

MARTIN CENQUIZQUI

by

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ABSTRACT

The historical novel, *Cortés Cenquizqui*, set in sixteenth century Mexico and Spain, follows the conflicted lives and minds of several characters through an age of freshly crossing culture, language, and power. The narrator, Maria de Quesada of high ranking Spanish and Mexica parents, resents the white world for condemning her work as a female healer or *curandera*. Yet she acknowledges that she is ill-equipped to leave Mexico City to live in the outlying Indigenous villages. Maria recalls the tale of her three brothers who were caught in a web of pride and prejudices. Her interjections throughout shed light on questions of feminism, nationalism, identity, diversity, love, and queerness. Her tragic story leaves the reader with an understanding of the outsider and of hopeful possibilities for the future.

This novel calls on a biblical passage and historical documentation. Page 39 and 191 are examples of the biblical passage and documented speech from historical persons used within the literary context of this work.

Dedicated to Carmen Cecilia Perez

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PROLOGUE

I'm surrounded. I hear the chiming of mass bells, the Spanish language rising from the street. I smell the coriander stewing in the chicken potaje. The white world calls--eat, your soup is getting cold, be white--it says, but I'm not white, and yet...

I remember my first weeks in the convent. A quiet doctor came into my room. His 'buenos dias' carried the fresh Castilian accent of one who has just anchored in from his mother land. I touched my throat and coughed a dry cough. I took down a clay jar from one of my herb shelves to show him with what I was readying to treat myself.

"I have this concoction of avocado leaf and poppy..."

He took the jar from my hands and placed it back on its shelf.

He told me to sit, so I did.

"I remember my mother used to apply that remedy on me with great success," I told him as he felt the lumps in my throat with hardly the tips of his fingers.

Finally he spoke more than two words, "Your mother without doubts, but your father, no. And we are not contemporaries in medicine doña Marina--"

"Maria," I corrected.

"Maria--so I will not discuss the subject further."

He left me looking out the window at the tree tops. I felt the weight in my hands of the small labeled bottle of dark, thick liquid he'd given me. He'd ignored me when I'd asked him what ingredients it contained. He'd rolled up his instruments in a long cloth and packed them into a bag without warming me with so much as a single prayer and was gone.

I took that bottle from the doctor with me under the sash of my black habit and carried the clay jar of my avocado remedy. I also brought a small knife, strips of old rags, and some tall sticks with me outside for a turn in the convent garden.

I'd already cultivated a small portion of the land with small trees and kneeled in the dirt to tend to two of them. I used the knife to sever two of the young trunks. I switched them, introducing each to its new identically slanted cut and uniting the foreign pieces together with cloth tied around sturdy sticks in the ground.

Pride, we all have it. I'm as proud as any modern doctor satisfying his duty to come here. Although the word doctor is not quite the right word I would use to describe myself. I am somewhere between nahualli and tepahtiani, in the words of my language, which would translate the same to Spanish minds as the word witch, without doubts, but nevertheless, let us say that I am a doctor.

A few nuns passed outside the hall and through the Moroccan style archway of our building. They pulled gloves over their hands and hovered over the rosebushes to give them a trim. The doctor walked out of the hall bowing his head to the holy rose gardeners. A flinch flickered over his eyes when he caught sight of me sitting in the dirt. He recovered with a slight bow of his head. I mirrored his bow.

Wherever there is goodness...

I watched the doctor disappear from the garden and the nuns murmur amicably, well absorbed with their pruning work.

I poured the liquid from the doctor's bottle over the dirt of one of the tree's roots. And on the other I poured my own mixture. I sprinkled dirt over the wet soil and brushed off my skirt.

...wherever there is goodness, I shall adopt it. This, the world has yet to learn.

From the confines of these cloisters, chapels, and plots I mull over my brothers. I am filled with restlessness. To this day they walk within me. Perhaps, I tell myself, feet gummed to the convent floor and my breast pressed over my writing desk, if I write this they will be still. I can think up no other way.

They confided in me--Martín beginning with his letters and continuing later in person and Atl trusting me since we were children. I imagine it was my donkey-like listening ears that seemed so inviting. They've told me of the steps of their journeys and of the aches they carried in their chests. I transported my spirit into their bodies so firmly that today I feel as though I've lived portions of their lives. I know their habits and characters well enough to describe or at least imagine their inner worlds better than anyone else. And what they haven't told me I've learned from the senses of the town: builders, prison maids, guards, mango peddlers, and forest dwellers--the eyes and ears of our land. My brother Martín, for example, would get hot in the ears when he was angry. And Atl, I don't think there was an emotion he had that he did not display outwardly to the fullest extent. As with my brothers, I feel the same knowing about others, such as my son who is so giddy around drums that his blood tugs at him and causes him to bounce up and down. As I said, I am somewhere in the middle of nahualli and tepahitani and as some healers say, you may think it strange for us to know people so well, but we do.

And I know that there is something glorious that lies beneath the surface of us all. I tell you that there is. The most precious of things. The gift the Mexica of this country understand. The gift that never tires of speaking within, that is, man's lavish, blossoming heart. We are diverse, but because of in here, the skin flies off like a bird.

My brothers, and I loved them deeply, were made from diverse seeds meant to flower big as the world. They saw this too late. They did try. But there is still time, Mexico, lindo y querido. By our children.

Atl was very close to understanding. He was a born leader open to that sort of thing. And it is a prickle on the nopal that he is not here to both comprehend and to explain in words so beautiful the king himself would give a head nod.

How would he put it?

Our children, they open their faces of various flowers, they breathe out honey. They are the fragrant bouquet of the goodness of Life Giver's seeds.

Ah, yes. He would say it in words such as these.

CHAPTER ONE

To Know Him

*One day,
a ship,
a drifting volcano
with sails above,
white smoke of Popocatépetl*

*Will carry me
over the sea,
farther and farther
from my querido Mexico,
to Spain's Puerto de Santa María.*

*There I will know my father
and the men like my father.
Hombres Españolas.*

*And at every bent viejo,
for he is of that age now,
I will nod,
perchance it be him.*

*My life is full as kernels on corn.
My heart thuds,
opens, quetzal wings.
I rise.*

*I will lay braided husks
over his head as a necklace.*

Madrid, Spain 1563

As I see it in my mind, from the descriptions I was given by Martín and the others, never having been to Spain myself, Martín walked through the streets of Madrid. He stopped to allow the passing of the men in carriages driving the palace horses down the cobbled street for their exercise. Their back ends were branded with the initials of Prince Phillip II and their coats shimmered with sweat. This reminded Martín of his voyage the following day that would take

him to the dock at Gibraltar. These were the very horses that would carry his bags and portmanteau. He looked forward to the night for their going away party. There he would see the beautiful and noble ladies of Madrid. In his excitement he picked up his pace and crossed the street. He knew the fastest way to the office of letters where his brother's message awaited him. He would need to curve his way between the stone buildings that were snugly arranged like the lines on the palm of a hand and intersected by the labyrinths of narrow alley ways. He swung around a strolling group of gray men with canes and a woman sweeping the front step of her corner cafe to turn into an alley. Once the building walls reached up at either side he felt something tumble into the back of his ankle. When he turned around he saw a tattered child's doll that must have fallen out of the doorway that framed a small whimpering girl. Brown ringlets graced her white face and flushed cheeks. When he bent to pick it up he saw the shadowy figure of a Muslim girl hesitate and quickly draw back around the bend. Martín handed the doll back to the girl who was peeking at him through her fingers.

“Careful niña,” he winked.

The girl lowered her hands and smiled grabbing the doll.

Further along, the alley dipped. Martín slowed to accommodate the hill that suddenly made the stones feel slippery. When he reached the bottom he heard running footsteps, yelling boys, a scream, and the thud of falling bodies.

At this, Martín turned around, hand on sword. But seeing no danger he relaxed. Three brunette boys had trotted down, one falling and bringing a girl down with him.

“¡Cabeza de tortuga! Morisca fea!” the boys yelled at the girl.

The one who had fallen gave her a push before standing back up. The boys glanced at Martín a moment and then resumed their shoving and laughing. Their hard soled shoes patted and scuffed up the hill as they raced to abandoned the alley.

The girl lay in the street in a pile of cloth. She hunched over and her back trembled with sobs. It was then that Martín recognized her. Her petite size matched the shadow he'd seen. She lifted her head and saw him looking at her. She scrambled to cover her head with the scarf that she'd been wearing and to haul her weight from off the ground. Her face was as dark as his own. Her black hair fell over one eye. He wanted to shave off the hair over her upper lip. Her shoe caught in a groove between the stone and she stumbled. She looked at him again and covered her mouth with the back of her wrist. Her face crinkled as more sobs poured out. She concealed herself with her hands. Martín began to step away and then paused again to consider down which alley he needed to head next for the store of letters.

He sped his way down another alley that opened into a main road. He eyed the letters shop and crossed the street towards it. He didn't know why she'd followed him. He didn't want to know, nor why the boys had tormented her. He'd wanted to immediately forget he'd seen the whole pathetic event. His mind searched for a distraction. Bernaldina would make him forget. After seeing to his letters he'd call on her. Flowers. He could bring her flowers and claim he could hardly wait until the evening at the party let alone the finish of his voyage to see her again.

Bernaldina's pale skin and the sheen of her blonde hair were a stark contrast to the covered Moor women that gaped at him in the streets. The girl who'd followed him was not the first he'd found watching him. It repulsed him to see their black eyes following his steps with intrigue. Perhaps they eyed him as one of their own, imagining one of their own usurped a position of Spanish power.

They were unbearable. But Bernaldina invited him to forget them. He remembered two nights ago he'd stooped into the bed of doña Bernaldina. Doña Bernaldina de Porras. Skin thick and smooth as cream and traced with perfume so light it was almost her natural scent. He'd stroked her soft arm and asked her how often she bathed in milk. She'd touched her chest with her fingertips. She'd covered her mouth in an attempt to keep her laughter out of the neighboring room, to keep herself secret from her mother's sensitive ears. He knew her family wasn't of the same class of nobility as he, and doubted they could cover the cost of lavish baths as he'd implied. Nevertheless, they survived well enough to store regularly the New World's chocolate drink.

At times, the two peered over their chocolate cups and looked each other in the eyes. Bernaldina would lower her cup and smile. He remembered her crooked teeth, the way each upper canine overlapped a tooth on either side. It had a charming feline effect, as though she were part cat. And then there was the endearing contrast of her green eyes. They had a silkiness to them, smooth and kind, with a spark of desire. When he'd told her of his expeditions in battle her responses always came in strings of questions. Her eyes widened and she craved the details of his adventures. She didn't know much beyond the confines of the Spanish borders. But he revelled in recounting his escapades. He enjoyed the look of horror and the way she clung to him as he described brutal battles and the unpredictable sea. Most ladies shied at this talk that they felt was reserved for men in any case, but Bernaldina always wanted more.

And he couldn't resist her pale complexion and charming perceptiveness. For example her quality of good listening led to pointed questions that surprised him. She asked him things that seemed to her commonsense. But for Martín they were in a light that without her he never would have considered. She had an entirely different vantage point. Why didn't they simply

replace their swords with those of nature? The Muslims have their impossible Alpujarras mountains that only they seem to understand, what swords of nature of our own could the Spanish use against them? And, the fact that we have banned Morisco silk does not stop its enchantment over every prince, duke, and lord of the other kingdoms, not to mention their wives. Starve the worms, order a plague on the beasts! Women had brains, he thought, and anyone who thought otherwise surely didn't.

She was white as bones but her cheeks were pink with life. If he'd thought her blush artificial he'd have asked her to wash it off to even her ghostly beauty. But he knew it was genuine, he'd rubbed the pink with his thumb, which only made her pinker. He'd chuckled at her squeal and replaced his thumb with his lips. Bernaldina could satisfy his needs, bear him children.

He never knew why women found him attractive. But when Bernaldina caught him looking her way she'd held his gaze. He thought her interest lay in finances or status or some such incentive because he couldn't comprehend why he interested her. But neither did he waste time asking questions.

Her milky ambiance enchanted him. Her whiteness, a temptation. She was a fascination, one that he explored before they'd even finished drinking. He remembered the paleness of her full breasts against his dark hands. He'd tasted the mysterious darkness of chocolate on her pale pink mouth. He touched the necklace he wore under his shirt. It encased a lock of her pubic hair. She'd given it to him to remind him of her when he was away. The lock was light and soft as the down of a blonde kitten. He remembered touching her hair when she was lying down half asleep by the warmth of her fireplace. Her initial look of surprise melted into a surrendering, a longing? Either way she'd allowed him and he hadn't cared which she'd felt.

Martín heard the horse hooves plodding in the distance. He saw the stand next to the butcher shop where three woman sold flowers from wooden buckets. Martín lowered his head in respect for them.

“Good day,” he smiled as the ladies responded with their own morning greetings.

“What beautiful flowers,” he grinned, “But how sad they will be when I take them away from you who are more beautiful still.”

They laughed and the oldest of them asked, “What’s you’re preference today, Martín?”

He chuckled and pointed at the white Calla Lillies. He flipped a coin and bowed his head again wishing them a marvelous day. He walked past the butcher and a few more stores until he reached the letter shop’s wooden door. He ran his fingers over the expertly carved leaves and sailing ships feeling the warmth the sun lent them. He saw the white flowers against the grain of the wood as he pushed his way inside.

CHAPTER TWO

“A Martín Cortés, de Luis de Quesada,” it read.

Martín Cortés lounged comfortably in his burgundy velvet chair across from his bedroom window.

His dark skin was covered with his old pocked scars. His deep cocoa eyes raced over the words on the letter he held before him.

Objects for the following day’s voyage were scattered over the surface of his bed: a compass, knives, maps, writing quill and ink; his hair brush, velvet hat, and a small round mirror encircled in gold. Next to his bed, on a wooden table, were several envelopes bundled in twine labeled ‘New Spain.’

Servants announced themselves at the door. Martín jumped, jerking his hand out of the pristine white collar around his neck. He pulled it higher, patting the material so that it covered him. He folded his letter, sat straight, and told the servants to pass in. Martín went to the table and shoved the letter he’d been reading into the bundle. He tossed them on his bed and told the servants the table was free for his meal.

He opened the tall white closet doors to look over his clothing. The rich fabrics drew him in. As always he felt compelled to touch and feel their softness and splendid quality. His eyes settled on the pant and jacket ensemble with matching blue silk thread. He smiled looking forward to Bernaldina’s reaction at the evening’s banquet.

If there was anything else he needed, Martín said no. The servants left, closing the wide and heavy door with a low, solid sound. Martín went to his meal and took a purple grape from

the tray. The plump grapes had arrived with an extended family of fish, rice, sides of lemon, cheese, peppered orange ham, and drinks of chocolate and wine.

Martín took up his plate of food. He squeezed a lemon over the dish. He brought his fingers to his lips and tasted the sourness of the juice. He gathered a forkful of fish and rice to his mouth. He closed his eyes for a moment tasting and then stirred his small white cup of chocolate. It was warm and smelled sweet and rich with cream. He preferred his chocolate this way over the Aztec style. They took everything the Aztecs had and improved it to degrees the Indians never thought possible.

Martín sipped the drink. It reminded him of Bernaldina and the chocolate they enjoyed together.

The sound of neighing horses and rolling carriage wheels came from outside. He set down his plate and cup with a hard clink and went to the window. Below, he saw the horses from in town stopped between their palace and the large spouting fountain. Servants loaded the back of the carriage with bags, boxes, rolled rugs, books, and several paintings. Emerging from the palace, Martín's younger brother, the Marques, walked down the steps, arms out, waving at one servant after another, checking his footing with overwrought frequency.

At the base of the stairs his brother passed the statues of raised chins and proud chests, those of Moctezuma II, Aztec ruler, and the statue of Atajualpa, Inca emperor. The stoic statues made an unpleasant contrast of his brother, revealing him as the quarrelsome, frenzied man he could be. The calm stone magnified his notorious attributes.

He knew his brother's lack of patience and that in his flustered state his white, paper thin eyelids appeared peeled back, nearly invisible, eyes fully opened, red-rimmed. His narrow nose pinched at the bridge and poised in the air. A tawny mustache and beard encircled a red mouth.

Behind the lips, a steadfast underbite accentuated his stubborn will. Martín saw a patch of cloud dissipate before the sun and saw his brother squinting. In the hot sun his brother's nose was redder than ever. Martín would have preferred a burning pink nose. His own only darkened on hot days and was aquiline, yet not as protruding as his brother's. His profile mimicked the Indios of the Americas as though he were chiseled in their statues' likeness. *His Indios? His ancestors?* He didn't feel so. He knew nothing of their lives save his father's stories of conquest. Martín would have chosen a long, fine, prominent, white nose.

Martín could hear the servants referring to him as the 'Marques' rather than the name he and his brother both shared, Martín Cortés, the name their father had chosen for both his sons. Recently, after their father's passing, his younger brother felt more deserving of the title and insisted everyone regard him as 'Marques.' Martín remained Martín. It had been his Spanish grandfather's birth name after all. And as much as it infuriated him to see his brother luxuriate undeservedly in his new insignia, bearing an ostentatious inscription on an unswung sword, he was glad there was something to dilute the confusion of their duplicate names. He rubbed his tongue over his teeth and tasted the chocolate and cane sugar that lingered in his mouth. He took another sip.

Outside the window, the Marques crossed his arms overseeing the servants carrying a long rolled rug. The end of the rug nudged the Marques and as if to imply the servant was amazingly ridiculous, he opened his fingers the way the Italians signify 'magnificence' with their hands. The servant looked down and nodded helplessly to whatever it was the Marques said.

Martín shook his head. He stroked his beard and mustache.

Despite his tiring brother, this would be the grandest expedition Martín would ever embark upon. Greater than Pamplona, greater than the galley Esperanza he sailed to the battle of

Algiers. This would be different, this would be to the New World. He would see with adult eyes the place where his father held his extraordinary adventures and conquered an empire.

Martín turned his eyes to the bunch of letters lying on his bed. He would not be as the servants. He would not wither under his brother's tyranny and he would see to it that the Marques kept his high nose out of his affairs. He went to his bed and lifted the letter he'd been reading.

"De Luis de Quesada," he murmured, feeling the wax seal between his fingers.

His brother-in-law would help him. He would secure his riches, younger brother be damned.

The Marques scolded the servants and pointed at the corners of the maps and scrolls standing up from beneath the clothing in the suitcase. The Marquesa Venera, his young wife, stood at his side with a hand over the slight curve of her belly.

"Damned fools," he complained.

If the Mexican slaves proved any more ignorant than his Spanish servants, he'd have to do everything himself. He grunted at the thought. His slim frame marched toward his travel cases and trunks. He shoved the servants aside and dumped the contents of the cases on his bed. The headboard rattled against the wall.

"Begin again!" he said, "Clothing at the bottom! There's no need for such incompetence."

"Forgive me Marques," they replied, "Yes, yes, sir."

“Now do you see what you’re doing to my poor wife?” he saw her touch her forehead and sway a little. She took a step back from the bed. He felt his his cheeks go warm and the warmth spread to his ears. He placed his hand over his belt and sword.

Through stiff lips and clenched teeth he spoke his words slow and steady, “The carriage is ready. Care for la Marquesa and finish now.”

The servants scrambled into action immediately. As one neatly folded the clothing with shaking hands, the other went to the Marques’ pregnant wife. With squinted eyes, he observed the servant who gently guided her. He sat her in a cushioned chair by the window darkened by cinnamon curtains dripping with tassels. Her face was faint, her already light eyebrows nearly disappearing beneath her white face powder, cheeks rouged more than the glow of motherhood could afford. Eyes closed, she groaned, overwhelmed by the burden of the life growing inside her.

The prospect of a long voyage intimidated her, the Marques felt sure. And what of their developing child? Would his son, he was sure the child was male, continue to grow strong on a rocking ship? It seemed his wife was becoming such a vessel herself, growing big and unsteady, unable to stand more than five minutes. How would she fare on the long passage to Mexico? Surely their unborn child would be safe in the hands of the many physicians he recruited for the journey. The Marques watched as her head lolled to the side. The servant took the glass of water beside the bed and placed it to her lips. She drank until a drip ran down her chin. She leaned back against the curtain where one of its silky red tassels brushed the pearl dangling from her porcelain ear. The earring was a gift from his most generous mother, doña Juana de Zúñiga. Although she came from wealth herself, the Marquesa showed little appreciation of her social

advancement since their union. The Marques pursed his lips and watched her wipe away the drip on her chin.

The Marquesa glimpsed at him from time to time, surely aware of his temper and doing her best to hide her discomfort. Preparations for the trip were bringing the worst out of him he knew. And he was finding it difficult to embrace her in her sickly states of late. But, at times he feared she wanted to leave him by slipping away unheard in the middle of the night, the way her sister had done her husband. Not that the Marquesa would stray far in her condition, but one never knew the whims of women, he thought. He couldn't imagine the shame of losing her and his son. He knew she shrank from him when he showed his anger. And he remembered not so long ago when she was so full of life and laughter. He hoped that one day the light would return to her. But until then it was a constant struggle to remind himself she was the mother of his child and the lady of his life. God's will be good. He went to her side and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Venera, mi vida? What can we do for you?”

“Amor, mil gracias. I'm following to get this body to behave, but it will pass.”

“Perhaps a banquet is too much today,” he said stroking her hair.

“No, no. I'm not so damaged. Perhaps if I lie down now,” she covered her mouth and burped a nauseous burp into her hand.

The Marques felt his stomach churn. He nodded at the servant and told him to take her to the spare room. The servant lifted her to her feet walking her slowly out of the room.

In this part of the story I must say that although the Marques was a solid professional type with the rigid edges of an instructor that adheres to all the rules, I have reason to believe that he loved his wife. Martín told me of the sternness that lifted and the love that softened his hard blue eyes when she entered a room. And the way in which he always treated her like she

was delicate as an egg, not as though she were a waif so much as she were just precious. Sorts of things as that, you know it's love when you see it. I suspect in that regard Martín took solace. Although he loved her too and that couldn't have been easy.

Time continued to dig its hooks into the city with night as its puppet. It crawled over bridges, trees, and cathedrals, golden crosses, and the Spanish flags flapping over the palace. It came all too quickly as far as the Marquesa was concerned. One last stationary day done and gone. Soon she would drive south and find the boats waiting. And the ill feeling in her body still hadn't released her, but she would lie. She would make the dinner as she would make the voyage.

She sat by the window in her dressing chambers. Her maids were securing the back of her gold dress. They'd finished her hair, two small braids pulled up with the rest of her tresses pinned. The gold ruffles of her sleeves came past her wrists and her hands sprouted out clenching a cold cloth that she patted her forehead with. She listened for footsteps so that she could hide the cloth should her husband enter. A maid stood in wait with a box of face powder and a silver tray for Venera for when she finally set the wet cloth down. On the outside Venera appeared plagued, her cheeks becoming pinker as though harboring a bout of scarlet fever. But inside she was thinking of the music, the witty conversation, the glances and the meanings behind them. It was the world beneath the clothes and the jewels that fascinated her. Although she found that world somewhat drab without the dressings. Banquets gave her something to be happy about. She could satisfy both her desire for exquisite ambiance and its social underpinnings where lived the mystery and honesty so often hidden from view. Also, Martín would be there. Venera dropped the cloth on a silver tray and stood up.

"Me voy," she declared.

The maids were caught off guard. They hurriedly dusted powder to her face, touched perfume to her pulses, and gave her blessings, while Venera went to kneel beneath a large wooden cross on the wall.

The ballroom torches, candles, shining silver, and bounty of food enchanted her. She kept her gaze polite and making only brief eye contact with the men who stood when she entered. She took her seat and glanced down the table. She had only to get a hint of the darkness cupped in one of the chairs to know he was present. No matter the passage of days she still felt the odd hard thud in her heart when she saw him. A servant poured her a glass of wine. She nodded to him to stop pouring and sipped. She looked above the rim of her cup and saw him laughing with a woman. She averted her eyes and set her cup down. She thought of the maids powdering her face and smoothing every hair in their braids and pins. She assured herself that nothing was amiss, but underneath she shuddered.

She remembered the first night she met Martín more than twenty years ago. Her family had answered the invitation to meet the Cortés' and traveled from the old Spanish capital, Toledo, to the new one, Madrid. Venera and her parents had arrived early. Venera was shown to her own striking room where her exacting mother attended her before leaving to dress herself. Her mother had visited her room scolding and pinching her for fidgeting while trying to place a beaded net over her hair. The scolding had reminded her of the tone her mother used with her father and all the financial arguments they'd had between her dreams in Toledo. Although her father was Eduardo Hidalgo de la Catalina he owned little property. All that remained rang in his title. They were fortunate that the Cortés' valued her father's knighthood. When her mother had left her alone in her room to dress herself Venera had seen a portrait on one of the walls. It was of a sitting lady adorned with jewels on her bodice and with a colorful parrot at her side.

She'd thought how odd it was that wealth and power made even owning exotic animals such as this seem unrare. The woman's grin was content in her environment. Venera would never have guessed that the glamorous woman in the painting would become her mother-in-law.

She'd known her parents would accept any offer the Cortés family would make and she'd anticipated meeting the Martín brothers. Brothers of the same name, how strange, she'd thought. Were they as alike as that? She remembered an unexplainable fear that kneaded her skin as she'd pondered their names. And in addition to that, their high standing ranks were one thing but their father's legacy was another. Her father admired him over his own. In her mind Hernán Cortés was a giant.

She remembered sitting in the dark wood and leather chair in in the nook of the room, gazing out the latticed window. She'd seen dark clouds tacked to the sky. And because there had been a seed of change growing in her life, who knew where and with whom she'd spend her next years, she'd felt sure the clouds would spill at any moment turning the whole world wet and changing too. She'd wanted to hear the sound pound the window. She'd have felt more secure. The rain would've been outside and she'd have been inside, safe, the rest of her life promised with a Cortés. She'd felt dizzy with excitement. She'd felt balmy palms and warm cheeks. She wished that the entire night had already passed. She'd quickly brushed away the thought that she might prefer one over the other. What did it matter? She was in persuance of a prosperous future and they each had the ability to offer that. Venera, she'd told herself, captivate both of the bachelors and either one will ensure a happy life.

Venera heard the Marques speaking. She pinched herself under the table to chase away the memory of that first day before she could get to the part where she beheld him with her own

eyes. She smiled toward her husband in feigned attention until she realized everyone's face was long. A patter of summer rain whipped the windows.

“--and the sea offers no guarantees,” he was saying.

She quickly joined the rest in deepening the creases in her forehead. Suddenly, a feeling of nausea spun in her belly when she realized she too would be on that sea. And her unborn child as well. The wave of nausea increased.

“But, as a Cortés I say that by the grace of God it can be done and it will be done. Amen.”

Venera forced herself to lift her glass, but she felt her hand turn weak. In this vulnerable state she glanced at Martín.

The group lifted their glasses in unison, “Amen.”

Martín wore a look of concern that replaced his earlier laughter. His eyes jumped from her to the Marques to the servants then back at her. He moved forward preparing to stand, but Venera caught herself and stood first.

“Con permiso,” she excused herself.

She saw Martín and the woman at his side staring at her.

A servant pulled back her chair and took her elbow in his palm.

“Cariño,” her husband touched her arm, “For anything, have them call me.”

She nodded and let the servant guide her out the hall door.

CHAPTER THREE

Days later Martín, the Marques, Venera, and several other conquistadores arrived at the dock of Gibraltar. Martín walked toward the boat. He felt the heat of the sun seeping through the fabric of his black cap. He tucked his chin in and lowered his head as always when out on sunny days. He kept the exposed skin of his hands in the shade in front of his body. His heart quickened pace when he saw the ship. It was one monster of a carraca. He was a bee gazing up at a halved and gutted pineapple or so the wood seemed, rugged and brown as it was. He heard cords wailing through wooden holes and metal clanking against iron bars. Cables hung everywhere, yet with the organization of a spider's own sticky hull. Sailors manned pulleys, rigging, and levers, faces grimacing at the work their muscles did. Seagulls called from the sky and landed on tall poles latched to large sails boasting the unmistakable red Santiago cross. The breeze rustled against them. Black cannons jutted out of square openings along the body of the ship. Africans and mestizos loaded crates, barrels, bundles, bales, and boxes over a ramp at the back end. Martín imagined the supply they carried. They would need to last two months or more until they reached New Spain. The provisions that came to his mind were of cloth, olives, almonds, oil, vinegar, biscuits, and livestock. There would be pipas of water and wine, crates of soap, weaponry, candles, books, and sacks of firewood. The Spanish captain gripped the railing on deck and thrust his shoulders over board shouting down orders at the slaves. Suddenly the Marques brushed passed Martín and stopped him.

The Marques bowed and extended his arm out in an advancing gesture making a show of letting his wife pass before them. Martín stood aside. The Marchioness approached slowly. The

lines of her dress were embroidered in gold and her fingertips were just visible in the long tulips of her layered sleeves. She brushed past him closer than necessary and he felt the touch of her fingers on his. His brother stood up from his exaggerated bow catching the direction of Martín's eyes upon the Marchioness.

His mustache drooped and Martín wondered when the last time was that his brother smiled. The Marques took a breath.

He mumbled loud enough for Martín to hear, "Cacafuego eso."

He followed his wife. Martín saw his lips still moving, forming what he knew too well to be further insults.

Martín let servants pass bearing the Marques' numerous belongings and carrying them on board. He watched husband and wife board the ship along with other conquistadores and their wives. His fingers prickled where the Marchioness had touched him. He thought back to the engagement dinner at the palace when they'd first met. He remembered her clearly. She'd appeared at once frightened and radiant. The naiveté of her youth and a keen sharpness in her brown eyes worked well together balancing her qualities. She was only sixteen but with the air of a cautious queen. Martín hadn't been much older, early twenties. And being that his allegiance to the Order of Santiago sent him touring through Europe so often the thought of finding a wife hadn't really fell on his mind.

But as it happened, he was home at the moment of Venera's arrival. He used his time back to recuperate, practice sword tactics, and kill his hatred for battle. But after a few weeks of inactivity he would again be burning to cover himself in steel. It always happened that way. Knowing this proneness of Martín's toward things that attracted and repelled him he must have found himself both intrigued and shocked by Venera. The first thing he'd noticed was that

unlike other women raised to submit to men, she held his gaze. He was right when he first assumed she was one who challenged conventions and brought exciting possibilities of thought to the mind in conversation. Martín craved the company of such inspirational women despite the fact that in his youth he lacked certainty in himself. I took it that after years of the contradiction between his insecurities and the unremitting flock of women drawn to him that he ceased questioning it. And when that happened there was no limit to the women he could entrance. But still, after all the time he lived on this earth it was Venera he talked about most. But love is rarely enough, is it not? I've come to see convenience have more sway.

Anyway, over the course of several more weeks, Venera and her parents visited often claiming to have business in Madrid. They'd send a written message ahead asking to be received by the Cortés'. The Marquesa would welcome them to join her at dinner with the other guests she'd be entertaining that evening. Her parents would accept. Once they were seated, they'd inquire whether Hernán had returned from the battle in Barbary. They'd express their well wishes and prayers for his safety abroad. Then they'd ask whether the Marquesa had any promising news? Had he agreed? The Marquesa would reassure them that she was confident he'd return shortly with his decision. The conversations at the table would go well past sundown. The women would support discussions on marriage and futures. The men would compare news and battle strategies for the battle against Algiers. The Martín brothers would compete for Venera's attention and she'd announce her exhaustion. Not a minute later, the Marquesa would offer all the guests a night's stay in the palace. Venera would thank her graciously and a servant would escort her to her room.

During these visits, which often extended beyond a single day, the Martíns' became more acquainted with Venera. With both brothers interested and with no word from their father they

couldn't jump into engagements just yet. So as I mentioned earlier, they would compete. These not being your common siblings, the brothers went about matters in the only ways they knew or perhaps had. The younger Martín worked on sweetening his mother. The older Martín, having no natural parent present to speak with, went to Venera herself in hopes of making for her somewhat of a patina of himself so that she felt comfortable with him and in turn would go to her mother.

Martín had seen that beneath Venera's fixation on finery, her attention to the new jewels around her neck, the culinary delicacy she had the pleasure of enjoying and the telling of the story that went along with acquiring it, lay an inquisitive, passionate, and even vulnerable woman. He'd decided on this after observing her in her interactions with the world. When she pet and looked into his horse's large eyes she appeared to communicate with it. When she performed harp for Christmas midnight mass she closed her eyes as though stung. Her true self was not always apparent and sometimes he only saw traces of it, but when he did he relished the moment. He thought of her as a spring from a large, hidden source that only gushed of its own accord. He desired to swim in that spring, for pleasure of course, but also because he'd imagined it to be like bathing in the sun after a cold night of camping or like cat eyes and ears watching and twitching at phantoms unseen.

And one night he'd come to her room. She'd told him to leave but when he just stood still and raised the jug of wine he'd brought she shook her head smiling and went to the door to lock it. He'd sat on one of the leather and wooden chairs before the fireplace and set the drink on a table. She'd taken the chair on the other side of the table and faced the fire.

"It's about time someone visit you, do you think? Always you come to us," he'd said.

The firelight had made patterns on her face and the shawl she covered herself with fell below one of her shoulders.

She'd confessed her happiness at his surprise, "One goes mad counting cracks and shadows."

Martin had smiled, "It was nothing."

He'd stood and retrieved the tray of two cups from the dresser against the wall and poured them drinks. She'd taken small sips and he'd wondered whether her actions were made of wisdom or inexperience. With a well-bred girl like her he'd supposed both. Nevertheless, her tongue loosened and she'd asked to see his hands.

"A person's hands can speak for them," she'd smiled like a knowing gypsy.

At first he'd felt naked and unsure of what she'd find. Would she see his dreams, his desires, and his nightmares? But when she'd taken his hand and turned it over interlacing her own white fingers through his brown ones he'd realized feeling foolish that she was no fortuneteller.

She'd said, "I've never..." and a moment later, "Beautiful."

She had only reactions and questions, no predictions or advice. Her chattiness about the scars and healing wounds on his hands along with the sounds of the wood burning from brown to charred black had filled every crack and shadow. Sure, he'd felt desired because she'd touched him out of her own will, but also her intrigue was unveiled and her naked truth passed into him so that he at least knew he wasn't ugly. He'd clung to the idea that in her eyes he was something to look at.

She'd questioned him about he and his brother's shared name. Why had his father done that? He'd shrugged and drank his wine. He'd half jokingly told her it was his father's way of

saying he loved his sons equally. Then he cleared his throat and informed her that his father had done the same thing with other illegitimate children in Mexico. One, for example, had been Leonor, Cortés' daughter with Isabel Moctezuma, the Aztec Emperess. Later, when Cortés married Juana de Zúñiga she'd born him twins. Cortés had baptized the girl, Leonor. She would have been his new wife's first daughter except that she'd died along with her twin soon after birth.

Venera hadn't seemed ready for his question when he'd asked her why her parents had named her Venera. She'd taken a moment to watch the fire and then smiled at him. She'd batted her eyes and said that she was the beautiful and dangerous Venus. He'd turned a little shifty because she really was beautiful. Then she'd stopped and burst out laughing telling him it was a joke and to relax and share the wine. He'd laughed with her and granted her wish. Pouring, he'd suddenly felt sturdier.

"My parents always wanted a stone beauty, one they could chisel into a perfect lady, a perfect Venus that would charm a wealthy suitor and put them in riches," she'd shaken her hair and a pin had popped out freeing a lock of her blonde hair, "But instead they obtained me."

She'd sighed and sipped her wine. He'd suspected that this was far from the truth, that she was the Venus her parents wanted, and that his coming in the night was all a part of their plan. He'd felt irritated by her honesty. But the alcohol and her company had felt good and he hadn't wanted to ruin the mood. Instead, he'd changed the subject and asked about Toledo. They'd talked by the firelight until dawn breathed a blue hue into the room. He'd said goodnight and taken the wine container back down the hall to his own quarters.

As Venera's visits increased so had his attraction. The moment he'd find himself alone with her he'd unconsciously reach for her hand and look at her seriously, saying something like

“Mi angelita” or “How I’ve missed you.” She would blush and look away but not remove her hand, unless they were in the open, which he understood because she was not his promised. She would look around to see if anyone saw. Or when she heard a voice she’d pull away.

Then one day, it happened that she withdrew even when they were completely alone. He blamed himself. Martín had gone to her room as he’d done the times before, late at night, with the wine. He had been so filled with a strange yet powerful surge of belonging the entire day. His wounds were healed and his sword practice was going smooth again. He’d made up his mind to ask her to marry him and to gather his parent’s blessings afterward. He’d entered her room and upon seeing her was filled with a feeling he’d never known from a woman, not from a lover and never from a mother. The feeling was so full of fire that he’d set the wine down immediately. He’d felt an urgent need to speak.

Martín flinched at the memory. He watched Venera on the deck of the boat now. He saw her carrying life, her belly pushing against her dress. Would things have followed differently had he not disclosed too much? Should he have spoken sooner? Had he frightened her, overstepped an invisible boundary, he hadn’t known existed? He’d gone beyond the joys inspired by conversation and small touches and taken a risk. Love, he’d spoken the word to her. And when it came out once, a dozen repetitions and variations rushed after.

In turn, she had been still and quiet. Only the nape of her neck faced him as she looked off to one side. After a few beats she’d carefully turned around and looked into him. Yes, into him. She was like a scared bird flying as fast as possible to the safety of a tunnel. Her eyes wandered his face. They were filled with what looked like a million words that she couldn’t find the sounds or the courage to express.

“My father has told me I am promised to...” her eyes had quivered and she’d stopped.

She'd looked away again and said not a word.

He'd only spoken to her out of desperation for feminine tenderness and that was as far as he'd thought it through. But since that time he'd found a plethora of activities and women to fill the years. Martín closed his eyes for a moment and felt the sea breeze. He rolled his head in a half circle over his chest to stretch his neck and continued on his way to the ship. His servants followed with his bags.

CHAPTER FOUR

The waves pitched the boat. Martín's feet anchored on the deck. His muscles tensed and gave to accommodate the movement. The white sails overhead billowed with wind and rustled with a sound like five enormous sheets drying on a line. Martín pushed his surroundings to the back of his mind as he read the brown inked letter from Luis.

On the question of Hernán Cortés' will and testament. Against the Marques del Valle who withholds rightful inheritance of mines and slaves, of which Martín Cortés I has received nothing...

Martín's thick, black eyebrows were taugth. They almost joined in the middle.

... Martín Cortés I has granted and given through his letter his full, free, complete, and abundant power to me, Luis de Quesada, his brother-in-law, being in the Indies of New Spain, so that for him, and in his name, I may demand, receive, and collect the one thousand ducados due to him each year from the estate of the Marques del Valle, his younger brother.

Martín looked out to sea. His hair tickled the tops of his ears in the stirring breeze. A headache bloomed above his eyes and he rubbed his forehead. He squinted and lifted his hand to ward the sun from his sight. He searched the horizon. No land, only the endless span of rippled sea. He thought about the long passage over these waters and the nearing meeting with Luis, his brother-in-law upon arrival. He thought about Luis' wife, his half sister Maria of the same mother, and about his half brother Atl of the same mother. He'd only seen their faces through his minds eye, through the letters they exchanged. He anticipated that beholding them would be

like looking in a mirror. In the letters Maria and Atl seemed educated, well versed in Latin and Spanish, and the politics of both the old and new world, as was he.

Most importantly, what shone like a diamond in a fountain for him was that they'd known his mother. Raised by Marina the translator they'd learned the skill of language acquiring, and were familiar with Spanish, Latin, Nahuatl, Mayan and other Indigenous dialects. His chest ached as he was reminded that unlike him, they'd known a mother, and an intelligent one. The natural feeling of knowing a mother had been carved out of him as he'd been taken from her as a toddler. He'd gone to live with his father in Spain. His father's wife, Juana, had then become his mother. But she'd handed him off to maids. Twenty-three maids, he'd counted, through the course of his upbringing. The lack of the feminine touch in Martín's life would have explained much were he to have seen it sooner. I'm sure that had it not been for the dreams he rarely spoke of he'd not been made to deal with his mother at all. Because it came from him, from no other than from him, the dreams showed him an alternate world one that nobody could come close to if they tried. And like all stubborn people I think it was this unconscious seed from his own being, though there were those who helped it grow, that helped him change.

But when the thought crossed his mind he squashed it to go forward with life. At the moment of reading the letter on the ship, he settled on the thought that he would meet his brother and sister. He blinked his eyes and re-examined the parchment. The flawless letter was only marred by the flicks of ink from the dipping of the quill and the travel time it had endured to reach him. If he could only secure his father's inheritance then he could enjoy the reunion with his family. He could return to Spain with peace.

He felt a weight on his chest. He reminded himself, he was fortunate. He was knighted under the Order of Santiago, the oldest, most honorable fraternity. Even his father hadn't been

admitted. He touched the scarlet swords forming a cross on his uniformed chest. The stitching told him he was worthy of bearing them. Every morning he saw his reflection as he impatiently trimmed his beard. And every morning he couldn't wait to undress from his sleeping clothes and put on his uniform. With the pride he had in it, you could say it was his second skin.

Martín closed his eyes and clenched the letter in his fist, creasing Luis' careful scripture. He went back to his siblings. He saw the ship drifting into the shore of the New World. Maria and Atl came on horseback to meet him. He imagined the greetings his father had encountered. Natives appeared from behind trees carrying baskets of food and treasure--just as his father had described. They came to his father and bowed so that their foreheads touched the ground.

Martín shuddered. Daydreaming unlocked his nightmares. He saw his own face from in his dreams, covered in tattoos and piercings plugged with jade. No, no. He thought, he was Spanish in mind, body, and spirit. These markings in his dreams defaced him. He thought of them with shame. Martín opened his eyes. He drank in the scent of the ocean and the salt of the air. He concentrated on the breeze against his skin and the tickling of his hairs. His senses were the fastest way back to the present moment.

Martín was fifteen. He, his younger brother, and other young knights in long, loose, white habits with the red cross displayed over their hearts, practiced their sword fighting in the plaza of their palacio after their sword lesson. The plaza echoed with the knights' grunts and quick steps, swords clanging and whooshing in the air. Their brown shoes scratched trails in the dirt and nudged small stones. They advanced and drew from one another, at times fighting throughout the archways and halls and back into the plaza. They were surrounded by Moorish patterned arches, which seemed to trace the rounded edges of flower petals. On the first floor,

against each column, grew small, manicured orange trees. And above, in the second floor's archways stood white statues of Spanish kings whose heads seemed to peer down at the boys and their swords.

Martín's strong, thick wrist turned to angle his sword toward his brother's throat.

"What do you think is their meaning?" Martín asked.

Martín had him backed into an orange tree. His younger brother leaned his head back into the green leaves. Martín's sword tapered into his brother's neck. Martín lowered his sword and turned to walk back to the center of the plaza. His younger brother went after him. He kicked him in the back of the leg. Martín laughed and ran to the starting point. He breathed fast and touched his own neck when he reached the middle of the plaza. He felt the pitted scars from the lamparones illness five Februaries ago. He confided in his younger brother the strange dreams that plagued him since his time in his sickbed.

"How would I know? In this manner you spend your hours?"

The younger brother took his stance. He leaned forward, directing his sword at Martín. Martín quickly mirrored him. They swung and their swords met with a loud clank that vibrated into Martín's hand. He held his grip on the hilt. Weapons scraping, the younger brother stepped into Martín who moved back. Together, their crossed swords swung in a half circle, neither willing to disconnect. They plodded down a few arches in this way.

"It's out of my control. She comes every night."

"What, father's whore?" the younger brother laughed and then clenched his jaw.

Martín frowned and shook his head.

"Good, well, simple, go back to New Spain, find your Indian whore--mother, pardon me--and ask her yourself."

Martín ignored the insult, “She’s dead, Martín. Remember.”

“Oh, well, it’s not like you knew her. You need a Spanish mother, a real mother, like mine. Not a heathen puta,” the younger leaned further into Martín.

Martín felt a hot wave rise to his face. Without thinking he thrust his sword forward. The younger brother dropped his. He yelped and cupped his ear. He brought his hand down and saw his own blood on his fingers.

Martín’s eyes got big and he pulled at his own hair, “Sorry, it was pure error!”

The other boys broke their fighting and ran toward the Cortés brothers to see what had happened. They looked from the wounded ear to the older Martín, while his younger brother alternated between tears and curses.

“H-he has dreams from the devil--” he said pointing.

“No, I don’t!”

“He’s lying! He told me all about them. He has dreams of his Indian puta. He doesn’t want to remain here...he wants to be an Indian, like her...drinking blood,” he held up his bloody knuckles.

“It was an accident!”

“No, it wasn’t! Go with you! Go live with the people of your kind! Those savage, ass...you barbarian, mongrel! W-we don’t even look like brothers!”

“Yes, go away, Martín. You can’t remain here!” one of the other boys picked up a rock and threw it at him.

Martín blocked his head with his arms, sword still in hand, “Yes, I do, I’m a knight in the Order of Santiago!”

“¡Bruto! Go away from here! Find your damn Indios! Barbarian!” the boys bent into the dirt collecting more pebbles.

They threw a small storm of stones and Martín dropped his sword to better cover himself. He heard the sound of the heavy handle thump against the ground. He ran behind one of the petaled archways, dipping into its shadow. He squeezed his eyes shut. His lips, quivering wet with saliva, spread out to the sides of his face as he let out nasal wailing sounds from an unseen ache. He wiped his eyes and ran down the shaded hall. He went up the stairway that led to his room where he knew a beautiful, shining, black latch awaited him on the inside of his door.

A hand touched Martín’s shoulder and jolted his nerves. He spun around in surprise.

“Do you scare by me? Sickness overcomes you for reading this way,” the Marques laughed and swatted at his letter. “One needs move, not remain occupied in one space thoughtful so much as this. The sea is a vixen. She’ll swallow you if you let her.”

The Marques’ lips smiled, but Martín thought the glimmer, no euphoria, in his eyes was from a source of ill will directed at him. Scattered hairs strayed upward from the Marques’ red beard. He reached for the letter and Martín pulled back. Martín brushed the hair from his own forehead.

“Your head breaks, does it not?” His brother touched his head the way Martín had, “Yes, it does. This voyage is beyond your withstanding, I fear. But, be tranquil, there’s plenty of wine for that head.”

The Marques put his hand on Martín’s shoulder. Martín felt his ears warm. Just the sight of his brother gave him a headache. But he didn’t want to get into another argument, especially at the beginning of a voyage. As the sailors say, that would bring bad luck. Instead, Martín

suffered the feeling of his brother's hand on him and thought on the brother and sister he had yet to meet.

"What are you thinking about brother?" the Marques asked.

"I'm thinking about greeting my sister and brother Atl after we arrive," he responded genuinely.

"Oh--the *siblings*."

Martín ignored the grit in his brother's voice and faced him, "Yes, Maria and Atl. I know them by their letters."

"Yes? Good, I can help you with that, save a little time. Maria, look at this, she's rare as a blue hog I'm sure with that deformity of hers."

"And Atl, he is a puto," the Marques stiffened. "Look at me brother. It's true we were all born in the same place, but we weren't raised there. Consider that."

Martín slid his eyes back to the sea and clenched his letter in his hand. He would fight his brother with his lawyer.

He glanced at the Marques, "You know what this is?" He held up the letter. It whisked against his palm, "Account from Luis."

"Ah, my dear Martín. To dwell upon such matters pushes the thorn of life further into the heart--"

"You owe me that which was offered me," Martín snapped.

The Marques grinned keeping his calm, "Do you know the cost to maintain those mines? In truth, I'm doing you a favor."

"You can't steal my inheritance--"

His brother held up a hand, “The food, clothing, and medicines of the slaves cost more than the silver they produce--”

“It’s not yours. We’re equal--I’m the son of Hernán Cortés, same as you.”

His brother opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. He lowered his hand and moved to the ship railing, grabbing it with both hands. He faced the waves and then hung his head. He was quiet at first and then he laughed out loud. Martín stared at him. Some of the other conquistadores occupying the ship deck glanced at them.

Martín dropped the letters and charged at his brother, “Pig! What do you think? You think you’re more a Cortés than I?”

Martín slammed his brother to the floor, thrusting his shoulders to the ground.

The conquistadores appeared around them like a ring of shadow waiting to press down upon them. The Marques squirmed out of Martín’s grasp and the darkness stayed back.

“My name carries more weight,” the Marques said, his chest heaving.

The brothers stood opposite one another, pausing for breath. Martín’s fists were balled at his sides.

“*Your* name?” Martín asked.

“Yes, why not? In any other situation, my father would not have felt the need to name me Martín.”

“*Your* father--”

“Yes!” he yelled, “He desired to correct his first *error*.”

“You’re wrong.”

“¿No me crees? Look at this, this piel,” the Marques stepped up to Martín. He pinched and twisted his skin. “You’re my brother by chance, pure luck.”

Martín struck him hard in the jaw. His brother shifted back and then lurched forward with a swing at Martín.

The conquistadores yelled, “Martín! Stop! Marques!”

A conquistador wrenched the Marques’ hands from Martín’s neck and three others grabbed Martín’s arms and pulled him back.

The Marques rubbed his jaw and brushed off his coat. How could his younger brother question his virtue as a Cortés when all his life he’d also devoted himself to God and their king, the Order of Santiago? In how many battles had he risked death and disease? It meant nothing?

“I hope for you the best of luck. You’ll need it to overcome the savage in you.”

Martín shoved off Suárez, the conquistador compadre of his, attempting to guide him away. Martín lowered his head and walked to the other end of the ship. Martín always looked bad next to his brother or at least he thought so. He thought he appeared the barbarian when really the Marques seemed to know how to give just enough fuel to his temper and let Martín finish what he started. He used the sword of his tongue. Martín thought it sharp and without honor.

CHAPTER FIVE

In his thirst for something other than alcohol Martín staggered to his feet. His sleeping chamber was tight but it was still the envy of the mariners and passengers unable to pay the high price of privacy on board. He had a cot and space for his portmanteau. Above his trunk sat earthen jars of olives, water, and wine, well, what was left, and a blue ceramic plate of white bread and cheese. His shoulder thudded against the wall as his foot caught on the jacket he'd thrown to the floor after the confrontation with his brother. He took a minute to compose himself and rested his head on the wooden panels that formed the doorway. He closed his eyes and felt his temple jabbed by a metal nail. Either it hadn't been pushed in far enough or the rocking of the boat had worked it back out. Life seemed to go that way for Martín with the structure of his life together but not as secure as he'd like. He drew back his fist and punched the nail into the wall. A little blood smudged over the wood and he wiped his hand on his pants.

There remained the last light of day when he emerged from below. He opened his chest to the rushing air. It was cool and fresh over the sweat that had collected across his forehead. He made his way to where he saw the sailors gathered in an uneven circle between the mainmast and toldilla, which was near the rear of the ship. A tranquil air had spread over the deck. He moved his tongue in his mouth tasting the fruity remnants of the Albariño.

As he neared the cluster he covered the sun with his hand to gain a better view. He didn't find his brother, but he saw Suárez in his plumed velvet cap and the other conquistadores joined there. Some looked out to sea at the setting sun. Others nibbled on the day's fish and brown bread at the ends of their knives. A fat sailor stood picking at his beard and hair while holding

up a rusting mirror. What did he have, fleas, lice? And a cultured fellow sat with his back against the base of the wooden mast reading aloud.

The portly man finished his grooming and sat down. Then suddenly Martín did not want to disturb the scene he beheld. He slowed his pace. Behind the groomer sat the Marquesa on the steps leading up to the toldilla. She sat next to one of the other men's wives. She faced the setting sun. The light illuminated her face. She ran her fingers along the lace hem over her belly. She looked at times to the sailor reading verse:

"And who knows if it is not for just such a time that you reached this royal position. Esther said to relay to Mordechai: Go and gather all the Jews who are in Shushan and fast for my sake, do not eat and do not drink for three days, night and day. My maids and I shall also fast in the same way. Then I shall go to the king, though it is unlawful, and if I perish, I perish."

For Martín the landscape was now complete. Although like enduring the nail in the doorway, he felt the familiar squall whipping his stomach as it always did when Venera appeared. He touched his stomach and decided to go for a stroll. Of course he didn't see Venera, also with her hand over her belly, spot him and watch him walk away.

For reasons unclear to him, Martín stayed out late into the night with the mestizo and foreign sailors he'd found at the other end of the ship. One lantern was set on the crate illuminating their cards and the contours of the men's faces.

They'd asked him questions, "Oye, ladrón, where'd you obtain those clothes?"

They'd nearly taken him as one of their own. But when they'd heard his proper Spanish inflections they knew he was something else. They'd asked him his name. The gamblers layed

their cards down flat and stalling their dirt encrusted nails over their crate. Martín had told them and began giving his background story, but before he could even tell about leaving Mexico behind and moving to Spain one of the men offered him his share of wine, urging him to continue. Martín had thanked him and drank it. He was beginning to feel an affinity with these men. When he had finished he patted the red cross on his chest swearing his allegiance to his king and country.

The men wanted to hear more about his father and the treasure and the Aztec emperor. He described the stunning sight of Tenochtitlán when the Spaniards first arrived as his father had told him. The men were still, listening intently. They wanted to know more details about the gifts of treasure. Their eyes sparkled and little smiles bloomed on their faces.

“Well, maybe I won’t return from this land of gold,” a cross-eyed man asked, blinking curls out of his eyes, “If it’s that grand.”

Chatter about how they’d each achieve their fortunes and what they’d do with them mingled with the thrash of the waves.

“And what type of plans now, don Martín?” the cross-eyed sailor asked.

The gamblers picked up their game again. Martín’s eyes wandered over the sailors. He heard the sound of rolling coins thrown in for bets.

“I’m going to honor my father and his legacy,” Martín said, “He has since gone to God.”

He saw criss-crossing scars over the sailors’ faces, arms, and hands. Soldiers of the sea he thought with respect. He watched them quietly for a moment not needing to speak. One man claimed, through his lips to the side, that his mates never beat him at malilla. He had a tick of touching his jaw and his gums showed red when he laughed in derision. Another had a splinter

in his hand that he hadn't removed. There was a boy that couldn't be older than nine sucking on a wet wheat biscuit.

"My mother Japanese, father Spain," a dimpled marinero said to Martín.

The Japonés smiled and his teeth shone in the light. He was the happiest of the bunch, "I know what you need!"

"Ah! No, Arata, he don't want it," the other marineros laughed.

The Japonés said that he had to get something. He ran into the darkness.

Martín asked them what he was talking about and they told him he had a hobby of tattooing. Martín's eyes widened. He could go head first into battle, the first of the line, but to say the least tattoos terrified him. He thought of his face from his dreams. Then he feared the men were looking at him and seeing his mind.

The man with the red gums spoke from the corner of his mouth, "Tatuajes? You like tatuajes, don Martín?" He handed him his cup of wine.

"No, gracias," he said, "I can't take your wine anymore. I'll get my own."

Just then, a sailor of a pungent odor appeared next to him.

"You fear tatuajes?" the foul smelling sailor asked touching Martín's arm.

At that moment Martín knew he wasn't drunk enough for this. He turned to go back to his chamber, but the sailor kept his arm there and held Martín's eyes.

"Leave him in peace, Gustavo," a voice said.

"You should fear more than tatuaje. Your brother said "good luck" to you. I was there," the man said.

Martín jerked his arm away, "Marinero, this is your ship but you injure yourself to step on me. What do you say? Explain yourself."

“We are not on normal ground Martín. Here the laws are governed by the sea and the rare salty airs that sweep over it.”

“Your point. Quickly, I say,” Martín felt the hilt of his sword.

“There are words that must not be spoken here. The only remedy now is,” the man stopped short and gasped. His eyes rolled up to the stars as though in a trance.

Martín felt his face grow warm. He wanted to leave this fool and spend the rest of the night’s dark hours resting, but now the other marineros were watching and waiting.

“¿De que, loco?” Martín looked at the men, “Well, can somebody speak?”

“He’s drunk don’t listen to him.”

“Cabrón, there’s no curse and no remedy. Cállate,” one of the gamblers grunted, “Asustado, people here go mad about illusions. Think the sea will spit a little on them. Think there’s phantoms and giant serpent sorts--”

“It’s talking about fears like these that causes troubles! Enough!” the other gambler raised his eyebrows and lowered his hand.

The Japonés returned with his box of tattoo utensils.

Smiling he presented the box to Martín, “I have red. You will like a red cross?”

“No, no,” Martín had had too much of these sailors.

He walked away toward his cabin. As he got further away he was glad the sea breeze drowned out their babel. He heard quick padding coming his way. It was the young boy. When he reached him he jumped up and down to speak into Martín’s ear.

Martín grabbed the child’s shoulders, “¡Ya, ya!” he said.

But the boy persisted. “Spill blood. That’s what you have to do. The remedy or else--” he whispered with tight lips and abundant saliva.

“Niño!” the sailors yelled.

The boy looked over his shoulder and then at the ocean with real fear and then his feet went clapping back to the sailors.

Martín looked over the ocean peaks that shone in the moonlight and continued to his room.

CHAPTER SIX

Tenochtitlán, Mexico, 1563

Martín paused beneath a tree. A priest, four mestizos, one African, and the Marques stood in his company. They took rest at his side. He toed the brown dirt and the yellow skeletons of shrubs. He gazed past his feet at the ruined land surrounded by Lake Texcoco. It lay beneath the hill he'd climbed. Not even the pyramids were left standing. How long had it taken people to construct it he wondered. And how long had it taken the Spaniards to obliterate it and build their own church with the same materials?

Martín heard no music, saw no floating gardens or causeways, no boats or people rowing, no market, no exchanging of goods, no grand empire operating, events or festivals to attend. All the tales told him by his father seemed impossible at the sight of the barren city. What of the golden treasures and exotic teal quetzal feathers and emperor robes?

“What is this father? This is not Tenochtitlan?” Martín asked seeking confirmation.

“It is. It was,” the priest responded, “A spacious city, channels of clean water--”

“Stop wasting time,” the Marques said, already leaving the shade to move further uphill.

The group followed. Once they reached the top of the hill, the workers dropped their heavy load to the ground: shovels, picks, and a head stone. Metal clanked against stone and wood. The head stone made a solid thud as it lay over the earth. Dust powdered the air. The Marques crossed his arms.

“Well, this is the place. Here will be built the monastery upon my father’s request,” he faced the workers, “Now, dig.”

They stood statuesque.

“First, need pay. No slaves,” one said.

Martín could hardly believe his ears, a slave speaking out to authority? He’d heard of changes in New Spain, resistance to slavery, but he never imagined they’d try a conquistador let alone one of Cortés status.

Martín heard the Marques curse under his breath, the way he did when he was agitated, “Damned Indios.”

He dug a pouch from his belt and took out some money.

“Here,” he said, and pretended to hand over money to the worker’s outstretched hand before snatching it back again.

Martín laughed. The Native’s gullibility struck him as funny. The Marques reached out his hand again and the slave took the single coin he offered.

“No. Full pay,” the man frowned.

“When you finish, you will be entreated with the rest. I’m not paying you to mount a hill. I’m paying you to work.”

The Marques nodded toward the tools. Reluctantly, the men picked up their shovels and dug their tools into the land.

Martín and the Marques faced the gradually deepening hole and waited for the priest who’d nearly disappeared into silence. He unrolled a scroll and prayed.

“El señor es mi pastor, nada me falta...”

Martín glanced into the distance where the grand city of Tenochtitlán once stood. The priest’s voice was calm and steady. It settled into a background sound, allowing for Martín’s thoughts. The meanings behind the words vanished, but his soothing voice remained.

“Me hace descansar...verdes pastos...”

He laid in a dark wooden bed with his head on a pillow. A red cross in the shape of two swords carved into the headboard marking the Order of Santiago. A full and spotless glass of water sat on a small table next to a book delineating in Latin the rules of the Order. He was merely ten years old and already fallen victim to ravaging disease, bedridden, enduring fever, throes of burning pain, interrupted by extended hours of sleep interrupted by nightmares, and that by waking in sheets of sweat.

Scarcely anyone besides servants and doctors had been to see him and the severe abscesses on his neck in weeks. For this reason, February was especially exhilarating to him for his father had returned from council with the king about his most recent royal expedition in Almería.

When the side of Martín's bed gave to his father's weight Martín absorbed his scent, a mix of wine and earth after passing rain. Hernán lowered his head to get a close look at his son's throat. He lifted the white cloth that lightly wrapped the sores. He didn't gasp at the sight. He was a man acquainted with the world. He spoke of his voyage, his favorite Andalusian horse's leg broken at battle and the unfortunate necessity of killing it. Martín understood this, but was reminded of his own strong horse waiting in the stables and hated to think that one day he would encounter the same.

He turned Martín's cheek left and right and told him to raise his chin. His father's eyes were rich and soft, yet a harsh shadow presented itself when he frowned. Martín took in his father's lightness and darkness. He gently repositioned the cloth. He wasn't sure how much time he had before Hernán slipped away. He was almost always occupied watching the progress

of Mexico or venturing on political or military duties. Martín memorized the scent clinging to the coat, beard, and breath hovering over him. They whispered of danger and adventure.

When his father made a sudden turn at the waist, Martín feared he meant to leave. Abruptly Martín sat up interrupting the story of the doomed Andalusian.

“Tell me something of Mexico,” he hastened.

As a knight, Martín maintained his brazen demeanor even while not clothed in white Santiago dress.

“Hijo, the doctor will be here soon,” Hernán passed a cool hand over his son’s forehead, “Ya, ya. Lie back down.”

There was dirt beneath his nails. Tawny hairs curved from his knuckles. Martín squeezed his father’s arm, looking pleadingly into his eyes.

“Alright quickly,” Hernán surrendered, “I have told you how the city of emperor Moctezuma was like a dream. Everything floated on water, many plants, and flowers, canoes down the causeways. It was beautiful. I told your mother to pass my praise to--”

“How was my mother?”

“It is not polite to interrupt.”

“Forgive me.”

“My little boy, you are bold. Definitely a Cortés,” Hernán laughed.

Martín smiled.

Martín wanted to know more. He was a Spanish boy and raised as such. But he was growing wary of strange dreams. Since the onset of his disease the dreams came to Martín frequently, but he hadn’t confided in anyone. It seemed a foolish thing to reveal. Martín had overheard many adult conversations about performing God’s will on the savages, exposing them

to the correct spiritual path. He wouldn't dare speak of dreams in which he himself was a savage. No, he was on the Spanish side. And yet, why did his unconscious stray from nobility?

In his dreams he was five years old, facing away, and sitting naked on a yellow animal skin spread over grass. He saw a small dog, felt a soothing breeze, and heard his mother humming--or at least whom he presumed to be his mother. At the end of every dream, his younger self turned around to reveal a face covered in tattoos and pierced with gold plated green jewelry.

"She was very intelligent. She lived with many different peoples. She learned languages, cures for illnesses--"

"True? Would she cure me?"

Even when he woke, the dreams drifted into daydreams.

"Well, she would not have known lamparones then."

"She would try?"

Were they vague memories of his past? He wondered if the remaining fragments had made a home in his dreams somehow. And now he was noticing not only the otherworldly dreams, but a blend of his present world among them. Rather than dreaming of the usual bare, infant, sitting on an animal skin, he now saw himself as he was, age ten, Santiago dress, riding his horse at full gallop intent on kicking over the Indian blanket. And he smelled in the breeze of the New World the very rice and oysters he'd had for lunch in his room that day. He wondered, would this mixing of his present life overlap his first memories, if that was what they were, would there remain any memory of his mother, if that was who she was?

There was a knock at the door and Hernán straightened his coat and stood up. He smoothed Martín's hair.

It was a known fact that Martín spent his first five or six years of life in Mexico. His mother was doña Marina, a principal Indian. His father sought the Pope to ask God to save him, free him from the mark of illegitimate birth--out of wedlock and of an Indian woman. Everyone knew of Martín's past, but also of its cleansing, of the Pope's legitimizing him. But what nobody ever explained was the expression on his mother's face when he was taken from her, taken to Spain or the life he might have led if he hadn't been. He was sure the other boys at court hadn't any of these troubling thoughts. He tried trampling them. He tried twice as hard earning his rank as a knight, to be exhausted every night, to keep from thinking about his past, whether memory or dream.

"Yes, my son. She would try."

Hernán walked to the door and opened it. Martín saw the prominent muscles moving through his father's stockings.

"Don't be too preoccupied, our surgeons are equally as smart as your mother," Hernán said.

Martín smiled, especially because his father hadn't used the word "was."

The surgeon greeted Hernán. They stepped outside to speak. A moment later they reappeared and the surgeon passed through the room to move the cloth from Martín's neck.

"He will care for you now," Hernán said avoiding his son's gaze.

Martín's smile vanished.

A nurse entered, one of her arms filled with white rags and the other a metal bowl of water.

Martín watched his father's back as he walked out. The shadow from the hall consumed him slowly as another nurse entered the room. The shadow swallowed his father's back and his red hair.

The second nurse handed the surgeon a hot metal lance while the first nurse with the metal bowl went to the opposite side of the bed, half holding Martín down, half stroking his shoulder. He attempted to distract himself by staring into the shiny bowl. But was alarmingly aware of his own hair in the reflection, how dark and unlike his father's it was.

The surgeon approached him and brought the lance to one of the abscesses on his neck. Martín clenched his jaw and did his best to maintain the bravery expected of him. He wanted people to know him as a fearless and faithful knight. But when the searing pain over his throat overwhelmed him, he cried out in spite of himself. He pressed the back of his head into his pillow, trying to lie still to prevent more burns than intended.

Tears trailed into his ears. *Mother. Mother.* He imagined the gentleness of his mother's humming. He pictured it with his eyes shut tight. He felt her hand brush his cheek and wipe away his tears.

Martín touched the collar wrapped around his neck.

The priest's prayers continued to fade in and out, "Con sus alas...en la cruz....Y en mi corazón llevame...de Jesus."

Martín imagined his father in the city: greeting emperor Moctezuma, receiving the humble bows and precious gold treasures of the Aztecs.

"Este bendito hombre...nos dejado...tan grande..."

He saw his father racing on horse back into battle, sword gleaming, severing limbs and heads, entrails falling to the floor like wet laundry, the burning and final destruction of Tenochtitlán, the smell of scorched hair and straw in flames--this rich and clean society settling into ash.

“Of the inheritance of Hernán Cortés First Marques del Valle de Oaxaca, I read,” the priest slid from prayer to mention of the final testament.

Martín severed his gaze from the island of ruins. He noticed the Marques’ uncrossed arms and his mouth that had fallen open a little. One of the slaves held a small box, another, a silver tube. The Cortés brothers listened carefully.

“To my son, Martín by doña Marina, from my estate shall receive mines, slaves, and one thousand gold ducados every year...”

Martín repeated the priest’s words in his mind, *estate, gold ducados, mines*.

“In return, said don Martín shall serve and obey his younger brother in all things and treat him as head of the family...”

The Marques looked at his older brother.

Martín held his gaze. He ignored the flickering flame he felt rising in his face. He switched his eyes to the hole dug before him and concentrated on his father.

The priest rolled the scroll tight and slid it into the metal tube held by a mestizo. The priest motioned to the small box. It was wrapped in gold-trimmed black velvet. One of the workers brought it to the Marques. The Marques held up his hand and waved him away, nodding toward the priest. The worker brought the casket to the priest, unwrapped it, and lifted the lid, revealing the human bones inside. The Marques clasped his hands behind his back.

The priest sprinkled the bones with holy water, “Y en Tú casa, oh Señor, por siempre viviré...”

The Marques sighed and turned to the priest, “Forgive me father, if possible, can we not say the final prayer?”

As the slaves wrapped the casket, placed it into the ground, and buried it with dirt, the priest nodded and recited the Serenity Prayer.

As Martín and the priest were crossing themselves and the workers dragged the heavy engraved head stone to one end of the grave, the Marques walked away. Martín let him do as he pleased and remained reading the engraving: “Hernán Cortés, Conquerer of New Spain.” His father, the conquerer, these men working before him the conquered. He looked at them. Had his mother not found his father would Martín have been one of them?

Martín saw one of the mestizos standing in the Marques’ path.

“Marques, we finished.”

The Marques stopped and glared at him.

“Marques,” he grumbled, “You’ve finished the grave. I will pay after you’ve built my father’s monastery as well.”

“No,” he scowled, “Grave.”

“I said I would pay you when you *finished*.”

“No--”

“Move, you.”

Martín watched as the Marques shoved the slave to the side and walked past.

“*We* are finished here! The grandeur of Mexico City awaits! Come brother, the streets are full of crowds and the guests of honor are late! ¡Vamonos!”

Martín and the priest made no move to argue. Martín let the priest walk before him and followed. He turned around at a distance to take one last glance at his father's grave. What he beheld next he never expected to see. Was it ignorance of authoritative power or madness brought on by pure rage? If they knew the consequences for this insolence--yet Martín did nothing. He watched, transfixed by their brazen defiance.

The mestizos. They gathered stones and threw them at his father's headstone. They kicked at it and shoved it until it fell on its face. The negrito was at the side picking up the tools.

They yelled in their Indian tongue, "Coatl poyot! Nahualli poyot!"

Their shrieking stirred something within him. He felt he wanted to join them, without rationalizing why. His father was Hernán Cortés, the greatest explorer and conquerer that ever lived. And Martín had, or would soon have with Luis' help, all the wealth he desired. And yet the mestizos desperate sounds tugged at something deep within him. He saw the back of the priest's long robe brushing against the dirt and ragged plants, but he could not follow. He felt the mestizo's voices pulling him. His hand curved around the hilt of his sword attached to his hip and he stepped in their direction. He focused on the tipped headstone, their flying rocks, and their curses that disgraced it. Their shouts made his approach invisible. He loosened his hand from the hilt of his sword as they were not armed. Once he was near enough to throw at them a blow that was just what he did. His fist struck their jaws and noses. He buried his knuckles into the brown fabric over their stomachs. Their blood was already on Martín's dark hands, but he punched their noses again to see it show brighter. One of them fell on his stomach, his face kissing the dirt. The negrito stood still, waiting with the tools in his arms. Two of the mestizos whimpered and stumbled away as another helped drag the fourth to a refuge behind formation of large rock and a tall tree. Martín didn't go after them. He blinked his eyes and went to his

father's stone. He lifted it so that it was sturdy again, standing on its own. He stood facing the spot and closed his eyes. He clenched his jaw and made the sign of the cross, kissing the back of his thumb.

He turned to go in the direction of the Marques and the priest who were now far ahead. Yet no distance he put between he and the mestizos helped close out the sound of their Indian cries. He didn't know the language or the words they'd screamed. He only knew what they'd said by the tone of their voices. They were shrill and wet, the way he and doña Bernaldina had been wet, the way they had yelled, rising above the fear of being caught, everything vanquished beyond the present moment's passion.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Panther Stalking

*You in the forest,
you in the tree.*

*Your eyes move like water.
But you are still
as darkness between stars.*

*Your fur meets the night without seams.
My teacher. I watch from above.
Yes, I, the monkey.*

Drum music filled the small clearing in the woods. Some of the women shifted babies on their hips. The men and women were naked with long hair that along with their faces and bodies was painted red. They murmured to one another. Atl, also covered in red dye, mounted a tree stump that looked like an overgrown hand sitting palm up. Extending fibers reached up like fingers. He set down his bow and arrow. He eyed his people. He knew that under their red dye lay those skins of lighter shades. And that there were pairs of light colored eyes, like his own blue ones, that looked up at him--eyes darker than black pearls. He thought they were all rare jewels that shone brighter than quetzal and jade and yes, gold.

You see, this was because Atl loved all of his people. And he thought they had a special purpose, the mestizos, the new race who were not completely indigenous and not completely Spanish. He, as one of this group, could think of no greater place for him to be than among the Natives of the north. Some of whose features clung to their Aztec, Mayan, and Coatzacoalcan roots, while others showed the lighter colors deriving from regions of the world they knew little

about. Because Atl thought nature was good he accepted their appearances as one might pick and eat a succulent fruit from a tree on a far off journey.

Atl wiped an itch on his face and felt the dye gather under his nail. He closed his eyes to go inside. Then he opened them wide as a snake and gave out a cry. Everyone closed their mouths and watched him. He began as he always did. He used his voice and his hands to tell the story of the great tragedy. His hands flew into the air and his voice rose and fell as he touched on the generous treatment of the Spaniards upon their arrival, the fall of their great Aztec empire, the splitting of the trees that shaded their ancestors, and the tears that fell from the eyes of Malintzin when she witnessed the horrific slaughter of people. Maybe they were not her people exactly because she was not raised with them. And maybe she hadn't agreed with the warring tribe and the blood letting and the skull collecting. But even she hadn't imagined the unspeakable outcome of allying with the Spaniards. The slaughtered Mexica were an ordered people with arts and loves and passions just like hers and with them she had shared life on the same land. Atl took pause. This land that *they* wanted to rape. The word *they* caused a rumble among the crowd. Some yelped out and others shook their heads.

He continued, speaking with an air of poetry, of times gone. His face brightened as he recited a short poem his mother had taught him as a boy. Stealthy panthers watched the forest at night. Their quiet breath and the soft pads of their feet kept them out of the ears of their prey. Their dark hair blended them with the shadows of the night. Their eyes looked out from blackness only visible for the light that reflected there. The panther's eyes always roamed in their heads alert. The curious monkey, aware of his carefree ways criticized by the other animals of the jungle, wanted to improve his stealth. But knowing that he could never be a panther in looks he went inside, into mind. He studied the panther and practiced every night being more

watchful and more quiet. In the day, he went through the forest laughing and mumbling louder than usual so that all the other animals grew confused, but behind his noise his eyes widened. He watched every creature and every leaf. Soon, the animals tired of his madness and left him to his own devices. It was at that moment the monkey knew he was free.

A laugh sprang from Atl's throat that was not so unlike a monkey's laugh itself. He sighed and watched his people feel his story. Their eyes were still. They were full of the monkey and the panther. Their bodies had fallen away like an old snake shell.

Atl continued. He said that not some people are like these animals, but that not every man and woman is a monkey or a panther. Just as every different animal is not a monkey or a panther. Every animal has its own means of stealth. He said this and left it at that, dropping his raised hand onto his bare thigh as though he'd just run very far and was now tired.

He reveled silently in the crinkled foreheads. He decided to go down another path. He spoke of the world their parents and parent's parents knew. No, their world was not perfect, he admitted, but he would rather go back than endure *this*. Veins bulged from his neck as he said this and pointed to an old man with scarred wrists without hands. The group nodded in agreement and grumbled in disapproval.

Nobody was asking them to choose a side, yet when his voice reached a pitch so high it brought a woman in the front to tears and moved her daughter to reach up and embrace her, Atl knew they felt as he did. They shared the feeling of mistrust toward the Spanish for their self-proclaimed superiority. They despised the Spaniards entering their villages and seizing their people for slaves. Before they were out the womb and crawling the Spanish nailed their lives to the mines of silver and gold. They mined and built until they died. The people shook their heads and narrowed their eyebrows. They raised their chins to the sky and protested.

Atl shared their inclination to shy from *them*, from the new blood that mixed within them. He had not asked them to choose, yet many of them now raised their fists and yelled. The drummer's expression grew more stern and his tempo intensified.

Atl was tired of stealing, he didn't want a life of wrong-doing, but he refused to break his back as a slave. He knew many that abided by the law and preferred death. It was his impulse to offer something besides death. They would rebel as many times as it took. They would paint themselves red and leave the white men with stains. They would attack and disperse. They would band together and take back everything the Spaniards robbed from their hills. His men seemed to stand with broader shoulders.

Atl saw jaw muscles twitching, lips pressing under teeth, and eyes rolling up in trance. The women weighed down from holding their babies seemed stronger and their faces showed less lines than before. Atl could feel their spirits grow feathers and he knew they would pass them to their children. Just as his mother, Malintzin had done for him. He knew the Spanish were only obstacles and that his people couldn't be stopped by them. His people hissed and grew scales stronger than those of Spanish armor. Atl's blue eyes sparkled. He had waited for this moment. He had filled his people's hearts with the truth. And now he needed only to lead them a little further to inspire them to act. He took up the bow and arrow sitting on the tree trunk. He let the thin arrow fly into the treetops with the loudest cry the air in his belly could fling.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bloom Song

The world has changed.

What shape are we now?

What new people is born?

Life Giver? Your answer?

Come petals, as beautiful, petals,

sprout from our mothers:

White specked with brown and black,

brown specked with yellow and red.

Oh Life Giver, they are the jewels at your side.

I am the brown and yellow.

I am the male and the female even.

Perfume fills my heart,

I feel a flower in my chest.

It fills the air with two scents,

that Spanish, that Indio.

And the bee stops once.

All nectar is here,

foreign and familiar.

The quetzal sings his sweet song.

*He flies, paints on the face of the Spanish dwelling
an arc with his plumage.*

The flowers open to the sun,

even in these new days.

Vasco felt the dirt between his small toes. He'd freed himself from his shoes and tights, his collared shirt and cap, hung them on the branch of a tree at the top of the hill. He and his two friends had brought him a tunic to wear. He wanted to dress like them. They'd spent the morning on that hill building a temple of foot sized stones. They pretended it was two-hundred feet high and climbed its many pretend stairs to the top. Vasco said he should be Emperor

Motecuhzoma again because his grandmother had met him before he was born. His friends agreed that he should be Emperor.

But when they heard the call of the first trumpet his friends abandoned their game to follow the sound. Vasco followed it too. There was no time to go back and get his clothes. He didn't want to be last on the hill. He knew his father would be angry and his mother would scold him. He wasn't too worried about his mother because it would only last as long as his father was in sight. Afterwards, she'd speak to him at eye level and say she loved him. She'd urge him to be more careful and leave it at that. But it was his father he was afraid to upset. He was the one with the hitting stick.

Like three avocado seeds, they bounced down the hill. Vasco had been the seed left to fade in the sun the longest. Their long dark hair bounced on their heads, each gleaming a black sheen from the sun. Vasco knew his own hair that grew past his ears glistened shades lighter. In the summer it went from brown to blonde. He knew this because the others pulled his hair complaining of having black hair that the sun liked to roost in. Vasco never even felt the rooster.

And when they played temple sometimes Vasco would trade being Emperor for being a sacrifice. His friends would lay their dark hands over his chest, digging their fingers into his soft flesh and holding up their hands, pumping their fingers in the air, eyes squinting into the sun. They'd return their hands to his body again and again as though he were made of infinite beating hearts. He remembered the day they had paused and commented on how white his chest was. How white like an egg next to their hands.

As they'd said this, the words of Vasco's father echoed in his mind. He'd said the key to the world had been born into his fair skin. And here were his friends calling so much attention to it. Vasco didn't understand. He just knew he wanted that key to the world more than anything.

He'd never seen it, but he imagined it was something very old looking. He wanted to turn it over in his hands and feel its shape. How would a metal key get into his body? Such rational questions took him out of his fantasy and he brushed them away. Instead he pictured holding the metal in his fingers and waving it in his friends' onyx eyes. He wanted to be able to tell them the whole world's doors opened for him. Marvelous to have a special key to a world of his very own, he thought. He would wear it on a string around his neck always. Even though he'd never seen it, he told his friends who were gazing at his white chest that he was born with a magic key.

“Show us! Tlatlapoloni! Key to the world! Key to the world!” they'd chanted.

He said he would show it to them the next day. He liked making their eyes brighten with excitement. He liked feeling as though he presented a dozen colorful sugar breads. He knew after that day they'd forget to ask him.

More trumpets shot into the air meeting the first. Vasco couldn't resist the fascination their sound stirred in him. They tugged at his blood, which he felt pulsing hard in his fingers like it wanted to jump out. His body followed his blood. It was the kind of trumpeting only played on days like this. The sounds within the city spoke to him. A person of power was here and the music sang of bright draping cloth, jeweled hems, and beautiful ladies with lace draped at the sides of their faces. There was sure to be a serious man with his chin in the air riding on a shiny muscular horse with tassels down its reigns.

Vasco and his friends raced each other to town. He shook the hair from his eyes and laughed. They pushed each other back to gain advantage. They followed the river that led to the city. It sparkled in places from the light that shone between the tree leaves.

Yesterday the air was flat and calm. He'd gone to school and wrote what seemed like endless parchments of Spanish and Latin letters. Toward the end of the day when the heat really

sunk into his skin he'd tapped his shoe on the ground to keep from falling asleep. He'd tried not to count the remaining minutes and instead imagined the smell of sweet bread, the sound of summoning music, and that exciting feeling he got in big crowds where he felt free like he was a great big endless spirit barely attached to his body. And today it was finally happening. It was more fantastic than he'd dreamed with the instruments unfurling a thrill in him and his feet barely touching the ground to roll with it. As the boys neared the buildings of their city Vasco thought the people's commotion rattled like beans in gourds vibrating his skull. There was a rumble like the sound from the long bellied drums he'd seen with the naked people. Vasco wondered whether they were the same kind of drums.

He remembered watching the red powdered hands beat the drums the day he and his friends went to watch in the forest. The drums and smell of burning wood had been the first things to greet them. Naked people stood among the green leafy brush like red sunsets and black birds. Their talk felt like boiling water bouncing the lid of a pot. They were all there for the same reason, to hear Vasco's uncle, Atl, the monkey man.

The first thing Vasco had seen were his uncle's shining blue eyes as he noticed them. He'd run up to Vasco with his hands curled out like claws and his mouth snarling like a jaguar. Fresh white paint had glistened his fingertips. He'd laughed and swatted at them. The children had giggled and swatted back. Then he'd hugged them and smeared white lines across their faces and lifted Vasco over his shoulders. Vasco had waved to them from way up high. His friends had looked at each other with big smiling Os for mouths. He'd felt the drums and the warmth from his uncle so strong it pumped through his body like sweet honey.

His mother and father always told him never to go. But his uncle had winked. Vasco knew this meant they would never know or so he'd thought. Vasco was tired of his friends

pulling on the clothes his father made him wear. He'd felt slapped when his friends laughed at him. He'd told them his uncle was a Chichimeca leader. A Chichimeca with blue eyes like water? His friends had laughed and pounded their bellies when he'd told them. He'd wanted to run into a cave when they'd told him not to lie that his grandmother had known the Aztec emperor. So he just had to take them to see. And even if his mother and father found out it would still be worth a stinging switch.

Finally they'd seen everything with their own doubting eyes--the tree trunk like a dead spider with its legs in the air, the Indios, and the mestizos, the fire burning a red cross on a white flag, and the drum pounding. Vasco had seen many people in town that looked sad with watery eyes and slumped backs. He'd been glad to see this group of strong people with solid postures and sharp eyes.

Vasco had always thought that his uncle was a curandero, knowledgeable of plants and cures, like his mother. He'd thought maybe the red painted people came to get cures. But once he'd joined the rest of the crowd and heard his uncle speak Vasco knew he was different than his mother. If he was a curandero, his cure was with words, not plant blood or crushed bark. But because Vasco hadn't understood half of the words his uncle had said, not because they were in Nahuatl but because they were about fighting, which the crinkled brows and shaking heads tipped off quickly, he'd listened instead to the inflections of his uncle's voice. He'd watched his listeners' reactions to the sounds his words made. At times they were like stones tossed into the sky. His voice going up high and the group looking stiff like they would break. Then they dropped back down to the ground and the group relaxed their backs and their faces. Vasco felt he knew what the sounds said. He got a feeling like when his mother told him he could come along to her underground ponds for his birthday. And he felt the feeling like when his father

slapped him to the floor for lifting the hem of a flower peddler woman's dress. It was the high and low of both of these.

His uncle had spoken in poetry. Vasco had liked those parts. They were funny with pictures in the words. But mostly he'd liked them because the funny uncle he knew sprung up. His smile replaced his stern face. And when Atl had laughed, not a small laugh, but a big, big laugh, with an echo that made the people look to their sides to see if anyone was watching, Vasco had laughed too. The people couldn't help but laugh after a while because Atl's laugh was almost inhuman and so instilled with delight. Vasco had known Atl made them feel it was good to laugh because his uncle had made him feel it was good to laugh.

During the poetry talk Vasco had followed the picture like words his uncle evoked. He'd talked about monkeys in trees watching panthers, monkeys reading books, and monkeys playing tricks. Vasco had seen different reactions among the people. While some had chuckled with quivering bellies, others had stood still letting the words move into them or nodding their heads with skinny thoughtful eyes.

Then the uncle he didn't know would return again at the end of the meeting. He'd throw the stone of his voice up high, so high the people had hardly been able to bear it. To relieve the feeling it had caused they yelped and raised their fists, and cried out words in Nahuatl: "ocelotl," "pehua," "oquichehua," and "tlalli." When they'd said ocelotl and tlalli he'd thought of his jaguar toy at home. The one with the wheels for feet and string out the mouth that he liked to build roads and bridges for in the dirt. The other words brought the images of skull faces and fire to his mind, but he didn't know what they meant. His skin had prickled with fear and he'd wanted his uncle to come down from the tree trunk and be the funny uncle again.

When the gathering had ended and the steady drums led the people away, men and women's skinny eyes had paused at other skinny eyes and nods of heads. Vasco had been left with the spirit of the drums rocking inside his bones and the sound of his uncle's voice swelling his ears. They'd remained buried under his skin when he'd gone home that night. They bounced through his mind when he'd received the gnarled branch whacks from his father for coming home after dark. While one side of him had wanted to cry into his mother's skirt the other had taken the beating quietly with inner strength like a man. He knew he was still small, but after seeing and hearing what he had a part of him was no longer a boy. There had been other children and babies there at the meeting in the woods. Vasco had noted how unalarmed and brave the other boys had seemed. He wondered what it would be like to mount the tree stump and pitch his voice to and fro like his uncle's, to see all eyes looking at him.

His uncle had a strange power to draw feelings from everyone. His voice felt for the nopal thorns in people and plucked them out. He talked about their wounds which spread over them like a soothing tincture. This made them feel strong. Vasco had tried to stand tall too so they would know he was a serious child even though he was only a boy.

When people had scattered away from the tree trunk, Vasco had brought his friends to his uncle. His uncle laughed like he knew he would, like the monkey in his speech, but his friends were quiet. Later through shy tight lips they'd told Vasco they believed him.

The trumpets and drums in town were different than the forest drums that sounded like they came out of the earth, but he couldn't help see the similarity of the excitement of both events.

CHAPTER NINE

Dos Lenguas

*I go back and forth,
Spanish to Nahuatl--
a woman over a fire,
flipping, tortilla,
tortilla,
all her life--
Nahuatl to Caxtillantlahtolli,
Nitlapatla.*

As they ran toward the plaza, Vasco saw an old Mexican woman sitting down facing the rushing river. She was petting a brown and white puppy that lifted its head when it heard the children coming. What was she doing staying here at the edge of the town when the fiesta was beginning? Was that what happened when people got old, they didn't care about the town and its fiestas?

The woman stopped staring at the river and lifted her head. She looked above the children's heads.

"Hijos? Is that you hijos?" she asked in Spanish. "I can't see you. I've gone blind since the last time I saw you. Did the soldiers let you go?"

She wailed without tears. That was very strange Vasco thought, to cry with no tears. The dog tucked his nose under her arm wanting to comfort her or wanting to be pet.

"No Señora. It is I, Vasco. And my friends, Etl and Tochin."

Etl being the Nahuatl word for bean and Tochin meaning rabbit, the woman smiled and licked her bottom lip with a chuckle trickling out her mouth.

“Those are good names. Do they do you justice?” she asked switching from Spanish to Nahuatl.

Vasco walked closer to the woman to pet her puppy.

Etl responded in his Native tongue, “Yes, ancient one. Because I am small and Tochin has--”

“Has what?” Tochin asked also in Nahuatl.

Etl smiled and started to run, “A fat face!”

Tochin who was thicker than the other boys chased after Etl.

“And yours, boy?” the woman asked Vasco.

“My--Vasco? I don’t know Señora,” he said in the Nahuatl he learned from his mother.

He looked down the river and saw his friends’ bodies getting smaller.

“Good day Señora,” Vasco said stroking the dog’s velvety ears.

The woman summoned up a high pitched song that Vasco thought sounded oddly sudden and very much like crying. Her hand touched his over the puppy’s ear.

“May you find your sons,” Vasco said picking up his heels and running away as much to catch up with Etl and Tochin as to not be alone with the woman.

Vasco ran toward the sounds of Mexico city. His two friends ran at his sides. They yapped in excitement in a mix of Spanish and Nahuatl.

“Ma Cuecuel! ¡Apurate!”

Vasco saw his legs moving under him, bare in the sunlight. He felt the air move over the small brown hairs on his thighs, an area his father told him to keep covered except for in the bath. But his friends liked him to dress like them. They’d smiled and nodded their heads in approval when he’d put on his new shirt. They liked him to take off his shoes and told him about

the spirits that entered through the soles of their feet when they ran barefoot on plants and earth.

Vasco was curious about their ways. He'd wondered for a long time what it would feel like in their clothes. What rare material wrinkled around them? Was it soft, was it prickly?

Vasco loved their stories that were similar to his mother's.

When she told him stories she was always busy with a task at hand. He liked the sound of his mother scraping cactus needles or peeling hibiscus petals, not because she had to, but because she wanted to, it was a gift, she never tired of telling him. The gentle sounds filled him with a warm safe feeling like a soft song played just for him. She wouldn't tell him to go outside and play so that she could cook. She let him stay in the kitchen and spoke to him tranquilly. His mother's sounds were quiet like a secret, like their whispering in Nahuatl when he couldn't sleep, when she would cut up mango fruit and eat with him in his bedroom. Secret because it was the language his father didn't know. He heard his mother love, bargain, and argue with his father in Spanish. His father must have thought one language enough for their marriage because he never asked what she and Vasco spoke about.

In their special language Vasco's mother told him enchanting stories of the earth, life, death, and afterlife. She entrusted him with details she never thought him too young to know. She told him about the rattling god of music and poetry Xochipilli and the goddess who gave birth to the moon and the stars.

She would lift Vasco's chin and raise her eyebrows, driving her eyes into his, "All that I say is true, mijo. But anyway, the truth is always inside you."

Sometimes she pointed to his father's Bible and told her magical stories with the names from that book. Especially when his father entered the room she made sure to open the book.

His father would take up the Bible and sit with them. He'd open to a page and read him stories about a woman's special son. But Vasco didn't understand why his parent's stories sounded different. His father's seemed more frightening. He lectured him about Hell many times. Vasco feared the devil and his flaming hands that would burn him if he went to his evil kingdom. He leaned toward his mother's tales because they were less scary and more magical. When he thought of her stories he felt an embracing, caring eye follow him wherever he went rather than the judging, Hell threatening eye his father warned him about. He tried to understand what seemed like two separate eyes of seeing the world.

Even though his mother prayed to el Padre, el Hijo, y el Espíritu Santo who were in the Bible, to Vasco they didn't feel the same as his father's Padre, Hijo, y Espíritu Santo. So in his confusion he melded the religions told him by his mother and father. Jesus was a man who shook rattles while dancing over water and his mother Maria was the moon sitting in the sky with the rabbit in her face. And all the stars surrounding her were her skirt. The brightest star in her skirt was a serpent. But that snake didn't frighten him. Instead he liked to watch its white light when he couldn't sleep. And he liked to look at the moon when she was full and try to see her bright face hiding behind the rabbit. When she was big it looked like she touched the land and Vasco thought that must have been when she and Jesus held hands and she told him his bedtime stories.

His friends stories, however were even wilder than his mother's, but nowhere near as frightening as his father's. At least Vasco could sometimes recognize the symbols of which they spoke: teal quetzal feathers streaking the sky like soaring serpents, snakes shedding their skins to crawl into fresh new days, and the coyote man lighting a fire because of little snake tongues licking his stomach, whispering great things to come, great things to come. Vasco didn't talk

when they told their stories. He just sat cross-legged and listened. They painted mysterious pictures in his mind which he liked because he felt like he was dreaming even though he was awake. His mind got very colorful and interesting when that happened, so much so that his friends would have to shove him to wake him from his daydreams.

Vasco felt like his head was reaching the town's action faster than the rest of his body. No matter how fast he ordered his limbs to move, the trumpeting throbbing in his chest and stomach told him to move faster and faster still. The boys charged forward, playfully swatting each other. At some times Vasco was in the lead and at others Etl or Tochin's nose would match with his and pass him by. Vasco felt the air, light as the skin of an egg, tickle his eyelashes when he squeezed his muscles tighter and tighter. He itched from the vibrations of running. Then, just when Vasco thought he could never catch up to his friends, he saw Etl's toes plunge under a fallen tree branch and pull him down. After he fell he clasped his knee and winced. The branch had sliced him open and he touched his dark hands around the wound watching helplessly as the blood trickled out.

Vasco and the other boys stopped to see. Now that he was still, Vasco could feel his blood thumping like a drum in his ears. He wiped his forehead on the neck of his tunic which turned out not to be scratchy as he thought it would be. They asked if their friend was well, if he wanted to be carried, but he only shut his eyes and moaning and sniffing. So the boys took the time out to marvel at the richness of Etl's blood's.

“It's like fire coming out.”

“It's ants.”

“It's rabbits' noses.”

“Snake tongues.”

“Spider chests.”

The boy had calluses from walking shoeless. He had daily scratches on his ashen legs from wearing no pants and only his tunic.

When the boys told him he should save his blood for their next temple game he sucked in his breath and rocked back and forth. He let Vasco and Tochin lift him. Vasco said how rich and beautiful his blood was and that if it fell on the ground flowers would grow. The boy giggled bravely putting a little weight on his hurt leg while leaning on his friends.

“Listen to the trumpet! It’s changing tunes, that means the king is here!” Tochin announced.

The royal instruments put Etl in a happier mood. Smiling faces were all around them. Etl let go of his friends and walked on his own. The boys skipped closer to the plaza’s thickening people.

The quacking instrument of the shawm singing between the loudening trumpets came to Vasco’s ears. He passed the fruit stands of sliced watermelon, mango, jamaica and tamarind water, the textile shop whose rolls of fabric leaned against the window, the smell of bread from the bakery that lit his stomach on fire, the candle maker whose candles dried on a line, and the half built stone walls and brick buildings.

At last they reached the wide road that emptied into the main plaza. The crowd lined the long road on both sides. Vasco pushed around the tights covering men’s legs and women’s high hipped street sweeping dresses. The crowd was a mix of the castas: Spanish, criollo, coyote, mestizo, negrito, Azteca, castizo, mulatto--rich and less than poor, masters and slaves--to name a few. White children with black hair and black and brown children with brassy or golden streaked hair.

He waved his friends to hurry, “Ma Cuecuel!” he yelled, wanting to stand on their shoulders.

He felt his words settle at the bottom of the noise floating around him. The royal trumpets bellowed again, the duck calling shawm quacked impatiently. For a moment he paused. He looked up and saw prickly hairs poking through bottoms of men’s jaws. A black girl with a rag tied around her head held on to the hand of her mother with the same head covering. A mestizo man supported his daughter over his shoulders. Her eyes smiled and she waved a yellow ribbon. Vasco turned around and saw his friends weaving through the people.

He saw Spanish women leaning on balconies draped with shining red, blue, and gold tapestry. Tall Spanish women stood around him. Their hairlines were soft like ground corn and their skin even whiter. They murmured into one another’s ears. Their lace shawls hung down, their forearms and hands bent gracefully like long leaves in cornfields. They touched each other’s shoulders lightly to peer over the heads before them. They balanced on their toes which lifted their dresses. Vasco saw something strange attached to their shoes. He was surprised to see blocks under their feet. For a moment he forgot about the parade as he stared. He’d never seen shoes like those. His mother’s were flat and touched the ground. This explained why Spanish women were so tall.

Suddenly Tochin’s weight pressed into him and he fell into one of the ladies he’d been studying. His cheek and lips landed in the folds of her skirt. She looked down, tugging her skirt back, her highly arched eyebrows frowned down at him.

“Off, slaveboy!” she yelled.

Slaveboy? Vasco wondered. He looked down at his body and saw his tunic and barefeet when Etl bumped his head with his knee climbing on top of Vasco and Tochin’s shoulders.

“Oye!” Vasco yelled maintaining his footing.

A grand cheer exploded from the crowd gulping his protest. He wrapped his arm around Etl’s skinny calf and ankle.

Tochin pulled Etl down and said he wanted to be lifted next. Etl and Vasco met eyes for a second. Tochin put his foot up like he was about to stomp a spider. The other two boys interlaced their fingers and their friend stepped into their hands. They all wobbled and grunted doing their best to raise him to the top. Once he was up he screamed at the approaching procession. He wiggled his hips and flashed wide-eyed glances down at his friends. Vasco and Etl couldn’t carry his weight any longer and patted Tochin’s behind to let him know they were finished.

“Me next!” Vasco yelled.

Etl and Tochin lifted him. He shielded his eyes from the sun and looked to the right where everyone faced and gasped. He’d never seen anything so enormous.

Entering the city were hundreds of knights in polished armor, followed by thousands of mounted Spaniards cloaked in black. It felt like a pressing sea of darkness whose wave was about to crash over them. The immensity of the procession made Vasco feel weak. He grabbed his friends’ hair to keep from tilting.

The knights were passing directly in front of him now. For a moment he forgot his breath. The knights were large and sturdy, like a row of buildings painted silver and mounted over horses. He wondered how they could support their weight. The men gazed straight ahead untouchable as though toward battle. Their horses were as disciplined as their riders, their hooves moved in unison. Vasco waved, but none noticed him.

Vasco felt Etl and Tochin getting restless. They traded places again. From below, Vasco thought the horse's legs looked like caterpillars. He felt the pounding of their hooves over the stone road. Vasco curled his own bare toes under. His nails scraped the dusty cobblestone.

When it was his turn again, he could see to the last row of the metal knights and a new row beginning, a row of knights dressed in black.

Vasco listened to the adults around him. He heard two men to his right. They were Spanish speaking in an accent like his father's. One of the men wore a brown cap and the other wore a black.

"We're only as loyal as the rewards we're guaranteed after all of all our fathers' work winning this country," the man with the brown cap said.

"Agreed. I think we'd be in the right to rebel. If the king abolishes the encomienda system, how will I run my estate?" responded the one in the black.

"That's the problem. Enjoy the free labor while you have it."

"If you ask me, the Marques is the obvious choice to lead an independence movement."

"Why do you think everyone is so happy to see him?" the man with the brown cap laughed.

The man in the black looked at the faces in the crowd and said, "True."

They nodded.

"But that old viceroy is not going to have his arms so wide open."

Vasco examined the crowd as the man had done. He noticed other men speaking under their beards. Their eyes were skinny and wandered the crowd. The two men in hats looked toward the end of the parade, moving their heads up and down like chickens looking for seed. Vasco wondered what they were looking for.

“He could even be king of Mexico. He has more right to this country than the King of Castille.”

“The Marques is the wealthiest, highest ranking...”

Wealthiest, highest ranking? Vasco wondered about these words not knowing what they meant. He moved his neck like a bird too, curious to see this incredible rich man the men talked about.

Vasco and his friends traded places a few more times as the thousands of knights continued to march with perfection. When he sat at the point of his friends’ pyramid one last time. He raised his head and gazed at the last row of conquistadores. There sat a white man and a brown man. Two men? He wondered why there were two and not one. He didn’t recognize them. Which man was the important man? One conquistador was light colored and wore a red beard and sword at his side. The red hair reminded Vasco of the man his mother spoke of, the man his grandmother had love for when she was a slave. The other conquistador at his side was darker and more muscular, not quite as long and thin. A long cloud that had been moving across the sky like a caracol leaned against the sun. Its white spiral cast a strange shadow over the town.

Vasco felt like he all of a sudden had walked through a church whos stained windows dimmed the light two shades darker around him. He looked up to see what trick Tezcatlipoca was playing on the sun and followed the tail of the coiled cloud from where it was wound tight to where it tapered out free. He thought this the strangest most interesting day he’d seen out of his entire life. He looked back down at the knights’ beautiful horses. He was in awe of their magnificent strong bodies, their reigns decorated with tassels, their backs covered in special saddles, and a cloth, red and yellow, falling over their behinds and back legs down to their knees

and tails. The crowd bustled like bouncing sugar and crumbs, shouting, clapping, and waving their hands. Small, white handkerchiefs flew down from the balconies. One glided toward Vasco and he extended his hand to catch it. He clasped the silken material in his hand and laughed in triumph. He waved it above his head. The two men who'd spoken at Vasco's side cheered and cupped their hands together with force, making loud and hollow claps.

Vasco felt the desire to feel the honored conquistadores' gazes on him. He waved his arms like palm trees in a storm. He swung his weight so wildly he nearly fell onto his neighboring lady again. He yelled at the knights and heard Etl and Tochin yelling from below too. To Vasco's satisfaction the red haired knight looked in his direction. He met his eyes directly. Vasco screamed and waved his handkerchief. The conquistador was sitting up straight on his black horse, speaking to the darker knight riding at his side.

The darker man looked unhappy. The lighter squinted his eyes and looked up at the ladies in the balconies and then back to the knights in front of him. Some of the women whispered in each other's ears while others thrust out more handkerchiefs. Ah, thought Vasco, he must be the important one.

The trumpeters heightened their pitch and people cheered louder. The red haired knight and his dark companion passed into the plaza. Vasco watched the backs of the men's coats, the horses' swishing tails, and the undersides of their hooves as they plodded away. He nudged his friends to let him down. The moment he felt the stone under his feet he and his friends ran.

They dodged the adults lingering in the parallel lines on either side of the street. When the cathedral came into view Vasco slowed. The plaza was filling with the people who lined the street to watch the parade. Police on foot and horseback hollered to keep them from flooding the

plaza and crowding the guests of honor. Vasco ran toward the cathedral. He, Etl, and Tochin climbed the wide steps to the top. They looked over the square.

“The red knight!” Tochin pointed a chubby finger.

Vasco waved his handkerchief at the knight with the red hair, “Conquistador!”

The noise was too loud for the knight to pluck out his small voice. He lowered his handkerchief and watched. He saw the fat viceroy standing in the middle of the plaza waiting for the men.

“He doesn’t look happy,” Etl said pulling the corners of his mouth down with his fingers.

Tochin and Vasco laughed.

The red knight and his compadre trotted to the viceroy. They exchanged words too far away for Vasco to hear and he lowered his handkerchief. He saw the viceroy shake their hands with a stern face. As they dismounted their horses they handed their reigns to African and mestizo men. When they passed, he met their eyes. Vasco saw that they looked empty of light like a starless, moonless sky. The men looked away continuing to walk the horses. Vasco watched them until they passed the church.

Just then Vasco recognized a man with a small feather tied in his shoulder length hair.

“Hello!” Vasco yelled until the man took notice.

Vasco hopped down the steps and stood on the lowest one waving his hand in the man’s face. The man ignored him and looked around the plaza. He walked a little faster past the cathedral.

Vasco was confused. He knew he was the right man he’d seen so many times before. He could never forget his eyes that flashed green as quetzal tail. And that sometimes he brought fruit covered in honey or chilé when he came to Vasco’s house to eat lunch with his mother. But

he acted differently today in the street compared to the happy man he was when he laughed with his mother.

“Look! He’s leaving,” his friends pointed at the red knight.

Vasco saw him walk with the viceroy to the big building next to the cathedral where they gave banquets for special people. The muscular, dark knight stopped the viceroy and they had a word. The viceroy pointed down a smaller street and the knight went in that direction.

Vasco wondered where he was going. Although both knights were famous enough to bring out all the people of the town, to cause them to color the street with their best clothes, tapestries, and ribbons, they seemed very different. They were both rich but they didn’t look like brothers or even like friends, yet they had ridden through the procession side by side like partners.

Vasco felt the warmth of the sun spread over his skin. He opened his arms up to the heavens and twirled in circles. And the whirling motion set something stirring in his friends because they saw him and did the same thing. Twirling and twirling in the day that the Holy Father and Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, and Tlatecuhtli had made just for them.

CHAPTER TEN

Now, just before going any further it would be a good idea to go a step backward. Following the city through the eyes of a child is one thing but following it through the eyes of a man, especially a particular conquistador, is quite another. If we were to go back to the moment the rare cloud first came over the sun we would be filled with an entirely different view of things.

“These mestizos, they cover the land,” the Marques said surveying the crowd.

The large procession of knights before them rode into the plaza. They disappeared down streets carved between the buildings.

Martín was amazed to see the cathedral standing there as though it had always been. He imagined the earthen Mexican dwellings and temples of only four decades ago that prevailed. The Marques and Martín sauntered their horses to the plaza center. Martín looked around him. He saw the mestizos and Africans dressed in tunics and faded and dirty worn rags. Some of the mestizos watched him with squinted eyes and being that the sun was only hidden partially behind a cloud he knew it wasn't bright enough for all that. When they broke their scrutinizing gaze on him they spoke a Native tongue he couldn't understand, pointing at other corners of the city. Often they shared a laugh amongst themselves and Martín imagined they'd just eaten a hearty meal together, maybe not much in the amount of food but momentus in camaraderie.

Other men and women dressed in the modern style that made them indistinguishable from the Spanish apart from their darker skin, angled cheekbones, and eagle noses--which weren't so different from his own, he thought, the idea clawing at him suddenly. Martín felt an involuntary contempt for these people especially, even though they appeared noble enough in

dress and yes even though he resembled them. He knew the same awaited him in the mirror. Perhaps it was the sheer number of them that astonished him into loathing. Hadn't the diseases deteriorated them? Some wore their arms naked and free in the sun, with their chins angled up.

His brother was right about one thing, he observed, they covered the land. Martín averted his eyes from them. He projected his sight forward: the cross of the cathedral, the curvaceous mountains with the snow covering their peaks, the donkey tied to a stick in the ground, and the stands piled with warm toned fruits.

"They were born with naturally evil inclinations," the Marques said leaning in closer to Martín, "I know it."

Martín searched his younger brother's face. No? It wasn't there. Martín had expected his brother's patronizing look that so often directed comments his way. But as accustomed to his brother's outspoken scorn for his underlings as he was, Martín was surprised he'd made no connection between the mestizos and Martín. He knew if he mentioned it, he soon would, so he held his tongue. He savored any moment he didn't need to be on his guard with his brother. Still, there was a sourness in his breath which made Martín's stomach turn on top of his growing hunger.

Naturally evil inclinations. Martín looked at the mestizo men as their horses slowed into the clearing of the plaza. He saw the men's muscled arms, those that were bare, darkness sinking into their contours, and in the distance some of the nearly black brazos of workers who hadn't stopped to see the parade. They were powerful arms. They could fight, they could battle on horseback, if given a horse. Their darkness fascinated and alarmed him. He never met the day in the way they did, so bare. And yet, they were powerless arms. They would never escape their work, as it would be there the next day and the day after.

Martín lowered his head from the sun and turned away to escape his brother's pungent breath, "I can see as well as anyone, Marques. You have reason, there are many of them."

"*Them?*" the Marques said.

Now the Marques took notice. He threw a quick glance at Martín. The Marques' mustache twitched and he went silent, not ushering himself to expound.

And there it was. Martín tried to find joy in the trumpets, the shawms, the shouting children, the ornate church facade, but all he could see was his brother. But just when he turned to expell the acid his brother had pumped into him a plump man called out.

"Take hold of their steeds!" he said to a couple of men on foot.

A mestizo man took Martín's horse.

"Not to worry, your horses are in good care. They'll be taken to the best stables in Mexico," the man said, "I am Viceroy Velasco. I won't keep you in the open talking long. We have prepared a banquet to refresh you."

The conquistadores dismounted their horses and shook hands with the viceroy. The cloud that had been oddly blocking the sun drifted to other parts of the valley. Martín was conscious of the new warmth seeping into his skin. He held his hands in the shade around his waist. Next to the viceroy stood another man in fine velvet and feathers in his hat, a gold chain, and glossy black shoes.

"And I am Alonso de Avila. I've been looking forward to your arrival, we have much to discuss," the fashionable man said with his glance bouncing between the brothers and landing on the Marques. "How does it go for you, your sea travels were rough were they not? Martín and...Martín--," he said with some hesitation.

“Don Alonso, if it pleases you call me Marques del Valle de Oaxaca to lessen the confusion.”

“Well, confusion for a mouthful,” the Alonso laughed heartily from his bulging waistline, “As you desire Marques, though god knows your looks do all the discerning one needs.”

Alonso raised his eyebrows at the Cortés brothers.

“You’re sure you’re related?”

“See for yourself,” Martín said reaching into his coat pocket for his father’s will.

“That won’t be necessary,” Alonso chuckled, “I’m well aware of your histories. Any sons of Hernán Cortés are revered as highly as kings in this region in my opinion.”

“Now Alonso, let us not go so far,” the viceroy who had been patiently standing by with his hands behind his back cut in.

The stylish man placed a hand on the Marques’ back.

“As you say, Your Lordship,” Alonso said closing his eyes piously, and then to the brothers, “You’re weary. Come to banquet.”

“Thank you Alonso and I’m honored by your greetings Viceroy. However, I have urgent business. Perhaps we will meet later tonight.”

“Brother, don’t insult our generous Señorías,” the Marques said, “Surely your darker halves can spare you for one more day.”

Martín ignored him and bowed his head in respect, “Con permiso. Can you point me in the direction of Luis de Quesada, the honorable man of the law?”

“Very well, Martín,” the viceroy pointed down the road, “Farewell.”

“I apologize on behalf of my brother,” the Marques said to Alonso and the viceroy.

“Go with God Martín,” Alonso said out of pure courtesy and turned to the Marques,
“Now, let us go. Don’t put me to waiting as such. I so enjoy tales of sea adventure and it’s been
so long since I’ve seen our dear country. I demand to know everything. Of course that would be
impossible in one evening, as such, you are always welcome to leisure at my own estate.”

Martín heard Alonso carry on as he led the Marques to a large hacienda. He suspected
Alonso was the type that could talk for hours and while someone else spoke continued to speak
not with his tongue but with his mind which would shortly find its way out with his tongue. He
had the mouth of an entire town. For such men Martín had dwarfed patience. He was happy to
part and to stray from the Marques for a while was the best banquet, a banquet of tranquility, that
the viceroy and socialite could permit him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next thing that happened in the story is that Martín came to my house. This was a moment in which many divergent feelings passed through me at once. Like a first puff of tobacco it still gives me a turn in the head to think of that moment. This is because had I not met my brother I would never have been enlightened as to how my own life might have branched out had I been raised in Spain as he had. What's more I would never have believed in the extraordinary existence of the seedlings of change lying dormant in even the most conservative of minds, even one as conservative as was my brother Martín's. And still my head breaks further to imagine that had he not come to my door our fates would have turned out different.

For this reason, I have a tendency to oscillate between two perspectives: viewing circumstances as they occurred to me and viewing them as though they had happened to someone else altogether, as though I were a stranger to my own being. I fancy each vantage, especially the latter which serves for me as a means of conjuring advice to myself. It's as though I were another, a patient for example, seeking the bigger picture, a simultaneous in body and out of body experience. I can experience my memories as the I and as the character Maria. It's interesting to observe yourself like trailing an ant walking over a stone. This manner of thinking may satisfy others as to my reasons for residing in my current place of residence at the Iglesia de Santa Teresa de Jesus. But, that is not the reason. And personally, I don't see anything catastrophic with my ability to consider alternative philosophies. Mystical thresholds are crossed every night into the world of dreams. This is not crazy. I haven't, after all, started rambling audibly: Maria wants her dinner or it would please Maria to accompany you. Even this is not bad--different, sure, but not wrong. Nevertheless, to most my opinion matters less than a dog's

flea and to most I seem to be in a convent so that my ideas can't hurt anybody. So, there we are. And here Martín and I are laying our eyes upon each other for the very first time. I'd wondered about my brother for years as we corresponded through mail. Was I very nervous? Did I act myself? In search of answers I want to fly over our meeting like a bird.

Maria's greeting was not overly emotional. She'd opened the wooden door with the rectangular frame. She'd blinked twice before speaking after Martín introduced himself, instantly struck by his resemblance to their mother.

"Brother," was the first word that breathed across her lips.

Then she'd stood on her toes to give him a kiss on the cheek and an embrace. She'd invited Martín to enter her house, but Martín stopped her.

"Maria," he'd said, "Wait for me. Let me see you."

He'd squinted his eyes to memorize her face, to see himself in her or better their mother. Then he'd taken her hand in his and turned it around. He examined her fingers and smiled.

"These, these are the hands that I know," he'd said. "They are responsible for your letters."

Unsure how to answer, Maria simply squeezed his hand back and reiterated her invitation inside her house.

It was strange to know a person through letters and then to meet them in person. Her letters were filled with so much spark that he didn't recognize her in physical form. Martín wondered whether she wore the same smooth face for all her guests.

She led him to the front room and then excused herself to bring him the chocolate she'd been saving for his arrival. Martín thought it strange he hadn't seen any servants in waiting and

that Maria would be serving him. He watched her walk out of the room and noticed her subtle limp.

He saw the walls were completely fleshed in leather embossed vines, leaves, birds, and flowers the exact color of gold. She gestured for him to sit. He took a wooden chair with a backing of woven green leaves and dark brown underarching arms that creaked when he sank his weight into it. He felt its metal rivets press uncomfortably into his forearms. He shifted his weight several times and let his eyes wander the room. The expansive rug under his feet was beige and in good condition except for a few faint and small foot prints. He saw red pomegranate and brown leaf patterns. His eyes traveled to the the dark wood and glass cabinet against the yellow wall. It held several small golden trinkets: a golden goblet, a golden family of deer, a gold box, an old book with gold edging, and and a set of pristine blue and white Japanese tea cups.

No servants and he didn't hear any children. The house sat as quiet as a cat at siesta. Martín interrupted his perusing to pay Maria his attention when she reappeared.

“Your sitting room is enchanting,” he said.

She carried rattling silver spoons, clay cups, and a less than polished silver pitcher on a silver tray.

“Luis' taste not mine,” she said making a grunt as she set the tray onto a small round table in front of Martín. “But, thank you.”

She pulled up an identical chair to his and dropped into it. She poured his chocolate first. Her hand was a little unsteady and he saw the pour come out too fast splashing drops of chocolate onto the tray.

“I brought fresh milk if that's how you prefer it.”

A skin sat over the milk in a small silver cup. She poured a cup of watery chocolate for herself.

“I do,” he said smiling; he smelled smoke on her dress.

She watched him stir the milk into his chocolate. She took a sip and waited for him to drink. Once the cup hit his lips she asked her first question.

“And so you gave up the royal banquet for me?”

He looked up to see his sister’s black eyes digging into his.

“I saw you admiring our riches.”

He looked puzzled. She waited for an answer.

“Sorry?” he asked.

She set down her cup and crossed her arms, “Come now Martín, we both know why you’re here.”

“You must want to know how my husband will guarantee your inheritance? Isn’t that right?”

Martín shifted his weight and his chair groaned. Would she scrutinize his every move? The sister he knew from the letters seemed lighter, excited to meet him. Or were they written purely by the hand of Luis?

“That is one of my priorities,” he responded, looking at her directly.

She was his sister, but a woman nonetheless. If she challenged him he sought to meet her. He searched her face for signs of backing down. But when she pressed her lips together and shook her head he only sighed.

“The only home I’ve ever known has been the palace and the dirt on the ground--neither of which are mine. I’ve never owned so much as a piece of furniture.”

Maria narrowed her eyes, “So, there it is. You haven’t come simply to accompany me.”

“Of course I wanted to see you,” Martín said narrowing his eyebrows at her.

They’d exchanged letters for years. This wasn’t at all the way he’d imagined their first meeting.

“Ya,” she waved her hand, “When Luis comes you can speak with him. He will answer all your questions.”

She rose and walked away from him.

“I fear this new world falls bad with me,” Martín murmured setting his cup down. Why was she treating him like an imposter?

He got to his feet and followed her. He passed through a hall with walls as equally detailed as the waiting room the only difference being a change of color from gold to red. When she went through a door he saw that she was moving into the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The rise in temperature made him feel instantly trapped in his uniform. What he saw in the kitchen surprised him. He was struck by its contrast to the main room. This room seemed looser than the other, not constrained by right angles. The lines in the architecture curved. Nothing was closed off like the gold ornaments encased in the wood and glass. The area seemed softer, touchable, as though every inch of the room had been pressed by the palm of a warm hand. His sister went and sat down near a lit fire with a pot simmering over it. She took up a bowl from a table and stirred, occasionally rubbing her eyes with the backs of her wrists. She reached for a glass jar on a shelf and sprinkled its contents into the bowl. Her knowing gestures made it appear as though she'd been cooking without help for years. The wife of a man of the law cooking.

For a while Martin left her to her work. She labored as though he weren't there. His eyes ran over the light colored tile that covered the majority of the walls. Yellow and blue tiles checkered the lower halves. Potted plants underlined a window. At one end of the kitchen stretched a low archway covered in blue tile. It looked about two feet wide and six feet high. It created a separation from the rest of the kitchen in which a person could cook over a large ceramic pot sitting over a space of burning wood. Hanging from the arch were dried ristras and other plants bound by string.

Overhead were long, dark, exposed beams of wood shooting boldly across the ceiling. A black iron chandelier hung down cradling lit candles over the wood table. Shelves under the archway pressed into the walls holding dozens of jars of what looked like powders and dried

leaves. Next to the jars stood orange pitchers and bowls painted in Aztec design. At times, the Spanish spider of light flickered above him making the shadows of the room flutter.

Lining the floor at the bottom of the wall were pale peach and gray unglazed, ceramic containers. Martín recognized the amphoras for their similarity to the ones he'd seen loaded onto the ship. He wondered what Maria's contained. Did she fill them with red chillies? Or other colorful Mexican flowers and plants foreign to him?

He sat at a stool next to a long and tall wooden table in the center of the kitchen. The table was overflowing with baskets of fruit, corn, a plate of halved avocados, bowls of cocoa and white beans, potted plants, plates of bread, jugs of purple, and red juice. He saw other things of nature he was unfamiliar with, things that looked fresh from the earth. There were pieces of bark, roots, various seeds, red chilies, halfway crushed to powder or poultice in a small rough stone bowls. It looked like she was in the process of everything happening on that table. With so much there he could hardly see Maria sitting on her chair under the archway.

He leaned his elbows against the tall table. He saw next to the amphoras a couple of baskets filled with tomatoes, potatoes, onions, green peppers, mangoes, plantains, and oranges.

He tried to absorb the environment of both indigenous and Spanish influence. The kitchen was as different from the rest of the house as his sister was from her letters. Martín ran his fingers absently over several cuts in the wooden table.

Martín broke the silence.

“Forgive me. Maria, where are your cooks? I can't understand why you're doing everything yourself--”

“What's so shocking about it? Don't tell me, you're just like--” she stopped, “You want me to sit in the salon embroidering and sighing out the window just like Luis wants. As much as

everyone would like to see me fit into the perfect mold of a Spanish wife...As far as I'm concerned, if I don't fit, well then I don't fit. It doesn't bother me, why should everyone else concern themselves with it? As long as there's food coming out, why should it matter?"

She didn't wait for him to respond. She changed the subject without putting time into introducing the new topic. She spoke to him over her cooking work as though all noblewomen carried out such a routine. Her husband had had an argument with a fiery tempered judge. The judge sounded immovable. Martín tried to listen without comparing the expectations he had of the Quesada household to the realities of it.

Maria looked at her brother. What did she want from him? He'd only just arrived in the city. He felt a fire in his stomach and thought of the Marques sitting content with his wine after his meal.

Just then light from outside filled the kitchen as Vasco scampered through the arched doorway. He pinched maize from Maria's bowl and she slapped his hand with her wooden spoon. He laughed and licked his fingers.

"Your clothes! Where are your shoes?" she demanded. "Ay, if your father sees you," she set the bowl down on a square wooden table. She seemed to forget Martín's presence.

Vasco looked down at himself. He patted his tunic and covered one dirty bare foot with the other.

"I'll get them back, Mamá, don't worry," he pleaded.

"Turn around," Maria said through tight lips, jerking back his arm.

She whacked his behind with her spoon three quick times.

Vasco yelped and covered his face, "I'm sorry Mamá, I'm sorry!"

“God help us if your father sees you!” she said, “Or worse a soldier in need of a little slave. Is that what you want, mijo? You want to go home with somebody else and be their slave? You want to do who knows what for them?”

Vasco crouched on the kitchen floor covering his face that crinkled with his crying. Ay, mi pobre hijo.

“Now, this is the last time you lose your clothing. Understand me?” Maria waited until Vasco nodded. “Good, stand up, we have company.”

Maria pulled him up and Vasco dug his face into her skirt. He was silent for a moment and then his crying sputtered out of his control. His mother stroked his back.

He spoke in a muffled voice, “I don’t want to be a slave. I’m sorry Mamá, sorry, sorry.”

She picked leaves from his hair and spoke to him softly in a language Martín didn’t understand, “No conetl. Ma xicehuia. Nimitztlazohtla. Ma xipactinemi.”

Martín thought of his father’s wife, doña Juana, and couldn’t remember so much as one instance of her comforting him.

She rubbed Vasco’s back briskly and said, “Ya, ya, ya--mijo, say hello to your uncle. Tío Cortés.”

Vasco turned around slowly, rubbing his eyes, “He-hello, tío Cortés.”

Suddenly his sadness faded and his watery eyes got big. His feet made small jumps, “Oye, you were in the parade! At the end! I saw you! Mamá, I saw him, I saw him!”

“Yes, I was,” Martín grinned, nodding his confirmation. “Your child, sister? I remember from the letters.”

“This is our Vasco,” Maria smiled.

“I can see he takes after Luis. The Spanish eyes and nose--”

“He’s mixed. He takes after us both, like you and I,” she corrected. She bent her knees, “Now mijo, don’t let your father see you this way. Change into good clothes and go outside to find your papa me.”

“Yes, mother,” Vasco skipped through the kitchen door that Martín had entered.

“He’s a fine boy, Maria. Make sure to look after him in the summer. His complexion may darken considerably.”

She picked up her bowl again and stared into it. She grasped the wooden spoon and folded the mixture slower as it thickened.

Martín went on, “I remember when I was a boy my nurse treated my skin with lemon juice and licorice. It burned, but afterward she soothed me with a milk bath. It didn’t transform me overnight, but it helped.”

“Martín, I’m sure you’ll be more comfortable in the waiting room while I finish this.”

“Maria, I don’t want to go away so quickly,” he said, “tell me about your son, life in Mexico?”

Maria stopped her spoon. She lifted her head.

“Hermano, there isn’t enough time to tell you, or rather to make you understand. But if you must know, there’re constant uproars over paid labor for the Aztecs, mestizos, mulattos, and negritos. Every time my Vasco goes outside I worry--”

“Worry about what? Maria what’s going on?”

“--I worry he won’t come back.”

Martín felt ensnared by her sharp black eyes. So this was the bug that bit her.

He moved his stool in closer to the table straightening his back, “Vasco’s the son of respectable parents. He goes to school. There are police on every street. What could happen to him?”

“No you don’t understand. Times are crazy. Anything can happen,” Maria’s eyes melted over. She smeared tears that fell over her cheeks.

“Of course you’re not aware. All you care about is your own wealth, your inheritance. You’ve forgotten about the people that made you.”

He felt his face heat up, “I’ve told you, my business is crucial, I have nothing else to live on. And what do you mean I haven’t forgotten my father. That’s why I came here to make certain everyone remembers his legacy.”

“Not *those* people,” she sniffed.

Maria laughed as though he missed her point, “My father left me for Spain years ago. Do you think I’d have any of this if I hadn’t married Luis?” Maria gestured at the house around her. “I can’t call any of this my own. This kitchen is the closest thing to mine I know. I understand what it’s like to not own property. And I don’t have the means to go anywhere else. But that’s not what ails me Martín.”

A vertical vein showed itself in the center of Maria’s forehead.

“What ails me is your ignorance over the abuse,” she said waving her hand over her steaming pot under the archway.

Martín saw her unkempt hands. One of her nails was nearly missing. He saw her hands with his brother’s social etiquette and law-abiding eyes and pursed his lips.

“It couldn’t be so bad. Under *encomienda* law, land owners are required to protect--” he said.

“Encomienda law! Slavery is slavery, Martín,” she waved again.

He couldn’t think with her dark eyes glaring at him. He was starting to wish he’d chosen to wait alone as she’d suggested. He heard Vasco’s high pitched voice paired with his quick footsteps coming down the hall. He also heard a deeper voice approaching.

Luis de Quesada appeared in the doorway, “Is this parade man?”

The tips of Luis’ short hair were soaked with sweat showing the heat of the day. He wiped his forehead and plucked at his red doublet and trousers to urge in some air.

“Yes, yes! But he didn’t bring the red man with him,” Vasco said.

“Oh there’s a red man too?” Luis chuckled up at Maria and Martín until he noticed they didn’t share his humor. “What is this? Such serious faces.” He looked from Maria to Martín. Maria turned her back to them. “Come now, we should be celebrating, our brother has come at last!”

Luis walked up to Martín and shook his hand, pulling him into a tight embrace. Martín smiled and squeezed him back.

“It’s good to see you Luis, at last,” Martín said standing back to take in the vision of his in-law.

“Equally to you brother, equally to you,” Luis said, “Well, how are you? No lady to accompany you?”

“Yes, there is one, the fairest lily of Spain.”

Luis nodded approvingly, “Marvelous display you had this afternoon, Vasco tells me.”

His son, now in haphazardly assembled stockings, short pants, a small jacket, and buckled shoes, skipped to the big wooden table.

“I was only able to pass by the plaza briefly on my way to the court today. I’ve been speaking with the judge over matters--that inheritance of yours.”

Martín caught the cessation of Maria’s movements when her husband mentioned the inheritance. *Tantas cosas que quería saber*, many times I caught my brother watching me.

“Yes, my brother does like to make things difficult for me,” he said.

Maria shook her head and her long braided hair swished left and right.

“Look Martín, I’m afraid things with the will aren’t well,” Luis came to the wooden table and leaned his palm into it. Vasco skipped to his mother’s side and stared into her pot. Martín heard the fire crackle.

“Pardon me?” Martín asked.

“Did Maria not tell you?” the tone of his voice changed and he glanced at Maria. He spoke slower, “Martín, there’s talk that the mestizo slaves will be freed. There may be no one to man your father’s estate if that happens. All the gold might as well be lost in the mines without extractors. And what would be the point fighting your brother for land that can’t be worked?”

“But nothing is final as of yet is it? There’s no reason why I should simply hand it all over to the Marques, right?”

Vasco glanced at the men and tilted his head.

“Well, we can still try to get you the land.”

Vasco came to Luis’ side and tugged his trousers, “Why father, why does uncle want land?”

“Claro, try, try. My little brother can’t take my father’s name from me. I’m a Cortés, the first born. How can he forget that? No, no, I won’t let him.”

Vasco went to the kitchen door and hopped outside without closing it behind him.

“Alright Martín, I’ll see what I can do.”

Martín touched the pock marks on his neck and saw Maria’s eyes on him. She stood up and took a jar down from a shelf. She watched Martín as she removed the lid. She picked up a small jar and sprinkled the herbs into it. She took down another jar and he saw her tap on it to pour out its dark powder into the jar where the herbs had been sprinkled. She poured in a bit of water and drops of other liquids. He moved the hand over his neck to his temples and massaged.

“I’m not leaving New Spain without resolving this. I have to have a plan.” He tried to ignore the weight of her eyes. Whether or not she understood, he would need a means to live.

Seconds later, Vasco trotted back inside with a handful of dirt.

“Uncle, uncle!” he yelled.

“Hijo, that’s dirty. Don’t bring that inside,” Luis frowned.

Vasco thrust his fist clenching earth toward Martín, “Want it?”

Martín laughed, “I don’t know. What is it?”

The boy ignored his father’s cross look and took advantage of his uncle’s approval. He raised the dirt overhead and danced in circles. His shoes clicking on the tile and his jacket and trousers hardly sitting right on his small body. Martín couldn’t help but transpose himself into the boy’s carefree shoes for a moment. He hadn’t felt a lightness like this wash over him for so long that he welcomed it. He walked the boy outside and made him throw the dirt back on the ground. The boy giggled as it landed on a worm. Martín felt an instant desire to protect this boy. Vasco jumped up and down and Martín chuckled putting his hand over the child’s head to lead him back into the kitchen. He forgot about Maria and her remarks. His shoulders felt lighter.

“You have an enchanting boy, Luis,” Martín said.

Luis touched his son's shoulder and nodded at the door, "Wash. This house is not for pigs."

Martín heard Maria clanking cookware in the background. Vasco hunched over a little and left the room.

"Come, Martín we'll go to my study and discuss your case. Maria will bring us a fine lunch," Luis looked at Maria and left the kitchen to the hallway.

She looked up to see Luis' back.

Martín locked eyes with her, "Maria--."

"It's alright, we will talk later," she said.

Martín turned to go.

"Wait," Maria called. She walked unevenly toward him, "Take this. Rub it over your neck every night."

She handed him the small jar she'd been mixing into and closed her fingers over his, "Máxipactinemi. Be well."

Martín's expression softened.

He smiled and nodded, "Muchas gracias, hermanita."

Nervous? I had a gullet full of nerves! The nerves he expected, but my anger and irritability he had not. Pobre Martín was at a loss with me. At least I got it all out in one swoop. After that we got along well.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In the days that followed, Martín and his circle of knights continued to shake up a buzz in the city. Since their introduction to it at the parade, the town continued to sniff out the fresh scent of the motherland clinging to the men's skins. And the newly arrived conquistadores didn't seem to touch ground so much as walk an inch off ground lifted in the aura of their celebrity standing. Children in the plaza donned themselves with a token denoting their favorite knight to represent in their wooden sword games: a feather sticking up from a hat, a little red pollen for red beard and hair, white cream for fair skin. Martín even noticed some of the mestizo children deciding against pale disguises and instead simply announcing their choice of conquistadore. They stood tall and declared themselves Martín Courts, the dark knight.

The extent of the knights' influence reached beyond the children and served as a modified model for all criollos, the Mexican born Spaniards, and all other admirers of proper Spanish life. For example, Martín along with an assortment of his companions floated over the town streets one morning on their way to enjoy a warm cup of café con leche. Martín was flirting with some criollo ladies selling flowers when a pretty young mestiza woman named Xochitl crossed their path. She carried a basket of neatly folded laundered sheets. Her face had a simple beauty like two shining tamarind seeds pressed gently into a mound of brown masa and her cheekbones were full like roses as were her lips. She attracted the attention of the conquistadores who were grumpy not yet having consumed so much as a crumb or drop to begin their day.

They tried to gain Xochitl's attention but she knew better than to look at them. She watched the cobble stones beneath her feet and picked up her speed.

"Girl!" Suárez insisted, "What do you have? Don't you have respect for the guests of your city?"

Xochitl misjudged her step and stumbled, but she caught herself and tried to compose her stature.

"Excuse me," she said, "I am working."

"Ah, it speaks," Suárez said, "Well, as you should be, I'm happy to see that, hard working woman. Can I help you with that heavy basket?"

"No, no sir. Thank you for your kindnesses. I am not permitted to accept."

Her eyes fluttered upward to meet theirs so as not to appear impolite.

Suárez took the basket from her, "Sweet girl, surely nobody will argue if I say I insisted."

Xochitl stared at him with her mouth open.

"Close your mouth mijita, nobody likes a fish," Suárez said.

He put an arm around her and whispered in her ear, "Unless it's between the legs, now that's something nobody can help." His voice resumed normal volume, "Am I right? Especially a slave girl such as yourself? Do I have reason?"

Xochitl shook her head no each time he posed a question. Up to this point Martín had been waiting for his compadre to tire of the macho act and continue on with the course of their morning. He wondered where he'd found the energy to pester her. In my opinion Suárez was intoxicated by fame that in some ways made him feel like a returning God. He thought the town wanted him to dominate it, to set an order. But when Martín saw that the young woman's head shaking only urged Suárez further, whispering more words to make her rose shaped cheeks burn

like roses too, he decided to move forward alone and who ever wanted to follow him could make that decision for himself.

“Don’t leave me so alone gentlemen,” Suárez yelled at their backs.

Martín turned around and saw Suárez catching up to them. Xochitl was picking up some of her sheets off of the street. She didn’t spend time folding them up again, but piled them in her basket and continued on her way opposite to them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Martín's Tongue

*My brother has arrived.
He greets me with a lisp,
“¿Como hassss esstado?”*

*He tries our mother's Nahuatl words,
they fumble, they are
clashing pebbles in his mouth.
Oh, tiachcauhtli, do not chip a tooth!*

For some it's having the same love of a particular song, for others its the acceptance of certain slipped and undignified bodily functions, but for Atl and Martín it was their laugh that bonded them. Although each ended at a different frequency, Atl's reaching to maniacal heights and Martín's trailing off in a low tone, at its core the laugh was the same. It began with a raspy exhale followed by a chuckle that bounced like a rubber ball. Martín thought Atl's to be exaggerated because of who he was, his wildness of life lived in the woods. And Atl thought it only a matter of time before he unlocked the depths trapped beneath Martín's restraint. Laughter. That was one thing you couldn't get from letters.

Without another person in sight, the brothers leaned against a slithering stone Quetzalcoatl. A butterfly fluttered to and fro by Atl's ear. He didn't seem to mind.

Atl had long black hair with pieces of red powder clinging to it. He smelled like smoke and earth.

“How do you wear all that clothing?” Atl asked poking the arm of Martín's coat.

Atl smiled with everything in him through nearly everything he said as he did now.

While Martín sweat under his uniform Atl sat at ease in the afternoon heat wearing only his

loincloth. Martín chuckled at Atl's level of comfort with him so soon. He felt like they were children spending their free time together after a day at school. His blue eyes had amazed him when they'd first faced one another there at the ruins. A pain of jealousies had rattled Martín's head. Nothing in the letters described this detail. And to Martín it had seemed too important to have been neglected. But he didn't call attention to it aside from privately storing the feature within the portmanteau of his knowing--such a quality could sure enough be sleeping within his makeup somewhere. A ripple of joy ran alongside his jealousies.

"I don't know what it's like in your homeland, but here it can get quite comonqui."

"Como-mon-chuy?" Martín stumbled.

"Don't hurt yourself!" Atl laughed, "Yes, it can get hot."

"That is difficult to say," Martín laughed. "It gets hot in Spain too. We endure it."

He took out a rag from his pocket and dabbed his forehead.

I had sent a message to Martín's house that at sundown his brother Atl would be waiting for him at the statue. Martín remembered seeing the place from the hill where he'd buried his father. Again he'd thought of his father's stories and the glory that passed through the city before he regretted having to destroy it. He relayed this to Atl.

"You believe he regretted?" Atl asked.

"He said he did, so yes I believe him."

"Martín, are you lost?" Atl asked just like that.

"Lost how?"

"You don't remember anything do you? You're an orphan, icnotl. An orphan from your people, your language. Pohtli, you lost."

Martín stared at Atl. Atl's plump purplish lips so much like his own curled up into a smile. He's not serious. He's mad, he told himself smiling in return. They both bubbled up with their laughter more out of a feeling of friendship than to do with the abrupt topic brought up by Atl.

"I am not lost," Martín chuckled, "Spain is my home. Soon I'll be home again."

"But, do you ever think of the land of Mexihcol also as your home. That's what I'm saying. Do you ever feel lost without feeling that inside? Does it haunt you at all?"

Martín frowned a little, "Spain is all I know."

"But, Spain is not all there is."

The butterfly that had found some fascination with Atl decided to fly toward the trees near the ruins.

"Mira Atl, we're brothers, but fate has made us each into something very different. You don't understand my life."

Atl laughed and laid his head on his knees, saying softly, "Oh."

He lifted his head, and smiling said, "Everyone now is in two worlds. My father is Español, my mother Indita. My father is in Spain. Adios," Atl waved goodbye to an imaginary father going to Spain. "Probably never see him."

"Well, what about you Atl?" Martín shifted, "Do you think of Spain as your home?"

Atl picked up a rock and studied it. He twisted his torso around and scratched a drawing into the serpent stone.

"It's hard to say without having been there. But I think about it sometimes. Given the chance, I would go. I might learn something, but I'm an earth man. Do you know what that

means? I can't turn my back on my country, not after what its been through and who knows what else it's going to go through."

"We're no different Atl," Martín said, "You know, I'm exactly like you actually."

Atl stopped drawing and turned around. Martín held his hand against Atl's.

"Same hand, same skin," Martín pointed out, "The only difference is I chose Spain and you chose Mexico."

Atl shrugged. He resumed his drawing, which on closer inspection Martín saw was a series of boxes encasing two drops each.

"Do you have hauntings? In dreams?" Atl asked just like that again.

Martín tilted his head at the mention of haunted dreams.

Atl kept talking, "You know, I have nightmares that I'll join the Spaniards and my people will kill me." He paused, then said, "This is a bad sign."

He laughed.

Martín noticed the butterfly had returned and fluttered behind Atl's neck.

"But I'm not sure. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if mother's people and father's people came together. I mean, I can't join my father's people as long as they make my brothers into slaves, try to erase the land with gold sickness. But, if I were you, a foot in the conquistador world, I would use my time while I was in the world of my other half--your Mexica land, language, people--to help my people."

"Help?" Martín asked. "End slavery?" Martín chuckled. He looked at the direction where the town lay. He thought of his father, his compadres, all who had property and riches unearthed by mestizo slaves, "No. We depend on it."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Atl and Martín left the temple well after sunset. They made their way to my front door for a dinner, also mentioned in my message. By the time they'd arrived Luis had already eaten and was busy working on cases in his study by lamp light. I had put Vasco to bed.

So we three siblings sat together at a table in the kitchen. Martín liked being in our company. He felt a lightness in Atl's manner and laughter and the way he was able to reach under my shell and pull out my softer side.

They ate a dish Martín had never had. It was a mixture of the most rich flavors of chocolate and chilé--a dark brown sauce poured over chicken. A small steamy basket covered with a cloth held corn tortillas. A stone bowl held cooked beans and another, jalapeños. He wanted to pour the dark brown sauce on everything he ate. His brother and sister laughed at how he covered his beans with the sauce. And he'd laughed in disbelief at the amount of chiles Atl and Maria ate. He could hardly touch one to his tongue let alone swallow a bite with each forkful.

Maria sliced a rich purple plum in half. She paused to admire how its veins crawled out from its center like a map in a heart.

"Tell us of your love life Martín," Maria said as she did out of nowhere, handing him a half of the plum and the other to Atl.

Maria and Atl smiled, waiting. Martín raised his eyebrows up and down smiling, but with a little bashfulness underlining the pan dulce rounds of his cheeks.

"I don't know about love, but I can tell you about women."

“No, tell us about love!” Maria swatted him with a baguette.

Martín smiled shyly, “Well, it’s tragic really. Don’t spread it around because that wouldn’t be fair to my brother, the Marques.”

Maria leaned in, resting her chin on her hand, “The Marques? Who--the Marquesa!”

Martín nodded, “Her name is Venera. My Venus.”

“His snow falls on Ixta,” Atl, who’d been waiting patiently, said.

“Who?” Martín’s forehead wrinkled.

Maria laughed, “Uy, a weakness for white women?”

Martín smiled at his food as Atl continued.

“Ixta, the white princess that the warrior fell for. Just go outside tomorrow when the sun’s out and see. They’re still there,” he chuckled, “Ixta lain out in grief covered with snow and her warrior nearby to accompany her in his own volcano.”

Maria nudged Atl, “Come now, surely Martín doesn’t want that end. What’s the situation with this “Venus”?”

Martín licked his lips, “Before her parents arranged her marriage with the Marques, she and I were inseparable. It slowed after they wed, but we saw each other at times in secret.”

She’d allowed him to unravel the ribbons of her night dressing gown and throw it over the rug of her guest room. He didn’t think about the mechanics of their relationship while inside that room.

He’d watched her sit up in bed and traced his fingers down the pearls of her spine to the line between her buttocks. She’d called him the better Martín--more charming, kinder. And he’d watched her tuck her hair up one pin at a time and retrieve her gown from the floor. He’d fastened her ribbons into bows and she’d turned and smiled at him.

“And you still see each other,” Maria pried.

Martin set down his fork, “No. She ended it.”

Maria shook her head and placed a hand on her brother’s.

Martín laughed, “Don’t pity me. It could never be.”

“There are plenty of Ixtas in the valley. And other picos that are maybe not as white, but beautiful just the same, just waiting to erupt for you!” Atl smiled and laughed.

Maria and Martín joined in his laughter.

Suddenly, I stopped. I angled my head listening and excused myself saying I’d heard a knock at the door down the hall. Martin and Atl watched me limp toward the door.

In my absence those boys discussed my deformity. I’d have brought it up, but I feared having to take off my shoe to expose myself to them. So, I left the explaining to Atl.

Martín set his knife down and spoke to Atl in a low voice, nodding in their sister’s direction, “What happened?”

Atl dipped his rolled up tortilla in his mole sauce and licked his fingers, “Bones in the foot, born crooked.”

“Can’t the doctors help her?”

Atl shrugged, “She won’t let them.”

Minutes later, I returned and brought Martín to the main salon with the yellow walls.

“Marques, what--” Martín started.

“It’s Suárez. The police have arrested him to question him. Do you know anything about him?” the Marques asked.

Atl walked into the room.

“I don’t know anything about this. Question him about what?”

The Marques didn't answer. He kept his eyes steady on Atl. Imagine what goes through the mind of a matador who comes home to find his own garden grazed by a bull. This was close to the feeling that passed through the proper Marques del Valle de Oaxaca. But, little did the matador register that this bull had been grazing in this spot long before Europeans like him decided to build their houses there.

“Martín, I present to you, Atl, my brother by our mother doña Marina.”

Atl stuck out his hand and nodded at the Marques. The Marques didn't match his gesture. Instead, he twitched his mustache and looked Atl up and down. Martín wondered what the Marques made of the blue eyes blazing out of Atl's brown skull.

Atl backed away and came to me, “Tlazohcamati. Nipatlani.”

“Ma xipactinemi, ozomahtli,” I replied.

Atl smiled and turned to Martín, “Buenas noches, hermano.” He then looked at the Marques, “Buenas--”

“Puto,” the Marques interrupted.

Atl chuckled, but not without a cactus needle of hurt in his laugh. He shook his head and said, “Ma xipactinemi,” then walked out the front door.

Why Europeans feel the need to make sexuality the bull's eye of every target board is beyond me. But, to look back on that confrontation brings a laugh to my lips. Even I hardly ever felt comfortable in that extravagant tight-wound salon, and wished I could go right out the door along with Atl and let the Cortés' handle the situation they were faced with. I can still see it as I sit in these convent walls--Atl's loin cloth, the golden wall covering, the Persian rug, the valuable golden collectables--all of which culminated in the paralysis that held the Marques, incapacitating him beyond a single word. It was a sight.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Aztecs Don't Use the Wheel

*My mother gave me a toy.
It was clay. Jaguar shaped.
A rope attached.
Wheels at its paws.
Smooth as sea stone.*

*I propped my doll atop,
rest him on his back,
fanned out the ridges of his corn husk skirt.
"Up!" my doll ordered.
I rolled him uphill.*

*Then when I grew high as my mother's breasts,
she took it away.
I stomped the ground,
laid at her feet like dead.*

*But she made predictions,
counted on her fingers:
round bodies;
slack muscle;
stranger to work.*

*She gave it away.
I saw the boy rolling it,
commanding, "Up!"*

*And just the other day in the street,
a wide man,
whose father was a well known conquistador,
rode in a carriage,
jewels jiggling like savila.*

In the study of Alonso de Avila, the Marques spoke with the fashionable and wealthy son of a conquistador. Alonso dressed in a red doublet that extended at his waist with darts that allowed his portly stomach room to protrude. Over this he wore a black coat unlike any the

Marques had seen before. It had smaller buttons than was common and extra seams to provide the illusion of a straight torso. When the buttons were fully fastened down the front the coat gave Alonso a thinner, younger figure.

Alonso's dark haired knuckles wrapped his crystal wine vessel as he let a well fed mestiza servant pour his red wine. As she left the room the men exchanged words on the fate of the Spanish colony. The Marques interspersed their conversation with his praise and questions about the grand collection of ornaments surrounding them. He couldn't help but admire Alonso's exquisite taste in household decor and items of Indio treasure.

The Marques took slow steps about the space, one hand clasping his wine glass and the other gracing various objects with his fingers to appease his curiosity. He saw a large glass cabinet filled with many pieces and others displayed atop carved wooden stands, tables, and decorative furniture.

Small clay statues of Aztec gods baring cut shells on their chests covered the surface of one table. The Marques' eyes settled on a table made from a slab of carved stone. It had been part of a tomb, Alonso enlightened him, marked with symbols of the dead: crossbones, skulls, and rows of soft cornered squares made of various symbols. Above the table were real skulls with white shells and stones of obsidian for eyes. He didn't know how Alonso could keep such a ghastly assembly under his own roof. A sitting skeleton figurine with arms crossed over its chest seemed to smile up at him, making him shudder. Small carved crystal represented a skull. It caught the sun and gave off a beam of light that hit the Marques' thigh. This culture's obsession with death sobered him. It seemed to scrape his mind and warn him of his weakness for riches. He felt the skulls and skeletons mock him, their smiles laugh at him. Grayish skulls with fine holes pitted here and there sat on a table all too real to behold, for they reminded him of what lay

just beneath the skin of his own brow. It was enough to give him nightmares. But like his father, the Marques wouldn't let the haunting faces of the dead bar him from the wealth he pursued. The Indios had scarcely knocked at the mountains. He knew they glittered immensely from within and he need only maintain the forces that kept them knocking to deliver the gold to his hands.

“Fascinating collection Avila. It pleases me, this enchanting flavor of yours.”

“Thank you. I'm happy it falls well with you. But, it is a melancholy time with the death of our viceroy Velasco,” Alonso shrugged and gestured his plump fingers as though throwing a pinch of salt, as though to say, but what can be done?

The Marques glided his nose over the scent of his wine. He saw a mask covered with turquoise mosaic. Its eyes beamed with discs of gold. He felt a wave of excitement rush through his veins down to his fingertips. These treasures were not out of his reach. He touched the mask. As clear as he saw them before him now, he knew they were out there as well, his to take.

“Will the King send another viceroy?” the Marques asked, his eyes swiveling around the room.

“There is no official word as of yet.”

The Marques looked at Alonso for a moment then took a sip of wine. He looked at his shoes and felt the plushness of the innately woven ivory carpet.

“Are these designs in the carpet woven of silk?” the Marques asked.

“Silk, yes. But, I don't see why the king doesn't appoint you as captain general.”

The Marques moved his eyes to the other objects before him. He took a few steps toward the tall glass case. Inside were shelves of everything from gold and silver pendants of ornate design to wooden dog, jaguar, dove, and monkey toys, some on wheels. There were old painted

clay bowls, and vases, and snail shells carved from stone. He saw five stone female figurines no taller than his finger, each lounged comfortably in a siesta style position. Blue and white painted men padded at the middle had the stance of an athlete.

He paused and studied his reflection, his nose inches from the glass. Had Alonso always planned to make the Marques' the ruler of New Spain? He had hoped this proposition were more than rumor. He knew that he could be a leader, that the heavens would part a path for him to follow. He hadn't, however, planned on the cessation of the viceroy so suddenly. Whether his death was of natural causes seemed less likely with the unfurling of Alonso's speech. But why hadn't he come to the Marques sooner? If he excluded him from the viceroy's demise, it was a wise decision that kept his hands clean, maintained his credibility. The Marques saw his own eyes growing wide with the possibility of rising to the head of the country. Yet, he was afraid of appearing too eager. The embellishments around him gave him the excuse he needed to pace the discussion.

"This Alonso!" the Marques interrupted, tapping on the glass, "Forgive me, but I cannot take my eyes from this yellow figurine in your cabinet. What is this?"

Alonso laughed. The Marques watched him in the reflection as he set down his glass and stood slowly, pushing up his weight with first one forearm, then the right, as though the strength of his legs were of no use to him.

The Marques turned to see him walk over. Alonso smiled with his wrinkled eyes and removed a key from inside his jacket pocket, "I suppose I should open it so that you can have a full look. Then we can continue our talk."

He turned the key in the door and opened it.

“This I am most proud of. It is an original statue formed by the first Spanish artisans of Mexico. The gold derives from the very mountains that surround us. The clock beneath was only recently added.”

His fingers shook as he reached inward to take the object of the Marques’ affection. He took it out and held it up.

“Our Holy Mother and her Christ child,” Alonso explained, “This may have very well once been in the shape of a heathen god before the conquistadores melted it down and reformed it.”

“This gold was extracted by the Aztecs?” the Marques saw nothing else in the room save the statue. He set his wine glass down on a nearby table and reached out for Alonso to hand it to him. He received it with two hands as it was heavy.

“Bellisima,” the Marques breathed.

“Likely extracted by the emperor’s subjects I presume. Much like those working the mines today.”

“The mestizos?”

“Well, they’re all Indios as far as I’m concerned,” Alonso shrugged, “Which brings us back to our conversation.”

The Marques stroked the soft veil of the Holy Mother. There is so much yet to be found. Here. Right, here. He wanted to unearth every last stone. Well, not with his own hands, but by the hands of those men secured by the encomendero masters. Entranced, his eyes moved slowly to Alonso.

“I do worry about our dear Indios, Marques. At least with the laws under encomienda we can assure their owners supply sufficient living conditions.” Alonso’s lips gave a small smile,

“In this society what’s to become of them if they’re freed? Our ways are strange to them, not all are converted. I fear their souls are in peril.”

The Marques handed the statue back to Alonso.

“I’m sure you feel the same. I have a sentiment that we supporters of the encomienda can entrust you to the task. Am I correct in this?”

Alonso’s hands rattled the statue as he settled it back on its shelf.

“I too worry about our dear Indios,” the Marques said retrieving his glass.

Alonso grinned. He locked the case and dropped the key into his pocket, “As I’d hoped Marques.”

The Marques held his glass beneath his chin and wafted the rich smells of aged grape and spice. “I can’t think of anyone more worried about them in fact,” he smiled at Alonso.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Romance with Encomienda

*I would kiss your lips. Our eyes would close.
You would share your flavor of power.
Oh! My hands crave your plump body, silken and tender.*

*Because, as it stands, you are so far from me.
There's a wedge between us,
that which readily accepts the dew from my brow
to encircle your fingers with gold.*

*You say the law of encomienda permits it so.
Ah, but how dull!*

*See that life cries for more!
Something more real than metal.
My sweat, if it falls, will not fall without a kiss.*

“I’m Moctezuma. Martín, you will be Hernán Cortés. Pedro, you’ll be Malintzin,”

Alonso said.

Pedro had a yellow complexion like melted candle wax. He had a permanent dark shadow on his jaw even when he shaved his beard. Martín appreciated his dark humor and knew he could be counted on in battle.

Martín watched Alonso rush off to instruct the conquistadores dressed in peasant garb.

Months after his arrival in Mexico, Martín received an invitation from Alonso de Avila. There was to be a surprise masquerade at Alonso’s hacienda in honor of the Marques’ newborn twins. Alonso had explained that everyone would have a part in putting on a game of charades to reenact the Conquest of the Aztecs for the Marques and his wife. Alonso would provide all

the costumes. Anything for the Marques. His wife had survived their journey and the months that followed until her sons' birth.

Alonso wasn't certain of the Marques' desire to attend the fiesta although he'd been animated at the suggestion the week before. Alonso insisted that the masquerade must go on. He wanted nothing more than to enliven the Marques' spirits. He'd wanted to celebrate life and not death. He wanted to entertain and to drink, to make the Marques remember the good things in life. The man prided himself in his estate and recreational genius. Martín and the guests had no doubt that he would deliver. And it was possible that the Marques would respond well.

This would be an opulent fiesta. The large room next to the front entrance had been transformed as only Alonso was skilled to do. Martín marveled at Alonso's talent. The way the hall mimicked the kingdom built by the Aztecs. Stone statues lined the walls and woven straw mats covered the floor. Tall vessels filled with cacao beans and corn kernels were placed about. Intricately designed tapestries covered the walls. Earthen bowls with black paintings of fish, plants, and animals sat at each place setting on several long wooden tables. Teal quetzal feathers burst from vases of marigolds set over several round stone tables carved in detailed Aztec design, a large sun in relief spread over the tops.

The most esteemed of conquistadores were invited, some with which Martín had fought in battle: Gómez de Vitoria, Cristóbal de Oñate, Pedro Quesada, Baltásar Quesada, Bernardino Maldonado, Gil Gonzalez de Alvarado, Chico de Molino. And the presence of the Marques, the guest of honor and new parent, was of course requested.

In the banquet hall of his immense house, Alonso dictated the roles while waiting hopefully for the arrival of the Marques.

Martín surveyed the other knights. He was not sure he would go through with throwing on his costume. The idea of masks and costume games seemed childish. Martín blinked. He absorbed the flames flickering over tall Spanish candle sticks. Their modernity seemed out of place among the authentic Native decorations, but they added sophistication, he decided. He could feel his stomach burning with hunger and knew he would enjoy the abundance of food and wine awaiting him later in the night. He was just not sure it would fill him as he wanted. He thought back to his last night at the Palacio Real. His joke about the food, praying that the memory of the food stay with him throughout his sea voyage. She had watched him make that speech. Had she laughed? He wished he'd seized more opportunities to speak with her, to be alone with her. He could have found moments.

It wasn't food Martín prayed for anymore. Now it was Venera's memory that he prayed would stay with him. Although he was certain the Aztec or Spanish dishes Alonso chose for the evening would be superb. He suddenly felt more cooperative toward the charades knowing if he complied he'd be well distracted from Venera.

He saw the other men transforming into key figures of the Aztec conquest. Pedro wore the skirt of a woman and a mask with long hair hanging from it. Martín chuckled at the sight of Pedro wiping the hair away that seemed to sting his eyes. Without debating it further he decided he'd go ahead and dress up. He'd fill his father's shoes. He sat on one of the benches at the long tables and applied armor to his legs. Hearing the sounds of clanking metal brought to his mind this ritual of war. He'd heard the metal many times before and felt the heavy protection of its weight on his muscles. Sounds of screaming horses and slashing swords tore at his memory. Yelling and crying grown men prayed through the last minutes of their lives. He saw as lucid as his hands before him the look of vulnerability wavering in the watery eyes and quivering lips of

the wounded. Too many times he had to forget himself and step over the dying, even the best of his men, to finish the fight. At the end he could go back to their sides, but they would almost always be passed on.

Martín had to remind himself that this was not one of those nights. He need not brace himself for the harsh blows of thrusting swords and the wide bruises he'd later encounter.

Tonight was not a battle with another army. Tonight was a battle within himself. He would have to begin now to live the rest of his life without the woman of his heart. He stared at the men for a moment to bring himself back out of his head. They were laughing and practicing their parts with mock seriousness. Martín nodded vaguely when someone's voice murmured to help finish attaching the armor. He smiled when he saw that it was Pedro in his woman dress, mask, and long hair.

"Why, hello doña Marina," Martín said.

"Don't you recognize your own mother hijo?" Pedro asked.

Martín turned his head and pretended not to hear while Pedro lifted the heavy armor over his shoulders and fastened it over his back. He slapped his back when it was done and Martín felt the vibration to his spine. This Pedro was not an ignoble knight, but there was something about him Martín could not see. And if there was something escaping his eye it meant he could not fully trust him, even if he liked him. Martín stood up and walked toward Alonso and the crowd of the other actors.

"Now Aztecs," Alonso said, "Use fear, and panic, tremble before Hernán." He nodded toward Martín. Martín felt their eyes on him and held up his white mask with the red hair. He saw his own dark thumbs against the pale cheeks of the mask in his hands. He closed his eyes

and pulled it over his face tying the string behind his head. He felt the red hair over his black hair. It felt rough like wool against his that was soft and straight.

Alonso explained the order in which he wanted each person to step forward. Martín listened and watched through the slits of his mask. The holes were too narrow and too close together for his large, wideset eyes. He felt his warm breath bounce off the closed mouth that covered his own. He felt almost changed into the son his father always wanted, the brother his brother always wanted. Although his father provided for him and had his birth legitimized he knew he wasn't the first born he'd wanted. What other conclusion could he have come to after his father placed the Marques in command of his inheritance? His brother had claimed the will lacked the official notary signature. But Martín wondered whether it was more than this; whether his father purposely changed the will. But if that were the case then could his brother be lying to somehow save him the indignity of knowing that it was his father himself who changed the will and not simply a neglected signature? He doubted the Marques had the capacity for such kindness toward him.

He hated his brother for being right, but what other reason would his father have for naming his second born son the same as the first, except to correct his mistake? Perhaps for one night Martín could become this white skin and red hair. If for only a small while, he could be the man he was supposed to be. The whole Martín Cortés, the correct first born.

He wondered what his brother would think when and if he arrived? Surely if his brother participated in the game, the part of their father would go to him. And if so, would he even need such a disguise? He had an identical look without it.

Martín listened to Alonso again when he noticed his questions mounted one another.

“Everyone back. Everyone back. Now you know what to do. Don’t come forward until it’s your turn.”

He ran out of the room. Either the Marques had arrived or it was a late guest. Everyone laughed softly as his weight and the green and teal feathers of his headdress bounced in unison with his steps. Over the months of Martín’s time in New Spain, he grew accustomed to Alonso’s excessive style. He was well known for stirring the social scene and opening his home to his friends. His fiestas had often taken Martín’s mind away from the pressures of his finances. His brother-in-law insisted he was handling his case, but admitted to being detained, inundated with work for other clients.

Alonso appeared in the fiesta hall again.

“I’ve sent the servants to admit the Marques.”

The men clapped knowing that the party would go on.

Minutes later, two servants, costumed as Aztec servants in brown tunics entered the room with the Marques following behind. After the servants bowed and exited, the Marques simply stared at the splendor before him.

The Marques wore his black doublet with diamond shaped stitching and long golden sleeves with black slashed breeches. A blonde feather protruded from his black hat.

“Welcome to my empire. I am emperor Moctezuma,” Alonso said, placing a bouquet of roses at the Marques’ feet, “Suchiles for Your Heiness.”

The Marques smiled a small smile. He looked down and took out a note jutting from the flowers. He opened it and raised his eyebrows. His eyes moved over the words.

He read aloud, “Do not fear the fall, because it is for a greater rise.”

“Yes, wisely put, Your Heiness,” Alonso grinned.

The Marques nodded. One of the Aztec servants stepped forward and held out a crown made of teal feathers for Alonso to take. He made a showy waving gesture toward the Marques with his thick fingers and took the crown with both hands.

“This is indeed becoming to Your Heiness. Accept the crown!”

He lowered his head and Alonso placed the crown onto his head with care.

The Marques looked content, “It is indeed a pleasure to meet you, Emperor.”

Alonso said nothing, but smiled and bowed as deeply as his large belly would allow. The Marques’ eyes traveled the people in costume and roamed the walls and the ceiling. His eyes sparkled and the candlelight moved on his face. He seemed overwhelmed or was it the hysteria of having lost a loved one?

“These are the Aztecs. A warrior people, yet, observe how well their conquerer, Hernán Cortés, causes them to tremble.”

Martín clenched his jaw and took a step forward to bow for the Marques. Then he placed his hand on his hip and raised his sword high in the air.

Alonso turned his head to nod at those dressed in tunics, the Aztec subjects. They acted out their terror by huddling together and pulling their hair in anguish. They covered their eyes and ears. One man fell backward as though struck by lightning.

The Marques laughed from a raspy place in his throat.

“Impressive,” the Marques clapped and allowed Alonso to lead him further into the room. He touched the head and hands of one of the statues. “What exquisite taste you have Emperor. These plumes, these gold shields displayed on your walls. I hope you are as generous with everyone as you appear to be.”

Martín wondered whether his brother recognized him. He didn't make any sign of it. He'd seen no condescending remarks or rolling eyes. Martín thought to himself that he'd gone unnoticed. He'd passed, he thought feeling foolish because everything would be as it was when the outfit came off. He would never admit to the Marques how deeply this costume, this role, and his brother's acceptance or rather lack of rejection, affected him. He bowed as though he were always Hernán Cortés and stepped back, fading into the crowd of disguises.

“Why certainly, you are our guest of honor,” Alonso said holding the Marques' gaze.

Alonso broke the stare by gesturing toward Suárez, “Now this, this is our lady, the distinguished Native, Nahuatl translator known by many names: La Malinche, Malintzin, Malinali, but to you she will always be known by her Christian name, doña Marina. Without you, your ladyship, I daresay there would have been little chance of Hernán Cortés conquering my prestigious empire.”

Pedro stepped forward and bowed. His mask was painted a crude purplish color and the long hair attached to it had many stray pieces in disarray. The hair fell forward as Pedro bowed and pressed his hand awkwardly flat over the face of his mask to keep it in place. The Marques chuckled.

Doña Marina settled his hair and spoke to Emperor Moctezuma in Nahuatl, “Teyacanani, Marques.”

“Quemah,” Moctezuma responded.

Doña Marina and the emperor kneeled on one knee and looked up at the Marques.

Martín's stomach was dripping fire. When had he last eaten and what were Alonso and Pedro saying? He wanted this to be over. He tapped his sword on the floor mat. Doña Marina and Moctezuma stared at him.

Martín stepped out from the crowd again,.

“Translate,” he said to doña Marina.

Pedro glanced at Alonso. Alonso nodded. There was definitely a secret passed between them, one that went deeper than masks and pretending. Martín gripped the handle of his sword as Marina approached him.

“The banquet is ready,” Pedro whispered into Martín’s ear.

Martín looked at him expecting more.

But when none came, he said, “My interpreter informs me that the great Emperor’s banquet is ready.” He lifted his chin and looked directly at his brother.

He thought he detected the slightest bit of awareness in his brother’s face. The Marques’ head tilted slightly and he awaited more words from Hernán Cortés, “the conqueror.” But Martín was enjoying his look of perplexity far too much to reveal anything. He kept his identity secret.

Alonso moved the party along, “Please, sit, we have for you food, gold, all that pleases your heart.”

He swept his arm gesturing at the table and the room’s many objects and treasures. Servants were now setting down plates glistening with food.

Alonso addressed all of his guests, “As Emperor Moctezuma, I invite you into my temple to eat, drink, and enjoy. Then let us play a game.”

Again, Martín saw their eyes meet and a strange knowing silence settled between them. The Marques followed Alonso to a table that sat on a platform higher than the rest.

Pedro slapped Martín on the back and offered to take the armor off. Martín accepted but studied Pedro’s eyes a moment before removing his father’s face. Pedro removed Martín’s

sleeves and breastplate. Martín took his seat at one of the other tables and saw Pedro join Alonso and the Marque on the platform.

Servants in tunic costumes circulated the tables refilling the emptying glasses of the conquistadores. Martín eyed the clay bowls and dishes filled with food as wet as his pallet. He smiled in appreciation of Alonso's attention to authenticity. He'd included the food of the Natives along with delicacies of Spain. Yellow corn, prickly pear, squash, pumpkin, fish and peppered roasts glinted in the light. Crab, turkey, rice, plums, plantains, grapes, and chocolate drinks. Martín lifted a forkfull of warm orange squash and ate. He touched his cup to his mouth and tasted the sweet and bitter red wine. He didn't care about his brother. He'd had fun hiding behind a mask, but that was over. He probably already had guessed it was Martín anyway. Or maybe he had been fooled. Either way, it didn't matter much in the long term. Venera. He felt his hand tremble on his fork. He forced himself to finish moving it to his mouth. After a few mouthfuls he felt his stomach ease its grip. The wine warmed his insides and loosened his seams.

One of the knights at his side belched so loud it echoed through the hall and the air filled with laughter. Even Martín laughed. Servants revisited the men's glasses and the clinking of cups didn't cease for long. The wine sloshed in their cups. Spills stained the tunics of some of the Aztec actors. They stroked their beards in anticipation of stories and jokes and they showed all their teeth when they laughed. Martín joined in the laughter, but he tried to stay observant. He needed to remain alert. His eyes darted to Alonso's table.

But, Martín told himself to relax into his chair and to drink his wine. He didn't want to appear on edge. He glanced casually to his side and saw the Marques and Alonso sharing hushed

words. Alonso gestured to some of the knights at Martín's table. They joined the small party on the platform.

Martín felt the alcohol reach his head. The coils of his ears warmed. He noticed his brother's eyes on him. It was as though the pleasurable experience Martín had had behind the mask had never happened. They were leaving him out of their conversation. His brother had not one son, but twins. He was in good favor with one of the wealthiest men in Mexico City and he ate his dinner literally looking down on Martín.

The Marques lifted his cup of wine to his older brother, smiled, and drank. Martín raised his own glass so as not to appear suspicious. He studied this creature who was at once his family and his obstacle. The Marques turned to better hear Alonso who was speaking with the new members of their table. Alonso slammed his fist on the table. The Marques moved in closer and spoke words that seemed to calm him. The other men quickly added their voices to the conversation.

To hell with him, Martín thought. He'd had enough food and wine now. He wanted to take his place next to his brother at the high table before he left the party. He scooped his chair back and raised himself. He looked at each of the men. Why shouldn't he do as he pleased? He would show them that he was more than an actor playing a Cortés in a game. He was a Cortés.

Alonso eye's caught on Martín who was coming his way. He elbowed the Marques and abruptly stood with a glass and fork in hand. He hit the glass with his fork three times and the noise of the room quieted.

"It's time for our game," he said, "Very simple, really. Whoever can drink the most without falling to the floor, wins."

The men shouted their approval.

“Servants! More wine!” Alonso yelled to the men standing in the doorway at side of the room. “We will all join together at the long tables. Everyone on your feet!”

Martín tightened his lips as Alonso and Pedro came down the platform. The servants coursed the room following orders as Pedro grabbed Martín’s elbow. He took him to the long table. He put a cup in his hand. The men there got to their feet and stood outside the table awaiting everyone’s hand to hold a full cup.

Alonso shuffled down the platform steps with the Marques at his side.

“No, he’s one of *them*,” the Marques said indiscreetly passing behind Martín.

The Marques looked at his brother when he’d finished his sentence. Martín saw him through the edge of his eye. He’d wanted to finish the brawl they’d started on the ship, but he reminded himself to keep his anger for the court. He knew it was unwise to have further clashing. His future depended on it. Still, he gnashed his teeth together and gripped the end of the table.

“Tranquilo. Enjoy yourself Martín,” Pedro said waving a servant over. “Fill Martín’s cup.”

“Drink!” Alonso yelled once he saw all cups high to the roof.

Martín eased his jaw to throw back the wine. Everyone gulped and slammed their cups down when they’d finished.

“Another!” Alonso shouted.

Martín drank hesitantly, watching for a while as the fiesta rolled on. His brother touched glasses with the men at his end of the table. They caroused breaking into proverbs and riffs of songs.

“Ya!”

Martín plunged his frustration down his throat. He pushed it as far as he could with the wine they poured again and again into his cup. While the others drank for joy of the newborns or the rank they enjoyed in their lives, Martín drank for his bad luck being the stained older Martín Cortés.

“Ya!”

First born son of Hernán Cortés.

“Ya!”

His father feigned concern for him. On his deathbed he'd turned his back, handed it all to his better son. Martín didn't have proof, but he need only join the obvious pieces of his life. The double naming, Venera, the will. It was so clear to him. Without his inheritance he'd soon be a dog in the street, worse, a mestizo slave. Or how would he live?

“Ya!”

He swallowed. His throat burned. His tongue felt like shriveled grape and his teeth like dry wood. Before he could think more on his brother again, he'd drunk himself to sitting. Yelps of laughter and prompting chatter pushed the game forward. And as more sat down, the remaining few challenged one another with raised cups.

The fantasy of the Aztec charades faded with their growing lust for the drink. The costumes of the actors no longer disguised their characters. It was a moment of clarity like the protruding nail in the door of his quarters on the ship. He knew from his father's stories that the Aztecs were a noble people conscious of the undoings of alcohol. They would not find themselves in the senselessness he witnessed, at least not without punishment. An ill feeling crept into his chest, his head spun, everything multiplied.

But, he wanted to see his brother once more. To have a visual that would spur his purpose and keep him fighting for his property. He squinted to see. Four or five men still played the drinking game. His head buzzed. It felt detached. But he found the Marques easily enough; being that the room held only one man in modern dress and that a blonde feather shot from the hat of that modern assembly, it could only be his brother. He saw that Alonso, Pedro, and others, were next to him again, speaking in a huddle at the head of the table.

The floor was littered with drinking vessels. A servant crouched with a rag over a pile of vomit. This was a room of silliness. It appeared the only conversation taking place was the one from which he was barred. Martín knew this and he wanted to leave. He made to leave in one swift movement.

In the wood framed mirror in the hallway he glimpsed his reflection, dark as the shadows outlying the spider of light and then his hands that gripped the golden door handle seemed black as coal. He covered his eyes, stepped outside, and slammed the door of the house of Alonso de Avila.

Martín heard the echo of the Marques' taunt, "One of *them*." It stayed with him in the dark, through the plaza, and wide cobbled streets of the town. He heard the muffled voices of the men at the party. He walked briskly to put those persons farther behind him. But, the voices wouldn't leave him and his feet seemed to catch on every stone and stick. His weight fell forward and back like corn on a broken stalk. He saw a bat darting into the sky. It looked like a small black bird or a big black butterfly. After he blinked it disappeared. Then another flew over.

Them. The word rang in his ears with all the dripping contempt his brother had given it. He saw his brother's mustache twitching. When he neared his house he saw the trees swayed

low in the night breeze. He felt the dark mass of their branches leaning into him. He covered his head and heard the voices hovering around him like the bats in the night.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Martín laid sprawled on the floor of the front room of his house. He heard the birds' noise outside and pushed his heavy eyes open. He saw the morning light driving around the curtains. The air was still and the arriving heat of the day made his back sweat and his mouth thick with thirst. None of the other men could be much better, he thought, not after the night they'd had. They must have ended in the same fate, none wiser for it, lain mindlessly wherever they might have stumbled, just past their own front door or if not, then that of the drinking game. Martín blinked to clear the blurriness. He felt a dull pain arrive in his temple. He knew the worst was yet to come. He let his weight press him into his carpet while he waited for a moment outside the haziness to stand, relieve himself, and take water.

He groaned and turned his head to the side where he saw the cup of wine he'd placed carelessly half on the edge of the table. He didn't remember pouring it. The sight of it made his head break. He knew it was far from being water, but it was wet, and wet was better than dry. An image of the nail on the boat came to his mind. He reached his arm for the wine, but could only swipe at it with the ends of his fingers sending the liquid swishing. Martín lay helplessly hoping it wouldn't fall. He watched it go still, then reached his arm up again, slowly this time.

Suddenly, the front door thumped with bold knocks. It creaked. Someone pounded impatiently and thrust weight against it. Martín jolted up, bumping the table. It vibrated, the cup trembled.

He struggled to pull himself to his senses. He scrambled to stand up, grabbing the side of the table.

Finally, the door burst open, followed by a wave of bright light. Silhouetted men poured into his house like his last sip of wine that buried him into a nightmare.

“We arrest you, for treason against the King of Spain!”

“On your feet!”

They wrenched Martín’s hand from the table which he was reluctant to release, it being his last anchor. The men thrust fists, elbows, knees, and feet against his struggling limbs and reddening face. They looked like whirling windmills trying to capture his shoulders and arms. The cup, caught in the commotion, tipped over, spilling its warm, red liquid over his hand. It fell to the floor with a clank and splashed out. His feet slid back and forth in the wine as they pulled him up.

“I don’t understand! *¡De que es eso!*” Martín yelled and squirmed in their grasp.

They ignored his cries and hustling and tore him outside, leaving a small smear of wine on the carpet and tiled floor.

He entered the full blast of sun. He grimaced for the sting behind his eyes, he shut his eyes tight. When he opened them again he saw the men clad in black. They were the jail soldiers he’d seen throughout Mexico City. Had something happened after the party the night before?

The soldiers threw him to the dirt. They tied a rope to his ankles and fastened his hands behind his back. Martín’s feet lifted. He twisted to see what was happening in front of him and saw the tail of a neighing black stallion swishing side to side. This was his horse, he recognized the two hind hooves, white, and the saddle, his with gold trim. A man sat above the horse looking back at him. People in the town stopped in their paths, gazing with open mouths. They recognized him from the extravagant festival not long past. Women held their children back by

their chests. Martín felt the humiliation cut through his alcohol induced state. Was this happening or a dream? No, too real, the dirt in his mouth and crunching between his teeth. He writhed and roared in protest but could not free himself.

“Yah!” one of the soldiers called out.

The rider kicked his heel into the stallion’s side. They galloped off. Martín braced himself. He clenched his jaw and his neck muscles to hold up his head from beating against the rocks. His back and sides went numb. The agony bellowed through his entire body and left his lungs in howls through the town to its prison.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Marques sat in an upholstered chair in his jail cell. It contained a bed raised off the ground, a wooden table, and a large carpet. The wooden door to his cell opened. The Marques stood and followed the guard who called his name. He was led to a more barren room of stone. This one was confined by an iron gate. Something in the center of the room caught his attention immediately. A wooden table lined with holes around its sides. Rope went through the holes connecting to large wheels at either end. The Marques almost stopped walking until the guard grunted behind him to sit next to Judge Bonifacio. He took the empty chair in front of the seated judge.

“Are you enjoying our prison’s royal chambers?”

Two soldiers arrived with pails of water and a horn. The Marques eyed them nervously.

“S-si, it has been most hospitable.”

“Bueno Marques. Let’s do this the easy way. Tell me who is behind this disloyal event and we won’t have to go through any pain.”

The Marques took a moment to choose his words carefully. He thought admitting knowledge of the event and any people behind it would reveal too much. Even to incriminate the innocent men would show he knew what the judge was talking about.

“If you would be so kind as to enlighten me of the details of the offense,” the Marques composed himself, “I would be of a better help to you.”

Behind the judge the soldiers were turning the big wheels, releasing their coiled rope. They pulled the rope through the holes in the wood. The rope looked caked with oil and dirt. It

slipped through the holes with what sounded like a long cry, if ropes could cry. They unwound the wheels again and the Marques heard their creaking noise. His eyes bounced between the judge who informed him of the masquerade and the men at work on the torture table.

The judge yelled spontaneously, “You ape idiots, don’t turn the wheels that way! You have to remove the rope from the joint.” The skin above his eyes drooped so that it was nearly in the top half of his eyes, along with some of his eyebrow hair. “These Indios are a race of monkeys,” he said gruffly. “They have no brains. No letters. No sensibilities for poetry and literature. Monkeys!” he screamed losing himself. His face had gone completely red.

The Marques licked his lips. His forehead showed beads of sweat.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sometimes we live more than we die and sometimes we die more than we live, but as long as we are in our bodies we remain in the middle, like the Nahuatl word for man, *tlacatl*, one who is between the underworld and the heavens. It is here, before considering these convent walls, that I reside. And it is here that Martín would contemplate his existence.

“What have I done?” Martín asked the soldiers leading him to the jail cell.

He did a quick survey of the cell. It was encompassed by thick stone walls and contained four or five low beds that seemed no more than slabs of wood under old sheets thrown on the floor. There was a rectangle of space pressed into one of the walls, the row of stones at the base served as a bench.

“You are under arrest for your participation in the treacherous gathering at the house of Alonso de Avila.”

“The masquerade?” Martín almost laughed with relief, “Well, this is only a mistake, last night was a just a celebration--”

The soldiers didn't wait to hear the rest of his explanation, they slammed the cell gate and walked away. Martín gripped the bars and watched the men leave. He spun around and saw Suárez and Alonso himself. Suárez slumped himself on one of the drab beds. Had he been imprisoned since that day they took him for questioning? Alonso sat with his elbows on his knees on the stone bench. If their arrests were as alike as his they must all be as drained of energy as he.

“Suárez? How long have you been--Alonso, what is this?” Martín asked.

Martín went over and stood before the men. Alonso raised his head slightly. He had a split lip and his hair was wet.

“Don’t worry Martín,” Alonso said lifting his arm weakly, “They won’t kill us. And you, you’re none other than the son of Hernán Cortés. You’ll be free before the sun goes down. We’ll just wait until this trouble clears up.”

“The men from the masquerade? My brother?” Martín asked.

Suárez shifted and stroked his beard, “The others are here as well. The Marques is upstairs, in the royal cell of course.”

Martín ground his teeth. That they were incarcerated didn’t make a difference, he felt the sting of knowing which brother was in the royal cell.

“Of course, of course,” Martín mocked, “*His* father didn’t build this jail. *Our* father built this jail,” Martín kicked one of the beds.

“This is so, but what can be done now?” Alonso shrugged.

“I’m going to speak with Luis de Quesada, he will help us get--”

A guard approached the gate calling for Suárez. Suárez leaned forward steadying himself before he stood.

“You’d think they’d leave me alone now that they have everyone,” he said.

He left the cell and followed the guard into the hallway. Alonso and Martín watched him go.

Martín blinked his eyes for long seconds. He was fixed in one place now, grounded in his body again, growing conscious of a horrible blossoming headache. He felt his temples, his neck, and back. They were wet with blood. He ached, throbbing inside and out both from the night of drinking and the horse’s dragging him to the jail. The pebbles and dirt, the land once so

passive, a thing to be owned, seemed to have lashed out at him. His ruddy, sticky clothes testified to this. But it seemed ridiculous to think the land had any power over him. His thoughts came in pounding waves as uncontrollable as his painful injuries. He felt overwhelmed and sick to his stomach. He took a seat next to Alonso on the stone. He leaned back and tilted his head up taking deep breaths. He saw nothing that would alleviate his torment, only the cell's spread of old stones, cracks, smudges, spiderwebs, and a small window high above. His eye traced the uneven, frameless window. It was too high up and too small to allow enough light to illuminate every corner of the cell, but it did deliver a glow, like moonlight rather than daylight. The light shone just as it had always done even before his return to Mexico, he mused behind his painful head, and as it would ever after his brother-in-law had him released. It was proof of the outside world. He focused on it as where he wanted to be.

When he'd stayed like that for some time, staring up like a man who died with his eyes open, he recalled the soldier's accusation against him.

"I don't understand, they say treason? What treason?" Martín rolled his head sideways to face Alonso.

Alonso took in a sharp breath as though he'd been deep in thought as well.

"They say some members of the party were plotting to rule New Spain."

"Rule New--"

Another guard arrived calling Martín to the gate. The guard's face appeared hard and cracked as the cold stones around him. Martín sat upright, every moment of these new circumstances surreal. But as Alonso had said, what could be done now? He felt he had no choice but to stand and follow orders.

"Good luck," Alonso said sinking to lie down.

Martín gave him a quick glance. What did he mean? Had they already gotten to Alonso? And what would they do to Martín? The gate clanked as it opened and shut behind him. As he followed the guard down the hall, what little natural light there had been faded away. He noticed the guard carried a lantern. Martín had a grave feeling that he would have to go farther away from the light of that small window before he could get anywhere near it again.

Martín's clothes lay in a pile on the floor. The soldiers had him tied down naked on a wooden rack. Rope bound his wrists overhead. His thighs, ankles, and toes were also tied down and spread to either side of the rack. Judge Bonifacio sat on Martín's right. The room was similar to his jail cell, walls and floor covered in large stones. A wooden table at one end of the room held metal buckets and a horn.

"Your injuries and death are your own doing," Bonifacio declared, emotionless, "If you do not confess your knowledge of this mutiny we are not held responsible of the resulting devastation of your person. And mind you the highest penalty of treason is beheading."

Martín lay stoic.

"Now, tell the truth. What do you know?"

"It was a celebration. New children--the Marques' newborns, we only meant the event to honor his new family."

"Really?" the judge sounded doubtful, "The Marques has told me that you have nothing but feelings of hate for he and his family."

Martín shook his head to the sides, "I have never expressed this sentiment. As I have said, I know nothing."

The judge made a simple gesture with two fingers. Martín yelled in pain as the soldiers tightened the ropes. The more the ropes slid through the holes on the ends of the rack, the more intense the burning in his thighs and ankles became. His bones made popping sounds as his limbs were stretched to impossible lengths.

This was unlike the fighting in the battles with his fellow conquistadores. This was different, a battle of one, a battle of mind. But he had the strength of endurance. Even if he had known the answers to the questions Judge Bonifacio posed he vowed that at no cost would he sink to his brother's level and incriminate an innocent man.

“So be it,” Bonifacio looked to the soldiers, “Call for the question of water.”

One of the soldiers nodded. He went to the wooden table and picked up a bucket and the horn. He brought them to the opposite side of the judge.

Martín clenched his teeth together and pressed the back of his head against the wood. He curled his toes as much as the taught rope would allow.

The soldier shoved the small end of the horn into Martín's mouth and pinched his nose shut. The horn rattled against his teeth and he tasted the rusty flavor of blood. The other soldier lifted the bucket of water and poured it down his throat.

“What do you know!”

Martín's mind flooded too. The judge and soldiers continued their torture in seemingly endless cycles. He remembered as a child being held down and receiving similar treatment. Although not so much as an act of torture as an act of healing, the surgeon attempted to cure him of disease. He remembered the nurses holding him down with all their strength. He smelled the smoke rising from his burning flesh.

“Who organized the rebellion?” Martín heard the judge persist.

Martín choked and gasped for breath. Judge Bonifacio told the soldiers to stop and glared at Martín who was sputtering water.

“The Marques says it was you.”

“I...I,” Martín spat water and fought for air.

“Or you tell me. Is it the Marques who plans to take Mexico for himself?”

“I have spoken the truth...I know nothing more, God as my witness!”

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Shell Treasure

*A myriad of foot prints
pock the earth.*

*His face,
a beige shell
dusted from grains of sand.*

*Hidden treasure,
how have I found you?
Drifted from what shore?*

*Come,
in the brief moment where
there is time.*

*Join me in the center of the cempohualxochitl flower.
Immerse in pollen,
yellow with kiéri powder,
dizzy with ecstasy.*

*Vamos al aire como las nubes
bathed in endless blue,
floating, floating.*

*My hand, a brown feather,
brushes your cheek.
My heart is wrapped in flowers.
Estoy renovado.*

Thin arrows struck a man of mestizo heritage driving the horses of a covered silver-carrying cart. He bent at the waist and his fingers went limp on the reigns. The horses slowed and shook their manes. They blew air through pouting lips. A conquistador behind the cart on horseback trotted to the front. He went down the path looking out the corners of his eyes at the

trees at his sides when an arrow swooshed through the air that was quiet save its birds and buzzing insects. The arrow impaled the front of his mail armor like a fitting key to a lock. His chest slumped forward and his thrown weight pulled him to the ground with his foot catching in the stirrup. The other conquistador on horseback, seeing that he was alone, took out his sword.

Black eyes, brown eyes, and a sprinkle of green and blue, shone from red painted faces watching through the tree branches. Atl's own sapphires squinted, studying the mining cart. He saw that it was different than the others that passed on other days. He held up two fingers toward his partner, a dark man with an arrow shaped peak of hair pointing down from the middle of his parted hair. Usually there were six horses to a cart. Today Atl saw two. The man at his side frowned and the paint across his forehead cracked.

“This one is easy. We take it,” the man whispered.

Atl shook his head, “Too easy.” He passed his hand over his heart as though it were being slashed. He felt a sharp thorn inside.

His partner placed his palm on Atl's naked chest. Atl covered the man's hand with his own. A butterfly fluttered near Atl's temple.

“Trust,” the man said softly. He nodded to their bows.

Atl nodded and without hesitation he made the high pitched song of the red cotinga bird.

Then like a new red eagle mother dividing herself into six, six red painted warriors on horseback swooped at the cart from all angles. They released obsidian tipped arrows as they charged on horses whose faces were painted white crossed with black lines. Two men on bare foot unhooked and mounted the Spaniards' horses. They rode away into the trees turning to aim and free their arrows at the mounted Spanish thrusting their swords in defense of their cart.

The Chichimeca, the relentless warriors of Mexico, fought the Spanish in an ongoing battle. Although not everyone adopted the all encompassing name, many adopted it, twisting the meaning of the word, “barbarians of the north,” to their advantage. If Chichimecans is what the Spanish feared, barbarian ferocity is what they got.

Since the Spaniard’s gold fever had driven them to lands north of Mexico City, the Native tribes felt their unwelcome pressure. But the more the Spanish waged fire and blood upon the nomadic people, the more the Chichimeca bound together and strategized. They were like a wall of sharptoothed fish, great in numbers and with the ability to disperse at the toss of a stone.

Even after the last arrow was thrown and the last sword swung there were always long haired, red painted survivors galloping away to resurface refreshed and reinforced on another day. There were many tribes of the north--the Guamares and the Guachichiles among the most threatening with their large numbers and fearless strikes--and nearly all with members willing to toss an arrow through supposed impenetrable Spanish armor. The conquistadores, who were underrepresented, were often reinforced by captured Natives, some of which turned on them in hopes of escape or absorption by the Chichimeca. The Indigenous warriors would not suffer the Spanish to capture them and to turn them into slaves nor would they be forced further north--not without a few thousand battles at the very least. The Chichimeca were the banderillas in the Spaniard’s backs.

This battle was well waged with Spaniards tumbling out of the cart and their limbs thumping the dirt like bundles of sticks. But in some imbalance of fate, as far as the Chichimeca were concerned, the Spanish took the advantage. This ambush would not have been so different from the others had it not been for the covered cart filled with Spaniards rather than the usual one

or two on guard and a pile of harmless unearthed metals. Unanticipated soldiers threw off the material covering their backs and slashed at the surprised Chichimeca. Atl made the retreat contiga whistle and his people obeyed, disappearing into the forest. The man with the peak pointing down from his part reached for his last arrow only to discover he'd used it. He threw his bow down and hurled his own body at the soldiers.

Atl whistled once more, but the man ignored it. Instead, he head bunted, he bit, he punched, he kneed, he kicked, and he shoved his thumb deeper into an eye socket than had ventured any obsidian tip, but it was too late. The conquistadores had Atl, three to one. And with a swish of Toledo steel the man's throat was slit. His blood trickled down his neck and over his red painted chest. His eyes met with Atl's for a perpetual moment before they rolled back. As his body lost all spark of resilience and dropped into the grassy side of the path, a butterfly rose from a nearing flower. Atl's muscles slackened a moment and then he revived himself. He lurched forward and struggled against the six-handed conquistador grip.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Medicine Power

*Conquistador, your armor has failed you
Throw on this mask of clay
Chillazotl poppy for fever--*

*Sores, enflamed quechol bird nests in your face
Your teeth are sinking in red,
arms grow deadly green spirits
There are ways before cutting off limbs*

*I cannot laugh, it is too painful
Do you not know of our remedies?*

Light from the small opening in the ceiling of the rocky cave shone on the pond below. It illuminated shades of teal and cobalt. A few golden tokens shone from the bottom of the water. Broken skulls and bones scattered along the cave walls. Roots hung through from the trees growing on the outside. Spikes pointed down from the ceiling above. Falling stones and spikes occasionally splashed the water where small gray fish swam.

A small cluster of ailing patients surrounded Grandmother of the Baths, as she was known, who sat on a stone that had been carved into a chair. Her black eyes were only visible when she looked straight at you because they were weighed down by wrinkles. Some of her fingers were crooked and knobby but they nevertheless conducted the business of her desire. And an air of basil and flowers accompanied her so that when it was your turn to receive treatment you felt like you'd reentered an old favorite home. Before her lay her blanket over the stone floor. It was full of satchels, tinctures, poultices, and raw plants. A long-haired, deer

necked girl named Mazaconetl sat on the blanket crushing a handful of seeds into powder. Xochitl, who accompanied Maria, stood next to her waiting to be seen.

Grandmother of the Baths touched a wincing woman's temples and whispered a prayer into them.

"En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo," she whispered, "I am the one who has gathered the sacred medicine to heal this woman. I am thankful and completely confident in this prayer and this pahtli of nature that heals her."

She scanned her blanket and groaned as she stepped forward placing her weight on her old bones to retrieve the spine of a stingray. When she had it in hand she sat back down and told the woman to bend down close. She pushed the spine against the woman's skin and shook her head.

"This cabrón has lost his bite--Mazaconetl," Grandmother of the Baths said placing the spine back on the blanket with care. "Mazaconetl, pass me the knife."

Mazaconetl took up a knife from the farther end of the blanket near her and handed it over.

She used the knife to poke into the woman's forehead. This time blood dripped out. It came slowly because it was too thick. She allowed the blood to drip into a pan and then gestured for Mazaconetl to wipe the woman's forehead with a rag.

Grandmother of the Baths layed her hand on the woman's head, "We give thanks that this woman is relieved from spiritual disease. Untether, untether. The truth waits within the heart, yoliliztli. Paccanemiliztli."

The woman looked at Grandmother of the Baths with an open face rather than one wrinkled with pain. It blossomed into a relieved smile. Grandmother of the Baths placed an orange sized satchel of dried green leaves and yellow flowers into her hand.

“Make a tea for body. Bathe in a pinch of this every day before leaving your house,” she advised to prevent future head breaking.

Grandmother of the Baths continued her treatments until all of her patients, save Maria and Xochitl, were satisfied: carrots and plant of Cat Tail for a blemished boy, a cough tea of Mango leaves and sugar, a braided necklace of Poinsettia leaves for a new mother’s breast milk, and Wild Yam root for birth control to name a few.

Grandmother of the Baths helped them all. And when they were satisfied they left her with their tributes: chickens, avocados, corn, mangos, magical feathers, and various rare herbs they knew she valued. Mazaconetl assisted her in collecting her tributes. She separated each into its own bag or jar.

When all the treated patients left the cave, Grandmother of the Baths rested with her chin down and eyes closed.

Maria spoke with her head bowed, “Grandmother, I beseech you.”

Grandmother lifted her head. Maria saw that she hadn’t closed her eyes after all, instead they had been hiding in her years. Still, Maria couldn’t make out the dark center of her eyes. She settled on the wet rimline of her lower eyelid and the lazy folds of skin that sat on the upper.

“Ma tlahto, my daughter,” she said.

Maria stepped forward. I remember this day in the cenote as clear as the gold glittering in the water of that cave--more worth than that gold is how precious it remains to me. Ohuaya. I enjoy both re-experiencing it in my body and from a distance.

Grandmother of the Baths extended her slightly bent fingers to Maria and Maria placed her hands around them. They felt warm, but cold at the tips against my skin. They were soft as a fern. Her scent of sweet basil and flowers embraced me. I knew she herself was a holy place, like a church on legs, and I felt blessed to behold her.

Maria spoke, "I have visited this cenote many times. But, I confess I avoided the days you would appear for fear of meeting you."

"And now you are here and have met me. What bad spirits chase you?"

"Grandmother...I have sinned." Xochitl looked at Maria as though she'd been pinched. "I seek guidance. Will you help me?"

"With the grace of Life Giver and all the spirits, I will help you. Go on."

"I have met a man."

"You are married, no doubt."

"Yes."

Grandmother looked at her belly and said, "You are not pregnant, therefore you were careful."

Maria was astonished by her accuracy. Xochitl continued to stare at her with the look of trauma on her face.

"The problem is I don't want to stop. And Grandmother," she stammered, "it is your son."

Xochitl gasped. She shamed and questioned her all at once simply by stating her name, "Maria..."

Grandmother on the other hand did not appear surprised nor cross, "Yes, you match the illustration of his description." She straightened her back and projected her eyes directly into

Maria's. Maria now saw her black eyes for the first time and felt that nothing within her could be hidden from this knowing elder.

She spoke casually, "He is a grown man I don't follow him. But, as with all things, love and pleasure tote their opposites, some worse than others. Know this."

Grandmother looked past Maria at Xochitl, "Are you waiting, daughter?"

Maria spoke fast, "Is there nothing you can offer me?"

Grandmother returned to Maria, "For this there is no physical cure." She looked at her assistant, "The chart."

"Yes Grandmother," she agreed.

Mazaconetl brought Grandmother of the Baths a rolled up deerskin. She unrolled it and held it open for her to see. Grandmother took a feather from a hole in her earlobe and used it to point the hard end at the intricate signs layed out in a perfect circle on the skin.

"Ah, yes. Hare and Monkey--you are very perfectionist, hard worker, healing power, more sensual than sexual. This explains the match. He's not hard worker, but my son is also sensual. And I believe the healer in you reminds him of his beloved mother. You think it strange a mother to know these things, but I do."

I did think it strange, but this was Grandmother of the Baths. From what I'd heard, there was little she didn't know.

"I can supply you with a tea that will clear your mind and enable you to think. That is what I can do."

Grandmother of the Baths murmured to Mazaconetl. Together they crouched over the blanket gathering several leaves. As they worked, Grandmother asked Xochitl to explain her ailment.

I waited patiently in exchange for my curandera's kindness. What I feared would be a more difficult confession had passed as easily as rain into a lake. Had I known, I would have come months earlier. Her lack of surprise and consulting with the deerskin made me feel natural. Do we condemn the wind for blowing our drying clothes off the bush? It is merely doing what it does. So it does, but, I didn't feel completely absolved.

After expressing her appreciation, Xochitl detailed her condition, "My heart is with him."

"Ay, another love sick one?" Grandmother said joining the leaves into a single bag.

"It is Atl, the poet with the monkey's laugh."

A warbling bird song flowed from Grandmother's lips and her eyes disappeared in her smile creases. Mazaconetl giggled too. They shared a cheery glance for some event they'd passed with Atl.

"I know this Atl. He is my favorite man of words. Yet, my daughter, he sings another song. You must know this. My remedies are not to force doors open but rather to ask and give thanks."

"Grandmother you speak truth, but his pure spirit is gifted with both male and female heart. He loves the heart *before* the body. He sees the people, the earth, the words--all with honest of eyes. When he speaks, I see his mind, I see his heart. His eyes swallow all the light in the sun and when you speak he drinks you in. I love his laugh," Xochitl chuckled and exchanged smiles with the healers, "Who doesn't know that wild monkey laugh of his. I've seen him speak in the woods and--"

"Xochitl, no! Don't put yourself in the path of danger in the forest with them. His revolutionary spirit intoxicates you," I shook my head and sighed. This girl was all appetite and that worried me.

Grandmother looked at Maria and said, “Shhh.” She gave her the bag of mind-clearing leaves. Maria bit her lip and thanked her.

“When it comes to love, this is the best I can do,” she and Mazaconetl worked without words on their last remedy.

“Will it draw Atl to my heart?”

Grandmother shook her head, “No. But it will free you of your love problem. It will prepare you to find another.”

“Another? Why must I--” Xochitl looked at her startled.

“Boil it. Let its bitter mixture sit under your tongue three times a day.”

Xochitl, a little crushed, watched as they mixed dark leaves and dried yellow flowers in a bag and handed it to her.

“Don’t be naive, amorcita. He’s lovely. He acknowledges your intelligence and so you mistake him for a match. I don’t blame you. But this won’t serve you well, not Atl. I promise you once this bellaco monkey is pushed out of the doorway there will be enough room for the next to squeeze through.”

Xochitl stroked the satchel’s leather tassels. She closed her eyes and bowed her head to Grandmother, “Forgive me. Thank you. Your medicine is precious.”

Xochitl and I said our thanks once more and made our way to the rocks that led out the leaf-covered hole of the cave. As we squeezed through it we squinted at the sunlight that engulfed us. The green and red quetzal birds were out of their holes in the trees singing their songs. The breeze brushed our faces and helped our skin breath after the musty cave. We covered the opening with fallen leaves and branches and dismounted the hill of the cenote.

As we walked back to town a large group of mestizos and Natives passed us going the opposite way.

“Where are you going?” I asked touching one of the women on the shoulder.

“To atlahuitl, caves. Atl captured,” she responded.

Xochitl and I looked at each other. Xochitl’s eyes were round as silver pillar coins. I felt a caterpillar crawl over my foot.

“No tears. He lives. Let’s get to town,” I said.

I thanked the woman and didn’t ask any more questions. I gathered my skirt and Xochitl’s hand and hustled us through the crowd. Xochitl shook her head as though awakening from a bad dream.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Luis and I sat in their yellow salon. Luis held an opened letter in hand.

“God knows he’s escaped too many times for them to let him go now. They’ll kill him Luis!”

“If they kill Atl they kill the Chichimeca. This is their opportunity,” Luis said without remorse, “And what were you doing in the forest today? What would happen to you if you got lost out there?”

I stared into our Persian rug thinking nothing of the number of stitches for which it was valued. I went quiet for a while.

Then I looked up at my husband, “I was gathering healing plants.”

“Pardon me? You’re still practicing those, those superstitions? There is a perfectly good doctor in town--”

I frowned, my patience waning thin. Why did he feel the need to take away what small pleasures I had?

“Not superstitions. Pahtli, medicines. It must be unbearable for you to see a proper wife playing with plants--,” I said, knowing he wouldn’t try to understand, “What’s in your hands?”

Luis leaned forward shaking the letter.

“From Madrid. Another ship coming. The king sent a new viceroy. Seems he will put an immediate stop to the encomienda system.”

I rolled my eyes and huffed out a breath, “Wasn’t the last viceroy promising to do that-- nevermind. What can we do for Atl?”

“What *can* we do?” he said not repeating her question, but saying it as though there was nothing that could be done. He laughed, “Go to his cell and unlock the door! Maria, no judge wants to hear a case for a...”

I stiffened, “Go ahead, say it.”

“A mestizo. Look, it’s hard enough getting Martín help and he’s the most distinguished one--”

“Martín is fine. He has the Cortés name to hold on to,” I said. I played with my skirt, plucking out stems and leaves.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. His brother is keeping an evil eye on him. If the Marques had to choose...”

Luis shifted and moved forward toward me. He gathered the end of my skirt in his hand.

“You’ve ruined it. You’ll have to mend that now. You see, going out to those woods is dangerous.”

“This is the oldest dress I own, I don’t wear it anywhere--”

“It’s not befitting of a wife,” Luis said.

“I’ll mend it--” I said with feigned concern, “I’ll just sew on a new bottom layer and...Wait, you’re right.”

Luis looked up, his brows relaxed.

“Yes, you’re right--just go to the cell and unlock the door.”

“Maria,” worry replaced Luis’ sternness.

“How tall are you? Atl is about your height. If I add some to this dress...”

“No,” he looked me straight in the eye and repeated, “No.”

I sucked on my lips and nodded in agreement, but I know my eyes sparkled with the mischievous gleam I get when a delicious idea entrances me.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Martín was shoved back into his cell wearing a stained tunic--his sweat, his blood, his saliva, all the water he purged. He stumbled to the gate and collapsed under it. He lay motionless hearing his name said a few times and a touch on his arm. He winced. He saw Suárez crouching there with one half closed eye. Suárez had the red marks encircling his wrists that Martín was sure his own burning arms would soon bare. Had Suárez talked to the judge? Did he know anything?

Behind him, Martín heard what sounded like preaching. He turned his head and saw the blur of a bald man speaking from the other side of the gate. The voice droned in and out.

“Aristotle was wrong about natural slavery. I told our emperor, Carlos V, as much. Mankind is one and all men are alike in that which concerns their creation.”

“Close your beak clown! Who are you? What do you know?” Suárez yelled.

“Son, I am Bishop Bartólome de Las Casas. I know because I was once like you. I owned slaves.”

Martín closed his eyes. His entire body was numb. He could scarcely bend his fingers or flex his toes. He let his skull, muscles, and bones sink into the stone floor. He saw Alonso stroking his beard, pacing along the opposite wall. He heard Suárez stand up and bang the gate, yelling again at the Bishop. Martín only hoped he could regain as much strength.

“I learned the wrongs--,” Bartóleme stammered to relay his message throughout Suárez’ curses, “of my ways--when I spoke with those enslaved--”

“Damn Fraud!”

“--Their sentiments are no--no different from our own. The mestizos are God’s children.”

“Shut up! You think yourself wise. Get out!”

Martín lay there listening to the two voices, unable not to; he waited for unconsciousness to pull him into silence. He faded in and out for a while. He dreamed very quick dreams of butterflies and then felt confused when he opened his eyes and saw butterflies only to drift off and dream about them again. The confusion played with him. He wanted to keep his eyes closed, at least knowing with his eyes closed that he was in a dream, that there was no chance to confuse what he saw in his mind and what he thought he saw with his eyes. Just when he was disappearing into sleep with this one certainty he felt a hand slap his face.

“Are you alright? Martín, you alright?”

He felt someone leaning into him and tried to lift his head. He saw a man with long hair smiling down at him.

“What, do you--” Martín tried to speak.

“It’s Atl.”

Martín squinted up at him and saw the butterfly again. It landed on Atl’s arm. He didn’t hear Suárez or the Bishop anymore. He mouthed his brother’s name, Atl.

“Yes, yes. You son of Malintzin and Hernán Cortés, you alive. Calm. Calm.”

Martín tried to sit up, but winced again when he moved his arm. He closed his eyes and let his head drop back down.

“Pain? You’re alright. We’ll pop it together.”

Atl jerked Martín’s arm back into its socket. Martín groaned louder and the creases in his forehead deepened. He slumped back down letting his fixed arm extend out.

Atl laughed a crazy laugh.

“Don’t touch him!” Suárez yelled fist ready, lurching for Atl.

Atl jumped back with more laughter. He ran to a dark corner.

“Fool! Are you crazy? Stay away from us or you will suffer,” Suárez warned.

Atl laughed and mocked him from the corner, “Xolopihtli, xolopihtli! Fool, fool! Monkeys, monkeys, pohtli, we all monkeys.”

Suárez spat in Atl’s direction, “Crazy puto.”

A gate down the hall rattled. Martín forced his eyes open. The inmates watched as a girl, who turned out to be Xochitl, the very girl they’d terrorized in the street, entered the hallway. She carried a silver pail and a handful of rags and she kept her gaze lowered to the floor. She set the pail down and dipped her rag in the water inside. She scrubbed the dusty floor allowing her long braid to fall over her shoulder and the loosened wisps to hide her eyes.

“Not too ugly for a slave, eh?” Alonso said breaking his silence and facing Suárez.

“Oh, I’ve already been down that street. Not far though--she smells bad.”

The girl hunched her shoulders and cleaned vomit from the stones, she wrung the rag into the pail.

“And she’s smells worse than a stray dog,” Suárez said, “She’s nothing next to my wife at home.”

“Yes, yes, of course. This one will never be cleaner than her cloth,” Alonso smirked, “But at the moment neither are we.”

Suárez laughed. Alonso’s chuckle broke into a cough.

The girl moved over the stone like a nervous bird, shifting her hair at times to survey the men around her. She wiped the floor making her way closer to the gate where Martín lay. She

slowed a little. She dipped her rag into the water and brought it back out scrubbing next to his outstretched arm. She slid something into his hand and quickly went on to the next stones. Martín twitched his fingers and felt a string strung with small beads fall between them. It reminded him of the necklace of Bernaldina and the light blonde hair it encased. Where had that gone? He'd worn it to the masquerade, but everything had happened so fast. Her creamy skin, he lost himself for a moment in the whirl of her milky memory. He lay motionless accepting the presence of the string in his hand like a part of a dream, accepting it like he had his arrest and torture. He accepted everything as it happened because he had little choice nor energy to do otherwise. He was barely conscious of the girl moving through the hall, scrubbing and wringing, and clanking her pail, the repetitious sounds flowing like ocean waves. It seemed like years since her fingers had brushed his. And before he could look into his hand to see what she'd placed there he'd fallen asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The city of Mexico awoke before me. The convent greater in length than the cathedral but uglier than the prison, soaked up the warm morning light. The roads were as wide as ten horses striding side by side and on both sides buildings went up two and three stories high. The building faces had uniform windows and balconies. The windows facing the east reflected the sunlight while those facing the west loomed in shadow. I like the warmth on my cheek. And I remember pushing back the long sleeves of my dress and tilting my chin up, letting my eyelids rest halfway down. I passed the shops that lined the lower levels: winery, cobbler, candlemaker, and shops of trinkets and rugs. I said good morning to mango and watermelon peddlers who were setting up wooden stands for the day. Once the street opened to the even wider road that passed the cathedral I crossed it toward the bakery.

Near the bakery I saw two of Vasco's favorite friends and several other mestizo children building a house with sticks. Vasco's friends were barefoot in tunics that bore tatters and spots. The others wore tunics or trousers and old long sleeved shirts two sizes too big. A few had on torn sandals. Their faces brightened when they saw me. I swatted the hands of a few tugging my new long red dress that reflected a sheen back at the sun.

"Necuhtic pantzi, necuhtic!" they yelled.

Vasco's friends ran to me first. They showed smiles of teeth also two sizes too big for them.

"Nonca zan cualcan. Ma tlalican," I said pointing at the bakery wall.

The children spun around pushing each other with their small hands and shoulders to claim their sitting spots. This made me laugh to myself, such naked eagerness.

“Cualli,” I smiled and disappeared inside the bakery.

Someone had to cross the bridge to these children, show them a beating heart. Afterall, they are our mothers and fathers and the teachers when we are old. My mother showed me a sweet bread from time to time and it did us both some good. I can’t say I ever saw a single woman in imported Spanish threads handing out free food. Perhaps that would have done this town some good as I hoped it would these young ones.

When I came back out with a large basket not one of the children had moved. The last time somebody did that they had to move to the end of the line farthest from the bakery door.

I nodded my head with a grin, “Cualli. Cualtin coconeh.” I let go of the basket with one hand and held out the other. “Maitl,” I said holding my fingers together like a bowl.

The children quickly took out their hands and held them in this way. I walked down the row placing a piece of sweet bread into each child’s hands. Their eyes grew big as moons.

“Tlazohcamati,” the children said as I stood before them.

“Ahmitla,” I responded.

They licked the sugar from the bread and murmured in content voices about the simple silly things of children everywhere, which are really the best things, in my opinion, “Ma xicuica. Quetzaltototl cuicatl. Macahmo xicuica. Chocani, conetl.”

I returned the basket to the shop owner and said goodbye to the children. Those finished with their morning treat sprang up and waved as I walked away.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Martín lay on his side on one of the beds of his cell. He thought he heard a rapping on the iron gate. But he didn't open his eyes; he was remembering. He thought of his first night in jail and the dream he'd had. The night had been interrupted with the screams of a neighboring inmate. But he'd been too tired in the company of his own pain to be overly concerned with the miserable sounds. He'd learned during his nights at battle in Spain that sleep overcame many nightmares of waking life he'd never imagined it could. He grew accustomed to hearing the cries and whimpering of men. At times they grew to be almost as regular as the crickets chirping and trees rustling. Sleep came because his body demanded it to repair the damages done him. The will to survive made anything possible. But although his mind relaxed and pulled him into slumber, it never completely drowned out his surroundings. When he was extremely exhausted it worked with them. As it did last night, weaving into his dreams the yelling and wailing of the miserable.

He'd dreamt of the time in his childhood when he'd nicked his brother's ear with his sword. He could still feel the pounding of the rocks thrown by the other juvenile knights in the palace plaza. In true life, after he'd injured his brother, he'd dropped his sword, run out of the plaza and into the hall, scuffing dirt in with him. He'd run up the marble steps and into his room, locking himself inside. He'd been thankful to have a room where he could be alone. He'd gone to the table underneath his wash bowl and opened a drawer. He'd fumbled inside and took out a box of toiletries. Cased inside the plush red velvet interior had been a built in mirror, small wrapped soaps, a metal pick for teeth, a wooden comb, a small pair of scissors, and a razor with a pearl handle. He'd saved the box for a long trip he might one day take. He'd set down the case

except for the razor. He'd examined the star of light that shone on its blade and pressed it against his skin preparing to slice. But he'd sighed and put it all back into the drawer.

However, in Martín's dream he had more courage. After his brother and friends had thrown their rocks at him, his dream revealed to him his hands growing impossibly darker. After he'd locked himself in his room he saw that not only were his hands darker than ever, his nails had turned black. Some curled and fell off. He snatched the razor from the box spilling the rest of its contents on the floor.

He saw the blade glint with light and placed it directly against the back of his hand. He pressed it down hard and jerked it all the way back to his elbow. He cried out in pain and saw his blood drip onto the small case's mirror laying broken on the floor.

A long layer of his skin drifted to the floor like a crow feather. He screamed as loud as his lungs allowed and stopped. The pain felt good. The blood looked brilliant on him. He saw some of his nails grow back like pink and white shells. He shoved the blade beneath a remaining black nail and popped it off. He took off the next and the next and they came loose like the shells of black oysters, ringing in his ears when they hit the marble floor. Like the others, light nails grew in their place.

He heard a knock at the door. But he hadn't finished. He trailed the razor up his arm. Blood spilled over his arm and made a puddle around him. Another feather of skin fell to the floor. White skin grew in its place. He was no longer a dark monster. He was vacant of any color. The knocking on the door continued.

Somebody rocked his shoulder and he realized he'd fallen again into the same dream as the previous night.

Suárez smiled and pointed at the cell entrance, "Luis is here."

Martín heard a rapping at the iron gate. His dream faded away. He rubbed his eyes and saw Luis on the other side of the bars. Alonso and Suárez went to the gate to salute him.

“Luis, you goat!” Alonso cleared his throat, “You belong in here with us. We’re lonely without you.”

“Ah, but I’m not. I was with my wife that fateful night. Listen, I’ve come to deliver important news for Martín. Martín!” Luis called.

Martín heard his name and sat up slowly.

“And what about us? What good news have you brought us?” Suárez asked.

“Yes, is there movement on our trial?” Alonso said wiping his beard.

“It is difficult to work with Judge Bonifacio. He’s convinced everyone is guilty. I’m trying, I’m trying,” Luis answered.

Martín rubbed his back and straightened himself. He hobbled to hear Luis’ news.

Alonso said something to Suárez and they walked to the stone bench to talk.

“Martín, oh Martín. As though you weren’t already in trouble enough,” Luis said.

“Luis,” Martín said in a hoarse voice, “What trouble do you speak of exactly? What’s the news? Be clear please.”

“The news is your name in your father’s will is good. The Marques only takes your money and property if you’re proven guilty, save he is not also proven guilty.”

Martín smiled and relaxed a little.

“That’s good. But *will* they find me guilty?”

“It’s unlikely. You’re a Cortés and be sure I will do what I can to see to your release.”

“Yes, do and tell me the minute you have word.”

Luis nodded and turned to leave. But before Martín could make it back to his bed to lay with the revived sense of hope for his life, he heard a loud squeal and whirled around. At the edge of the hallway that was visible Martín saw Luis nearly toppled by a madman. The madman was brown like Martín but with long hair to his waist. Yes, it was Atl. Atl smiled big so that even his gums showed. The guards peeled him away, hurriedly unlocking the cell gate and throwing him inside. He giggled and reached through the bars at Luis.

“You might like to stand back from there,” the guard warned.

But Luis didn't keep his distance and came closer to the gate. Martín couldn't hear what they were saying because they whispered, but the guard was loud.

“Alright that's enough. Time to leave him alone, loco.”

Atl waved goodbye and Luis followed the lantern lit stone hall that would take him out.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

I continued my walk along the road through the main streets of Mexico City. A group of mestizos and Africans hammered wood and carried heavy stones to a foundation they were building onto. One of the mestizos was Xochitl's uncle Tomás. I knew him well. He had sharp cheekbones and a mole above his eyebrow that was not one of the flies soaring around us. He was a hard working man even though he knew there was no end to his job. He looked at me and wiped his forehead. I nodded and he nodded back. I turned a corner. TEXTILES, the bold letters read above a shop doorway. I saw the crispness of the details in the windows as I got closer. Mannequins were draped in dresses, rolls of fabric leaned against shelves, a wooden measurer was tossed over a table covered with cloth, scissors, pins, and thimbles.

“Good day, doña Maria. How does your day begin, God willing?” a voice said as my hand grasped the handle on the door.

It was Bartolomé de Las Casas, the man of the cloth and advocate for abolishing slavery. He meant well, but I was in no mood for talk.

“Explain to me how it is a good day, God willing?” I asked unable to help myself.

“Well, God always wants good for us and so every day is good because He wills it so. In turn we all do God's work in our own ways to make it good.”

I glanced inside the shop and saw the perfect bolts of cloth to match the dress I would mend. “Ah, you speak great truth Bishop. A good day indeed,” I smiled.

“Good day. God bless--”

I went through the door, leaving him standing there on the cobblestoned walkway.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Martín listened to the snoring of the men in his cell. He sat cross-legged in a corner of the room. Aimlessly, he tossed a rock on one of the walls and when it fell to the ground he threw it again. With each throw his thoughts went deeper and deeper.

Finally, he held the rock in his fist and brought it to his tense forehead. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He felt the walls of the jail winning. They were dim, dank, indifferent--he thought of as many ways as he could to describe them, to keep from thinking the other thought, the disturbing dream that'd awoken him. He couldn't go back to sleep. He covered his face with his hands and then scratched the rock on the side of his forehead until it hurt.

He'd dreamt of a royal room. But, it was missing the wall with the door in it, the entrance that should face King Carlos V who was seated in his throne. Instead, a field of wild grass grew past the open threshold. A breeze blew through and was the only sound Martín heard. He saw that the floor inside was so clean it shone. At the back of the room sat the king on a raised platform. Martín realized he was in the grass that faced the king. The grass was very tall. He moved through it to see more clearly. Then he realized how small his hands were and that he was a child. He saw the king leaning to one side in his chair, elbows resting on his padded armrest, hands folded in the air before him. He had a brown mustache that grew into his beard. He wore thin, long stockings, a black doublet, a cape, and a cap. His gaze settled straight ahead of him. Martín lowered his head thinking the king saw him.

“Gracious king, I have returned,” he heard his father say standing next to him. He watched his father exit the plants and walk onto the white floor ahead.

Hernán Cortés wore all black. The long coat, reaching the bottom of his trousers where his stockings went up and stopped and his sword flashed, seemed so stark and foreign that it frightened Martín, the child in the dream.

He felt the breeze swoop through his hair. His eyes followed his father walking down the long aisle toward the king. The aisle was formed on either side by men and women in magnificent Spanish dress and a collection of various special exotic items. There were caged quetzal birds, monkeys, and iguanas. Two Aztec men in long brightly feathered cloaks stood very straight. One of the men carried a lorikeet bird on his shoulder. Martín was very curious about his bird and animals in cages. He wanted to stroke their colorful feathers, their soft fur, and scaly skin.

His father neared the throne. The breeze tangled the wild grass. Martín became aware of himself again and felt the urge to step out of the plants. He moved his right foot forward and saw he wore dark brown ribboned shoes and white stockings. He felt his clothing and found that he had on a small doublet, a very soft velvet cap beneath which his hair was cut short. He took his first step onto the perfect white floor. He took another and nobody seemed to notice him. He saw Aztec acrobats bouncing a rubber ball and wooden rollers on their feet. When one threw the ball in the air and caught it the other sliced the ball with his knife. The men and ladies of the room gasped and made exclamations of amazement. Out of the ball dripped white liquid. The men and women lowered their voices and asked one another what it was.

“Milk?”

“Sap?”

“White water?”

The Aztecs picked the liquid from the ground and rolled it into more balls. They bounced them on the floor. The men and women, the conquistador, and the king all clapped, their mouths happy circles of awe. Martín smiled as well. He heard the whoosh of the breeze behind him.

His father reached the king and knelt before him. Martín took a few more steps. King Carlos stood up and stepped down to take Hernán's hands. Then, he lifted him from his knees and sat him in a chair to the left of his. Martín saw his father gesture up to the grass and the king's eyes lifted too.

His eyebrows lifted in anticipation and his gaze slowly fell on Martín.

Suddenly, his expression deflated as his eyebrows dropped and his mouth folded downward. His eyes narrowed. He waved at his soldiers in uniform, who'd been standing in the corners of the room.

"Seize the savage!" he yelled.

Martín looked to his father, but he stood passively with arms crossed in front of him. He heard the breeze blow harder. His hat blew off of his head and he let it fall because his fear of the approaching soldiers paralyzed him. His hair rustled and he stood while everyone stared at him. The animals squawked and hooted. The Aztecs left their rubber balls bouncing across the brilliant white floor and dashed away into the tall grass. The soldiers grasped Martín. He felt the roughness of their hands scrape his. He struggled to free himself. A woman looked at him and covered her mouth. His fingers crawled over his face and he felt the piercings protruding through his lip, nose, and ears, the thin raised lines gliding across his cheek where he must have been tattooed. He shrieked and hid his face behind his hands.

Martín hit the back of his head against the wall. He shook his head and threw the rock against the wall again. He picked it up and threw it again. He heard Suárez snoring. Somebody else breathed a heavy sigh.

“What you doing? Yoyomiquiliztli...you itch me!” the madman said, “Rock noise.” He stood in front of Martín like a sturdy tree and rapidly scratched his arms. He bent down and snatched the rock out of Martín’s hand. He flared his nostrils and made an exasperated grunt. He threw the rock over his shoulder.

They both heard it hit something soft. Quiet filled the cell as the snoring stopped. Atl and Martin saw Suárez lift his head for a moment and squint into the dim light. Atl bit his thumbnail.

“Idiot,” Suárez said, throwing the rock back.

Atl lowered his head and let it sail past him.

He looked at Martín and laughed a hushed version of his mad laughter.

“What you doing?” he asked again.

Martín looked at Atl as though he were a puzzle, “Atl, what are *you* doing? You’re speaking strangely.”

Atl shook his head and whispered, “Quiet Martín. This is my jail voice. You think I’m going to let them know I have a brain? Give them more reason to kill me?” Atl shook his head, “No, no, no. I fool. Cause no threat. See?”

Martín shrugged. Whatever rare thing Atl was up to didn’t concern him much at the moment. He rubbed his face and mumbled that he couldn’t sleep.

Atl giggled into the palm of his hand and crouched down next to Martín.

“You go crazy? When world make crazy I make poem,” he said tapping his temple.
“Try poem, xochitlahtolli.” He nudged Martín who stared at the stone floor. “Xochitlahtolli si? Timachtiloz poesia? You like?” He nudged Martín again, “Me otitlayeccac? I speak Spang-huatl.” He shoved Martín again to no response. “I sorry.” He brought his hands through Martín’s hair until Martín acknowledged him.

“Stop,” Martín said.

He shoved Atl’s hand away, which seemed to only please him more and send his bubbling laughter tumbling out. Martín narrowed his eyes and looked at him as though to say, don’t make me angry.

But the look didn’t seem to bother Atl. He mocked him by mimicking his serious face, then bursting into laughter. But still Martín did not share his good humor.

“Good, Martín. Your way.” And under his breath, “Tzontetl...stubborn.”

Atl surveyed Martín’s sitting position and mirrored him. He saw Martín’s chin supported by his hand and placed his hand under his own chin. He looked at Martín staring at the floor and also stared at the floor.

The sounds of Suárez’s snoring textured the air.

“Uuuuyyy, life hard,” Atl said.

Martín nodded, “Claro.”

“People so serious,” Atl said.

They sighed in unison. Atl lifted his head again facing Martín.

“You know what happen? Our people run to atlahuitl...canyon. Caves.”

Martín creased his brow, “Who?”

“Los mestizos--yes, *our* people.”

Martín felt the grooves in the stone floor and found a loose rock. He picked it up and threw it at the wall.

“I don’t know them,” he said.

“They know you--Where coztli? Necklace?”

Martín bounced the rock in his hand, “Necklace? What are you talking about?”

“She give you. I think you go sleep, lost necklace, remember nada.”

“Necklace, no,” Martín threw the rock against the wall.

Martín was starting to feel the itchiness Atl spoke of. He didn’t want to be anywhere near these cold stones and bars. His brother only annoyed him further. He seemed so comfortable in his surroundings. It wasn’t the conditions that bothered him as much as this was not the way things were supposed to be. He was never meant to be imprisoned in the jail built by his father on soil conquered by his father. He felt God was testing him or laughing at him. He didn’t know which. Martín glimpsed his bed and considered going to it.

Atl didn’t stop, he pointed his finger to his chest and sat straight, “I Chichimeca leader. I tell if I captured go canyon.”

“Run away,” Martín laughed, “And what will they do there?”

Atl looked at Martín for a moment.

“Live, pohtli, live. Free. No cehuayan...no white brother shadow.”

Martín laughed and hung his head over his knees, “You have one of those as well? My lawyer is removing mine.” When he lifted it he saw that Atl was staring at him without a smile on his face. Martín’s smile faded too.

“Xolopihltli,” he said under his breath. He ran up to Martín and put his face nose to nose with him. Martín half prepared himself to throw a hit, but when he stopped just before his face,

he knew it was just another harmless, rare thing by his brother who he knew was different. He felt some of Atl's spit on his face when he spoke, "Xolopihtli."

Atl spit on the ground. He paused for a moment closing his eyes and bringing both hands flat against his chest in a silent gesture that Martín didn't understand. When Atl opened his eyes he went for a bed and laid down facing the wall.

Martín watched him, expecting him to burst out of the bed laughing. He expected him to persist, eventually bringing Martín to his first smile since he'd been arrested. But he didn't. He watched Atl's breathing, quick at first, then slower, and finally accompanied by a light snore.

The next day, Martín paced the cell. He scoured every crevice of the stone floor. He finally saw something by the iron gate. He walked to it and gazed down. He bent down to pick it up and hid it in his hand. He made sure Suárez and Alonso weren't watching. He opened his hand. A necklace. It was a brown string made of a rough material with a worn away feather and small round seeds strung along it. It seemed rare and jagged to him, not at all beautiful. It gave him a shiver under his skin. He looked at Atl who was still sleeping in his bed. And despite his pagan nightmares, Martín opened the necklace and fit it over his own head.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

In the plaza the baskets, tables, and shelves were the only things surrounding the food for sale in the stands. A cloth fanned the hanging fish that nobody was buying. Not the watermelon nor the coconut were selling. Nor the pineapple, nor banana. The lettuce, the mango, nor the tamarind. Only the flies lapped at the cut samples. They walked over the food in small emerald and black circles. An ant crawled over the cacahuete.

Today it wasn't the life-giving food sources that called forth the tunics and tattered pants, the dresses, the grayish stockings, the no stockings, the bare feet with the rough soles, the ribboned shoes, the black caps, the head scarves, the new pleated doublets, and the long lace trimmed sleeves. Today it was the sound of mournful trumpets that called them.

Clothing of every thread gathered around the execution platform. Two black coats were led to the base of the platform steps. The first coat came with dark hair that seemed to turn silver where the sun bounced. The second coat covered a stocky form with brown hair. Bartolomé de Las Casas led the dark hair and coat up the scaffold's steps. The tips of Bartolomé's shoes pointed toward the chopping block and basket. He watched the coated man with a soft kindness in his eyes and holy book in hand.

As the man approached Bartolomé prayed, "The sun doesn't grow tired, nor the moon. God guards through all."

The man kneeled behind the block.

Kerchiefs appeared throughout the crowd.

An executioner in a hooded black coat took his stance behind the man. He sharpened his thick wooden handled axe.

Vasco and I passed the food stand empty of customers. We followed the same path in the sun that I'd taken to the bakery. When we'd reached the plaza's ornate cathedral I looked up at the array of garments and the platform with the man on his knees. I pulled Vasco close to me. He craned his head to see around my arm. He saw the backs of dresses, head covering shawls, patched trousers, velvet capes embroidered in gold and silver, red gloves, feathers that plumed from caps, and ruffs that encircled necks.

Suddenly the black haired man blurted from his knees, "Pedro Quesada, Baltasar Quesada, Alonso de Avila!"

"This is not the time for that, my son," Bartolomé de Las Casas said in a calm voice, "Save your soul, make penitence to God alone and pray for forgiveness."

The executioner raised his axe and a flash of hand kerchiefs and shawls went up in the crowd.

Bartolomé de Las Casas soothed the kneeling dead, "I promise you this, I will say a mass for you tomorrow."

The man nodded tearfully, lowering his head and facing the floor of the scaffolding. Not a moment later the axe, already in the heavens, came down striking the back of his neck. The basket received his rolling black haired head.

I tugged Vasco's hand into the textiles shop.

The clerk removed his hand-held eye glasses and greeted me from behind his desk, "Señora de Quesada, how beautiful you appear today. Returning so soon?"

“How does it go? I forgot something. Do you have anything that would enhance,” I glanced down at my chest and back up, “the bust?”

The clerk blushed and darted his eyes away. “Y-yes, Señora. Although that is not the fashion of these days.”

“Nevertheless, please,” I said.

Vasco wiggled his hand out of my grasp. A spike of worry jabbed my stomach.

“Stay inside,” I said after him.

“Follow me,” the clerk turned.

Vasco nodded and skipped to the rolls of fabric against the store window. He rested his forehead against the glass and peered at the backs of coats and dresses.

The stocky man walked up the steps of the platform. He made a sudden move to escape, but several guards had him barricaded. They pulled him up to the block and kicked the backs of his legs so that he would kneel.

Bartolomé intervened, “My son, do not have fear. It is right. We are all equal in death. All must die. We leave nothing but faceless garments. I will pray for you tomorrow.”

The man shut his eyes and the fibers of the basket absorbed his tears.

The executioner raised his axe and chopped his head off. The executioner picked up the brown-haired head from inside the basket and drove a tall pointed pole through the base of it, while another did the same with the black haired head. Men on the ground arranged each pole to stand upright in front of the scaffold. Vasco’s eyes were wide behind his breath blooming on the glass.

The Marques looked out his barred cell window down at the beheadings. He turned around and pressed his back against the window. He laid the back of his head against the window. His hands were cold and he placed them over his cheeks. He bent forward and threw up.

I sat on my four post bed with the canopies draping overhead. On my lap lay the dress I'd torn at the cenote. Vasco sat on the rug at the foot of the bed rolling his wheeled jaguar toy on the ground. I hummed a song in Nahuatl as my needle and thread wove in and out the hem of my dress. In the corner of the room stood a tall oval mirror. I faced it and held the dress in front of me. I held the shoulders above my head and watched how it draped to the floor.

Vasco looked up and laughed, "That dress is too big Mamá!"

"It's not too big, mijito. It's perfect," I smiled.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Alonso and Suárez sat facing one another on the stone bench. Alonso fidgeted, rubbed the back of his neck and bit his nails that were already small and red at the cuticle. Suárez tapped his toes on the ground.

Atl sat a short distance from Martín whispering to himself, “Calloused hands for tale of Galvarino...Winding snakes, ayahuasca haze...”

Martín angled his ear to hear more of Atl’s strange words. He was a rarer and rarer character by the day. At one moment he was an excited animal and the next was placated and serene. He wasn’t an evil-minded shadowy low caste brute, as the Marques would believe. Martín had never thought ill of his brother, but he had made exceptions. He knew that now. And the more he learned about Atl and Xochitl, the more he filled with wonder and questions. He felt the beads and the feather on the necklace around his neck. When no one was listening, the man had words, words even Martín didn’t know in Nahuatl or Spanish. If Atl and Xochitl weren’t heathens then that meant the other people of the town, the ones he’d seen upon his arrival at the procession of knights, shared their intelligence. He wondered for how long Atl would remain imprisoned, how long until he escaped over the crevices of the stone wall he paused to feel out?

“Winding snakes...Life Giver...your creations float across the hips of eternity,” Atl murmured.

Martín felt a blow travel through the iron gate against his back. He looked behind him and saw the long robe of Bartolomé de Las Casas. A guard stood there with an iron rod between

the bars. He rattled them again and stepped back to his chair. Martín saw that Bartolomé held a Bible and a rosary. Another man, short with a chin that melted into his neck, approached them. He removed his black cap.

“I’m secretary Gonzalo. I’ve come to deliver the verdict for treason against His Majesty, King Carlos V. Alonso de Avila,” he paused for a moment, “sentenced to decapitation in the plaza early tomorrow morning.”

Alonso gasped. Bartolomé stepped up to the cell gate and moved his lips in prayer. He held up his rosary and traveled down its beads with his thumb and forefinger.

The secretary continued, “His head will be nailed to a stake in the plaza as example against rebellion.”

“No!” Alonso yelled, walking to the gate. He wrapped the bars with his fists, “This is an unjust verdict. I have done nothing to disgrace the crown of Spain!”

The secretary looked him in the eye, “God save your soul.”

“Nothing!” he screamed.

The secretary placed his cap back on and walked down the hall.

“Avila, I am with you. God is with you as the guardian of your soul,” Bartolomé said. He opened his Bible to a passage and prayed. Alonso nearly collapsed to the floor. His knees shook and Suárez and Martín helped lower him to sit along the bars. Alonso dropped his head in his hands. Martín walked to the other end of the cell and looked at the high window on the wall.

The crust of another long night scratched Martín’s eyes. He remembered how unsettling his necklace had first struck him. He felt the soft feather against his chest. Now, the necklace didn’t disturb him. It kept him company and hinted at alternate ways of being he’d never

imagined. It didn't actually speak to him, but the fact that Xochitl had used it to communicate to him spoke well enough. He knew it was telling him about the earth, the beads, or seeds rather, the birds, the feather attached to it, the string, fibers from a tree. All these things whispered from the earth. All his life he'd lived an inch off the ground, accustomed to his modern means: clothing, food, shelter, all prepared by others. The only time he touched ground was at battle. His battles always had him on edge but he enjoyed the nights sleeping on the land with a ceiling of stars over him. Yet, he was always happy to return to his palace and the advantages he enjoyed there. He kept listening to the necklace, but he didn't understand what Xochitl expected from him? And what could he accomplish as a prisoner?

Alonso broke into his thoughts, "This means they cannot prove I'm connected with this treason of which they speak," he said excitedly.

Alonso held onto a sliver of hope after another visit by Luis told him that except for a mountain of native ornaments on display in his house, his estate held no evidence of heresy.

"There was a betrayer among us," Suárez said between the beans and corn mixture he stuffed into his mouth.

Alonso stared into the stone wall and sat with one leg out in front of him, the other bent at the knee. He rested an arm in his lap and the other over his knee. He lifted his little finger in a lofty manner, "If by 'us' what you mean is the people of our country, then yes, I must agree. We've been betrayed. This region and our motherland of Spain are as beloved to me as my own beating heart. It breaks to think a person would doubt the righteousness of our court. But if by 'us' you mean a traitor among my own men, I don't know what you're talking about."

Martín saw his little finger and his upper lip had developed a tick.

Suárez shot Alonso a glance and shook his head.

“What proof have they? They have nothing. There is nothing,” Alonso twitched and wiped his face.

Martín looked to Atl. He wanted to show him the necklace and ask him what he meant by the native word he’d spat in his face. He saw Atl pacing the room in a strange way. He moved his head in circles nodding ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and spread his arms out, shaking and wiggling his fingers. He would sometimes drag his hand across the stones as he paced. At random he would stop and wiggle his fingers between the cracks of the stones. The other men ignored his rare behavior, but Martín noticed a pattern emerging. Every time he stopped it was below the high window. He fit his fingers around the edges of the stones and reached his arm up as high as he could, going on his toes. He would tear away from the spot, giggle, and make rare monkey noises. He hooted, screeched, skipped, rocked, and hopped, but always stopping under the window.

Suárez slid his tray across the floor, “It would give me pleasure to go back to Spain, no matter if I never see this New World again.”

A butterfly fluttered by Atl and landed on the strands of long hair over his back.

A guard rattled the gate, “Xolopihli! Council with Judge Bonifacio!”

Atl tried to hide himself, arms out at both sides and his cheek and torso flat on the wall. He put on a witless grin and howled. His fingers felt the stones and the butterfly flew up.

Martín wondered at his peculiar ways. Nights ago he’d seen him in a different shade, as the man he knew he was beneath the fool. Now he wore a mask.

Atl squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth together and shouted. His laughter rolled out of him, “No here!”

Xochitl entered the hallway with her rag and pail of water. She glanced inside the cell through her fallen forelock of hair and turned away when she set sight on Alonso and Suárez on their stone bench.

Alonso stood. Martín watched the look on his face.

“Xolopihtli...fool. Wouldn’t know his head from his culo,” the guard banged the gate, “A-hor-a! Judge Bonifacio will charge you for your disobedience!”

Atl laughed and pushed off the wall. The butterfly climbed the air until it reached the window and flew outside.

Alonso and Suárez stared at Xochitl who now lowered her chin so much only her hair could be seen. Without remaining any longer she crouched to the ground, throwing rubbish into a second bucket of hers.

Alonso stood up and walked toward the gate.

Atl squirmed against the guard leading him out the cell, “You call me fool! Monkey no fool. You have cacahuatl? You have nohpalli fruit?”

The guard locked the gate behind him and Atl glanced back at Martín whose hand went up to his shirt where the necklace lay. He pulled it out for Atl to see he wore it. Atl winked and disappeared down the hall laughing maniacally.

Suárez stood up and joined Alonso at the gate. Xochitl sloshed the water from her bucket and moved away from their watchful eyes. Martín dropped his arms and gripped the side of his tunic when he saw his compadres steady gaze. He stood up and moved toward them.

Another guard who remained in the hallway called Alonso, “Alright unlucky fellow of mine, I’m afraid I have to take you.”

He unlocked the gate and motioned for Alonso to follow. Alonso and Suárez shot through the prison gate past him, darting toward Xochitl. Martín was just at their backs following them through the door.

“Jail break!” the guard called, leaning in in a delayed reaction with his fists toward the men going for the girl.

Xochitl looked side to side for an escape.

Alonso threw her to the ground.

Her water-filled pail fell with a splash.

The guard kicked at him furiously, but Alonso’s hands were at work tearing her tunic.

The guard hit Suárez in the jaw and his head swung to the side. Martín pushed past him to get to Alonso tugging at Xochitl’s tunic, exposing her behind, which when compared to the rest of her café body had a hint of milk to it. Xochitl looked back at Martín with big almond eyes. Martín unfurled punches on Alonso, but the man was a rabid animal that wouldn’t relinquish her. Two other guards arrived. One grabbed for Suárez who jumped onto Martín’s back.

Suárez buried his knuckles in the back of Martín’s head, “Traitor!”

Finally, Martín pulled Alonso’s arms back and Xochitl scrambled out of his reach.

“Martín!” Alonso looked back at him, “Leave me!”

Suárez kicked as the guard dragged him and threw him into his cell. Another kicked Martín down and the third guard took hold of the fanatical Alonso.

They beat the three delinquent prisoners to the floor of their cage.

For a moment it was quiet. The men remained low to the ground, scuffed, and bloody. But Alonso wasn’t finished. With watery eyes he leapt at Martín and grabbed his collar. He

ripped Martín's necklace off without hesitation. He threw it behind them and lumbered to a stand. He kicked Martín again and again.

With each kick he screamed in a terrifying pitch, "You'll never get the inheritance you seek! If I can stop it I will! I'll speak with the Marques...you're a traitor! Consorting with the monkey fool...helping a slave girl!"

He pummeled Martín's face and dug his feet into his ribs. Martín curled his body in like a spiralling shell, would curl infinitely smaller if he could, disappear even, or open infinitely bigger if it meant it would free him, make him bigger than men. But at the moment he assumed the fixed coil of a stone shell at the Aztec ruins. While he waited for the pounding to stop he felt something tickle inside of him.

Alonso yelled, "You're nothing, a halfbreed! There was always something wrong with--"

Something tickled him from his belly all the way up to his throat and out his mouth. He laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" Alonso grunted with a kick.

Martín couldn't stop.

"Laughing at me? What's so funny!"

Blood gurgled in his mouth and made his laugh bubble in a froth out his lips. When Alonso's thrusts hit his body his laughter broke midstream and struck him as funny so he laughed some more. He screeched laughter. His body ached internally and externally; his body felt it but he was detached watching it happen. He felt a numbness and a clarity. He thought it was insanity to live this violence. Over what? Not allowing an underling to be violated the way she was meant to be? Was that normal? He went against the grain and the world around him

wouldn't let him forget it. So he laughed. His laughter was the last thing tethering him to his body, to reality. Perhaps this was why Atl laughed.

Alonso stepped back. Martín saw him through half closed eyes. He stepped back with wide eyes, his jowls jittering. Was he afraid? Fatigued? Surprised? Martín was surprised at himself, but it didn't matter what Alonso thought. He didn't care. Not anymore.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Luis heard mournful trumpets play as he walked through the wide street in front of the cathedral. He followed the sound, but halted his steps when he recognized Alonso on the platform. Alonso in lavish velvet stockings, brown cape, feathered hat, and a rosary.

A crowd of varying attire faced the chopping block.

The number of decapitated heads around the platform had grown. Although they varied in hair color and flesh, each wore a rusty nail through the forehead. The first two conquistadores, the black and the brown, had already lost their eyes and lips, parts of their nose and ears to the vultures. Black flies delighted in their stench.

Bulky shadows from soldier uniforms stretched over the ground and from horseback: metal helmets, chainmail, simple yucca sandals, black boots, leather gloves, a sword slung through the belt.

Bartolomé de Las Casas stood next to Alonso on the scaffold. Alonso touched his brow with his shaking plump fingers and dark knuckle hair. Another prisoner with shackled ankles awaited his own fate at the bottom of the platform stairs. The black gloves of a guard wrapped the crook of his arm.

From his kneeling position Alonso looked up at Bartolomé, “Is this possible?”

“Yes, Señor. Make peace with God,” he responded.

“Is there no other way?”

“No, Señor.”

Alonso sobbed and clenched his rosary into his panza whispering, “Have mercy on me Lord in thy kindness.”

Bartolomé spoke to their onlookers in coats, dresses, and stockings, rich and poor.

“Pray for him! Ave Maria, God save you, Maria...”

The handkerchiefs and the scarves lowered to pray. A wooden beaded rosary rotated. Another made the sign of the cross.

Luis placed his forehead against his prayer hands, “Full you are of grace. The Lord is with you blessed are you amongst all the women...”

When they finished, a voice in the distance yelled, “Confess!”

“Confession! Confession!” other voices rose in a chant.

Alonso’s hands shook violently, “I c-confess. I’m guilty! Yet I can offer no other names.”

Alonso turned to Bartolomé and whispered. Bartolomé nodded closing his eyes.

Alonso lowered his head. The woven pattern of the basket came into his view and he pulled his shirt collar down.

The executioner stood behind Alonso with his axe. It came down on Alonso’s neck, but his head didn’t fall into the basket. The executioner swung twice more until the head finally tumbled down. The crowd yelled in disapproval.

The Marques had seen the heads of Alonso and several others lost on the scaffold outside his royal jail cell. There was no more time to spend defending other men. He summoned for Judge Bonifacio de Acalde. Three guards accompanied him and stood in the room.

The judge cleared his throat, “Marques, you have something for me?”

“Yes. I have something to say.”

“Ah, so your memory is working,” he chuckled and his phlegm rattled, “Well, quickly what say you?”

“Alonso only intended the masquerade to honor my newborn sons,” the Marques said.

“It’s too late for Alonso, I’m afraid.”

“Yes. Too late. But, it was my brother Martín. My brother had ulterior motives.”

“Martín?”

“C-claro. He’s always talking about my father’s inheritance. I tried to tell him the mines wouldn’t be good if His Majesty decided to forbid slave labor.”

“So he spreads treason for his own gains?”

“Si, he’s plotting against His Majesty to rule New Spain. I’m certain of it.”

“Who are his accomplices?”

“Martín is the only one. He tried to involve others. They said he was crazy. That he’d do anything to receive our father’s inheritance.”

“I see. I understand his brother-in-law is assisting him,” Judge Bonifacio waved the guards away, “We must have Luis questioned. And Marques, notify me should additional names come to mind.”

The Marques sighed a sigh of relief as the guards exited the room, “Of course, of course, Your Honor.”

Martín’s eyes were swollen shut. His finger traced the line of his eye lashes sealed in mucous. He licked his finger with saliva and rubbed it into his eyes working to open them.

Suárez' back was to him. Luis de Quesada called Martín and waited at the cell gate. Martín went over slowly. Atí waved at Luis like an excited child and Luis half smiled.

Luis took a scroll from his pocket and unrolled it, "Greetings Martín. Oh no, what are they doing to you.

Martín made a slight effort to shrug.

"Listen to me, there's not much time. I have a plan. Due to your current state of arrest...."

Martín steadied himself on the gate bars to listen to Luis. But Luis' voice sunk into the dank hall like his eyes that had been locked behind his sealed lids.

"I can secure... sign...to be under my name temporarily," Luis droned slapping the parchment.

Martín shifted back. He laid his forehead on the gate, closed his eyes, and groaned. Luis pushed a quill against his arm but Martín held up his hand.

"No more. Stop, stop," he said.

"Pardon me?" Luis retracted the quill and paper.

"The inheritance, the--no, no importa. Get me released Luis. Take me out of here."

"You don't know what you're saying right now. Maybe when you're free...listen a new viceroy is sailing in as we speak. I'm riding out to speak with him immediately. He has to put a stop to this--"

"Good, good, good, good..." Martín trailed off. He rubbed his hair and walked to the other end of the cell leaving Luis.

Luis rolled the scroll back up and squinted at Martín. He stood there perplexed until Martín went to his bed on the floor and laid himself out.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Martín felt the weight of his soldier's chainmail and the coolness of the metal around his neck. He looked down and saw his steel breast and arm plates. He was low to the ground on his knees in the position of prayer. He heard murmuring and yelling from the people waiting in front of him. He looked up but did not see mouths moving. Nor any hands that shook kerchiefs at him. He saw a range of uniforms, doublets, dresses, head scarves, tunics, torn hems, sandals, and brown shoes. He saw no faces and no hands. No skin. It was as though all people were ghosts in cloth, all equals in that regard. When they died they would be nothing like a man or a woman or a child, but something else--the same. Piles of material; their cloth would remain. He could still hear the noise. It all seemed directed at him.

He wanted to leave. He turned his head to escape and saw a basket before him. Inside was a cracked mirror at which he gasped immediately. Brown, yes brown, always brown, but worse was his face so riddled with jade and gold piercings and empty holes that his features vanished. He could see worms crawling through the holes. He heard heavy footsteps behind him and turned to see. A man with no face, a hood, an axe, black like a merciful night after a hard day. The man raised his axe. "Llevame, Señor mio, Dios mio," Martín pleaded for God to take him.

Martín's eyes flicked open. He took a moment to breathe and look around him. Was he in another dream? He saw Suárez asleep. Martín felt his face, swollen eyes, lips, and cheek. He felt the stone beneath him. No, no. The hardness persisted. He was awake.

But when he looked for Atl he couldn't find him anywhere. Instead, he saw two new inmates. Two sleeping mestizos with black hair cut jagged to their chins. Someone had slashed it off, but that was not all. Each huddled around bandaged wrists whose hands, Martín knew, had been hacked away. The sloughing paint that fell from their skin collected on the white sheets around them. The red paint told him they were connected with Atl. He remembered the poem his brother whispered--calloused hands for the tale of Galvarino. He rolled the name over his tongue, Galvarino, Galvarino, and encircled his wrist with his fingers. What was this Chichimeca war? To give up their hands? What would they not give?

The men lay across from one another each on a bed. He watched the rise and fall of their resting bellies. They were brown. Their arms were brown. Their necks, their legs, and almost the soles of their cracked feet. And even with their missing hands, there was something Martín envied. In their bodies they knew a freedom he'd never known. Maybe up until now, until the loss of their hands, they had led lives in full sun. They hardly wore clothes, well at the moment they wore the same tunic provided him by the prison. Martín imagined the sun climbing over them, their walking with chins untucked, hands not hidden in the shade before them or in pockets. They knew the unrestrained pleasure of walking with the sun on their hands and faces. Although no, no more hands in the sun. Martín squeezed his own hands.

In a way Martín was jealous. He thought about the estrangement he felt from his own body. Unlike them he'd worked hard to stay hidden from light. His shade of brown was lighter than theirs, an accomplishment he'd always thought. But what mattered anymore of his efforts to be like the Spanish? Had he been fooling himself his whole life trying to be one of them? Was it true that Hernán Cortés was his father?

But it must be true. He would not have lived the life he'd lived were it not. He'd not have served Phillip II, lived in palaces, worn fine clothing. His status always overlooked his skin and his illegitimate birth. His father had convinced the Pope to legitimize him. So there was no problem when he'd pursued the Order; the Santiago knights had accepted him. Yet he knew he wasn't one of them. He always knew. Even aside from his brother who never let him forget, he knew. There were his dreams. He couldn't blame his brother for those. And at the end, his father had reminded him with the revelation of his true heir or so the writing in the will led him to believe: "Obey your brother in all things," he recalled.

Then, who was he if not Spanish through and through? Was he one of these men? He couldn't say for he knew next to nothing of their ancestors and their ways save that his father destroyed them and took their riches to Spain. To whom did he belong, he wondered?

Martín, lost in thought, saw movement along the wall of the jail. He spotted Atl climbing down the stone beneath the small window high above. What was he doing? How had he reached that height? He had something thin and shining between his teeth reflecting the moonlight. A knife?

Martín wiped his eyes. Was he in a dream? He didn't want to risk calling his name and startling him. So he lay still. Atl's feet hit the floor and he took the shining thing from his mouth. He looked around and Martín shut his eyes. When a few moments had passed he opened them again and saw Atl leaning over one of the handless sleeping men. He slowly stroked the cut hair and kissed the man's forehead. He went to the other man and did the same. The men stirred but didn't awaken. Atl's hair, which was still long, hid his face. Why hadn't they cut Atl's hair short? Why had his hands been spared? Did the viceroy have something worse in store? The man's eyes opened in sleepy slits. He turned his head up just enough to see Atl over

him and then dropped his head again, closing his eyes. Atl reached for his bandaged wrist and held it lightly. Martín saw his brother's back shake. His tears caught the light when they fell and rolled over the strands of the man's slick hair.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Nights later, Martín was restless and wandered the cell collecting the beads Alonso had ripped from his neck.

Suárez lay in his bed staring at the cell ceiling.

Martín passed by Atl who was whispering, “Panther. Your fur meets the night without seams. My teacher.”

His men were no longer in the cell. Like everyone they were called upon by the guard without explanation and led down the lantern lit hall. Martín wondered what other horrible thing the judge would do to them. Remove their feet? He shuddered and wondered what was worth it to him to lose his hands and feet for. He’d felt protective over this land as well, but not for the same reasons. The land was his father’s legacy. And with his father gone he’d arrived thinking no other would guard all he’d won. But seeing Atl’s army he thought differently.

Martín wanted to ask his brother what he was saying or more importantly what he meant. He wanted to confide everything and learn everything. He shook the collection of beads in his hand. He walked toward his brother when a moment later a guard rattled the gate. Suárez and Martín jolted, their eyes darted at the sound. Suárez sat up. Martín’s chest prickled and his stomach burned. The guard stepped back and in his place stepped Secretary Gonzalo and Bartolomé de Las Casas. He squeezed the beads in his palm and they were so small they hardly pushed back.

The secretary spared them the greetings and stated his business, “The verdict for treason against His Majesty, King Carlos V., sentences Martín Cortés to decapitation.”

Martín stared at the seeds in his hand. A thought flashed through his mind that they represented the plants that came before them and the plants before them for as long as that type of plant had been in existence. Who knew if it always would? Who knew?

“This punishment will occur soon. The exact date and hour will be disclosed in due time,” the secretary looked to see whether Martín comprehended.

Martín looked at Gonzalo. But his eyes didn't connect with the secretary's. Instead they concentrated on a single button of his jacket. His vision swelled to incorporate the entire figure of the secretary and then also the Bishop. It swelled some more to include the jail cell, the prison, the city plaza, and Mexico, and after that, the ocean and Spain, Portugal, France, Europe, Africa, China, and Japan, and then the night sky, and the moon and all the stars. Had he heard the words he'd thought he'd heard?

Bartolomé sought Martín's eyes, “I will pray for you my son. I have prayed for the other men and they are safe in the hands of God.”

Suárez rubbed his forehead and slumped back into his bed.

Martín could feel his face warm and yet his skin felt cold, his hands clammy. He walked forward. He was a skeleton encased in flesh. It would rot. Wet, mush, then in time dry. And the wind would blow what he considered to be himself across the earth. He stopped at the gate where the Bishop stood. From this moment on his body was weight around him, although he wasn't sure what it was it weighed down, the him that was bodyless, skinless. The idea of a separation had never occurred to him. At the moment the only thing inside this body of his was hate or rather aggravation for a life lived attached to this body, the grievance of this dark skin so soon to fade, at last to fade. He concentrated all the fury this feeling brought him into his eyes. He set those eyes on Bartolomé. Hot tears blurred the Bishop. He wiped them away. He

thought the Bishop saw an Indio no different than Atl, no different than any Native person wearing the tunic he wore. But this thinking was the old thinking of his. What did it matter anymore? He'd not be in it much longer, his tunic, nor body.

“Martín Cortés.”

So Las Casas knew him. And, so. So what? He was another Indio with ties to a famous Spanish father. His name was Martín, so was his brother's, so were thousands of men he'd never met.

A handful of Mexican beads lay in his hand. His brother Atl had gentle feelings like a woman yet was a warrior. And there lived men with no hands, men that could have been him hacked for wanting to live, for wanting to remain at home. This was what he knew. The world appeared for him now more dreamlike than his own dreams. He felt dizzy.

The softness of the Bishop's voice irritated him. Martín wrinkled his brown face in loathing. It was easy for the man to preach, easy for him to pray. Did he never tire of being untouchable? He wanted to say he heard in his voice a condescending, like his brother's-- another old thought, but how could he stop them from arising when they were like habits big as giants, built little by little each day of his life? One thing was different, he thought. His thoughts would come, but his growing apathy rearranged the light over them and made them vanish quickly like phantoms in the sun.

This anger, what came from it? He'd be dead, was dead. Anger too subsided. Suddenly he let go of the creases in his face and let out a deep sigh that croaked deep in his throat. The sound carried like prying open an old forgotten wooden door of many locked years. His body fell against the bars. Uncontrollable sobs escaped him. His hands gripped the bars. His beads bounced on the stone and rolled into cracks and holes. He felt a weakness in his legs.

Bartolomé touched his hand, “Bless the son of Hernán Cortés and doña Marina. See his tears as testimony of his goodness and have mercy, oh God. Accompany us in all hours, dark and light.”

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

The new viceroy, the Marques de Falces, overlooked the shore from the ship deck he arrived on. His brown eyes were narrow. His black beard and mustache formed a diamond. His broad shoulders were accentuated by his black cape and coat. Like a strong, well cared for Andalusian stallion he carried the air of a man ready for his post.

Men, women, and soldiers disembarked the ship. Servants and sailors unloaded the ship's horses, trunks, and barrels. The new viceroy came down a ramp.

Luis de Quesada was riding through the crowd.

"Viceroy Falces?" he called out when in range of the crew and passengers.

Some men pointed at the ship and Luis trotted toward the ramp. He asked his question again.

"I am the Marques de Falces," vertical lines between his eyes appeared, "What's the trouble?"

Luis' breathing was heavy.

"Thanks be to God you've arrived. We are desperate for an urgent message to suspend the executions."

"Executions? The law states no deaths shall pass outside the presence of a designated viceroy--"

Luis' horse skidded to the side and he pulled on its reigns, "The laws are not always just. Judge Bonifacio is beheading knights suspected of conspiring against the king. Viceroy, he's killing the sons of the conquest."

The viceroy stared at Luis, “Is there proof?”

“The proof will soon be a Cortés nailed to a stake,” Luis said dismounting his horse.

He took out a letter and a plume from his coat. He handed it to the viceroy who unfolded the parchment and scanned the words. His plume glided over the document. His handwriting was rushed but flawless and controlled. Luis thought he would push through the paper.

Luis advised the viceroy to act quickly in overseeing the situation. He bowed his head in respect and tucked the signed message into his jacket. He hoisted himself onto his horse and kicked its sides. The horse reared up and galloped inland from the sandy shore.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Two Bloods

I am a man of two bloods.

A man.

What song will I sing--my mother's, my father's?

I sing my song.

In what shall I believe?

The giggle of a tickled baby.

All flowers are precious. All flowers are jade.

Martín sat on his bed having collected his beads a third time. He strung the necklace back together. Atl sat at the foot of Martín's bed eating plain rice from his metal tray. He was rambling about all the foods he missed: cacahuatl, prickly pear, banana, papas, squash, nopalli--Martín thought he'd never hear the end of the list. Atl boasted he could eat one hundred tortillas with chilé--the hottest chilé alive! Pieces of rice dangled from his lips and fell on his tunic. Twenty mangos, ten guavas with chilé and limón!

Martín shook his head grinning. His free spirits managed to lift him.

"Atl," Martín interrupted, "I don't know how much time I have. I want to tell you something."

Atl picked up the pieces of rice he'd dropped and smiled at Martín.

"What?" he asked.

Martín sighed, "I have dreams."

Atl licked his fingers, "Dreams? Yes, talk dreams good to spirit."

"I never talk about them."

“No?”

“I tried once, with my brother, the Marques.”

Atl lifted his arm and watched his own wrist turn. He put it to his ear as though listening for something.

“What he say?”

“He called my mother a whore. That was one thing.”

Atl stopped moving his wrist and gasped. He looked at Martín.

“It put me angry.”

Martín told Atl the story of his cutting his brother. He told him about wanting to cut the skin off his arms. He told him about all the piercings and tattoos and people frightened of him in his dreams. He confessed that he loved his mother even though he didn't remember her, that he thinks the humming and hands in his dreams are his mother's. That all his life he never knew that sort of tenderness from a mother, but that he was too ashamed to admit that he wanted and possibly remembered his mother's.

Atl pinched some rice into his mouth and waved the air with his hand.

“They fools,” Atl said pushing his ears forward with rice stuck to his fingers. He laughed hysterically.

Martín felt his ears warm, “I shouldn't have told you either.”

Atl stopped laughing and swallowed his rice in one loud gulp.

He still wore a goofy grin when he said, “No Martín. They fools. People and brother. No understand two bloods.”

Martín faced Atl, “Two bloods?”

The plate of rice scraps clattered on the stone floor as Atl got rid of it to pick up a rock. He drew a box on the ground. Inside he drew two drops and tapped them each with the rock.

“Two bloods!” he yelled.

Atl pounded his chest and moved in to squeeze Martín’s bicep, “Two bloods strong. Muscles like two people!”

Atl pressed his palm against Martín’s forehead, “Smart. Think better two people. He know both minds. Know bad and good of both minds.”

Martín sighed, unconvinced. All of this sounded interesting, but if it were true wouldn’t he know both his bloods and feel strong in each?

“People no understand good of two bloods. Good thing two bloods make world come together. But people,” Atl laughed, “People no look.”

Atl opened his eyes wide with his fingers. His eyes moved side to side in their sockets. Martín laughed.

“And two bloods no broken. Two bloods, cenquizqui--whole. You whole man, brother Martín.”

Martín tried out the word in his mouth, “Cenquizqui...cenquizqui...”

“Si, cenquizqui,” Atl’s blue eyes sparkled.

Atl put his hands on his hips and fluttered his eyelashes. His lips pursed like a shrinking worm.

“Malintzin, she woman,” he freed one hand from his hip to gesture with his wrist, “Woman no power. But she strong mind. She know, Malintzin fight, Malintzin die. No fight, no die.”

His face lost its smile and he tapped Martín’s temple, “Mother strong.”

Martín pushed the finger away several times but each time Atl's finger came right back. Martín laughed.

Atl maintained a straight face and moved to tap Martín's chest, "Strong father--"

"I hate you serious," Martín laughed.

"--Cacafuego, but strong." Atl tapped Martín's chest again, "Make you, strong, cenquizqui."

Atl tapped him once more, hard enough to push Martín back a little.

Martín laughed and finally succeeded in pushing the finger away. Atl smiled and threw his arms up, spinning in circles.

Martín laughed and felt his necklace.

Atl stopped spinning, grabbing his head in exaggerated dizziness. He cleared his throat and Martín looked at him.

Atl's forehead wrinkled, perplexed, "Dreams good. Dreams help." Atl made a slithering motion with his arm. He looked at his curving arm and then up as though through the roof to the sky. He wiggled his fingers and brought his hand down wiggling his fingers in his face, "Look snake, look tree, look cloud...look hand."

Atl waved his hands in front of Martín's face. Then he raised his eyebrows and peered all around him, "Not real. All dream. Sleeping, waking...all world, dream."

Atl dropped his arms and snapped his gaze at Martín. He looked wide-eyed and Martín wondered how he kept from blinking.

"But, fear real. Love real. Dream all tell where is fear, where is your love."

Atl grabbed his plate of rice and put one foot on Martín's bed and a hand on his waist. He puffed up his chest. He held his index finger at ear level, "No fear mother awake. No fear

Mexico awake. And no fear people awake...” he raised his index finger higher in the air to make his final point, “No fear dream asleep!”

He nodded rapidly then brought his hand down over Martín’s head and rustled his hair. Martín smiled and swayed back from Atl’s hand.

Atl went to his bed and Martín leaned back chuckling.

“Dreams...,” he whispered, bringing his hand above his face and wiggling his fingers.

“Cenquizqui...”

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

Luis' horse strode alongside the execution scaffolding. He saw Alonso and the other decapitated heads raised on sticks.

“Dios poderoso,” he whispered, crossing himself.

He rode to the jail and leapt off his horse.

Luis stood on the opposite side of the desk of secretary Gonzalo. On his desk sat stacks of brown books of both law and religion. A quill with a pot of black ink, piles of paper, and several unlit candles stood at the sides. Another table held a tray with metal cups and pitcher of water. Luis laid the paper signed by the new viceroy flat on the secretary's desk and poured himself a cup of water.

“What's this?” Gonzalo lifted the corner of the document.

“Read it. Postpone all punishments in the absence of a viceroy. Signed by Viceroy Falces.”

“Impossible. He hasn't yet arrived.”

“He has. He will be in town any day.”

The secretary eyed Luis. He nodded, rolling the paper up. He would see judge Bonifacio and present the order.

Xochitl's nails scraped against the stone floor as she scrubbed the Marques' cell. She pretended to be working on a particularly dirty stone as the Marques and Judge Bonifacio sat and exchanged words.

“I will gladly board the next ship back to Spain,” the Marques ran his hands through his hair.

“That is how it must be and never return,” the judge said.

“When can I leave?”

The judge motioned for the guard waiting in the hall to step into the cell.

“Today.”

“Your Honor, muchas gracias,” the Marques bowed his head.

He took one last look at his room and stood to go with the guard until he remembered something.

“Your Honor,” he said.

Judge Bonifacio met his eyes.

“One more thing remains. Atl. He is just as much against the crown as any of the men beheaded in the plaza.”

“Of course he is.”

“He’s a puto. If you don’t kill him, I swear I will.”

Xochitl stopped scrubbing in spite of herself. She forced herself to go on, but she slowed her strokes.

The judge shook his head, “Marques, his name is not Atl. His name is Juan Bautista de Pomar and the King of Spain has decreed his life spared.”

“But, he is illicit! He goes against God!”

“Watch your tone. Guard, take him now.”

The guard grasped the Marques’ wrists behind his back and pulled him to the door.

“Forgive me, Your Honor. What plans can the King have?”

“He is to work with Señor Bernardino de Sahagún. He will help with the records of the Aztecs.”

As the Marques moved out the cell door he looked over his shoulder at the judge.

Bonifacio clasped his hands behind his back and smiled, “Poetry.”

The Marques’ eyes grew wide, “Poetry!”

The Marques struggled in the guard’s hold as he led him out the stone, torchlit hall, “This is ridiculous! You are going to let that sodomite free? You disgrace God himself! I won’t let that vomit soil this society! God as--”

Xochitl listened as the Marques’ screams faded. She looked up and saw the back of Judge Bonifacio’s thick neck and the black coat that cloathed his poor posture. He hummed to himself as he closed the gate behind him. She dropped the rag down and sat against the wall to think.

The Marques stepped into the free air and sun. He shielded his face when he looked up at the sun and closed his eyes. He adjusted the cuffs of the long sleeves under his coat. A mestizo boy looking no older than ten brought him his black horse. He handed him the reins with his small and calloused hands. The Marques adjusted his coat and trousers to mount it.

He rode past the scaffold and slowed when he saw the raised heads. He stopped in front of the head of Alonso. Flies filled his eye sockets, nose, and mouth.

“It should not have ended this way,” the Marques said.

His horse pranced in place when a mestiza in ragged dress and headscarf approached him, scrounging for money and lost belongings around the platform on her way.

She extended her hand, “Nimitztlatlauhtia. Tomin.”

The Marques cringed and jerked the reigns back.

He backed the horse away from the woman, murmuring, “The new world is mad. If nobody had done it for me, I’d exile myself.”

He kicked his horse’s sides and galloped away from the plaza.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

After the surviving conquistadores were released and exiled, Martín paid us a visit. Luis, Martín, and I were in my kitchen. I was boiling myself a cup of Grandmother of the Bath's tea.

Luis placed his hand on my brother's shoulder, "It's alright now Martín. Do as Bonifacio says and go back to Spain. Make that girl, she's waiting for you, your wife."

Martín crossed his arms and leaned back against the table with his head bowed.

"We are seeing the end of slavery, but I can sell the land in your inheritance to pay your imprisonment charge."

It always amazed me the casualty with which Luis discussed slavery around me. He never connected me with those in chains, but of course I was, and it irritated me to live under the same roof with him. It was true what he said, slavery was at its end. The new viceroy was phasing it out, but it was the wistful tone in Luis' voice that made me want to give him extra special chilé in his dinner that night.

As for the outlawing of the encomienda system, I was hopeful, but skeptical. I waited until freedom happened to the people I knew to become a believer. Some felt comfortable after the released reins and remained at their place of work in exchange for pay. Xochitl, for one, continued at the prison, but not for this reason. Oh, she was paid, but that was not the basis of her decision to stay. She had long since tired of the filthy work and ogling men, but she was not about to step off at the first taste of liberation if it meant leaving Atl behind. As I said she was all appetite. But I admired her grit and it made me feel good to know he had someone watching over him in the dragon's mouth.

The effects of that dungeon could be fairly grim. As in Martín's case, the consequences cultivated his body with hollow cheeks, trenches of fresh scars, and patches of skin tilled raw. He stared into my square tiled floor vacant of response, verbal or physical.

Vasco came into the kitchen. His head was downcast and he rubbed at his little nose.

"Uncle?" Vasco slung his arms around Martín's legs, "You're alive! I saw the other men and their heads. I thought you died."

Vasco hid his face in his uncle's trousers.

At last Martín showed some resemblance to humanity with a trace of a smile. He told Vasco he was alright, his neck, alright.

"Can I see?" Vasco reached up to touch his neck.

Martín crouched down and lowered his collar. He stroked his old scars and looked up at Maria. His sister smiled encouragingly. Vasco's hand pulled back when he saw the pocked scars.

"It's alright Vasco. It's only skin," Maria said.

Vasco reached up slowly.

"You see Vasco. Nothing but my old damned scars," Martín said, "But my skin is tough, strong, like two skins."

Vasco's fingers hovered over his uncle's neck, and touched lightly, "But it doesn't hurt anymore?"

"No mijo, nothing can hurt it now," he pulled his collar up again and gave Vasco's arm a quick squeeze. "It's strong, like two bloods. Cenquizqui."

He looked at Maria and she glared into him, mouthing his words "two bloods."

Martín looked away, back at Vasco. He couldn't bare her eyes. They were intense with an emotion that embarrassed him. Vasco stood by his uncle fiddling and examining his dark fingers. I poured my tea and sipped a few sips.

"Bueno," I set my cup on the wooden table, "Sleep time, Vasco. I'll come in soon."

Vasco hugged Martín's leg once more and sped off like an arrow.

"Ma cualli yohualli," Martín yelled after him.

I looked at my brother like he'd just pinned a jaguar. Wishing my son a good night in Nahuatl, I couldn't believe it.

"Martín, sit. I'm going to serve you your favorite, chicken mole!"

"That's good. You'll need a warm meal to get your health back for the voyage home,"

Luis agreed.

I moved toward the pot of hot mole over the fire.

"I'm not going," Martín said.

I stopped and turned around.

Luis shook his head, "Martín no. You have your life again. Be satisfied--"

"I've made up my mind."

"W-why?" Luis stammered.

Martín glimpsed over at me as though asking whether Luis would understand.

I shrugged and shook my head no. I busied myself with a stack of plates.

Luis ignored us, "You can have everything back in Spain. Why? After everything I've done to help--Do you value your life at all?"

Luis' questions pulled the wrinkles from his forehead.

"It was my mother's home. It's my home too," Martín said.

The plates clapped the table as I set them out.

I was interested in the logistics, “How do you mean to stay?”

“The canyon.”

I nodded.

“No, no, no, no...” Luis combed his hand through his hair and turned to lift a jug of wine.

He poured himself a cup and looked at me. He drank and wiped his beard.

“Atl fits your build,” I indicated.

Luis set his cup down.

“He’s always wanted to see his father’s homeland.”

Martín tilted his head and squinted at me.

He opened his mouth a little, “A switch?”

Luis shook his head, “Vieja, what’s in that tea of yours? Ha? Do you have a brain of cabbage? Atl is imprisoned, New Spain will never let him go. And Martín received his second chance, he won’t get a third. Close your mouth and bring the mole.”

We looked at one another for a moment. I wanting to drown him with the red in his cheeks and he wanting to curl his fingers around my neck.

Luis poured another cup of wine and walked toward the hall, “Bring my dinner to the study. And Martín, I know you won’t do anything foolish.”

I was glad he left us. I poured the mole sauce over the chicken and folded three tortillas onto a plate. She placed it in front of Martín who was quiet again.

“Tomorrow is the festival of San Pedro de Arbues,” Maria said. He moved his eyes to meet hers. She went on, “After the beheadings people will want to go out and unload. Don’t worry I have a plan. Tomorrow, Xochitl and I will free Atl and--”

“Atl won’t do it. He won’t leave them,” Martín said.

“Then he can lead you to the canyon,” she said.

“Maria? Can I do this? Can I survive there? I don’t know what I’m thinking. Luis is right, I’m making a mistake...” Martín trailed off.

“Eat your mole,” she mandated, not knowing how else to comfort him.

“Come with me,” Martín whispered.

His eyes were red in the whites, but she saw new depths that made their centers endless. They implored her. Maria hesitated and turned around. She went back to the plates to serve another dish of mole for her husband.

She carried the plate and limped her way toward the door stopping to rub Martín on the shoulder, “Eat your mole.”

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

The next day I went to the plaza where Xochitl's uncle continued his work on the building. It looked much taller than before, more filled in, but still rough and barely recognizable. I nodded to him and he nodded back.

"Tomás, you have spoken with Xochitl?"

"Si, doña Marina--perdoname--doña Maria."

I laughed and touched his arm, "That's alright. So, you know what you have to do?"

"Claro," he affirmed.

"Come to my house just before the sun sets."

Tomás nodded and lifted another brick to lay along the building.

Later that day he did just as we'd agreed upon. He came to the back door of my kitchen and I looked about for any onlookers. I handed him a bag. A piece of the dress hung out and I tucked it inside. I threw old sheets over the dress and tied the bag up with the string at its top. I handed Tomás a warm tamale and wished him luck. He smiled and unwrapped the husk. He sauntered away from my house nibbling on a corner of the masa. I hoped he looked casual, but not too casual.

Tomás crossed the plaza with the bag slung over his shoulder. He kept his eyes straight ahead on the jail as he passed the scaffolding.

Once at the side of the jail he lowered the bag and kneeled to look under a bush.

"You. What's inside the bag?" a voice came from above.

He squeezed his eyes closed. And prayed he wasn't about to be arrested, persecuted, and tortured. He was a man. Only a man trying to do some good for someone. He stood up and turned around to see a uniformed soldier on horseback. He opened the bag and the soldier peered down.

"Sheets?" the soldier asked.

"Patched sheets," Tomás said.

"Remove them," he ordered.

The man followed his orders and dumped the bag out. Old yellow sheets tumbled out and on top of them fell the dress.

"What's that?" the soldier pressed.

"Special repair to prison maid."

"Give it me."

The mestizo handed the dress up to him and the soldier shook it out, letting it dangle against the side of his horse. It draped long past the stirrups of his saddle. The soldier patted the fabric and squeezed the bust that was padded.

"Tall girl. Not very big...up here," the soldier patted his chest.

Tomás shrugged scratching his eyebrow with the mole above it.

"For your wife?"

"Daughter."

"Why are you hiding it under the bush?"

"Need bathroom."

Tomás grabbed himself under his tunic and turned around to urinate. The soldier cringed and threw the dress on the ground.

“Porqueria eso. Away with you and this trash.”

“Almost. Almost...” he said shaking his leg.

He heard the horse’s hooves plod away. Tomás finished urinating and relaxed his shoulders. He picked up the bag and walked to the back of the jail where stained tunics and sheets lay spread out over bushes. He found a fitting bush and looked to his sides for more soldiers. He hid the bag underneath.

Xochitl came outside with a basket to collect the dry laundry. She searched her periphery as she folded each piece and stacked them in the basket.

She spotted the bag underneath a bush and scanned her surroundings before going to it.

Atl was alone in his jail cell when the guard motioned for him to come out. He held Atl’s arm taught and guided him down the hall. Xochitl caught Atl’s eye as she crossed their path on her way to his cell. One arm carried her laundry basket and the other carried a pail of water. Atl saw the slightest of hints. She glanced at him, then at the sheets, then back at him again. His eyes widened and he slowed his pace for a couple of steps. The guard tugged his arm. Atl snapped into action. He plugged his nose and wrinkled his face at the Xochitl.

“Stink. Stink. Very worse than monkey,” he said, hopping up and down and hooting.

The guard jerked his arm again, “Shut up fool or I’ll kick the bananas out of you!”

Atl saw Xochitl disappear into his cell. He felt the air get colder and damper as they went to another end of the jail. The guard stopped in front of another cell. This room was barred with a slim iron door. It was lined with rivets and had four square windows at the top to peer through. The guard threw Atl into the cell.

“Monkey want kiss,” Atl said.

The guard arched an eyebrow. Atl puckered his lips and made kissing noises. The guard’s eyebrows lowered into a frown. Atl batted his eyes and pouted his lips.

“Kiss the maiz, xolopihtli,” the guard grunted as he tossed Atl into the room. “I’d rather not spend one extra minute with you. Peel everything in this cell and you will eat tonight.”

Atl hit the floor, his cheek scraped against the stone. He lay there a moment listening to the door slam and lock. He pushed himself up and a chuckle rose from his belly. It grew louder when he touched his scraped cheek.

“If that’s the worse I get, then I am happy,” he smiled.

He looked at the back wall of the room and saw a large pile of fresh picked corn. He saw additional corn husks peeking out of several bags.

“Tonight?” He smiled bigger, “Dinner is already here!”

By the time Atl returned to his cell his fingers were littered with fine cuts from peeling corn. He heard a door slam in the distance. A butterfly fluttered in front of his face.

“Ah, the butterfly twirls,” He whispered under his breath. “Dusted wings of papalotl laugh at the weight of stone.”

The butterfly rose up and down and landed on the top of his head. Atl sat on his bed slowly. He lifted the sheet there and slid his feet underneath. He stopped when his foot felt a thicker fabric. It was softer too. He looked inside and saw it was a dress!

He also found a small note that read, “CENOTE.”

He fell onto his bed laughing as though furiously tickled. He kicked his feet in the air.

“Xochitl, I love you!”

The guard returned and looked in on him.

Atl looked at him and smiled sweetly.

The guard grunted, spat on the floor, and walked away.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

Post Prison Escape Mood

*As the serpent, I shed
my dress, the folds
of brown and white.
I am naked, but for the dew.*

*I toe leaf undersides,
feathers, and seed shells tipped
cups collecting rain.
I stoop in the trill of
guardian frogs.
 I go making my way,
 taking my way.*

*My fists ball, the rumble
in the panther rumbles in me,
silky black fur rubbed wrong way;
calloused hands for the tale of Galvarino.*

*Winding snakes, ayahuasca haze,
a fearless caress, she coaxes me
into her depth.
 I entreat the canyon to swallow me.*

*My brothers, my sisters, indeed
my ancestors, await. Spirits
 unfurl like smoke,*

*calling me, my heart's blood,
beating drum in my chest,
 I'm making my way,
 taking my way.*

Atl's thoughts ran like a jaguar on the hunt but his body lay motionless. He heard talking and laughter bounced off the buildings of the plaza sending their faded counterpart in through the jail window. There were clarion trumpets, shawms, and kettledrums, popping fireworks,

children screeching and laughing. It was September 17, day of San Pedro de Arbués, the saint venerated for his martyrdom inflicted by los marranos, or so the Jews and Muslims came to be known. But who were the real pigs Atl wondered pursing his lips?

Atl watched through squinted eyes as a ray of moonlight gradually traveled from one side of the room to the other. It highlighted two new prisoners--the twitches on their faces, their scabs, and the dirt under their nails. It spilled over the stone floor with the grime-collecting cracks.

Atl whispered a prayer for them, "Panther be thy teacher."

These prisoners were not his enemies. And he didn't think they were against each other either. But Atl knew being incarcerated could change men. A brother could step on a brother. Fear and hunger for survival won over everything.

Outside, the commotion from the fiesta livened the night. Inside though, was stillness. The jail hall was guarded by one man and lit by a dimming candle in a lantern. He wasn't asleep yet as he opened his eyes and straightened himself every minute or two. Atl waited patiently for the intervals to grow longer.

And there still remained in the corner of the room one of the new inmates awake. He was not a boy Atl knew, but like the other men that had shared his cell he had black chopped hair. But this one was lucky to still have his hands attached. His age had saved him Atl imagined. He sat with his back against the wall rubbing his eyes. Atl remembered his own first night. He'd lain awake. It was possible somebody could come from behind and strangle him or have something sharp behind his back to cut him. An illness, anyone could be carrying a deadly disease and hand it to him with a breath. An array of possibilities.

Atl had been in and out of jail enough to feel at ease here. He knew the pain, the work, the highest place to climb, the smallest crevice to crawl in, and learned each and every loose stone. The one he needed now for example, nestled directly beneath the boy.

Finally, Atl saw his eyes rest closed. He looked at the guard and saw his head resting on his chest.

Almost.

He waited like a panther about to pounce.

When the boy's head hung low and his body limp, Atl carefully moved his feet out of his bed to the floor. He swung a glance over the room and saw the other man asleep. Slow breathing. Now snoring. And the guard dreaming.

Atl slid out of his wooden bed, dragging with him the Spanish dress. He slinked across the room.

The prisoner boy shifted his weight. He suddenly sucked in a breath like trying to escape a drowning.

Atl waited as long as it took until the boy calmed and breathed easily. Atl grinned.

His heart palpitated and his flesh tingled.

Again, he stole the seconds of the jail's unconsciousness and scampered toward the boy.

He paused with a breath inside him.

His nails are long. There's a shiny gash on his forehead. Atl prayed he did not spook if awakened.

Then, gradually, hem by hem, he slid into the dress. He tucked his long hair into the back of it. He found a bonnet tucked in the bust of the dress. He tied its strings under his chin. He patted around his head to make sure his hair was hidden.

Now.

Atl approached the boy over the stone.

He crouched down and lifted the border of his skirt from under his toe to keep from tripping. The dress bunched up, and pinched his side. He winced a little and blew a strand of hair from his eyes.

The boy sat halfway over the stone he wished to lift. He put his fingers into the crevice of the stone and lifted. The stone nudged the boy.

The boy mumbled, “Ac, aquin...”

Atl stopped and licked his lips.

Atl let out a breath and continued lifting the stone.

Oh, cacahuatin! Atl thought when he smelled the explosive powders from the fireworks. In only moments he would be outside in their light!

A butterfly landed on Atl’s shoulder and he reached under the stone to pull out his knife. He carefully lowered the stone back into place.

The knife glinted in the moonlight and he placed it between his teeth. He toed his way to the wall beneath the window and fitted his fingers and toes into the cracks. He climbed up and up feeling like an ozomahtli, fuzzy all over with excitement.

Just as he reached the high window he looked down and saw the boy staring at him. Atl covered his mouth with his hand and the boy did the same. He didn’t know whether the boy were sleepwalking, but just the same, Atl bowed his head in thanks. He maneuvered the window bars loose with his knife. They came out as he knew they would.

He pulled himself through the hole and lowered himself down the outside of the building, clutching his fingertips tight around small pieces of jutting rock. The butterfly hovered over his shoulder.

“Papalotl, niltze,” he smiled at it.

The tree shadows and the sound of whirling wind hid him as he made his way down. But when he heard the whistles of the fireworks he paused as much not to be seen as to watch their dazzling colors. He chuckled when the smoke that followed touched him. He couldn't see anything but the stones on the wall before him, but smiled knowing the only direction he needed to go in was down. He laughed again when he saw the ground come into view. He took one last step and leapt to the ground, thudding down in the grass and dirt.

The town's fiesta was bustling with instruments. He saw the puffing cheeks of the Indio trumpet and shawm players playing in front of the church. Plenty of people scattered in the plaza and streets. Atl pulled the lace of his bonnet around to hide his face. He bent his back and faked limp in his gait as he walked through the plaza.

When he reached the middle of the crowd he spun around. He folded his lips over his teeth and yelled in his best elderly feminine voice, “¡Ay Dios! ¡Mira! Prisoner! ¡Se escapó!”

The noise in the crowd changed from laughter and chatter to gasps and shouts.

Atl took a moment to watch all of this and grin to himself beneath the hood of his bonnet. Look at this, he thought and laughed.

“There! I see him! ¡Alla!” people yelled and pointed at the smoke and shadows on the wall.

Glass shattered on the cobblestones and soldiers rushed from their posts. They shouted orders to block the doors and man the roads.

Women gathered their skirts and fled for awnings, dragging their children away from their play. They cried, “Mamá, mamá!”

Townsmen’s brows went stern and they discussed what they’d seen. They explained to their nearest soldier, who pursed his lips.

Atl laughed to himself again, but his smile faded like the sparks in the sky when he felt a heavy glare laying upon him. He looked left to the inlet of a brick wall. It was filled with the fire of flickering candles that melted in meditation at the feet of a stone Arbúes. In an instant he realized to whom the gaze belonged. Leaning against the wall by the shrine with arms crossed was a more lively statue, one of red hair and a plume in his hat, he who genuflected to both the written and unwritten law of his society and as a result drove like a sword his unwavering gaze into the subject that offended him. Nobody else had seen through Atl’s smoky mirror, but then they hadn’t any reason to. He was well aware of the woman clothes that cinched his waist and topped off that which the Marques despised. With this in mind he returned his stare. They were to each other a snag in a fabric that caused every stitch around it to unravel.

In nature, as it was in Atl’s beliefs, when there was too much of one thing, such as a land that was flooded, the gods cooperated to reabsorb the imbalance and restore harmony. His stars called him to act in this way, to reabsorb that which the Marques had taken too much of, the freedom of his people and the metals from the earth’s mountains. And in the beliefs of the Marques, God punished the sinners that disturbed that which he declared good. The Marques charged himself to do God’s work, which, in part, meant protecting the sacred sexual paradigm that was solely between man and woman.

Though neither was entirely bad nor entirely good, I believe, responding to the views that nestled in their flesh, their meeting was a grand clash to say the least.

Without a minute more, the Marques pushed off the brick wall into Atl's direction and Atl resumed his limp feigning a frightened old maid dashing through the crowd toward the forest.

CHAPTER FOURTY

Beforelife

*Why do we speak of afterlife
without asking about the before?
You send us babies who echo of joy,*

*of Your laughter-soaked world.
We rejoice in their smile and the warmth
of their glowing skin.*

*The ridges of my cheek bones rise,
my high pitched cackle, fills me.*

*I carry forth my skull of laughter.
A torch for you, Life Giver.
In spite of Mictlantecuhtli,
God of the dead,*

*We pour word and breath
of thanks, and wink at
the fleeting blossoms,
who know of the before.*

With the commitment Xochitl showed by remaining at the prison for Atl I'd have thought the tea given her by Grandmother of the Baths failed to clear her doorway for new love had what happened next not occurred.

After depositing the clean sheets and one feminine disguise into the prison cells, the girl with the appetite for love went to the tiny laundry room to change. With flashes of Atl's face and the sound of his laugh circling in her mind she flung off her work tunic. She stood naked shrouded by shelves bulging with sheets and rags. Brooms, brushes, and wooden buckets lined the floor. She closed her eyes a moment to feel his silky blue eyes stroke the curves of her body like smoke.

She unfolded a new beige outfit she'd saved for a special occasion. It was a long skirt and hiplength huipil threaded with a teal stripe around the hem of the skirt and one across the chest. She brushed her hair and wore it long and loose except for a blue ribbon weaved through a braid over her head from ear to ear. She stepped into a worn pair of sandals that hugged the contours of only her feet and kicked her soiled tunic into a pile of dirty rags.

Once she entered the plaza she felt the energy of the fiesta mount her spine. Burning wood, flowers, music, and cooking meat filled her senses. People drinking loosened their leash on their children. They waited for the comedia to be performed on lily-adorned cathedral steps while their children ran wild with stray dogs around bonfires behind them.

Xochitl lingered at the corner of the church for a minute as the play began. She watched as a man in rich golden clothing pretended to pick the pineapple in his hand from an imaginary tree. He laid it on a table and cut it in half. He squeezed some of its juice into a cup. Just then another richly dressed man wandered by and seeing what the man in gold was doing walked up to him and slapped him across the face.

“Sir, what do you have? Nobody works in the land of milk and honey!”

The working man tripped forward, stumbling down the steps. Once on the ground, he adopted a great smile and bowed to a female member of the audience. He then offered the pineapple juice to her. Without delay, the other traipsed after him and gave him a second beating, this time with a whip procured from behind his back.

The crowd spilled with laughter.

“In the land of Juaja there is no need for work!” he yelled dramatically.

Xochitl knew the play was directed toward the elite Spanish who came to Mexico to live in splendor, but she was in good spirits herself. She gave herself permission to laugh and be a

part of this New World, which was new to her for her new liberation in it. She tingled with possibility. She could do as she pleased, go without concocting excuses for lengthened absences between laundering. She could disappear and nobody would hunt her down as their own property. She chuckled at the silly actors because she so wanted to be in good humor and join the light hearts laughing around her.

As she absorbed the theater her fingers felt the soft petals of immaculate lilies bursting from bouquets in clay vases. She felt the small yellow lily stamens that she saw when she looked closer were abundant with pollen. She rubbed her fingers together to feel the texture and bent down to smell the flower. It's sweetness intoxicated her and she touched her neck and arms with its perfume. She thought of Atl's kind eyes and shiny black hair and was filled with ecstasy at the thought of him picking up the scent on her skin.

The audience broke into laughter again and she giggled too. She decided to continue on her way, checking her image in the awed gawks of a firelit group of mixed-race men as she left the plaza behind her. She turned down the street in which she knew sat the house of Martín.

She went for three reasons. First, she wanted to thank him for protecting her from his cellmates. Second, she wanted to tell him what she'd heard in the Marques' cell. And third, she was going to seduce him.

Martín answered the door. He had been sleeping and was dazed when he saw the large brown eyes looking back at him.

"B-buenas noches," Xochitl said not expecting the sudden wave of nerves to impair her tongue.

He tried to identify the woman who stood before him.

“It is I, Xochitl, fr--,” nor did she expect the flood of shame in her cheeks when she reminded him, “from the prison.”

Martín pictured her in one of the prison tunics that would blend its hems into the color of her café skin. Once he saw her, the Xochitl he had saved, he became aware that she was extremely attractive.

“I didn’t recognize you. I’m sorry,” he said, “--I mean you look different.”

He felt the warmth in his ears for possibly offending her and asked her in. She thanked him and passed inside. She sat in the chair next to the one he sat himself in and faced him.

“Thank you for what you did,” she said, not wasting time, “That man was going to die. I saw the look in his eyes--madness.”

“Yes, correct, madness,” he said. “It was nothing.”

Xochitl noticed the swollen skin around Martín’s eyes.

“You suffered much damage for me.”

Without thinking she reached up and touched lightly. When he winced she uttered a stuttered apology. But, feeling every bit the hero he was to her, he’d have to be for her to beautify herself and personally seek him out, Martín felt the desire to continue to help her. He stood up and offered her a drink. She accepted, seeing now that her nerves had undone her.

This area of Martín and Xochitl was about as awkward as a man and woman could get. They were hesitant and overly courteous. But such is the encounter of two that appear alike on the outside, yet because of their very different upbringings exude an alluring exoticism capable of piquing the curiosity of each.

Xochitl sipped her wine and gave him a quick picture of the fiesta she’d passed in the plaza.

“--written by Lope de Rueda,” she chuckled.

“¿La Tierra de Jauja?” Martín laughed because it felt good to hear about nonsense that allowed children to play and adults to laugh.

Xochitl was shocked by the similarity of his laugh to Atl’s. She looked at him fully expecting the blue eyes.

“You’re so much alike,” she said feeling the warmth of the wine.

“With who?” he asked tentatively.

“Atl.”

Now, Martín gave a big laugh. The thought of his brother inundated him with a joy he couldn’t contain.

“Ah, my ozomahtli?” he smiled leaning back.

Xochitl laughed a laugh that made him feel as much at ease as when he heard his brother’s. She told him about Atl’s bravery as a warrior and his powerful influence on the people who fought for the land. She’d known him her whole life. She was only twenty years old or somewhere around there, she wasn’t sure, she giggled.

Martín too felt the wine and he enjoyed the company of this beautiful creature next to him. But he reminded himself to retain his senses for the sake of the very man of which they spoke.

“Those men without hands?” Martín asked without knowing what it was he was asking.

Xochitl, who was about to sip her wine, lowered her cup and looked inside.

Martín felt guilty for having robbed her of her smile.

“The world we’ve inherited,” she said withholding her eyes.

“I understand now,” he said.

He pulled down the collar of his shirt unashamed of his scars, which he knew she'd already seen in the prison.

"What?" she asked, unalarmed at the sight of his neck. She waited as he reached inside his shirt.

He pulled out the necklace he'd pieced back together and took it off his head.

"I didn't understand, but I do now, or I'm trying to," he moved the beads and feather between his fingers like praying on a rosary. "My mother, two-bloods, cenquizqui."

Xochitl smiled feeling that she'd won a voice for her, for everyone--one that could reach the King, like the voice of Bartolomé de Las Casas. It mattered even though she was already free. She felt the smoke had yet to clear and one never knew what one would find when it did.

She listened while she consumed him with her eyes. His own dark eyes, darker than tamarind and matching the color of his lashes, were set against the reddened whites of his eyes, made efforts to widen against his swollen lids as he expressed the unfolding of events since arriving in Mexico. He raised his hand in frustration for having forfeited his mother for a false one who always shuffled him into the shadow of his younger brother. He gripped his hair when he spoke about prison and the handless men and his brother who was too smart and good to be in there, to spend his life fighting when he had a knack for poetry and who knew what other talents. His nightmares. And then Judge Bonifacio ordered him to a beheading. And then he'd finally understood the drain through which he'd poured so much of his energy resisting himself and attempting to belong. And men were losing their hands--yes, he'd seen more than his share of war and bloodshed, but he'd never thought into the minds and seen what the ones who had lost had truly lost--for a life that was once theirs, now compromised, taken away.

Xochitl allowed him to talk until he wanted to stop. When she'd given him that necklace she'd wanted him to lend them his power. She hadn't imagined what conflicts and changes might occur as a result of it. Neither had I anticipated, as I mentioned long ago, the seed that lies within us capable of change. The seed that can grow unimaginable reaches of varying perceptions and sympathies. Martín dropped his head and gripped the necklace in his hands and squeezed them so hard one of the beads fell to the floor and then he let the whole thing fall.

Xochitl sat her cup down on the wooden table next to her. She got up, picked up the beads he'd dropped, and set them next to her cup of wine. She stood before him and stroked the hair on his bowed head. She took the cup from his hand and set that on the table too.

Martín looked up in increments. She touched the back of his neck and brushed her fingers around the front lightly. She watched him close his eyes.

She wanted to mention the next topic she had planned to speak on, but she couldn't bring herself to interrupt.

She licked her lips and lowered her face. She felt his breath cool her lower lip. Xochitl pushed herself toward him and they exchanged cycloptic looks. Along her back she felt the scratching of his rough hands and the scabbing that hadn't yet fallen away.

"How beautiful. How beautiful you are Xochitl," he said, sliding his hands under her huipil and wandering the new land of her body.

He caressed her curves never thinking he would be with a woman like her, like himself. Her kiss felt like wet petals blooming in his mouth, but it wasn't just the surface of her he felt. He saw her bravery, her willingness to help her people, and the endurance in her that took her past the horrible things she'd undergone in the prison to the beauty that showed in her

appearance: the steady confidence in her eyes, her carefully fixed hair, and the joy in her laugh that spoke of wells of life surviving within her.

For an instant, he saw himself too, like catching a glimpse of himself in a mirror without realizing it. There were things about himself he liked but had suppressed, his laugh being one of them. His brother Atl had helped him unlock that. And the sun. He liked the feel of the sun on his body. He would enjoy its warmth on his skin from now on. He imagined himself living in the canyon with others who walked in the sun. He would no longer envy them nor try to fill a mold he could never fill. He would learn from the ways of his brother and his people and restore himself completely. The excitement of his new life prickled him and he ignored his bruises to pull Xochitl on top of him.

Xochitl was drawn to his deep voice that broke into that familiar husky laugh with the high-toned fringes. She undid the buttons of his shirt. She was impressed by the changes in him of which he spoke and which she'd gathered on her own from the time he was arrested to the present moment. He had been hesitant at first, clinging to the life he knew. But, no one else had ever risked himself to protect her from the forces of men. She felt his pocked scars and kissed his neck. She felt the power of his character beneath her fingers on his chest. She knew that deep within this flesh ran the same blood that coursed through Atl. She sucked on his neck and made him groan until he lifted her skirt and grabbed her buttocks into the palms of his hands.

“Cenquizqui,” she whispered in his ear. “Martín cenquizqui.”

CHAPTER FOURTY ONE

I Go With Calm

*Lily and marigold, in your perfume we rejoice. Our heads spin.
As in a different realm.*

*You seduce our senses and make more bearable this life.
As fire in the cold night, by your scent we sit.*

*Only for a brief moment may you seduce.
We follow your fragrance to our graves.*

*Life Giver is generous, oh your sympathy moves me!
I go with calm.*

Maria waited in the cenote with the skulls. Nobody came for a very long time. And when someone did come it wasn't who she'd expected.

Xochitl had slid down the rock through the hidden opening to the cave. She waited until she could see the water before she called Maria's name.

"What happened?" Maria asked.

Xochitl threw her weight against her, "Maria!"

"What, Xochitl?" she demanded, "What has passed?"

It was almost completely dark except for some slivers of light entering from the hole Xochitl had come through. Maria couldn't see her so she felt her face and felt something wet there. Its texture was too thick to be sweat or tears so she knew something awful had passed.

Maria had brought a lantern but hadn't yet lit it. This seemed like a good time. She struck the rock wall several times until her candle caught a spark.

"Are you hurt?" Maria asked when she saw the blood.

Xochitl was shaking and her stutter was starting up, “No, no. Not me.”

She pushed herself onto her own feet and took longer breaths. Maria could tell she was attempting to explain the event.

The high pitch of Xochitl’s voice, the inflections caused by her disturbed nerves, and the exact letters which she stuttered upon in the words she spoke next, Maria would never forget.

CHAPTER FOURTY TWO

What happened while I waited for Atl in the cenote was this.

“Martín, I heard the Marques and the Judge speak.”

Martín stroked the line of soft hairs that ran down from Xochitl’s belly button. They lay in his bed listening to the fireworks. Xochitl stared up at the wooden beams crossing the ceiling. Atl may have escaped by now. He would be safe in the cenote soon, she thought, considering that he would choose the firework show as further disguise.

“When was this?” he asked sitting up on an elbow.

“Just before you were released.”

“And?”

“He tried to coax Bonifacio into killing Atl. But he said that the King wants Atl alive. He’s sparing him to record the poetry and history of Mexico.”

Martín sat up, “They don’t mean to kill him?”

“No,” she answered. “But, he was enraged. He swears he will kill him if they don’t.”

He stepped out of his bed and dressed himself in his shirt and trousers. His brother had always found ways to provoke him. But this time he wanted to face him and tell him he’d made his last threat. He wanted to show him that he no longer had power over him.

“Where are you going?”

“To find the Marques. I haven’t seen him since we were released.”

“Atl knows where to hide. In the forest. It’s safe,” Xochitl said.

He didn't know what state the Marques' mind was in, but he knew he wouldn't break the law to kill a man like he'd said.

"I'm not worried about Atl. I'm going to go and have my say with the Marques."

Xochitl kicked off the sheets and jumped into her skirt, "I'm going with you."

The new lovers roamed the plaza. They followed the leads they were given and found his brother at La Taberna de Quinto Vino, which was more brothel than bar. Xochitl watched from the doorway. The Marques was seated with a woman of sandy brown hair whose bust bulged at the top of her dress. She looked at Martín with an interested raised eyebrow and tendrils framing her face.

"Ah it's my big brother." The Marques looked at the chair beside him, "Remain a minute if you please."

Martín followed his eyes to the chair and obeyed. He wasn't quite ready to speak and he no longer heard threatening undertones in his brother's commands. The Marques told the woman to bring him a drink. Martín looked around the room and saw more women than men. They circulated with earthen pitchers and cups, laying their hands on their customers' shoulders and arms, allowing their eyes to wander their busts and flowing hair. La Taberna was little more than a room filled with wooden tables, a torch, and a few lanterns to keep it from sinking completely into the dark.

"This will be our last night Martín. I will be glad to board a ship for once. This is a country where many an unpleasant memory was made. Am I right in saying your tortured eyes are testimony of your own?" the Marques pointed his cup at Martín's swollen flesh.

Martín studied his brother's demeanor. He'd never seen him drink. He was always well in control. His hair was disheveled, he wore a fresh scratch on his face, and the bottom half of

his mouth was puffed. Martín wasn't sure whether he was intoxicated or just disturbed. The woman returned with Martín's wine and he thanked her. He took a sip.

“And what unpleasant memory is this?” Martín asked gesturing to the Marques' scratch.

“Come to thrust your brute force again have you?” The Marques said. “You can't simply enjoy a cup of wine with your brother.”

“Alright, Martín. I agree, many hardships have passed here. The grandest being the departure of Marquesa Venera into the hands of God,” Martín made the sign of the cross and kissed his thumb.

The Marques shot him an accusing look that said he dared speak her name with him. “A great loss indeed, Martín. At least I won't have to wonder anymore into what bed my wife has slipped. She was beautiful. But women don't care about men. They only take.”

“She died giving you your sons--”

“Basta. She was nothing more than a pretty whore. You of all people know. You are no different. But God will forgive her. I wish I could say the same for you. She was only a woman confused by a man.”

Martín resisted his urge to defend Venera's memory. He didn't want to fulfill the role of the brute the Marques spoke of. The brothers went quiet. The waitress felt the wrinkle and attempted to smoothen it. She covered the Marques' ear and whispered to him rubbing his arm. The Marques nudged her off. But when rebuffed she didn't take offense. She shrugged and gave his arm a squeeze saying she would return.

The Marques stroked his mustache.

Martín shook his head, “Think of me as you wish.”

“You come in here with a love mark on your disgusting neck. And you talk of my wife and kiss your thumb. You will never change Martín, never,” the Marques said.

“Now, before you shackle me with your words, hear mine.”

The Marques drank his wine and looked out the door. He squinted at the shadow of a woman leaning on a pillar watching him.

“All my life I’ve listened to you taunt me about things I have no power to change. I know you were the reason I was arrested. You were the reason I was sentenced to die--”

Martín stopped when he looked down at his brother’s sword. He saw the sheen dulled with blood. “What’s this?”

The Marques stared at him. His mustache twitched.

“What have you done?”

A grin showed at the corner of the Marques’ lips for a second and then it disappeared. He bent down and lifted a folded dress from the ground, “I found this in the jungle.”

Xochitl looked in horror as the Marques shook out the dress Maria had made.

“He was a puto.”

Martín saw blood on the dress. He lowered his face and peered at the floor through swollen lids. Then he raised his eyes looking over the Marques, wondering how this man were raised in the same manner as he. He was created differently from birth with a heart of mandates and with stipulations that flowed in place of blood. Martín didn’t feel anger burn his ears. He didn’t feel like a bull scraping the dirt. He felt a heavy ball dropped down his stomach. He hesitated to speak.

Xochitl saw Martín’s inactivity and wanted to jolt inside to see what was happening, but she thought it better to wait.

The Marques went on to wave the red cape, “You won’t see him again. New Spain--no, the world, is better for it. Thank me for purifying God’s great earth.”

Martín clenched his jaw. He forced himself to ask, “Where is he?”

“God knows, brother. Only God knows. But I can tell you this, my beloved Venera has nothing to fear. Not that he would bother her even if he did manage to get to heaven.”

Martín’s hand rested on his sword. He needed something firm to latch onto if he was going to comprehend this impossible news.

The Marques interpreted this gesture differently; he gripped his hilt, “It’s a fight you want Martín?”

“I didn’t come to wave my sword at you. You’re a liar and you’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk Martín and I’m not lying.” The Marques unsheathed his sword. Blood stuck all the way to its tip. “There, you see? This blood is as true as that fool was rare and unholy. He was an infidel, a convict, a nuisance for New Spain. He escaped prison but he didn’t get far. As long as he is found dead, nobody will miss him,” he said with a venomous flick of his tongue.

He could say what he liked. What moved Martín to take up his sword next had nothing to do with his brother’s words for once and everything to do with his actions.

Martín moved toward the Marques knocking over his chair, “You will pay for his life with your own!”

The Marques pointed his sword at his brother.

Patrons at the table in their path leapt off their chairs.

The table groaned across the floor, a candle on it fell in a puddle of its wax. Xochitl rushed to the doorway. She glanced at her sides but couldn't think of a way to help. She thought about me waiting in the cenote.

Martín was the better swordsman. He'd known it since they were boys practicing in the plaza of their palace. He could have taken him then, all those years ago and have avoided the death of Atl, the death of Venera. But he was but a child. They were both children with time yet to improve. How was he to know his brother would remain the same the rest of his life?

The bite of Martín's sword sunk into the Marques' side quietly. His back slid down the wall of La Taberna. The Marques dropped his sword. It clinked when it hit the tiled floor.

Xochitl ran inside now. She ran toward the darkened wall tucked into the back of La Taberna. There she beheld the scene which seemed fixed in time. Martín was unmoving. He stared at his brother's crumpled body. Xochitl broke the spell when she grabbed Martín's face in her hands.

"Martín? Martín? Look at me," she said.

A few customers kneeled around the Marques while the others watched in mutters as to what they'd witnessed.

Xochitl looked at the doorway. "Run with me Martín, run!" Xochitl pried the bloody sword from Martín's fingers and tossed it to the ground.

He looked at her, "He murdered Atl. Martín had to die..."

She felt as though she'd been hit with a sword herself. How would she live without Atl? She couldn't imagine. She heard the memory of his laugh ring in her ears. She saw his blue eyes sparkle. Then she looked at Martín and swore she would not lose him too.

She pulled his arm, "Come!"

He responded by moving his feet and running with her to the door.

CHAPTER FOURTY THREE

That night, when the events had finally settled and everyone went home, I lay in bed next to my husband. He was asleep. I could feel the vibrations of his heavy snore. There was no place I wouldn't have preferred to be. I sat up and went to my kitchen as I was apt to do when I couldn't sleep. I lit a candle and set it on the wooden table. I made a quick fire and poured water into a pot. I made myself a cup of Grandmother of the Bath's tea. I watched the mixture of leaves float between the hot water and steam in my cup. I let the steam rise. My eyes looked over the steam and wandered my shelves of herbs above the hearth.

He didn't know him, I thought. The Marques didn't know the magnificent spirit encased in the body that was Atl. I was trying to place meaning on the meaningless. I can be very thoughtful when death and I cross paths. In its close proximity I trace the life of the deceased from the end all the way back to the moment of conception, like following the leaves at the ends of the tree branches down to the trunk and the seed from which it sprang.

I sipped my tea and let its warmth soothe me from the ache of the expanding chasm within me.

There was no randomness. There couldn't be. There had to be meaning. I felt the tea working, or so it seemed, my mind was clearing. Atl had been killed so that people would look. He had to have been a leader and a famous poet so that there would be something worthwhile for everyone, even the king of Spain, to look at. He had to have lived a life of mixed ancestry so that Bartolomé de Las Casas and the king and the other onlookers would see themselves in him. He had to be fatherless so that, as a child, he would carve his own way, go to the trees and the

animals in the forest for consolation, which in turn would make him protective of the land, and make him sing his poetry, and so on.

A knock at the kitchen door interrupted my mapping of Atl's life. I answered it sure of who it would be.

It was Cielo, the man with the green eyes, son of the coriander, Grandmother of the Baths. He looked handsome as he always did to me with his black hair framing his face down to his shoulders and a small brown feather tied on one side. There were spiral shells filling the piercings on each of his earlobes. He wore a white mantle on his shoulders and dark trousers.

He smiled and embraced me when I opened the door.

His eyes roamed my face and he traced the marks from my tears. "Otichocaca," he said.

"Yes, my brother Atl, my brother Martín--" I responded in Nahuatl. My voice broke and I was unable to speak so he held me there in the doorway.

Cielo was the one I talked to, the one who looked into my eyes with compassion, and made honest assessments about the things I said. He was the one I made love to. I wanted him to plant his seed in me, but knowing that I no longer laid with my husband I knew Luis would find out. Nights and stolen hours in the cenote or when Luis was away were the moments we had.

"Come," he said, tugging me outside.

Maria was afraid. Was there not the lingering remnant of bad spirits still to avoid out there? But, the emerald sheen of Cielo's eyes charmed her and she followed. Whatever plans he had it was sure to make her feel better. He took her hand and pulled her to a spot in the forest he had prepared. It was a simple bed of leaves under a tree. He removed his mantle and laid it flat over the leaves. The air wasn't cold, but it was cooler and refreshing after the heat of the day.

They lay on their backs next to each other. He cushioned the back of her head on his arm. He'd come that night already knowing the facts, but he coaxed her into talking to him.

She felt safe with him and eased herself into remembering the fateful day of San Pedro de Arbúes. She told him that Xochitl was lucky to break free when Martín was apprehended by the soldiers. She came straight to the cenote not knowing where else to go. Her words echoed in Maria's mind, "The M-marques slaid Atl. Martín s-slaid the Marques. And the new viceroy has ordered swift beheading of Martín to be c-carried out--tonight!"

The viceroy had initially sought to protect the Cortés brothers, but seeing the trouble they were causing he decided to finish off what they had started as soon as possible.

Cielo stroked Maria's hair and sang her a song. It was one his mother had taught him he said. With the backdrop of crooning frogs it transported Maria to a place of fantasy and possibility. She imagined sleeping beneath trees and stars every night with Cielo humming her to sleep.

When he finished he turned his head and looked at her, "Martín was going to run away to the canyon."

"Yes..." Maria waited.

"Don't you think he would want you to go in his place?"

"Go to the mountains and the canyon?" she felt unsteady because she knew what he was getting at.

"You want to be free, Maria. Martín wanted to be free. Don't go to the canyon then, live with me, study prayer and medicine with my mother. Come."

Maria looked away from her green-eyed Cielo and back up at the white star-filled one. His words provoked her. She felt how good it would be to do as he said.

“Vasco,” she whispered.

“Bring him,” he pleaded. “I can’t live without you anymore.”

Maria envisioned her life with he and Vasco. She struggled to find the flaws except that in the small town everyone who knew her husband would turn his back on her.

He leaned over her and kissed her face down to her neck. He detailed the way it would be, the comfortable house they would live in with Vasco and the other children they could have. He emphasized the healing power she had and that needed nurturing. His mother was the best healer of their time. She had told him she’d felt the ability in her when they’d met in the cenote.

Come, it was her destiny.

Maria said that she was scared. Women didn’t just leave their husbands. It wasn’t the way things were. How would she keep Vasco? But she said that she wanted to go, of course she wanted to.

Maria moaned with the frogs when he went under her skirt and touched her. He fit his fingers inside her and kissed her belly.

“Don’t think that just because you seduce me means I’m going to do what you say,” she said retaining her authority.

“Nitlamati,” he said blowing on her abdomen.

She dropped her bent knees to her sides and felt his hair with the feather tied to it tickle her stomach. She wrapped her hand around the strong arm that supported his weight. He was good to her. He loved her. She pulled his face to hers and opened his mouth with her tongue. She surrendered her thoughts to him saying she wanted to leave her old life behind the way Atl had and the way Martín had wanted to. She wanted to learn the ways of la curandera. She wanted to

start over, forget the pain of the deaths, and live a new life with him at her side. She just didn't know if she had it in her to actually do it.

That same night after Cielo brought me back to life in the forest, and I slipped back into my house, I would have gone straight back to my bed and slid back underneath my sheets had my husband not already been waiting for me in the kitchen, stirring the half drunk cup of tea I had left behind.

"This is some marvelous brew you have here Maria. A little bitter, but what isn't right?"

"I went for a walk," I said passing him for the hallway. "I'm going to sleep now."

He gripped my wrist with force.

"What do you do on your walks? You a witch?" he accused.

I told him we'd discuss it in the morning and he struck me hard in my cheek where only recently I had been kissed tenderly.

"I'll not sleep with a philanderer or a witch or whatever you are."

I wrenched my arm from him and attempted to leave, but he grabbed the front of my night dress and pulled it down snapping the buttons off. He inspected my bare body a moment and then picked up my cup of tea and swung it across my face. I fell to the floor with the tea dripping down my forehead. He pulled my hair back and hit me again.

"This is what happens to wanderers of the night! ¡Put a! Don't cry, brujita. Use some of your curitas and *then* we'll talk in the morning," he pushed me flat on the ground and left me.

Luis had never thrown these names at me. He'd lashed out at me before, but now I'd given him more solid reason, which I knew to be founded in the wrong end of his code of moral conduct. I lay on my kitchen tile for the rest of that night pondering how I would leave.

Chapter 44

They had traveled for several months to various villages of Mexico. They went through the canyon in the north. Mazaconetl and Maria hiked through unmarked paths that only Grandmother of the Baths could navigate. They dodged vines and branches that swung back at them after Grandmother took her steps forward. They carried baskets and filled them with whatever growing things of nature she told them to collect: wormseed, guaco, palo verde, lemon grass, flor de tilo, and others. Grandmother was in high demand around the country and she liked to make the tours to help people.

Maria relished the chance to see the new places and Cielo always kept their horses and camp or guest room warm and clean for them while they were out. Maria had already absorbed so many of the teachings of Grandmother of the Baths. Every time she thanked her for passing her knowledge on she said it was nothing, it was just the cycle of things. She was getting old she would say and it was good that a younger woman wanted to learn. Her eyes were getting bad and she liked having Maria's extra ones closeby.

While they were there Maria thought they ventured in as deep as they could go in the canyon until she saw tiny figures of people wandering as far as she could see. Often she would stop on a cliff with Cielo standing behind her with his hands on her shoulders to oversee the green valley with all its plateaus, rivers, caves, and waterfalls. She had never felt so tall in her life. She said prayers to Martín feeling that he would hear her and hoping that he was smiling knowing that she'd made it to the canyon.

Some of the people who lived in this place, while waiting to be treated by Grandmother, would tell old stories of Atl when they had run with the Chichimecas of his rebellion. They

made Cielo laugh and brought happy tears to Maria's eyes. And when they got the chance of free time, Cielo and Maria would take a day to themselves. They would laugh and bathe and make love in the water spent from the waterfall. She had never felt so alive as she did immersed in the mist from those falls.

I can say without difficulty in the walls of this convent and without a drop of Grandmother's mind-clearing tea, that those months of touring Mexico were the happiest moments of my life. Today they seem so long ago that they feel like they were in a dream. But, this only sweetens the memory and fixes it into a realm of fantasy that I relish to think I was fortunate enough to be a part of.

When we finished our tour and I had become Grandmother of the Baths' most trusted apprentice (Mazaconetl stayed in the canyon after meeting a handsome young man) we returned to Mexico City. Leaving had been easier than I'd imagined it would be and going back seemed it would be just as easy. I had tasted the freedom I'd always craved to live the life of my destiny, as Cielo put it. I was untouchable. But when I heard the chime of the cathedral bells of home city I felt a knotting gum poured over with a gritty sand churn in my stomach.

"Let's wait for Grandmother in Tepoztlán," I begged. I pictured the pockets of land shaded by zapote trees speckled with their sweet green and orange fruit.

But Cielo, confident, told me we wouldn't be long and sang a song to calm my fears.

Chapter 45

A sorrow filled me for having abandoned my child. But, I told myself I wouldn't go into town nor see Luis nor my son. I went to the only place that could comfort me. I hid in the cenote. When the three of us went inside we noticed something was different. The blue water was still just as blue and the small gray fish still swam just as I expected they would. But there were no gold offerings lying at the bottom. Grandmother of the Baths said this was no longer a safe place. Greed had visited and tainted this holy church, she'd said. Being the nomadic soul that she was it was just as easy for her to rise back out of that cenote and find another dwelling. But for me it was not so easy.

Although I'd been overjoyed on our trip I was exhausted. I chose to remain in there for a few days, the closest thing to a place I could call my own. I spoke with Cielo about it. He said we could go to another town where we could find a house to make a home. The nomad didn't live in me like it did Grandmother. And I missed the stationary feeling of waking in the same bed every day. I thought about Luis and Vasco. What had they been doing since I'd left? I missed Vasco terribly. I can't say that I missed my husband with Cielo filling his place, but I did consider that a vanished wife would not only damage his pride and heart, but also his reputation.

I was waiting for Cielo to return on the day we were to set out again when some unexpected visitors dropped into the cave.

I went far enough down one of the passageways to think that they would never know I was there. The men would stay by the lake and when they'd found their gold they'd leave. They didn't. They'd kissed every piece of gold they could find and were lusting for more. When they

found me they dragged me out and back to the city. They put me in a jail cell until they could discover who I was and what to do with me.

Luis came. He told the guard to open the gate and stepped inside. He came up to me. He held my hands that were now rough from the digging and plant hunting I'd done and he cried. I told him nothing. He blamed himself for my disappearance. He pulled his shirt off and showed me the lacerations he'd done to himself everyday to punish himself and to persuade God to bring us back to him where he would be a better man. The grooves in his back were so deep and numerous that they horrified me and they convinced me of his remorse. I expected that my leaving would hurt him, but I'd thought he'd move on and find another woman, someone younger, more obedient. But seeing how wrong I was I was riddled with guilt for my own selfishness.

It was the subtlest of alterations that let me know I had been away longer than I'd guessed. Not in measurements of time but in moments measured by other means. Rapid spurts of growth run by their own clock showed themselves to me. My potted plants crowded the window sill and reached out wildly toward the sun shining through to the kitchen. And my soul cried to see that Vasco had changed in my absence. Another layer of his childhood had peeled away. He was not only taller, but his nose was slightly more prominent like his father's, the skin on his face more taut, and the shape of his eyes less round and wondering. Did he hate me for leaving? I held my arms out and he walked into them timidly. When I asked in Nahuatl what adventures he'd had with Etl and Tochin he responded absently in Spanish that they were carving wooden swords.

And every morning I awoke to the healing strips of skin and the scarring ones on Luis' back. They were a constant reminder of what I'd done. I could no longer live with myself. I

knew I'd never been the perfect wife he'd wanted but I never wanted to cause him this pain. I couldn't bring myself to meet Cielo and I spent nights crying at the kitchen table while his light taps on the door faded away. I was ashamed next to everyone and remained in my house. I felt desperate to confess. So without the courage to find Grandmother of the Baths, I sought a priest.

After several meetings I explained to he and Luis that I was not only an unfit wife but a bad mother and would commit myself to this convent home in repentance.

And here I sit.

EPILOGUE

Prophecy of Seeds

Son. Daughter.

*You don't know me. Perhaps,
you live in a place which
I have never heard.*

*Over pecan orchards,
seaweed scented air, and dusty rose skies.
Many days away. Twenty
to thirty generations out...*

*But I know
your dimples, the wave of your hair,
slick, black lashes or are they now red, even white?*

*If so, I will search deeper, for your manner the same as mine, that which lives
beneath the skin.*

*I will see how you lay your hands on the land,
the way honey coats the valleys of the tongue,
sweetening, conjuring: xochitl, xochitl,
come out! Your daughter with her bubbling laugh,
to be kissed by you, for me, and to repronounce her name, Flor.*

It has been seven years since my convent has permitted me to settle in. The life is a recycled series of routine. But such predictable patterns free me of surprise and thus my mind from the distractions of foul premonitions and preemptive planning. Here I am not on edge.

There is of course the loss of the excitement that my life once had. I think about the emotions that once passed through me: the nerves upon meeting Martín for the first time; the thrill of Cielo's visits and the saucy pleasure of keeping him a secret; my determination and scheming to free Atl; my eagerness to venture into the forest; and my joy connecting with Grandmother of the Baths.

But I have my small joys now to look forward to. I can sit at my writing desk and scribble as I wish, as I do now. I can see weekly visitors, whom I wait for now. And I can till the garden as I please, as the soil beneath my nails shows I've done. Las sorores see my plant practices as a mere hobby and do not object to what I bring back with me to my room. And, as of yet, nobody has discovered the scroll I've unrolled and placed under my mattress. It was something Luis had shown me upon my return. And before I'd come to the convent I'd taken it off his study desk and brought it to stay with me here, the last will and testament of Hernán Cortés.

Xochitl and the children were waiting for me at the visiting parlor. I greeted them from my side. I touched Xochitl's hands through the grille that separated me from the outside world.

Vasco, who was now taller than myself with growing brown hairs on his chin, slid rolled up parchment paper through the grill.

"The twins made it for you," he smiled with his voice that wavered from boy and manhood.

It was a drawing of Xochitl's twin boy and girl holding hands with Vasco around a tree. Below each figure they'd scrawled their names: Vasco, Atl, and Martín. Under the tree they'd written "Tía."

"Cualneci!" I gasped, because it really was beautiful. They had used pollen and plants from nature to color it and provide it with texture. "I will show it to everyone in the convent."

The twins smiled and I told them not to move. I ran to the desk behind me. I brought back two small boxes and gave one to each child. Little Martín opened his and peeled into the monkey laughter that I never tired of hearing when he saw a motionless, yet large and vibrantly

colored blue butterfly. Atl opened her box and peered inside. She saw a quetzal feather. She quietly reached in her small fingers to stroke it.

“And for you mijo, smart and growing boy,” I slid a leaf wrapped present through a lower slot that was larger than the other squares in the grille.

“Yetic...what is it?” he asked weighing the gift in his hands.

“Nimitzmaca amoxtli. Something to read.”

I looked at Xochitl who smiled at me. She told me many things just by saying my name, “Maria.”

“You’ll read it won’t you, mijo?” Xochitl nudged him.

Vasco rubbed the leather cover and opened it to its first page. He rubbed his thumb on the corner of a drawing I’d sketched--a map of the earth inside of a heart.

Martín closed his butterfly box and stood on his toes to look at the book. Atl pranced after her him tickling her nose with her feather.

Vasco nodded his head, “It’s about the world inside us, isn’t it Mamá?”

“The world inside our heart,” Martín and Atl echoed, touching their dimpled hands to their chests.

Because we had taught them that they are not criollo or mullato or mestizo or castizo or any other ruling determined by the drops in their blood. We explained that they are a new people growing the whole world inside of them. They are made up of all their different ancestors from around the earth who continue to live inside of them, joining all their hands together to open up their hearts wide for all there is to learn and for all who require their compassion. They are Mexican because of the name of their birth country and their birth country’s ancestors and much more and cenquizqui.