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Chacuaco

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On the last night Papa was alive, his soft voice fell over me like an extra blanket on top of my quilts. He sat on the edge of my bed telling made-up stories and true things, too. I pinched myself under the covers to stay awake. I'd heard this stuff he talked about lots of nights, but I wanted to enjoy being the only one still awake, out of all my sisters. To stretch out the time the warm-blanket voice was just for me.

He told about a band of wild horses with clouds in their veins, instead of blood, led by La Yegua, the marvelous mare. About the mountain called Blanca where La Yegua lives. He reminded me Blanca is important to everyone here, because of its beauty and power. Like I could forget the enormous mountain north of town.

He told me our family was part of a special group. The Spanish of San Luis Valley.

"We were here hundreds of years before Anglos surrounded us and said we belonged to Colorado, their brand-new state. The border crossed us! Remember that. We didn't cross the border! Even after Anglos moved into el valle, stealing and tricking so many of us out of land and money, we're still here. And we're still Spanish!" He laughed to himself.

Then he made a fist in front of his face, still smiling. "We held on! We held on to so many good parts of our cultura!"

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"Oh, Piñonita! What a little philosopher!" Papa tickled my sides under the blankets. I giggled into my pillow, even though I hated being called a little pine nut.

"I was hoping you'd ask if I'd ever seen La Yegua come out of Mt. Blanca."

"You haven't," I said. "You've only heard her marvelous hooves. They're like thunder coming up straight out of the ground."

"That's right, Piñonita," he said. "The whole ground shakes cuando viene La Yegua."

"But you want to see her because they say you see all the colors of the rainbow shimmering on her beautiful hide, and when you see those colors, you're actually seeing everything, all of existence, together in those colors."

"Yes, eso, that's it. And I know I'll see her one day. One day." He smoothed his hand over my hair and smiled.

Mama stuck her head in the door. She looked at my older sisters, asleep in their bunk beds. The one on top snored softly. She walked to the crib and rubbed my sleeping baby sister's back. She patted Papa's shoulder with her other hand. My bed was squished right between the crib and the bunks.

"Let Josette get some rest, mi amor," she said to him.

She made a kissy noise at me. I made one back. Then she left to check the boys' room.

"Well," said Papa, "guess it's time to tuck you into your shell."

I stretched out flat as a mummy. Papa poked the blankets under me from my shoulders to my toes. I sighed a happy sigh and closed my eyes.

For a few hours the next morning, the time between when Papa shot a deer off a lonely road high up in the Sierra Madre, and when an Anglo with a badge from the Forest Service stopped his truck on the way back down, we were a family with enough meat to last the winter. A family that would be celebrating.

But the man with the badge asked to see Papa's hunting license. Papa couldn't afford one. The man took him to jail.

Just like that, we became a family with no deer for winter. And no Papa forever.

Papa's cell was so cold; he and the other two men inside begged for a heater. It leaked gas fumes during the night and killed all three of them.

I know it matters who you are and how much you have of anything important. That's why I'm out here in the Sierra this morning, up before the sun.

The sky is the color of the blue corn mush Grammo makes for breakfast. I trot up a dirt road in my birthday dress, my hand-me-down oxfords slapping up tufts of red dust. Good thing the plastic bucket and aspen pole I brought are both light as a feather. They don't slow me down. I have to hurry.

On both sides of the road, piñon pines cover the slopes.

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begging people on the road.

"Pick me," trees moan, up ahead. "I have the most seeds! Pick me!"

"I'm coming, geez!" It's hard work jogging uphill. I can see puffs of my breath, but I'm sweating, too.

Finally, I get past where my family picked yesterday, past trees that stay quiet with no seeds to groan about.

I step over the road cut and walk from tree to tree. "Look how many seeds," they all say. Their branches are covered with cones. Every scale of every cone has a little brown seed shell tucked inside.

I choose a tree to start on, set my bucket down, and lift the aspen pole over my head so fast it pulls me backward. My feet slip on dried needles, but I don't fall. I tighten my grip on the pole and swing at the branches in front of me. Pine nuts jump from their cones and spatter everywhere.

"This." The branches murmur as they swish against each other. "Ah, this."

"Yup," I say. "I'll try to get all the piñon out. I have to get a lot."

It's nice talking to trees without being made fun of. I don't see what's so dumb about it. They speak. I answer. Some kids talk to dolls and grown-ups talk to cars all the time.

"Do you know why I have to get so much piñon, right now, at this crazy hour?"

"Ah, this, this."

So, the branches don't care why I'm out here. I do. I make a chant of it while I beat at them.

"I have to. Get more. Than Marilu."

"Doesn't matter," the branches say. "Just free our seeds!"

"Doesn't matter? Now hold on a minute!" I plant my aspen pole in the ground and stand up straight.

"Marilu always picks the most piñon. And now she might be the one Grammo chooses for her special helper, instead of me. I done all these extra chores for Grammo. Elderberry picking, sweeping, dishwashing, you name it. But Marilu's older, prettier, and picks more piñon. Grammo might choose Marilu, but Marilu doesn't need the extra attention! She's thirteen, she'll have boyfriends soon, go to dances, and I'll just be the same old middle kid. It's been a year since Papa died and I still feel cold and dusty inside. There's no grown-up who talks to me-just-me like he did. Grammo's apprentice is getting married and moving away, and you know what, Grammo's a medica, an important lady, so whoever helps her will be important, too. And that will be me! I don't want to feel empty anymore. You think I'm a big baby who just wants attention? So, what if I am? If I bring Grammo more piñon than Marilu, maybe she'll pick me instead of Marilu—Miss Perfect—to be her apprentice. So, it does too matter that I get more piñon than Marilu!"

I pound my pole in the ground.

But I've wasted so much time arguing; the sun's coming up!

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"Why did you stop hitting our cones?" the branches above me moan. "Free our seeds!"

No surprise that's all they have to say to me.

I try working faster, but it's hard to see the dark seeds on top of dead needles and dirt.

Too bad the light's not bright enough to tell which shells are good, which are vano. Grammo taught us to look for red or gold shading on good shells, the ones with smooth, white nutmeat inside. The vanos are gray at the ends. Nothing inside but a flat, dead flap.

I drop any piñon I can find in my bucket, hoping I'll have enough good ones to cover the vanos.

When I've scooted further and further away from the tree and can't see any more fallen seeds, I grab my pole, hustle back to the road cut, hop down, and start running.

Soon my brothers and sisters will cross our yard to go to Grammo's for their chaquewe, and there's no one who loves that blue corn mush more than me. If I'm up here too long, there'll be nothing left but burned crust at the bottom of the pot.

I can hear my tummy growl, even over tree talk.

"Come back," the trees screech behind me. "Free our seeds!"

I keep running. I wish I could've picked more, but I need my chaquewe.

Between pots of bolito beans, eggs from our hens, the piñon we keep for ourselves in fall, plus kelitos in spring, and summer's green plums and wild strawberries, we aren't starving without Papa. We don't chew tree bark all winter like old-time people did.

But if the other kids gobble all the chaquewe, there'll be nothing until lunch. Grammo told Mama not to make any other breakfast because she wanted to feed us something nice and warm when we brought her our piñon buckets to sell. Marilu will be carrying over the whole bucketful she got yesterday, when I didn't get any because I had to watch my baby sister. Well, now I have a bucketload, too.

At the bottom of the road, I see my oldest brother with my littlest sister on his back, walking with Marilu toward Grammo's back door.

"Hey!" I call to the three of them, panting. "Hey you!"

They turn. I speed up.

"Josette!" Marilu waves. "Happy Birthday! Why are you running in the dirt with your new dress!"

As I run, getting closer, my brother calls out. "Mama thought you went to Grammo's already. But you were up in the Sierra? Alone? What are you doing?"

"Beating you to Grammo's!"

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But like Jesus lifting the lantern in the painting on Grammo's wall, I hold my bucket high as I slide. Nothing spills!

"Josette!" My little sister Trudi giggles. "You ok?"

I lift my head and spit dirt. "What's it look like?"

My brother gently takes my aspen pole, but when Marilu tries taking my bucket, I hold so tight the handle digs in my palm.

"Fine, you hold it," she says. She sets down her own full bucket. "Upsy-daisy!"

Marilu hooks her hands under my arms and pulls backward.

"I can get myself up!" I thrash around to break her grip. My bucket goes flying. I face plant again. When I look up, I see my bucket upside down on the branches of a chamiso bush, piñon scattered in the grass and under the branches.

There's still a claw in my middle, tearing me from the inside. I roll to my side. Far above the dried wheatgrass and grama, light from the new day crawls up Mt. Blanca's massive gray sides.

"Josette, calm down!" Trudi squeals. I press the tender spot between my belly button and my right leg and holler.

Marilu scoops me up with one arm under my neck, the other under my knees.

"Give me my bucket" she says to our brother, her voice straining. When he hands it to her, she grabs it with the hand she has under my knees. She's going to carry me into Grammo's like this! Just another load on top of her victory bucket.

Grammo will think I'm just a dirty good-for-nothing. She'll think how Marilu's such an angel, carrying me so nice, with her bucket full of piñon. She'll choose Marilu, for sure, now!

I want to kick and twist my way out of her arms, but I can barely move. Each step Marilu takes bounces me against her and makes the belly pain so bright I can't see.

I wish I were big as Mount Blanca and never had to worry about being first, or most important, ever.

My brother sets Trudi at the bottom of Grammo's steps, lays my aspen pole on the ground, and runs up to open the door.

"You're here?" he says to someone standing inside, sounding surprised.

Whoever it is doesn't answer. He goes into Grammo's kitchen, Trudi at his heels, and then wham, wham, wham, Marilu bounces me up the steps, and I'm inside too.

My other brothers and sister are already here. Grammo's kitchen is filled with the flinty warm smell of chaquewe. I breathe in. For a second, it feels like the pain has weakened.

"Marilu, put me doooown," I say.

"What happened to the malcreada?" a scratchy voice asks, from over Marilu's shoulder. My sister sets me gently on my feet.

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she's just been cheating. Every time we go across the valley to visit her family, she finds a reason to call me malcreada.

"Don't touch my records, malcreada. Get your own lipstick, malcreada."

I think she's cool. How she always stands with one bony hip jutted out to the side, looking past everyone.

She's two years older than Marilu. She ignores her other cousins, but for some reason, she jabs at me with that word. I think the word sounds pretty in English, "miscreant." In Spanish, when she says it so automatic, like swatting a fly; it just sounds everyday normal. Doesn't bother me.

Once, I asked Mama why Canela hated me. She said, "Maybe she's mad no one ever favored her the way Papa favored you. That pobrecita has a tough home life."

I don't see why she would have a tough home life. She still has a Papa.

Canela has never once come to our side of the valley for a visit. I'm so excited to see my cool cousin, I could jump and clap, except my tummy hurts now even if I just breathe. And of course, I have to pretend I hate her back. I give her the stink eye.

"Nice grass stains," Canela snorts, tossing her head at my dress. "They go great with the dirt on your shoes. Why you dressed up on Saturday, anyway?"

"It's her birthday, honey." Grammo puts down the spoon she was using to stir the chaquewe and comes over to look at me.

"Jita." Grammo frowns, pushing her bottom lip up.

I shake my head no, no no no. It can't be that Grammo decides, once and for all, not to pick me, just because I got dirty and didn't bring any piñon.

"Why are you holding your side like that?" I hadn't realized I was.

She lays a hand on my shoulder. "'Stas bien, jita? You ok? Vaya." She waves an arm toward her bedroom behind the kitchen.

"Maybe you need a treatment. Never since I delivered you on that bedspread have you been one of my patients!" Grammo smiles, her eyebrows still wrinkled together. "Go lay down, honey. I'll come right in to check on you."

The pain is back at full strength, but I have an idea that dulls it a little. Now I can show Grammo how I know each step of her ceremony by saying what she'll do before she even does it. I've watched her give my little sister treatments enough times that I know Grammo's whole routine.

I go over it in my head while I work up the strength to walk against the pain.

First, Grammo lights candles. She cracks an egg in a bowl, then asks the patient to lie down on towels she's put over her bedspread. She asks for the Blessed Mother's help and sings her favorite hymns, while she rubs the egg yolk over the patient's tummy. Where the yolk breaks, that's where the patient's empacho is. Then she wraps up the person in the towels with the egg still on them, rolls them over and gives them a massage, then she sits them up for a teaspoon of prune juice with castor oil. After that, they get bathroom time, a warm bath, and a nap.

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"Grammo," I'll say, "you saw how I knew every step of your ceremony. You know I love to help you. I can be the best apprentice."

I turn to leave the kitchen, the pain leaping from my belly to hover all around me like the tilma over the Blessed Mother in church. Marilu calls after me in a voice so kind I feel bad about wishing she won't get picked.

"I'll save you a bowl of chaquewe, Josette. Don't worry!"

When I pull off my shoes in Grammo's bedroom, streams of red dirt spill onto her wooden floor. I'm embarrassed but can't imagine walking all the way back for a broom. I hurt so bad that the edge of my vision has turned orange and feathery, like the sun's coming up from all directions.

"Canela!" Grammo says, from the kitchen. "Get an egg from the basket. Bring matches for the candles!"

I lay down and watch Grammo's ceiling fan slice the air.

Canela and Grammo come in together.

"First, the candles," I say to Canela in a croaky voice. My pain-voice makes me sound more like her regular, cool-girl voice.

"That's right, jita," Grammo says to me. "But you just relax. No need to talk. Just relax. Now, Canela." Grammo turns to my cousin. "Light the candles around the room like I showed you. Then crack the egg in a bowl. I'll get a towel to put under her."

Grammo leaves and comes back with one of her scratchy towels. She rolls me on my side and slides it under me, then rolls me back and tugs part of it out the other side. If only she'd sing her favorite hymns right into my face, like she usually does with her patients, she might see how I squeeze my eyes shut and grit my teeth during all this rolling. She might say "Pobrecita" and smooth my bangs.

But instead of singing and watching my face, she's talking over her shoulder to Canela.

"Got the egg cracked in the bowl, jita?" Of course, all the girls are "jita" to her. We're all little chicks in her flock. When Canela shows her the bowl with the raw egg, Grammo nods.

"That's it, jita." She pushes my dress up over my tummy. "Now scoop out the yolk. You need to know how to read the egg. Set it here, on her belly. Good. You'll make an excellent medica, jita."

Did she really just say what I think she said? I want to hit the re-wind like on Papa's 8 track deck.

Canela starts sliding the yolk around on my skin. Like a medica. The cool, gooey feeling wakes something in me.

"No!" I say. "Give it to me!" I claw at Canela's hand and accidentally break the yolk.

"Malcreada, hija de perra!" Canela curses as she steps back, holding her messy hand away from her.

"Canela, you don't know how to do Grammo's treatments! You don't know anything! I hate you!" I'm not pretending, now.

Grammo puts a hand at her throat. "Take some deep breaths, both of you! I'll go get another egg."

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Canela steps closer. I lay my sticky hands on the bed, next to my sticky sides, not even looking at her. She bends down near my face.

"Know what you're turning into?"

"A ten-year-old."

"A Mexican," Canela hisses.

I stop breathing.

Smack. I hear my hand land on Canela's face. But she dodged me. I only hit the end table.

"Ha!" Canela crows. "You see? That's the kind of stupid fighting a dirty, lazy Mexican like you would do. Happy birthday, Malcreada. You're a Mexican now."

I struggle to sit up against the claw tearing at/into the right side of tummy.

"I'm Spanish! I'm Spanish and you know it! You're the one who's a Mexican!"

With a noise like a bobcat yowl, I slide off the bed and stand. My dress flops down over my knees.

I don't need a treatment from esa perra Canela. What did I ever think was so great about her? She's bitter and dried up. She's vano.

And I wouldn't take a massage from Grammo if she were the last *médica* on earth. Her hands would burn like brand irons. She didn't pick me after I worked so hard for her all year. She didn't even pick my prettiest sister. She chose a cousin! The worst one!

I need to get away from them both.

Back through the doorway Grammo comes, smelling of soap and corn grit.

"Where you going, jita?"

I don't answer. With both hands over the clawed-at part of my belly, I lurch toward the doorway. The feathery orange circle at the edge of my vision starts closing over everything. There's only a little space open in the center. I step into that space, and all goes dark.

#

This elderberry thicket in a gully by Grammo's house used to have my third favorite voice. My first favorite voice used to be Papa's, telling me stories while everyone slept. Second used to be Canela's sandpaper voice, showing just by its sound how tough she was.

But Papa's gone and Canela's a pig, so I guess this big stand of chacuaco has my number one favorite voice, now. It sounds like the plink and splash of water bubbling into sunlight from underground.

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around as my thumb, then on their midnight purple skin. Bunches and bunches cover these bushes.

I start picking berry by berry, since I have no clippers for the bunches.

The chacuaco thicket hasn't said anything yet, which is one more weird thing. Any plant full of berries usually says. "Pick from me, pick from me."

"What am I turning into?" The words pop out my mouth.

"A Mexican," Canela says in my head.

I clear my throat to use my strongest ten-year-old voice. "Am I turning into a Mexican?"

From behind me, I feel the cold fall air coming down off Mt. Blanca.

"Well, my child." It's her, the chacuaco, at last. I want to enjoy the feeling I usually get from her voice, like sweet, clear oja water gushing from a spring, filling me up. But I'm too nervous about what she'll say.

"Why do you ask?"

She heard me!

"That perra Canela says I'm turning into a Mexican!"

"Are you?"

"I'm Spanish!" I say. "I'm not a bracero going door to door at night, hat in my hand, trabajo pa' comiiiiida. I don't live in a tent. I am not a Mexican!"

A woman's face rises just above the highest branches, with hair the gleaming purple of elderberry juice, eyes dark as berry skins. She speaks in the chacuaco's voice.

"Keep picking, Piñonita. We'll see what I can show you of this and that."

I've never seen a human face with a plant-voice before. Her long hair lifts and falls in the breeze like the mane of a wild horse loping through the chamisal. How did she know the nickname Papa used just for me?

"Keep picking."

I force myself to look back at the half-picked bunch in front of me and start pulling berries off again.

"That's better." Her voice flows down from the highest branches.

I want to sit back on my heels and look at her some more, but I have the feeling she'll disappear if I stop picking.

"Here's a mirror story to say what you're turning into, child. It will show you parts of who you are, with a few things reversed.

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...as people to be treated as second-class citizens, at worst. But Hsinaps know themselves to be special and important. They were able to hold on to so many good parts of their culture that whatever the Nacirema Oligna people thought of them didn't matter much.

"Even though Ute, Arapahoe, Diné, and travelers from the northern Pueblos were the first people in the valley, the Hsinaps believed they had a paper that made el valle theirs and no one else's."

I wanted to ask her what this had to do with me, and what did she mean about a mirror story, and which parts were in reverse, but it felt like my lips were glued together with old honey. I could only listen and keep picking. She went on.

"One day, Nacirema Oligna people came with newer papers saying they now owned most of the land in el valle. The Hspinaps struggled to fight paper with paper. They didn't want to be treated the way some of their forebears treated the indigenous people.

"While this went on, many Hsinaps lost land, status, and rights. But they held on to one fierce belief, one great source of pride: that they were not the lowest of the low. They were not a group they called "Mexican." Even though Nacirema Oligna sometimes mistook Hsinaps for Mexican because they had language, food, music, prayers, hands, and feet in common—and even though they were as alike to each other as cousins—Hsinaps insisted they were different from, and superior to, Mexicans.

"But listen, child. It takes many berries to make one jar of jelly. And it doesn't matter when they all get boiled down, which single berry was best, or which came off the most important bunch."

My bucket's not filling up, no matter how much I pick. And she hasn't answered my question. I look up and make an annoyed humming through my sealed lips.

"You're restless, yes," she says. "That restlessness will take you far from this valley. Newly grown, you'll move to El Paso, Phoenix, Denver, looking for work, excitement, your real life. But in your twenties, you'll find a reason to move back home, all heavy metal shirts and cigarette-breath. You might be lost, here in your home valley, after your mother passes. Because you think you don't know what else to do, you'll start taking classes at the university in Alamosa. In one called Chicano Studies, you'll read books that show how the lives of you and your siblings are all roots from the tree of life, or as you would think of it, you're all colors of the blessed mare, and you're part of a wise, rich tradition that knows and celebrates this unity, and guess who claims this tradition and brings it to life in these books for you? Mexican people. Those you think of as the lowest of the low will help you to know yourself."

I strain to speak. My lips unstick with a pop. "But what am I turning into?"

"You're a girl picking berries, growing into a woman who picks berries! After you return to this valley, you'll make delicious jellies to trade and sell. Gooseberry, champe, green plum, purple plum, red plum, wild strawberry, capulin, and, of course, chacuaco. People will come from all over to buy what you make right off a little table you'll have along Main Street in San Luis. You're turning into the jelly lady!"

"How do you know all this?"

The Chacuaco gives a splashy laugh. "It's plain as the s-p-a-n-i-s-h nose on your face!"

A rumble begins deep inside the earth. The branches of the thicket shake like quivering fingers. The chacuaco lady ducks her face back into the thicket.

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I try to pick up, hoping to bring the chocolate vases back, but the ground under me shakes with a sound like the pounding of enormous hooves. I fall onto my rear.

“Señora?” I call to the high branches. Nothing. The ground still shakes. Then her voice speaks in my head, saying again, “It takes many berries to make one jar of jelly. If you remember that, your ride inside La Yegua will be like heaven. If you forget it, even for a second, your fear will sweep heaven away.”

What does she mean, a ride inside La Yegua? That was just a story Papa made up for us kids. A mix of magic horse stories he heard from his papa, plus his own imagination.

“Ya viene. Behind you.”

I scoot around to look up at Mt. Blanca. An enormous horse comes straight out of the gray face of the mountain and gallops toward me. No, she’s not coming toward me. I’m getting close to her. Each hoof strike pulls more of the valley toward her, like a sheet that gets bunched up at the foot of a bed.

Her translucent hide shimmers all the colors of the rainbow. Streams of clouds course through her.

“Papa,” I whisper. “You were right.”

La Yegua is upon me. I’m swept up as though by a twister. Then I’m suspended in the clouds she carries, and I’m seed sized, along with everything else that got kicked up under her hooves. There’s a seed-sized morada worship house, a seed-sized filling station. There’s piñon floating everywhere, and that’s how I can tell everything is seed-sized now. Me, and everything, are only as tall as the seeds. I try swimming through the air to grab onto one of the seeds. It has gray edges, probably vano. So, I swim past a spinning truck, then a bear grinning like a dog, to get to another seed. The shell looks good, a little goldish red on the end.

I squeeze my arms and legs around it to crack the shell, and sure enough! There’s a nutmeat inside, the size of my little sister. I run my hands over its smooth, creamy surface. Then I pull myself around to the other side and see a white baby tree just exactly the same size as me, tucked in the edge of the nutmeat. I take a bite of a little white leaf. Sure enough, it’s that partly bitter, mostly sweet taste of piñon.

Now that I’m the same size as everything else—no less important than anything else, and no more, either—now that I’m weightless and floating, it’s like a flying dream where everyone and everything is lifted with joy. Except I don’t see any other people floating in La Yegua. Could I really be the only one who gets to feel what this is like? I take another bite of nutmeat and shout to the tumbling world around me, “Gracias a Dios, there’s no Canela!”

Then there she is, spinning slowly in front of me, holding up a Thermos and saying something I can’t understand.

“No!” I say. “This is my place! You don’t get to have this, too!”

Quick as a bubble of boiled berry juice, the whole thing pops.

I’m flat on my back in a bed again. Grammo sits at the foot of it, where her son, my Papa, used to sit on my bed back home. Behind her are pale blue walls with no pictures. Canela stands on one side of me, Mama on the other.

Where am I?

A white sheet with faded pink flowers covers me. Shiny bars curve up on either side of the bed.

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...jita. Mama smiles when tears in her eyes. You're in a hospital. Thanks to Grammo being so quick that you needed surgery."

I look down at Grammo, who smiles too, looking relieved.

"What surgery?"

One of my feet pokes out from under the sheet. Grammo rests a hard brown hand over it, like a shell covering a seed. "You needed to get your appendix out, jita. That's what caused your pain."

I reach down to the place that used to hurt and feel a numb, bumpy ridge.

Canela holds out a Thermos. "I made this oshá tea for you."

I'm about to make a disgusted face and tell her that stuff tastes like horse piss and celery.

But the thought of telling her off makes my lips feel gluey.

I take a deep breath.

"It's good for healing," I tell her. "Thank you. I'll make you the world's biggest jar of elderberry jelly."

"World's biggest?" Canela says. "What's wrong with a regular jar? I don't even like chacuaco."

She takes off the Thermos top, turns it over to make it a little mug, then pours the hot tea for me. When she passes me the mug, I crook a finger into its little plastic handle and balance it with my other hand.

There's an old me who wants to dump this hot tea right over the bars of the bed, all over her shoes.

I scrunch my lips like a kiss above the rim of the mug to blow away the steam.

There's a new me who wants to feel better.

"Jita," Mama says, squeezing my shoulder. "Have you congratulated your prima? She's Grammo's new apprentice. Her mama drove her over to Grammo's place last night."

I look at Grammo. She nods and squeezes my toes with her hard brown seed-shell hand.

"I didn't hear them drive up the road," I say to Mama.

I also want to say, "I've seen La Yegua. I floated inside her."

But what I experienced is so mysterious, it shimmers like clouds in my veins, too tangled with my blood to come out as words.

"You didn't hear their car because it was very late, jita," Mama says. "You were sleeping, dreaming about your birthday coming. Her mama didn't stay."

Beside me, Canela makes a cough sound. I gasp when I see she's trying not to cry.

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I give Mama the mug and reach out to hold one of Canela's wrists.

The sob she's been holding breaks out. She tries to cover it with the back of her other hand.

"I am never." She gives me a burning look, wild and scared, but doesn't pull her wrist away. "Never going back there."

Canela under my hand, and me under Grammo's, we're seed-sized. Our skin is a shell. Our bones are hidden stems.

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