheds wine as her blood, sweat, and tears, the finest mulled wine all the world.

Our gods drank, and drank, and drank. They fell into drunken debauchery with her and awoke the next morning from the wildest, merriest night of their lives. Our gods realized all that was good and generous in Lady Paquini, the Wine Goddess, and that they did not want to weather the tedious centuries without her. So Eupana, Lady of the Lake, adopted her as granddaughter, for Lake
Parime nourishes the grape vines just as it does all the fertile earth of Lady Raima.

Where the priests and priestesses of the other Vine gods were the Jaguar God's spoils, Lady Paquini's were spared. They alone know the secrets of fermentation and distillation, how to transform a humble grape into the blood of their goddess, and not just sour vinegar.

That is why pure wine is a libation reserved for the gods and great sacrifices alone, for it is an offering more holy than even the pulque of the earlier age. Even the great priest cannot drink such holiness undiluted, but with one part wine for only four parts water. The rest of us make do with what our lot allows, be it one part to six, or one to eight or ten and so on. That is why we honor Lady Paquini with a temple of her own in the city center, so she need not dwell in squalor on the outskirts with the Vine People.

She goes where there are good times to be had, be it the royal palace or the humble homes of her children. That is how it has always been, even when she was hailed as Queen of Creation. And right now she is needed most in the city center.

After all, it's not every night a reverent feast is held with gods themselves as the guests of honor.

Not that any of them are great gods, yet. Lord Miguel and Lord Tulio are little things with grand words and cute little illusions. She likes their pluck, even if she more appreciates Lord Altivo's silent, unabashed for what he currently is and is actually capable of.

There are other gods present, of course, eagerly waiting for the moment things fall apart and they pounce upon these little pretenders as interlopers, unwelcome and very much unwanted. It's almost like all of these great powers have conveniently forgotten they too were once so small and dependent upon the people's every whim. They all are, at some point or another. Of course she mixes with them, making chitchat about the night or how their own spheres of influence are going. She flutters from group to group like a butterfly, leaving wine in her wake. Lots and lots of wine.

Eventually Lady Raima stops threatening to start smoking her volcano again, but lulls back for Lord Cassipa to suck reverently at her neck. She draws nervous Lady Kama from her corner, into an actual conversation with some star deities. One cup is enough to stop Lord Maka from his gossiping and go fluttering after that tree goddess he's been infatuated with since forever.

"Great party, Paqui," the Flayed Goddess calls out to her, skinless face radiant with her smile.

Of course she winks right back. "Only the best for you, Tlaxi."

When the gods of Manoa are deep in their cups, she sets sights on her true targets for the evening.

Lord Miguel and Lord Tulio hold their wine impressively well. She can't help an appreciative whistle, because it's been a very long time since she ran into another deity who knows their wine cults. Too bad they don't see her for who she is when she outright funnels her best stuff into their mouths. The sober almost never see her, unless they know the true power of her name.

The wise Manoans caution each other about rationing their alcohol, even if their high station lets them near drink to their heart's content. They remember even know she is a goddess of truth, those of the most unwelcome sorts - those found at the bottom of the wine bottle.

She appreciates what Lord Tulio and Lord Miguel have done for Chel so far. Truly, she does. Such a clever daughter of hers should never suffer the indignity of the Jaguar God's altar. But right now they are such small things, reined in by their utter terror of discovery and incurring the wrath of their hosts.
How can she see them for what they truly are, if she does not strip all their inhibitions away?

IF they are truly weeds of the worst sort, better to rip them from her garden before their roots grow too thick and deep.

Neither starts groping at people or calling out for blood. That's always good. Lord Tulio tries to impress Chel with an endless list of epithets, but can't manage a tongue she can understand. No surprises there - she already knows how full of himself he is. Lord Miguel tries to weave a spell so others might share in his dizzy elation, but can't string a proper song together.

They meekly Chel up into their temple for bathing and bedtime, collapsing into their bed with snores. Uneventful as an after party as there could be.

Lady Paquini smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Lady Paquini - goddess of wine, grape vines, fermentation, distillation, merriment, revelry, sex, and the truth found at the bottom of a wine bottle. Former goddess of the earth, agriculture, and all creation.

There is no grape species native to Central or South America - though are a few in North America. Given our boys are clearly drinking wine in the movie, and all the other fantastical fruits that clearly shouldn't be there at that place and time... Yeah, there's your mythic origin story for it all.

Especially in areas between or before large, expansive empires, individual cults were very much tied to the success of individual towns or city states. If another city's gods so clearly 'beat' your own... well, why bother to keep supporting the losers?

Unless there's one goddess that really, really means a lot to you.

Lord Maka - the Parrot God. God of the birds of the air (non-waterfowl), messages to the heavens, and general rumors and gossip.
Lady Tlaxipeua - the Flayed Goddess. Goddess of maize, general agriculture, and the harvest.
Chapter Summary

Manuel the security guard is having a bit of a rough afternoon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It is four o'clock in the afternoon.

For Manuel, it is the witching hour.

With only an hour left until closing, it's time to start making his rounds and politely remind guests to wrap up their visit. Most of the families and usual patrons had the decency to come and go hours ago. All that's left stumbling into the natural history museum this late are the weirdos, mostly the artsy types and the tourists trying to cram in some last minute selfies in the indigenous people's exhibits to rub into their friends and followers back home.

Outside it's a beautiful day. Even the tourists can't be bothered to waste it inside. Except for a small group of old people shuffling for the exist, the first two galleries are empty. So far, so good.

The third gallery is the one with all those creepy naked statues and people in weird poses on loan from somewhere in Europe. On first glance, it looks deserted. Manuel is about to happily write it off too, until he does a double take. Because he's not alone after all.

It takes three blinks to ensure, yes, these three are real people and not escapees from one of the exhibits. They're wearing normal clothes and not... whatever he stupidly thinks they were wearing a second before. The woman is certainly gorgeous enough to look like she stepped out of a painting. Her companions have hairstyles that are pretentiously quirky at best and at worst laughably old-fashioned. All three are... definitely tourists. Maybe they're from a little town out in the countryside or from New York City. All he knows is they're obviously not from here.

Manuel politely hangs around waiting to be noticed, but these three are lost in conversation. Out of curiosity he eavesdrops a little. In the busy season he hears a dozen languages a day, from French to Mandarin.

At first he thinks they're most definitely foreign. But, after a few moments, Manuel belatedly realizes their language is Spanish. A bit of different dialect than what he's used to, but still his own friggin’ mother tongue. Yeesh. No more waking up at four in the morning to squeeze in that morning exercise before work!

"...Wow, you really weren't kidding about that little cape thing. You're naked in more than half of these."

"N-Not technically! Capes still count as clothing!"

"Yes, yes, Tulio but by the standards of today, in this city, she has a point. These cloaks are barely on your shoulders, if they're not just wrapped over your arm. Everything's all just hanging out there."
"L-Like yours are any better, Miguel!"

"Actually, he is dressed in most of his. However, I am wondering why you're wrestling a naked, bearded man for a... tiny chair?"

"That was my sacred tripod, Chel! Our stupid brother wasn't happy with the answers I gave him, and tried to steal it for himself. So I wrestled him for it. I would've won, too, if our dad hadn't broken us up first."

"...How did that work out you?"

"Surprisingly well," the other man, Tulio, cuts in. "Miguel got to keep his tripod. And I got to sell our dickhead of a brother off to some queen for a year to weave and clean for her, so it all worked out in the end."

And that's where Manuel draws the line. He clears his throat and draws their attention back to reality. "Excuse me, ma'am, sirs, I'd wrap up now if I were you. We have less than an hour until closing."

The blond beams at him. "Thank you, Manuel! We'll be on our way shortly. Just a bit more..." He flicks a near-naked statue an unthinkable look. "Reminiscing to catch up on."

"He means admiring the art," the woman corrects. Which does not help the situation at all.

"Okay," Manuel says, because all of his madness is way above his pay grade. He surreptitiously hangs around in the background for a bit to make sure nothing untoward happens to the naked, priceless historical artifacts. Then he hurries for the exit.

And nearly screams his head off, when he thinks one of the equine statues came to life. His second thought is that's obviously ridiculous, and that a horse merely wandered in from the busy street. Only on the third try does he saw the long-faced man staring mournfully at some lady seated between two stone horses.

Manuel awkwardly hangs back for a moment, because he feels like he's intruding on something intimate. But a job's a job, so he clears his throat and warns this weird guy the museum his closing time. He decides to interpret the long-faced guy's long, meaningful blink in his direction as a yes. And hurries back to relative sanity.

Until the next hall, that is. It always gets the most traffic, and therefore the most colorful characters. Manuel does his best to avoid the very ancient, very unsettling artwork of flayed men and eldritch monsters to catch the eyes of the only people still loitering. The poor man is very sun burnt, because of course his skin is all accounted for. Just like his woman companion has a long leather skirt, a very metal taste in jewelry, and a very normal human head.

"Excuse me," he calls. "Closing time is in half an hour."

Manuel waits for some vague form of acknowledgement and fast-walks his way on. The woman's skirt definitely does not hiss at him as he passes.

At last they aren't overly enthusiastic tour guides or creepy old janitors. Those are the people Manuel actually has to put up.
A lot of depictions of Miguel and Hermes aren't technically nude - tiny little cloaks still count. Even if they conceal nothing whatsoever XD

Heracles, the raging dickhead who decides it's a great idea to steal Apollo's sacred tripod and start his own damn oracle with blackjack and hookers when he doesn't get the answers he likes. And then winds up struck by lightning by dear old dad, and enslaved by Hermes to the Queen of Lydia for a year to do some menial labor. The divine protector of mankind, everybody.

Yes, those two gods are who you think they are ; )

Cameo? What cameo :p
who is like god?

Chapter Summary

At first, there was faint curiosity. Then apathy, interspersed by the occasional annoyance.

Now, there is only fear, and the feeling of going down a one-way river with a yawning abyss at the end.

Or, as the balance of power shifts, Apollo is feeling far too much like Cassandra before Troy burned.

Chapter Notes

Musings of the many iterations of the ancient Abrahamic belief systems by a pagan god, in a world where each interpretation of that religion is no more or no less valid than the others. Also that god also belongs to a society that casually threw around discrimination to peoples of the Jewish and Early Christian faiths. Please read at your own discretion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The gods of the east are ancient, some older than even himself, with names and powers made all the hazier by close languages and shifting city states. In his earliest memories, there is 'Il. Ancient, venerable 'Il, creator of creatures and father of gods, consort of Atiratu, she who treads upon the sea, and sire of seventy sons. Of lesser regard and uncertain origin, there is also Yahweh, a god of storms and the heavenly hosts of 'Il.

He never has time to pay them much regard, because there's far too many gods out east to keep track of as is. The further his later followers carry him to greater glories in the west, the less he cares of whatever murky roots he has to Anatolia and the lands further east.

And, sometime after that, there is a God. One who can't just be taken as another name and face of his own father. God's followers are very insistent on that. Just like they are of His one Temple and that, no, the sacrifices and idols offered up by outsiders are very much unappreciated. To them the blood is very much impure unless offered in just the right way, and all the idols graven images. Many of Apollo's own followers are convinced God's followers are donkey worshipers. Apollo isn't sure why, but the accusations are there. All that matters is that God's people acknowledge their allegiance to the state, participate in the same sacrifices and pledges that bind the Roman citizens as one.

Apollo is able to ignore God, for the most part. He's in Iberia now, far away from all the chaos and rebellion back east over the issue. Aside from the occasional unpleasantness from God's community all the way here, Apollo is apathetic to them. So long as they pay their taxes, they can keep their God.
And then there are Christians to make things more confusing!

Apollo has trouble differentiating them in the beginning, if there's much difference at all. They worship in the same spaces and pretty much adhere to the same practices, at first. Until they argue and pull away from each other, because apparently some believe in the just the one God and others God and His Son.

Only no, it's not that simple. There are Christians that insist their... Christus was born a righteous man and adopted as God's through resurrection. Others believe Christus never human at all, that his physical form was only an illusion, or that he and God the Father are mere aspects of the same Trinity. Or something. Every school has their own belief that of course makes them the true followers, and sets them against all others.

Unless it's Apollo's followers right after all, and Christus is just a bastard by some Roman soldier named Panthera. But that's a headache for another time.

When Apollo learns some Christians are debating now if there's even one God, and start writing scathing discourses on demiurges and one God actually being the Devil, he throws up his hands and leaves the whole superstitious lot to their bickering. Most of the converts are of the peasant class, a dull and superstitious lot anyway swayed by the esoteric ramblings of a long dead sorcerer. What does he matter what they parrot, when his true, educated followers keep up with his sacrifices and ceremonies?

Besides, when the followers of the proper pantheon grow too frustrated against all these young upstarts, there's always a good riot or church burning to put them back into place. Distasteful, really, but what can you do?

Or so Apollo's family believe. Even Mercury doesn't really believe him when he prophecizes these weird little zealots as a threat instead of mere pest, much less a world-ending one.

Fate deferred is fate denied, and so the Olympians hem and haw about Christians for over three hundred years. There's a riot there, a short-lived edict there, and gaping apathy the rest of the time.

At first, there was faint curiosity on Apollo's behalf. Then apathy, interspersed by the occasional annoyance.

Now, there is only fear, and the feeling of going down a one-way river with a yawning abyss at the end.

Within two short years, there comes the Edict of Serdica to end all formal persecution of Christians and grant them implicit rights made official by the Edict of Milan. No longer are they dangerous breakaways of the Jewish faith, but a religion just as legitimate.

It's an omen of turning tides if Apollo's ever seen one. Still, the gods turn a blind eye. The deviant class has been brought once more into the fold, inherently lesser than those who remain true to the sate and the state's pantheon.

Most of them, at least.

"H-Hey, Apollo?"

The god doesn't look up from plucking his lyre. "Oh, hello, Mercury. What brings you here?"

Mercury at least has the decency not to ask what Apollo is doing hunkered down in a deserted grove in the ass-end of the Pyrenees. They both know he comes here to brood and work his
frustrations out through heavy melodies. And Apollo has been especially vexed as of late.

"Just, you know. Information."

Apollo arches an eyebrow. "Isn't that what you're for?"

Mercury snorts. "Yeah, sure, on our matters. This... isn't about us, per se."

"Is it Christus, or His Father?" Really, there's only the two. Mostly. "Or that evil demon or whatever They're supposedly greater than but allowed into the world anyway?"

"Um, more than the former than the latter. I think."

"You think? Mercury, how did you even-"

"I was checking up on a shepherd," the messenger god butts in quickly. "You know, that cute one from a few years back? The one with the-"

"Yes, yes." Apollo pinches the bridge of his nose. "I remember. Far, far too well. Please, go on."

"I hadn't heard from him in a while. A long while, and he used to be so pious." Mercury shrinks in on himself, as Apollo sighs in sympathy. "I had to check up on him, to see if he was really... And he was, Apollo, he was. I overheard him and another shepherd discussing... somebody important named Miguel."

The other god frowns as he tries to parse this. "You mean... Micachel?"

"Pft," Mercury snorts. "Like they're even speaking proper Latin out in the countryside anymore. Gods damned language drift. It's almost like the more they grow distinct from the rest of the empire, the more they drift away from... Well, it doesn't matter. Back to Micachel-"

"Miguel," Apollo gently corrects.

The other god rolls his eyes. "Please, Apollo. Don't indulge the traitor peasants like that."

"Time flows forward, Mercury," Apollo chides gently. "So do you languages. You used to love it too, once. If that's his name to them, that's his name."

"Still a crappy epithet either way you frame it. Who is Like God!? Really, who calls themselves that?"

"It-It's just his name," Apollo corrects. "That's all there to it."

"What?" Mercury squawks. "What kind of self-absorbed Father gives his Son a name like that?"

"God is not Miguel's Father, Mercury," Apollo explains slowly, as if teaching a small child. "He's Miguel's Creator. And Miguel is just one of His angels, His messengers. They all have names like that. God Is My Strength, God Is My Light, and so on."

"But isn't Miguel like, the really strong one? As in, an actual warrior that kicked that demon's ass or whatever while Christus just stood around preaching and taking shit from humanity?"

"Yes."

"And they even pray to Miguel too, right? Dedicate churches in his honor?"
"On God's behalf."

"Technicalities, Apollo! And Christus is the one they call the Son of God? Not the actual dragon-slayer with the fiery sword and actual experience in a war that's already happened?"

"I'm not the one making all this up, Mercury. It's just how it is."

"Huh." Mercury falls silent in thought. Then after a quick eternity mischief breaks across his face. "All the powers of the god, even the prayers, and he gets saddled as a servant with a name like Miguel? Hah! Think it'd be fun to meet a being like that?"

"No," Apollo intones wearily. "It wouldn't be."

The other god rolls his eyes. "Spare me the theatrics, Apollo. His God might be a distant threat, sure, but this Miguel has to be a walking bundle of resentment and insecurities for being pigeonholed like that. We can welcome him to the right side of the law and just... ruffle his feathers a little. For a little laugh."

Apollo sighs. Inexplicably he is reminded of Cassandra, how she must have felt in the waning days before Troy burned, with all its horrible futures unfolded before her and not a soul to believe her. 

He is very, very sorry for the curse he laid upon her head, when he stands where she did.

Chapter End Notes

The ultimate origins of God can most likely be traced to a syncretism between Il/El (a Semitic creator god) with Yahweh, a storm and war deity of still uncertain origin. Early fragments of deities like Asherah, Ba'al, and others linger for some centuries after, suggesting a period of transition from polytheism, to a henotheistic belief system where El-Yahweh was held above the others, and finally a consolidation into a monotheistic movement that would form the backbone of the earliest form of a God most modern audiences would recognize.

Greco-Roman polytheism was irrevocably linked to the state itself, with sanctioned sacrifices and the like being a process of affirming allegiance to the people and the emperor. In theory allegiance was more important than belief, so as long as you put in your appearance and didn't outright talk shit about the gods you were golden. Unless, of course, your belief system allowed for one God only.

In theory Judaism was an 'approved religion' where with certain taxes and like Jewish people could still live in relative peace legitimately in the Roman Empire, so long as they didn't disrupt worship of the official gods. In theory, of course, because people from all time periods are raging assholes sometimes. That still didn't stop Romans from sometimes conflating God with Jupiter or Ba'al, erecting graven images on their sites, interpreting them as donkey worshipers (?), violently repressing their faith at times, and other shitty atrocities.

Christians, regarded as deviants of the Jewish faith, were technically 'illegitimate' until the Edict of Milan granted them official legal status. And then seventy years after
Early Christianity was a red-hot mess in terms of all the various movements going around before orthodoxy became a thing. Early Christians worshiped in shared spaces with the Jewish faith for their first few centuries of existence. Only with increasing push back against the whole Messiah thing for one side and strictness of adherence to the Jewish Law for the other did they start drifting into two very distinct movements again.

Some fun forms of Christianity bouncing around in the early 300s include, the one where Jesus is just a very holy man, the one where Jesus is adopted by God, the one where Jesus' physical form is an illusion, the one where the Old Testament God is a faker called the demiurge, the one where Old Testament God is literally Satan, and enough different interpretations of the Trinity and godhead to make your head implode. And also the stubborn old pagan Romans who still insisted Christians are all just dumb, gullible peasants and Jesus was a lying sorcerer whose real dad was a Roman soldier named Panthera.

Michachel is the more classic Latin rendering of Michael, but by this period the slurring of sounds that will give rise to Vulgar Latin and eventually to the earliest forms of the Spanish languages are probably in effect. Angels more obliquely mentioned are Gabriel and Uriel, both major angels today who surprisingly owe most of their mythology from apocrypha and later interpretation of the canon texts, depending on your flavor of Abrahamic faith.
strangers (in a strange land)

Chapter Summary

"Non plus ultra," warned the Pillars of Hercules. "Nothing further beyond."

Their warning was right, after all.

Or maybe it wasn't.

A story of a ship very far from home, and those their crew brought with them.

Chapter Notes

Death and mentions of very dark subjects, because most of these people are stranded at sea.

The ship's come all the way from Campania, with stopovers on the Tunisian coast. Quintus only joins the expedition at Carteia, where the ship takes every last amphorae of wine, olive oil, and salted fish the captain will begrudgingly allow onboard. Even Quintus can see there's some room left over in the hold, but the captain is adamant on not overloading the ship, no matter what his father argues. This is not yet another voyage across the Mediterranean, gentle and predictable as a sea can be. The Atlanticum is not tried by the faint of heart, no matter how round the boat and strong its sails.

Quintus is no stranger to the sea, not really. He's accompanied his father to other ports across Hispania, and even out to Italia once. Yet, when their ship sails through the Pillars of Hercules, he cannot help but cling to his silver medallion and whisper fervent prayers to Mercury. He know all too well the warning inscribe upon those rocks - nothing further beyond.

Marcus laughs and slaps his back. "Really, Quintus, don't act like we're sailing to the actual Isles of the Blessed. I've been out to the Fortunate Islands twice before now. Each time we took in a fortune's worth, but there aren't any dead heroes out there. Only islanders greasy with all our olive oil."

Quintus knows it, all too well. The Phoenicians had jealously guarded the sources of their famed dyes. Now its orchil and dragon's blood is the Empire's for the taking. "I pray for the commerce awaiting us, Marcus, and that my tongue won't fail me in sending us home with the biggest fortune you've ever fucking seen."

Marcus smiles. "Maybe Mercury will hear you, then. Pluvialia is the closest island to the empire. With all the traders, he's probably our most popular god out there."

Quintus relaxes somewhat. He knows Mercury is bound to the roads, but they're still travelers, aren't they? Surely the god will heed them here, past where so many of their ancestors had refused
to venture. "Which god is your patron, then? Neptune or his lovely wife? Venus, even, who was born from the sea form?"

Marcus laughs. "Apollo, of course! He who is Actius and Theoxenius is a very good friend to have, out here."

Quintus almost frowns at the names, before he forces his face to go blank. They're Latinized to sound more palatable to the ear, yes, but their nature is still very much Greek. He's almost forgotten that Marcus, while born to a very respectable merchant father in Corinthus, has a Greek slave for a mother.

"Of course Apollo loves the pretty sailors like you!" he jests instead. "We all see from your hair how much he means to you!"

Marcus laughs and tosses his head, with sun-streaked curls longer than what's considered fashionable these days. "Hah! Five years ago, maybe. I think the beard has driven him off!"

As the Pillars of Hercules vanish behind them, the refuge of land does not. The experienced captain cleaves to the coast, where there are ports to restock food and water as needed. These are not Roman settlements, but familiar enough with their traders to welcome them. The crew is in good spirits, even when they at last veer away to the open ocean. Quintus is in a good mood too, and laughs with several others at the dolphins that frolic one day in their wake.

"Look," he laughs to Marcus. "Apollo's with us, after all!"

Marcus smiles tightly, despite some of the glowers the other sailors send him. Several spit and make signs as if to ward off evil. Livius, who has never liked him, outright glares.

Later, when most of the crew sleeps and there's no one around to hear, Marcus drags him to a deserted corner of the ship. "Do you know why," he hisses, "why we call that god He of the Dolphin?"

Quintus swallows, very keen his friend is not invoking the name. "He guided a ship of Cretans sailors to safe harbor, and they founded one of the greatest temples in the world to him. What's so bad about that?"

"First he turned into a dolphin to create a raging storm to escape Delos, and blow those Cretans off course," Marcus whispers flatly. "He leaped onto their boat, and threatened to capsize it every time they tried to throw him off. He didn't let them go until they had passed out of the waters they knew. Then he stranded them, away from their homes and families, and commanded them to live there forever more as his first priests."

Well, okay then.

To be on the safe side, Quintus never invokes a god again in the crew's presence, lest he somehow stumble upon another taboo. Most of these crewmen are veterans in sailing even past the empire's borders. They've earned their superstition by surviving this long. So Quintus limits himself to private, murmured prayers to Mercury, and agitates the fates no further.

The Fortunate Isles are not yet in sight, when storm clouds swallow the stars and the sea heaves beneath them. The captain roars an order lost to the boom of thunder, before a black wave sweeps him overboard.

There is no time for fear or frantic prayer. He clings to the rail in a death grip as the ship is batted back and forth like a mouse caught in the cat's claws. Eyes skewed shut against the wind and rain,
Quintus breathes when he can, and chokes on salt water when he can't.

The loudest *cra-ack* is not thunder at all. It is the mast snapping in two, taking three screaming sailors with it when the ship bucks it overboard. It misses Marcus by a foot. Quintus tries to scream out his friend's name, and only gags as another wave nearly steals him too.

Across the deck, their eyes meet. Marcus skids across, near tangled in the rope he holds to lash sails no longer there. Quintus reaches out to catch him, nails digging into slippery skin.

It's enough. Marcus gets a steadier grip against the rail, baring his teeth as he lashes them to it.

Quintus doesn't care he's too tangled up to swim if the hull gives out beneath them. All that crosses his mind is relief Marcus is here with them, and neither of them shall die alone.

Dawn brings bloody light on the horizon and waves smooth as glass. There are no prayers of gratitude called out, not to Neptune or Jupiter, not to Apollo ascending upon his fiery chariot.

They had set sail from Africa's coast with more than thirty fine men aboard. There are less than ten left. Two who nearly made it drift beyond them, still lashed to the boat but unable to fight the swells. Quintus skews his eyes shut against the beasts already swarming their drowned bodies, and cuts them loose with his knife. He sends each off with a prayer to Mercury, that the shepherd of souls shall find them so far out here.

Wearily Quintus falls beside Marcus. Almost all of their fellow survivors are too weak and shaken to stand for long. Those that lashed themselves to the ship have arms and legs rubbed raw and bleeding.

"Where do you think we are?" he rasps out.

Marcus squints out at empty, apathetic seas before gracing him a smile that does not reach his eyes. "Past Nivaria, certainly, and drifting by either Iunonia or Ombrion. There are ships that sometimes trade that far, much less the islanders sailing and fishing for themselves! We'll be spotted soon enough."

The ship certainly can't go anywhere under its own power, not ever again. Their mast has snapped. Such a deep, seafaring vessel was never intended to be rowed and they have not enough healthy crew mates left beside.

Their captain, gods rest his soul, had been foresighted enough to store some redundant food and water, should the winds have not cooperated with their voyage into Pluvialia. With less than a third of the crew left, they can stretch their supplies even further.

They drift on endless doldrums, the patient pull of the sea carrying them ever further west. Livius and the two grizzled old sailors left sneer suspicious at the empty seas ahead, the sea birds that wheel further and further out to the east before at last disappearing.

Despite their best efforts to clean their wounds, an infection sets in on the youngest of their member, fresher-faced than even Quintus. They try to best their nurse him, and Marcus murmurs frantic prayers in Greek and Latin to Apollo and Asclepius and the lesser healing deities, but out here their pleas go unheeded. A week after the storm, Manius succumbs, and they give him to the sea.

With little too do, idle hands take advantage of the ruined wood the storm has left them. Old Priscus lovingly carves out his wife and all their many daughters and granddaughters. Rufus, called
so for his flaming hair, tries to show them all of his feminine conquests from back home. As he is a shit carver, his lovely ladies come off as misshapen dolls. Titus dutifully jots down a note for every day, even if it's just to bitch about the beating sun or the last of the olive oil running out. Even Livius creates something precious he wears on a cord around his neck. They take bets on what he's shaped for himself and use up some of their last wine trying to ply the answer out of him, not that he ever does.

It is Marcus starts it. He begins with a rough-hewn shape of a common dolphin. By the time he finishes it's Apollo Dephinius, reverentially placed atop a makeshift shrine. So does Titus make one to Father Jupiter and Vibius the twin forms of Castor and Pollux, patrons of sailors. Tacitus weeps silent tears when he forms shrouded Vesta, mistress of the hearth and home.

Quintus is shit at humans forms, even with the medallion of Mercury's face for reference. He tries and fails to shape a ram, a tortoise, a hawk. Instead his fingers form something smoother, leaner from a piece of rounded wood.

"Mercury's serpents?" Marcus whispers, startling him from his reverie.

Quintus blinks down, bemused to find his knife has carved two serpent heads, coiled together as one. "Maybe," he allows.

It is the only form he can imagine for Mercury, so far out to sea even the hardiest bird would drop dead of exhaustion, that might comfortably swim the waves. Apollo is fond of serpents, too, so wise and magical. Quintus likes to think it's the two gods coiled together, his patron and Marcus', together as only brothers and partners can be in this time.

When Vesta is formed, Tacitus instead carves the names of the dead upon the prow, starting with the captain's and ending with Manius'. Then, when they awake one morning, Tacitus is nowhere to be found. Solemn Vesta is alone in her desolate shrine, and Tactitus' name is carved beneath that of Manius.

Something breaks in the crew, after that. Old Priscus denies his share of water one day and does not awake the next. Vibius, weakened from hunger, slips on the slick deck and cracks open his head. He's gone by nightfall. Some days later, Titus scrawls one last day for the count before adding he's fucking off. He's overboard before anyone can stop him, and sinks like a stone. No one has the strength to clamber after him, not even strong and nimble Marcus. Their rations are too meager, and bodies too shriveled.

With Titus gone, the time stops passing by in orderly days, and blurs by the dwindling amounts of food and water in the stores. There is too little rain, and so Father Jupiter's idol is tossed overboard in a huff. Fucking bastard got them into this situation, anyway.

Then, on a noon where tempers are boiling more than their blood, Livius' trembling fingers spill a slosh of fresh, precious water. Rufus snaps a like a rabid dog.

"You fucking moron!" he roars, spittle flying as he lunges for the other man's throat. "You gods damned, fucking mo-"

Quintus and Marcus race to break the two apart. Before they can, Livius snarls. Steel flashes in the sunlight. Then Rufus is on the deck, gurgling like a sacrificial ram from the slash on his throat.

When he falls silent, so does the ship. Pale as a ghost beneath his sun burnt skin, Livius stumbles back. "I- I- He came at me. You saw it, he-"
"We're not the ones you're going to need to convince, Livius," Marcus answers wearily. "We'll all be answering to them sooner or later."

It takes all three of them to get Rufus overboard, because their strength went to shit a long time ago. For one moment, Quintus' hands linger as he considers the flesh he holds, still supple with water. Vehemently he throws the body to the waters. Even now he is a man, and will not devour his own kind. Desperation will not make him into Lycaon.

They retreat to opposite ends of the boat, Marcus with Quintus and Livius alone. They creep together only at dawn, to ensure the other side does not take more than their fair share of the rations. Livius' eyes glint, but it is two against one. Quintus goes with knife in hand, and even withered with hunger Marcus cuts a broad frame indeed, and so Livius holds his tongue.

Though with each other for company, neither of them speak much. It hurts to speak through their parched throats, and there's little left to say. Their tears and mournful confessions had been spilled weeks ago, when there was water still enough to weep. Now Quintus leans listlessly against Marcus' side, turning his medallion over and over in his hands until Mercury's face is near worn away. With single-minded intent, he whittles away at a piece of driftwood fished from the seas early on, and whittles some more.

"Q-Quintus," a rough voice croaks, with no small amount of desperation.

Quintus lets himself get shaken awake with a grunt, to assure his partner he is still very much alive. "Hm?"

"Need your hands." With a ghost of a grin Marcus presents the fruit of his labor. "Steadier than mine."

It's a dolphin, far smaller than than the one on Apollo's altar, more roughly carved. Quintus' fingers shake as he carefully pierces a hole into the dorsal fine and threads a rough cord through. He presses the carving back into his partner's calloused hands, but Marcus only smiles wanly and ties it around Quintus' neck instead.

When Marcus tilts his head to press a rough, reverential kiss to his neck, Quintus snags his hand in a death grip. "Don't you dare."

"Dare what, my Quintus?"

They stare at each other, silent, for to speak the evil breathing down their necks is to invite it to lunge down upon them.

On the dawning, Marcus barely has the strength to rise. He leans heavily against the hall when they descend to the devastated stores for their shares. Livius eyes them and Quintus stares right back, stoic as a hawk, as a serpent.

The scratch to mark off the water's newly depleted level is smaller than the one before it, and even smaller than the days before that. Quintus glares suspiciously Marcus, for it is certainly not Livius taking less than his previous shares.

That night, Marcus drifts off early, scarcely after sunset. His eyes as glassy before they slip close, and his breathing swift and shallow.

Quintus flexes his fingers and tests the sharpness of his blade. He prays to Mercury and Apollo, coiled together on their altar. He does not beseech their fortuitous aspects as giver of wealth and god of the sun, but rather the lord of thieves and averter of evil.
Marcus does not stir when he slips from his side, silent as a shadow from their domain into the central hold. He lingers on the threshold, for his eyes to grow accustomed to the dark, and steals inside. There are so many emptied amphorae, chucked carelessly aside, and inedible materials of no use to anyone now. Aside from the shush of waves against the hull, all is silent. Quintus refuses to settle. It is as the twin serpents of the altar are coiled around his shoulders, hissing warnings into his ears, that-

A lump he has dismissed as an amphora erupts with a roar, as Livius rises from his own ambush.

Quintus turns.

In the night, steel strikes, swift as a viper.

It was a fisherman, that first spotted exactly what has beached upon their shores. It is a full party of warriors, properly armed, that heads forth from the village to investigate. In times like these it never hurts to be too cautious. Besides, if it does turn out to just be some odd type of dead whale it's more hands ready to get started with the harvesting.

When the distant blur resolves it turns out the hysterical fisherman is right after all. It is indeed a boat, the strangest one they've ever seen. Wherever the hell it came from, it's painfully clear it's never sailing anywhere ever again, and so thankfully not the harbinger of yet another war fleet.

While a few hesitate, the boldest warrior rolls his eyes and leads his men onto the boat itself. Their noses wrinkle at the terrible stench of so many survivors hunkering in squalor. They raise cudgels and clubs, for the quarters are much too tight for spears, and brace for a surprise ambush as they descend deeper in. One smartly strikes up a torch against the dark.

A few younger boys gag at the smell of decay, but the boldest warrior needs only one look at the fallen figure and the rats scuttling back into the dark to know he is very much dead, and the splash of dead, dark blood on the floor tells from what. His men murmur at the large, oddly shaped pottery. Perhaps they were used for storage, but now all are empty of their contents. There a few strange statues and stone heads lying around in the corners, all carved in the same strange and disturbingly realistic style. Compared to those of their home, the faces are not quite right, either from strangeness of carver or just the look of the people. The face of the dead man on the floor has been consumed, but his rags are still clearly of an alien style.

One warrior curiously tugs at the cord around his neck. The wooden little disc at the end, lovingly carved, is either a girl or young woman with features like those on the statues. He guiltily draws his hand back.

At the utter end of the ship, in its last chamber, they discover the first man's likely killers. They lie like puppies, one protectively sprawled across the other. Neither are much paler than the warriors themselves, though their faces and rags are strikingly alien. Both are hairy, their hair odd streaks of reds and golds and browns.

The bold warrior prods the top one with his club. The stranger stirs, blinking dazedly. His eyes are pale gray, like a cloudy sky, but cannot quite focus on them. Across his neck is another thin piece of cord. One talisman is a roughly carved wooden dolphin. The other is most definitely a disc of silver. When one man snatches for it, the stranger clumsily swats him away before the bolder warrior can shove the thieving bastard out the way.

The bold warrior bends down to inspect the stranger's companion, so still upon the floor. Only then does the first man rouse himself with a rough, fearsome cry. In his roughened throat the sound
comes out as a strangled, furious hiss. Metal flashes in the torchlight.

The warrior takes a shallow slash to the arm before punching the man down. He struggles valiantly against the two men that hold him up with little effort. The bold warrior idly inspects his dropped knife. Once he's sure it's not dipped in poison, he takes a moment to wonder at a material sleek as obsidian, but brighter and less brittle.

Ignoring the stranger's spluttered curses, for from his tone the words can be nothing but, he searches for a pulse in the second.

An older warrior lets out a cynical grunt at his appraisal. "I don't either of them are long for this world, not even the first bastard. He's like a snake's head, still biting before it can realize the rest of its body's been chopped off."

The bold warrior steps back, as he motions for his men to take the second stranger with them. Limp as a corpse, he lolls in their grip, with only a long groan to show he's not one already. With a weak cry, his partner gives up his struggles, and slouches in their hold. His glassy eyes, half-open, stubbornly stay open and fixated upon the other.

The bold warrior smiles wryly. "I don't know about that. Looks like they've got some fight left in them to me."

He should be in bed. He really, really wants to be in bed.

Instead, here he is, standing all alone in the middle of the night. Again. Staring up at the golden stele. Again.

Their temple's getting a pretty big change tomorrow, what with the new image finally being done and all. Not that the old one will be totally replaced, of course. Manoa cherishes its past too much to efface it completely. No, instead the Dual Gods and Feathered Serpent in their original incarnation will simply be joined by a visage that better embodies the current Golden Gods, complete with the resplendent Lady of Faith and the Lord of Winds in all his undoubtedly equine glory.

For a Feathered Serpent, the herald of the Dual Gods has a stern, equine land. And the people in this region that have ever seen a horse touched down mere weeks ago.

Tulio traces his chin, long and defined. It's his chin, has been so for more than a thousand years when this one body had been the only one he'd had. Up until recently, he had taken it as happy coincidence his chin has granted him plausible similarities to the foremost of the Dual Gods.

Next he feels the sharp slope of its nose and its upturned point. It's his nose, incongruous as ever in Manoa. It's not quite like the more down-turned noses of the Dual Gods, so similar to the Manoan people and their fellow gods in the pantheon that don't like prefer giant animal heads instead.

He and Miguel can look like anything or anyone they damn well please, now. Miguel does it more often, because he loves to prance anonymously the city streets and awe over everything without drawing the adoring masses or accidentally sending them all into song. Even Tulio will look like an ordinary thief or dancer, when he just wants a bit of peace and quiet. But when they appear before the people in godly guise they're still, well... themselves. Mostly because Manoa now expects them to look like that, and because they expect themselves to look like that. They're still very much outsiders in a way Chel was not and never will be.

Yet, for all he's still practically a newborn on these shores, Tulio's still old. He's survived cultural
migrations and stylistic shifts before. His image has been hewn in rough stone by the Arcadians, painted in black by Athenians, and carefully carved in marble by Romans. No matter how realistic or stylized, he's look into those faces and always seen himself.

When he gazes upon the Dual Gods, and the slow prickle of familiarity creeps up his back, he sees...

"Tulio?" a sleepy mumble sounds from behind him.

With a wry smile Tulio turns back toward Miguel. Or at least a sleepy, half-awake part of him anyway. Tulio wonders if Miguel's even conscious enough to realize he's (somewhat) in two places at once. They've been bound as two grounded consciousnesses for so long that their extended sense of selves is... unnerving to become comfortable with, again.

"Go back to bed, Miguel," he murmurs fondly, even though most of Miguel is still there, keeping their bed nice and warm with Chel.

"Can't," Miguel grumbles. "You're out here."

With a handy comparison for reference, Tulio can't help but glance back and forth from the bearded Dual God to his partner. He knows Miguel's face better than he knows his own, and upon that stele he sees...

"Hey, Miguel," he tries. "You've always been more of a boat god than me, right?"

His partner sighs knowingly. "Tulio-

"Hear me out, okay? You remember the Fortunate Isles, right? With all the dyes, and mixing up with the Hesperides? Well, remember how all of Iberia basically forgot they existed for a thousand years, and then rediscovered their existence as the Canary Islands? Say a ship got blown way off-course and-

"Please, Tulio, let it rest."

"Well, it's possible, isn't it? Maybe this is a homecoming after all, and-"

"Tulio," his partner interjects, "where was I born again?"

Tulio's mouth flops open, because there's a dozen ways to answer that question. Parts of Miguel might have been born across three thousand years among a dozen different peoples. Or reborn and retold a thousand times as people migrated and mixed up their gods and made up new ones and-

Tulio closes his eyes, suddenly as dizzy as he is when he tries to imagine what happened to the parts of him left behind in Greece and Italia and all the outermost edges of the Roman empire. "Down that path lies madness, doesn't it?"

"Hm-mmm."

"And I should stop rambling like an idiot and come to bed?"

"Pretty much."

Tulio turns his back on the past and takes Miguel's hand. He gratefully goes to bed without a murmur of protest, and soon becomes stuck when Miguel and Chel both burrow atop him.

He dreams of the ship that has borne them to these shores, Miguel always at his side, and the home
they have found here, in Chel's arms and the hearts of their people.

All is at it should be.

Chapter End Notes

The Canary Islands are off the coast of North Africa. Historically they were known and saw Roman trading, if not settlement. Romans traded for dragon's blood (a tree resin) and orchil (extracted from lichen), dyes in high demand at the time. This ship's voyage and manifest is inspired by a historical Roman wreck off the coast of modern day Lanzarote (what the Romans called Pluvialia) in the Canary Islands. Here, that ship... might have gone a bit farther. It was probably the westernmost point of the world the Romans were aware of, even if they never settled out so far. The islands of Ombrion (La Palma) and Iunonia (El Hierro), the westernmost in the chain, would have been the utter edge.

Then for about a thousand years after the Western Roman Empire fell Europe sorta forgot about the Canary Islands. Then they 'rediscovered' it in the 1300s and what followed in the early 1400s to the islands and the native Guanche were... a harbinger of what was to come later in the century.

Greco-Romans had taboos about bringing up certain bad subjects, such as referring to the Furies as 'the Kindly Ones.' Considering Apollo was a dolphin when he destroyed a bunch of lives by dragging men hundreds of miles away from home to worship him... Yeah, bad idea there. Vesta was a goddess home and hearth, Jupiter of course supreme god of the skies and storms, and Castor and Pollux protectors of sailors at sea.

No, there is no solid evidence Romans, Greeks, or Phoenicians had knowledge of the New World, let alone ever reached it. Most of their ships were designed for the relatively sheltered Mediterranean, backbone of the Roman Empire. But there were some ships that fared out to the British Isles and the Canary Islands. And certain statues of a style on certain east coasts of South America just a little bit questionable... So maybe's there a ghost of a chance at least one ship got blown way, way off course ;)

I flip-flopped twice if Marcus survived the journey two or not. I went from alive to dead to mostly dead. I had a more definitive ending for Quintus too, before deciding I was going to be THAT person and go for ambiguity. Again XD It's that kind of story, and freaking Life of Pi was in the back of my head for the scenes at sea.
Chapter Summary

There are those who will always seek El Dorado. Some will never find it.

Some always will. No matter what.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There is an El Dorado, a city of gold and endless treasures, where no soul walks free without being draped in finery. No matter its name among the savages, it's out there.

There is an El Dorado, one last great empire worthy of conquest, somewhere out there in the jungle. It is the last savage country in these lands on par with the Aztec and Inca. There must be one out there, for one last conquistador to earned a name as famed as Cortes and Pizarro.

A slew of land marks define the path, weeping heads and cavern mouths like fire-breathing dragons. Even with some variation accounting for translation and personal tastes of the speaker, the accounts are still too detailed to not be based in reality. Some soul, no matter where he is now or if he's long dead from disease, has been there and brought the knowledge back.

So do the expeditions march out, again and again, beneath Ordaz and Quesada and Federmann. In the highlands they find the Muisca, who paint their zipa in gold and throw treasures into their sacred lakes. But all too soon their gold is gone. The Muisca traded for their gold and there are no great mines nearby. They cannot be the source of El Dorado, not when the rumors filter out deeper still from the jungle.

More often, however, the conquistadors find folly or little villages only worth burning. Some expeditions start off so promising, working their way from the eastern coast into deep jungle. They find rough stones or ruins that must surely lead the way. In the end they find only pestilence and poisoned arrows rained down by hostile tribes, vicious beasts and trails so disorientating even the most disciplined cartographers lose their way.

They die by the dozens and then by the hundreds, as the years wear by.

There must be an El Dorado. Berrio and Roe and Sir Walter Raleigh have sacrificed too many to consider. Their lives could not have been sacrificed to a dream, a rumor blown wildly out of proportion.

There are still unconquered places in this world, if one knows where to look, refuges no Spaniard can ever claim, where their diseases and their God have no dominion.

One must follow word of mouth to find the path. Maps only distract the eyes and lead the heart astray.

There is no set start to the trail, not when people flee from all directions in search of sanctuary. Every journey begins by leaving the tested trails behind, heading forth into the jungle, and deeper
still.

No soul is ever alone, of course. The gods are watching over them from their first step. Watching, and judging, and guarding.

Those with hollow hearts shall find no gold or glories to fill them. They will know only the beast-ridden jungles and treacherous paths of the Lord of Evening, who shall lead them in endless circles without hope of ever finding home. They will know every plague and pestilence of the Lord of Morning. The Lady of Faith shall eat away at whatever is left in their hollow hearts, so that the men shall turn upon their own brothers or give themselves to the jungle or just drop dead in despair.

Yet so can the guardian gods be kind. No favorite of the Lord of Evening shall ever be lost. He guides their aching feet down the trails and their eyes to landmarks they know like the stories of their childhood. In dreams he shall send them omens that will echo the paths to come in the living world. So will the Lord of Morning smile, and daylight will shine through the thick canopies to illuminate fruits safe to eat or a dry place to bed down for the night. The Lady of Faith will send rainbows and wondrous sights to lift their spirits and buoy them onward.

The faithful know to follow the laughter of owls in the night and the flashing tails of rainbow hawks at dawn. To those most lost, who consider falling down and never getting up, there shall come a white hummingbird, white as the clouds and the snow on the distant mountains. From darkness she shall lead them and unto deliverance.

Every true soul, no matter how long their journey or steep the cost, shall find the golden city at the end of their trail. On the border the Lord of Morning and Lady of Faith shall meet them. They will throw off every chain and ailment to gaze upon the city's golden pyramids gleaming in the dawn. So will they live out the rest of their days in peace and prosperity.

There are those who stumble in the dark, who fall and cannot get up again. Perhaps the beasts are too quick or the fever in their veins too hot. Even they are not forsaken.

None lingers in the dark for very long before torchlight falls upon them. The Lord of Evening is a very good shepherd. He finds every soul lost in the night, his golden blade cutting down every evil that seeks them still. With a sad smile he takes them beneath his cloak, to bring them forth into peace ever-lasting.

No bodies are ever found upon this trail. The jungle is quick to claim what the gods will not.

There is a golden refuge guarded by the gods, if one knows where to look.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of Spanish expeditions tried and fail to find El Dorado. So did German(?) and English expeditions in roughly the same time period. The closest they ever got to was the Muisca people. Part of it was busy work to keep veteran soldiers from the Inca campaigns occupied and attempts to chart further out into Venezuela and Colombia. Part of it was just good, old-fashioned greed.
the first storm (and the last)

Chapter Summary

His is the first storm, and the last.

Or, for the pagan gods of Hispania, the beginning of the end.

Chapter Notes

Jupiter is his own warning. Nothing explicit, but still the first section is just about what you would expect in hate, misogyny, and general shittiness from the literal embodiment of Classical kingship.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zeus, as king of the gods, took as his first wife Metis, and she knew more than all the gods or mortal people.... from her, children surpassing in wisdom would be born, first the gray-eyed girl... but then a son to be king over gods and mortals was to be born to her and his heart would be overmastering; but before this, Zeus put her away inside his own belly so that this goddess should think for him, for good and for evil."

--Hesiod, Theogony


His superiority over the skies and all beneath them, men and gods, has been his name since the very beginning. That he is king in heaven is a saying common to all men, be his name Tinia or Ammon, Zeus or Jupiter, to them. All are his, and their faces his own. His domain are the storms and the skies, fate and the thunderbolt. He is thunderer and leader of the fates, king of the gods and god most high.

In the beginning, when men hold up the lord of earthquakes or his earth goddess as superior, his lofty domain is less certainly regarded, his throne threatened. Yet, one by one, their cults are forced to acknowledge his as superior. So is the past rewritten, and the competing stories die out for him to claim the present and future. His greatest competitors become his older brothers, but lose the lot, when he draws forth the fortune that proclaims to rule the wide vault of heaven and all beneath it.

Sky Father he is, and Sky Father he becomes. The other gods and goddesses that compete for his throne become his children, and their mothers his consorts and conquests. He is a fair father, who grants his children their domains and ensures they do not encroach upon each other, so they will not seize upon his own. He has learned the lessons of the gods who came before him, remembered now as only his defeated father and grandfather. While his cult claims the right of kingship, it does not seek to deny all the others.

With his kingship secured, so many are held up as his equal, who their followers try to shape into
his queen. Seven are the ones he bothers remembering, for there endless iterations are too tedious to remember beyond the thrill of conquest. Six wives he casts down, for they are no more than consorts slightly more significant than all the others. He winds up stuck with his bitch of a seventh, she held up as his twin and counterpart. He is still her greater, though not great enough to throw her down, and so she must content herself with killing his offspring and harrying her competition. No matter how she is sacred marriage personified, so too is he the embodiment of rights far older, far stronger in the hearts of men.

However, even his seventh and current wife is only a pest, a queen subsumed beneath her king.

It is his first wife he fears.

Motherless Metis defies the order of the world. She is older than the faces granted to the seas and skies, for she is magical cunning itself, the same wisdom and council that births the best and worst of mankind's children, their gods included.

It is Metis who raises him to his throne, whether by instructing Rhea to grant a stone to Cronos instead of her last-born son, or elevating his cult above all others. It is cunning who guides his followers to their victories, and sees his praises sung.

It is Metis who will one day cast him down, when she turns upon him to back the next challenger she's fond of.

Metis cannot be conquered by brute strength alone. She is the wisdom that urges the soul to surrender, to live to fight another day, to rebel in quiet ways and eat away at authority from below. So he tricks her into a shape small enough to swallow and subsumes her as Cronos should have Rhea, and Ouranos Gaia.

Her wisdom is within him, and so becomes his. Her council always steers him true, to rule as the unconquered king of creation.

True, some of her wisdom is too much to be contained, and bursts forth as Athena. But this gray-eyed girl is near his equal, not her mother's. So does she become his aegis, his trusted council.

Her birth is a boon, in the end. Few defend him so fiercely as she does. Her birth from his being proves him as creator, holder of a power only women possess. Still he is mighty, god of gods, unlike those weak hermaphrodites hailed in the east among the perfumed barbarians.

What matters is that, so long as Metis is contained, so is the son that is even Athena's superior. With Metis contained, so is his destined successor, who one day cast him down as he did his father and Chronos did Ouranos. Fate deferred is fate denied.

Too late, does he realize the new Mother wisdom and council have shaped, and the triumphant Son she's borne.

"It is our desire that all the various nations which are subject to our Clemency and Moderation, should continue to profess that religion which was delivered to the Romans by the divine Apostle Peter as it has been preserved by faithful tradition... We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics... They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority which in accordance with the will of Heaven we shall decide to inflict."
The cacophony in the back of his head has been most unpleasant as of late, and the damned debates between Nicenes and Arians bouncing against them even more so. Mercury is all too happy to drown them out with another bottle of wine, humming happily to himself as his nimble fingers comb through Apollo's unbound hair.

"You were right," he purrs to his partner. "A little escape to the countryside was exactly what we needed."

"Aren't I always?" Apollo quips dutifully.

His eyes are closed, half in bliss and half in worry. Even now he still can't quite manage the same levity to his voice, the radiance to his smile.

Mercury can't blame him, not with all the shit going down amongst their followers. The Edict of Milan's made it damned hard to stem the growing tide of Christians, no matter what stupid schools of thought they argue about. It doesn't help the authorities supposed to be ensuring the proper order are increasingly less inclined to do so, if they do not forsake their temples altogether.

But, in their quiet little corner of the Pyrenees, Mercury can shove it all out of mind. For just this once, everything is perfect, a bliss as sublime as their first days in Hispania, when their days had been brimming with bright potential and without end.

Yet, even in the ass-end of Iberia, he's still its messenger god. And there is most certainly a message clamoring to be received. His fingers pause in Apollo's hair as it spills out of ships and spreads through his easternmost ports like wildfire. He frowns, brow furrowing as he parses out the jist of it.

Then, his jaw drops.

"W-W-What the-"

He manages no more, before their father's fury drowns out the world.

Mercury winces, falling back with his hands clenched over his ears, as thunder splits the world. Lightning spits across a clear sky, but from all corners of the land quiet cirrus clouds are brewing into seething thunderheads and drowning all beneath them in darkness. The wind builds into a howl, as eagles scream to the skies and bulls bellow in their pens.

It is war, theomachy, god against God. All of Iberia shall be their battleground, and its people their fodder.

With none of his usual grace, Mercury scrambles to take flight. He's the messenger god, and this the call to end all calls.

He scarcely gets airborne before a burning hand seizes his foot and wrestles him to the ground.

"Mercury!" roars his older brother, strong and terrible. "Stay down!"

Mercury is the champion god, the wrestler god, and fights with every last dirty trick in him. Apollo does not budge, save to cling all the tighter.
Then there is more thunder. No, not thunder, a sound great and terrible, that shakes all of heaven and earth. The sky splits open and there is something there, blazing bright and terrible, flaming swords instead of arcing thunderbolts, with far too many eyes and wings.

Apollo shakes his head, and his unbound hair falls around them in a golden curtain. "Don't look," he breathes into Mercury's ear. "Don't look, don't look, don't-"

There is one last roar, cut short.

A scream follows, high and hateful, before it too ends abruptly.

Then there is only silence. Utter, utter silence.

Apollo sags, spilling onto his chest. Mercury kicks him off, fighting to get to his feet. Breathless, he manages only to fall to his hands and knees, for the very nexus of their universe has been ripped out, and left them unmoored in a big, big world.

"N-N-No," he whispers, soft and small as a child. "H-He can't be-"

But he is.

Beyond the shock, something unexpected rises hot and heavy, a flood he can't contain. So he rounds around to unleash it all on Apollo.

"Y-You knew this was coming!"

"For three hundred years," Apollo murmurs, hunching into himself, until he is no longer tall and domineering.

"Why didn't you warn us? Warn me, warn h-him?"

"I did. Oh, I did. Again and again."

Mercury opens his mouth to spew accusations, vile cut off only when all those omens shrugged and laughed off come pouring back in a terrible flood of realization. He, too, is a god of prophecy. He has dreamed this day again and again, only to wake up and forget the vision as a bad dream, without grounding in the waking world. As if any of his dreams are so frivolous.

"The Edict of Milan," he blurs out instead. "W-Why didn't we-"

Apollo closes his eyes wearily. "Please, Mercury. The writing was on the wall long before then. How could any of us listen, when we were so determined to cling to every second we had left?"

Mercury keens, long and high and terrible. Then he weeps for the king and tyrant he called sire.

So dies Jupiter, king of the gods.

So dies Juno, his queen.

Chapter End Notes

Dyeus Phter is the great Pre-Indo-European sky father (theoretically) that gave rise to all the others, Zeus and Jupiter among them. In the early Greek and Italic religions
chthonic gods and goddesses seemed to have more favor, so proto-Poseidon, Hades, and Demeter were likely held as chief gods in different eras before the sky god cult dominated all of them.

As an ancient and ubiquitous god, a lot of goddesses have been set up as Zeus' heavenly spouse or feminine counterpart. Hera/Juno won out in the end. If being Zeus' wife counts as first prize. The Theogony ascribes Zeus seven wives - Metis, Themis, Eurynome, Demeter, Mnemosyne, Leto and then Hera. Most of these goddesses had real early oracular cults and importance attached to them.

Except Metis, who is the literal embodiment of cunning and council especially so prized in Ancient Greece. She is prophesied to birth two children - Athena, and then the son that will depose Zeus. Zeus, of course, eats her before the kids can become a problem, and so avoids the headache Chronos and Ouranos did with the whole rebellious offspring thing. By eating Metis, Zeus gets her wisdom and theoretically subsumes the best and worst of human ingenuity. Which worked until human will turned on him entirely, and solidified behind a new religious movement.

Zeus gives birth twice - Athena from his forehead, and Dionysus is sewed into his thigh for a while. This confers unto Zeus a creative power otherwise unique to female beings in Greek myth. But Zeus is still the epitome of masculinity, because Greece had a... thing about the intersex and sexless deities worshiped in the areas east of them. See the Greek myths around Agdistis and Cybele.
dii consentes (the far-flung family)

Chapter Summary

The legacy of Rome, and those they knew best.

Chapter Notes

I... I might have gone overboard, you guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

13. Liber Pater (The Free Father)

The Third Estate is the largest in all of France. It is upon the back of the common man that the king and clergyman ride. It is the common man who starves when the taxes are tightened, his sons who sail off to die when his king aspires to color more of the map in his shade. As representative of France's overwhelming majority, as they send twice as many delegates as the church and the crown to the Estates-General, when France's crippling financial woes must at last be addressed. Their numbers include craftsmen and wine merchants, men respected despite the lack of a single drop of noble blood in their veins.

Their efforts are all for nothing, when they learn on the very day 'power' and not 'head' will determine France's future. Power lies not with the common man, the first two Estates claim, but in those born and ordained by God to rule. So the hundreds of common delegates abandon court for one of their own. It is in a tennis court close to Versailles's opulent walls they began to speak for their own.

Denis du Bois is but one face in the crowd. He is a plump man, with rosy cheeks and eyes that flash violet in the right light. He is a humble wine merchant who never loses his cheer. Even disparate men find common cause in liking him, for Denis du Bois is a very hard man not to like. He happens to have some very good vintages on hand, for when those first days in the tennis court grow too tense. With wine flow words and accords, as a National Assembly forms, independent of those who call themselves their masters.

Denis du Bois is there when the king rallies all three Estates back under his banner. His army gathers when he orders them to disperse. Already he has seen the headache of what he has wrought, and wishes nothing more to choke the seeds he has unwittingly loosed.

But they have already taken root.

"Catiline," Denis du Bois murmurs darkly, a murmur soon taken up by his fellow deputies.

"Where are the enemies of the nation?" Mirabeau challenges, as he gestures to the soldiers outside. "Is Catiline at our gates?"

Even those who don't know their history are swift to learn it. Catiline thought himself above the
people, who tried to throw down Rome's republic so that the aristocrats might dominate the plebeians as tyrants.

Catiline had failed. Those brave plebeians had thrown him down, as they had thrown down their last king so many years before. Louis XVI is of the same ilk. Even as the Assembly stands firm against his demands, the royal armies gather. The Frenchmen beginning to look at their own king askance are joined by foreign soldiers, driven only by gold and no regard for the people. They are as alien to them as the king himself.

Denis du Bois regretfully takes his leave of the Assembly, if only for a short while. There are family matters to attend to in the capital.

Beneath the shadow of the Bastille, Paris listens, and Paris stews.

In no one tavern in particular, one man downs his wine. It's a poor vintage, old and sour, but it's free. The owner has so much stock to offload. "Ugly old thing, isn't it?" he mutters. "That fucking old Bastille. Built by kings or lords or some shit. Now it's just an eyesore."

"Ugly fucking thing," another agrees. "What's it even good for, anymore? Aside from holding the king's curs."

"Holding good men," a third patron realizes. "Our good men."

"Victims of tyranny."

"Prisoners of oppression."

So it spreads.

The following morning, a crowd gathers outside the Bastille. At first the men stationed along its walls think little of it. The first few are drunks, stumbling on what's left of their liquid courage. Then more gather, as the trickle becomes a torrent, and then a flood. Their murmurs of trepidation against ancient walls and the guns bearing down at them fade away, little by little, as their numbers swell.

No one remembers who first directs the swell. Perhaps it's one of twenty-one wine merchants in the crowd, shot dead by a stray bullet only meant as a warning shot.

Denis du Bois is well-loved and well-liked. The crowd roars in outrage as he falls, as their bravado descends into madness.

Above the crowd watches a radiant woman, made even more so by the red cap upon her head. Thousands of miles and centuries removed from Phrygia, it is a symbol of freedom still.

From her rooftop perch, she smiles at the man who arrives to join to her. He is handsome, beautifully so, youthful and limber and unbearded. His dark curls fall rich and thick, so unlike the powdered wigs hailed as fashionable. His wine-dark eyes light up at the sight of her, and below the mob throws themselves against the Bastille's defenses in earnest.

"Libertas," he exclaims joyfully, bending down to kiss her hand reverently. "Always a pleasure to see you again."

"Please, Savior," she chides him. "Like either of us are ever truly dead."

Radiant and reborn, he grins. "Admittedly, it's what I'm known for."
Proudly, they watch the madness unfold below. When the Bastille is breached, their uncertain forms gain definition. Her clothes remain ancient, from Rome's height, for such is the glory those below aspire to. Red and blue were once the clergy's colors, and white the king's. She has claimed all as her own, and stands all the taller in them. His hair is tied back, his simple clothes those of a simple man, the anonymous face in the crowd that will spur this chaos further and further, until true madness unfurls and crumbles even the Ancien Régime.

"I quite like the name Marianne," she murmurs. "Don't you?"

He grins and kisses her hand once more. "A lovely choice, as always."

He has a thousand names, though the truest ones are found at the bottom of a wine glass or in the eyes of the mob. He's always been fond of Liber.

12. Interpres Divum (Messenger of Heaven)

"He's back, he's back!"

"Do you have another one for us, Lord Tulio?"

"Oh, do I ever."

Usually it's considered bad manners to swarm a god, but Lord Tulio only grins and swings two lucky children into his lap as he settles by the fire. Lady Chel and Lord Altivo pick up a few of their own as they settle in. With a snort, Lord Altivo settles with his legs curled beneath him, so that children might clamber atop his back or occupy themselves with braiding his mane and tail as they listen. Most adults venture close enough to listen and at least feel the warmth of the fire, if not so close as to disturb the personal boundaries of divinity.

Lord Tulio clears his throat. The fire rises, and the wall behind the gods becomes a stage, casting out its shadows far and wide for all the crowd to see.

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."

11. Polyphron (Famed for Skill)

Catania, in Mount Etna's merciless shadow, was saved from destruction by its walls when the volcano erupted scarcely twenty years ago. Such walls became their tombs, when the very earth heaved beneath their feet, and even sturdy churches buckled. Priests gathered to celebrate Saint Agatha's feasts are dead. More than half of Catania is dead, as the rubble is removed and the thousands upon thousands of corpses uncovered.

Once is his own family is secured, Donato rushes to check on Old Ignazio. The upper level of his building is demolished, but it's not like the sour of man would have been up there anyway.

"Ignazio?" he tries, knocking against the door. "Ignazio, are you there?"

The minutes drag by like hours. Donato can't help but imagine the man helpless on the floor, thrown from his wheelchair, or crushed by beams from the fallen ceiling.

When he's ready to force away inside, the door finally jerks open. Even on a good day, Old Ignazio is not a pretty sight. Even from his loom chair he looms, dark eyes smoldering and arms brawny enough to snap a lesser man in two. Aside from a covering of dust, the man looks unharmed.

"Boy?" rumbles Old Ignazio. "How fares your family?"
"T-They made it, senore, but-

"Good. Now go and make yourself useful."

Donato stutters as a broom is thrust into his hands, but Old Ignazio is already turning around. Tears pool in the young man's eyes as he takes in the clockmaker's wondrous workshop, all the priceless masterpieces smashed to smithereens.

The master settles back down at his workbench. With a delicate touch that belies his large, calloused hands, he returns to installing gears in a piece commissioned by a Spanish lord.

"B-But, senore, your-

"I'll get around to them eventually!" Old Ignazio snaps, not looking up from his project. "Etna roars as it will. You and I can't change that, or how time is still ticking by. However, I can work on this fucking commission, and get the money owed to me. Now shut up and get to work, or get out of my shop."

Donato meekly begins to sweep.

10. Verticordia (Changer of Hearts)

"Oh, Lale," Sevda purrs. "God has graced you with the loveliest hair."

Lale lowers her eyes. She is still getting used to her new name, and precarious situation here. Part of her insists Sevda must be lying. She is the most beautiful woman here, with hair like honey and eyes the like the sea. Lale's hair is a dull mousy brown. Sevda could be the sultan's favorite, if only she bothered to engage him outside the bedchamber, to grant him a son has several others have already done.

Yet Sevda's comments never tear a woman down. They only point out what is truth, and help even the dourest old mothers in the harem acknowledge a girl's talent or a special glint to their eye. When she hands Lale the hand mirror, she blushes. Her hair is indeed not mousy brown, but warm and rich as chestnut.

"T-Thank you," she murmurs modestly, as she must. "The sultan will be pleased to see me."

Sevda sighs. "Unfortunately, he has insisted upon me tonight. You know how he gets." She smiles. "This is the perfect chance for you to spend time with Aysel. She has grown up here all her life. She is the wisest of all the sultan's sisters. With her guidance you'll hopefully feel a little less lost."

Lale flushes, which only makes her reflection all the prettier. Aysel's mother was a Slav. She inherited her hair, pale and pure as moonlight. Lale has spoken very little to Aysel, beyond some long looks as they passed in the hallways.

"I-It would be an honor, to have her... guidance."

Sevda beams, radiant in their reflection.

Slowly, Lale smiles back.

9. Ultor (Avenger)

Once the clash of steel was his song, and the battle cries his hymns. Now the gunshots sound as his anthem, and baptize this new battleground in blood.
Still, when one Ottoman officer tries to call away, there is nothing to sweet as a knife to the back, and a terrified soul's sight in this world being his triumphant sneer.

He and his brothers laugh and bask in their victory, even as the doubters among them mutter.

"We're two weeks early. We were supposed to announce this-"

The man his brothers only call Ognyan shrugs callously, lighting a cigar. "Good. Then we're two weeks closer to freedom." He nods at the brothers they freed from imprisonment, true rebels and simply those innocent caught in the crossfire. "And so are they."

"Nicip Aga got away!"

"Good." When his brother splutters in outrage, he silences him with a puff of smoke to the face. "Really, that only gives us the pleasure of hunting him down later."

"W-Where do we go from here?"

Ogynan, brutally handsome and able to command a crowd as no other can, motions to the burning police station that stands as proof of their power. "An independent Bulgaria, free of the Turk once and for all. Kill any that tries to take that from you, and leave the meek be."

His men inclined to mercy cheer, for he affirms his humanity, the promise they fight for a higher cause than those before them. Those who have scores to settle against the Turk will of course have very different versions of 'resistance,' as they always do.

Ogynan promises his men a victory. He never says it will be theirs.

He helped march the Turk here so many centuries ago, when the tide had swung against them. He knows this uprising will end only in bloodshed and brutality, as the Turks crush them and any ounce of resistance left. But that will only fan the flames further, turn scattered cells of rebels into widespread upheaval.

This land is not quite his beloved Thrace, but its people are borne of it, and have fondness for him still.

So he will bless them with fire in their hearts, and the chance to take all he gave to the Turk for themselves. Either way, his champion wins.

Such is the way of war.

8. Satia (Plentiful)

Gisela stands straight up in bed when they come, even though she feels part of her is still lying down. Leaving it behind, she shuffles out of her makeshift bed by the hearth. Usually she sleeps bundled up warm with her sisters, but ever since her lungs started hurting she's not even allowed near them anymore. But, the further she wanders, the less she feels the part of her sleeping by the hearth, and the less her breath wheezes.

Her breath hitches when she sees them. They shine like stars, though she can peer them like glass. They smile at her and dance in graceful circles around the kitchen. As they whirl by the larder they steal bites of bread and cheese for themselves. But that's okay, it always calms back by morning.

Her grandmother keeps the home in good order. They spirits don't come with curses. No, they sing good things, like the poultice Grandmother can use to turn back Hiltrude's infection or where
Father can find his misplaced axe, lost somewhere on the farm in the chaos after the last wolf attack. Gisela stands and listens, spell-bound.

While all the spirits are lovely, their leader is loveliest of all. Her skin shines bright as the moon, and her hair black as the night. She's tall and lithe, with muscled arms and a tunic that lets her legs move freely. Gisela sighs in envy. When the queen's pale eyes fall upon her, she is not afraid.

"Do you know me, child?"

Gisela frowns. The priest likes to rant a lot about Herodiana, but that name sounds stupid. "Grandmother calls you Satia," she volunteers at last.

The queen tilts her head, before extending a hand. "I am, when I mean to be."

Gisela crosses her arms. "I'm not leaving. Not yet."

The queen turns to her spirits. They're all girls, most little older than Gisela. Spectral rabbits bounce at their feet, while elegant owls swoop below the rafters and deer gambol at their sides. "There's space for you, child. You'll be free as every little girl wishes. You'll never be forced to grow up, or marry."

She shakes her head. "I'm staying."

The queen inclines her head. "For now. Until next time, child."

Gisela lasts seven whole turns of the moon, before her tuberculosis claims her. She gets to watch her mama's belly grow like the moon, and hear the first cries, before the queen comes to claim her. She does not accept no as an answer.

But Satia is generous, when she means to be. Gisela's mother is delivered of two healthy twin girls, more than enough to fill the void their elder sister left behind.

7. Phoebus (Bright)

When the blond guy strides into his shop, politely asking to try one of those new-fangled electric guitars, Hector thinks little of it. So many people are asking to try it nowadays. Curiosity is good. Curiosity gets people to actually pay for one, because he's learned the hard way to limit trial time. And the speaker volume.

But, when Hector actually gets the display guitar out, the man's face sours a bit as he takes in the speaker. Hector refrains from rolling his eyes. Stupid purists.

"The speaker only amplifies the sound, sir. It's nothing to be afraid of."

The man sticks his nose into the air. "I'll be the judge of that, thank you."

Gingerly the customer picks up the instrument, as if it'll bite him. He and Hector both wince at the speaker's shriek of protest. He strums once, and then plays.

Hector has grinned through crappy beginnings of a dozen different instruments and now through pretentious bastards that think themselves the next Buddy Holly. Every once in a great while, he gets someone he actually enjoys listening to.

Within the first minute, Hector's mouth falls open. Hector, who couldn't cry at his damned dad's funeral, has tears flow down his cheeks like waterfalls.
Then, just when the guy *really* lays into the music, every speaker in the store explodes. Even those not plugged in. And take the lights with it. The room flares blindingly bright as the lightbulbs explode.

Dazedly sitting on his ass, Hector can only watch as the man gently sets the mauled, smoking guitar to the ground. With a frantic stammer of apologies, he helps Hector to his feet, crams something into his hands, and flees like he was never in the first place.

Blinking blearily at the coins in his hand, he stops and stares.

Then, he whistles.

He's pleased to learn the gold coins are actually legal tender, and that they are literally worth their weight in gold, at far more than their printed value.

6. Mille Operum Dea (Goddess of a Thousand Works)

When her frowning assistant informs of her of the man at the door, she does not hesitate in inviting him. She has expected him for quite some time.

Of course, she does not stop her work, only look up from her loom to pierce him with a gaze that gives even him pause. Her masterful hands weave their masterpiece all the same. It is humble to the wonders she wove, but no other hand can match her skill, and she commands the highest prices in the region.

Her visitor is handsome, in a cruel way, for he is the kind to crush the common man and the impoverished patrician beneath his well-shined shoe. He is even richer dressed than the last time. Every stitch of his suit has the blood and sweat of thousands woven into it. He has the gall to bring his smoky stink with him, and wave dismissively at her assistant.

But the woman stares undaunted at him, for she is older than him. She is an unremarkable woman, but he is among the youngest of his ilk, and even she can recall the days when weaving was dismissed as too nuanced an art to ever automate. She does now bow her head and leave until her mistress dips her head.

"Formidable old crone," her visitor concedes, with a curious tilt. "Is she one of yours too?"

"Mortal as a mule," she answers, "and just as hardworking."

Agnes Weaver takes no apprentices. She has not done for decades. Her only assistants are gray-haired men and women stubbornly set in their ways. She ages gracefully with them, so that her hair is the same steely gray as her eyes. She looks no less majestic for it, and the lines in her face harden like crags when she is displeased. Before Mr. Miller she is as stoic as the mountainside.

"Are times so hard, Minerva," Mr. Miller murmurs, "that you must toil without taking time for a guest?"

"Miss Weaver, to you." She sniffs, turning back to to her weft. "It is not desperation that I work so hard, Mr. Miller, simply to emphasize you are no different from all the others, and no less dull in your suit. Therefore, you spare no special regard."

Mr. Miller presses his top hat to his chest in what he hopes she will mistake as earnest affront. "How can I not spare the great goddess *my* special regard, Ms. Weaver? Here you are, scraping by in Britain's backwater, when you could be the radiant face of revolution!"
"Because the 'efficient' weavers down south toil away in factory systems, away from their homes and at hours dictated by their employer. Yet, here I am, a weaver in her own home, who works at her own pace and her own wont. We both know what your powerlooms will do, to those weavers with homes and without." She pauses to pass her shuttle. "But not quite yet."

"Soon," he vows, for he has tried twenty years to kill the weavers as he had the spinners. "And I'd rather not take them with you, Ms. Weaver. You embraced the spinning wheel and a dozen different looms made obsolete. What makes this change any different?"

"You," she says succinctly, as she weaves her last. "I've had many suitors before you, Mr. Miller, and I'll have many after. They come for my words and my wisdom, my wealth and my strategies. And here I am, the virgin still."

"For now," Mr. Miller vows. "You'll sell yourself eventually, Ms. Miller, or industry will fuck you over like it does all the others."

Agnes Weaver smiles as her labor comes to fruition. "Come see, Mr. Miller. It's my finest yet."

Despite himself, curiosity beckons Mr. Miller forward. To the mortal eye the pattern is elegant, yet abstract.

To Mr. Miller, young and proud and yet to fully come into himself, the strands weave together to show his doom.

Pale in fear, Mr. Miller stumbles away from her. Fury tries flushing his cheeks, before fleeing at her scornful laugh.

So runs Mr. Miller from one woman in her humble highland cottage.

Innovation is a wondrous and terrible thing, these days, spewing forth new inventions to raise humanity up even as they tear the individual down. So too will it one day turn against those who feed upon steam and coal and the suffering labor of millions, to make them just as obsolete.

Agnes Weaver retires not long after, leaving her trade to those with a few years left in them yet, to join some distant family in the country.

Sonnets, a once-venerable form of poetry that has languished for centuries, finds more and more eager listeners among England's fledgling Romantics. Sophia Wordsworth is an esteemed patron of such circles, though none can quite agree upon her relation to William Wordsworth. It is also agreed upon she is just as significant to Coleridge and Keats and Shelley, that they would not be who they are without her.

5. Alma (Nourishing)

The Grange is no longer quite the draw it once was, for industry and recession has driven many from this small, sleepy town. Still, without the Grange, there would have hardly been a town once upon a time. It's a place for community, much lacking in town since the community center had to close for lack of funds, and so the old and stubborn gather.

Of course old Alma Greene is one of the first ones there, to warmly welcome every last member. She is a stout, salt of the earth woman, with a rich voice and rosy cheeks that grow only rosier when she inquires after children and grandchildren long moved out of the area. Alma's from a large family herself. While some of her children and grandchildren are still natives, and even regulars to the Grange, far more have drifted around the country to make it where they can.
Alma's never been one for a nomadic lifestyle. When she settles, she digs, and digs deep. She's always been uprooted forcibly in the past, and dragged here and there with the family, but in her old age she's grown cantankerous. This sleepy town in the Midwest is her home now, dammit. It will be until it dies, for this town was born by the Grange and will die by the Grange.

The Grange is all about agriculture, all about community. There's very little of either to go around, these days, which it makes it all the more important to stand together.

In these times, the issue of immigration is one the old-timers would very much like to sweep under the table. The town is divided enough as it is.

Alma Greene, of course, does not take silence for an answer. "Well, why the hell *don't* we want to double the amount of immigrants? I don't know where else we're getting people out here that actually *want* to farm. All the kids keep taking off to the cities."

"*Legal* immigrants, that-"

"Like your corn cares if it got picked by someone who was born here or not, Carl," Alma sneers. "It's not like I came over here with a passport either, seeking a new life and a chance for my family just like everyone else."

The uproar is only a minor one. Alma Greene has only so much patience for idiots like Carl. When she stands to storm off, the Grange is quick to come to the consensus that perhaps it *is* time to give serious talks about initiating that signed letter to Congress, supporting all farmers in their communities, no matter how they came to be there.

Perhaps it's superstition on their part, but Alma Greene is practically the heart of this community, of the Grange itself. And *very* bad things tend to happen when she storms off in a huff, from malfunctioning tractors to full-on crop failures.

Mollified, Alma Greene settles back into her seat, as true progress toward *something* unfurls. She smiles at the small farm tools displayed at every morning, a ceremony observed without question. It is simply part of the Grange, and has been since its inception.

This order still *does* uphold her as one of its three patron goddesses, after all. The least she can do is humor them in turn.

4. Frugifer (Fruit-Bearing)

When he orders them to watch and wait, they watch and wait. And wait. And *wait."

"Maybe the sun's finally gotten to him," Izem mutters.

"Sh," Idir hisses back.

"Rest assured," their captain calls back languidly in their same tongue, "the sun has *not* gotten to him. The greedy bastards just have their shipped weighed down too much for it to catch this wind properly."

It doesn't matter if they're whispering in Tamazight or not. Between them the crew speaks a dozen languages. Their captain knows them all and, hell, probably a dozen more. He always knows just what to purr to the slave girls to calm them down or fool a ship into lowering their defenses.

Their captain is a tenacious old bastard, his wine-dark hair streaked white as the sea foam in places. His eyes are as tumultuous as the sea. On a calm day, they're a gentle blue-green. When someone is
asking to get themselves thrown overboard, trussed up for the sharks, his eyes are black as the merciless depths. Before a raid they churn a stormy blue, as they do now.

"And here she is," their captain rumbles as white sails unfurl like clouds on the horizon.

Izem whistles. It's a Spanish galley, alright, loaded with gold and woefully unguarded, a fat and lumbering cow for the wolves too take.

"Bring her around," the captain commands, as their ship emerges like a ghost from behind its island hiding place. He grins like the waves before they smash a ship, for the Spaniards have nowhere to run, and nowhere near the firepower to fight back.

*El Aluvión* the Spaniards call their captain, for he washes over their glutted galleys like a wave.

He has given himself a hundred names to his crew. To them he is mostly simply *al-Thamir*, the Fruitful, for his expeditions are never without plunder, treasures and slaves beyond belief.

3. Aidius (Eternal)

Somewhere in a quiet village along the Tejo, a fire has burned for the better part of two thousand years. The walls around it have altered with the times, though it remains upon the humble foundations of its first incarnation. She has never seen a need for grand palaces, even at her zenith, when the common man and woman has craved only the comfort and security of walls like her own, a hearth just as warm, and a face like hers to lovingly welcome them home.

She is not hard to find, for she has first come to this land she has never moved at all. Her family can always find her light, for it burns eternal in her hearth, a pot of stew always awaiting the next guest. Once those prouder than she had scarcely deigned to visit her. Some stopped coming long ago, when they had allowed them pride and despair to claim them. Others are delightful regulars and others unpredictably... delightful.

"Aunt Marta, Aunt Marta!" cries the nephew at her door. "I came as soon as I-

"Good evening to you, too, nephew," she greets him jovially. The moment she opens her door he leaps the boundary without touching the threshold. "Thank you for leaving your shoes outside this time."

"Hm?" he says, with only an absently guilty look at the dirty shoes still attached to his feet. "Oh, sorry. Here let me just-" He opens the door, hurtling his shoes outside with a laugh. "Guess what we did to the Oppressor, Aunt Marta? The exact same thing!"

"Oh?" she muses, setting the table for three.

"And then we-"

Her *other* nephew barrels in through the same door, wheezing for breath. "You... f-f..."

"Sorry, Nico, sorry," soothes her first nephew, rubbing the second's back in apology. "I didn't mean to outrun you, *again*, it's just-"

"WethrewoutFelipe!" Nicolau blurts out, unaware the news is already out.

"Then that makes us a kingdom with out a king?" Marta asks archly. "Again?"

"Oh, no," laughs her first nephew. "The nationalists-"
"-Appointed the Duke of Braganza the new king, because he's the true heir," Nicolau finishes, granting his partner an irate scowl. "Seriously, Micael? You couldn't just let me do my job?"

"Well, it's partly my job too, seeing as how the kingship is a civil institution, thank you."

Marta rolls her eyes to the ceiling, sloshing stew into each bowl. It's a humble meal, but fresh off the fire, and with plenty more to go round. "Isn't Felipe descended from the old kings too?" she asks, if only to heed off another argument.

"Sure, but he's, you know, a... Spaniard." Nicolau leans over to spit, before remembering it's her floor and thinking better of it. "Who tried to actually make us a county of Spain. At least the Duke of Braganza is, you know, actually Portuguese."

Marta can't help a mournful sigh. "I suppose that's that, then."

"Good riddance," Nicolau huffs, settling back into his seat.

"Nico!" Micael rebukes indignantly.

"What?" Nicolau grouses. "My head's been nice and quiet since... since way before the Crisis, when that little prince was still alive. It's not like they're recently dead or anything."

"Yes, but-"

"They were lying, thieving Spaniards," Nicolau says ruthlessly. "Didn't even have the decency to stick to herding sheep like you and I did."

"How is the flock, by the way?" Marta interjects.

"Micael's sister is watching them," Nicolau answers bluntly. "Or at least, you know, making sure nothing of hers eats them. Which is more than what those Spaniards would have done to us."

"It would have been the other way around," Micael says softly, leaning into the hearth for all the warmth he craves. "That little prince was Portuguese. If he had inherited, we would have most likely been the ones facing, you know, the s-word."

"They were nice boys," Marta notes, with only some sorrow. "Lonely, with only each other to turn to. Even if they weren't quite family like you two are, they were always good guests. Polite, entertaining." She smiles hopefully as she at last takes her own seat. "Perhaps they left these lands behind to try their luck in the New World. I hope they're happy there."

Nicolau swallows his sneer. When Marta and Micael raise their goblets in toast to those family far from home, his face softens as he bows his head and lifts his libation up too.

"May those those find their way back to your hearth and home, Lady Vesta," he murmurs. "May those gone beyond find the peace they could not here," Micael prays.

Marta inclines her heads as they pour out their wine goblets upon her floor. The thirsty dirt immediately absorbs it, as the fire flashes high and bright.

When the flames settle, they sit back to dine.

Marta does not what makes the difference between her nephews and the boys that have not darkened her doorstep in well over a century now, but the divide is as stark between Spain and Portugal. No king could bridge that divide, or meld two tongues back into one. She does not know
what befell their closer relations, what made them wonder their country alone for centuries on end. She can only wish them the best, and keep her flame burning for those who seek her still.

2. Regina (Queen)

Roma is a holy city, the shining center of Christendom, where the Pontiff speaks the will of God and even emperors bow down before him to be crowned. There are no women more beautiful or more pious than Roman women, who are good and chaste Catholics all. Yet there are so many young maids out there without mothers to grant them guidance, even older women who need guidance in reining in unruly children or patience for an unruly husband. It is only natural they turn to venerable women of their own community for advice.

No woman is more venerable than Signora da Samo. She is a widow, regal in her solitude. She still commands her husband's household in his absence, for their children are grown and gone, and her house in the Capitoline's shadow her own. Perhaps her home is somewhat faded in its grandeur, and her dresses not quite fashionable, but her stance is no less proud for all her family has fallen upon hard times.

Signora da Samo is a formidable ally, for those humble enough to seek her assistance, and grant her the proper boons. Her favored maids shall always escape scandal and win only the husbands of their dreams, as unsavory betrothals fall through due to scandal or misfortune on the groom's part. The married mothers find the inner serenity to bear a dozen healthy children, the patience to endure philandering husbands and appear only more respectable against such shame. Even widows find new strength in her favor, a second chance in companionship or the liberty to enjoy their new independence unbothered by sons and brothers.

For those that dare sully Signora da Samo's doorstep with scorn and scandal?

It is best not to speak of them. For everyone's sake.

1. Kouros (Youth)

"Zinon?"

"Hm?"

"Have you ever... mmph... have you ever thought about leaving... mmm... Crete?"

For a heartbeat that wondrous warmth pulls away, and he's left floundering without kisses exalting every inch of his neck. Spyros sucks in a nervous breath, afraid he's chased off the beautiful bastard. But Zinon only huffs a laugh, grabs his hand, leads them from their hiding place by the rocks further up the hill.

"Wow," Spyros breathes as a cave mouth comes into view. "I've trekked all over this hills, and I've never seen this place before."

"Because your family has a shitty memory," Zinon teases, leading into a dark cave that offers far more privacy on their old spot ever did. "My mother and I know this land like the back of our hands." He grins conspiratorially. "Did you know the old pagan priests and kings used to try sleeping in these caves in hopes the gods would send them dreams while they slept?"

Spyros laughs. "No shit?"

"No shit." Zinon raises his lips to his ear, breath warm and sweet. "Now, you ain't no priest and I'm
Spyros jerks back. He's sprouted his beard just this year, while Zinon is still clean-faced as ever, not that stops the bastard from having luxurious curls that make all the girls sigh in envy. "Zinon, my father has grown... rather persistent about me joining him on his next voyage. Says it's time to take up the family trade."

"So long as that's not tonight, what's the problem?"

Spyros sucks in a nervous breath. "I'd... I'd like you to come with me. If you'd like! So that we might learn the seas and see the world together. If you want to, that is, I know you and your mother are close and you have more family to consider and-"

He breaks off as Zinon exhales grumpily into his chest. "Crete is my home, Spyros. It's where my family is, my roots are. When I leave that all behind I tend to become... unrooted... an utter, raging asshole at best. And unspeakably worse from there."

Spyros chuckles. "You, an unspeakable asshole?"

"Yes." Zinon's sky-blue eyes are flat, without the smallest glint of laughter.

His... friend can't help but deflate. "I've known you since we were boys-" since Spyros was a boy, but Zinon has always seemed just his size and-and- "-and when did you even last leave Crete?"

"Too damn long ago. And I'm not going anywhere again. Because out there I'm just not myself." While Spyros is about ready to crumble, Zinon only sends him an encouragement smile, with only a glimmer of sadness. "But don't hold yourself back on my account. If your destiny lies out there, it lies out there. Perhaps you'll come back to Crete. Perhaps you won't. What matters is that life is yours, to seize as you wish."

Spyros can say no more, so he joins his lips to Zinon's, to let them speak all he can't. The blissful afternoon melts into the divine night. Spyros soars to dizzying heights, with only the stars to hear.

When the sun breaches the horizon, and the quiet sanctuary of their cave, Spyros raises his boneless body to press a kiss to Zinon's forehead. He tastes of the fresh air after the rain. His lo-

"Spyros?"

"Yes, Zinon?"

"Gotta secret to tell you. If you'll let me."

Swallowing, Spyros nods, and holds his breath for a lifetime.

"I grew a beard, once," Zinon admits in a barely audible whisper. "It looked fucking terrible."

Chapter End Notes

Dii Consentes - the consenting gods, the Roman version of the Twelve Olympians. They counted Vesta as one of their number and not Bacchus/Liber, but by gods was I leaving him out. Tried to find all Roman epithets. Too bad some are too obscure to
have much.

13. Liber/Bacchus, god of madness, plebeian rights, and free speech - 1789 France, the formation of the Assembly and storming of the Bastille
11. Vulcan, god of innovation, fire, and Mount Etna - 1693 Catania, after the devastating earthquake
10. Venus/Aphrodite, goddess of love and desire - Ottoman Turkey
9. Mars/Ares, god of war, battle strife, and Thrace - April 1876 Bulgaria, the uprising that will kick off their independence
8. Diana/Artemis, goddess of fertility, the hunt, and the night - 1200s Holy Roman Empire, as leader of the 'Society of Diana' spirits the Church was freaking out about
7. Apollo/Miguel - 1950s America, trying and failing hard as mythic god meets electricity
6. Minerva, goddess of wisdom, weaving, and poetry - 1800s England, just as the powerloom is about to make weaving obsolete
5. Ceres, goddess of agriculture - 2000s America, in her role as one of the three patron goddesses of the Grange, a society inspired by Free Masons (!) with the goal of furthering community and agricultural interests
4. Neptune, god of the sea - 1500s Barbary Coast
3. Vesta, goddess of home and hearth - 1640 Portugal, upon the disposal of the Spanish Philip III for the Portuguese John IV; Miguel da la Paz would have united Iberia 140 years earlier if he lived beneath the Portuguese crown, but died as an infant
2. Juno, goddess of marriage and family - Renaissance Rome; in lore her girlhood was spent on the island of Samos
1. Jupiter/Zeus - 1800s Crete; Zeus Velchanos was the god's ancient Cretan aspect, a beardless youth superseded by his mother, the great earth goddess
ships in the night

Chapter Summary

A tale where Miguel and Tulio are not the ones to stumble onto that ship, and the destiny that finds Chel anyway.

Instead of two thieves, Manoa gets someone a little more maddening.

O, the gods that could have been, and the gods that are.

Chapter Notes

...This one might really gotten away from me, guys. Because one reader suggested a really cool alternative that didn't suit the other what-if series.

"For Spain, for glory, for gold!"

Though the call spreads among Seville's fervent faithful, it is carried loudest by the men of Cortes. They believe in him the most, are willing to abandon the land of their birth to follow him across the sea and into the misty unknown.

He too carries the call, though his smile is more one of lazy amusement than zealous adoration. He's not there for any of that, but rather what will inevitably come with Spain's all-consuming greed for such material things.

His face is nothing remarkable; bearded, hair sheared short, eyes dark. Perhaps his cheeks are a tad too rosy, but such can be blamed on sunburn. Cortes does not look at him twice when he rides his grand stallion aboard.

Altivo, however, is not so blind. Too-intelligent eyes appraise him, before narrowing in suspicion. The stallion snorts and flicks his tail, working up a warning.

"Onward, Altivo!" Cortes barks, digging his spurs into the warhorse's side.

From the crowd he can't help a sympathetic wince. How must it feel, to be a god so ancient, to have survived waves of Greek and Roman gods, to endure now as but a beast of burden to God's self-proclaimed champion?

But he's not here for horses.

Somewhere up in Seville's upper levels there's a faint whisper of interest as a bull careens through the city streets, but before anything can come of it the beast charges in a different direction, as its prey takes an unexpected turn. So he shrugs and thinks nothing of it.

For now he answers to Lisandro, Spanish enough without being too on the nose. Lisandro is well-
liked among the crew. Smiles and jests come easy with him around, as even the tightwads learn to loosen up a bit. When good behavior grows boring, he steals down to the cargo hold for a quick tumble with one sailor or another. Sometimes a rope will slide loose or something small will go missing; something to make his superiors eyes twitch, but nothing that can't be blamed on accident or pests rather than a seditious crew.

Lisandro's eyes are dark. Even in close quarters, none realize they are not merely dark brown or blue. Some Catholics they are; any who has attended Eucharist should know what they proclaim to be the blood of their God.

The captain is keen to keep the crew busy, for even busy work prevents idle hands and minds, but there is only so much he can do. The longer out at sea, the more impatient the men grow, and the tighter the walls become. Cortes's iron grip creates more sparks than it stamps down. Regimenting the day so tightly, watching the stores of wine and beer like a jealous dragon, punishing the wrong comment with hours scrubbing the deck. Confining his own horse to half-rations?

It would be child's play to make those sparks flare into a full-on fire; a little comment here, a roll of the eyes there. Hell, maybe even let some of his dalliances stumble into each other.

But these ships only hold so many men, and Spain will keep sending off ships even if these one turns to mutiny. With no other fun around for miles, he twiddles his thumbs, and wiles away the days.

Complacency shatters the night the storm rolls in. As the shrieking winds drown out the panicked shouts of men, Lisandro tilts his head reverently upward, toward what was once his father's fury. For a moment he basks in the stinging rains that lash his face and the mounting hysteria of the crew.

Then he throws his head back and laughs. Laughs at the best joke he's heard all millennium.

"Madness," a horrified man shrieks, soon taken up by the whole deck.

Cortes tries to fight his way through the throng, to cut down the source of such sedition, but the winds are turning. His furious shouts are drowned out by the storm, and the men that will soon tear into him for condemning them to die upon a ruthless sea.

First, however, there is a scream, high and shrill. Lisandro groans as one violent wave heaves Altivo overboard.

Lisandro rushes forward, the mob parting for him. Two men thoughtlessly lower a longboat from its ties, before Cortes or the captain can quite realize what's going on.

He leaps overboard and onto the boat below, the momentum driving him down the rest of the way. He scowls down at the stallion thrashing against the swells.

"I had a good thing going there, you know," he huffs.

As the men aboard the galleon regain control of themselves, and push him from their minds, he considers those the storm has cast down upon the waves. There will be no rescue for them, not when their comrades are still fighting to save themselves. Their fear and desperation are almost overwhelming. They scream for their God and their mothers, against the water in the lungs and the salt in their eyes, to simply live.

It's enough, combined with the kernel of power he has scrupulously accrued over these boring weeks at sea.
"Oh, fine."

He dips his hand into the water, and unleashes weeks of effort, to work some of the oldest magic he knows.

The drowning men pray for life.

So he obliges them.

Power, true power, not just the raging of a faceless storm, hits the waves. Altivo's panic only grows, as he somehow finds a new well of strength to thrash and keep his head above water. The magic is not made for him and so passes harmlessly by. For all he fights to save himself, Altivo knows better than to call out on those like him, and risk only a fate worse than death.

The screams and swears of the men dying all around him grow high and shrill. Even those already swept under are not immune. With new tails they instinctively kick upward, for the air they still very much need.

Altivo snorts dubiously at the bewildered pod of dolphins that surround him, well out of range of curious hooves. Chattering amongst themselves, they look for him to the longboat bobbing on the swells. Some skirt away to push the boat forward, while others cautiously close the gap between them.

With no better chance, Altivo forces down his instincts, and does not strike the lean forms that help to heave him from the waves and aboard the longboat. He lays there, a soaked and bettered heap, gasping for breath. He snaps only once at the hands that try to offer him aid. Then their owner has the good sense to stay away.

For a time, Altivo sleeps, and dreams of the days when he might have commanded such a storm. It's a good dream, so vivid he feels fully himself again. Part of him wouldn't mind never waking up.

He does so, however, back in the equine shape shivering from lingering wetness. The sea is calm, and dawn a red promise on the horizon. In the waves bob only curious dolphins, for Cortes's ships have long drifted out of sight.

Suspiciously Altivo regards his fellow passenger. The man's switched faces on him. Now his unshaven face is annoyingly pretty, his hair dried into perfect ringlets despite the shitty weather. His eyes have lightened to rich red-violet. Altivo is only half-surprised to see the man still dressed in modern clothing, because the classical garb would be even more unpractical out here.

"Feel free to jump overboard, if you like," the man offers casually. "Perhaps you'd make a fine hippocampus."

The stallion rumbles ominously. He may not have the balance to stand properly, but he still has the strength to kill his man with a single blow. They both know the man doesn't have the strength to do a damn thing about it.

The man dips his head. "As you wish. Find your master when we reach the New World. Or don't. It makes no difference to me."

The man stands, throwing several ropes out into the water. Several dolphins grab them and start towing. Granting their savior a lift is the least they can do, even if they themselves will never know land again. The rest of the pod keeps pace, taking over the pulling when the first group grows tired.
They make good time that way, for a pod of dolphins prove more reliable than the fickle winds.

Altivo sulks for the majority of the journey, except when he scavenges from the supplies or drinks the rainwater accrued from the storm. He says nothing when his passenger helps open boxes or secure the buckets of water. Generosity is only the sign of a proper host, and the man has made it quite clear Altivo is a guest on his boat.

When the water finally grows shallow enough, Altivo finally springs off and wades the rest of the way to shore. His fellow passenger, soaked wet by his splash, waits until their escorts push the boat all the way ashore before disembarking.

"Thank you," he tells them absently. "That will be all."

Some dolphins only dip their heads back and go surging out to sea. A few remain behind to chatter furiously up at him.

He arches an imperious brow to them. "You prayed for life, didn't you? Now you have it. Unless you'd prefer to be dead men to dolphins."

Those left race after their fellows. Altivo snorts in laughter.

For a moment man and horse consider each other, then the eagle rock carved too intricately to be a mere natural marvel, and finally the bodies left on the beach. The blade through the skull of one is as clear a warning as there can be.

The man quirks a smile. Altivo rolls his eyes.

They are not alone. An armored little creature, somewhere between rat and tortoise, scrabbles onto the rocks to look them solemnly in the eyes.

"Good morning, honored deity," the man greets grandly. "We have traveled far and wide to reach your splendid shores, though we are admittedly weary from such a feat. Might there be somewhere we can stay to recover our strength, if only for a night?"

The god needs little consider to deem Altivo acceptable. It is the man he stares and long hard at, before he finally nods.

"Thank you, generous lord," the man murmurs sincerely. "Your hospitality shall not go unrewarded."

The god twitches a skeptical ear. Altivo fights hard from doing the same. Someone here has to have faith in a god that might bring only madness in his wake, because he is capable of greater things. If he feels like it.

Humans are agonizingly slow, and this stumpy-legged form their host has chosen can't be any faster. Altivo deigns carry them both. After all, this man offered him a ride in turn, and the god offers the sanctuary of his people. A ride is the least a horse can offer.

Chel runs for her life. Even if an increasingly large part of her insists she’ll never make it, that she'll be hunted down like her big brother, Manoa will never have her again.

Xaya was dragged back to be executed, piece by piece. She'll slit her own throat first and deny the Jaguar God her blood and her screams.
Too lost in her head, Chel is blind to the being before her until she stumbles into it. She falls
dazedly back, cowering before the herald that screams his indignity at being so rudely plowed into.
For a moment she thinks his rider Lady Paquini, for surely no other goddess could have eyes the
color of wine, or hair so luxurious.

It takes her a moment to realize the figure is angular instead of voluptuous, the face a bit too sharp,
and that this is a Wine God.

By then Chima and his warriors have caught up, and there's nowhere left to run. So Chel kneels
before the gods as any faithful mortal should do, and lifts up her stolen tribute with trembling
hands. The Wine God smiles warmly before he arches an expectant brow at their audience.

Some warriors jerk as if to raise their spears, before thinking better of it when the beast-shaped god
snorts ominously. Chel represses a savage grin as proud Chima and his men sink to her level.

"M-My lord...s," Chima stammers. "Y-You have been long expected."

This not one of the Dual Gods, or even the Feathered Serpent as Manoa knows him. Still, these are
physical gods that have deigned visit the world where no other has in a century. So of course
Chima hastens them through the waterfall and to the boats. They try to haul Chel back like the
filthy thief she is, but one mild look from the Wine God has them escorting her from a wary
distance.

The beautiful god gracefully dismounts from his messenger and climbs into the foremost boat,
settling himself by the prow. With some snorting the messenger squeezes his bulk into the back.
He seems the safer one to sit with, so Chel cautiously takes the seat in front of him. From time to
time the Wine God looks her over in his idle examination of his surroundings. Chel keeps her eyes
cast respectfully downward. Beyond their beautiful color is a danger she certainly doesn't want to
draw out.

When they make landfall the messenger is the first to disembark. His rider mounts. At the glance
in her direction Chel moves to his side, clinging to her golden tribute like a lifeline.

The crowds are quick to gather in the city center. Fortunately their eyes are for the gods, or for
Lady Raima's smoking volcano, and not the thief sheepish at their side.

Chel briefly considers slipping away in the confusion before deciding against it. She's a daughter of
the Vine People, one of Lady Paquini's favorites. This Wine God has to be of some relation to the
great Wine Goddess, and has already spared her once. Chel trusts him as she can no other.

"As the prophecies foretold, the time of judgement is now!" Chel stands still like a frightened
rabbit, as Tzekel-Kan thrusts his way forward. "Did I not predict the gods would come to us?"

The god smiles.

Tzekel-Kan's eyes flick briefly to the divine messenger. "My lords, I am Tzekel-Kan, your devoted
high priest and speaker for the gods."

He is not the only one fearless enough to approach divinity. Chief Tannabok strides forward to
represent all their people, not just the spiritual side. "I am Chief Tannabok. What names may we

call you?"

"I have gone by many," the god muses languidly. "To you I shall be... Bacchus." His smile sends
shivers down Chel's spine. "Yes. Why ruin the classics?" Then he considers his herald. "Him you
may call Altivo, the High."
"Your arrival has been greatly anticipated," Chief Tannabok murmurs. Sure, perhaps these are not the Dual Gods, but they're still gods. "My lords, how long will you be staying in Manoa?"

Wine-dark eyes consider Lady Raima's smoldering mount. "For as long as we are welcome," he demurs. "It is the mark of a poor guest to intrude upon their host."

The city heaves a silent sigh of relief when the Volcano Goddess stops smoking. Tzekel-Kan is not so appeased when he fixates on Chel. Were she not so close to the gods, he would dare reach out and snatch her from them. "Ah, my lords, I see you have caught this temple-robbing thief!"

"She is mine," the god says mildly. The high priest recoils.

"Y-Yes, my lord," Chel stammers out. "I was sent a vision... to bring the gods tribute from the temple to guide them here." She sinks low before Lord Bacchus, because Lord Altivo won't lower himself to conversing with mortals. "My only wish is to serve the gods."

"And she has served us well," Lord Bacchus replies.

"O-Of course, my lord," Tzekel-Kan is quick to say. He bites back his fury when he realizes where Chel's tribute has come from. "Please, let me show you to your temple."

Chief Tannabok falters somewhat, Chel realizes, but he's quick to follow the high priest's turn for the temple of the Dual Gods. Perhaps Lady Paquini's temple or the royal palace might be more suitable for gods with undeclared cults, but it's not like the creators of the Fifth World have yet come to claim their thrones. With their temple long awaiting the arrival of their divinity, any divinity, the place is not yet formally consecrated to any one god in particular.

So it's not blasphemy. Not technically.

Lord Altivo lingers at the base of the temple steps. Lord Bacchus dismounts. For a moment the two gods stare at each other, then Lord Altivo rolls his eyes and gallops off. The mortals stammer after him.

"Do we displease Lord Altivo, my lord?" Chief Tannabok murmurs desperately.

Lord Bacchus considers this. "Gods are jealous beings, Chief Tannabok. Why would he wish his divinity forever attached to mine, when I am no more special than the dozen of other deities he's borne across the countless centuries?"

"Of course, Lord Bacchus," Tzekel-Kan quickly replies. "We shall attend to his needs, once we have finished with yours."

Chel glances in the direction the messenger god disappeared, but continues following Lord Bacchus. He was the one to verbally claim her as his own, so it's not like she can do anything about it.

Long used to the daily climb up the golden temple's steps, for Chel has long cleaned its chambers as an acolyte, she hangs politely back while the high priest proposes a reverent ceremony at dawn and the chief a glorious feast for the night.

Lord Bacchus grins. "Why not both?"

Then they depart, and Chel is left alone with divinity. She stutters an excuse about reuniting the head with its body and runs off to do just that.
Once that's done she's tempted to bolt for the stairs and keep running. But no, because a god has adopted her. Chel finds Lord Bacchus inspecting the massive stele of the Dual Gods.

"Their image is everywhere," the god notes. "Yet this temple is not devoted to them."

"The Dual Gods have never come to claim it, my lord," she answers honestly.

"You have awaited them a long time?"

"A thousand years, Lord Bacchus."

"Ah." A shadow passes over the god's face as he takes in the two empty thrones, forever awaiting their holders. "A thousand years is a long time to wait for someone, a very long time indeed. Please, what name may I call you?"

"C-Chel, my lord," she squeaks out, for Lord Bacchus chooses that moment to peel off his wine-red shirt and disdainfully throw it to the ground. "Call me Chel."

"Thank you, Chel. Now perhaps you could fetch me something you would consider more worthy of a god?"

Chel rushes to search the temple. Her first instinct is for a simple hip wrap, favored by the younger, more athletic gods for their simple versatility and ability to show off their builds. But, after a whisper of hesitation, she reaches for a purple full robe worn by older men and a matching cloak.

Her impulse is correct, for Lord Liber grins at the sight of her choice. Chel hastily averts her eyes, for it takes her far too long to realize the god has stripped *all the way down*. He has a beautiful face, yes, and is very, very male. When the god takes her tribute, she whirls around, half-surprised she hasn't at least been stricken blind from the impasse.

The god huffs. "You needn't worry, Chel. I'm not my thrice-damned father."

"I-I don't know who he is, Lord Bacchus."

"Someone best unnamed and unmourned." Chel jumps at the gentle hand on her shoulder. Blessedly clothed, the god smiles. "Do I look the part?"

"Regal, my lord," she admits, for violet is very much his color. "But... incomplete."

"Alas," sighs Lord Bacchus. "I am but a guest in these golden halls. It would be improper to assume more of my hosts."

Chel ducks out to announce Chief Tannabok of the god's impending arrival. Immediately the crowd ceases their anxious murmurs, plastering on their brightest, most desperate smiles.

Lord Bacchus is serene as he strides down the steps. When he meets Chieftess Miya at the base, he graces her with a chaste kiss to the hand. She flushes with delight, while even her cranky toddler laughs gleefully at the wink sent his way.

When a golden bowl of unmixed wine, a pure tribute only offered to divinity and the most sacred of sacrifices, is pressed into his hands the god considers it thoughtfully. Then his face breaks into a radiant smile that shakes the fear from his audience.

"Let this first libation be to all the great gods of wine and merriment!" he declares. "May they
smile down upon us, and revel with us, for a night neither man nor god shall ever forget!"

Manoa roars its approval. So Lord Bachus upends his wine and feeds it to the flame. Rather than douse it, the flames reach high and bright, flaring a deep, merry pinkish-red. The god laughs, and Manoa laughs with him.

"I am called Bacchus, and Release!"

Technically raised into the priesthood by Lord Bacchus's blatant favoritism, Chel has the right to only the minimally mixed wine, as close as mortals can come to the pure vintage. She allows herself only a single cup of liquid courage to chase the fear away. She needs a clear head tonight. Lord Bacchus has not yet actually done anything... divine, and his cult is not yet a full day old. If something goes wrong, it's her job to fix it, before she's the one winding up on the altar tomorrow. So she calls for dancers and drummers, singers and cigars, anything and everything to sway people to Lord Bacchus.

It's working, Chel feels. The buzz in the crowd is contagious. Part of her just wants to let go and join in the merriment, but she can't.

"Chel." With only a stifled squeak, she smiles tensely to the god at her side. Lord Bacchu's eyes are glowing through the fire's smoky haze, cast like a pall over the square. "Perhaps you should see that Lord Altivo's accommodations for tonight have been attended to. You are the closest thing he has to a priestess, after all."

"Y-Yes, Lord Bacchus. That's an excellent idea."

Chel makes her escape. She has more than enough activities lined up, and at this point people care far more about guzzling maize beer and pulque than any structured ceremonies. She heaves a sigh of relief when she leaves the square behind. The moment she escapes the smoky haze, the crisp night air washes over her, and clears her mind of that dull, intoxicating fog.

She's not the only one retiring for the night, either. Parents are shepherding whiny children off to bed. The old and dignified abandon the festival before it wholly descends into drunken debauchery, though from the looks in their eyes most have more private celebrations planned.

On a hunch she first tries the Feathered Serpent's temple. The acolytes anxiously awaiting Lord Altivo's return assure her their god has granted them favorable omens in allowing the... Horse God sanctuary to the night. If the god ever stumbles back. Last Chel saw him was in the square, consuming his weight in apples.

The Feathered Serpent's temple is far from the tallest in Manoa, but it still commands a grand view of the city center. Chel squints into the mass of shadows reflected off the smoky clouds rising from the fires below. Lord Bacchus casts the grandest shadow all. While the foreground is the shape Chel knows, the edges writhe in a hundred jagged aspects. Her god dances, and his shadowy partner has the same voluptuous figure of Lady Paquini's bountiful idols.

Chel averts her gaze and takes the long way back to her-- Lord Bacchus's temple. Near the base she rounds up some of the less intoxicated acolytes, which at this point are those awake enough to blearily listen to orders, just in case Lord Bacchus needs an escort to bed.

The party has descended into a full-on mob. Most are naked, clawing at each other like animals, and.... doing things that need to be scalded from her mind. She lingers at the edge, trying and failing for the courage to press onward.
Right when Chel is about to brave the mob for her god Lord Bacchus strides forward, thoroughly disheveled. Chel's drunken attendants regain some semblance of sobriety as they hasten to his side.

"You have an early start, my lord," she reminds him gently.

"Yes," he agrees, somewhere between weariness and bone-deep satisfaction. "That I do."

Lord Bacchus goes willingly into the bath. Somehow Chel is the one to wind up brushing his luxurious hair. Realizing the god about to drift off then and there, she calls for clothes to be fetched. The acolyte returns with another full robe, this one a deep green.

Bathed and dressed, Lord Bacchus is ushered through the temple without a fuss. At the threshold of the bedchamber, he freezes, immovable as stone. Power crackles off him in waves of irate, terrible rage. The acolytes flee as respectfully as a panicked mob can. Heart hammering, Chel draws in a breath... and holds her ground.

"Speak your mind," the god grits out, "before I take it from you."

"I never meant you offense, my lord," she says, calm as an unarmed woman before the jaguar. Fear before a predator does no one good. "I simply want to assure you get a good night's rest."

"I offered this city release tonight, and you spurned me. You were relieved when I sent you off on an errand. Why?"

"You made everyone in that square let go of everything, of themselves." Chel crosses her tremulous arms. "I owe you my life, Lord Bacchus. Never my sense of self."

His brow furrows in earnest confusion. "You are bound up by your fear and your cynicism and your desire to escape this place. Why not let it all go, and spare yourself the pain?"

"My pain keeps me alive," she answers bluntly. "The last time I let go, I nearly clawed the eyes out of someone when my mother offered herself up to Lord Xarayes." She shudders, gagging at the memory of bloodstained fingers. "She was an innocent woman, Lord Bacchus, who only wanted to keep me from getting sacrificed to. And I almost killed her for it. Then my mother's sacrifice for me would've been in vain."

Sealing up her pain, dark and deep, had kept her from screaming at Xaya's torture. Xaya couldn't have kept his fear and hatred bottle up anymore, not after years of his demons eating away at him since Dad died. Even if he hadn't unleashed it on Tzekel-Kan, he had still dared to run. It's why he is gone, and Chel is not.

"Oh." The god slouches against the threshold.

"Oh?"

"I forget sometimes, that mortals don't often appreciate my mania," he admits sheepishly. "They don't like awakening from euphoria bloodstained... surrounded by body parts... and the severed heads of their sons."

Chel shudders. But she does not flee. She considers the bedroom beyond. "...We were putting you to bed, my lord, alone. No one I grabbed was intoxicated enough to believe laying with a god is anything less than the gravest blasphemy."

"Really?" Lord Bacchus cocks his head. "What happens when the god seeks them out?"
"T-They don't, my lord."

Lord Bacchus is utterly mystified at this, which again makes Chel wonder where the hell he stumbled in from. And exactly what he had to consider his father figure.

"I'm... I'm married," the god whispers, confessing a grave secret. "For two millennia now, give or take a century. I haven't broken my vow to her. Not once."

Chel says nothing. Every possible response could be considered a grave insult.

"I... I should probably go to bed now, shouldn't I?"

"Yes, my lord."

His wine-dark eyes appraise her knowingly. "When you fled from your death this afternoon, it was not revenge or release you prayed for."

"No, my lord."

"I am your Soterios, aren't I?"

Though Chel does not know that name, her being shivers with the truth of it. "Yes, my lord."

"Great," the god groans. "Just great. I've regrown my conscience this time around, have I?"

He collapses face-first into bed. Chel retires to the couch.

"The dawning of a new age... demands... sacrifice."

"No."

Chel drops her basket of flowers, eyes bulging. The crowd gasps, and even Tzekel-Kan lowers his cudgel in utter bewilderment.

Utterly unimpressed, Lord Bacchus stands tall and proud, eyes cold.

"Y-You do not want the sacrifice, my lord?" the high priest stammers out as he tries to quantify a god not wanting human blood shed in their honor.

"No, Tzekel-Kan, I do not." When their audience breaks out into nervous whispering, the god crosses his arms. "There is being a gracious host, and then there is blindly swallowing an offer made in bad faith. This is the latter, and a grave insult to me."

"I-I do not understand, my lord."

"My mother was born mortal," Lord Bacchus states bluntly, unmoved by the even more scandalous whispers breaking out. "She was still mortal upon my conception. To offer me human blood is as grave an insult as me, oh, making me maul your mother to death in your madness. Simply because you hadn't thought to ask what sacrifices were acceptable to me."

Something in the high priest shifts behind his skeletal mask. "My apologies, my lord," Tzekel-Kan purrs, low and dangerous. "I do not mean for you to call your wrath upon this city, and show them the proof of your divinity."

Lord Bacchus's handsome face shimmers like a mirage, but his burning wine-red eyes remain
constant. "I'm so good this is a harmless mistake, then," he hisses back. His face guise as the one Manoa knows him as, though flushed with fury. "My wrath is such a very... inhospitable thing to inflict upon this city, where the great gods have only welcomed me as a privileged guest."

The god stalks forward. Tzekel-Kan's courage crumbles as he skitters out of the way. Lord Liber kneels before the man nearly sacrificed. One touch has the man's eyes flying open with a gasp, as the drugged haze clears.

"I am called Bacchus, and Recovery from Madness," the god tells the mortal stammering in his hold. He glances curiously over the precipice, where the gateway to Xibalba roars forever loud and hungry. "This is the entrance to your underworld, yes?"

"Y-Yes, my lord."

Lord Bacchus smiles, as he helps bare the man away from the edge and into helpful hands. "No need to visit it yet."

With Tzekel-Kan so thoroughly disgraced, Chief Tannabok clears his throat and ventures forward. "My lord, may the people of Manoa offer you our tribute?"

Lord Bacchus considers the attendants before him. Their baskets are heaped with gold and gourds of wine, pulque and glittering gemstones.

The god smiles. His pleasure buoys the city, and forms a procession from the altar to his temporary temple. Chel cannot join the great god in his litter, but keeps pace because Lord Altivo has insisted her to climb upon his back. Compared to the enthrallment of the night before, the joy of the crowd is more tempered. For all he looks outwardly pleased Lord Bacchus's eyes are elsewhere.

"Chel," he absently calls. "Please inform the chief I wish to meet with him personally."

"Yes, my lord."

Altivo effortlessly cuts through the crowds. Chel can't help a smile when Chief Tannabok does his best to rein his surprise at the sight of her. Atop the generous Horse God she feels half a goddess herself, as giddy as Tzekel-Kan before he plunges the dagger down in the Jaguar God's name.

Of course the request is granted. Not even the chief of the city can deny the gods.

Tannabok receives Lord Bacchus in his throne room. There is no more formal a place one might receive divinity. He does his best to sit calmly as the god strides in. His face is his usual one, and not the hazy one from this morning, with curled horns and madness in every line. Yet gods are unpredictable as the winds, and a docile jaguar does not mean a tame jaguar.

"Lord Bacchus," he calls lightly and half-sincerely. "I hope the people's tribute was well-received."

"The one organized by you was, yes," the god says. Wine-dark eyes appraise him. "Chief Tannabok, how much authority do you have in the true sacrifices?"

"Very little," he admits earnestly. "My rule is over the secular. I can arrange celebrations for the gods and recommend when perhaps a blood sacrifice might be needed, but the rites and the tribute are left always to the priests."

An elegant eyebrow arches. "Priests who cannot be bothered to learn what is a grave insult to offer to me?"
"Tzekel-Kan is... zealous in his service," Tannabok answers carefully. "Most gods of this city prefer a human sacrifice as the highest one. His offense was not intentional, merely... based on common convention. And no other god in this city has revealed such... heritage to us before."

A god born from a mortal, of all unions!

Lord Bacchus's face twitches. Was that a laugh? "I take it the great gods of the city do not usually tend to... consort with their followers in such a direct manner?"

"No, my lord."

Lord Bacchus does not hide his rueful smile this time. "Those gods in the east were... not so discrete with their digressions. Even when mortal, my mother was... not so in the conventional sense. Her mother was a peace goddess, and her father a hero of heroes."

Tannabok considers this, and tries not to groan with his growing headache. "'When mortal,' Lord Bacchus?"

"My father came to her in a form much like the one I wear now. One palatable to mortal eyes," Lord Bacchus stresses. "My stepmother did not receive it well. So she disguised herself and convinced my mother that perhaps her lover was a liar, and not a great god after all. When my mother insisted my father show her the truth of her divinity, he could not deny her. Even if she burned before his full majesty."

Tannabok cannot hide his wince. "I-I'm sorry, Lord Bacchus." Sorry his mother was so arrogantly naive she had burned for it.

Lord Bacchus shrugs. "She was pregnant with me when it happened, you know. Perhaps my father unwittingly purified me of my own mortality. Or maybe it carried over from my first parents."

...What?

Lord Bacchus leans back into his chair, swirling his cup of wine glumly. "Lady Paquini is an old and venerable goddess. She is well-loved here."

There is a question there. So Tannabok explains as fully as he can. "Lady Paquini is ancient to the Vine People, my lord. They hailed her as a great goddess long before my ancestors conquered theirs. Of all their gods, only Lady Paquini charmed Lord Bibi into letting her go, to show the gods what she could do. She brought Manoa good things, and so we hail her for them."

The god's brow furrows. "The Vine People wear green stones in their ears, yes?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And are a lower class than those who wear gold?" At Chief Tannabok's affirmation, the god's face slackens with terrible recognition. "They are plebeians. And are the first choice for sacrifice?"

"...Unless the omens attest otherwise, yes."

The god buries his face in his hands. "I... I chose the wrong name."

"We are privileged with every aspect you reveal to us," Tannabok answers carefully. He considers what he knows of the god before him, who he has favored so far, and takes his leap of faith. "Perhaps you would deign bless us with another name, my lord, should you choose to make your home among us."
Lord Bacchus looks up in disbelief, brow furrowing. "Chief Tannabok, you know full well what you are inviting into your city."

"Yes," he admits. "I know you well enough to know what you are capable of, and that those you wish your wrath upon are enemies of my people."

Tannabok knows full well what he is condemning Tzekel-Kan too, should he grant this god the power to take his vengeance. It is high time for all his people to stop living in terror that the smallest slight may have them thrown onto the altar next. The high priest has grown only ever bolder in the rights he takes, intruding into even Tannabok's domain. Tannabok will never grant Tzekel-Kan the chance to turn his eyes upon his own family, not when he has already tried offering up his own chief as an example to make out of.

"You invite me in, then?"

Tannabok exhales. "Yes, my lord, I do."

The chief speaks for the city, and so the city speaks.

Lord Bacchus smirks. "Then, as the only god who deigns grant Manoa his physical presence, I request the unoccupied temple I reside in to be consecrated in my name. Construction can of course begin immediately on an even greater temple for the Dual Gods, to await them for when they ever return to us."

Tannabok agrees with little hesitation. Reconverting a temple already in existence is far easier than building a new one for a god already in residence. He wonders if the Dual Gods will ever come at all. Their reign was lasted a thousand years already, after all, however absent their rule. Perhaps the emergence of this new god, of such uncertain parentage, is their quiet retirement from the Fifth World into the Sixth.

The god's face turns pensive, and Tannabok wonders if his silent musings have counted as a prayer. "In my first life I was destined to succeed my father as king of this world. Perhaps there is truth to that after all."

Tannabok inclines his head. Who is he to say? "Shall I prepare a feast for tonight, my lord, to celebrate such wonderful news?"

"Please do."

Before the god takes his leave, he makes one final request. Of course Tannabok grants it, though he has no idea why the god needs a third throne in his temple while one already lies empty.

Between Tannabok and Chel, Lord Bacchus's priestess, a proper ceremony is ready by nightfall. Reclined in his throne, the god radiates contentment, a gentler sort than the one that induced such passion the night before. Perhaps it is because of the children passionately reenacting his first day in the city, albeit with more plain grape juice and goofy dancing than thriving, frantic bodies.

Hazy with contentment, Tannabok cares little where Tzekel-Kan is brooding tonight. His sullen streak will break sooner or later, when he can no longer chafe beneath the reign of a god who spurns all he stands for. When he dares lash out again, Lord Bacchus will be there to strike him down.

But, for all he stands high and proud, Tzekel-Kan has never stood alone.

When the ground rumbles beneath their feet, Tannabok's first thought is Lady Raima's fuming
wrath. Then he gapes up at horror where the jade idol of the Jaguar God rips itself free of its fallen temple.

Even as Tannabok rises to evacuate the square, Lord Bacchus surges from his throne. No longer is he shrouded in green, but in golden armor. He raises a shield of black skin as he charges through the crowd.

The jade jaguar neatly evades his charge, wrenching itself free of the grape vines that writhe up its paws. This is not Balam Qoxtok, only his avatar, and not a direct match to a physical god.

Tannabok pushes himself forward, to put as much distance between Miya and their boys as possible.

But the beast ignores him too. Its eyes fixate on the woman who has placed herself between it and the children still fleeing the square.

The idol's jade paws come crashing down.

Lord Bacchus's horrified cry is ice in Tannabok's veins, that makes all the city freeze.

With his roar, the ice erupts into fire, and the night falls into violet madness.

First, there is pressure and pain.

Then, Chel falls, down, down, down.

There is the roar of water and the whispers of shadows, leering faces and endless darkness, the shriek of a jaguar and the booming barks of dogs.

Chel slams onto stone. She groans instinctively at a pain that is only a dull, distant throb, before it is gone.

"Oh, oh dear."

Soft, gentle hands so much like her mother's help her sit up. Chel's nose twitches at the muted fragrance of flowers. Her head stops spinning as she fixates on the face before her. It looks young as her own, with hair that cascades in familiar rich black curls. The eyes of the goddess are the fresh green of new leaves.

"Easy, there," soothes the goddess. "The first fall is always the hardest."

"The first fall?" rumbles a voice from behind her. The god looms high over them both, his face dark and stoic as his onyx throne.

"Well," the goddess amends, "perhaps her only fall. I have no idea what our Zagreus stumbled into this time."

"He can't have her back," the god grumbles like a petulant child. "He can just spend more time down here instead of gallivanting around like some sort of-"

"Language, dear."

"Excuse me?" Chel bristles. "I'm pretty sure I'm not even supposed to be here."

"You are not," says the god.
"Our dog fought off the big cat that was chasing after you," says the goddess. "He's still sulking across the river."

Chel shuts her mouth.

The goddess rises from her side to take her own throne of wood and living blossoms. Her husband rolls his eyes, black as oblivion, as they fall into what sound to be old bickering about prodigal sons and revolving doors. Chel leaves them to it.

The cavernous palace stretches on forever, an endless maze of rooms and flower-filled courtyards. The walls are austere black, but veined in streaks of gold and bronze and silver, all the riches of the earth shining through bare stone. Some windows look out to sprawling fields and orchards where faint shades huddle beneath the trees. Others gaze out to the mouth of a river that yawns open into the endless waters of the void. She wonders how far Xibalba is across that sea, and if Lady Eupana ever swims so far.

At first Chel wanders. Then she realizes her feet guide her purposefully forward.

There are so many souls in residence, groups of people that have happily claimed little corners as their personal courts and tuned out all around them. Chel passes them by. Their faces are as strange as their dress and the beasts at their feet.

Some courts are elegant and others grand beyond compare. Of course Chel arrives at the noisiest of them all, where beautiful maids lounge half-nude with wine goblets in hand, and hairy half-men sing and drink with each other. There are at least familiar features here. The goddesses that lounge in drunken and restful repose have wine-dark eyes. Several young men have their father's handsome face, but it's the homely one that has his smirk.

At the head of the table are three seats of honor. One of course sits empty, but those to its left and right hold great goddesses. The one with the enigmatic smile and coronet of braids must be Lord Bacchus's wife. The other with warm dark eyes and rich ringlets is of course his mother, who waves Chel over to embrace her like a daughter.

"Welcome to the family," she rumbles in a voice rich and deep.

Chel awkwardly pulls away. "I-I'm pretty sure I don't belong here either."

The wife of Lord Bacchus smiles. "You could say that about any of us."

With fresh eyes Chel looks over the court. Part of her recognizes countless cultures, from across thousands of miles and years, united perhaps only in their love of wine and merriment. Lady Paquini would feel right at home here, and so should her People.

"Call me Chel," she offers weakly.

"Ariadne," offers the wife.

"Semele," offers the mother, with an impish wink. "Down here, at least."

Chel wavers on her feet. With nowhere else, she collapses into the empty throne. No one bats an eye. "I died, didn't I?"

Semele considers her. "For now, perhaps."

Chel crosses her arms. "The dead stay dead."
"If they're mortal, yes," Ariadne demurs.

Semele smirks, and Chel sees where her son got it from. "My boy doesn't bring back mortals."

Something in the feasters shift, as they fall into mournful silence. Chel erupts from her seat with a shriek, for it is no longer empty.

Lord Bacchus slumps against his throne, eyes half-lidded and thoroughly disheveled. Wine-red bleed seeps sluggishly from fresh claw marks and bite marks. Immediately his attendants swarm him, but without ever bumping into Chel. One panicked maid starts coming his air, while one of his daughters dutifully thrusts a sloshing wine goblet into his hand.

Semele tuts. "Now, now, dear. You weren't gone very long at all."

"I had higher priorities, Mom," her son answers blearily.

Chel eyes him, aghast. "W-What happened?"


Ariadne side-eyes him. "You look you fell."

"I did. From a thrice-damned whirlpool. The body was easy enough to dispatch, but the soul clung to its avatar and needed some... persuasion. And its god was not happy on the other side."

Gods don't die, except when they do. Chel sputters.

"You came all this way to just die after not even two days with us?"

Lord Bacchus hums. "It was an easy death, all things considered. Much less painless than getting ripped apart by giants."

"Or burned by the unadulterated brilliance of divinity," Semele points out ruefully.

"Yeah, well, Dad sewed me into his thigh afterward, so I was alright."

"What?" Chel says, flatly.

"Part of the deal," Lord Bacchus answers warily, as his attendants clothe and clean him from his chair. "Has been since the beginning."

"And now you're just going to lay there and drink yourself stupid?"

"Also, make love to my wife."

A distant, exasperated scream pierces the air. Chel winces, as she considers what prowls the borders of this land, to devour any future souls seeking rest here. "So you're just going to leave Balam Qoxtok to eat any soul he wants?"

The god shrugs apathetically. "I got him out of the mortal world, didn't I? I think I deserve a respite."

Chel's fists clench. She barely escaped Balam Qoxtok by virtue of this god claiming her. Every other Manoan to die won't be so lucky. Most make it through the Jaguar God's domain by appeasing or tricking him with a dog's soul or a clay effigy instead. Without Tzekel-Kan to keep the god fed in the mortal world, he won't be nearly as stupid in letting souls escape him in Xibalba.
Lord Bacchus appraises her, then he smirks in satisfaction. "You never needed me at all, did you?"

"Not if you're just going to laze around while our people are getting eaten," she spits.

One of the god's daughters adorns his head with a crown of leaves Chel suddenly recognizes as ivy. He lifts it off his head to plop it on hers instead. She scowls back.

A hand pokes her in the shoulder. Nearly jumping, Chel turns to face the god with Bacchus's smirk. "You ever seen my mother when she's about to go on a warpath?"

"No," she grits out.

"Well, she looks like you right now. And by gods do not you not to be between her and what's pissing her off. So why don't you take this, and do what you need to do?"

The god thrusts the staff of a pearly spear in her face, beautiful as it is deadly. Chel thanks him. Heroically refusing to look below his naked waist, and what hangs there, she takes the spear and marches out to make her own gods damned jaguar pelt.

Dawn breaks still and mournful over Manoa. The last of the people still clinging to madness come back to themselves, shaking and sobbing. Those calm help ease them away from the remnants of Balam Qoxok's temple, which they have brought down with only their bare hands. Not a trace of the Jaguar God remains in the city, for all his idols and effigies have been scratched and shattered.

Chief Tannabok does his best to appraise the damage. There are blessedly few dead and missing, for Lord Bacchus had cleaved a straight path through to the Jaguar God's idol and to where Tzekel-Kan had lurked. His trackers follow the trail of destruction the city to the jungle, through Lady Raima's devastated crater and down to the gateway to Xibalba. The altar is no longer there, snapped beneath the jade jaguar's weight.

There is no sign of Lord Bacchus.

Chief Tannabok sighs and turns his mind to more immediate matters. Chel sacrificed herself to save the lives of those children still in the square. She deserves a grand funeral procession, gifts enough to carry her straight through the Lords of Xibalba to Eupana's verdant paradise. The searchers scour the city high and low for her body, or at least what remains of it.

They find nothing.

"Chief!" one of his warriors calls, skittering away from Xibalba's edge.

Chief Tannabok turns, eyes wide in disbelief, as divinity climbs forth.

Chel-- Lady Chel looks almost like she always did, before... There is new strength in her stance now, a certainty to her eyes. A jaguar pelt, black as obsidian, dangles from her shoulders.

Lady Chel smiles at them, before she turns. Planting her pearly spear into the earth, she bends over to help those climbing behind her.

The goddess brings forth her family - or part of them, at least, three sisters and a brother. Of course they're all draped in patches of jaguar skin, with fangs and claws as trophies of their conquest. The brother takes Tzekel-Kan's sacrificial knife, hanging from his side, and hurls it back into Xibalba with a disdainful sneer.
A crowd gathers around the family as they proceed through the city, following Lady Chel's lead and never letting each other go. None dare venture too close and crowd divinity. Murmurs slowly ripple through the crowd and inevitably reach their chief. There is Xaya, executed some years ago as a runaway traitor. Some who remember the last Dark Days insist those are not Lady Chel's sisters, but her aunts - Altia, Ameya, Acheli.

Faced with impossible proof, the story changes. Lady Chel must not have truly died at all, merely gone down into Xibalba to battle Balam Qoxtok directly while Lord Bacchus drove him back from above. Of course she found her family too, divine as she is. Lady Paquini used a bit of herself in creating the People of the Vine, after all. Perhaps her divine blood seeped into some children more than others.

Planting her spear into the heart of the temple ruins, Lady Chel declares this land hers now. Silence rings, as no divinity dares challenge her. So does the last of the Jaguar God pass from this world, saved for those parts worn and wielded as trophies.

For some days, there is peace. As the foundations of their temple are raised, the Vine Gods find temporary shelter elsewhere, in Lady Paquini's temple and the humble, yet joyous halls of their mortal relations. The third throne Lord Bacchus requested is installed in his temple, to await his return.

They need not wait very long. The morning smoke is spotted on the horizon, the Vine Gods and Lord Altivo thunder off - not for the border, but for Xibalba.

There are screams in the worlds above and below, as the demons there are hunted down and torn apart.

The sentinels sent to investigate the smoke on their borders wisely turn back when the heady smell of blood and wine hits their noses. A few with sharp ears hear foreign shrieks and curses, and flee all the faster. They have felt their god at his most passionate, and rightly avoid him at his wrathful.

At sunset that same day, their god rides forth from the east. He looks as they first knew him, though his eyes are less wild, and more content. His happiness is borne from his mother to his left, and wife to his right. Now his name is Lord Liber, the Free Father, and so he is received. His wife is Lady Ariadne, his holy mother Lady Thyone. Strange names for the Sunrise Gods, borne from the east, but what does one expect for such far-flung relations?

When the Sunrise Gods return, so do the Vine Gods, their number doubled. They arrive in a wake of butterflies and hummingbirds, souls freed from the Lords of Xibalba, that flutter off into the horizon and into whatever new beginnings await them there. Many more souls happily take their place at Grandmother Turtle's turtle that night, content with her paradise instead whatever may lie for them past the sunset.

Great days of feasting follow, as Lady Paquini seems to descend bring all the great gods with her. It's a family reunion, the likes of which the world has never known before. Perhaps she is Lord Liber's other mother, or an aunt. What's more certain is that she is Lady Chel's great-grandmother, for Lady Sija has frostily claimed position of grandmother. What matter is that all these gods are cut from the same cloth, and related somehow or another. In the wake of endless alcohol and heady nights, the details don't matter.

Manoa has been blessed with a great number of gods in so short a time, even if most are minor deities. Great Lord Liber happily keeps to his temple if he does not wander the myriad worlds beyond. He is most piqued when strangers dare try finding Manoa's sacred borders. So the Free Father blurs their minds and drives them into madness, to keep Manoa unbothered by them. It is
Lady Thyone who sews the seeds of madness to take root in them, just as she plants the beginnings of the best passions in young and faithful heart. If his mother imbues his madness, it is his wife who banks it. Lady Ariadne, Most Holy, who guides the worthy through the maddening maze to deliverance on the other side.

If the Sunrise God keep the borders, then it is the Vine Gods who keep the people. Lady Chel is Watcher of the Heart, who girds the soul against baser instincts that would let the Jaguar God and his ilk back into the world. While Lord Liber inspires crowds, it is Lady Chel who physically brings the spear down, or hauls the innocent from the fray. Her family assists, lending wisdom and strength, patience and fortitude, virtues that resonate with different people depending on their prayers and preferences.

Lord Altivo, the Horse God, cannot be forgotten either, of course, no matter how much he and the Feathered Serpent prefer to keep to themselves except when it pleases them.

Manoa has a great many gods, but few very fortunately choose to walk among them at any one time. The exceptions are almost always the craziest nights of the year, when Lrd Liber brings forth his entire extended family, and drown most everyone in passion. Those looking for only a quiet night need only leave a pointed offering of ivy or pure water at their door, to let the party gods know now is not a good time.

Of course, then there are the two bumbling gods Lady Chel eventually and inevitably chooses as her consorts... but that is a tale for another time...

..And this is not that tale...

Lisandro strolls on board for all the madness and mayhem these Spaniards will soon bring forth into the New World. He is prepared to sever all roots to this land to plant them anew across the Atlantic. At this stage there is nothing, nothing that can make him change his mind.

"On three, we jump out and head for the dock."

The man freezes, wine-dark eyes flicking to two innocent-looking barrels. Barrels that refuse to shut up.

"One, two, three!"

The barrels shake heroically, but no one these days is strong enough to lift the dead weight heaped atop them.

It does not take long for the barrels to descend into whispered bickering. The frenzied sailors loading up the voyage's last supplies are deaf to them. But Lisandro isn't. All too soon those hissed voices take on a familiar pattern. His eye twitches. Convulsively.

There is only so much madness a god of madness will tolerate. Lisandro suddenly recalls every reason why he didn't seek them out the first time he died. Or the second. Or the tenth.

He didn't miss them in Spain, or in his father's halls. He sure as hell doesn't miss them now.

Lisandro innocently makes his way behind another man, holding out a foot just as two men carrying heavy crates labor past. He's a face in the crowd before the men even start swearing at each other.
From the docks he watches to see if the two stowaways are uncovered in time, but all is calm as the galleons ship out. He waves his big brothers cheerfully goodbye and hopes this mean he never has to see them again.

If these idiots haven't figured out the ramifications of Hades being absorbed into the Christian afterlife yet, they probably never will. Which means no more relationship drama, in this world or the next.

As the ships disappear into the horizon, Lisandro pivots on his heel to consider the situation before them. All that gold and greed is due to soon back over the sea, because Spain is just as eager to snatch up land on this side of the sea as it is across it.

...Throwing the Germans out of the Spanish royal family too could also be fun too, he supposes. Maybe things will be even more interesting with a *Frenchman* in charge.

Chapter End Notes

Dionysus has a lot of names, you guys. Bacchus is literally just the Latin rendering of Bakkhos, 'he of Bacchic frenzy,' that certain type madness that results in really wild times for the revelers... or them ripping their relatives apart because their god was pissed with them. Liber literally means 'free.' He was also a god of wine and merriment, but very specifically one of plebeians, and the casting down of kingly tyranny :p

One legend states there was once a god named Zagreus, son of either Hades and Persephone or Zeus and Persephone (ew). This little guy was destined to be king of the gods after Zeus, but then monsters ripped him apart. His heart was saved though, so that somehow got implanted into Semele. When Semele burned, baby Dionysus was sewn into Zeus' thigh (double ew) until it was time for him to be born. So that's why Dionysus is also a god of rebirth and reincarnation :p One of his names is literally Dimetor (Twice-Born.) More like thrice-born given the legend, but whatever Ancient Greeks -.-'

...Also Dionysus married Ariadne and made her immortal. And then rescued Semele from the underworld to turn her into a goddess named Thyone, so there's also that. Dionysus' maternal grandparents (through Semele) are Cadmus (founder of Thebes) and Harmonia (goddess of harmony). They also got turned into snakes, but that is a story for another time.

Dionysus has a lot of immortal kids. Mentioned here are daughters Methe, goddess of drunkenness, and Pasithea, goddess of rest. The sons are Iakkhos and Sabazios (two guys nearly indistinct from their dad, anyway.) And Priapus, the one with the... yes. Giant phallus.

Hades being a synonym for the afterlife in general, and then compounded with the earlier incarnation of Sheol. So Hades became a 'place or state' for even departed Christian souls. Exactly what it is varies from sect to sect, such as where souls sleep or just chill before Judgement. Or bask in God's love or burn because God's love is like fire to their sinner souls. What matters is ambiguity to a concept at least still partially tied to the pagan concepts that predated it. And those gods may no longer be actively
worshiped, but are also diligently recorded and recalled, if only in a scholarly way.

That is how dead becomes Only Mostly Dead : )
the seventh son

Chapter Summary

It does not take long for Tannabok and Miya to realize they might have accidentally adopted a seventh son. His name is Miguel.

Or, what to do when you accidentally adopt a god.

Chapter Notes

And now back to our favorite mortal family! (Chel's doesn't count, 'cause they're all past mortal XD)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they first cradled Matla in their arms, there were many ways Tannabok and Miya considered where parenthood might take them.

"Daddy, can Lord Miguel stay for dinner?" is not the question they expect to hear almost every night.

It's an almost weekly occurrence, for the Golden Gods to dine the royal hall. And Lord Altivo too, sometimes. The gods are gracious guests, accidental miracles aside.

But Lord Miguel has a special fondness for the family. He alone calls Tannabok 'Chief Tanni' as if that's his name. When his consorts aren't around, and there's no need for propriety, the chief and chieftess quickly become 'Tanni' and 'Miya'. With protocol out the window anyway, Lord Miguel eventually just becomes... Miguel. Because there is nothing lordly about the grinning man that shoots grapes across the table with unerring accuracy, because Kuili is going through a picky stage right now and won't eat anything not tossed into his mouth.

The precedent Miguel set on that first day out stands true weeks and months later. He will still gladly play ball with every last Manoan child, patiently sit through painstaking bone-sticks put up into simple patterns and badly-strung guitar renditions by clumsy little hands. Miguel is 'the fun god,' to Lord Tulio's spluttered chagrin.

Of course, there is only so much indignity even a god will openly take. Miya notices all the new 'playmates' the boys pick up, grinning boys and androgynous little girls from noble families that don't exist or just can't fit in. Tannabok spots all the new 'pets,' rainbow-feathered birds and golden-furred beasts. He even walks into giggling nurseries, where his boys pretend to sit quietly and sunbeams look a little too innocent.

Not that Tannabok is immune either, of course. His court suddenly enjoys an uptick of constituents that want very detailed discussions on city planning. And debates on nuances of laws that haven't been touched on in literal decades. There is also the fact Miguel always can't keep his identities straight, and keeps rambling points from earlier with a different face or just his own.
"Tanni?" Miya whispers to him one night, when all the boys are allegedly fast asleep. They probably are, because Miguel is actually responsible enough to honor bedtime.

"Hm?"

"Do you ever feel like... we adopted a seventh child? One exceptionally large, loud... divine child?"

"Yes," he mumbles, uncaring of who and what are around to listen. It's not slander if it's true. "A big brother who is a positive influence on our other boys, mind you."

Baby Chiku is toddling months earlier than anyone expected him too and Kuili has some out of his sullen shell to be a surprisingly sunny little boy. Nauí asks deep questions to the priests and the healers, with an acuteness that promises greatness in either path. Yei has taken to the guitar like he was born for it and Ome excels with a toy bow as he never has the spear-thrower. Matla, their firstborn, is asking his parents about ruling and justice, because his games of pretend with Miguel land a new little too close to home sometimes.

It is not a bad thing, to favor their family so. Even if Tannabok is ready to pull his hair out at some their antics.

Inevitably, however, such closeness wears away on the divine decorum they've tried so hard to instill in their boys, since Tzekel-kan's time and especially since. It's hard for children to respect a great god when all they see is their indulgent playmate.

The fateful day comes when Tannabok is just so happens to be strolling by the sunny courtyard his sons have claimed for the afternoon. Miguel has the decency to wear his own face this time, partly so he can tell his stories with aplomb and because the eldest boys' tutors will never dare intrude upon a god for math time.

"Hey, Miguel?"

"Yes, Yei?"

"How many brothers and sisters do you actually have?"

The god's face scrunches with earnest confusion. He tries counting them out on his fingers, before shrugging. "A lot."

Matla cocks his head. "Do all your stories have the same ones? Because it's always 'this sister turned this rude lady into a spider' or 'this sister turned a guy into a deer for peeping.'"

"Well, those are two different sisters." When Ome presses for their names, Miguel answers with his usual indignant bluster. "Do you know how many names we gods use among ourselves? And my sisters didn't give out their names to this city, so it's impolite to name names."

"Can't you differentiate them, somehow?" Naui murmurs politely. "Like, this your wise sister, and the..."

"The prissy one?" Yei volunteers. "The one who always gets upset about girls that maybe want to try things besides from hunting and exploring all the time?"

Miguel's face twists, because he tries to laugh and huff at the same time. "T-T-The prissy one? She happens to be my twin, thank you very much!"
Tannabok's boys sit in knowing silence, which only makes the god bluster more. With a smile, the chief stops eavesdropping, and comes to his defense.

"Aren't all four of you supposed to be somewhere?" he muses innocently. "Like learning your numbers?"

His eldest three smile nervously at him, stutter their apologies to Miguel, and scurry away. Little Naui is too polite for such an unceremonious retreat. He climbs off Miguel's leg to hug Tannabok's leg apologetically.

"Sorry, Daddy. We got a bit carried away." He blinks earnestly up at the god, who melts at his sincerity. "And sorry to you too, Lord Miguel, for taking up so much of your time."

"Nonsense." The god grins. "An afternoon with Tanni's boys is an afternoon well-spent."

"Your brothers and sisters are lucky to have you," Naui declares, "because you're a very good big brother to us too."

Miguel's smile freezes, but innocent Naui scurries away without realizing the damage he's done. Tannabok winces after his son, and then carefully considers the god left in his wake. Miguel has a habit of fading away when things grow too awkward, but here he is, rooted to place.

"You have a way with children, my lord," he begins diplomatically. "I am sorry mine are still learning proper piety." And basic tact.

"Nonsense, Chief Tanni," Miguel croaks out. "They're perfect just the way they are. You and Miya are lucky to have them."

Tannabok smiles sadly. "We are blessed, my lord."

"Yes," he murmurs, almost too soft to hear. "You are."

Remembering that morning on the ship, when he had been still so uncertain of Miguel's divinity, Tannabok musters up his earlier courage. He closes the gap between them to lay a sure, steady hand on the god's shoulder. Miguel gasps sharply, but does not pull away. Tannabok does not burn for his forwardness.

"Our father always had way too many children than he knew how to deal with," Miguel muses, eyes very far away. "We all grew up so fast, so proud and so jealous. He gave us things to make us prouder, so we'd stop bothering him, and laid down the law when we pissed him off enough about it. My sister and I were some of his oldest. We barely had time for each other, let alone all that came after us."

"It must be very hard," Tannabok says neutrally, "to be big brother to so many little siblings."

"...Yes," Miguel agrees gamely. "Quite right. Never had the best examples to begin with. Dad was the youngest of six himself, and most spoiled of the bunch. Mom... Mom had the time for us, so long as we took care of the things that made her unhappy. I was a shitty... big brother myself. Jealous and short-tempered, when it mattered most."

"My boys are better people now, Miguel, with your tutelage," Tannabok replies. "They will be better men because of you."

A smile returns to Miguel's face as he chuckles ruefully. "Me? Chief Tanni, that's all because of you and Miya. You're a good father, a great father. The best."
Tannabok dips his head. "I can only try to be my best for them, and admit when I am at my worst, so they should learn all they aspire to be and how to avoid my own mistakes. I can only hope Miya and I will do enough for them."

He moves to withdraw his hand, but the god only takes it and squeezes back. His smile lights up all his face, while emerald eyes peer up at him in soothing certainty. "Chief Tanni, you and Miya will do a spectacular job. You're doing it right now."

Unable to resist the impulse any longer, Tannabok lifts the god up into a crushing god. Miguel laughs and gives one right back, because his scrawny arms are always so much stronger than they look.

Then the god cocks his head to a call only he can hear, grinning wryly. "Better get going, Chief Tanni. Duty calls."

"Of course, my lord," Tannabok agrees.

He releases Miguel. The god dissipates in a sunbeam, before forming into the emerald hawk. With a chirruping laugh he circles the courtyard once, rainbow wings flashing in the sunlight, and wheels off toward his temple.

Chapter End Notes

The number seven is considered sacred to Apollo, who is also considered a seven-month child. Unsurprisingly, the seventh month of the Greek calendar used to be sacred to him, and his holy days usually centered around the seventh day of the month.

As Diana's twin Apollo shared part of her duties in protection of the young. Even if he was also the paradigm of Ancient Greek youths, and all the maturity you'd expect of one.
giver of joy (and good things)

Chapter Summary

Tulio likes to think of himself as the distant, dignified god. He's nothing like Miguel.

...Except he's not.

Or, two things a diverse god bumbles into on purpose, and one earnest mistake.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

god of translation

"Are you sure you don't want to come, Grandma?"

"Why, so they can poison me faster?"

"They're being hospitable, Grandma. Our new neighbors are welcoming us."

"Yes, with their grapes and their apples. Unnatural food, to give me an unpleasant night atop all these days."

A barely repressed groan. "They have maize, Grandma, and almost all the foods from back home. Sure, the neighbors make it a bit different, but beneath the flavor it's still all the same."

"Maxya," Tlalli sighs at last. "Leave your grandmother be. If she wants to mope at home, let her mope at home."

"This is not home!" Yoliya snaps at last. "You dragged me from there, you poor excuse of a daughter, through stinking miles of jungle. You had your no good son-in-law haul me here like a sack of chili peppers!"

"Mom, Nauac carried you through miles of jungle so you didn't have to walk all that way." Tlalli crosses her arms and scowls at her own mother, as if Yoliya is the ungrateful child. "I'm sorry this isn't home, and that people here speak differently. But their gods granted us a place here, and a chance we don't have outside anymore. Can we please try to be grateful for their blessing and the hospitality of our neighbors, to maybe pick up some more basic words to get along here?"

Yoliya spits on the ground. "You can make me die on foreign soil, but you can't make me soil my tongue with foreign filth."

Maxya's youngest fusses in her arms. She rocks him calm, at last heading for the door. "Okay, Grandma, okay. I don't know when Nauac and the kids will be back, but there's enough food to keep you 'til dinner."

Yoliya scowls further. Yes, that's what she needed right now, an unpleasant reminder her great-grandchildren and her no-good grandson-in-law are spending all day with Manoans when they should be here, listening to her gripe about all that is wrong in Manoa.
When they're gone, Yoliya goes over to brood by the hearth like a proper grandmother. But this
damn city is too hot, and the sticky air displeases her even further. So, cursing her gods damn
family to not give her the decency to die in her own damn home, she drags her chair outside and
into the late afternoon shade. Maybe the mosquitoes will grant her the blessing of a sickness to
finally deliver her from this giant, noisy place.

Of course, so many stupid Manoans ignore her pointed scowls, and still come over to socialize.
They chatter like monkeys, because not a single damn word of theirs makes sense. Spitting at their
feet is at least a measure that crosses cultural barriers, and at last Yoliya is left alone. Her
neighbors give her a wide berth.

The blue sky gains streaks of red and gold, as the day winds down. Yoliya tries to as well, to enjoy
a peaceful dusk before her hoard of great-grandchildren come galloping back.

It lasts for all of five minutes.

"Will you shut up already?" she yells to that accursed whistler. Surely her rage transcends cultural
boundaries too.

The whistler stops and looks her way with an apologetic grin. She can't help but relax a little at the
sight of him. Sure, he's a bit scruffy to be proper, but he's dressed properly. Even Nauac can't keep
up with the style of home anymore, with so many more bright Manoan fabrics to choose from.

"My apologies, honored grandmother," he calls back. "It's simply too nice a night to not be
singing."

Yoliya eases her scowl. "It is pleasant enough," she allows. "And pleasanter still to here the proper
tongue for once."

The man grins, hopefully holding up the gourd in his hands. It sloshes enticingly. "Perhaps a bit of
pulque, and some proper conversation, is just what you need?"

Yoliya acquiesces. The pulque is a bit sweeter than she is accustomed to, but goes down all the
easier. Sweeter still is the guest who listens in rapt attention, agreeing with every fault she finds in
this city. Yes, all that gold they flash around is ostentatious, as ostentatious as the gods that just...
gallivant around here without the self-respect gods should have.

But the nights are free of mosquitoes, she concedes. Perhaps there is something to all this running
water after all. And of course she is grateful the ache from her old bones faded when she stepped
over the barrier. This moist air is bad enough without it flaring up pains now gone.

By the time Nauac and the great-grandchildren come stampeding home, Yoliya is... almost calm,
because her guest has vented off most of the grievances that have been simmering in her for weeks.
Nauac is pleasantly surprised to have another man from home to talk manly things too, and his
children gladly abandon their broken Manoan to chatter in the true tongue.

When Tlalli and Maxya return home, supper is waiting. Nauac and their guest prepared it,
diligently following her every command. That is how Yoliya treats her family to a proper meal,
when she is much too old and respectable to have prepared it herself.

Because fruit only keeps for so long, Yoliya reluctantly allows the leftovers from their visit to be
served for desert. The ripe red melon is not so terrible, she supposes, and adda a sweet lightness
after a good, heavy dinner.

"You know," Tlalli muses, as the evening draws down into true night, "I don't believe I ever caught
your name."

Their guest considers this, and smirks. "Call me... Aka."

Yoliya scowls. "That's not a name at all!"

"It's part of one," he glibly responds.

He rises to leave. Maxya's children whine and swarm him like puppies. 'Aka' deftly weaves his way through them, graciously exchanging farewells with the adults of the house, and makes his escape.

Yoliya smokes her pipe in contentment, as her daughter and granddaughter clean up. Nauac is granted the task of herding his offspring to bed.

Tlalli frowns, glancing from their large number of emptied plates, to a full pantry and the leftovers from their neighbors Yoliya remembers eating earlier. "Mom, did our guest bring any food with him?"

"Pulque," she states firmly. "Unless he was hiding a feast down his loincloth."

Maxya gasps. "You don't think..."

Yoliya rolls her eyes. "Please, child. What sort of a self-respecting god drinks his weight in pulque with an old woman?"

---

god of astronomy

"Nuh uh!"

"Yeah huh!"

"Nuh uh!"

"Yeah huh!"

"Excuse me?"

Olli and Eztli whirl around with shrieks. Lord Tulio looms tall before them, his blue eyes bright in the night. The boys fearfully consider that their bickering may have disturbed a god from his godly business, before remembering that god is also Lord of the Evening, and therefore the final authority for their argument.

So they turn and start blurting out their sides at the exact same time, arguing over each other to get their point across first.

The god wearily holds up a hand. "Stop. You, first."

"How come he gets to go first?"

"Because I said so," the god replies. "And because he looks like he's ready to explode if he doesn't get it out of his system."

Olli jabs his finger up at one particular cluster of stars. "My grandma says that's the Marketplace. When the calendar ends, all the gods gather there to eat all they can to start it up again and keep the
world from ending!"

Eztli puffs out his chest. "Yeah, well my great-grandma says all the stars are skeleton spirits, and if we don't give the sun enough blood then the skeleton women will eat him and that will end the world!"

"Tell him I'm right, Lord Tulio!"

"No, Lord Tulio, I'm right!"

They pipe down when the Lord of the Evening raises up his hands. "What if both of you are right?"

"But-"

"Can you count all the stars?" Olli sadly deflates. Eztli's smirk falls when Lord Tulio's eye turns to him. "How about you?"

"...No, Lord Tulio," he mumbles. Long before he can finish, it'll be morning. When the stars next rise again, some will have moved below the horizon, and others risen.

The Lord of the Evening holds out his arms, which of course fail to take in the whole wide vault of the heavens. "A lot of room up there, isn't it? More than enough for marketplaces and skeleton women and all the relatives you can shake a stick at, if you ask me. And you did."

"...Sorry, Lord Tulio," they mutter as one.

The god smiles, pats their heads, and swoops off into the night.

After a moment, Olli frowns up at the infinite lights. "Which ones do you think he's actually related to?"

Eztli shrugs.

---


god of dreams of omen

Uema's shoulders are aching, but nothing can stop he and his friends from grinning in triumph. Their tribute, hauled over their shoulders, gave up their struggles long ago. When the sight and sound of such outsiders spreads, most of Manoa is quick to gather, eyes wide in amazement.

Uema puffs out his chest in pride, as the rest of his dream comes true. He has long prayed for his chance to shine, and last the gods have answered him. The friends that didn't believe his vision have to stare slack-jawed from the sidelines, as Uema and his loyal friends stride forward to present the gods their tribute.

Uema does his best to kneel before Lord Tulio, shunting his captive from his shoulders into his shaking arms. The tribute puts up only a brief struggle. "We traveled far and wide, my lord, past the city to the edge of danger. Now we offer the pride of that village up as tribute to your glory."

"Baah," bleats the beast mournfully. A sheep, almost like those Lord Tulio and Lord Miguel speak of in the stories of their homeland, the same offering that will ensure Uema's place in the legends.

"...Yes," Lord Tulio announces after a moment of purposeful silence. "Yes. These will do nicely."

("...Seriously, Tulio?"
"I had a craving for mutton, okay! I didn't mean to turn it into a... thing."

"Your reckless bravery and regard for only your own glory do him proud," Lord Miguel states grandly.

Uema, basking in the praise, is blissfully blind to two glowers sent Lord Tulio's way.

Chapter End Notes

'Aka' is short for Akaketos - Gracious/Guileless. A legitimate epithet for Hermes :p

Hermes/Mercury is a god of many hats - translation, hospitality, astronomy, and dreams of omen are all in his wheelhouse. So are sheep, though that was a craving dream broadcasted to someone searching for a sign anyway :p

Mesoamerican star myths are hard to find. Apparently some Spanish monks took some detailed accounts from Aztec elders, but I can't find much on Aztec constellations. Maybe most of the secondary sources are just in Spanish? 'The Marketplace' was their interpretation of the Pleiades. Its rising at midnight apparently marked the time of the Aztec new year/or count of years (?). Skeleton demons in the stars were also a thing for the region. Good thing the sky is an awfully big place :p
three gifts (and three truths)

Chapter Summary

There are only so many offerings that will appease a testy volcano goddess.

Blunt honesty is one of them.

Chapter Notes

Remember those gifts Miguel gave to Raima to appease her for dropping a giant jaguar into her volcano? And that Tulio gave some more off-screen to apologize for the whole 'sorry I told you to shut up' incident? Guess who decided to cover it after all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How do you tell a Volcano Goddess "Sorry I accidentally told you to shut up?" Or "Sorry I made an ass out of your baby brother, the man-eating Jaguar God, twice?"

Tulio can make very compelling arguments with his silver tongue. And his fingers, if the situation calls for it. But Lady Raima doesn't have the patience for pretty words and prefers her men built strong and solid as mountains. And is not afraid to blow her top if his apology is not sincere enough.

Three is a good number, a holy number. It's the number of gifts Miguel made this morning. If that number suited his partner then it's good enough for him. On the way up to the peak he very pointedly does not look at the larkspurs blooming from every corner, because Hyacinthus has followed him through the centuries and across a gods damned ocean.

Two offerings come easily enough. The third does not. Tulio has always been more about the beasts than flowers and trees. He doesn't have Miguel's same track record for turning lovers into plants. Except...

His forehead doesn't itch, it doesn't. That's just his nerves speaking.

Tulio politely stops at the edge of the edge of the caldera, respecting the boundaries between Lady Raima's domain and his own. He does his very best not to squeak when the Volcano Goddess appears in a gush of magma and steam that rips through the crust Miguel helped form this morning. She is no slender waif like Proserpina, but a goddess of the sturdy earth like Terra, and more than strong enough to snap him like a twig.

"You come skulking to me, at so late an hour?" she rumbles in a voice that shakes the ground beneath his feet. In a show of good faith, Tulio works hard to keep his faith rooted there, and not hovering anxiously in the air. "Did you need the time to work out your excuses?"

"I'm sorry," he says bluntly, for earth deities are, well, down to earth. "There was no excuse for me lying out of my ass like that on our first day here, or for presuming I had any right to stop your
eruption."

Ominous red flares behind Lady Raima's craggy face. "Is that all you've come to grovel mercy for?"

"Your brother tried to eat a little girl and then my partner," Tulio says flatly. "I'm sorry such force was needed against him, not that I had to do it."

He braces himself for burning, lots and lots of burning. It just means taking the long way up from Xibalba, again. If there's anything up here to return to after.

But Lady Raima only nods and holds out an expectant hand.

The first gift comes easily enough. His mouth waters as soon as the ripe red berries manifest in his hand, pulled from his heart. Their taste is something he has come to enjoy only in the past millennium or so, when he had no godly pride left to cling to. He has known its light, sweet smell for near as long as he's existed, for their trees grew over his mountain slopes. His mother nursed him on nectar and ambrosia beneath the branches of the one outside their cave.

Lady Raima plucks one berry to eat. For Pliny the Elder, the fruit of the strawberry tree had been too delicious for him to ever eat more than one at a time. A goddess has no reservations, and so takes the rest from him.

Beneath her expectant stare Tulio bites back a grimace. He reaches deeper into his heart, past the love of his mother, for one deeply repressed. Tenderly he cradles the single flower in its hands. The petals are vibrant purple, its crimson threads worth more than their weight in gold. They are still as vivid as the day Krokos' lifeblood splattered the earth with his fall.

Tulio looks Lady Raima in the eye when he hands the saffron flower over. It is better than gazing at the symbol of his utter hypocrisy, that he still resents Miguel for loving Hyacinthus for all a part of him forever mourns Krokos. The flower is also red with his own blaring guilt. It is the wind's jealous gust that felled Hyacinthus. Krokos was killed by Tulio's own foolish throw.

With such shame in her hands, Lady Raima does not soften with pity. She nods all the same.

Tulio relaxes and ignores the itching of his forehead. Perhaps this tribute is enough. Saffron is beyond price. The strawberry tree yields fruit and wood, two gifts in one.

The molten eyes of the Volcano Goddess fall upon him. His skull aches.

"Three are the gifts you owe me," she rumbles.

"Yeah," he sighs. "I know."

His horns sprout short and stumpy, the truth of a past long buried and disowned. It's been a long time since he wore the full, curved set like a crown. In the past, as his cult had grown beyond the rustic mountains of Arcadia, it had been... simpler to offload his most primal parts of his nature on a convenient son or random deified king. But the great god Pan is dead, dead as Mercury. It's Tulio's job to owe up to all their fuck-ups.

With a heavy heart he considers all the women he has wronged. Pitys would have hated it down here, when her pines thrive on the cold and arid slopes. He knows who would thrive in Manoa, with its soil warm and wet.

His first instinct is to hand over a set of pipes, hollow and dead, but he owes Syrinx more than that.
This time Tulio digs down deep, through millennia instead of centuries, and dredges up a single green shoot. Gingerly, he hands it over.

Lady Raima solemnly considers the shoot. "Such a small thing, to grow so high and mighty."

His lips twitch. "The more you want to get rid of her, the more abundantly she grows."

Lady Raima steps forth. He leaps back, but she strides past him. When her feet leave the caldera the red lines fade from her skin, but never from her eyes. She stoops to settle the shoot in soil wet by a small stream.

"Your gifts, Lord Tulio," she prompts in a voice steady as the earth. "Name them."

"The strawberry tree, the saffron, and the... carrizo."

"They are acceptable." When Tulio bows and tries to take his leave, Lady Raima warns without looking up from her planting, "Command me again, and I shall burn everything you love to ash."

"Would never dream of it, Lady Raima," he promises, with only a small shudder.

Tulio's first instinct is to hide away in the jungle he works up the courage to snap off his horns and go sulking back home, but his first instincts have proven themselves to be utter shit. Instead he listens to common sense, and heads straight home. Miguel knows him, warts and all. So does Chel, mostly. Pretty much every ugly secret between came spilling out that morning they climbed out of Xibalba. And she had boarded that boat with him anyway.

That night are yet more confessions and catharses, private and passionate secrets bared only to each other.

By dawn, nestled firmly between his partners, the last stumps of his horns recede on their own.

The acolytes of Lady Raima know she has made full peace with both the Dual Gods by the morning after. Lord Tulio's gifts sprouted at dusk, for he is the Lord of Evening, and only in the light of day do their beauty shine. The trail to the volcano's peak is not only restored, every last trace of the idol's devastating path erased, but even more beautiful with the divine accord.

The path is adorned with violet flowers, harmoniously entwined with the blue ones Miguel gifted the morning before. Low-lying trees laden with ripe red fruit flourish on the upper slopes. In the low-lying streams grows a new type of reed, already knee high and climbing further.

It will not take long for that plant to reach Lake Parime's shores. One of Lady Eupana's smaller, more curious children takes a bite. Its elders are swift to follow, as the grand turtles discover their new favorite fodder. The other gifts the gods granted, beyond the obvious beauty of the new foliage, will take more investigation.

However, the secret of the reeds is one not kept for long. On quiet nights, when the mood is just right, the strums of Lord Miguel's lute will float far over Manoa. They are joined by another sound, softer and sweeter. Almost always the songs are sorrowful, at least in the beginning. Only over years will Manoa learn their other melodies, those of quiet contentment and frenzied passion.

The carrizo on Lake Parime's far shores will whisper in the breeze, and almost sound content they are so honored by Lord Tulio and the generations he shall inspire.

Until a turtle emerges from the waters to lazily crunch a nighttime snack, but new shoots always
spring up sooner or later.

Chapter End Notes

The strawberry tree and the saffron are sacred to Hermes in particular. The strawberry tree (not to be confused with the European alpine strawberry or the American cultivar you’re most familiar with) was where Maia nursed Hermes under. Hermes' lover Krokos got killed by Hermes by a bad discus throw in a story that near mirrors Apollo and Hyacinthus'. Krokos' blood is transformed into the saffron flower. The threads of its stamens remain the most expensive spice in the world.

Yes, Tulio can be a raging hypocrite at times. Canon shows that well.

Pan-Hermes was the ancient iteration of the god that gave rise to them both. Pan, as a wild and fertile god, has many legends where maids turn into plants to avoid rape. Syrinx and her reeds are the big one, but Pitys turned into a pine tree. The carrizo/giant reed thrives in wet environments. It's almost always a pest in the Americas, except when giant hungry turtles keep growth under control ; )

Hermes has a more or less straight transition into the Roman Mercury. Pan was mashed together with the Roman Faunus, who is sometimes said to be a deified king of Latium. Yet another reason for Tulio to disown that part of himself.
Chapter Summary

Tulio had only intended to keep a lonely moon goddess occupied at night, before getting drafted in a plan to unite her with her father.

Getting swarmed by Lady Kama's many, many little sisters was not part of that plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Foresight only serves a god so well. Miguel's sight in particular has always been heavily dependent on everything under the sun. Well enough for the mortal plane, and of course utter crap in Xibalba, where even the sun lies dead every night. And Xibalba is where they need some eyes right now, on Lady Kama's ethereal palace, somewhere east of Lady Iztaya's. She always pays Tulio a visit when her many adopted children grow bored with his last crop of them.

Kids, mortal or perpetually young, are especially unpredictable. Sometimes they demand the same story over and over again for a month. Sometimes they demand more the night after.

This is not a bad thing, per se, if one did not also take into account Lady Kama's overwhelming anxieties. She will let only Tulio see her face, forever scarred by the Crocodile God, and bolt the moment even friendly, harmless Miguel tries to wander close.

And also the fact her dad has waited millennia to see her again, while unfortunately having the emotional intensity of a world-ending flood. Because he's done that before.

At the very least, Lord Cassipa's own gaggle of surrogate daughters has taught him patience. Impressive patience. For a while he's content to watch his firstborn from a distance, an innocuous rain cloud on the horizon, weeping silent tears at the thought of beholding her but never coming closer. Lady Kama doesn't notice anything off, because Tulio tells some especially wild stories those nights.

Every time, Lord Cassipa strays a little closer. Chel and Miguel start switching off on Rain God duty.

Which is how Miguel winds up sitting in a tree, anonymous as a green-eyed hawk can be. Next to the honking big crane he's practically invisible.

"Lord Cassipa," he breathes out of the corner of his beak, because Lady Kama has an owl's ears, "perhaps... we should be... retreating a bit, right now."

"No," says the Rain God. "Never again."

Miguel wilts in defeat. Fair enough. If it'd been his kid he would've immediately tried to tackle them, hugged them and never let them go, chased them until...

And it's that kind of thinking that makes people prefer existence as plants, Miguel.
Tulio stirs with the warning. "Hey, Lady Kama, remember that story I told about that mortal that was really, really glad to come to his wife and kid after twenty years? Because your dad hasn't seen you for way longer."

Lord Cassipa sucks in a breath, as Lady Kama jerks back anxiously. "N-No. He can't see me, none of them can, not like this!"

Tulio winces, guiltily waving in their general direction, because the stilt-legged crane is two feet too tall for his branch. "He may have already."

The Rain God spreads his wings. He flies, slow and purposefully, their way. Miguel watches anxiously. Lady Kama has plenty of space to run. Her father won't follow, not if she flees into the night, because Lord Cassipa does not have Miguel's poor sense of self-control. Clouds drift over the moon without fully shrouded its light.

But Lady Kama doesn't flee. Tulio winces as her clawed fingers sink into his hand, but does his best to turn his grimace into an encouraging smile.

When Lord Cassipa throws his arms around his daughter, the sky bursts open with him.

Drenched in the downpour, Miguel settles by Tulio's side. Their fingers entwine.

The rain shields their own tears, bittersweet at the reunion that is and all that will never be.

Lady Kama has little sisters, lot and lots of little sisters. The Moon Goddess agrees to meet them at noontime on a cloudy day, when the Sun God isn't out to see her and she has no need to light vigil over the world. It is the first time since the last solar eclipse she has allowed herself to be out of Xibalba after sunrise.

Tulio doesn't know quite what any of this has to do with him, but Lady Kama is clinging to his hand all the way up the steps. And her fingers are talons. Miguel has attached herself to her other side. His endless stream of chatter at least gives Lady Kama something else to focus on other than all the anxieties that must be screaming in her head. Miguel's rambling always makes the best white noise.

Chel strides a bit ahead, to help ensure the flood of little girls doesn't overwhelm the poor goddess. It helps her childhood best friend, Mari, is among their ranks.

Tulio is a bastion of moral support through the first tentative introductions, and there are a lot. As the tension in Lord Cassipa's palace winds down, Tulio expects to bow out gracefully with his partners, to give the family their breathing space.

But, even as Lady Kama releases Miguel to cautiously shake hands or accept hugs, she never lets Tulio go.

Inevitably, one little girl makes an innocent comment and starts a chain reaction through the crowd. His fate is sealed the moment the combs and brushes come out. Gods damn him for letting his hair grow so long again.

Chel grins and settles right into the throng, Mari and her sisters swarming her raven locks. Miguel, who has been fawned over by nymphs and Muses, plops down happily. The girls of course squeal in excitement in his golden hair, even if there's nowhere near as much as there used to be to brush. Under their cooing Miguel of course teases his out longer, if only to preen. Even if he likes it short most of the time he always makes exception for the adoring masses.
Tulio takes great pride in his hair. It takes oils and hard work to keep those waves soft and well-tamed, thank you very much. Out of its tie Lord Cassipa's daughters squeal in delight at its quality. He stops needing to hide his winces quickly. An eternity of sisterhood has at least made these girls very skilled stylists. Much more than the hoard of Oread daughters that used to unwittingly try to scalp him way back when.

But Lord Cassipa's daughters aren't quite experienced with hair of his... texture. Their squeals of delight multiply when, after little teasing from their combs, his hair stubbornly springs back into its many ringlets.

"Oh," Miguel gasps in delight. "I forgot it used to do that."

Tulio groans. "Now I remember the reason I cut it all off after leaving Arcadia."

"What?" Chel cries, as scandalized as the girls around them. "But i-it's so..."

"Shaggy?" he tries. "Obnoxious? Unruly after getting caught out in a rainstorm?"

"Pretty," Mari butts in succinctly. All girls, including Chel, nod in sage agreement.

"One of a kind," Lady Kama murmurs. Coaxed from its yellowed shawl and its tight bun, her hair falls smooth and sleek, the deep black of the starless sky. Her human form now looks further removed from its owl form, radiant with a quiet contentment Tulio has never seen from her before. It suits her well.

"It's really not," Tulio demurs, even as the admiring hands paw at it and he preens beneath their adoration. "More of a nuisance, really."

"Surely exceptions can be made for... special occasions," Miguel suggests innocently, for they are surrounded by little girls.

"Or just because we feel like making something feel a little special," Chel chimes in.

Tulio near goes boneless as their fingers twine into his curls. "Well, for special occasions, maybe." Purposefully he raises a hand to run through Miguel's unbound hair, like a golden waterfall from the length the little girls have teased from it. "If you're not afraid to let your hair down, too."

Miguel smirks. "If you can convince me too."

"Girls," Lady Kama breaks in purposefully, "did our daddy ever tell you exactly how much hair he has bound up in that topknot of his?"

Lord Cassipa freezes in dread upon his throne, as the avid eyes of the hoard turn upon him.

With giddy waves and promises to of course come back real soon, Tulio and his partners leave them to it.

Chapter End Notes

Most early depictions of Hermes depict him with a long, curly hair and beard, with later depictions having him clean-shaven and closely-cropped (but still curly) hair. With his hair long and tied back, Tulio probably spends hours of grooming keeping
that same hair under masterful control.

Two out of my three Greek aunts keep their hair short. The other has a fortune to spend in hair care products XD I only partly inherited the gene. When the stars align? Natural, loose curls. All the rest of the time? Frizz cloud.

The myths give Hermes a surprising amount of divine daughters, because he's the father of a fair amount of Oreads/mountain nymphs.
Chapter Summary

It is a terrible thing, to walk this world alone.

Even beyond the borders, Manoa need not fear the Jaguar God. The jungle belongs to someone else now.

Chapter Notes

I grinned like an idiot the whole time I wrote this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As a boy, Totoma had loved the jungle - the heady smell of earth and wood, the soft dirt and rough bark beneath his feet, a silence broken only by squawking parrots and chattering monkeys. Even then he had been warned of the Jaguar God, but back then he had only been a monster for scary stories, when Totoma had been safely put in bed by his mothers.

He loves the jungle still, though now that adoration is tempered. He has seen infection and snakebite claim even those hunters still alive and screaming when hauled home. One year, when the tapir had been scarce, he had woken to his uncle's screams. The jaguar had gone for the bigger target, mindless of the campfire, for all hunters that year had been desperate.

His priest cast down and his refuge in Xibalba burned, Balam Qoxtok is especially wrathful as of late. The jungle is full of strange and foul things, these days, as some sickness in the east spreads far and wide. Not that the god aren't watchful in their vigils, of course. Lord Tulio ensures nothing evil follows rangers like Totoma across the border, while Lord Miguel and Lady Chel do their best to peer into the dangers beyond.

But the deep jungle is the Jaguar God's domain, where no living man has ever tread before, where no other god has dared. Once Balam Qoxtok could be appeased in his element, to at least not temper in a hunt if will not actively aid it. Now he and the Lords of Xibalba take their vengeance where the Golden Gods have not the power to punish them. No water can be trusted, when even shallow puddles might hold a venomous snake. Death stalks from the trees and slithers underfoot. Every cut might lead to lethal infection, if a hunter is not vigilant with their first aid, and travelers quick to return to Lord Miguel.

There are a thousand risks and no rewards. Still Totoma hunts. There's more and more mouths to feed these days, as the desperate seem to trickle in through every direction.

Totoma hunts alone, because he's learned the hard way he is especially cursed, and most hunters aren't dumb enough to try him anyway. But he's not alone.

With eyes on him, he raises his spear and slowly circles in place, checking the shadows for glinting eyes or a shape in the foliage ever so out of place. The chatter in the trees is no consolation, when
the Jaguar God has been especially deceptive as of late.

After a while, he loosens his stance. His instincts, attuned to this place, sense the difference between hunting silence and *hunting silence*. In one, he's the prey. In the other, he's the predator waiting for the ambush.

Totoma considers the stream beside him. He creeps onto a higher slope, crouching low. The silence eases when he lowers his spear, to instead take out the net at his side. The murmur of the stream sounds almost approving.

Ten heartbeats later, something rustles. After twenty more, a clucking troop of birds, fat and flightless, march out for a drink.

Totoma grins.

Later, as he is tying up his catch, the hunter frowns thoughtfully at his net and the hunch that led to his best catch in weeks.

"Thank you," he sincerely murmurs to the silent air.

Hesitating, he stoops to the ground, and lifts some stones from the stream bed into a makeshift altar. He drains his game there, until their blood stains the stones red.

Totoma morbidly expects the scent to draw in a jaguar. His journey home goes undisturbed.

Something is different, Chel is certain of it. It doesn't matter how new she is to this state of being, or what exactly constitutes the parameters for a 'Lady of Faith,' but something is not as it was.

In the state of the Manoan mind, Balam Qoxtok left a deep well of fear behind, even with his temple smashed and head priest literally cast down into Xibalba. With Tulio to safely shepherd souls through his jungle, and Miguel vigilantly watching the border for all threats of physical war, the Jaguar God's shadow has receded by the day. The more the fear fades, the more readily apparent the gaping power vacuum left behind.

Very few in the city had ever revered the Jaguar God, even when Tzekel-Kan had revitalized his worship. Manoa had come to fear Tzekel-Kan and his thirst for human lives, the distant but ever-present promise that Balam Qoxtok would one day soon be upon them to write the Age of the Jaguar in the blood of thousands. But Tzekel-Kan is gone, and his promises of war and conquest with him.

Balam Qoxtok now rules only beyond the borders, where only the bravest hunters tread. Not even Miguel, for all his arrows, can drive him where even his sight begins to fail. The Golden Gods are gods of Manoa, and Balam Qoxtok intrinsically of the outer powers, the embodiment of the wild unknown. He and his vengeful Lords of Xibalba take what lives they can there. Even if Tulio and Chel are swift to receive their souls, those hunters are still very much dead.

Now the balance of power is shifting once more. The prayers for the Jaguar God to spare them have tapered off, when it becomes readily apparent the beast cares little for their entreaties. So the hunters turn to a new presence, one that is not actively hostile, but deigns drive game their way or show them the trails if pleased.

Chel doesn't know where that faith is going, aside from the utter certainty it's not to her. Or her boys. Which freaks them out to no end.
"What do you mean you don't know? You, the oracle god!"

"H-How can I know when they don't know? They're just making it up as they go along!"

"You saw God and you can't see a pipsqueak like this?"

"There's a difference between a structured belief system being introduced and a brand new one being made out of whole cloth! It's been literal millennia since this was a problem!"

"Why is it a problem?" Chel wonders.

Her boys stop their argument to look at her in earnest disbelief. Tulio angrily kicks the pebbles at his feet. His own attempts at divining the future have resulted only in contradictory signs. "Um, hello? Utter uncertainty on the horizon! How are we supposed to know what's coming to our door?"

Chel frowns as she follows the tentative webs of belief. By now discussion has shifted from the hunters to some of the lower priests, as they to identify a spirit already known to them such feats might be credited to. Certainly not the Golden Gods, who are so open in their aid. Nor Lord Altivo, who is not this annoyingly subtle.

"It's not a malicious energy," she answers. "It can't be that bad." When her boys frown further, she realizes their expressions. "You're not... jealous, are you?"

"No!" they burst out as one, before stammering their denials. Because they are totally jealous.

Chel raps a hand against her golden throne. "You do realize these aren't going anywhere, right? The people love you, love us, as much as they did last week. More, even. We already hold influence over so many things it's hard to keep track of them all. What's one minor deity to help the hunters out where we don't have the same sort of power?"

Tulio crosses his arms darkly, slumping against his throne. "Sure, it starts out as a minor deity. Then some crazy emperor gets attached. That's how a rock gets married to your virgin sister, and raised above all other gods."

"...Elagabalus was more than a rock, Tulio."

"Well, Miguel, he started as one. So did I!"

"Chief Tanni's kids love us!" Miguel breaks in, with a reassuring smile. "We're not going anywhere."

Chel bites her lip, because the stories he and Tulio so innocently fed to the children all these months might now be mixing into that speculation. It's not like they attached any names to their family members. All they've provided is more material to sift through.

"You're still afraid, too," she points out quietly.

Miguel's expression falls into one of genuine hurt. "I-It's... We just got here, Chel! Manoa is just starting to feel like home. We've settled in with our new neighbors and everything. Can't things stay the same, for a century or two longer?"

Now it is Chel's turn to gape at them. "You two were responsible for the downfall of the Jaguar God and his entire cult."
"Good riddance," Tulio mutters.

"And the eradication of major illness, and human sacrifice."

Miguel smiles sheepishly. "Well, someone had to do it."

"I was deified!"

"That was bound to happen anyway!"

"Then, we proceeded to systematically humiliate most of the major lords of Xibalba before robbing them of their souls. And kill the Jaguar God again."

"...Yes," Tulio says, as he tries to figure out where she's going.

"And stopped Lady Kama from... rescuing anymore children. And reunited her with her dad and showing her face outside the night, for the first time since she was the Second Sun." Miguel and Tulio cock their heads, and she pinches the bridge of her nose. "We turned a good portion of the pantheon upside down. We eradicated a major cult. Did you think everything could just magically stay the same after that?"

Her boys mope, because denial is not something they left behind in Egypt.

She sighs, rising from her throne to fall into Miguel's lap, and tugging Tulio with her. "You guys know change doesn't have to be a bad thing, right? It brought you here, didn't it? And made me from a thief on the run into a goddess." She kisses their brows reassuringly. "This isn't a bad thing, I promise."

Chel speaks the truth. Whatever she believes in must be true.

The expressions of her gods soften. Somewhat. Tulio is still plotting mutiny.

"Promise me you won't try to kill a divine being before they're even fully formed," she says flatly.

"As long as they don't try to kill us first," Tulio vows darkly. Miguel nods.

...It's a start.

Miguel starts watching the borders like a hawk, not that he wasn't before. Fewer and fewer hunters are returning with snakebites and wounds from wrestling off hungry jaguars, so he grudgingly concedes this new interloper is playing their part. Even if they stubbornly avoid his sight. And somehow evade his every attempt to just try sneaking a quick glimpse of what's to come for them. The irritation is almost familiar, maddeningly so, but he has higher priorities in the brain.

Cortes and those like him have already begun to burn their way through the eastern shores of this land. The survivors are already beginning to flee east, to lands still untouched, most especially to those places that will never be conquered. More than one of them have the specific path to Manoa in mind. Tzekel-Kan has served his fate as their herald well, and will spread their legend far and wide.

From a distance Miguel guides them as best he can, passively leading the way to safe shelter and edible food by casting the sunlight just so. As soon as they reach the true border of his power he is there in the flesh to heal them of their wounds and weariness. He has less and less time to personally escort them to the city proper, but Altivo helps out where he can.
One couple travels agonizingly slow, for the woman is pregnant. Alarmingly so, and her husband exhausts himself by carrying her most of the distance. They had not been alone, in the beginning.

Tulio has long escorted the rest of their party to their final rest.

There are so many places even physical gods might intervene directly, when this family are not yet their people, and they are driven only by the frantic search for sanctuary than true belief in the golden city and its guardians.

Miguel is not overly anxious. Not just yet. The mother is not yet due for weeks and at last they are getting close. It won't be long until he can help her through the worst of the danger and leave her to finish out her pregnancy in the very capable hands of mortal midwives.

So he turns his sight away, just for a moment, as a very large family finishes their journey. The great-grandmother is a formidable woman, who glares even suspiciously at the god who eases the aches of her arthritis. Her poor grandson-in-law merits even more healing, because his aching back bore her across who knows how many miles she could not make on her own.

He's just finishing up with their colicky baby when a sudden burst of blood catches his eye. Miles and miles away, far across the opposite border, the mother falls in premature labor while her panic-stricken husband stares on.

"Sorry about this," he tells the family, shifting the baby back into his mother's arms. "Duty calls!"

"Hmph," harrumphs the great-grandmother, as he barrels away with all the hawk's speed. "Rude gods they have here."

Miguel flaps across the city and then to the opposite edge of the valley. Crossing the formal border sucks the air from his lungs.

He makes a crash landing by misjudging the angle and smacking into a tree. He pops up in his usual shape, spitting dead leaves from his mouth. The couple have far bigger things to worry about than such an undignified arrival.

"Easy there," he murmurs, for the wife's shrieking curses at least allow him to string their words into something understandable. "Lean back, just like this."

He is not helpless outside Manoa's borders, only hindered. It takes far more concentration to return color to the woman's frightfully pale cheeks. At first he misjudges, and her replenished blood only makes her bleed faster, before he can weave the wound shut.

It's a breach birth, his panicked mind knows that much. Lambs, he knows. Calves and goat kids, yes. The three human lives in the balance? Not so much. Childbirth is not, and has never been, his-

"Now spread your legs," commands a new voice, "and push."

Part of Miguel's brain wants to shut down then and there, but he does not. This is the first voice he heard in all creation, before his own mother's. When she orders him to lean back, and help the mother by healing her just so, he obeys just like the husband that readily tears up blankets into rags and prepares a cleaner space for his children to enter the world.

The first baby is a girl, pale but squirming. The authoritative hand that slaps her back brings new color to her cheeks, and a squall that pierces the air.

Miguel trembles, half in relief and half in weariness. Sweat breaks along his brow, for the two lives
still in his hands and slipping.

The first child is swiftly passed into her father's hands, for the second refuses to follow. Time drags on.

"I must reach for him," the midwife informs the mother. "Brace for it."

Miguel braces too, as the mother lurches against him with her shrillest scream yet. He grits his teeth against the black wings about to bear down on them.

He falters. One, he grabs in time. The smaller slips through his fingers.

"No," he breathes in horror, as the brother is born limp and still.

But she has never played by his rules. She braces the babe against the earth, leans over, and *breathes*. When his heart refuses to beat, she compresses his chest for him, until...

The angry cry is sweet as song, sweet as the grateful sobs of his parents.

With the last of his strength Miguel eases the mother through the last of her labor, easing what weeks of stress and hard labor had done to her constitution. The only tremble in her limbs is that of gratitude, when the midwife passes he son unto her arms.

"T-T-Thank you," sobs the husband, before his gratitude becomes incomprehensible.

His wife, who takes their firstborn from him, settles more firmly with both children in her arms. "We owe a debt beyond payment, my lord and lady," she responds wearily. "Please, might we know your names?"

"I am Lord Miguel," he offers gently. The lady scowls knowingly at him, so he offers her a sheepish grin.

"Sipaktli," she replies chidingly, for her name is as proudly Manoan as his is shamelessly Spanish. "I am Lady Sipaktli, the First Light."

"Sipa and Mixchel?" the woman murmurs. "If I would be so honored to name them for their saviors."

The goddess only offers a curt nod, so he supplements with, "For me, there would be no greater honor."

Their newborn reverence grants new strength to his limbs. He effortlessly swings three quarters of the family into his arms, as the father follows on foot. Already Sipaktli, their safety assured, retreats to the trees.

"Well?" he calls after her. "A thousand years apart, and not even a proper 'good bye' this time?"

"That implies you won't be bumbling into my life again," she replies over her shoulder. "And you always do."

"Excuse me, I was here first, thank you!"

"And who dragged me here with you?"

"T-T-That's... You were d-"
"So was a part of you every day, for centuries. Remember what always happened with sunrise?" She pauses, eyes green as the trees flashing amber. "I quite liked that place, actually. I was graceful there."

"Um, my lord and lady," the husband whispers tactfully, as his babies begin to fuss. "Perhaps we should."

"Yes, yes," Miguel assures him. "I hope this means I'll be seeing you around."

She smirks. "If you know where to look, little brother." The light shifts just so, and the girl is a spotted ocelot. She scrambles up a towering tree, and vanishes into the dappled canopy.

Miguel grins the whole way home. And can't help his giddy laugh when Tulio, the eavesdropper, plows into a tree at the parting shot.

Chel will love her. Tulio will... remember to tolerate her. Eventually.

Big sisters are like that.

Chapter End Notes

...I've had this planned since Chapter 6.

And NOW all those hints make sense now, don't they :D Because removing one of Manoa's old gods created a power vacuum that needed filling, and some parts fell beyond the purview of those in existence. How fortunate the gods are so insightful with stories about their family for a candidate to be chosen ;

Selasphorus/Phosphoros - Light-Bringer. Guess who helped birth Apollo, the sun god, and helped all children see their first light ;)

Artemis/Diana literally helped bring Apollo into the world by helping their mother deliver. She is thus not only a patron of the wilderness and the hunt, but of childbirth. Where other deities specifically looked after the mother and the act of childbirth she is more so the protector of the child itself. Britomartis, an ancient Greek goddess oft connected to Artemis, is specifically associated with the nets used for catching fish and birds.

Due to the cults bouncing all around the Mediterranean, Miguel is at least a tiny bit Ra-Horus, the sun who died with the sunset and was reborn with the dawn. By the Greek reckoning, Bastet the cat goddess was Diana's Egyptian counterpart. Fertility aspects aside, Bastet was also a patron of childbirth and protector of children and women's secrets.
Chapter Summary

When a long-lost sister returns from the dead, Tulio learns how to reconcile his past with the present.

...Without accounting for the future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The dead don't come back to life."

"Well..."

"Dead gods don't come back to life. Not after a thousand years and thousands of miles from where they died. T-This is..."

"Completely unprecedented?"

"Yes!"

Chel arches an eyebrow. "Like three gods waltzing among mortals, casting down human sacrifice, and uplifting their mortal priestess to divinity in, like, three days?"

Tulio slouches into his throne. His partners try very hard to not coo over his pout, because that would only make him grumpier about this than he already is. They squeeze in to his left and right, each half in his lap as they plant consoling kisses to his head.

"This isn't a bad thing," Chel murmurs. "How can this be? One of your loved ones returned from the dead."

"Yeah," he says glumly. Diana and him had never gotten along. They'd butted heads for control of the wild lands and wild beasts. He'd been too handsy with her huntresses. She'd seethed in vicious rage for getting between her and her twin.

Part of him wants to ask Miguel if he's sure this is Diana truly returned from beyond, and simply not another twin Manoa's faith and the imagination of children invented to fill on the gap. Of course it's not. No matter their names or faces, Miguel always knows his twin, and this one is no imposter.

Green eyes appraise him. "You're not jealous, are you?" Miguel asks, brows furrowing. Then he sighs. "Not like I'm one to talk, what with Orion and all."

Gods forgive, sometimes, or at least smile and lie through their teeth so their bout of revenge will be all the sweeter. Gods never forget. And Miguel has only helped engineer the murder of the only being his twin sister had ever loved romantically.

"No!" Tulio snaps, before shame makes him sag. "A little. Mostly afraid, for you."
His partner, the naive idiot, blinks. "Me? She's my *twin*! What would I ever have to be afraid of?"

"She nearly killed you!" he snaps. "Don't you..." Tulio trails off, looking away from Miguel's hurt expression and Chel's searching gaze. "Never mind, it's-"

"Tell me," their goddess orders.

"Di-" No, don't *name* his family, for any errant ear to hear. The last thing he wants are more shades skulking out of their graves. *She* didn't take the loss of her last followers well. Some of us learned to wallow in our misery. Others decided it was best to go down as monsters, and claim as many lives as we could on the way down. One may or may not have tried coaxing her brother into a suicide pact. And *still* came this close to dragging him with her when she finally got herself annihilated."

"Oh," Chel says, for that is all there is be said, and clings tighter to them both.

After a small eternity of stunned silence, Miguel struggles for the words. "We weren't exactly paragons of virtue either, Tulio." The other god swallows bitterly, for a moment the screams of countless echoing in his memory. "And, well, here we are."


"If I can change," Miguel whispers, nearly too soft to hear, "why can't she?"

Tulio groans. "Fine."

"What's fine?" Chel presses.

"I'll... give her a chance." *I'll slaughter her if she tries to drag you down with her again*, remains unsaid, because they both know that already.

Miguel seals their lips, imparting all of his hope and joy in their kiss. Tulio does his best to cut himself loose from his own trepidation, and let such blind faith sweep him away too.

For a while, Tulio can almost pretend everything is back to normal. Miguel's twin has never been one for forced family get-togethers and, as it turns out, she's not one for melodramatic family reunions either. She happily keeps to the jungle, beyond the outer reaches of Manoa, regarding only the hunters. Those are where her shrines are, small and secret things raised during each successful hunt before abandoned to the elements. It prevents her from being tied to a single shrine, which suits her nomadic nature just well, and gives Tulio every excuse to not drop in.

Sure, as lord of borders Tulio glimpses a slender shadow from time to time, or a spotted ocelot slinking back into the forest as he helps the unending tide of refugees into the valley proper. Both happily pretend the other doesn't exist.

Occasionally, rumors of a new childbirth goddess fly. At first there is only scant speculation, as most of the newcomers can't speak Manoa, and the Manoans understand little of the many different peoples finding homes amongst them. This suits him just fine. Even when invoked, Miguel's twin refuses to intrude into the city limits to help a new child into the world. There are several Manoan goddesses devoted to childbirth that happily carry on without her input.

However, all good things must come to an end.

One day Miguel flutters back home grinning in excitement, making the immediate area so bright it can hardly be called dusk at all. "What would both of you say to meeting my sister tomorrow?"
"I'd love to!" Chel gushes. "It's about time you have us a proper introduction."

Tulio snorts. "Trust me, it's overrated."

"Nonsense, Tulio!" Miguel laughs. "You knew her other incarnations. This is Sipaktli."

Tulio makes a sound that Miguel interprets as vague optimism. Which it isn't. Tulio remembers some of her incarnations vividly. To him, each is more unpleasant than the last.

"It'll go great, Miguel," Chel declares with the utmost faith, and elbows Tulio in the ribs for him to smile in agreement. Stupid cheating faith goddesses and their unshakable resolve.

Miguel, in his excitement, rises before the sun the next morning. With some good-natured grumblings, Chel rises to join him. Tulio joins them much more grouchily, because he scarcely slept the night before. Part of him wished for a late night in Xibalba, but no. Miguel is vigilant in his charges and, freak accidents and old age aside, death is rare in Manoa.

Together they fly to a quiet edge of the border, a neutral place between their boundaries. Tulio burrows into his cape, half-fading into the shadows. The hands around his own keep him from disappearing entirely.

As the first light breaks the horizon, Miguel's twin deigns make her appearance. She is... not what Tulio remembers, but somehow exactly what he expects.

Once both twins were tall and statuesque, but with Apollo insisting on a few haughty inches above Diana. Sipaktli retains her proud height, towering above a confidently short Miguel, with the lithe build gained from an eternity on the hunt. Her simple green tunic reaches to her knees. Black hair bound, her only adornments are the bow and quiver slung over her shoulder. Her skin tone is more Manoan, though her facial features and green eyes are shared by Miguel.

Sipaktli, the long-suffering sister, stiffens only slightly when Miguel lunges forward to embrace her, babbling excited introductions the whole while. Only when she briefly squeezes back does he release her.

Then the huntress' attention turns to Chel. Eyes deep as the jungle search her. "You are Lady Chel, yes, the Goddess of Faith?"

Chel smiles, offering a hand. "Please, call me Chel."

"I am Lady Sipaktli, the Huntress." Her face shifts toward something Tulio recognizes as respect. "The Jaguar God bears many scars from your spear."

"He earned everyone of them," she agrees brightly.

Miguel puffs out his chest. "I helped."

"I saw the arrow shafts," his sister agrees dryly. "Your aim's gone to shit."

"E-Excuse me?"

"Just because this 'gunpowder' is now a thing was no excuse for you to slacken with your gifts." She smirks. "I might just have to take over for you completely."

"I'll have you know I can out-shoot you any day, thank you very much!"

Tulio groans, needing no gifts to foresight to recognize where this is going. "Have your pissing
contest in the jungle this time, please. Miles and miles away from innocent bystanders. So you
don't leave me another mess to clean up, again."

The ruthless eyes of the huntress fall upon him, flashing accusing amber. Tulio tilts his chin up. He
wears his face as proudly as he does the Manoan garb Chel first gave him, though the colors have
deepened to the sapphire blues of his domain.

"And you are...?"

"I'm Tulio," he supplies, baring his teeth in a smile. "And I'm called Lord of the Evening, on top of
a shit-ton of other titles." Technically, the Fifth World is also at least a third his, but that's prime
gloating material to save for later.

"Insufferable as ever, I see," Sipaktli deadpans.

Tulio smirks. "It runs in the family."

The huntress scoffs. "On your side, perhaps."

Tulio's first instinct is to puff up in rage at the implied insult to his mother, for Sipaktli has never
had reason to despise their father as he and Miguel did. In comparison, Jupiter had spoiled her
rotten, what with giving her Cyclops-made weapons and eighty gods-damned nymphs as her
companions.

But Sipaktli only arches an eyebrow slightly, face otherwise unmoved. It's something she and
Miguel picked up from their mother, an expression that Tulio is missing something. So he frowns
and turns the insinuations of this over again.

"Oh," he blurts out.

Just because Sipaktli is Miguel's sister doesn't mean she also has to be Tulio's. None of them were
first dreamed up as Jupiter's children. Only in later centuries, when their cults had mingled and had
come to supersede their own, had he claimed such dominion over them and their mothers.

And it's not like he and Miguel have advertised any potential blood relationships to Manoa either,
because both of them have refused to entertain any speculation about their parentage from curious
mortals. Incest is as taboo among human here as it is back in Catholic Spain. Even relations among
their native deities are often ambiguous at best. Lord Kinich and Lady Kama have never been
referred to as blood siblings, even if their parents the Rain God and Volcano Goddess later married.

Tulio's had some alternative options, over the years. Like a woodpecker. Even being his own
damned father beats having any form of Jupiter as one.

"We both know Miguel is proof of what's on your side," he retorts. Because he doesn't have to
claim her as a sister ever again. (Many years from now, when an impulsive offer slips from his
lips, there will come to be a tree that will forever bear the imprint of his forehead upon realizing
the irony of this statement.)

"Yes," Sipaktli agrees in weary resignation, her eyes mellowing back to green. "I heard it's your
torch marks that burned the Jaguar God's sleek hide."

Tulio smirks. "It did indeed. And my staff broke a few bones. Bastard limps because of me."

"Not real sporting of you, is it?"
"Not our fault the bastard won't stay dead," Miguel quips.

"Once we get his pelt nailed up, it would make quite the conversation piece," Chel notes.

Sipaktli smirks. "Sounds like quite the family bonding experience to me."

"It would be!" her twin offers hopefully.

"I look forward to such a night," the huntress offers, because she is too cryptic to go with a simple yes.

When the goddess turns to disappear in the last shadows of the night, Tulio blurts out, "Wait!" Once he catches her attention, he asks the question that's been bugging him for weeks. "How much did Miguel bug you to make this morning happen?"

Sipaktli glances at her baby brother. Her left eye twitches. "My suffering is eternal."

Miguel bristles. "It was one innocent little tune, you know the one with-" The goddess flees into the undergrowth. He sputters indignantly after her, before turning hopefully to Tulio. "You remember that one, don't you?"

"It's seared into my mind," Tulio deadpans. "Forever."

Chel glances at him in dread and has the good sense not to ask. Miguel has the senselessness to sing it anyway.

Ear worms are an evil not even the Lords of Xibalba deserve.

Chapter End Notes

Readers may insert the ear worm of their choice :p If the irony doesn't choke you first XD

Various eastern incarnations of goddesses Greeks likened to Artemis have... bloody pasts. That is all. In her oldest aspects she is a goddess of the hunt and hills. Pan is a god of the wild beasts and places. There's gotta be some tension when domains overlap like that.

Apollo, Artemis, and Hermes descend from real ancient deities that definitely predate any form of Zeus being their father, because at least some of their earlier aspects evolved independently. Because Pan-Hermes got split into two deities, Tulio is literally his own father. Or, because the Pan part later got syncretized with Faunus, his dad could also be Picus, founder and king of the Latin tribe. Guy was into divination through birds... and also turned into a woodpecker.

Kinich is the son of Raima and Kama the daughter of Cassipa. Raima and Cassipa later married. It is ambiguous which deities, if any, were the other birth parents of their kids. Adoption, creation, self-procreation are valid ways for Manoan gods to become parents too :p
Sipaktli loves her idiot of a little brother, really. She just needs space that is more her own. And an identity beyond being the Lord of the Morning's older sister.

Or how what should have been a temporary stay with the Moon Goddess has the unintended side-effect of multiplying her family by a hundredfold.

Chel kneads her temples as if she can push their bickering out of her head. She could, if she really wanted to. It's enough to make her idiots fall into sheepish silence, if only for a moment.

Sipaktli is a minor goddess cosmically speaking, little observed except by the hunters that dare the borders and the new mothers from outside Manoa, that have come to favor a goddess as new to the pantheon as they are, who helped them where the Manoan goddesses could not. Her shrines are small, secretive sanctums in the jungle. For most minor deities, it's enough, because not every being in the pantheon has their own priest and temple in the city proper.

Most deities don't have Lord Miguel as a little brother. And the fretting of the populace over getting her a proper shrine is making Chel a bit... twitchy.

"Miguel," she sighs. "Keep it brief."

Tulio pouts at not going first, but Chel doesn't give a damn. Miguel fixates on her with his big puppy eyes. "She's my sister, Chel, my twin. And she's only here because of us. The least we can do is offer her a permanent place for a shrine while her cult gets up on its feet and solidifies a bit more."

"You want her to have a big shrine, Miguel," Tulio replies warily. "She doesn't need one. Before any of us turned domestic we were all fine with springs, groves, and grottoes over fixed foundations. Your sister can rough it for a bit more."

Miguel crosses his arms. "We 'roughed it' for a thousand years without any sacred sites, Tulio. How did that feel again?"
He slouches in his throne, blue eyes earnestly hurt. "That's not the same, Miguel, and you know it."

Miguel's lip twitches guiltily, but the apology won't yet come. Because Tulio will interpret Miguel's guilt for going too far as permission to dig into him about Sipaktli. And so the circle goes.

Chel sympathizes with both sides. If Xaya decided to wander out of Xibalba in search of a new home she'd put him up in a heartbeat. He's her big brother, one of the first souls she's ever known and loved. But this temple is hers, it's Miguel and Tulio's. Their essence is hammered into every brick and breathed by every prayer that wafts up from the lower levels where the worshipers congregate. The temple is home, not so far removed from the cosmic oneness Chel and her gods share when they leave the material realm behind entirely. Just because she loves Xaya doesn't mean she wants him crawling into their bed, because ew.

Too bad they're all missing the most important thing. "Have either of you actually asked Sipaktli what she wants?" Her answer is averted eyes and flaming cheeks. "Yeah, I thought so. Good thing I asked her myself."

She falls innocently silent, until her boys near explode with anticipation. "And?" they prompt.

"Sipaktli loves you, Miguel. She's touched by the offer, but she felt she couldn't intrude on us like that."

_I love my baby brother deeply, but I refuse to ever make a home in a place reeking of his sex_, had been Sipaktli's full answer, but neither of them need to know that.

Miguel deflates, eyes wide with hurt. "She wouldn't be intruding," he mumbles. "Not on me."

Tulio doesn't swell with his victory, but reaches over to hold their partner's hand. "Miguel, Sipaktli's never been onboard with... you know, vigorous physical contact. She'd love living here as much you'd love living with her and..."

Miguel swallows a grimace. "I get it. But we still can't just leave her without a roof over her head. She's my sister! How come I get the Fifth World and this temple, while she gets little shrines in the jungle?"

"Who says it has to be our roof?" Chel points out. "Lady Paquini had a shrine in Lady Eupana's temple until hers was built." On top of a thousand personal altars the captured People of the Vine had consecrated in their name in this valley that had been forcibly made their new home.

"Exactly!" Tulio enthuses. "Altivo is shacking up with the Feathered Serpent and no one is freaking out about it." His dark blue eyes glint with a plan. "And I think I know just where Sipaktli could be fine, even if it's temporary."

Tulio tells them. Chel grins at his brilliance. Miguel ducks his head in quiet concession.

Chel knows they'd get along just fine.

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Xibalba is dark and desolate, without stars or sun to illuminate the world. Down here even the great Kinich is dead, dull and listless until the dawn brings about his rebirth. With his first new breath, he spreads radiant wings, and abandons the spirit world to return light to the land above.

Only then does Xibalba know light again, when she descends so that her husband's brilliance will not be dulled by her presence. But even muted and scarred her face shines. Beneath her pale silver light the demons of the outer edges hiss and retreat into the shadows. Not that there are much souls
to torture anymore. There are no more agonized screams when she next swoops over the Houses of Xibalba. Tulio is a vigilant shepherd and a diligent thief. The surliest of her uncles-in-law hisses and slinks deeper into his trees when her light glints off the newest scars in his obsidian hide.

The little brown heron flying at her side tilts her head sharply after him, green eyes flashing gold. But Kama serenely passes over the jungle of Balam Qoxtok. So does the heron. For now their hunt is over. Kama need not fly again until Kinich dies at dusk and the filth of the spirit world tries to swarm into the lands above. The goddess at her side has done nothing but hunt since her arrival in these lands. A rest is well-deserved.

Through the dark home shines like a beacon. The lanterns of her hall burn silver-bright. Even the very walls glow, for they are hewn from moonstone.

"Mommy!" shriek the youngest of her children.

When she lands they swarm the courtyard. The Owl Goddess scoops them all beneath her wings, riffling her beak through their soft hair and greeting each one. Her guest hangs warily back, so Kama uses her wings to gently brush her babies away until they make some space. Only then does she assume a smaller shape, her guest landing beside her.

"Good morning, darlings," she murmurs fondly, words echoing through her palace. "This is Lady Sipaktli."

"Is she our new sister?" pipes up one of her youngest.

Kama churs in laughter. "Lady Sipaktli is our guest, Yeta. All of you please do your best to help her feel at home, but remember to be polite."

The Owl Goddess hangs back to greet her children, but understandably most of them are mesmerized by their new house guest. Lady Sipaktli takes their bombardment of questions and compliments in stride. Kama relaxes slightly, but always keeps a sharp eye on her brood. The moment they make the goddess uncomfortable she's pulling them all back.

But Lady Sipaktli only eases into a more comfortable sitting position for her enthralled audience. The young goddess has lived quite the life already in the jungles outside Manoa, and thousands more in her distant childhood with Lord Miguel. They breathe in her stories of hunts and heroism. Kama smiles knowingly, but of course pretends it is only for her children.

"Sipa, Sipa, look!"

Sipaktli looks. Young Dera proudly holds up her net. Ensnared inside is something like a shrieking bat, some minor plague or another. But it is Odera's first catch and so the goddess smiles.

"Your reflexes are quicker by the night," she praises. "Now, where's your club?"

"Here," Ihui murmurs. "You can use mine, Dera."

In truth Ihui is more youth than boy, one of the oldest children Kama rescued when his hunt went wrong one night, and he was left lost and injured for the Jaguar God's jaws. But Dera grins when he helps the club into her hands, and helps her swing it down. The bat demon falls silent and Miguel is left with one less ailment to strike down in the world above.

Sipaktli has had male devotees before. Of course the hunters of old used to pray for her favor.
Sometimes she had done so distantly. Very few had she counted close to her, for Venus had always despised her for keeping youths and maidens from her influence. Their lives had never ended well and never had Sipaktli deigned let them around her huntresses.

But these are not her personal companions. In Manoa Sipaktli is much too young to have attendants clamoring to her side, no matter how high her brother rules, because those sycophants wishing to curry his favor aren't worth her scorn. These are Kama's sons and daughters, those restless with peaceful eternity in her palace walls. Their mother hunts down the evils that slip out of Xibalba on a nightly basis. Of course some seek to follow in her footsteps.

It's nice to have company again, Sipaktli concedes. Even if it means she has to accept the boys along with the girls. What they lack in skill they make up for in raw enthusiasm.

The goddess feels her lips quirk up from graceful poise when one such boy tugs guilelessly at her tunic. "Yes, Quenan?"

"Can we try finding more of the parrot monsters, the ones with the pretty feathers?" he asks with wide, earnest eyes. "I have, like, two more moms to make stuff for?"

"What?" Sipaktli blurts out.

Quenan waves across the black waters of the shore they stand on, where Grandmother Turtle swims. "Well, Kama is my Goddess Mom. My First Mom died when I was real little, but then my Aunt Mom took care of me. Plus, I've got grandmas and-

"Sipa gets it, Quenan," Yaya breaks in. "You've got a lot of moms."

"Of course," Sipaktli says gently, though she does not, in fact, get it. "Who wants to start searching for signs of parrot demons?"

Many of Kama's children eagerly volunteer, darting off this way and that. Beleaguered older siblings follow closely at the heels of the younger.

Quenan starts after them, but after a moment's hesitation darts back to Sipaktli's side to squeeze her leg, for he is too short to reach her waist. "Thanks, Sipa! You're the best big sister ever!"

The Hunt Goddess blinks after him. Yaya smiles sympathetically up at her. "Don't worry, Sipa, a lot of sisters are Quenan's favorites. That's just his way of thanking whoever did something nice for him. It'll probably be me next when I help him see up a tree or something." Like Sipaktli once chased after an overeager Miguel, Yaya quickly chases after Quenan before he blunders into actual trouble.

Sipaktli once counted herself among the infinite offspring of the king of the cosmos. She has been forced to consider gods like rapacious Bacchus and jealous Venus her blood. She is perfectly content to now count Miguel as her sole blood brother. He has enough ego to fill the vacuum their entire old family left behind.

...But maybe a few hundred adopted little brothers and sisters are tolerable too. So long as Kama also doesn't try to stuff Sipaktli too into her nest like a giant broody mother hen.

Chapter End Notes
Artemis and Apollo have shared temple complexes before. Of course, such sacred spaces were also not dedicated to Apollo's sex partners too :p

As a goddess of the hunt Artemis/Diana was certainly prayed to by male hunters. In the myths beyond Orion only one male attendant stands out - Hippolytus. And Venus was very fucking jealous a guy would spurn her to serve a virgin goddess. So she made his stepmom fall in lust with him. Who then accused him of assault when he refused her advances. Which led to his very pissed off father calling on his own dad (friggin' Neptune) to smite him. Goddess of love, everybody -.-'

Of course, seeing as all Kama's adopted children are eternally young, Sipaktli picks up hunters AND huntresses in her retinue this time around XD Because there is no god or goddess out there that would dare fuck with the kids of the Owl Goddess.

Greco-Roman myths have a history of fostering and adopting, seeing as the gods slept around with married women or pissed Juno into trying to off their offspring. Manoa puts an even bigger emphasis on it, but also that adoption expands a child's family without necessarily excluding the first family. This is how Sipaktli gains an Owl Mom and almost as much siblings as she had the first time around XD Because Jupiter was that gods damn prolific.
Chapter Summary

They're haunted metaphorically. But also literally.

The shades are a little slower on the uptake.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She remembers her back heavy with spears and blood in her mouth. She remembers the rage to tear down all around her, her last fleeting thoughts as her being dwindled away into the dark.

She remembers absence, a place for her to fill. She knows the words that wove her a new face and new purpose. Only recently did she claim a new name, binding her to this New World her little brother has so eagerly embraced. This is her home, now and forever.

She remembers Diana and her death just as she does Sipaktli and her birth. What came between...

She recalls only darkness.

Perhaps this is nothing else to remember. She died in the minds of the people and so faded from their world entirely, until her baby brother carried her memory to more welcoming shores and planted the seed that germinated into her return.

Sipaktli is not so far removed from Miguel. When the sun is bright on her back and her brother's love bright in her heart there is no place for shadows. She wants nothing to do with shameful memories of her own demise, the guilt she almost dragged her brilliant little baby brother down with her. In the light of day there is only gratitude for the present, and cautious optimism for the future. Manoa will never fall, not when the Golden Gods ensure it will endure forever as the city that can never be obtained.

Most nights, the shades murmur. They are not so easy to ignore in Kama's pale moonlight, when Xibalba is so thick with the dead already. Still, the Owl Goddess is watchful, and prevents Sipaktli from wandering down the paths that once led to her destruction. So does the cheerful clamor of her many new brothers and sisters drown out the muted voices.

On moonless nights, however, Kama turns her back on the world entirely. She retreats into the utter dark, for only with light to illuminate her shame will she find her fallen Sun God, and allow herself the warmth of his arms. That is when even her nocturnal children sleep, tucked away safe and sound in their beds. This is when the murmurs of Diana and Selene recede, when another name forces her way to the forefront.

Restless, Sipaktli leaves the complacency of Kama's palace. On owl wings she circles the borders of Xibalba, where their stories start to blur with the spirit worlds of others. Here wrongness plucks at her feathers and the whispers fade to near silence, so she whirls away, back to oblivion.

The waters of Lord Xarayes lap at the shores of Xibalba cold and black. Even Tulio, who has tweaked the nose of every last Lord, flies far and fast over the waters to reach Lady Eupana's halls.
Only Grandmother Turtle swims these waters, for Lord Xarayes is her husband and from him she has nothing to fear.

Sipaktli refuses to leave the shore. Tulio and Miguel have never known oblivion she has. She has no desire to ever meet it again. She is one of the deathless gods, and deathless she shall remain. Here death will never find her.

But it is not Sipaktli the shades cry for. At the edge of the waters, with keen owl ears, she cannot dismiss what she hears as mere madness.

One new moon night, she can take no more. With a barn owl's terrible shriek she hurls herself over the House of the Waters. Sipaktli flaps and flaps. She near crashes on Lady Eupana's broad back, gasping like a young divinity pushed to her utter brink.

She does not stop there. Sipaktli swoops to the utter edge, at the easternmost tip of the turtle shell. She alights upon a tree that juts out over the waters and edges her way out. Her talons refuse to budge an inch further. There she stays, as the voices wail across the waters. Or from the depths of a madness she thought dead and buried.

She is alone with them.

Until she is not.

"Uh, hey." Tulio clears his throat as he sets down beside her. "Nice night we're having."

Sipaktli swivels her head to stare at him. So too is he an owl, blue-eyed and black-feathered. His form is a laughing owl native to these shores. No barns have yet been built here. Lady Kama's white-faced form is a ghost owl that roost in trees.

"You can hear them too, can't you?"

"...Hear what?"

With a terrible hiss Sipaktli fluffs up her feathers far as they will go, to loom all the larger. "You were a messenger god, and god of far more. We both walked where few others dared, including Miguel."

"A literal lifetime ago," Tulio corrects coldly. "In your case, at least. I didn't survive this long by courting my own destruction."

"Then why do you still dwell among the dead?"

The laughing owl shifts uneasily. "They needed me," he murmurs, small and soft. "They called, so I came. Isn't that how it always worked?"

"Always," she whispers in fervent agreement. "This place, these people, ached in their emptiness. They cried out and so I came. I came, from..."

They had been like babies, too young and unknowing to cry out for anything beyond a mere purpose, hunters who needed to provide and yet be protected from their ruthless jungle. So she had come, and given them a name for them to center their prayers around, and solidify her home here.

Blue eyes stare into the abyss. "What do you hear?"

"Hecate."
He shudders as the past scrapes up against their present. She stands impassive to his dread. On new moon nights meddling with the ways of the world are simply a fact of life, most especially in disturbing the shades of the dead. And few are deader than the gods of an extinct people. The Roman Empire is a dream one thousand years dead.

"I never understand how you could do that," he mutters. "It's one thing to get syncretized. Getting hailed as three separate goddesses and still mashed up into a triplicate? How in the hell do-"

"You disowned your eldest self as a bastard son because you could not stand your wildness," she answers scornfully. "Not all of us are so removed from ourselves."

Tulio huddles into his wings. "I took it back," he confesses almost too quietly for even owls to hear. "I am Tulio, and Tulio owns his fuck-ups. Even the ones Mercury foisted off on Faunus."

"What do you hear?"

Tulio swivels his head west. "More refugees making their way to the borders, the prayers of an old woman's family that will be needing me tomorrow night. Chel and Miguel, who-"

"I don't wanna hear it," Sipaktli grinds out.

The bastard chuckles. "Of course you-"

"What else do you hear?"

A fraction too quickly, he answers, "Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Liar."

"Guilty as charged!" he says brightly.

Sipaktli waits for him to leave. And waits. She grinds her beak when he doesn't. "What?"

Tulio furrows his brow. "Whatever is calling y-us, isn't worth our time. Not when you consider what they're trying to drag us back into."

She ruffles up her feathers and scowls across the waters that swallowed her once. "So you propose burying our heads into the sand into the voices go away?"

He snorts. "If they want us so badly they know where to find us."

"Do they?"

"Well, you found us, didn't you? Across a thousand years and thousands of miles. From... wherever you were before."

Sipaktli grudgingly concedes that point. So she swings her gaze east, to another thing that has eluded her. "Are you and your... partners perhaps in the mood for something more... productive tonight?"

Tulio follows her eyes to a dark jungle ripe for hunting. "Perhaps," he allows. "But no bows until the prey's actually in sight, otherwise that just ruins all the fun."

Two owls depart Lady Eupana's paradise for a jungle that has only grown all the more fearsome, for the Jaguar God gluts himself on the bloodshed outside their borders. Its one bright side is how quickly it resurrects her favorite prey.
As his death converges from all directions, Balam Qoxtok twitches. He runs for it, where their boundaries blur with the worlds beyond and their powers are not so absolute. The challenge makes it fun.

Time means little in the underworld, where the skies are perpetually gray and souls only trickle out to seek the life after. Time means even less in the halls of Ariadne. Wine flows as easily as conversation, punctuated only by the occasional orgy or her exhausted attendants enjoying a respite before the festivities sparked up again. They are in such a lull when the throne next to her is suddenly filled.

And now she is a widow no longer, for her husband has returned from the world above. "Hm?" she murmurs. "Oh hello, dear. I feel like I've just said goodbye to you. Were you only gone for several years or so."

Her husband waves away his flock of attendants to lean over and press a kiss to her cheek, smirking smugly. "Something like that. It was quite a productive time."

She arches a dangerous eyebrow. "Oh?"

Since their marriage her husband has been nothing but faithful. From a certain definition. Down here, in the domains of his father, they are always equal. Some of his incarnations up above embrace his widowhood differently than others.

Her husband falls back into his throne, allowing the nymphs to fuss over his curls and stripped his bloodstained clothes for wine-dark robes. "Oh, yex. Something like three revolts in as many years. Because, surprise surprise, no one appreciates being lorded over by some imperialist bastard who believes the whole damn continent his birthright."

"Do you think any will win?"

Comus, their youngest, diligently pours him a goblet of wine. He downs it eagerly. "Oh, the guilds and the rebel peasants are inevitably fucked. Navarre at least stands a snowball's chance in Tartarus at regaining independence."

Ariadne smiles into her goblet. He is still her Liber, raging against the hierarchy on the plebeians' behalf. And so much more gentlemanly than Bacchus. "What happened to your big plans for the New World?"

Liber swings up his cup in the way that hides his grimaces. "Change of plans."

"Something concerning Diana?" she asks.

"What? No." He blinks, eyes wide, before frowning suspiciously at the empty throne to his left. "What happened to Diana? And my mom, for that matter."

One smile at Comus has him smartly backing away. The Tityri spark up a new song on their flutes to drown out eavesdroppers. "Your mother is trying her best to calm down Latona. The poor dear's been bitching her heart out to Hecate every new moon since Diana disappeared, trying to demand answers."

Liber thankfully isn't drinking or else he would spewed his wine down the table. "Diana is missing? Or... missing?"

Ariadne's face falls. She had hoped Diana found a way to stumble back into the physical world.
The alternative of her finding new life is her finding a death even more permanent than this one. "Then you haven't seen her around?"

"No! The only family I saw topside was..." Her husband pales.

Ariadne frowns. With the conversion of Iberia so very few souls wander their way down to Hades and the pagan side of the afterlife. Crossing the divide used to be difficult. Now, excepting certain beings like her husband, it's damn near impossible. The oracles are ended and the ghosts driven back by priests into their pits. Hecate jealously keeps their secrets. Even great Dis is ignorant of what goes on in the world above, save when a great oath or curse unwittingly reaches his ears.

"Well?" she prompts dryly.

"There haven't been anymore... family reunions since I was gone, have there?"

She grins wryly. Apollo and Mercury are a special sort of trouble, to fluster their little brother so. "No, Liber. Praise the Fates."

"Praise the Fates their fate is elsewhere," Liber mutters. "Like, an ocean away. The last I saw of those morons they had blundered away on a ship bound for the New World."

Ariadne's fingers slack in horror. Only with divine reflexes does she set down her cup before she can drop it. So many of her children by Liber have been mortal. Even now some have chosen the waters of the Lethe, to break away from the footsteps of their father to make a new life for themselves. Poor, poor Maia, who has never given up hope of one day reuniting with her son. Poor Latona, who has lost both her twins in such a short...

Why is she thinking Apollo and Mercury died on inhospitable shores? God reached the New World mere years ago. Perhaps, across the sea, there is still a place for gods.

"She followed them there," she breathes in awe.

"Good riddance," Liber mutters. Then he yelps when she slaps him on the shoulder.

Diana's huntresses have scoured all of Hades for her. The boldest have even ventured into the neighboring afterlives that have long mingled with their own. Many would have dropped dead from their efforts, if not for the fact most are immortal and all already dead. Orion, for once sweet in his idiocy, is preparing a hunt through Hell itself. Despite numerous gods, most especially Dis, having ordered him not to. As if Orion ever actually listened to anyone.

"How far did you go, to find me?" she murmurs. "To find your mother? To tell death no?"

Liber's face crumbles. "Fine," he grumbles. "But those idiots better not drag everyone across with them too. This was my first home and it's damned convenient to have all my worthwhile family in one place for once."

Ariadne bites her lip to keep herself from informing Liber has already very much jinxed the chances of that ever happening. She only takes Liber's hand and leads him onward. For once, she has a way forward into something other than darkness and despair. It's a thread some will follow to the edge of the earth, and even further beyond.

Chapter End Notes
Artemis sometimes formed a Triple Goddess with Selene and Hekate. Hekate was a goddess of ghosts, necromancy, witchcraft, and presumably moonless nights. In the Roman pantheon these goddesses were Diana, Luna, and Hecate. They were still distinct goddesses, their edges just... blurred a bit. Which means when Latona presses Hecate on where her damn daughter went, Sipaktli can hear it an ocean away :p

Barn owls are also known as ghost owls, night owls, death owls, and demon owls. Their genus ranges across the Old World to the Americas. In a lot of European folklore they're symbols of death and misfortune. They have similar connotations in Manoa, but their white faces are likened to the moon, and so gentle their image more into nocturnal hunters of demons. And occasional child thieves, a la Lady Kama's brood. Tulio's laughing owl form is based off the New Zealand whekau, but is one of the fantastic animals native to Manoa - like the giant turtles and behemoth fish.

Where have you seen these last few gods before ; ) 1519 to 1521 was a busy time for Spain domestically, what with a French-Navarrese war and two separate peasant uprisings. Comus/Komos was Liber's cup-bearer, son, and a minor god of revelry. No mother is given, so I made her Ariadne. Ariadne's proper Roman name is Libera, but she's dead and prefers her own gods damned name, thank you very much. The Tityri/Tityroi were flute-playing satyrs in Liber's retinue.

I had two choices for Hades' Roman incarnation - Pluto or Dis Pater. I chose the one that didn't share his name with a Disney dog, while also neatly tying back to the Christian preconceptions that also unwittingly keep Hades in existence for all those old pagan spirits :D
Chapter Summary

What's sweeter than a reunion a thousand years overdue?
Revenge three thousand years in the making.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matla is the firstborn, the biggest brother. He's also probably gonna be chief one day. That makes him the responsible one, the one his baby brothers have to listen to. Ome and Yei are old enough to know the way of things. When he tells them to shut up and go to bed, they listen. Even when he too lies awake in bed, mind racing with the stories the gods wove them at dinner. It's the principal of things. Mom and Dad always have to make an example for the city, like Matla has to do for his brothers.

"Guys," Naui whispers from the threshold. "Hey, guys, are you awake?"

"Of course we are!" Yei pops up in bed, grinning.
Matla sighs and rises out of bed, glowering at Yei as he passes his bed. "Well, you shouldn't be. And neither should you, Naui."

"Yeah," Ome agrees. "You're still in the nursery and babies need their sleep. For someone so smart you can be awfully du-"

"Ome!" Matla snaps, before biting his lips because that was way too loud. He grabs Naui's hand comfortingly. At least he has a plausible excuse in escorting his baby brother back to bed.

The brothers wait a few breathless moments but no one seems to have noticed they're awake. So Ome wilts guiltily. "Sorry, Naui," he murmurs. "I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay," Naui mumbles. "I know I should be in bed, but I just couldn't sleep."

Yei grins. "Do you feel up to stealing some cows, Naui? Because L-"

"Sh!" Matla hisses. "Do you want to get us into even more trouble?"

Yei's mouth snaps shut. Invoking a god's name is a surefire way to get their attention. Considering Lord Tulio is on actual speaking terms with their parents, this is not always a good thing, when certain little princes are up way past their bedtime.

"Why didn't he get into trouble?" Naui presses emphatically. "Why wasn't his mommy around in the story?"

"Who says he has one?" Yei mutters.

Ome rolls his eyes. "Everyone has a mom, stupid. Even... people like him. He probably didn't
mention here because she probably got super mad for him sneaking off and then he got grounded for, like, a thousand years or something.

Matla bites back on his own laugh, because he's the responsible one, dang it. "We shouldn't be talking about this, guys. Something about this has to be blasphemy." Somehow. Tzekel-Kan had called a lot of things blasphemy. Talking about the gods behind their back has to have something to do with it.

Nai frowns up at the stars. "He's Lord of the Evening, right? His mommy should be up there then, watching over him. That's what mommies do."

Yei gapes up at the endless multitude. "Yeah, but which one is she?"

"Someone bright," Nai murmurs.

"Someone pretty," Ome chimes in.

"Someone important," Matla blurts out. His cheeks flame when his brothers gape at him. "Well, her son's Lord of the Evening, isn't he? She has to be pretty dang powerful herself."

Some stars are scary skeleton goddesses, because they have to fight back the monsters chained in the inky blackness of the sky. Others dictate certain times or the changes of the seasons. Some just make the night sky a little brighter. They're all clustered so close together it's hard to tell which is which. Even the priests only assign most of them general placeholder names to big constellations, lest they accidentally offend a star deity by being presumptuous about a name not given.

"Yeah," Yei agrees. "But what about-"

"No," Matla deadpans. "Go to bed."

They don't, not for hours, but at least the conversation drifts to safer topics. Like the epic groundings their parents would give them if they ever tried anything half as stupid.

Their first year in Manoa draws to a close. The calendar here keeps only three hundred and sixty days. The remaining five days are not included in the months. This is extra time, the Days of Reflection, where people might put work aside to think back upon the past year and how they shall embrace the year to come. There is fasting, solemn meditation, and prayer. Good gods are there prayers.

Miguel is fascinated by it all, because a people that have eighteen months in their yearly calendar can still cram in extra time like the Egyptians did. Chel spends a lot of time reflecting on her newly immortal life, with them and by herself.

Tulio's dreams have been... restless, as of late, leading up to the Days of Reflection. In the way that foretells things of import, and aren't just memories vomited up by his unconscious mind.

They're not nightmares. Or even disturbing. They're... nice.

He dreams of the light wind through the strawberry trees, the breeze fragrant with their ripened fruit. Into his mouth is dribbled nectar and ambrosia, beyond mortal taste buds. He is content to be cradled in warm, soft arms. It is only his first few hours alive, after all, and he won't feel the urge to leave the nest for a few hours more.

His partners feel it too, of course. Together they threw down the Jaguar God and claimed the Fifth
World for themselves. Now they feel the gaping hole left in the old order. Though they have established themselves near the top the lower levels ebb and flow. And things have become especially potent as of late. Their first new year in Manoa will be upon them soon, and all the city thrums with anticipation.

Their gods sense the changes in their own ways. Chel keeps biting back smiles as human faith flows and coalesces over the coming festivities that will explode after the period of somber reflection. Miguel practically vibrates in excitement, even if he doesn't know quite what's coming until the damn mortals make up their minds. And Tulio forces his anxiety down deep and ignores it.

Nothing is set in stone until it happens, because the human heart is a fickle bitch. No matter his dreams, his hopes, the new year may all yet come to simply one more day in Manoa, their first year of hundreds more. Sipaktli proves only a need the hunters felt when the Jaguar God turned so viciously upon them. Manoa may still decide one new minor goddess to watch over their distant hunters is all it needs, and there are no more holes to billed. Not when the Golden Gods prove themselves such capable stewards.

As the dreams grow too intense, Tulio is too anxious to sleep. Omnipresence is a wonderful thing. Part of him can at least lie in the arms of his partners while the majority of him wanders the dark. He is Lord of the Evening and so draws purpose from the time of thieves and shades, if not peace. It at least keeps him fixated on the present and not lost in the past. Night is when jaguars think to slink in under Miguel's sleeping nose. Scaring them back into the jungle is always a lovely catharsis.

Of course, no matter how brilliant the stars glimmer above, Tulio stubbornly keeps his gaze downward and shrouds himself in shadows to avoid their gaze. He is Lord of the Evening, not the night sky itself. In the east he once counted numerous constellations as his extended relations, before they withered into dead bones without true faith to give them life. Here in the west these stars have always been strangers to him. He has every desire to keep it that way.

The star spirits are none too pleased. He drowns out their gossip and murmurs of disapproval but some still seep in anyway. It's not like he has to acknowledge them, after all. He has claimed the earthly realm, not the heavens, as his domain. As a lord of this world he could technically do whatever the hell he wants. Only he can't, without his partners shunning him and Lady Raima blowing her top. But it's not like any of them care he does his damnedest to keep a polite distance from minor star deities.

Miguel knows better, of course. The stars above Manoa turn on the same immutable axis as they did in the lands of their birth. Tulio feels their rise and fall like Miguel does the arc of the sun, like Tulio also does intruders on the borders and predators among his flock. Tulio wants nothing to do with Manoa's calendars or astronomers when he has no ties to these heavens, not like a god of such should have.

On the last night of the Days of Reflection, Tulio can't make any part of himself keep still. He's way too keyed up. While the people ponder and pray he paces the borders like a caged animal. His partners grant him blessed space. There's time where he needs warm arms and soothing words, and time when he needs to work shit out on his own. He huddles deep in his cloak of shadows and retreats from the wider world.

Not like he's the only one with priorities tonight. Chel dwells especially deep in the heart of their people as they seek her guidance more than ever. Miguel retreats to the jungle with Sipaktli to reflect over the twists their own lives have taken. Mostly, Sipaktli having one.
So Tulio gives them their privacy by turning from the borders. Instead he glides up the winding paths to Lady Raima's volcano. On her fertile peaks the gifts he and Miguel granted her grow most abundantly. Here the strawberry trees grow tall and thick, their branches laden with fruit. Tulio's internal calendar testily insists early April is much too soon for the tree to be ripe, but tropical Manoa is gentler on Lady Raima's new favorites than the cold slopes of Arcadia.

Suddenly weary of his wandering, Tulio stops in the grove of them, too high on the sacred slopes for their fruit to be disturbed. He leans against a trunk. It is a comforting weight at his back, the breeze through the trees a lullaby. Beneath its fragrant branches he feels more peace than he's had for weeks.

So the Lord of Evening chuckles back his hood and plucks one of the berries from its branch. Who's around to see him now? Through the thick canopy the stars scarcely twinkle.

"Good evening, my lord."

....And he spoke too soon. "Good evening," he offers dryly, not rising from his impertinent slouch. This is his world and his time, dammit! "What's left of it, anyway."

The star spirit is shrouded head to toe in white, but for the deep blue trimmings along her dress. Even her face is masked, the painted features in the shape of a serene womanly face. Beneath their light some spirits are fair as his aunts once were. Others are literal skeletons.

"There is always the next night, my lord," the star spirit offers. "And what a night it shall be. Might we see you at the festivities?"

Tulio blinks before remembering Manoa does not see Seven Sisters. Their constellation instead forms a Marketplace, a heavenly reflection to Manoa's physical one. There the heavenly gods gather to celebrate the turning of the years.

"Weren't those tonight?" he blurts out. "Because my- the Marketplace rises for the first time tonight."

"Just before the dawning, my lord," she chides gently, as if he of all gods should know better. "Only then does the new year begin. Right now is still the last Night of Reflection."

"Of course," he offers gamely, before popping a strawberry into his mouth. "Hell of a year it's been, isn't it?"

"You could say that, my lord," the star spirit murmurs, voice light. "My sisters and I missed having you beneath our light. It was a thousand years since we saw you last. Or enjoyed your presence in our halls."

"Sorry about that. Big plans down in this world and all that. Just couldn't spare the time for a jaunt upstairs." Tulio playfully tosses another berry into his mouth. "There's always this year, right?"

"Oh?" challenges the shrouded star. "And here I thought I raised my only son better than that."

Tulio gasps in surprise... just as the berry sails down. He, the Lord of the Evening, choking on it until a hand helpfully slaps him on the back. The berry flies like a shooting star down the slope to nail an unsuspecting fox.

"I suppose I should be thankful lordship did not change you for the worse," she chuckles.

Tulio's breath hitches when he at last places that voice. He swallows thickly when she lowers her
hood and curly black locks spill out. Casting off her mask, she reveals a long face and eyes the deep blue of the night.

"W-W-W-"

A smile plays at the corners of her mouth. "Fair is fair, my son. You ran off the day you were born. The only reason I survived my heart attack was because I was immortal. And possessed by the need to somehow pay you back one day."

Tulio chokes out something between laugh and sob. He throws himself into his mother's arms and weeps like a lost child.

"Oh, my baby," his mother cries, voice breaking. "My Tulio."

She speaks his name tenderly, as if she were the one to first bless him with it. Here in Manoa that might as well be true.

Some of the stars whisper at one of their lords bawling like a baby. Others murmur at the sweetness. Tulio gives no fucks. On his and his mom's behalf Lady Kama clucks at the gossiping deities. Mist sweeps over the earth to provide them some privacy.

Overhead, through the haze, a constellation dips above the horizon for the first time in months. Manoa knows it as the Marketplace. Tulio calls them family. On their first night the stars scarce have chance to shine before the sun swallows them all. His mother's radiant robes dull to deep blue but she doesn't fade with her star. This day is hers, and it has only just begun.

"Happy new year," she whispers teasingly, rubbing his back as the last of his sobs decline.

Tulio manages a watery smile. "It's gonna be a great one." He blinks as something dawns on him. "Are you still gonna be..."

"Of course," she answers serenely. "It's my name."

He grins. "Yeah, it is."

Well, in the Manoan inflection it's Maya. But when has his mom ever cared about her name being translated with her? Maia she was, and Maia she remains.

Chapter End Notes

The constellation of the Pleiades first rises in early April. The Greeks took the rising of the Pleiades to generally be the start of farming season. Apparently the Aztecs took its heliacal rising as the start of their new year in some sources - though others put their new year more in early February by our calendar. The nemontemi are five 'dead' days in the calendar to make a complete 365 year and mirror a similar set in the Ancient Egyptian calendar where Thoth gambled five days of extra light away from the moon god to ensure the births of the gods Ra refused to have born during the normal year, for fear they might replace him. Manoa obviously follows a different variation of the calendar :

In Aztec myth their name for the Pleiades translated to 'gathering place' or 'market place.' Every 52 years, when it precisely appeared over at midnight, their 52 year
count came to an end. That's quite some time away as of 1520ish or so in the Manoan calendar - the last one only happened a bit less than 30 years ago. Needless to say the next cycle will be a lot more fun with the Golden Gods in charge instead of mass human sacrifice :p

Maia's name remained consistent from Greece into Rome. Alongside being a star deity she helps connect Hermes/Mercury to a very astral side of the family. His maternal grandfather was Atlas, who turned the stars on their axis. Alongside the Pleiades, Hermes' maternal relatives include the Hyades, Maira the spirit of Sirius, and sometimes the Hesperides. Hermes was himself a god of astrology, astronomy, and the calendar because of it.
reckoning

Chapter Summary

Miguel and his twin have a lot in common. The horrific past is one thing. The resulting nightmares are quite another.

Or: Miguel helps his sister learn how to cope with her brand new conscience.

Chapter Notes

Yet another dip into the skeevier parts of mythology. Warnings for referenced non-con and child death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From baby Kuili to Matla, Tanni's firstborn, he checks over them all. He has to. It's so late at night even his older boys are fast asleep. Their soft, quiet breaths calm his hammering heart. Their carefree faces almost banish the memories of burnt flesh and bloodied, broken bodies. Or at least bury them down, down deep, back where they belong.

Nauí shivers in his sleep. Miguel hoists his blanket further up his shoulders. He leaves behind a sunny warmth in the fabric that will linger until noon.

Then he leaves the palace behind for another restless lap around the city limits. His far-seeing gaze pierces through narrow streets and shrouding shadows. There is no evil out tonight, nothing to sink his talons into or gore an arrow through. For a moment Miguel hates Manoa's peacefulness. Then he hates himself for wishing his people any less safe.

He is not a child anymore, bored and arrogant, willing to do anything to break up the monotony of his day. Those urges died with Apollo.

Miguel is not the city's only guardian tonight. Through dark trees he catches a flash of white. It is not Lady Kama, who prefers the shape of the ghost owl native to these shores. Only four gods here have ever beheld a barn owl personally. Only one has ever favored it.

The hawk wheels away from his vigil. He finds his twin woman-shaped, sprawled out like an ocelot. Miguel lands beside her, exchanging wings to swing human legs beside her own. "Hi," he attempts. "Nice night, isn't it?"

"Quiet night," Sipaktli murmurs. He follows her gaze through the trees, where an exhausted couple finally sleep in the precious hours of sleep their infant twins grant them.

"It is, isn't it? Quiet enough for..." Miguel clears his throat awkwardly. "Well, you wouldn't understand."

Diana had died abruptly, when their names were being murmured in prayers for the final time. She
had never endured the voices finally going silent and the emptiness of her own head, with only her own ghosts to echo back. Breaking down in the street because a child smiled the right way, or screamed just so, is an experience only Miguel and Tulio can lay claim to. No other of their family had survived long enough for the world to shift so drastically, for mortal consciences to finally catch up.

"Do you remember Niobe?"

Miguel jerks, floored by the question. "How could I ever forget?" he counters wanly. "I hadn't seen Mom that angry since our infancy, when everything was out to kill us."

"The children..." Sipaktli trails off, staring down to where two babies named for them slumber. "We spared the youngest of them, didn't we, a boy and a girl? I-I can't remember."

"No," he answers sadly, but resolutely. "We didn't."

Seven sons and seven daughters had been Niobe's price, for mocking Latona and her divine twins so arrogantly. Her transfigured, stony form still weeps eternal tears.

His sister jerks her head up defiantly, green eyes blazing gold. "That bitch had the hubris to mock our mother, us. Our punishment was in the right. We were gods and she an arrogant mortal."

"Yes!" he snaps. "We always were in the right, weren't we? Just like Dad."

Asclepius had dared heal the sick even his own father could not. For Dad his final straw had been raising the dead. Of course he had been justified in striking his own grandson dead with a thunderbolt. Asclepius had only been a mortal then, and Jupiter upholding his cosmic order with an iron fist.

Sipaktli flinches back. Then her eyes narrow. "Like you were, when you took my Cyrene from me?"

Miguel laughs scornfully in her face. "Oh, yes, because every huntress that maybe wanted a bit more out of life had to be stolen from you. She practically threw herself into my chariot when I offered her a ride. We had a pleasant fuck in Libya and then she went to raise her own damn city. Probably because any nymph that could kill lions barehanded rightly convinced any sane man to join her cause." His face falls. "I... I wouldn't have taken any huntress against their will. Not from you."

If Cyrene had not been sworn to his sister, if she had chose to hurl her javelin at him rather than demand he bring her to a land she could claim all her own... Well, there's a reason Apollo is dead and gone, why not even Miguel mourns him.

Sipaktli's face goes slack. Once more her head swings away from him to that young family below. "Do... Do you remember Aura?"

Miguel's nails sink into the wood of their branch as he wrestles with the words. "The mountain maid, Lelantos' daughter?" He wants to leave it there. Instead he blurts out, "The one you threw to Bacchus?"

"She... She made mock of me, little brother. We bathed together, like I did with all my girls, and she... pinched my breasts. Dared call me too womanly to be a true virgin. How the fuck could I have let that stand?" Sipaktli's face twists, unable to settle on a single emotion. "I... did not foresee the extent of the resulting bloodbath."
Miguel sighs, remembering whole mountains of massacred beasts, shepherds slaughtered along with their flocks, as one mad huntress had blamed them and their gods for her suffering. "Well, Tulio and I both did. The second you thought going to Nemesis was a better idea than just putting an arrow through her throat."

"She... She had twins. Twin sons. Our nephews." She pales, curling into herself. "Mom was despised by Juno. She still walked a thousand miles for us, moved heaven and earth to grant us a place between them. Bacchus was a brute, but he always provided for his children. The beast themselves would have cared for those boys, if Aura had deigned abandon them. How... How the fuck could she have..."

Gently, he nudes her shoulder. "You saved Iacchus," he points out. "Ceres was a better parent for him than either of his parents could have ever been."

"After his brother was devoured alive by his own mother." She buries her head in her hands, in a gesture Miguel remembers all too well. "I was the protector of virgin girls, of expectant mothers and their children. How the fuck could I have..."

Miguel swings a sympathetic arm over her shoulder and squeezes her close. "I know," he sighs. "A mortal conscience is a bitch, isn't it?"

Sipaktli sniffles, before her head shoots up in disbelief. "We... had very different fates, before this place."

Miguel raps the branch beneath them, solid wood rooting to them this place and their people. "This isn't Lycia or Greece or even Iberia, Sipaktli. This is Manoa, and it believes us both better than what we were."

She frowns. "But how does that help us change our past?"

"It doesn't," he answers bluntly. "All you can do is learn from it, and try to do better today. And every day after that."

Sipaktli is too proud to cry, not even before him. Especially in front of him. Not yet. This isn't the breakdown. Oh, not even close. This is only the pebble atop the mountain.

For now Miguel just holds her, as he once held Tulio all those centuries ago, to make the night a little less desolate. At dawn Sipa and Mixchel, their little namesakes down below, wake their parents with hearty wails for breakfast. Sipaktli jolts at their cries, slipping away from his side to attend to those refugees seeking sanctuary yet far beyond their borders.

Miguel sighs after her.

One night down.

Thousands more to go.

Chapter End Notes

Why, yes, Miguel does project his past failures as a father onto other people's kids :D Asclepius was one of the lucky ones - given that only about a handful of Apollo's kids were deified to any degree after death.
Some versions of the Niobe myth have Apollo and Diana spare the youngest son and daughter. Miguel isn't that generous with his past self. The myth of Aura was codified quite late by Nonnus. She is a nymph of the breezes and a huntress of Artemis. One suicidal enough to body shame and slut-shame ARTEMIS by calling herself the superior virgin. Artemis replies by having Nemesis spur Dionysus into getting her drunk and... yeah. Aura then proceeds to go on a rampage against anything and everything in her vicinity. Before eating one of her kids. The either, Iakkhos/Iacchus, was a lesser god in the service of Demeter/Ceres in a mystery cult.

In contrast to all of this, Cyrene was a bad-ass huntress and lionkiller. Apollo got so hot over seeing her kill a lion with her bare freaking hands he spirited her away to Libya to give her lands and a whole name city that came to be named for her. As Cyrene's name literally means Sovereign Queen, and not all girls wanna hunt things for eternity, you can sure as hell bet Apollo was just along for the ride on this one.
sunrise (sunset)

Chapter Summary

How does one define the undefinable?

Or in which the family reunions keep on coming.

Chapter Notes

No more angst. For the time being.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He dreams of floating islands and snakes in the reeds. Upon waking Miguel sneezes. It still can't quite take away the heady fragrance of lotus blossoms.

"Oh," he blurs. "Oh."

Tulio snorts blearily awake. "Huh? Whazzat?"

"Nothing," Miguel whispers, as Chel groans into his chest. "Nothing at all. Go back to sleep."

"...'Kay."

It's scarcely dawn. Miguel sings softly under his breath, stringing his power into a lullaby that will keep his partners nice and cozy in their bliss for another few hours. Once both are snoring again he leaves behind just enough of himself to be a familiar weight against their bodies, a warmth between them. Such is the glory of omnipotence.

The majority of his being takes wing as an emerald hawk, the newborn light glinting off his rainbow flight feathers. He flaps desperately for the border. Spotting his sister, he immediately flares his wings and lands.

"Sipaktli? Hey, Sipaktli... Um..."

Miguel cocks his head as he considers his sister's latest catch, bound and dangling upside down from a tree. The victim is a youth dressed in riotous colors, his hair vibrant red and green feathers. His wings are tightly bound to his back. He squawks mournfully through his gag.

"Is... Is that the Parrot God?"


"That's... kind of what he does, Sipaktli."

Lord Maka is lord over the birds of the air. They are his spies and messengers that allow him to keep track over humanity so that he can report back to the heavens. Of course it's in his nature to be
curious. The Golden Gods are still brand new rulers to the pantheon. Sipaktli, as aloof sister to one of the lords of this world, is an even bigger mystery. She is also fiercely defensive of her privacy, and an ocelot goddess of the hunt. With a bird at her mercy. Oh boy.

"The winged monkey wasn't even sniffing after me this time, were you?" Sipaktli strikes her knife against a whetstone, as if she's ready to gut the god right then and there. He gulps. "You just have to drag her in too."

And now everything makes sense. "Maybe you should let Lord Maka go now, sis," he offers gently, "so we can talk this through."

His twin snarls mutinously at him, green eyes flashing gold. Miguel squares his shoulders and smiles right back. She's the older sister. He's a Lord of the Fifth World. It's their biggest power disparity in eons. The last thing he wants is to make this a true order and widen the rift further, right when things made finally be whole again.

After a short eternity Sipaktli huffs. Lord Maka's bindings evaporate. He falls to the ground with a squawk.

"T-Thank you, my lord! You have my eternal gratitude for-"

"Please, Maka," Miguel laughs, holding out a hand to help the youth up. "We're family now. Forgive and forget, right?"

"Right," squeaks Maka.

"I never forget," Sipaktli intones ominously.

"But you do forgive," Miguel points out. "You'd have buried me in the underworld a long time ago if you never got over everything I did to you. Surely we can put one more little misunderstanding behind us all?"

"It is his misunderstandings that shall drag our mother's honor through the mud," Sipaktli hisses, human form evaporating as she prowls around them as an ocelot. Maka twitches to fly away. Miguel grounds him with a calming hand on the shoulder that keeps his sister at bay. "She is as powerful as she is wonderful. You aren't worthy of knowing her name, much less her face."

"I was just curious!" Maka protests. "Lord Miguel returns miraculously after a thousand years without an explanation and now you're here too! You can't exactly keep everything under wraps forever!"

"You're right," Miguel breaks in easily. "Both of you are right." He grins at their bewilderment. "Our mother is an ancient and wide-ranging goddess. Not even I know the true extent of her domain. Sipaktli and I can only be dutiful children when she calls on us. But I haven't heard a word from her, yet. Have you, sis?" Her tail lashes. "Let her show Manoa what she wills of herself. All we can do is honor the aspect she deigns reveal."

"Of course," the Parrot God rushes out. "I'm just trying to put the pieces together here!"

"You shall when our great mother wills it so," Sipaktli growls. "And you will honor every piece she shows."

The youth nods in hasty agreement. Then he's a red parrot flapping wildly in any direction that isn't here. Miguel waves after him.
"He'll pervert her image," the Ocelot Goddess growls to him. "He-"

"Pft. Like Mom would ever allow that." He cants his head as he considers something. "Do you remember what Mom actually does?"

"She is our mother, a queen among deities!"

"Yes, but why?"

"She's- Well, she..." His twin scrunches her nose in thought. "She's Mom. She didn't need to show any of her power, not once we got strong enough to take care of all her problems."

"You haven't heard from her, have you? Because I definitely haven't."

Her sullen silence is answer enough.

He sighs. "I thought so." He kicks at a rock before a thought comes to him. "D-Do you think she's trying to make us remember too? She was great before us, before..." Before Dad. Before Greece, back when they had dwelt in the east. The further west they'd ventured, the unhappier she'd become.

"As if we could ever forget her," Sipaktli murmurs.

Not the parts that mattered.

Faith is a god's lifesblood, but gossip is their breath. Deities are not created in a vacuum. It takes a mortal eye to notice the miraculous in the mundane. Such wonders spread by word of mouth, are compared and correlated until the patterns form into a personality. It is rhetoric that wrought golden thrones for two Dual Gods long awaited, forged a new Lady of Faith, and formed the bridges that allowed their family to cross into a new world from one long dead.

Lady Sipaktli stalks the wild jungle and Lady Maia dwells in the night. This new goddess hides in plain sight. She dwells right in the city itself. Manoa sees her in the snakes that lay still when they should bite, or the snakebites that deliver no venom for Miguel to draw out. Pregnant women rest more easily and people stop fearing the water's edge. The reeds along Lake Parime whisper just so, to warn mothers to retrieve wayward children before they topple in or that a crocodile lurks nearby.

Matla, Tannabok's oldest, sleeps especially sound around dawn. It is a peace of mind Miguel cannot entirely take credit for. Mom's always had a thing for promising princes and vibrant young rulers alike. Matla will one day match or exceed Tannabok in his wisdom and patience, if Miguel has anything to say about it.

The Golden Gods do not exclusively dwell among mortals. From time to time they do make appearances in the heavenly halls of the gods. Lord Kinich invites them all up for a splendid party one day. Of course they all go. Tulio makes himself life of the party and drags Chel in too, when Mari doesn't steal her best friend away. Altivo and the Feathered Serpent remain aloof in their own little corner, smiling enigmatically as the gods inevitably gossip about their closeness.

Miguel enthuses with the craft deities and serenades the music deities. He challenges Paquini to a dance-off and gets hip-checked off the floor. He flutters around the social butterfly he is. When he can he checks on Sipaktli, who has sequestered herself among Lord Cassipa's throng of daughters. It's a miracle she showed up at all. She'd show up for nothing less than one.

As late afternoon drags down into twilight the party starts to wind down. Lord Kinich yawns
between his smiles, his face pinched like only a dying solar god's can be. Miguel winces in empathy. Lord Munah gives up on trying to arm-wrestle Tulio to suction himself to his partner's side.

Only when the hour grows late does the chariot thunder in from the east. It is as radiant as the dawn and the dusk, pulled by two snorting bulls. Their coats are white as the clouds and their horns golden as their hooves. Down steps their imperious driver. She stands tall and imposing, shrouded head to toe in loose green garments. Her veil obscures her features.

The party's music grinds to a halt. The bold gape. The minor deities all bow before her wake. Miguel's breath hitches. He stares even as his partners stare holes in him.

Sipaktli surges through the crowd, halting uncertainly when she approaches the cloaked goddess. She lifts her veil high enough for Sipaktli to sob at the face beneath it. Miguel desperately pushes forward. The goddess whispers something too soft for him to hear, kisses his sister on the brow, and sweeps forward to receive her true charge.

"My lady," Lord Kinich rasps hoarsely, trying to dip into a bow. Lord Munah catches him when he coughs and pitches forward.

"The time has come, my lord," she murmurs back in a voice like the wind through the reeds.

"To Xibalba, then?"

"I take you where I must."

"So a yes to Xibalba." Lord Munah laughs. "Nice to get a ride for a change."

The goddess says nothing. With a gentle, implacable hand she guides the Sun God into her chariot. The Hero God hops onto the back. One stern look back stops Miguel's aimless steps after them.

Off the bulls charge, carrying Lord Kinich into the west and into his nightly death. Miguel's knees smack against the floor as they thunder away.

Not that any gods witness his shame. Tulio's shadows have covered the halls far and wide, growing only stronger in the encroaching evening.

"Go on, people," he shoos. "Show's over."

Miguel is still stammering when Chel's gentle hand falls on his shoulder. He grips it like a life-line.

"Why?"

"It's nothing personal," she soothes. "You know it's not."

"But-"

"Miguel." Tulio envelops him in a crushing hug. "Please. I'm still just glad dying every night is someone else's burden over here."

He searches the darkened halls for his sister. She is nowhere to be found. The night has always been more her time than his.

"I-I- She-"

Chel kisses him on the brow. "You know where to go from here."
He does. So they do.

Off they fly into the east, over the sea and to the edge of the world. They settle down on the horizon. To venture a step forward is to leave the world of the living behind. The long hours pass by quicker with his partners warm weights at his sides, their whispers to fill the quiet. Overhead Maia and her sisters rise, pale before Lady Kama's silver radiance. They wave down to them as they ascend. Tulio grins back. Miguel swallows his bitterness.

As the stars start to set he squirms impatiently. Tulio sighs. "You gotta do this on your own?"

He nods mutely.

"Yeah. I know." Tulio plants one last kiss on his cheek. "Go do what you need to."

"She's not going anywhere this time," Chel breathes into his ear. "Not from your heart."

His partners vanish. He is alone.

The night draws its breath. Even the crickets die down.

The silence shatters as the bulls breach the horizon. Lord Kinich draws his first breath. He surges skyward, his wings painting the horizon the colors of dawn the higher he rises. Lord Munah sighs fondly after him. He slings his spear-thrower across his back and leaps out of the chariot. He claps Miguel on the shoulder as he passes.

"She's all yours, buddy."

The goddess descends from her chariot. Through her veil he feels sharp eyes appraising him. Miguel stands like a statue as she strides forward.

She lifts a hand, her robe falling back to reveal a skin tone much like his own. Gentle fingers card through his hair.

"You had such beautiful hair. And you cut it all off."

"N-Not all of it." He manages a shaky smile. "It's easier to handle. Birds and small animals get trapped in it less."

The hand trails from his hair to his chin. Her stroke is as tender as it is stern at the same time. Despite the tears his smile widens into a grin. "Well, I like it."

"If I told you to shave it off, and show these people your handsome face?"

He laughs. "I'd say no."

A thousand years as a beardless youth had been a thousand years too many. He likes his beard. More importantly, his partners like the beard. The beard stays.

He braces for scornful disappointment. She's always been a proud goddess and himself an impertinent brat. Here he's possibly gone and fucked over what should have been a joyous reunion. His jaw drops at her huff of laughter.

"You've grown a spine. It suits you."

"I think so too," he croaks. "Don't know how I got along without it."
She tears off her veil, carelessly letting it fall to the ground. Under it her features are beautiful and
proud, eyes green as the reeds and hair golden as dusk, still the same visage she proudly bore from
Lycia across Greece and all the way to Iberia. Miguel drinks her in. When he can take it no longer
he throws himself into her arms and weeps like a child. Deep down a part of him will always be
one.

"Oh," his mother murmurs, embracing him right back. Her head is now tall enough to rest on his
shoulder. "My boy, my baby. M-My... Miguel.

He sobs a laugh at her distaste for his chosen name and its unabashed Spanish. But she chants it
over and over, until she drills out whatever visceral hatred she may have for its origins, until she
hears it and hears her son alone in it. Or maybe until she just no longer feels compelled to call him
Apollo. That name did follow him across the centuries and two different cultures.

"Hi Mom," he chokes out. "It's been awhile."

"Yes," she hisses dangerously. "Because someone never bothered to visit your sister and me."

"I-I-"

In Spain he'd been the next best thing to mortal. It's not like humans died on a nightly basis and
popped back up anew every dawn. Then again, he knows she'd prefer her children with her for all
eternity, with Tulio solidly trapped on a different plane of existence just as long. Yeah. Never
happening.

He smirks wryly at her as he pulls away. "What should I call you this time around?"

She imperiously raises her head and casts off her heavy chiton. Under the old Roman modesty is
the Minoan robe in all its flair, tapered, breast-exposing bodice and all. "I am the Goddess in the
Horizon, Lady of the West and Lady of the East. I have borne the morning and the evening. I am of
both worlds and of none. I am... Baalal."

The Hidden. A mystery wrapped inside an enigma.

He grins. "Sounds about right."

Chapter End Notes

Maka the Parrot God got a cameo or two before. He's a god of gossip that gets all the
juicy news back to the heavens.
He's kinda rude but also, y'know, vital to spreading a literal cult following.

Leto is a mother goddess of Lycia and apparently was of importance back to the
Minoan religion. Despite remaining the mother of Apollo and Artemis she is really
obscure even by the Classical Greek period. She doesn't have much of a domain
outside general motherhood and protection, but her name and lineage hints at a
celestial domain having to do with light. Regardless of her original incarnation, Manoa
knows her as a horizon goddess, who births the day and brings it to a close.

Baalal is Yucatan Maya for 'hidden' due to Leto's cryptic nature and one theory that
states her name does mean 'hidden one.'
Baalal also has a bit of Wadjet in her. The Greeks knew her as Uto/Buto and syncretized her to Leto, making Horus-Apollo her son. She is especially fond of protecting promising young royals because of this and has a thing for cobras.
"Y-You came from where now?"

"Hades," Baalal repeats icily. "Where else would our dead dwell?"

Nowhere at all. He dipped his toes into that oblivion himself. Tulio helplessly turns to his own mother. Maia smiles sadly. "I set a thousand years ago, Tulio, and slept through it all. I recall... dreams. Dreams of dreams. Small, broken things. Things were not clear for me until I woke up above these skies, to gaze down upon you once more."

His eyes water. Their weeks reunited do not erase the long centuries he thought her dead and forever beyond his reach. Maia holds out her hand. He squeezes in a death grip, to ensure she is really here and once more assure himself all of Manoa is not some wonderful dying dream on that gods damned dinghy.

"I remember even less," admits Sipaktli. Her green eyes glance from Miguel to their mother. "Save for when the moon is new. Then I hear whispers from across the sea."

Tulio does not admit he hears him too, even when Miguel's gaze suspiciously falls on him. Of course Tulio would hear the dead of their past. He was their messenger and one of their leaders once upon a time. He turns away when Chel too tries to catch his eye. He gets an elbow in the gut for it.

Baalal does not notice. Instead she sighs with a tender patience she only ever shows for her twins. "Daughter, we dwelt an eternity down in your uncle's hall." She seizes Sipaktli's hand, just as desperately as Tulio had taken Maia's. "And then you were just... gone. Gone like your brother was to us. Oh, your huntresses searched for you. They scoured the known corners of the earth. That bitch Hecate laughed in my face when I tried to beg your location from her. I-I thought..." She kisses Sipaktli's brow, and then Miguel's. "But there was light on the horizon. And there both my babies were."

Her children squirm. Tulio dares not ask how Baalal remembers so much of a death the others have all but forgotten. Sure, Miguel and Sipaktli were both cyclical gods at one point, but in the Roman pantheon the sun and moon were tacked on late to their cults. Once Baalal had been queen of her own damned pantheon. It is not Tulio's place to ask how central rebirth is to that.

"My huntresses," Sipaktli echoes hollowly.

"Yes. And your... Orion. He harrowed hell for you."

Ever so slightly, Sipaktli's lips part in surprise. Miguel's thin in disapproval.
His mom eyes him right back. Miguel guiltily averts his eyes and mumbles an apology. It's not like he has any right to judge his sister on the closest she has ever come to a romantic partner. In Greece and Rome alike Miguel was a serial bachelor who left only an army of bastard grandchildren in his wake. What he left behind in the lands peripheral to such great empires...

"So long as you love, you never forget," Chel whispers. "Your heart shall always find its way back to what you left behind."

Baalal's eyes glisten with approval. "Indeed, Lady of Faith."

Maia bows her head in agreement, clutching her son's once more. Tulio automatically squeezes back.

His mom is all the miracle he needs. Really. The rest of his past can stay dead and buried. Well, not all his brothers and sisters were so bad.

And maybe his ex-lovers deserve every groveling apology that's been rattling around his head for centuries.

And his kids-

Good gods, his kids. What were the last words he'd shared with all of them? How many had he ever told he actually loved?

Tulio's knees go weak.

In his head a chasm yawns vast and deep. From it whisper ghosts in tongues centuries dead. They call out only to the names of a ghost. Tulio nods and hums along dutifully in a habit long picked up from Miguel's longer ramblings. This is how he agrees with the vague, general sentiment they have to go back to Hades. If only to ensure their friends and family none of them have vanished into oblivion or something.

For a visit. Baalal certainly doesn't want her hard-won power ripped away by more in-laws clamoring for more. Even Maia quietly agrees Manoa doesn't need most of the rabble. Sipaktli is torn, because Cassipa's daughters and Kama's brood have all adopted her as a big sister. Now they might have more pseudo-siblings to compete with. Miguel...

Miguel deserves his closure.

Which is how Tulio winds up pacing a quiet corner of the world, hitting himself for his idiocy. But of course Chel finds him. If she can find him immersed in oblivion than his own angst is nothing in comparison.

"No one's making you go, you know. Hell, no one can make you."

Damn right. Tulio is a Lord of the Fifth World. Even his mom can just indirectly guilt him through her best 'I'm not mad just disappointed' face.

"Yes, but I gotta go. I owe it to, well... a lot of people." He groans. "Doesn't mean I wanna."

He'd never wanted to get trapped on a boat to the middle of nowhere or follow the trail to El Dorado either, but here they are. And now he can't picture himself anywhere else. Manoa was Miguel's home since he practically set foot here. It's been Chel's since she was born, no matter their hard history. Of course it's his home too.
Chel affirms this by grasping his hand as he paces by her once more, stopping him dead in his tracks. He promptly embraces her, growing warm from her arms and the faith of their people reverberating through her. "I'll be right with you guys. We're partners, right?"

"Right," he mumbles.

"And you did promise me adventure, remember?"

"...Yeah."

"No reason not to start now." She grins. "Besides, you and Miguel met all of my family. We trampled all over Xibalba to make it happen. It's only fair I get to see more of the land that helped make you two you."

Tulio clings to her tight. She is the living embodiment of all he has to stand up for now.

"Yeah, about that... Hell, you remember how I was when we first stumbled like morons into this city, right?"

She cackles. "You never did turn me into a tortoise."

"Well, that's the person I made myself a thousand years above ground. The parts that I buried..." He shudders, as the sins of the past rattle against his mind, and his skull aches with repressed horns. "Should stay dead and buried."

"What's your name again?"

"Tulio?"

"And you're called?"

"...Tulio?"

She rolls her eyes. "Yes, but how did you phrase it that first time?"

"He of the People," he murmurs in Manoan, as the true meaning of that archaic Latin finally rings through.

"Which people?"

"Our people," he blurts out automatically. "The People of Gold."

All in Manoa claim the title now. Even the desperate refugees that pour into their lands find gold for their ears a ready commodity, to adopt any and every soul into the people. Sure, some remain proud People of the Vine on top of that, just as others claim a dozen other identities and speak a dozen tongues. None of that stops them from also being their people. Tulio shall always be a Spaniard, just as he remains a proud Arcadian.

She pinches his cheek. "And we won't ever let you forget it."

That puts his heart at rest. Truly.

Oh, he's still scared shitless to stare across Lord Xarayes' vast abyss and expect his past on the side, but it's bearable now.

So long as he clings to his partners for dear life. Miguel holds on with near the same level of
desperation, though is his buoyed by earnest excitement and hope for those they are able to meet again. Some of them, at least.

But Chel only laughs and tugs them forward to blaze their trail, a shining comet of faith across the open ocean.

They won't be gone long. Manoa need only call upon its Golden Gods, and they shall be there.

Chapter End Notes

I summarize the sexuality of the Greco-Roman near universally as 'not straight.' 'Cause like... virtually none of them are. Sipaktli is a very content virgin goddess. She also has a thing for big, hairy hunters that hunt big-ass monsters and tear other people's afterlives apart in grand gestures to her. Orion lives to see her smile. And hunt big-ass monsters side by side in bloody, dramatic battles with him.
old ghosts

Chapter Summary

You can't go home again. Not when it's no longer home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Text

They say the first step is always the hardest. 'They' never had to face a pantheon of dead relatives before.

For Tulio those are the easiest. Their journey begins with simply descending into the underworld. On this side of the Atlantic that just means turning down into Xibalba. By this point he knows it like the back of his hand. He's plundered near every Lord of Xibalba and feasted with the rest. The hostile squirm away from a path forged by the Golden Gods, the hospitable wave hello. This is a trail he's blazed into a safe route for every soul he shepherds to paradise.

Tonight Lady Eupana sedately swims some distance offshore. Tulio flies fast over the waters of Lord Xarayes without ever looking down. Once on that broad, green shell he breathes easily. Here he and his partners are received as guests of honor. Sipaktli eventually becomes swarmed by the curious children well used to Miguel's gushing. Baalal and his own mom are introduced to Chel's family. Pana and Sija both make fast friends with them.

Their children vary between fond smiles and grimaces, depending on whose turn it is to tell the baby stories. Xaya just smirks through all of them, until his turn comes up.

Fortunately (but also unfortunately), their pressing business cuts their visit short. Chel hugs her family and they all thank Lady Eupana for her hospitality. Tulio promises to warn her this time if any more chairs need to be set up for the next family get-together.

There won't be. An ocean between his new life and the old suits him perfectly well.

At the edge of Xibalba his confidence falters. He halts at the brim of Lady Eupana's vast turtle shell. Beyond the waters are black and vast, dark as the formless skies churning overhead. He has not stared into such utter unknown since sailors had hit the Hesperides centuries ago, and declared nothing further past them.

"You ready for this?" Miguel breathes, squeezing his hand.

"Absolutely not," he murmurs, clenching it right back.

"You got this," is Chel says, pecking their cheeks. "I'd lead us there, if I knew where the hell we were going."
Tulio clears his throat and musters up his bravado. As a god of travelers, borders, and the underworld it's his place to take charge. Even if he's never been much of a maritime god. "Well, Baalal? Where to?"

The goddess arches a cool brow. "Shall I not lead the way?"

Yeah, no. Baalal might want to paint a grand picture for everyone in Hades as the triumphant queen leading the lost children (plus Maia) home, but that's not how it works here. Not when it's because of Tulio and Miguel she has a place here at all. And the greatest lady in their land is Chel and Chel alone. So Tulio squares his shoulders and looms right back. He's grown tall where Miguel has grown confidently short, and Baalal isn't the only deity here who knows how to posture dramatically.

"Just a refresher is good, thanks."

Because he adamantly refuses to let his partners go Baalal settles for lightly placing a single finger on his shoulder. The ominous heaviness on the horizon lightens ever so slightly. Now when Tulio squints he doesn't squint out into an endless abyss. Just across a huge-ass sea that's a bitch to fly over.

"Thanks," he says crisply. "We'll take it from here."

Tulio's feet are the first from terra firma due to pride. Chel and Miguel surge after him. Maia and Sipaktli follow at a respectful distance. Baalal does so grudgingly. If Miguel did not rule so highly here she would have probably spent the rest of eternity sulking across the ocean in her aloof solitude.

Reflexively he switches his form for one more adept in the air. He's long been a god of birds since Miguel showed him a bit of augury. Yet he defiantly ignores all Old World bids for the laughing owl of Manoa, jet-black feathers, demented call, and all. Miguel is just as riotous, the emerald-green hawk with rainbow flight feathers. For all of ten seconds Chel soars as a snow-white egret. Then she decides to hell with dignity and zips along as a red-throated hummingbird, still blindingly white.

Maia, with actual respect for Manoa or just a preference for the land that hails here as more than a minor nymph, glides quietly along as an elusive nighthawk native to Lake Parime. Sipaktli flies as a barn owl out of habit. Baalal's honking huge swan is out of pride.

Theirs is not a straightforward path, paved time and time again by the steady course of galleons. Their way is slow and meandering at first, tracing back from where a lone dinghy had first fallen into storm-tossed seas. Tulio laughs as they come full circle. The laugh breaks off as they soar past to really come full circle.

As they near the Old World he catches the faintest whiff on brimstone on the wind, a sound almost like the screams of the eternally dead. He rolls his eyes and corrects course. That's just Hell hell. The hell he's looking for is entirely metaphorical. Theoretically.

Below godless, apathetic sea grays into the heavy waters of the Acheron. Even before that happens Tulio starts feeling an old, familiar nudge against his head as two different cultures conflict against each other. It was the same that made him shift faces from Hermes to Mercury, as he jumped from Greek colonies to the Roman. Even further at the edges of his dominion, when the barriers had become far deeper, those voices had once called instead for Lugus or Wodan.
The deeper he pushes from the New World into the Old, the harder those voices insist. And start screaming. The pounding headache now threatens to split him open.

He left this world as an unwitting stowaway. Now he returns in a crash landing.

Oh f-

Chel winces as her partners slam into this shore as twitching, shape-shifting messes. Maybe they really should have thought this through better. She remains a hummingbird to hover anxiously above this suddenly... apprehensive shore and the gods with a dizzying number of faces. At least the goddesses behind her touch down without ruffled feathers.

The barn owl rolls her eyes. "Really, brother. It's not that bad."

"Oh, my son," sighs the swan. "Please stop fighting yourself."

Chel almost wants to agree. She opens her mouth to coax them through it when the nighthawk becomes Maia, still the same but for the swap of clothing. Then it hangs open in horror when the other goddesses resume human shapes. Because those aren't the faces she knows. Their features are still beautiful, yes, but sharper. One might even call them cruel. The older, already draped in voluminous robes, veils her radiant face in dark cloth until only her shining arms are visible. The younger is garbed in a short tunic and a deerskin cloak, with night-black hair tightly bound and a slim, crescent-shaped crown above her moon-pale brow.

"Miguel!" she calls at the exact same time she does "Tulio!" Omnipotence is neat that way.

She sighs in relief when the dizzying array finally settles on not just any idiots, but her idiots. Miguel gingerly rubs at his beard. Tulio frantically checks his hornless forehead. They grimace at each other.

"Are you all right?" she presses, flitting between their heads.

"I've been better," Tulio snarks, right before he vomits up a good portion of last evening's tribute all over this strange corner of the underworld. Heedless of the mess, Maia rubs her hand soothingly against his back. He leans weakly against her side. "Thanks, mom."

When Miguel's metaphorical stomach also disagrees with his new surroundings, his family hesitate too long. Chel is there for him first, a steady pillar of Manoan faith at his side. A good portion of her power drains away when her human feet touch this strange earth, but an ocean away from her people she remains a goddess. Once Miguel starts regulating his breathing, she holds out a hand. He clings to it like a lifeline and finally finds the strength to stand.

"Ah." Wide green eyes appraise the endless miles of bleak gray shoreline that stretches from north to south. "Just as... Well, just like we left it."

"By which you mean it somehow remains more depressing than actual Hell," Tulio gripes. He glances to... Miguel's sister. "Why didn't everyone take up residence in the Isles of the Blessed, or at least the Elysian Fields?"

"Here is where Dis makes his hall," she answers coldly. "Here he rules as king and extended shelter to us all." Dark eyes flash silver as they stare at the pale, dull shades that wander in the distance. "Here is where our hearts lie."

One might have once said the same of the Lords of Xibalba, before the majority of Manoa's
souls had been delivered unto Lady Eupana and her paradise. But these souls aren't actively suffering. Their afterlives are just... dull, without great pain or great pleasure. And not unlike the average existence in the world above.

"Diana?" Miguel murmurs questioningly. She tilts her head up in response, so his eyes flick to Tulio's mom. "Maia?" He smiles at her smile, because some things never change. Then he turns to his own mother and his levity evaporates. "I... Chel doesn't know what to call you here."

"You may address me as Latona," intones the goddess, her head scarce tilting Chel's way. Despite her veil, familiar irritation creeps into her voice. "Your aunt and uncle have been generous hosts for well over a thousand years. If you refuse to clean up your face can you at least dress respectably?"

Miguel frowns down at his clothes, picking at the loose red shirt while Tulio pulls at the neck of his. Big surprise they defaulted to Spanish clothing among Spain's ancestors.

Miguel smiles brightly at his mother, shifting into clothes that befit a Lord of the Fifth World; bare chest, golden adornments, and all. With a smirk Tulio slips into just the same. Maia heaves only a soft sigh. The air around Latona boils hot as the sun.

"So," Chel butts in, "your aunt and uncle?"

"Dis and Proserpine," Tulio supplies, sidling to her other side to spirit both her and Miguel away. "Sweet couple, great deities, surprisingly stable for our family."

"Well, from a manner of speaking," Miguel inserts hesitantly. "You see, Dis is our uncle. Proserpine and him caused quite the scandal quite the day back when they ran off together. Near caused her mom to end the world on us. But, when a technical standpoint, Proserpine is more like a..."

Tulio rolls his eyes. "Who isn't down here?"

"Point. But-"

Miguel gets no further out before the giant, flashing-eyed dog with a mane of writhing snakes pounces upon them and proceeds to vigorously lick them to death. With his size, and three slavering heads, the feat is very much possible.

"Hello, old boy!" Miguel laughs, scratching under the dog's right head. "Who's the best guard dog ever? You are, yes you are!"

"Good to see you too, Cerberus," Tulio grouses between licks. But his grouchy face falls short. He's already had a special fondness for dogs and three heads only gives him more to love. In the end it's Chel that has to haul her partners onward. Otherwise they might spent all eternity giving the best boy ever belly rubs.

Together they walk through orchards laden with foreign fruits and fragrant gardens flourishing despite the utter lack of light. Under the trees lounge countless shades. Most continue with their own conversations or listlessly watch them pass. A few rise in faint curiosity. Diana and Latona following close behind them scare back the boldest souls from questioning these strange new faces in their realm. Chel flashes them her friendliest, most apologetic smile and makes a mental note to go and back greet everyone of them. But none of them are her true hosts, and they deserve her regard first.
The palace itself is black and austere, rigid walls and columns of cold stone. Yet the onyx walls are streaked in mineral wealth, veins of gold and silver and gemstones. They twinkle with radiance of their own.

Dis has a hard face and curly black beard, eyes dark as his throne. He carries himself with the solemn majesty of a king, the who throne room heavier just with his presence alone. His stoic exterior does not change when their presence is announced. If anything the pressure in the air strengthens in annoyance.

For a moment Proserpine leans forward in her living throne of vines and flowers, smiling warmly. Then she blinks. Her face slackens in surprise, before she grins. Ghostly white flowers erupt around the chamber when she leaps from her throne. She full-on tackles Miguel and Tulio. Chel manages to avoid the hug fest not meant for her. Miguel and Proserpine babble to each other too fast to keep up. Tulio nods dutifully and barely gets a word in edgewise.

"Uncle," Diana greets, cold and dignified, over the chaos.

"Niece," Dis acknowledges. Ever so slightly, his left eye twitches. "And... nephews."

"Uncle Dis!" Miguel gushes. "How are the dead treating you?"

"Much the same as they have the past thousand years," is the response dry as bone.

"Dear," Proserpine chides, extricating herself from the gods to latch onto Diana instead. "We don't talk that way to guests, much less family!" After crushing Artemis with her hug, she holds out a hand to the one true stranger to this land. "Sorry for the fuss. These two were a sight for very sore eyes."

"They do have that effect on people." Chel eagerly takes her offered hand. "Please, call me Chel."


"Well met," rumbles the god on his throne. "I am Dis, Lord of the Dead." His stoic features devolve into fond exasperation. "And that is Proserpine, Queen of Spring."

"Welcome to the family!" Proserpine squeezes her too, briefly and enthusiastically. "We're an utter mess, and I wouldn't have it any other way." Chel grins right back. Proserpine has eyes green as new leaves and a wild mane of curly black hair. She sees the family resemblance loud and clear. "We should call everyone together for a feast, just like we used to! What better way to greet our guests?"

"By not subjecting them to that?"

"Dis!"

"It's true, dear."

"I'd be fine with that," Tulio breaks in quickly. "We're just not worth the trouble and we couldn't burden you with such a last minute-"

"-Which is exactly why we could all use some time to get things prepared," Miguel breaks in smoothly, after elbowing their partner in the stomach. "You know, give you time to prepare while we spread some of the invitations around the more immediate family. Ease us all back
"Of course," Proserpine agrees. "Take all the time you need!"

Dis' expression falls into the grim determination of a host seeing an obnoxious family visit through to the bitter end. "You have many not to keep waiting."

"So we do," Tulio mutters, as horrified realization breaks. "Miguel... how are we gonna do this?"

As they bicker over logistics and the drama that will start by various relatives reacting to their visit order, Chel thanks her hosts for such a warm welcome. Beyond their thrones stretch numerous hallways that might wind on for eternity. She chooses one at random and starts walking. The way her idiots talk about their family, she's bound to bump into one of them sooner or later.

Chapter End Notes

The Roman Empire bumped into a lot of pantheons and equated a lot to their own. That didn't necessarily flow both ways. A big Greek god might have no problem jumping into Roman influence in the later centuries, but into the Celtic or Germanic spheres? Yeah, there's some blending at the borders, but eventually their comes to a point when Mercury stops being Mercury Whatever and just flat-out becomes a different deity.

Cerberus has three heads in a lot of myth and serpentine aspects just as common. The mane of serpents seemed the most metal :p
Family reunions are never easy when you're somehow related to everyone down in the underworld. Narrowing it down to immediate family doesn't help when your dad slept his way through creation.

Or, how two idiots really, REALLY come to regret trying to reconnect with those left behind.

Many are the children of prodigious Jupiter. Many are the reunions two long-lost brothers must make them all. To dwell on them all would drive any one to madness, much less the gods themselves.

Let us stick to nine. For sanity's sake.

1. Goddess of Discord

Falling back to bickering is a very understandable thing to do, in Miguel's opinion. It's a predictable rhythm to their relationship, a distraction that's filled the long nights right after their fall from divinity and the grueling trip over as prisoners in Cortes' hold. Tulio, faced with the daunting task that they call family, is willing to argue to the end of time to avoid them.

Miguel is the first to trail off in puzzlement. Huh. Usually Chel breaks up their idiocy by now.

Tulio blinks as he realizes just the same. "Hey, Chel?" They turn to behold the empty space their partner once occupied. "Um, Chel? Chel!"

"Oh no," Miguel whispers.

They've only set a goddess loose on an unsuspecting pantheon. A goddess with foreign features and divine curves, against relatives that have never known restraint.

Miguel does not want to find out if the dead here can be killed again. Because Chel's spear is gonna its way inside so many people.

When they are on the verge of utter panic, Tulio has the sense to ask the relatives present which way she wandered. Apparently their arguments are still theatrical distractions, because not even Dis or Proserpine has a solid answer for them. They get apologetic murmurs and vague points down various hallways. Miguel counts up a vague consensus and charges down the most likely path.

To Miguel the winding hallways and endless chambers of the palace are an utter maze. He's never made it a habit of dropping by on Uncle Dis. Faithfully he lets Tulio speed past him to lead the way. Instead his partner somehow gets them even more lost.
"Good gods," Tulio mutters. "How big did this place get?"

Miguel inhales a deep breath. He's not sure what's about to spew out of him before movement catches his eye. He fixates on it like a hawk.

She manifests in a cloud of smoke, her golden hair floating around her and the edge of her clothes remaining misty. She leans casually against a column, head cocked in apparent innocent curiosity. Her eyes, however, openly leer at their naked torsos.

"Oh my," she sighs. "Well, don't you two look very lost."

Tulio groans. This is the one sister no one except Mars ever really likes to acknowledge. She is more easily grouped with the many eldritch spawn of Nox and Erebus than seen as a legitimate daughter of the king and queen of heaven. "Discordia."

She cocks her head further, interest sharpening. "I'm sorry, have we met before? Because I'd certainly remember those pectorals."

Miguel braces for his shock to give way to familiar annoyance. Once he was a god of rationality and authority, she his opposite. She'd been the brat who always messed up parties she was never invited too, the dogged little sister who followed eagerly at his eyes and tweaked the noses of his current paramours. He remembers a pest, obnoxious but harmless in the grand scheme.

Now his fists clench with a sudden surge of utter loathing. "Get. Out."

The goddess blinks. Then she laughs scornfully. "Please, handsome. This ain't your place to kick me out of." She taps her chin. "Though, come to think of it, that self-entitlement sounds awful familiar."

"Eris," he chokes out.

"Apollo!" she says, gleefully. "So nice to be known! Though I do remember you taller. And without that gods awful beard." This time she leers openly. "Did you go native among the barbarians again? Are you playing at king again? How's that working out for you."

Miguel trembles with barely restrained hatred. Here is war at its worst, who delighted in his plagues as a playground to stir up even more deaths among the survivors. In spiteful boredom here is the goddess that once threw an apple at a wedding and damned his beloved city of Wilusa along with it. Before him is a monster, his mortal enemy, one who would gaze upon Manoa's peace and see only an anthill to kick over.

His partner's hand on his shoulder is a link to restraint, to love, to the grim reminder that hospitality must never be broken. So Miguel does not rise a hand or his bow to strike evil down when they are both guests under the same roof.

That does not prevent his from rumbling out of him in a sound like thunder.

Eris shrinks back, half-evaporating, as she realizes her grave miscalculation.

"Haroeris," she whispers in horrified disbelief. That name is also wrong, but less so than the first, and so he stops growling. Eris slants her eyes at his partner. "And that would make you-"

"Tulio," his partner interjects smoothly. "That would make me Tulio. You wouldn't have happened to have seen a goddess dressed like us around recently, would you?"
Eris considers this. And smirks. "I might have."

"Did you see which way she went?"

Eris tells them.

"Of course," Tulio mutters. "Of course he's the first one she meets. Thanks... Discordia?"

"Eris," she insists. "Can't ruin the classics. And thank you. Really."

She seemingly vanishes in a cloud of smoke. Not that Miguel trusts her to be gone. He stalks onward with Tulio's hand firmly in his, speaking in a private place between them no eavesdropper can breach.

"Isfet?" Tulio murmurs quietly.

Miguel only nods.

Once upon a time he had been a god of pestilence and archery, who had expected strife as a natural consequence of his domains, but not always. In Egypt he had stood as a king. By upholding law and tradition he had keep strife and evil from them. He had failed them as he had Wilusa. He will not fail Manoa.

Tulio bites his tongue. Miguel knows that he knows Eris is more than a goddess of destruction and discord; that a little strife shakes up the stagnant and can drive the human mind to succeed. Miguel doesn't care. He remembers another chaos deity, a god of storms and disorder that once sought to kill him for his crown. Manoa doesn't need Eris worming her way into the pantheon anymore than it needs Set. Their faults far outweigh their virtues.

Eris is no true sister. She is a daughter of darkness and night, disowned by both Juno and Jupiter. Let her rot down here.

2. God of Festivity

Chel wanders the palace of Dis and Proserpine to swiftly realize just how many damned courts are set up in vaulted halls and humble corners. Every god down here has their own retinue and every god wants their own space. She happily leaves them to it, stealing past with the some stealth that her plunder the Houses of Xibalba. Most are too engrossed in their arguing or their sulking to notice her regardless.

Of course she follows the raucous music and drunken laughter to the loudest damn court in the palace. Young women recline with wine goblets or else cheer on the hairy goat-men drinking each other on the table. Most get pulled up to dance by various revelers or into dark corners.

Chel grins as she flashes back to Lady Paquini's parties. At the threshold she drops her stealth and asks if she can join in.

For a moment the music grinds to a halt. Then it starts up again around her. Chel is warmly led to a place of honor by her hosts, ripe fruits and rich meat heaped onto the plate before her while mulled wine is passed into her hands. Only when she is settled do her hosts properly introduce themselves.

Liber is the son of Dis and Proserpine, explaining the grandiosity of his court. He is among the most beautiful deities Chel has ever seen, with a fragrant mane of curly hair and wine-dark eyes. The leopard skin draped over his form does little to hide the sculpted muscle beneath. To Liber's left sits Semele, his other mother, who rises from her golden throne to fervently shake Chel's hand.
On their right sits Ariadne, who smiles enigmatically.

"You're a new face around here, Lady Chel," the goddess notes mildly. "We certainly don't get too many of those these days. Did you come up south from beyond the Field of Reeds?"

"Or from out east," ventures Semele. "From beyond the lokas?"

Chel sips her wine. "Out west, actually. From Xibalba."

"Oh?" Liber arches a brow. "Are you from the Fortunate Isles?"

"Nope." Chel grins at their intrigued glances, and wider still at Liber's left eye sudden twitching. "Further. A lot further."

Liber's twitching eye becomes chronic when her partners scramble their way inside. At the sight of her they sag in relief, then draw themselves up and swagger forward with their usual bluster. The revelry parts to let them through. Their bravado becomes even more forced under the unabashed staring.

"Ah." Miguel smiles brightly at the sight of Liber, looking oddly constipated on his golden throne. "Little brother!"

"Liber," Ariadne whispers gently.

"Liber!" Tulio adds with gusto. Then he sends the goddesses his brightest grin. "And Lady Semele and Lady Ariadne, looking lovely as ever!"

"And you're still charming as ever," Semele giggles, much to her son's mortification. "How is the New World treating you, boys? Last I heard from my Liber you two were on a ship bound for it."

Tulio blinks. "You were... um, topside, that recently?"

"Oh!" Miguel laughs, conspiratorially elbowing Liber in the side as he leans against his throne. The wine god slouches deeper into it. "Of course! Death just can't hold a good god down, am I right?"

"Neither can oceans," mutters Liber.

"We just stopped by for a visit," Chel demurs. "I just had to see how much of their charm and good looks run in the family."

"Well, my husband got the lion's share," Ariadne giggles, pecking Liber on the cheek. "But I see you've acquired two of them, so perhaps the disparity balances out."

The whole court falls into awkward silence. Liber and his three guests all reach for cups of wine and down them beneath Ariadne's serene smile.

To focus on anything else Chel looks out to the crowd. Most avert their eyes. A lot look like Liber's kids. They have his wine-dark eyes or curly hair or beautiful features. But some bear pointed resemblance to other gods in the room. These mostly slink to the back. Others stare like they've seen ghosts.

"Thank you for the hospitality," she butts in at last. "Might we see you at the celebrations later, once we've had time to invite everybody?"

"Of course, Chel," Semele answers warmly. "It's never a good time without us!"
One of her grandsons steps forward to pour them one last glass for the road. Their libations are downed and they escape with grace.

"Well?" Chel asks, once Liber and all the drama stuffed into that one court are behind them. "Where to next?"

"Minerva?"

"Minerva."

"Minerva is good," they agree as one.

**3. Goddess of Wisdom**

If there is a sibling Tulio and Miguel can unanimously respect, it's Minerva. As a goddess of commerce and crafts, her domains had always complemented Tulio's, just as her domain over poetry and medicine also granted her common cause with Miguel. For their family she is... fair enough with her historical punishments, what with demanding girls as priestesses from a city that had wronged her than outright killing them.

More importantly, Minerva is a *virgin* goddess. From her there is no family drama.

...Well, minimal drama, what with her mom still presumably being trapped inside their father and all.

Unlike Liber, Minerva keeps a small and practical corner of the palace. Never much one for a pandering crowd, she sits alone at her weft.

They all freeze when the goddess peers up. She is almost always severe. At times her disposition is no better than Dad's. Those pale gray eyes stare right through them.

Minerva smiles, actually *smiles*.

Tulio's dread intensifies. Minerva never smiles. When she's pleased her eyes shine and her face becomes less stern.

"You finally found me," she says into the silence. "It only took you three thousand years."

Tulio grins sheepishly with Miguel as they concede that point. "Well... We may have had some help."

Chel smiles and offers a hand. Minerva rises from her weft to greet her properly. Her eye soon fixates on Chel's dress, unlike any known to Rome.

"What fabric is this?"

"Cotton."

Minerva rubs at the sleeve with an expert eye. In Rome's time cotton had been a rare and foreign import, but not unheard of. "Not unlike any I've ever worked with before."

"All done on back strap looms," Tulio adds, because then the goddess really sharpens with interest. He and Miguel mostly fade out of the conversation, listening with stupid smiles as Minerva happily converses with one of very few goddesses that can hold her patience for a considerable length of time.
With the goddesses engrossed, Miguel considers Minerva's practical abode. "I'm surprised she doesn't have philosophers lined up down the halls."

"It has been a thousand years, Miguel," he murmurs.

His partner droops at the sober reminder time did not entirely stand still in their absence. Without an influx of new souls and new ideas the discussions must have stagnated down here to the point where Minerva abandoned the circular debates in disgust. Hell, the philosophers had always been the boldest of the bunch. Most of them probably drank the Lethe and took their chances at a second life centuries ago.

But their sister is not entirely forsaken. They linger so long another goddess drops by. From the certain way she carries herself she can be nothing less. Tulio tries his best not to stare. Her face is oddly familiar but gods be damned if he can place her. Their family's giant size means uncanny resemblance carries across most of them. He catches Miguel's eye. His partner shrugs back.

Finally Minerva introduces the stranger as her mother.

Tulio plasters on his brightest, most frantic smile as realization clicks. No wonder Metis looks familiar. She has her daughter's sharp features and those same shrewd eyes.

Metis, who had counseled their grandmother into saving Dad from Saturn's belly by switching him with a rock. Metis, whose wise council had won their parents the Titan War.

Metis, swallowed up by Jupiter so that she might never turn against him. Never birth the son one day destined to rule the world after him.

"Metis," Miguel greets brightly, as if they have ever truly met. "It's been too long."

"So long my bastard of an ex-husband sired a whole damn pantheon after me," Metis finishes dryly. Her gaze sweeps over them both. "Fortunately, the vast majority of you have the grace to take after your mothers."

Miguel rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. Tulio tries his best not to stare the goddess' belly. Her flat, empty belly.

Metis and Minerva smirk at his terrified bewilderment.

"You'll see my youngest around," Metis vows. "Eventually."

"You'll have to invite him too, of course," Minerva demurs. "He is family, after all."

"Of course!" Chel enthuses, utterly unaware of the doom she invites upon them.

Behind her Tulio and Miguel share a grimace.

A little brother even nastier than Jupiter, Saturn, or Uranus, if he was destined to succeed them all.

Hooray.

4. God of the Forge

With all the reunions having gone so swimmingly, it is Miguel who decides on Vulcan next. He's one of the most... agreeable of their brothers, as long as his own mother and ex-wife go unmentioned.
Vulcan dwells dark and deep in the fiery heart of the earth. The journey to his court would be long and tedious indeed, without Miguel's clear sight to guide them true and Tulio's light feet to bear them there. They expect to find the great smith hunched over his forge, his brawny hands shaping one of his intricate masterpieces. He is a god even surlier than Minerva, who prefers his forge as she does her loom.

On the threshold a spirit with her father's frizzy black curls and lopsided grin hugs them all exuberantly.

"Uncles!" she squeals at the top of her lungs. "I haven't seen you guys in, like, forever!" Her voice reaches whole new heights when she beholds Chel. "And you brought company!"

Philophrosyne ushers them all inside. Her father's forge sits dark and empty. The homey hall beyond is bathed in warm light, because the Vulcan family's version of charades of course involves lots of fire and hastily constructed miniatures. Their three other nieces abandon their game to swarm them in hugs and four conversations that try happening all at once. At last their mother clears her throat and they guiltily flinch away.

"Giver of Joy and Averter of Evil," their sister-in-law greets with easy grace. They both stand a little taller at proper epithets respectfully offered.

"Lady Aglaea," Miguel murmurs, bending low to kiss her hand with his best Old World charm. "And Vulcan! It's been eons!"

He breaks into a full, idiotic grin at the sight of his big brother. Vulcan looks as he always has, calloused hands and broad, uneven shoulders and all. But his robe is clean and the soot carefully scrubbed from his face. His dark eyes do not smolder with repressed rage awaiting an outlet to erupt. They are utterly at peace.

"It has been," he acknowledges in a gruff rumble, briefly enveloping them both in spine-crushing hugs. "I'm sure you remember my girls."

"Where have you guys been?" Eupheme asks.

"What you have been doing for the past thousand years?" Eucleia insists. "I haven't heard anything!"

Euthenia's eyes gleam when she taps at his hawk head medallion. "What an intricate technique. You must tell me all about it!"

Vulcan and Aglaea are graceful hosts and their daughters a delight. Considering the reunions ahead, Miguel almost never wants to leave. He certainly understands why Vulcan would choose to fuck off from the wider family drama for his own little haven. Still they extend the family an invitation out of courtesy to the upcoming shit show. It's the polite thing to do, even if they expect only the smith god's blunt refusal.

Instead Vulcan pauses. He glances from his serene wife to his daughters' pleading faces. Then he shrugs. "Sure. Why not?"

Despised or not, Vulcan is still the son of Juno. Of course he wants a front row seat to the carnage.

5. God of War

"Best rip off the bandage now and get it over with," Tulio mutters in regard to the next brother.
"Oh, think on the positive side!" Miguel chides. "He has lightened up a teeny bit from... where he was before."

Tulio snorts. "Yeah. Because that was such a high bar to clear."

Miguel grimaces but tellingly doesn't argue that point further. "Well, he is the last major sibling you've get to meet, Chel. It would be only... proper."

Like war gods give a damn about propriety. Her partners couldn't even agree Mars was necessarily better than Balam Qoxtok or just a different kind of terrible.

No matter. Her spear is always there when she needs it.

The court of Mars is exactly as she has pictured it. The floor is splattered with wine, red blood, and golden ichor. Its raucous guests, great warriors of their age and countless martial daemons, settle their differences by fighting fiercely until one is slashed or stabbed through. Then they pull out the blades and go right back to drinking. Few pause to gawk at the strangers in their midst.

Mars, however, spots them immediately. He rises from his throne of bronze and iron, the crowd parting to let him through. His features are brutally handsome for all his eyes are two flaming pits.

"Brothers!" he booms above the din, before snatching for them both. Tulio deftly escapes. Miguel is not so fortunate. He is caught in a headlock and ruthlessly noogied. "Look at you! I think you actually shrank on me." Right when the air around Miguel flares in dangerous warning, Mars lets them go, leaving the shorter god to furiously blaze. He grins. "You definitely have larger balls this time around, though."

Miguel juts his chin out defiantly. Mars next turns his burning gaze on Tulio. He does not flinch away.

"Huh," Mars grunts. "When did you two little pansies grow spines?"

"Since we found those worth protecting," Miguel grates out in the same tone he uses on the countless demons that plague their borders.

"From anything and everything that poses them danger," Tulio promises darkly.

Mars blinks. Then he throws back his head and laughs. "Good. Now you get it."

Chel's shoulders loosen somewhat as the confusing web of dead prayers around the god gain clarity. Here is a war god, yes, but one that picked up his spear to ensure the peace of his people. She gets it. Sorta.

Her patience evaporates when he turns his leering grin on her. "You look like a lady that knows her way around a spear shaft."

"You'd choke on mine," she promises sweetly.

He blinks and stares at her a moment. "Huh. So I would." He cocks his head in consideration. "Hey. Have you met my twin yet?"

"No," Chel answers neutrally, even as her partners tense up. "Should I have?"

Mars grins. "Oh, she's a riot."

Chel considers the court before her. "I'm sure she is."
Only hospitality makes Tulio grit out an invitation. Mars grins and accepts.

6. Goddess of Justice

After the *lovely* omen Mars heaped upon them, Miguel knows there is only one true place they can turn to counteract it, somewhere to stifle the war god's overwhelming testosterone. She and Chel will get along just fine. That is enough. So Tulio swallows his instinctive refusal and goes along with it.

Not that Justitia has ever regarded them more with exasperation or simmering disapproval she could never show, not with Dad as the final judge on all things just in their world. And he had always supported his sons in following his footsteps.

Despite his dread, Tulio still sags in relief when they cross into Justitia's court. The daughter of justice is quiet and rest. Only in the domain of Quies is Eris' spying shade fully repulsed.

They find Justitia on her throne, handsome face severe as their sire's as she stoically explains to the shade groveling at her feet why it is not her place to see his unworthy soul over to the Isles of the Blessed. Right when the shade is about to throw another tantrum, Quies lays a placating hand on his shoulder. At her touch the fight drains from his stance. He sullenly apologizes for wasting their time and lets himself be led away.

With her daughter and the plaintiff gone, Justitia's merciless gaze bears into them. This time Tulio does not flinch away. Nor does he tilt up his chin to sneer as if mortal justice is beneath him.

Justice does not condemn them. Instead she arches a brow and descends from her throne.

Of course Chel warrants one of her rare smiles. Their introductions are nothing but cordial. Miguel and Tulio plaster on smiles through their the cool regard Justitia shows them and are otherwise ignored. Tulio is relieved for it. Better to be ignored than actively glared at. But Miguel seizes his hand in a death grip.

When Justitia accepts Chel's invitation, Miguel lingers as his partners depart. Tulio sighs and lets his feet drag too, especially when Chel shoots him a look and quickens her pace.

"I-"

"Save it. We all know your crimes."

"She does," Miguel murmurs. "All we can try to do is be better than what we were for her, for all of them."

"And that all the good we do now doesn't erase what we did," Tulio adds.

"Please," Justitia sneers. "Had you been what you were when you first met her, then she would have slayed you on the spot."

Miguel snaps his mouth shut. Tulio's jaw drops open.

The goddess turns her back to them. They still bow to her before hurrying after their partner.

7. King of Arcadia

Most times, Tulio prefers to think of himself as an only child. From a certain perspective it's almost true. He was conceived as a humble pile of stones, a keeper of boundaries between the domestic
and the wild. Only later generations of worshipers constructed a grand family tree for him by binding him to fucking Jupiter. At least he remains Maia's only son.

By blood.

His foster brother is a hulking warrior, broad-shouldered and with an unruly, thick brown beard, a thick bear's skin worn as a cloak over his shoulders. In his prime he was a beloved king of Arcadia, a hunter of hunters, a tutor to his people who taught them lessons learned from Maia in weaving and bread making. Then Juno had fucked with him.

"Arcas," Tulio manages after several moments of painful silence. "How've you been?"

"Not a bear anymore," Miguel notes brightly. "That's something!"

Arcas never relents from his death glare. "You worried Mom for a thousand fucking years."

"Yeah," Tulio murmurs. "I did."

How was she to watch over him, once her star set a final time? After she made him vow to do all in his earthly power to avoid following her fate? The home he unwittingly made for her among the heavens above Manoa does not mend a thousand years lost.

"Maia is doing quite well these days," Miguel says tersely, protectively sidling close to his side. "Fantastically so."

The man bares his teeth in a feral grimace. "So I heard. She won't shut up about her little Lord of the Evening." His face gentles as he turns to Chel, bowing like the fucking king he was. "Though it is a true pleasure to meet you, Lady of Faith."

She grins in delight. "Charmed, Lord Arcas. Is Maia around?"

Arcas smirks.

Tulio's heart drops at the sound of muffled curses and the rustle of clothing hastily rearranged. Callisto's riotous head of curls and rumpled chiton might be blamed on her rural aspect. His mother is never so careless with her appearance, not unless...

"Oh," he says dumbly.

Logically it almost makes sense. Two reclusive nymphs who share a son and places among the stars, who'd both been fucked over by Dad and the other great deities? But it can't when one of the deities in question is his mom.

He is still spluttering when Miguel pulls Chel forward for proper introductions to Arcas and Callisto. As they wind down Maia arches a brow at him.

Tulio manages a shaky smile. "Hi, Callisto. You look... happy."

She beams. "I've never been happier, Lord Tulio."

He takes a deep, calming breath as his shock gives way to emotions far more pleasant. His smile quirks into sincerity as he considers the two goddesses leaning so close together. He has never seen either such at ease, with only light in their eyes.

"Then I'm happy for you two. I... I just wish you'd told me sooner, Mom."
Maia grins. "Surprise!"

Faced with the tables turned on him again, Tulio laughs. And secretly prays his mom doesn't intend to repay every last time he pulled stunts like this on her. He can't take three thousand years of this.

8. Goddesses of Inspiration

"T-This seems a bit... hasty."

"Oh, come on, Miguel. We can't deny them all eternity."

"Well, maybe we should do them one at a time. With plenty of the others sprinkled in between!"

"They're practically inseparable, Miguel! Best show them all the due respect and get it over with!"

At this point Chel is too intrigued to be swayed much by Miguel's mounting dread. She squeezes her hand in hers. "They sound like wonderful goddesses, Miguel. And we'll be right there with you."

Miguel whimpers.

The court of the Muses is a place of wonders, false stars spinning above on their heavenly course while disembodied masks and instruments recite a thousand lost masterpieces. Each Muse is radiant in her own way, though each with a commonality that marks all nine as sisters.

"My ladies!" Tulio gushes. "All still radiant as ever!"

Their smiles for him are short-lived. Most fixate immediately on the other god in the room. Some smiles vanish entirely. Others sharpen into smirks.

"Hey," Miguel squeaks out.

Chel's eyebrows climb into her hairline as she realizes the weighty tension in the air to be far more than sibling rivalry.

Her eyes bulge out at Tulio. He deftly taps her palm five times.

Oh.

Oh.

Oh no.

"Well," she muses dryly. "I'd say the majority of us have good taste."

9. The Littlest Brother

Many, many, many spurious siblings later, Tulio loses his swagger once they make it out of Alexander's nest of jealous admirers relatively intact. They swoon, leaning weakly against an onyx well. "Please, please tell me that was the last of them."

Miguel wearily tries counting them out on his fingers. "Did we get-"
"Yes."

"And-"

"Oh, most definitely."

"Even-"

"Yes!"

Miguel slumps. "Then that should be all of them."

"Praise the fucking fates!"

Chel frowns. "Aren't we missing two?"

"What?" they blurt out as one.


Both. They're missing both. Both is bad. Both is very, very bad.

"We already ran into the twin while looking for you!" Tulio spits out, because they dare not invoke her name. "She... knows."

Miguel clenches a fist. Eris knows how unwelcome she is at the table and all the wrath she faces if she dares follow them back home. Nothing of value is lost with her.

That still leaves Dad's last and youngest unaccounted for.

From the bowels of the Stygian palace sounds young, impish laughter. Miguel's eyes narrow. Light, hot and ruthless, pours out of him to burn the surrounding shadows away. The blur that breezes by is still almost too fast to see. His hand reaches out on blind instinct. His fingers snap close swiftly and ruthlessly as a hawk's talons. He and Tulio rise to their full height to better consider what they caught.

It turns out to be a kid, utterly bald expect for the long lock dangling from his forehead, the same Miguel currently has him by. His little white wings buzz furiously and futilely. Because a brat ain't struggling his way out of a full god's grip.

"Do you mind?" the kid huffs.

"Boys," Chel murmurs, when she realizes they're not about to let go anytime soon. "It's a kid."

Miguel laughs dryly. "Like that stops him from being any less dangerous."

Tulio nods fervently from personal experience. He scowls knowingly at the kid. "You're gonna bolt the moment he lets you go, aren't you?"

"Of course not!" the kid lies bluntly. They both roll their eyes at such an amateur. Tulio was lying better while still in his cradle!

"Swear on the Styx you won't," Miguel rules at last. "Not until we agree you answered our questions thoroughly."

The boy rolls his eyes and kicks up a fuss before finally mumbling his oath. With far more grace
they give their own promise that their interrogation won't take that long and that Chel has full leeway to cut him loose early if she judges they're being bigger idiots than usual. When Miguel grudgingly lets the kid go, he stays put. At least the spawn Dad kept contained for untold millennium is still bound to the ancient tenements.

"I'm Chel," she introduces gently. "These idiots are Miguel and Tulio."

"Yeah," he mutters. "I know."

Gossip has always spread far and fast in their family. It also certainly took a while to work their way through their army of siblings. For now Miguel lets his suspicion slide.

"A name of yours would be nice, kid," Tulio prompts.

"Kairos," the kid mutters.

Miguel and Tulio glance at each other. It's a name they've heard before. Now they have a face to put to it.

"Son of Jupiter?" Miguel prods warily. "And... Metis?"

"Duh." The kid rolls his pale gray eyes, those he shares with his mother and big sister.

"Kairos as in the spirit of opportunity?"

"Yep."

Miguel and Tulio exchange a sympathetic wince. Of course Dad had stayed on top by denying all others even the chance to overthrow him. How many rival cults had he stomped down or absorbed during his many centuries as king of their cosmos? Too damn many to count. And it's not like poor Kairos is the first kid in the family to be kept trapped in the belly of a jealous relative.

"Good gods, kid. You've had... quite the life."

Kairos beams. "Well, you two made the last millennium a little less boring."

Miguel almost smacks himself at the simplicity of it all. Mortals never gave up hoping their chance would come. Those who let such pass by them are only more eager for a second chance. Thieves and con artists have most especially lived for those opportunities, the distracted passerby and goading their marks only at the moment that made them risk it all.

Tulio blinks down at himself and then back at the spirit. "Don't tell me this was all you."

Kairos shrugs. "That stupid map was something new. Just because I couldn't use it didn't mean I should've let it go to waste. I don't where it came from or where it led to, but for a second, it was mine." He grins. "And then it was all yours."

Miguel casts his mind back to that fateful day, when everything had changed forever. Tulio had only reluctantly given in to his pout. He might have never looked at that map again, if all that gold and easy living gone their way. Tulio had only put his faith in their journey after being stranded on a foreign shore with nothing left to lose.

And that had not been the work of Kairos.

"Eris," he hisses.
The shadows laugh, coalescing into a familiar form. Tulio splutters indignantly at the stolen treasure in her hand. "Well, then I suppose you want these back, again?"

He frantically snatches his beloved dice from her. "H-How'd you get those?"

Eris smirks. "Same way I got them last time. Not my fault you keep your pockets so lose."

"I-I don't even have pockets!"

"Then where were you keeping them."

"F-F."

"Did you know?" Miguel butts in. Their faces have not changed in a thousand years, and still she had not recognized them.

She shrugs. "Eh. Kairos asked me if I was up to a little fun, and I was." She smiles fondly, rubbing their kid brother's mostly bald kid. Kairos squawks and zips out of range. "Like I could ever say no to this wittle face. Or to wanton property damage. Even shades can appreciate some healthy chaos once in a while."

Chel arches an intrigued brow at them. "You know, you two never told me the exact details of how you got on that boat."

Eris grins hopefully. "And I don't know it either. Maybe it's something we can share over dinner. Our family's put the last one off for far too long."

"Of course," Chel agrees, before her partners can warn her otherwise. "Call me Chel!"

"Call me Eris. Can't go ruining the classics!"

"Can I go now?" Kairos grous.

"Of course you may," Miguel says immediately, if only so that one of them may survive them. The spirit of opportunity takes his opportunity and bolts.

"Lucky," Tulio mutters after him, because now the goddesses are hitting it off.

Oh.

Oh no.

Chapter End Notes

Eris is sometimes likened to Enyo, being not only a goddess of strife, but of strife in war and also productive chaos. As both Enyo and Eris, there are accounts of her as a daughter of Zeus and Hera. More commonly she is one of Nyx's many eldritch offspring. Big surprise she got herself disowned.

Pan-Hermes has... a lot of satyr kids. Like, a lot.

Bitter relationship with Aphrodite aside, Hephaestus has four daughters and a second wife in Alglaeia, goddess of beauty and glory. You're damn right I ship it hard. Their
daughters are Good Repute, Prosperity, Praise, and Welcome. While viewed quite lowly among the Greeks, Mars had higher status among the Romans due to a different perspective on war. Justitia/Dike tolerated the assholes in her family only because her dad was the highest authority among the assholes. That is no longer the case.

Arcas and Callisto are the same mother and son pair that got turned into the Big and Little Dippers due to Hera's general shittiness. Arcas is both a son of Zeus and fostered by Maia. Callisto and Maia then somehow happened. Because they have too much in common to let my mind rest. Their relationship flourished. Apollo, with similar close connections to the Muses, burned bridges with at least five of them.

Metis was foretold to bear a daughter of Zeus' equal and THEN a son to overthrow him as Zeus had Kronos. Zeus thinks he beats fate by swallowing Metis alive and taking her wisdom as his own. Not that Greco-Roman fate could be defied forever.

Kairos/Caerus/Tempus/Occasio is an honest to gods historical spirit of opportunity. He had an actual shrine at Olympia and everything! His appearance is also pretty rooted in metaphorical history, given that opportunity can be easily grabbed from the front if you can see it coming, and then just flies by you. Lore also records him as the youngest son of Zeus. Given that Zeus ruled by denying all other cults the opportunity to supersede his own... yeah, it made sense he had swallowed Opportunity alongside Wise Counsel.
Tulio's got a lot of kids to account for. Too bad one set doesn't recognize the other as siblings.

Or, what to do when you were one god, split into two, and got over your identity crisis... but your family didn't get the memo.

Some are easier to find than others. The first has known of his existence since it was announced in Proserpine's hall. That is her job, after all. Now it might even be hers exclusively, with him being a thousand years deserted from his post and no true light in the underworld to bridge Iris' rainbows.

Tulio has felt her lingering for a while now. She is his daughter, an extension of his old domain. But she is too skittish to approach and he too ashamed to seek her out. Not yet.

Only with their numerous siblings found and contacted can he and Miguel turn to more... immediate relations. Without missing a beat Chel wanders off with Eris, deep in conversation, as her partners each slip their separate ways. They can worry about the effects of such a friendship after their own damn kids are seen to.

"You can come out now, if you want to," he ventures to the nearly empty air. "Don't feel pressured to do so. Gods know you owe me absolutely nothing."

After several pounding heartbeats she appears. His breath hitches at the sight of her. She is his daughter, especially so as humanity never settled on a mother for her. Her face is almost like his.

Well, his older face, that clean-shaven and sharp-faced young man so favored during his later centuries as Mercury. She has the same small face and tight black curls. He remembers a slip of a spirit that had followed in his wake. Now she stands tall and sure of herself, sure as a goddess can be when faced with her deadbeat dad. Her pale, great wings are proudly flared. He knows from personal experience birds fluff up their feathers when trying to intimidate a larger threat.

"Father," she returns in cool propriety.

"Angelia," he murmurs. "Y-You... look... so grown up."

"Someone down here had to," she mutters bitterly.

Tulio's heart twists. His domains had been too broad and ill-defined for one daughter to inherit alone. "You're doing a great job of it."

"Because I'm the part of you obligated to do so?"

"Because you always cared long after I stopped." He swallows thickly as he recalls how many of those days had been sequestered away with Miguel, willfully blind as their followers dwindled
down to nothing and their pantheon slipped one by one into oblivion. "Without me to fuck things up you finally had the chance to excel."

"You never fucked things up, Dad." Angelia pauses at his deadpan stare, then amends, "You never fucked up your actual duties. You cared too much about your people to do that."

Tulio's bites his tongue, because today is not the day to drag his daughter through his failures. Instead he quirks a grin at her plumage. "I like the wings."

Her feathers ruffle proudly. "They're classier than your stupid old sandals."

He guffaws at the memory of them. "So they are."

For a time they reminisce on the old days and the juiciest news they once delivered. When Angelia stirs restlessly from a job left unattended he tries for a graceful bow and of the head and just letting know his kid how damn proud of her he is. Her response is a brief, crushing hug with arms and wings alike. Then she's off, fast as word of mouth. Tulio smiles after her and continues on his way.

He is not surprised to discover his next child utterly nude, slathered in olive oil, and choking a giant into submission.

Tulio grins and settles against a wall of the makeshift arena to watch the show. He shrouds himself in shadows to better hide from the crowd and not distract from his kid's victory.

Red-faced, the giant frantically taps the ground in submission. Palaestra rolls off and leaves him gasping.

Despite Tulio's discretion his daughter's eyes still pierce through him. A bond goes both ways.

She sniffs. "Old man."

To be polite he drops his stealth. Every athlete around him leaps back from the god in their midst. "Palaestra."

"Today is the day."

Only the intensity of her stare makes him bite back his grin. He strides into the arena as the other fighters scramble for the corners. "What makes you say that?"

The goddess of wrestling rolls her shoulders as her attendants swiftly prepare her for the next match. "One of us has spent the past millennium honing their craft and the other sleeping and drinking in the world above."

He shrugs off his cloak and gold adornments. "Only some of the time. I've fought my way through some pretty shady bars over the centuries."

When he'd had too, at least. Wrestling these days is more a provincial past time than the grand sport glorified by Greece and Rome. Still, it had once made him and Miguel quick cash against overconfident betters back in the day. Tulio fights with mean skill that belies his slim frame. They had used it only sparingly, given their quick healing outed them as something less than mortal.

His daughter sneers. "Were your last great victories against drunken peasants?"

"A Jaguar God, actually."

Palaestra sharpens in interest. Tulio stops stripping at the hip wrap. But only for a moment. Under
the judgmental stares of traditionalists he rolls his eyes and abandons his last shred of modesty.

"You are the guest, old man."

"And you're the hostess." At her glare, his lip quirks upward. "Pankration, then?"

She smirks eagerly, because he knows this daughter all too well. True boxing is done without grappling. Pankration combines the two in thrilling, violent glory.

"Swear on the Styx you won't hold back or throw the bout." She sniffs. "Such cowardice is beneath you."

He vows to do all in his power to win without cheating or exceeding her in brute strength. Palaestra arches a brow, but one is a shade and the other head of a stable pantheon. The match comes down to skill and cunning alone. They agree on traditional rules. Eye gouging and biting is for the savage Spartans, but in pankration everything else is fair game.

Their match rages hours or even a small eternity. Time never behaves in the underworld. Some souls feel every day in the world above and others still believe togas to be the height of fashion. When Palaestra hauls him down, he leverages his way out. They block punches and evade kicks that would leave donkeys sore with envy. Tulio is vaguely aware of their audience ebbing and flowing, as morbid curiosity sometimes overpowers fear.

It's that damn paradox of the fox who could never be caught and the dog that always caught its quarry all over again. Dad had solved that headache by turning both into static stars.

He and Palaestra take a third option. Eventually their eyes lock and they share a brief, mutual understanding. In the next breath they both declare a draw. Together they split the victor's olive wreath. Palaestra dons hers with fierce pride. Tulio does so with the gratitude he left his feather crown back in Manoa. There is only so much a sane deity can use as headware at once.

"Are we on for dinner?"

"Pft. Like I'd ever miss out on calling the bluffs of braggarts."

Which means more broken tables and spirits surly they got thrashed by the wrestling goddess. Tulio's always taken pride in how his kids expressed themselves.

Mostly.

With his clothes gladly pulled back on he continues his search. He finds the next kid alone, blessedly detached from an army of capricious half-siblings. A chiton and hunter's gear lie in a careful pile. Rich, curly hair is unbound from its tight knot and left to fall in splendid waves. Even as his kid continues to fix their hair, they smile at him through the mirror's reflection.

"Hey, Dad."

"H-Hey, Maph," he chokes out, as if a thousand years has not passed since their last conversation.

As a goddess of love and beauty Venus is innumerable facets, her face different in the eye of every beholder. Their child is no less myriad. Maph's hair ranges from midnight black to honey gold. Their form is hard and lean, soft and strong, shifting by the second until Maph settles on one with grace and angular sharpness. For a time Tulio watches, breathless at what he gave life to.

"I-Is it a special occasion?"
Maph’s reflection smiles enigmatically as they sprinkle perfume onto their dove-white wings. "Yes."

Tulio waits for elaboration. And is met by laughing silence.

"...To your invitation, Dad. Of course I'm going."

Maph is half-sibling to some of the biggest gossips in the pantheon. Big surprise they know. He relaxes.

"After all, I have to meet the deity both you and Uncle consider equal partners."

Tulio splutters only for a second. The Erotes are all about relationships. Due to their nature Maph is especially keen at gauging their health and longevity. There is a damned good reason why Maph had been banned a long time ago from the betting pools on when an Olympian's latest tryst would fall to pieces.

"I... I've had wives... before."

From the mirror Maph's gaze cuts no less deep. "Is letting someone into your house the same as letting them into your heart?"

"No," he murmurs.

Maph flutters up from their seat to tackle him in a full-on hug. Tulio squawks and barely manages to return it. Fragrant white feathers obscure his sight.

"I'm happy for you three." They pull back with a grin. "And especially so that you and Uncle finally stopped beating around the bush."

He spits out a feather and chuckles. "Yeah, Maph. So am I. We can't wait to introduce you to Chel. She's... Well, you'll see for yourself."

Maph grins at the prospect.

With some of his immortal offspring seen to Tulio turns to those less so. His Oread daughters could not be felled by age, but had died to human cruelty and human apathy. Now those left joyously swarm him on their mountain slopes. From the truly mortal offspring he begins with Norax, who led the Iberians to colonize Sardinia. Those princes and kings receive him mostly in confusion. They do not recognize him as their flighty sire, not until he near hits them over the head with the fact. There is little and yet everything to discuss with them. Aside from the odd favor tossed when he heard a prayer, he had never much cared for them in life the first time around.

Some sons Tulio cannot find at all. He scours all the underworld for them.

Instead he discovers a daughter.

First he spots her four-headed torch, the cardinal directions glowing brightly against the gloomy gray. He is drawn in like a moth to the flame.

She is garbed like a queen, adorned in gold and pearls. Fathomless eyes appraise him.

"Father."

His breath catches as he considers her names. Most are never uttered carelessly. Especially outside a holy refuge. "Eleusis," he finally decides.
Her lips quirk as she resumes walking. He follows her step for step. For a long time they travel in silence. The eyes of countless shades pass dully over them. To them the torchlight, so hotly brilliant to Tulio, is pale and ephemeral as foolish fire.

"...How are your boys?"

"Bored and too curious for their own goods."

Tulio winces, remembering an incident in Scythia involving a very pissed off Ceres (well, Demeter then) and a dead dragon-serpent. "Runs in the family, sadly. How's their father doing?"

"Let him or the boys drag you into a conversation on modern agriculture and you're never escaping. Losing out on a thousand years of progress drives them mad."

He wrinkles his nose on habit. Tilling the earth has always been much too permanent a lifestyle for his liking. Hunters wander the wilds for their quarry and even shepherds must migrate over the mountain meadows to graze their flocks. "How's... How's your mother?"

Eleusis smiles her strange, cryptic smile, the same she inherited from her mother. "You can always ask her yourself."

It takes all his willpower not to shudder. "Maybe later."

Most of his dalliances had involved beings of a rustic persuasion. Only once had he swung toward the more cthonic side.

Once, and then never again.

"Are there any initiates still around?"

Eleusis casts a fathomless eye over the hordes of unseeing shades. "Those who had firsthand knowledge of the Mysteries are all long gone. I saw them from this purgatory long ago. There is only so long the wise can dwell among the dead."

The sons he seeks had never stepped foot in Eleusis. If they had known of the Eleusinian Mysteries it had only been in the vaguest sense, unaware of the role their own family played in it. "Do you make exceptions, then?"

Her eyes gleam. "The name you use for me still commands power here, among those old enough to remember its significance. Some are even vital enough to remember their curiosity, when they tire of eternity. My brothers and sisters have always been especially observant."

He sighs in regret at having returned too late for proper sendoffs. Where they have gone he can never follow.

"Have you seen them onto good things?"

Eleusis smiles. "We only ever promised a faster way forward. Each mystery is for the beholder to uncover."

"...Does your path forward lead to a nice family dinner by chance?"

She smirks. "Perhaps."

Their paths diverge. Tulio doubles back west, where his heart draws him home. Eleusis walks east, for the lands that remember her best.
Before he does so, however, he makes a quick detour on the primordial waters. Before the headwaters of the Acis flow into the world above its course is first subterranean. There he meets his son of the same name, the first and only one among them to be a river spirit. Mostly because no other of his kids won the love of a river nymph, got crushed by a jealous cyclops, but have that same nymph turn their lifesblood into a river so that they might be together forever.

After Acis his next child finds him. She swoops overhead to nestle herself fearlessly in his hair.

"Hi, Dad!"

"Hi, Jinx. Er, are you still...?"

"Nope!" she chirps. "I'm just comfy."

"All right then."

Some people cursed by Juno into animals welcome the reprieve of death from their transformation. Others still prefer to be birds even then the option otherwise is available.

"What happened to your horns?"

"Got rid of them," he answers.

"But why? They were your best feature, and so fun to perch on!"

He laughs. "I had them for eons, Jinx. It was high time for a change."

"Oh," she mumbles, and then falls silent.

Tulio sighs and stops walking. With both hands he picks up his daughter from his hair. The wryneck bird struggles a moment, neck twisting in that creepy way that got her kind written off as birds of witchcraft, before she settles back in his cupped palms.

"Jinx, I'm a proud dad to a river, a bird spirit, and satyrs alongside goddesses. Just because I got tired of my horns doesn't mean I'm ever going to get tired of the kids that still have them. They're still your brothers and sisters. Every last one of them. Carefully he cradles to his chest in his best hug at such a sheer size difference. "And I love every last one of you."

Jinx makes a strangled sound then throws out her wings to try hugging him back. That idea doesn't really work, so she settles for shifting into her nymph form just to nearly squeeze the life out of him. Once more he sneezes feathers when they part.

"I don't think I've ever heard you say those words to any of us before," she murmurs.

"Guess I grew up enough to stop swallowing my feelings, huh?"

"Yeah, Dad, I guess you did. Only took you three thousand years!"

In a whirl of feathers Jinx is off again. He watches her whirl off into the dark before taking on his last, and hardest, challenge.

Tulio returns to the hall of Liber. This time he comes alone, without his partners, and with one small caveat to his appearance. Because the headache from the confusion otherwise would not be worth it.

Again, Tulio enters to the silence of a stunned retinue. Wine sloshes to the floor. Dance partners
and... other sorts of partners are dropped. All because he rolled his eyes and sprouted a small, humble pair of horns to go along with his unabashedly Manoan get-up. The paradox is enough to lure in sons sired by both sides of him.

"...Father?" ventures Pronomos.

"Yes," he answers simply.

Krotos hesitates, staring at his horns. "And that... makes you my grandfather?"

"No, Krotos," Tulio sighs. "That also makes me your father."

The oldest of his satyrs jolt in recognition, then smile widely. The majority of their younger brothers, sprung up long after his... identity crisis, are confused enough to come in closer. Tulio does not shy away from them and meets questions face-on.

"Are you Lord Faunus?" asks one, just as another blurts out, "Are you Lord Mercury?"

"My name is Tulio," he offers instead. "The golden city of Manoa calls me their Lord of the Evening."

All three of his Panes grin wide. Despite their name they are believed sired by his other aspect. "Might you also be called Terrifying One?" calls out Phorbas.

"Or Slayer of Argos?" chimes in Agreus.

"Or just plain old Mischief?" drawls Nomios. Then his sons on both sides wilt in recognition because, really, his sides weren't that different.

"Yes to all three!"

"What about All-Stones?" snarks Liber from his throne in a tongue that leaves most squinting in confusion.

Tulio rolls his eyes. "If wanna get archaic about it, sure."

"W-What happened to you?" blurts out an uncomprehending soul from the retinue.

"Youthful rebellion and a mid-life crisis all at once. Then some soul-searching and some growing up. Not necessarily in that order."

Eventually the interrogations give way to hurled accusations, quiet admissions, and then sobbing reunions. Liber's attempts to cut in are shushed by his wife and mother. By the time Tulio can finally get away all of Liber's retinue are emotional wrecks, pulling each other into catharses or running off to reunite with lost family.

Liber downs another flagon, curses his brothers, and sourly starts putting together the long list of other parent figures deserving of a check-in.

All his own kids are long settled and accounted for. Not his gods damn fault it Pan-Hermes (sorry, Mom, Tulio) let the drama simmer for centuries longer.

Chapter End Notes
This... This was supposed to be both boys (plus maybe bonus Diana and her huntresses) in one. Turns out there's only so much family drama I feel like stuffing into one one-shot. And Tulio might've been the EASY one.

Pan-Hermes was probably a singular deity before the split. Helps their characters are both mischievous trolls with strong ties to pastoralism. And that three of Hermes kids are literally called the Panes and are literally just aspects of Pan's character divided among three satyrs.

Angelia is a daimon of messages and tidings and Palaestra the awesome as fuck goddess of wrestling. Both are two of Hermes' aspects chopped up - as a god of messages and as a god of athletics. Likewise, Hermaphroditus is the embodiment of both masculine Hermes (literally a rock pedestal with a phallus for a large part of his cult in Greece) and the (mostly) feminine Aphrodite, perhaps an evolving of her male aspect of Aphroditos. As a child of Aphrodite, Maph ranks among the Erotes as a deity of the relationship (often involving a blend of male and female.) That creepy-ass story Ovid came up for them seems largely an invention on his part, because Aphroditos and Hermaphroditus existed in Greek deities centuries before that. Maph is chill with their pronouns, has an appearance varied as their mother's beauty, and tells social constructs to go fuck themselves. The Oreads are lesser mountain nymphs sired on older Oreads, because of his rural aspect and canonically horny nature.

In comparison to these kids, Eleusis is a bit... of an odd duck. Her existence is kinda iffy, given some very creative leaps from Theoi (which is usually pretty solid on their info and inferences.) Given the role she apparently played in the Eleusinian Mysteries, she might lead initiates into a new life after death like Hermes leads souls into death. Here she's more of an embodiment of the Mysteries in general than anything. I kept her in for the possibilities and also because her mom, Daeira, is probably an alias for Hecate.

On the Pan side, there's Acis, the dude who got killed by Polyphemus and turned into an immortal river spirit because true love and miracle and hyper-determined river nymph. Jinx made a love-charm Zeus used on Io, so guess who got cursed by Hera into a little woodpecker? Only wryneck birds have crazy necks they throw around and hiss when threatened, so a 'jinx bird' became associated with witchcraft.

On top of dozens of satyrs and mortal figures, including apparently the founder of Sardinia.

Dionysus/Liber has like so many biological and surrogate parents. So many. This is what happens when your cult tries going independent for a while.
never too late to learn (too little, too late)

Chapter Summary

Miguel, recovering deadbeat dad. To various degrees of success.

But some things can never be forgiven.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he and his partners mutually agree to go their separate ways for a while, Miguel immediately makes a beeline down very specific hallway. His sight is not so sharp down in Hades, not like it is under Manoa's golden sun, but it still guides him true.

The court he finds is unsurprisingly a small one. For all Asclepius was beseeched in life, the shades of the dead are beyond healing. That does not stop it from being neat and orderly, though the dead need not fear disease, for all the floor and columns swarm with snakes. When Miguel enters, the serpentine crowd still reverently parts for him. They flick curious tongues toward his bare toes, bridging the gap between him and the god they once knew.

A brood of grandchildren congregate. Most of course have snakes coiled around their staffs or around their shoulders. They regard him with wary disbelief. Miguel stares right back at them.

His instinct now is to scoop up them all up into his arms, like they're Tanni's boys. But these grandchildren are long grown and have never known him as Miguel. They remember another face, beardless and no small amount disgruntled whenever he had to deal with something as aging as grandchildren. His affection had extended no further than awkward pats on the head and condescending compliments.

Even the small smile he gives them now makes them stare. That little bit of genuine warmth declares him a stranger.

But not all gods grow up. A boy drowning in a large cloak and Phrygian cap charges through his older siblings.

"Grandpa!" he cries, before rocketing himself into is arms.

Miguel laughs, letting himself be tackled to the floor. Mostly because another grandson, this one shaped like a man-sized serpent, slithers fearlessly up his shoulders.

"Hello, Telesphorus." He shifts his human grandson to run a fond hand through the serpent's golden mane. "And to you, Glycon."

"You cut your hair!"

"Well, it was time for a change. You pull off long hair better than I ever did, Glycon."

"And grew a beard."
Miguel grins. "Makes me look more my age."

Or at least no longer as young as the beardless young men Telesphorus' older brothers still appear as. Now he's distinguished in comparison. Sort of.

His casual attitude disarms his older grandchildren into finally greeting him properly. It helps that the serpents have now lost their fearful regard of him and now swarm over him and his younger grandsons. And there are quite a few to catch up with; Machaon and Podalarius, Iaso and Aceso, all-healing Panacea and...

Miguel's gormless smile falters as he considers the oldest of the bunch, a woman grown. Most of Asclepius' brood remained the same over the transition from Greece to Rome. This one, however...

"Er, Salus?"

"Hygeia," she corrects, an answer in itself. She frowns in his direction. "Young deity, your grandfather is not climbable."

Glycon sullenly flicks out his tongue but obeys despite Miguel's gentle assurances to the contrary. Hygeia is a big sister many times over, but the look for Glycon has a special power to it.

Huh. Guess that makes him a great-grandson. Miguel grins even brighter. He's glad Glycon finally found his place in the family, after... er, such ambiguous beginnings.

His smile gains a sheepish edge when their mother finally finds them, but does not dim despite the mess of snakes still clinging to him.

"Epione."

The goddess of soothing pain stares at him, before her lip quirks up. "Lord Miguel."

"Please, Epione," he laughs, standing to foist Telesphorus into her arms. "Just Miguel. We're family. Been so for centuries."

Epione considers him. Her response, if there was ever going to be any, is interrupted by the arrival of her husband. Miguel's breath hitches. The serpents, sensing his mood, are quick to slither off.

Asclepius is no aimless mortal shade, but he is dead all the same, a shadow of what he could be. His family is no different.

"Father," the god acknowledges curtly, leaning against his staff.

"Asclepius," he returns. "Ah... You've made a lovely home down here."

There is little they discuss directly. Instead their conversation is made through Epione and her children. Miguel is excited to hear it all. Not that there is much new to discuss. They are dead gods without purpose. Even in the world above their domains are largely stagnant. They find common ground in grumbling over Spain's circular medicine, not much changed from their heyday. Because the snakes down here are between lives and are shameless spies in the world above.

Then Telesphorus blurts out Grandpa Chiron feels much the same way. Some smiles strain.

Miguel never hesitates. "Well, of course he does. All those people, crowded together? Don't even get me started on what I last saw in Seville's docks."
Miguel can call himself Asclepius' father. He is the god who sired him, who saved him from his mother's funeral pyre. That doesn't make him Asclepius' dad. He's not the one who raised him, taught him right from wrong, showed him the full art of healing. Miguel had only ever deigned teach his son a few tricks. All the rest had come from Chiron, and the serpents who whispered their secrets of resurrection.

Their reunion ends on a good night and hearty promises to see him at the big family get-together. It is Asclepius alone who escorts him out, still looking vaguely bemused.

"You grew up," he murmurs.

Miguel grins ruefully. "Only took a millennium or two." Just as quickly his humor dissipates. "It should have been quicker. For all of your sakes."

His son's eyes stare knowingly into him. "You were justified in your punishment, and great in your mercy."

"No," Miguel says tiredly. "I wasn't. Not even by the standards back then. I spared people by whims, and you were mine to protect. She..."

Coronis had not been his lawful wife. She had been mortal, the latest in a long line of conquests. Had she and Ischys found each other even a few weeks later, Miguel would have never cared. His interest would have already driven him on to the next life to ruin.

"She's still down here. When you're up to it."

"I... I've got a long list, before your mother."

Asclepius bows his head, claps him on the shoulder, and leaves him to it.

From a court of slithering serpents Miguel ventures outside, into the gardens of Proserpine. He follows the sound of bleating sheep to an idyllic grove. Under the olive trees a rustic court has gathered. Their leader, with gray in his honey beard, rises with a sagely smile.

"Father."

"Aristaeus!"

Miguel lifts him in the sort of hug he uses on Chief Tanni. His son has the good humor to laugh and go along with it. He does not return the embrace, but instead passes a goblet of golden mead into his father's hands. Miguel downs it eagerly.

"How is it?"

Miguel smacks his lips. "Divine, as always. Also, floral, with hints of... asphodel?"

The older god sighs. "Yes. The bees don't have much else to work with down here. The queen loves her flowers so. One gets used to the taste."

Miguel frowns in consideration. He happens to know an earth goddess who is very much into wine and gardening, who resides in a golden city blooming with wonders ancienet Greece could never have conceived of. "There might be someone I can introduce you to about that. Maybe."

Aristaeus arches an intrigued brow. Too late does Miguel also remember his son takes after him both healthy curiosity and reckless interest in beautiful people. Lady Paquini might very well
transfigure Aristaeus into a new type of wine to flavor her wines if he gets a bit too presumptuous.

And Miguel is having a very hard time making his mom and sister play nice with Manoa's wider pantheon as it is. Just because he's a Lord of the Fifth World doesn't mean he also has to be Lord of Importing Family Drama.

So instead he brightly turns the conversation onto Aristaeus' own family. Makris is a sweet girl and the reason Miguel can also proudly tease Liber to be his foster great-grandfather, because his little brother has no shortage of parental figures. Autonoe, Aristaeus' wife, smiles thinly and stares very pointedly at Miguel. And then back to her son. The one remembered for very different reasons than his sister.

"Ah," he manages. "You must be Actaeon, then."

The stag blinks, nonplussed. "So I am. Did your sister happen to return with you too, Grandfather?"

Miguel sighs. "So she is."

Diana's grudge extends beyond death. Of course it does. Her cthonic aspect is probably to blame for this.

"Asclepius and I can put him to rights, when Lady Diana roves out of Hades to hunt or such," Aristaeus explains in consternation. "Upon her return, the transformation always reasserts itself."

Frowning himself, Miguel pokes experimentally at his sister's magic, just to see what it's made of. Somewhere across Hades, his twin rolls her eyes.

"Poof."

The family blinks down at one rather disgruntled hunter. Then Miguel grins.

"W-What did you do?"

"Absolutely nothing." Beyond essentially poke his big sister from across the underworld. "Guess she mellowed out after all."

Clapping the human Actaeon on the shoulder, Miguel accepts a slew of acceptances to his invitation, and scurries off before all that gratitude mistakenly falls on him. In a great mood, he skips off to visit the Muses.

Not those Muses. Oh gods no.

His Muses. The ones he sired. And oh so creatively named after the strings of his lyre.

"Daddy!" they squeal as one, leaping into his arms.

"Hello, my inspirations," he declares grandly, kissing each one on the brow. "My joys, my suns, the lights of my-"

"Daddy!"

"All right, all right. Now, how have my girls been doing?"

He plops right down to be regaled on every adventure with Auntie Diana's huntresses or the times their Oread cousins showed them how to really prank Venus' pissy nymphs. And then the horrible
aftermath of the prank war that followed, because no relation of Venus holds anything back, in love or in vicious retaliation. Then it's his turn to dazzle them with some his own stories. Thanks to Tanni's boys he already knows the greatest hits.

With them Miguel could linger the rest of eternity. Not that the rest of the family is so accommodating.

Mnemosyne is of the eldest generation of Muses, born to the Titans. She lingers as a silent chaperone. Every time Miguel tries to lose himself in his daughters, his eye falls upon the relentless stare of the Goddess of Memory. In her he can see traces of her nine infamous daughters, and in the children he sired upon so many of them.

Miguel regretfully rises from the floor. His daughters cling to his legs, so he grants them gifts for their curious hands to latch onto instead.

Nete, the oldest, gracefully accepts his lute. Mese snatches his vihuela and Hypate the gittern far more gleefully. Something either very wonderful or very wicked glints in their eyes as all three start whispering to each other.

"Tell your father goodbye, girls," Mnemosyne breaks in. Her gaze pierces him. "Until the feast, of course. All your brothers and sisters will be there."

Miguel dips his head in silent promise, and moves to those children who will not embrace him so readily.

He finds the Corybantes doing what they almost always do, dancing, clashing spear and shield in the wild dances of the old Mysteries of Samothrace. The cries of their devotees is so enthralling Miguel is almost pulled in with them. His sons try to, until he quietly asks where he might find their brother.

Then the clamor dies, as every Corybantes falls still. There is only one brother they hold in such close regard as each other; their pupil in poetry and song, who repaid their generosity by spreading their cult among the Greeks. As one they swing their spears in his direction. Miguel sighs, thanks them, and journeys onward.

First come the mortal sons and daughters, those who have not already left Hades behind to seek new life in the thereafter. They regard him with wariness or faint curiosity they call such a strange god their father. He never stuck around long enough to bond properly with any of them, and now it is too late. Far too late. When he bids farewell to the last shade, Miguel takes to wandering once more, and lets his mind wander with him.

He remembers a son so skilled even the rocks and beasts refused to harm him, a voice that charmed even Dis and Prosperine from their unwavering resolve.

So too does he remember wavering faith that cost a lifetime of happiness, just as he remembers a son who withered away in his grief. A son torn to pieces for spurning all gods but his father above, whose disembodied head was left to float the River Hebrus.

Miguel refuses to gaze ahead, to see how the dismembered shade of his son has spent centuries lamenting in his plight. Orpheus deserves to meet him face on. Miguel might not be able to raise the dead like Asclepius, but he will do all in his power to see his son's shade restored.

Miguel's brow furrows as he wanders out of dreary Hades, for the verdant paradise of the Fields of the Blessed. Here the souls of the dead are as vibrant as they were in life. they gawk and cluster
around him like plain shades never do. Miguel smiles and blusters his way through the crowd until he seemingly poofs away. Disguise it is then.

He strolls through Elysium in the guise of just another mortal soul, albeit with one a hair bit too fashionably long for any historic period. Is it rude to ask for directions to the mournfully singing head?

Miguel is on the verge of just swallowing his pride and doing so when he stumbles into the son he seeks. Literally. Because he's too far in his head to notice where he is until it's far too late.

...Maybe he should have just looked ahead.

"Sorry!" he cries, whipping around as the lovers shriek and fumble for their clothes. Well, the woman does. Her lover tries to hide his modesty behind her rather impressive curtain of hair. "I didn't realize that was still a thing down here!"

Too late his mouth snaps shut. The words are out there. He groans and drags a hand down his face.

Wow, that was insensitive of him. As if all the dead exist as dull, dreary shades without a single desire beyond floating listlessly for all eternity. Chel's already been scarred for all eternity, after they dropped into her family in Lady Eupana's paradise at all the wrong times. Her parents. And her grandparents.

"Really?" squawks Orpheus, squeaky and indignant. "How long have we all been dead for again?"

His lover sighs at the obvious. "That's because he isn't, honey."

"W-What? How is that even..." His masterful voice reaches thrilling new heights as the drachma drops. "Dad?"

"Erm, yes." With an awkward cough Miguel drops the guise and turns around. "Hello, Orpheus. And, um, Eurydice?"

"...Yes," manages his daughter-in-law with admirable grace.

Orpheus settles for burying his head in his hands. "Is it possible to die again? Because I really feel like dying again."

"Sorry," Miguel blusters. "So, so sorry. Let me just go and we can all pretend this never-"

Miguel has delivered many a crushing hug, in this world and the one above. Now it is turn to be squeezed as his son latches on and refuses to let go. "Y-You were gone. And now you're trying to slip away again?"

"Why wouldn't I?" he murmurs. "I only made your life a literal living hell."

"That was of my own making," Orpheus states flatly.

"Well, yes and no," Eurydice points out. "I see now why you handled my death like you dead."

Father and son grin sheepishly. There's only one parent both blind and arrogant enough for Orpheus to think charming the chiton off Dis was a great idea. To reunite with his dead love. As a mortal himself.

"You're... You're remarkably well-adjusted, considering how I last saw you."
Orpheus shrugs, slinging an arm over Eurydice. "It was a problem that solved itself, wasn't it?"

"...You also could have tried really healing from your pain, honey." Eurydice rolls her eyes at Miguel. "But that an argument argued to death, again, so let's enjoy we're all here together and go from there."

And they do. Until Miguel can once more delay the inevitable no longer.

"Orpheus... Where's your brother?"

His son's smile falls. "The older one?"

Miguel nods silently. And bites back his expression when Orpheus mournfully tells him.

First, he detours to the edge of the underworld, where some of the fumes from deep Tartarus seeps up, and billows onward into the world above.

Amphiaraus and Trophonios are not among family, but instead each still dwelling in their subterranean haunts. Upon their mortal deaths Miguel had made them both daimons, for their oracular gifts had given them second lives in the world above so long as people had deigned dream by their shrines for guidance. Now they haunt their last footholds in the world above. It takes great patience to pry them out. Their relations, mortal and godly, are both dead now. At least they can all be dead and dine together.

But not all his sons were so deified in the world above. One was born only to die, for how else would his Muse mother raise her voice in the first funeral dirge? This son he finds by a grotto, one much like the one where the worshipers of Mount Helicon offered sacrifice to him whilst worshiping the Muses.

"Linus," he croaks out.

The shade arches a brow, plucking one string at the lyre Miguel had once gifted him. "Father."

That one word brings Miguel shamelessly to his knees. Linus deserves nothing less from him. "I... I'm..."

"I know." Linus strums at his lyre, not sparing him a second look. "You might even be. It does not change what you did."

"No," he murmurs. "It doesn't."

Hercules does not deserve the blame. Not for this. Myth might be myriad, but for Miguel there is only truth. And the truth is ineffable.

He bows his head and leaves Linus to his playing. There are no words, not from a father that slew his own son in petty spite and jealousy.

There will be no invitations to a shared table, not now. Not ever. Linus has brothers and sisters, a brilliant mother and doting aunts. They can all dine happily together, without Miguel. A god who takes lives over a music competition is no father at all.

With a heavy heart, Miguel is ready to rest. But there is one last insistent whisper he must first see to.

*Phaethon,* a part of him whispers. *Helie, Aigle, Lampetia,* and on. And on.
They had not been his children. Not at first. He had come to inherit them with the sun, as people had stopped differentiating between the new solar god and his predecessor. It was convenient to simply combine the two.

Before he can more than three steps in Phaethon's general direction, a pair of burning, all-seeing eyes glares across the vast distance. Miguel stops and shudders, as he beholds a god who is most definitely not him, no matter how their cults mashed together.

Miguel was not born a sun god, not this far west. That title had been inherited from another, if not stolen. And down here he is not so dead.

Miguel bows in apology and submission to Sol, once called Helios, and slinks on without ever bothering the god's family. His kids deserve a father that never killed them on purpose.

Chapter End Notes

Asclepius was ripped from utero by Apollo after he slew Coronis for committing adultery on him, in one of the most blatant cases of double standard ever. But still totally justifiable by Ancient Greek interpretations of hubris. Which is why Asclepius was later struck dead by Zeus for, y'know, raising the dead and perverting the natural order. He learned this secret from snakes, believed by the ancients to be able to resurrect each other. His formal medical knowledge, yes, mostly came from his foster dad Chiron.

Asclepius had a wife named Epione and a butt load of minor healing children. The puppet god Glycon later gained a legitimate cult following and was seen as some vague descendant or incarnation of Asclepius. Hygeia kinda adopted our puppet snake here. Hygeia, Asclepius' Greek daughter, was paired with the more established Roman goddess Salus, but to keep things simple she mostly identifies by her Greek side and family down here.

Aristaeus is a very old Greek god that's also kinda Apollo's son. And sometimes responsible for causing Eurydice's death through typical divine lust. What a family. Paquini probably would just turn him into a pretty new vine (with honey-flavored flowers!) for her garden. And then mash his leaves up to mull her wine with. Makris (a foster mom of Liber) and Actaeon are his children. Yes.

Actaeon showing up as a stag shade to lament his death to his parents is canon to one myth, so yeah. Diana's grudge carries beyond death. Until she finally learns to let a total accident slide. Because, yeah, Actaeon did not intend to 'make a bride' out of his aunt, as that stag myth also suggests. No. Just no. Some shitty family traditions just die with Zeus-Jupiter, okay?

The Apollonide Muses are just one trio of Muses out there. Somewhere down the line they totally mash a guitar out of its predecessors. Mnemosyne is both the Goddess of Memory, mother of the Muses, and grandmother to both Linus and Orpheus.

The Samothracian Corybantes are dancing, orgiastic deities connected to the Samothracian Mysteries. And not to be confused with the OTHER Corybantes. They were tutors of Orpheus. Who is kinda okay now. Because eternal reunion with his love and two thousand years to get over his angst.
Linus, on the other hand, is the literal personification of the funeral dirge. But also he made a lot of innovations in life and shit too. And yet another musical tutor of Orpheus. One version has Hercules as another shitty musical student, who then proceeds to kill Linus for mocking his shittiness as a musician. The other version has Linus killed by a jealous Apollo over another music competition. Guess which one I went with?

Apollo got syncretized with Helios the sun god, to the point where the myth of Phaethon and the burning chariot became myths about a son of Apollo. Hell, Miguel feels enough apart of Sol-Helios to have also viewed his kids as HIS kids before in this series. That... That probably won't happen publicly. Not with Sol hellbent on not getting syncretized out of existence again.

End Notes

This one-shot is set in the late game Roman Empire, right when our heroic idiots really, you know, become the guys we actually know. At this point the Western Roman Empire is on it's last legs, Vulgar Latin is starting to develop the into proto-Romance languages, the Visigoths are starting to pour in from the Pyrenees, and laws against paganism in the cities are as harsh as they're gonna get.

Apollo's famous for being clean-shaven and having long, uncut hair. Miguel is literally trying to compensate with that lil' beard of his.

Hispalis - the Roman name for Seville

pandura - the Late Roman answer to the lute

Tullius - the Roman name that eventually developed into Tulio

Tarraco - the Roman name for Tarragona, one of the first Roman provinces in Iberia, and likely birthplace of the cults to Mercury and Apollo in the region

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