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A Young Adult Multicultural Urban Fantasy Novel

By Kim Baccellia

Fifteen-year-old Lupe Hernandez wishes she was blond, white, and popular. She dismisses the legend her Mexican grandmother tells about a treasured family heirloom—a pair of ruby earrings—as a silly fairytale, despite recurring nightmares. But when the earrings thrust her into the parallel world of Ixtumea, she must confront the very thing she shuns—her cultural heritage.

Lupe's journey takes her through a dense Mayan jungle to the damp underground kingdom of Malvado, where a rebel leader plots to keep her from fulfilling her destiny. She is guided by a hot warrior protector named Teancum, who tells her about a prophecy of a long-awaited young prophetess. She trains with the Spider Goddess, who teaches her the sacred knots that bind both worlds together. And she meets her long-lost mother, Concha—who is now a dangerous enemy.

Life as Lupe knows it will never be the same!

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*My bisabuela, Cipriana,
whose guidance helped me find and embrace my own Mexican roots.*

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Si, se puede!

Earrings of Ixtumea

Kim Baccellia

Chapter One

“How often do you hear a girl saves the world?” The melodic hush of *Abuela’s* voice downstairs in the kitchen woke Lupe. Darkness filled her room. She peered over at her alarm clock, six o’clock in the morning.

She pulled her pink blanket over her head and moaned. *Oh, here we go again. Couldn’t Abuela let me sleep in?* The blanket might cover her, but she couldn’t escape the sounds of her grandmother reciting yet another fable from the mystical land of Ixtumea. She’d been forced to listen to that stupid tale last night. And even worse, downstairs in their kitchen, listening and encouraging were *Abuelita’s amigas*.

Lupe stumbled out of bed, kicking aside a collection of navy-and-white uniform clothes on the floor. Throwing on a faded flannel robe, she cracked her bedroom door open. The voices grew louder.

“*Si, tell us more!*” The ting of spoons against the tiny teacups sounded like a battle cry. Didn’t those women know it was way too early? *Jeez, no way am I going to sleep. I might as well see if they made some hot chocolate or tea. Maybe then I can stomach this whole nonsense of Ixtumea and Super-Girl before I go to school.*

She had long outgrown the silly tales. Though she hated to admit it, the tale of the girl savior fascinated her. Never had she heard of a teen-aged Latina battling evil forces and saving her people, in a world not unlike the land of Lupe’s Mexican ancestors.

No, the only stories of teen heroes she’d heard starred thin beautiful blondes. Everything she wasn’t.

Still, *Abuela’s* voice cast a spell on her. Lupe knew she shouldn’t eavesdrop on the *chismes*, but she couldn’t help herself.

She crept down the stairs past the pictures of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Pope John Paul II, and one of the mysterious Mayan gods.

“Ay, too bad she couldn’t have come sooner,” Coco, their next-door neighbor, sighed. “Too many *cosas modernas* in our world. Now who believes? No one but us.”

Who are they talking about? Lupe wondered.

“Now that’s one story I’d like to hear,” an unfamiliar gravelly voice replied. “Not another

pobrecita guera who steals the ranchero's heart. How many poor blondes from Mexico do you ladies know?"

"You mean real ones or ones that appear with *la magica* of the bleach?" asked Esperanza, the acknowledged gossip of the apartment building.

Laughter filled the small condo. Lupe couldn't help but smile. These ladies loved those *telenovelas* almost as much as *Abuela's* tales. She thought it funny her grandmother got on her case about her Anglo pop idols. Maybe the ladies weren't different from her, after all.

Lupe crouched down and hid behind one of the banisters. Ixchel, the spider goddess, smiled down on her from a painting on the wall. Red gems sparkled from Ixchel's earlobes, similar to the earrings Lupe's grandmother had tried to give Lupe last night.

From this position Lupe saw the usual group of *amigas* sitting around the Formica table, sipping *café de leche* or *manzanilla*—chamomile—tea in delicate small cups. Vivid crimson, yellow, and orange housecoats brightened the kitchen. The women sounded like a flock of lively parrots.

Next to the stove, *Abuela* worked her magic. She pinched off a bit of dough, rolled the soft *masa* into the size of a golf ball, and flattened the dough between her earth-colored hands. Quickly she threw the pancake-shaped *masa* onto a sizzling black pan.

The other women helped. Esperanza scrambled eggs, the vivid red housedress she wore fluttering over her round figure. Esperanza's large gold hoop earrings bounced with every movement.

Coco stood in the far corner, one large embroidered rose peeking out of her simple *rebozo*. She cut the tortillas into thin strips to mix in with the eggs, chorizo, and cheese. "*Oye, espera un momento*. Tell me more about this *niña* who'll save Ixtumea."

"Here, let me finish." The scrape of a metal chair dragged across the wooden floor and one of the women took over cooking the tortillas.

"Ay, where was I?" Lupe's *abuela* asked as she settled down in one of the chairs. She wiped her hands on her apron, sealing in the roasted scent of tortillas.

"The prophecy. How does it go, again?"

"Oh, yes." *Abuelita* took a deep breath. Then she began.

"*She will come,*

*Descending through the sacred web,
To vanquish the great deceiver.
Many will be her name:
Savior,
Redeemer...*

“Cipriana, do we know this *niña*?” someone asked.

Lupe leaned down closer to the stair, curious to find out if her grandmother would reveal the name of the person. Wouldn't it be a real hoot if it were someone she knew?

“Let me guess.” Esperanza turned off the stove. “She's tall, thin, and has blonde hair.”

“You sound as bad as my Lupita. *Nadie está contento con su suerte*. Always dreaming the other side is better.” Her grandmother let out a deep sigh. “If only she'd listen and take the earrings...”

“So she hasn't taken them?” Coco asked. “Does she not know how *importante* they are?”

“You know the young. Never listen.” Her grandmother let out another sigh.

“If I was her, I'd be dying to use them...wait, maybe, your Lupita is this *niña*!” Esperanza laughed so hard she snorted. “Wouldn't that be something?”

Startled at hearing her name, Lupe leaned back against the wall. An old picture of her mother wearing those same earrings shifted above her.

Lupe felt a strange foreboding. The tips of her ears burned. What was wrong with her?

She got up and went back to her room. Quietly she closed the door to block out the voices. A prickly sensation covered her body, along with a sick feeling, maybe Esperanza was right. She thought back to last night and her grandmother's attempt to give her a pair of earrings, identical to the ones in all the pictures in their apartment. She'd started up again with the legend and refused to let Lupe leave the room. “No, this is *muy importante*,” she said. She talked about a web between the worlds fraying and the time of the fulfillment of the prophecy was now. How Lupe needed to be prepared.

As if jewelry would be a shield against any supernatural force! Lupe resisted the urge to cross herself.

Still...could the tales be true?

Lupe plopped back on her bed. All thoughts of joining the ladies had vanished.

No. They were only fairy tales.

* * * *

“¡Lupita! ¡Vente! Come down before your breakfast gets cold.”

Lupe rolled over in bed. She glanced at her clock. Seven-thirty. She must have gone back to sleep. Then she remembered what she’d overheard from the *amigas* downstairs. The prophecy of Ixtumea and the magical earrings had been the talk of their early-morning meeting.

Esperanza, the queen *chismosa*, had even joked Lupe might be the girl savior from the fairy tale.

Yeah, as if.

Jeez, why did the *amigas* have to come over on a school day? She hoped they’d left the apartment.

She got off her bed and made her way to her closet, catching a glimpse of herself in the vanity mirror. Her figure might’ve been in style back before Cortez conquered Mexico, but not now. Everything about her was round—including her butt. She was nothing like the willowy thin singers and actresses on the cover of the magazines. Pictures of Ashley Snow stared back at her from around the mirror. Ashley’s heavily lined eyelids mocked her. Why couldn’t she be like Ashley?

She was tired of being brown-haired, brown-eyed, and brown-skinned.

With her foot, she kicked yesterday’s outfit under her bed and took out a clean navy pleated skirt and white polo shirt. She put these on and then the white socks before she completed the look with a pair of white Oxford shoes.

She took a final peek at herself before she opened her bedroom door. Light filtered through a glass painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe, filling the walkway with vivid greens, blues, and reds. Lupe stopped by the picture. Gazing into the saint’s eyes, she longed for the Virgin to whisk her away from the pagan discussions she’d eavesdropped on earlier. She’d make it a point to ask Father Michael for penance during confession. Maybe that would help her avoid a trip to hell.

A loud snort from downstairs broke the spell. The muffled voices of the *amigas* could only mean one thing: they hadn’t left. Lupe clasped the wooden banister. *Oh, please leave.* She didn’t want to go downstairs and hear yet more on Ixtumea, but she really had no choice. She’d left her backpack, which held her English essay paper, on the kitchen table. Without that...forget about hell. She’d rather die than spend any time in detention.

As Lupe made her way down the stairs, a few of the *amigas* strolled out of the kitchen. Esperanza followed. Her wide hips danced to a silent salsa beat. Lupe stared in fascination at her *nalgas*. Though she hated her own, she knew Esperanza prided herself on her butt.

“Ay, look at our Lupita, not so little anymore.” Esperanza smiled.

Lupe flushed.

Esperanza grabbed a black reboza off the couch and flung the wrap around her shoulders. “*Escúchala*—listen to your *abuela*. Don’t be so *cabezona*. And next time,” she added with a wink “don’t be so afraid to come and join us.”

So she does know! Lupe’s heart dropped to her stomach. It figured she couldn’t hide anything from that *chismosa*.

She didn’t have a chance to comment. One by one, the women left the kitchen and grabbed their sweaters and wraps off the couch.

“*Hasta luego, Lupita,*” Coco said. “Tell your *abuelita* we’ll see her tomorrow.” She opened the door as the women left.

Finally! Relief surged through Lupe. She hoped all the foolishness of Ixtumea had departed with them, somehow she doubted it.

As she made her way down the staircase, the roasted scent of chorizo con huevos grew stronger. Her stomach gurgled. Lupe took a deep breath.

She strolled into the kitchen. Though small, a row of windows made the room feel larger. From its prominent space on the kitchen wall, a framed drawing of Santo Toribio, Patron Saint of guidance, blessed the room. An assortment of herbs and spices grew in a window planter. A scattering of tiny coffee cups cluttered the sink.

“I’m glad you finally decided to wake from the dead, *m’ija*.” *Abuela* sat at the table, a cup of streaming *café de leche* in her hand. “*A quien madruga Dios lo ayuda*. Remember, God only helps those who rise early.”

Figures. Her grandmother seemed to have a Spanish *dicho*—saying—for everything.

Lupe made her way to the old Formica table in the corner of the room. Nothing remained on the tile counter of the *amigas* except some tattered *novelas* with racy covers. Lupe hoped she could sneak a peek at them after school. She liked the romances too.

In her usual spot sat a plate filled with a mixture of eggs, chorizo-sausage, and cheese. Warm tortillas were wrapped inside a white kitchen cloth. A few slices of the shells were on her

plate. Hot chocolate steamed in her favorite large mug. The picture of a calico cat seemed to purr, content with the sweet beverage inside.

Abuela lifted her own cup to her mouth and watched Lupe. Her intense gaze made Lupe uncomfortable.

Lupe glanced over to the end of the table where her books were scattered from last night's cram session. She could still see the notes she'd tried to study peeping out of the red notebook. She slid over and crammed the books and notes back into her backpack.

Abuela took another sip of her *café*. "Did you think about what I said?"

"Ah, *Abuela*, I really got to go." Lupe grabbed another warm tortilla from her plate. She shoved some chorizo and egg inside and wrapped it in a napkin. "I can't miss my bus."

Her grandmother watched with half-veiled eyes. "*M'ija*, the bus can wait, but what is coming cannot."

Lupe raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

"The web grows weaker between our world and Ixtumea. Soon you will be called on. You need to be ready."

"Yeah, right." Lupe picked up her mug. She took another sip. "*Abuela*, you've been reading too many—" she paused for a moment, then nodded at the romances "*—novelas*. And I really gotta go."

Sadness covered her grandmother's face. She placed her mug down and reached inside her apron pocket. "Lupe, don't forget these." *Abuela* pushed her chair back. With a slight limp she walked over to Lupe, clutching something in her palms.

The earrings! The earlier prickly sensation, like ants crawling up her skin, returned. What was it with those earrings?

Abuela opened her hand and the familiar red rubies glinted up at Lupe. Fine strands of gold curved around the gems. Lupe squirmed in her chair. She wished she could tear her skin off, anything to stop the awful sensation.

Her grandmother's large topaz eyes never left Lupe. "Here, you need these."

"Come on, *Abuela*. I'm not from one of your dumb tales. Those earrings won't whirl me into Ixtumea. This isn't a fairy tale."

"*Dios mio*. Why don't you listen?"

"They're only jewelry and don't have any *magica*. That kind of stuff only happens in those

novelas you all read.”

Abuela grasped her hand. “No, child. These are important.” She pressed the earrings firmly into Lupe’s hands. “If you won’t listen, at least keep them with you.”

Lupe gritted her teeth in frustration. She wanted to throw the stones on the wooden floor. Did her grandmother think she was six, or something? It was embarrassing enough she had to subject herself to *Abuela*’s blessings every morning, now this?

Something else bothered her. The urgency of *Abuela*’s words and the women’s discussion earlier scared her. Maybe she should take them. If nothing else it would stop her grandmother’s nagging. Or better yet, she would use her own *dicho*—*ojos que no ven, corazon que siente*—out of sight, out of mind.

“Thanks. I think.” Lupe went back to the table and picked up her backpack. She pushed the earrings into her skirt pocket and rushed past *Abuela* toward the door, skipping her daily blessing. She figured the earrings were more than enough.

“*Lupita?*” The slam of the door behind her shut out her grandmother’s voice. Lupe felt a twinge of guilt. She hated being disrespectful, but the combination of the women’s gossip, the earrings, and a vigilant *abuela* was just too much to deal with this early in the morning.

Lupe fought the strong urge to turn around and ask her *abuela* why the earrings were really important. Would they really protect her against evil that was destroying the web?

Come off it. Like there really is such a thing as a gigantic spider web hiding another world. One that no one, except Abuela and her amigas, can see. Lupe stopped at the foot of the stairs for a moment and opened the backpack flap to look for her mp3 player. She took it out, scanning for Justin Summer’s latest songs before she put the earphones on. She turned up the volume, not only to drown out the sounds of the passing traffic and loud neighbors, but to quiet the fears bubbling inside. She walked around a collection of greasy hamburger wrappers and half-empty soda cans, lost in her music...and away from her embarrassing life.

Chapter Two

Ixtumea

Tezcatlipoca's Underground Palace

A breeze snuffed out a row of candles lining the palace corridor and the remaining lights flickered in their huge urns. Eerie shadows crept up the cavern walls. Though a jaguar pelt covered Malvado, a chill went through his body. *Some kingdom I have.* He snorted in disgust. *How much longer must I wait in this godforsaken place?*

Hiding his impatience, Malvado strolled back to his jade-encrusted throne. Lavish signs of wealth filled his chambers—gold and silver vases, precious gems, and fine silks, but none of them pleased him. The real prize he sought was still elusive.

An obsidian statue of Tezcatlipoca caught his attention. Most wrote the god of the underworld off as a myth, but Malvado knew better. No; the god lived.

Tezcatlipoca had whispered Malvado's own day of godhood was at hand. He had only to be patient, but lately, doubt filled Malvado's mind.

Malvado regarded his so-called kingdom bitterly. The cloying scents of overripe bodies and damp vegetation made the air suffocating. The faraway drip of water on porous limestone walls grated on his nerves. Not to mention the bats, three-inch spindly legged scorpion spiders, and other wildlife that dwelled in this tomb-like palace.

To hide his growing discontent, he wandered to the rear of the great subterranean cavern. A heavy tapestry with his image towering over the inhabitants of Ixtumea, covered the wall. It filled him with a renewed purpose.

Ah, maybe the girl will reveal herself in the web today. When I capture her, I'll sacrifice her to Tezcatlipoca in exchange for my own godhood.

He snapped his fingers at a battalion of short, muscular warriors in the corridor. Jaguar tattoos snaked up their copper-colored arms.

"Come," he said sharply. "Prove yourselves useful."

The men followed him without argument.

Malvado strutted forward. He pushed the weaving aside, revealing a monstrous web. Delicate white strands stretched from the high ceiling to the width of the subterranean room.

Parts of the web were frayed, with fist-sized holes, while others were bigger than him. Lately, the gaps were growing in number.

Throughout the web continuous pictures of his old world played, like a huge movie. The images were so lifelike he felt he could walk into the display and no one would be any wiser.

For a moment, he scanned the web for his father. Sure enough, there he was, in his university office, sitting behind a large mahogany desk with all his degrees and big-shot awards framed behind him. Next to the desk a glass display case contained some ancient K'iche-Mayan artifacts; beaded turquoise death masks, obsidian knives, and the source of his present troubles, an ancient skin document recording the prophecy of a girl savior. Something no one in the anthropology department at UCLA believed in. And they never would, as long as Malvado stayed trapped in this hellish excuse of a world.

“No.” Malvado clenched his teeth. “Someday, old man, I’ll come back. And when I do, we’ll see who the failure is.”

He could never go back to modern Los Angeles, where his friends, colleagues, or even his self-important father lived.

That witch, the Revered One, had sealed his fate.

The prophetess, ensconced in nearby Irreantum, had forced him to stay. As the spiritual leader, she had the final say in dealing with those who ventured into Ixtumea. And, somehow, she knew Malvado’s plan. He’d never take orders from a woman and had chafed at her command.

He slammed his fist against the wall. *I could have had anything I wanted. Worldwide acclaim, fame, and wealth.*

He searched the web again for the girl, but in the same annoying manner as the television sets of his old world, static filled the strands. His heart pounded. He licked his lips. It was only a matter of time until all of Tezcatlipoca’s promises were fulfilled.

Glancing over his shoulder, Malvado snapped his fingers. One of his most faithful servants, Omni, rushed up to him.

Omni was dressed in a brown leather loincloth; a leather headband wrapped around his head with a few brightly colored macaw feathers. As Omni bowed, his brightly colored macaw feather swept the floor.

“Yes, lord?”

“Bring Concha to me at once.”

“But, lord, it was a long difficult night...”

Malvado glared at Omni.

Omni fell facedown. Malvado curled his lips with contempt. Omni might be a good servant, but he was an idiot like all the others.

“Lord, forgive me. I would never disobey you,” Omni said, his voice tremulous.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Malvado sneered. “Remember, when you question me, you question Tezcatlipoca. Rise,” he barked. “Get her quickly.” Omni ran toward the door, leaving behind a lone macaw feather

Malvado turned back to the web. Scenes rushed in front of him. He clenched his teeth. Sometimes he wished he had a remote control so he could go directly to the scene he wanted.

An older woman appeared, shouting something while a door closed in her face. Malvado’s eyes narrowed. She might not be in her goddess form, but there was no mistaking those inhuman topaz eyes.

“For now, you can meddle, *bruja*, but soon you will be gone.” Malvado knew he couldn’t touch her but when his plans were fulfilled, that would change.

The appearance of a young girl caught his eye. Finally! The teen with a navy blue pleated skirt was rushing somewhere. Before too long she’d grow into a beauty like her mother.

“There she is.” Malvado turned to his guards. “Bring her to me, and you’ll both be richly rewarded.”

“Yes, my lord.” They thumped their chests and bowed.

“Go.” Malvado stepped back, while his men jumped into the scene. The web rippled, erasing any evidence of the guards.

The swish of the tapestry behind him caused Malvado to turn from the web.

“Lord, you summoned me?”

“Concha, come.” He knew her weakness. All it took was a touch and promise of things to come to gain power over her.

She walked to his side. A multi-colored dress of woven cloth hung like a burlap sack on her tiny frame.

He placed one hand on her shoulder. A shiver went through her body. He smiled.

“Come closer,” Malvado said, pointing back to the web. “Look here.”

Expressionless, Concha stared into the strands.

Malvado sighed. *What a pity.* Concha had been good for his purpose, but somehow working with him had intensified her madness. He had seen glimpses of this in the past. *Oh, well. Once I have the daughter, I'll discard the mother.*

Malvado leaned over to push back her thick black hair. He whispered gently in her ear. "Look into the web. You know what you need to do."

A low hum vibrated in the room. The blurred image cleared, revealing the teen within the opaque strands. Malvado glanced at Concha.

Concha's eyes widened. She reached over to touch the younger version of herself in the web, her child, her daughter. The air crackled with static. Concha's hair coiled out, giving her the appearance of a bloodsucking *duende* seeking a victim.

He watched her, the excitement building within him.

An anguished scream pierced the air, cutting off any thoughts.

As Concha touched the web, a gust of energy hit her chest. She crumpled to the ground. Her shrieks echoed through the chamber.

"Nooo!"

Malvado folded his arms and smiled. *Well, well, well, today's my lucky day.*

Chapter Three

Tustin, California

8:00 a.m.

A flock of finches chirped in an isolated stand of sycamore trees across the street.

Lupe wished she felt some of the birds' happiness. Not even the sun's warmth erased her unease.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get *Abuela's* words out of her head. *You'll need these earrings, m'ija. They're the key to the world of Ixtumea.*

Earrings, key, Ixtumea. She really worried her grandmother's stories were affecting her sanity, but on the other hand...

Talk about a strange coincidence. The previous day, *abuela* had shared the magic of the earrings with her. Something bothered her and she had been insistent. So Lupe had tried to humor her, though she hadn't taken the tales seriously. Come on, a portal to another world? But last night she had experienced the most intense nightmare ever.

Lupe shivered. Could there be a weird chance maybe *abuela* was right?

Shoving her hand into her pocket, she fished out the earrings. *Let's see if these things really work.*

Lupe waited. The world around her passed by; congested traffic, moms pushing babies in faded second-hand strollers, and the local hamburger joint's greasy breakfast smell hanging in the air. Young kids bustled by on their way to the nearby elementary school. Nothing looked strange or out of the ordinary.

She shrugged. Did she actually expect a Mayan warrior or a mystical god to step out of a wavering ripple in the air? *Yeah, as if that's really gonna happen anytime soon.*

Lupe took out one of the earrings. The ruby glowed in her palm. She admired how the gem reflected the morning light. It wouldn't hurt to wear the earrings to school. Maybe the stones could weave a magic spell on her appearance--drab to fabulous!

She slid the earring back into her earlobe, thoughts of school chasing out any of her *abuela's* superstitious mumbo-jumbo.

"Hey, Lupe, wait up!" Marisol's loud voice could carve through the sound of her pop music

any day. Lupe sighed, turned off her mp3 player, and waited.

Subtle Marisol. Bright yellow ribbons decorated her hair. A vivid floral design highlighted her socks. Boy, did Marisol hate to conform!

“Lupe, did you finish that essay last night?” Never known for completing her work on time, Marisol took a quick look at Lupe’s paper. “Oh, where’d you get those?” She pointed at Lupe’s earrings.

“*Abuela* gave ’em to me.” Lupe rolled her eyes. “Along with a really dumb story.”

“Why do you always rag on your *abuelita*, Lupe? She’s cool. What story did she tell you this time?”

Lupe couldn’t understand why Marisol loved hearing any of her grandmother’s crazy tales of Ixtumea. Sometimes she invited herself over just to hear the stories. Stories that made Lupe want to turn her mp3 player on high.

“Something to do with a special person coming to help redeem us.” Lupe shook her head in impatience. “Like we don’t hear enough of that in church, huh? Hey, check out the poster by the bus stop.” Lupe pointed. “Isn’t he hot?”

The bus stop had a poster plastered on the side, advertising the new movie of the week. Both girls made their way across the street, zig-zagging through the oncoming traffic. A crowd of teens surrounded the stop. Their other friend, Roberto, stood by himself, totally absorbed in either another scientific book or game manual.

Her heart skipped a beat. Huddled at the other end of the bus stop were the girls from the popular crowd, giggling.

Lupe clutched her books to her chest as she walked past. The cluster of blonde heads radiated an allure of goodness. Who knew how many of those locks were real or enhanced? Just like the girls themselves. Queen Bee Ashley was conducting a loud discussion.

“Ohmigod. Check out what she’s wearing,” Ashley snickered. “No way I’d be caught *dead* in that.”

As Lupe walked toward the bench, the snickers grew louder. She tried not to think of their comments. Maybe they weren’t talking about her. As if she’d be that lucky.

“Just ignore them, Lupe.” Marisol’s hand on her back kept moving toward Roberto.

“Hey, Marisol!” Ashley pointed toward her. “Like those socks you’re wearing. Where did you get them? At a garage sale?”

Great, Lupe thought. They were the joke of the day.

The other students, including Roberto, glanced down at the ground in embarrassment or relief that they weren't the butt of the group's joke. Lupe wished just once someone had the guts to stand up to this group of phony hyenas. No one ever did.

"No, I got them somewhere else." Marisol smiled at the girls. "Thanks for asking."

This only made the girls more eager to bother them. A sick feeling rose in the pit of Lupe's stomach. "Hey, Lupe," Ashley called. "Nice earrings. Where'd you get them?"

"Yeah, where did you steal them?" Diane, an Ashley wannabe, strolled over to Lupe. She reached over to touch the delicate rubies entwined with gold in Lupe's ears.

"Um, my grandmother gave them to me."

Snickers from the girls made Lupe's face burn in shame.

"You sure? Those look too expensive for someone who cleans houses."

Diane's hand brushed up against Lupe's thick brown hair. Suddenly she froze.

Expressionless, Diane stared into space. Lupe couldn't move either. A warm sensation moved down her whole body. Goosebumps erupted. The hair stood up on the back of her neck.

At that moment she had a vision. In it she saw Diane standing next to her in a strange place. Many people, dressed in Indian-like clothing, were yelling and running away from something. Lots of men, dressed in dark shiny metal, carried wooden clubs with a serrated edge. Screaming women clutched children to their breasts while the men came toward them. One of the armored soldiers swung his club at a cowering man. Lupe watched in horror as the weapon sliced through the victim's neck. His head only hung by the skin. Blood poured down his body.

A distinct sweetish smell hung heavy in the air. It reminded her of pork cooking. A nauseating taste filled her mouth, making her want to vomit. She saw hundreds, maybe thousands of people dead or dying, their flesh like charred hamburger. She flinched and turned her eyes away.

A man's face appeared unexpectedly in front of her. While the rest of the vision felt like a terrible dream, the man seemed to be right there. She knew if she reached out, she could touch him.

A sticky mixture of soot and blood covered the man's body. His gaze pleaded with her, while lines of blood dribbled down his ruined face. What did he want? A pain on her side shot through her body. His scream became hers.

Then, just as suddenly as it had come, the vision left her.

“Diane, you okay?”

The voices of other girls brought Lupe to her senses. She found herself and Diane lying on the sidewalk. Diane clutched her side and moaned. Surrounding them were not only the girls, but the other commuters.

“Someone call nine-one-one,” a bystander yelled out to the crowd. A woman fished in her briefcase for a cell phone.

“No, I’m okay,” Diane said. “I’ll be all right.”

Lupe couldn’t catch the woman’s reply. She stared at Diane. *My God*, Lupe thought. *The earrings do work!*

Diane turned and looked at her. Loathing covered her face. Ashley pulled her up while the others gathered around her.

“Get me away from that freak of nature,” Diane screamed at Lupe.

“Hey, what happened?” Marisol reached down and helped Lupe up. Lupe trembled with horror.

She couldn’t help but think maybe she had caused the vision. Didn’t she tempt the earrings to open up the world of Ixtumea? Maybe the gods were angry with her and her disrespect to not only *Abuela* but their world as well.

Only one thought went through her mind; get away and fast.

Lupe bolted, running until her legs felt rubbery and numb. If the stones had the power to fuse a nightmare into the brains of two different people at once, what other damage could they do?

Oh my God, what have I done?

Chapter Four

Lupe sprinted past Walnut Avenue, startling numerous bystanders. No matter how fast she ran, she couldn't escape the taunts of Ashley and her group. Freak, loser, reject. Even the ravens on the stucco roof of the grocery store seemed to laugh at her.

When Lupe thought the coast was clear she stopped. Glancing over her shoulder, she scanned the area to see if Marisol or anyone else from the bus stop had chased after her. Only cars, moving at a snail's pace on both sides of Red Hill Drive, plus the usual collection of morning commuters with cell phones glued to one ear, lattes in the other hand. They stared right through her, not caring about any fourteen-year-old cutting school.

Relief flooded her, at the same time she felt a tinge of sadness that neither Marisol nor Roberto had bothered to follow her. Didn't they care?

Apparently not.

Well, so much for them. If they don't care, neither do I. As if they would ever believe her, anyway.

She didn't want to dwell on the fact she'd gone into a vision, become part of it...and a scary, bloody one, at that. And another human being had gone with her. No, it was impossible. She would let herself forget; she'd make herself wonder if she'd made it up.

She rummaged for her mp3 player at the bottom of her cluttered backpack. Putting the earplugs into her ears, she searched for a song that would make her feel better.

Ah! Here it is. Lupe closed her eyes. One of her favorite Justin Summer songs came on. She imagined his strong arms wrapped around her, sheltering her from any other calamity.

Abuela's favorite dicho wormed itself into her brain, refusing to be ignored. *Nadie esta contento con su suerte.* Lupe batted the thought aside. Yeah, she knew life wasn't a bed of roses for others, but she could dream, couldn't she?

As Lupe walked under the freeway overpass, the drone of cars made the pavement vibrate. Not much longer and she would be home. *Abuela* wouldn't be too happy with her ditching school, but she didn't care. If anyone knew what had caused Lupe and Diane to witness the horrific vision at the same time, it would be her grandmother.

Maybe people can travel between worlds. The realization something she had brushed off as

a stupid fairy tale could be true sent shivers up Lupe's spine.

Could the earrings really be a portal to some world, a world her grandmother called Ixtumea?

For once she wished she had listened to those off-the-wall tales.

A high-pitched scream broke Lupe's concentration. She pulled her earplugs out, thinking at first her mp3 player was broken, but the sound surrounded her. Startled, she dropped it and her backpack. Books and papers scattered on the ground. Passersby seemed not to hear the sound.

The inhuman scream increased in volume. The hair on the back of Lupe's neck stood up.

Will this nightmare never end?

Lupe looked around. She expected to find someone hurt, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

Lupe bent to pick up her books and papers. As she shoved everything into her backpack, she glanced over her shoulder and bit her lip. The sound intensified.

She tossed the broken mp3 player inside her backpack, fumbling with the zipper. Adrenaline surged through her; she scrambled to get her legs under her, but they'd gone to jelly.

Then she saw him.

Out of nowhere, a bare-chested young man with funky leather underwear jogged across the street, coming toward her. His strong muscular torso rippled with each movement. Panic jangled through her, prickling her skin. Only one thought went through her mind—*get home, and fast.*

The stranger crossed the street, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Lupe, come."

How did he know her name? It sounded foreign in a guttural way. She glanced around to see if anyone else was around. The sidewalks were deserted.

She'd heard of strange men abducting girls; especially foolish ones who cut class. She never imagined this could happen to her.

Lupe threw her backpack and ran. Her apartment seemed miles away. The pounding of his sandals grew louder.

"Lupe, *paraté!*"

Oh my God, he's behind me! Lupe's heart raced.

Why was this stranger chasing her? Fearing the worst, Lupe ran harder down the littered sidewalk. A burning started in her side, ignoring the pain she pushed herself harder. Where was

everyone? If she screamed, no one would hear because of the concrete wall separating the Santa Ana Freeway from her home. Trapped. She might never see *abuelita* again.

A warm hand grabbed her wrist from behind. Fear went through her. Lupe twisted, yanked to break from his grasp. Tugging on her, he spun her around to face him. She ducked, and tried to ram her knee into his crotch, but he turned, blocking her.

“Lupe, stop.” He pressed both his hands on her shoulders. “Listen to me. I will not hurt you.”

Lupe stared at the handsome stranger for the first time. Brown hair touched his shoulders. Red decorative lines swirled around his cheekbones and forehead. Spider web like lines twisted around his cheeks. The design reminded her of something.

Then Lupe remembered. Her ruby earrings had been etched with the same markings as the design tattooed on his face.

“We need to talk.”

Stunned, Lupe nodded. Looking satisfied, he let go of her shoulders. Lupe caught a whiff of his rich earthy scent, it reminded her of moss near a creek. A sudden image of a jungle came to her. She pushed the random image aside.

Lupe jerked the bag away. “¡Hijole! Who are you?” she demanded. Anger sparked through her, heating her blood. Who was this guy and why did he think he could make her follow him?

“A messenger.”

“A what?”

The stranger cocked his head. “Do you not know?”

“Know what?”

“I was sent to return you to Ixtumea.”

The mention of the fantasy world caused shivers to go up her spine. How did he know...? Lupe narrowed her brows in anger. *What does he think I am? Stupid?*

“This must seem strange to you.”

“Strange?” She gestured to the leather scraps covering his privates. “Not at all. I always get stopped by naked men on Red Hill Drive.”

“Listen, Lupe—”

“How do *you* know my name? And who are you anyway?”

“My name is Teancum. I will answer all your questions. But first we need to go back to your abuela.”

A cold chill went through her body at the mention of her grandmother. Maybe he'd been spying on both of them. No way was she going to lead him to her apartment.

"I'm not going anywhere with you until you tell me what's going on." Lupe pushed him away. Putting her hands onto her waist, she tried to assume a fearless posture, similar to the latest Latina comic book heroine with spider powers. Though Lupe put on the front of being strong, her legs shook like a carton of jell-o

"*Dios mio.*" Teancum swore under his breath again and looked up at the sky. "Why do they all have to be so difficult?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, but you're crazy if you seriously think I'm going anywhere with you."

He made a move for her but too late. Lupe ran, her arms pumping wildly. She ran past the freeway overpass, the graffiti blending into a blackened mess.

She turned a corner. A bright white light blinded her. She blinked once and looked up. A loud rip tore across the heavens, revealing a horizontal line. The sky opened and spit out two figures. Their bodies fell earthward.

Two men...

Lupe's lips formed a mute *Oh. Oh my God, what kind of nightmare have I stumbled into?*

Fear gripped Lupe. Her world dissolved into madness. Whoever those men were, she just knew they weren't raining down from the sky to make her happy.

The men lightly touched the ground and sprang back up as if the pavement was one humongous trampoline.

Both were dark-skinned and incredibly muscular, but that wasn't what got her attention.

No way! Lupe rubbed her eyes, thinking she must be seeing things or hoping it was all an illusion. It wasn't. The men wore bristly weapons strapped to their hips, the same strange weapons she'd seen in her dream!

In both of their hands were wicked-looking clubs. The tops of the weapons were surrounded by pieces of razor-sharp serrated blades.

Frantic, she searched around for help. Didn't anyone else notice these strange men? The shoppers continued to shop, ignoring her. She felt as if she was in one of those snow globes, only instead of snowflakes she had menacing men raining down on her.

The two men took wide stances a few yards in front of her and Teancum. Grimacing, they

began to advance.

Lupe's heart clutched. "Oh my God!"

Teancum's face darkened. "Lupe, we cannot go to your *abuela's*. We need to leave, now."

"Right. Let's...leave." Lupe's body refused to move. Paralyzed with shock, she stared at the advancing thugs.

"Trust me," Teancum's voice sounded strained. "Give me your hand."

Teancum didn't wait. He grabbed her hand, his own scratchy with calluses. He gestured at the sky, waving his arm back and forth in front of them. The wind came up.

Strangely, she grew calm.

Hot gusts of air snapped like rubber bands against her skin. A stinging sensation crept up her arms travelling through her body. Her flesh crawled with an electrical charge, lifting each hair.

The sky darkened. Another gust of wind yanked her backpack off and flung it across the street. The thugs still came on, but seemed to get no closer...Her papers flew against store windows, the Arco gas station, and a baby stroller. Her long dark hair came undone from her braid and slapped her face. To her right, she saw another long line etch itself across the sky.

Teancum fell to his knees and spoke to the air. Lupe's eyes widened as she recognized some of the ancient words from *Abuela's* tales.

"What's going on?" she shouted, but the wind drowned out her words.

Crack!

She glanced up. The sky lightened, brightened. A small square opened in the East. It looked...inviting. She floated closer to it. Teancum, too. Lupe tried to pull back, to stop from being sucked into the sky. "Teancum," she screamed.

"Go, now." With a rough shove, Teancum pushed her through the opening.

* * * *

Lupe fell down a tube-like slide, and screamed. A sucking sensation twirled her around, similar to one of those water parks—but without the water. With each curve, she bumped and crashed against the transparent tubing. Faster and faster she sped down the twisting long tunnel.

The bottom of the slide disappeared. The sky sucked her downward. Her heart fell to her stomach.

Closing her eyes, she prayed. *Let this be quick. I'm so sorry I doubted you, Abuela.*

A buzzing erupted in her ears from her earrings. Sparks of red light flashed, like road flares

from her rubies and formed a crimson blanket underneath her.

All the while, words flashed through her mind. Words she somehow knew, but couldn't recall.

Orucula, Promised One

How she wished she had listened to *Abuela*. Now it was too late.

With a loud whack, Lupe landed on the ground. Though it was a surface with some give to it, the impact stung her hip and elbows knocking the wind out of her. She checked out her surroundings. Hues of green colored the lush vegetation. The tall grass reminded her of a living carpet. This had cushioned her fall somewhat, but her hip really ached. She guessed it could have been worse...she could be dead. Or maybe she *was*.

Bruised, Lupe bent forward and sucked in breath after breath of hot moist air. As she tried to get more air into her lungs, warm beads of sweat entered her mouth. The salty taste made her gag, giving her the reality check she needed. She doubted she'd be puking and dead. She turned to spit.

Teancum lay not ten feet from her. He opened his eyes...*thank God*.

"You okay?" he rasped.

"Are you kidding me? We were attacked by Neanderthals, got sucked into the sky, and I—I can't breathe right."

Teancum sprang up—he was in such good shape—and walked over to her. "Breathe slowly. It is hard the first time."

"The first time?" *There'll be others?* In between visits she would see *Abuela* again? Jeez. She needed to find a way out of this. She glanced at the hothouse of greenery, like a jungle. She climbed to her feet, took a step. Nausea overcame her. Bending over, she vomited up the morning's tortilla.

Teancum's eyes soften. Lupe glanced away. Right now she wished she could just sink through the ground. Anything would be better than having him witness her humiliation again. She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. Scanning the area around them, she asked, "Are we still being followed?"

"No, but we need to go before the warriors come. Now that Malvado's minions know about you, it's only a matter of time before they try again."

"Who's Malvado and what do those men want me for?"

“Give me your hand.” Teancum pulled her. “I will tell you more on the way.”

“Boy, you guys sure know how to treat a girl, huh?”

Teancum looked at her oddly.

“Whatever.” Lupe rolled her eyes.

Sore, bruised, and sick to her stomach, she only wanted to end this nightmare.

“I just want to go home,” she said. But there were dangerous men after her. What if they followed her home and hurt her *abuelita*? No, she couldn’t go home yet. Not till she found out what was going on in this nightmare that felt so real.

A well-worn trail lay hidden behind the damp vegetation. Squinting, Lupe could make out the outlines of towering buildings in the distance. Gray smoke belched from the tops of the structures, clouding the otherwise brilliant blue sky.

Lupe turned to Teancum. She rubbed her eyes in disbelief. “So Ixtumea does exist.”

Teancum smiled.

Who knew, all this time, her grandmother had been right. She’d been right about Ixtumea, the earrings, and...

Could gods be here, too? Lupe fingered her Virgin of Guadalupe medallion and said a silent prayer. If the ancient gods happened to be pissed at her, it wouldn’t hurt to have the protection of at least one saint.

“Come, little one.” Teancum rested his hand on her shoulder. “We need to go.”

Numbness clouded Lupe’s mind. Usually she’d snap back at this stranger’s insulting reference but for now she decided to leave it. She tagged behind Teancum, fearful to let him out of her sight.

The soles of her Oxford shoes crunched against the pathway. Hard-packed dirt was compressed together, similar to the dried mud pies she’d made as a young child.

Clusters of wild flowers grew on the sides of the road. Vivid reds, purples, and yellows blended into a living wildlife painting. Huge hummingbirds hovered over the petals.

Further up, the soft, melodic tone of people’s voices grew louder. Lupe froze. She didn’t know what to expect. Would these natives look like Teancum or something else?

She clutched her medallion tightly. A fuzzy dreamlike sensation engulfed her. This couldn’t be happening to her. But just like in her dream, she hung back and waited.

Sure enough, a few men and women strolled by. The women wore ankle-length cotton

dresses in a rainbow of colors—red, orange, and yellow. The men wore simple loincloths and beaded necklaces around their necks. Not all were as fit as Teancum. More than a few prominent stomachs rolled around.

“Lupe.” Teancum placed his hand on her shoulder. “Do not worry. We are expected.”

“Expected?”

“No one here will harm you.”

Surprised, Lupe stared at Teancum. Had he forgotten those scary men back in Tustin? Once more the strong feeling she had experienced earlier rushed back. As long as Teancum was around, no one would harm her. This thought comforted her.

One thing did trouble her though. Who could be expecting her?

Lupe glanced down at her torn uniform, now smudged with dirt and vegetation. She felt awkward and out of place. More than one person raised their brows in passing.

The sound of laughter made her turn.

Off the side of the road, a group of young children hid behind their mothers. Giggling, they batted their long dark lashes at Lupe. Most only wore loincloths, exposing dimpled bottoms. One young boy, probably around three, darted out and pulled on her leg. Startled, Lupe jumped. The boy scampered away to hide under his mother’s skirt.

Well, now I know I’m not dreaming. The warm touch of the boy’s grubby hand on her ankle, his musky scent, and those amazing long dark lashes could only be real.

Teancum folded his arms and watched the encounter with a smile.

Lupe jogged up the trail to him. Close up, Teancum’s large brown eyes radiated warmth and humor. Lupe never cared much for tattoos, but his were different. The decorative pattern around his face only intensified his good looks.

No: she didn’t think she would have any problem following this Mayan Prince Charming.

Lupe continued down the trail, keeping Teancum’s strong back in constant view. She didn’t want to get lost. Still she found it hard not to absorb all the other sights.

Stone buildings of different heights were scattered throughout the village. Layered on top was straw or some other kind of grass. *Boy, that’s a fire waiting to happen,*

Everywhere she looked, something exotic and strange appeared. A dark wave of people rushed by her, holding clay containers topped with rainbow hued corn, chilis, and avocados. She wished she had brought a camera. No one, not even Marisol, would believe any of this.

Splashed on the sides of dwellings were bright reds, yellows, and greens. The paintings were huge, like those murals in Mexico City or downtown Los Angeles.

As she proceeded through the village, many different smells assaulted her senses. A hearty whiff of corn masa and beans made her homesick. The aromatic smells reminded her of *Abuela's* kitchen. The corn tortillas and spicy hot chilies made her stomach growl.

She maintained her pace behind Teancum. Around the corner she heard the clank of stone against stone. Some men were constructing some sort of structure. Lupe stopped in front of a pyramid-shaped building. She rubbed her eyes, but it wasn't an illusion.

Out of nowhere, her earlobes started burning. Lupe put her hands to one of her earrings and flinched. The closer she got to the building, the warmer the stones became.

The throbbing increased. Lupe grimaced.

As quickly as it came, the pain vanished.

"Welcome, Lupe."

She looked upward. The imposing figure of a thin elderly woman stood on top of a flight of stone stairs. Her regal stance indicated her to be of some importance. Several men, probably bodyguards, stood on each side of her. Long white shirts exposed muscular chests tattooed with bright red patterns. Beaded necklaces of all colors and hues. Bright reds, oranges, and blues graced their necks. Clasped in their hands were strange club-like weapons.

The same spider like patterns covered the long cape wrapped around the woman. It had the same pattern as both Teancum's face and her earrings.

"You have done a good job, Teancum." She motioned to Lupe. "Come here Lupe, we have been waiting for you."

Lupe felt as if she knew this woman, but how could this be? The woman somehow reminded her of *Abuela* with her walnut wrinkled face and spotted arms. Within her topaz eyes a light burned similar to her own *abuela*. Lupe felt its presence fall on her.

She hiked up the steep flight of stairs. Gasping for air, she finally made it to the top and faced the older woman.

"This must all seem strange to you, little one." The older woman stroked Lupe's face. Her golden thin bracelets slid down her arm. Gently she moved her hand to the earrings.

"Ah! She finally gave them to you. Did she also tell you their importance?" Lupe looked at the woman in confusion and shook her head."Well, at least you are here. Tonight we will

celebrate your arrival...”

“Why am I here?” Lupe interrupted. “And who are you?”

The older woman’s bodyguards’ hands flew to their sides, gripping the same weapons Lupe had seen in her vision.

“It’s all right.” The woman placed her hand on one of the guard’s shoulder. “She does not know our ways.”

She signaled for Teancum.

Teancum stepped forward, “Yes, Revered One?”

“Take Lupe to Ixchel’s temple. The temple servants have been alerted of her coming to help them in preparing a meal for her.” She turned back to face Lupe. “Lupe, you might think this is all strange, but your presence is important. Forgive us if we seem to have forgotten our manners.”

“Wait a moment here,” Lupe demanded. “You still haven’t told me who you are.”

“I am the Revered One. Tonight I will tell you more.” Turning, she walked to a carved stone door in the building. Her bodyguards followed.

Lupe shook her head in amazement. Once more her *abuela*’s stories came to her; and the importance of accepting the earrings.

She stared around her and could’ve sworn she’d been plopped right in the middle of a 3-D version of *abuela*’s tales. For some eerie reason she felt like one of the characters.

She racked her brain trying to remember some of the names. Spider Goddess, Kish, and some sort of girl prophetess...

Lupe flung her hand to her mouth. No way. That would be too strange.

Could she be the one *Abuela* said needed to save Ixtumea?

Once more the earrings hummed.

Oh great. Now, Lupe knew she would get sick again.

Chapter Five

“Damn!” Malvado threw his goblet of wine across the hall, the purple liquid spreading out on the hard mosaic floor. Tezcatlipoca had promised him a power to surpass anything in his old world, but only when he faithfully found the missing piece to the puzzle. This puzzle piece was in the guise of a young teenage girl, who—as far as he knew—continued to be clueless of her part in this world.

Good. He would use her naiveté to his advantage.

The sound of leather sandals slipping on the now-forgotten wine bought him back to attention.

His servant Omni slowly got back up and brushed his backside before he timidly bowed down on one knee. “My Lord, a messenger has arrived with news.”

Malvado glanced down and noticed Omni’s knee quivering. He watched with smugness as Omni pushed his hand down on the betraying knee. This only made the movement worse.

Malvado held back a smirk and instead showed the facade of beloved ruler. *It wouldn’t do me any good if these idiots knew what I really think, now would it?*

“Does he know the signs?” Malvado asked.

“Yes, my lord.” Omni briefly glanced up before bowing once more.

The secret signs were what gained access to the hidden kingdom. Without this knowledge, no one could get to him. They would be immediately killed.

“Bring him to me,” Malvado said softly.

Omni still flinched before he turned, careful not to trip once more on the growing purple puddle.

Two servant women quietly wiped up the mess behind Omni. Malvado ignored them and tapped his fingers impatiently on the arm of his throne.

The door creaked open to admit the visitor, his finely decorated cloak hiding his features. The guards stepped aside, letting the visitor proceed down the long pathway, the torch lights his only guide.

This stranger had traveled some distance—the hem of his long robe was frayed, torn, and black with dirt. He also was unwashed and stank. Malvado wrinkled his nose in disgust.

The messenger strutted forward and stopped just short of the throne. He pushed his hood back and stared up into Malvado's face.

He displayed the secret sign to Malvado. He raised his left hand forward with his thumb and index finger together. Then he swept his hand quickly across his breast before dropping it to his side. Satisfied, Malvado nodded, and with his bejeweled hand signaled for the man to speak.

"My lord, I came as fast as I could," he said loudly. "She is here."

"Who's here?" Malvado motioned him to come closer.

Swaggering with his own importance, the visitor stepped closer to Malvado.

"The chosen one. She is here. I came as quickly as I could."

Malvado knew it could only be the girl he had viewed in the web. Excitement pulsed through his body. *If this is true, then....* pushing these thoughts aside, he shrugged indifferently. "How do you know it's her?" Malvado sat back and studied the stranger for any sign he might know more.

"She had the sign," he replied. "The symbol of the chosen one was stamped in her ears."

Malvado rose off his throne. "Where is she?"

"In the village of Irreantum, my lord." The messenger meekly shifted his gaze to the floor, but Malvado wasn't fooled.

"Thank you for your diligence," Malvado said and smiled. "Please. We are all friends here." Malvado's words were saccharine-sweet. With deliberate slowness the messenger got to his feet and smiled back.

"Thank you, my lord."

Malvado glanced at his guards. They were standing on either side of him. Fire torches in clay holders lined the earthen walls; the flickering flames cast grotesque shadows on the guards.

Malvado focused once more on the man standing in front of him. "And what is the name of the one who has brought me this news?"

"Oh, I'm Zoram, from the same village." Zoram's breath smelt like old fermented wine. He was practically salivating with excitement. This only repulsed Malvado more.

"Guards, kindly take Zoram to a room where we will show him our appreciation." Malvado snapped his fingers and the guards advanced on Zoram, whipping out their *macuahuas*.

Malvado watched the interchange between his warriors and Zoram with amusement. When Zoram finally realized where he was going, his overconfidence crumbled into disbelief. With

bulging eyes he frantically searched the chambers for an escape.

Turning to run, his long cloak got caught between his legs. He fell to the ground. One of the warriors laughed as he grabbed Zoram by his greasy hair and yanked him back up.

Malvado chuckled. “Now, men, be gentle with our guest. We wouldn’t want to cause him any *unnecessary* pain, would we?”

Malvado’s laughter louder. All his followers joined in.

“Zoram, please don’t think I’m being rude, but I need to know if this information is true or if you are yet another spy.”

A guard whacked Zoram in the stomach causing him to bend over in pain.

“My—lord—I’d—never—” The words gurgled out of Zoram’s mouth as the guards dragged him away.

“Now, men, is that anyway to treat our guest?” Malvado shook his head in mock indignation. “I’m so sorry you will miss the party, but I’m sure my men can help you celebrate in their own special way.”

“No, please. Don’t!” Zoram’s parting cries grew fainter as the guards dragged him out of the chamber.

“Why are you still here?” Malvado glared at his remaining court. No one answered. Everyone left his chambers in one sudden movement.

Malvado waited until everyone had departed before he made his way back to the ancient tapestry. He lifted the cloth and walked down the many steps before entering the hidden chamber. His part of the web hung down before him. Before too long all the web would be his, rewoven the way he wanted. He searched the web, now with a larger hole, to see if what Zoram had said was indeed true.

“Well done, my son.”

A tall hooded figure leaned nonchalantly against the corner wall, the darkness of the chambers shadowing his features. His presence caused the hair to rise up on the back of Malvado’s neck. No one else knew of his existence—only the privileged few that could count themselves as his true disciples.

“Is it her?” Malvado asked.

Tezcatlipoca smirked. “Yes. But you need to move quickly before the false one gets to her. Or else everything we have worked for will be lost.”

As he came closer, Malvado felt the sting of hot breath on him.

“Remember, I will not be disappointed.”

Even though Malvado suppressed a shudder, he had to smile. His destiny was here and nothing—or no one—would stand in his way to get it.

“Don’t worry. You won’t be disappointed.”

Chapter Six

Lupe felt as if she'd fallen into some twisted version of the *Wizard of Oz*. *Jeez, at least Dorothy had a stupid dog for company!* While she had—she took another sideways glance at Teancum—some Mayan warrior wannabe who looked like he'd had a field day at the local tattoo shop.

So what if he was a major hottie? Lupe scowled. Because of him, she now stood at the top of some stone stairs, in a mystical land; with two other Mayan bullies somewhere out in the jungle ready to do something bad to her.

“Come, Lupe.” Teancum touched her shoulder. “You are expected at the temple.”

She glanced up at Teancum. “Maybe I don't want to go this temple. Take me home. Now.”

“You are needed here.”

“Back off.” Lupe took a step backward. “I don't care what you or any of these people think; I'm going home.”

Two large hands grasped her. “You are coming with me. If I have to carry you, I will.”

“You wouldn't dare.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“Okay.” Lupe slapped his hands off her. “I'll go, but don't think I'll like it. Protector? Yeah, right. More like prison warden.”

Teancum, without breaking his gaze, leaned closer, his face only inches from her own.

“You need to trust me enough so I can help you, little one.”

Lupe ducked instinctively, fearful of being found. “You mean those thugs back in Tustin *are* here?” Gruesome images of those men dashing up the stairs and bashing her brains onto the stones made her queasy.

“No. They will not harm you.”

“You saw them. My God, they wanted to kill me.”

He put one finger on her mouth, silencing any further complaints. “Later, I will tell you more. For now, you need to go to Ixchel's temple to rest.”

She pushed away. His touch made her uncomfortable; and, even though she hated to admit it, she was tired. No way around it, she just had to take his word no one would mess with her

while here. But that didn't mean she couldn't try to find a way out.

In the meantime she'd try not to argue.

“O-kay. Whatever.”

Lupe made her way down the stairs. Teancum followed a step behind.

Mid-day shadows creep in, covering everything in Ixtumea with their cooling touches.

Once off the stone steps, Teancum turned and proceeded back on a dirt pathway. Lupe pushed herself harder, breaking into a fast trot in order to keep Teancum in plain view. His broad back wasn't hard to make out in the thinning crowd. Most of the villagers had left the area, probably for their homes.

More of the jungle appeared the further they went away from the village. Huge trees blocked out the sky. Teancum made a quick turn to the right. A stone wall of some sort appeared, heavy vines snaked over the top. Large rocks, not unlike cobblestones, covered the ground.

Not far ahead a group of buildings appeared. Teancum stopped in front of a longer building, similar to all the others they had seen previously. The one-story rectangular structure opened out on the sides.

Once again Lupe couldn't see any doors on the stone temple. *Don't they know about doors here? Talk about trusting your neighbors!*

Around the temple, many women sat crossed-legged on straw mats. In their hands were clay bowls and some kind of food. A whiff of a spicy aroma caused her stomach to rumble. She put her arms across her midsection in an attempt to silence the embarrassing noise. From the corner of her eye she caught a few of the women smiling at her obvious discomfort.

When Teancum and Lupe got closer, several of the women stood up, their bowls still held tightly in their hands. One of the village women, wearing a pair of dangling earrings, took a closer step before stopping in front of Teancum.

“Welcome, my warrior,” she said, leaning yet closer to him. Teancum quickly took a step back—to the amusement of Lupe and the other women.

Lupe assumed she must be the leader of these women by the way the others deferred to her. Also, even though all the women had red lines and dots tattooed on their faces, this woman had what appeared to be a small red spider on the bottom of her right cheek.

The other women resembled tall, skinny, Mexican Barbie Dolls with long black hair flowing behind their backs. Each of the women wore a white peasant blouse with a skirt knotted at the

side. The skirts were bright blue with large circle designs reminding her of the 1960s tie-dye clothes popular in the little shops in Laguna Beach.

“Um, Teancum, who are these women?” Lupe asked.

“They are the guardians of the Spider Goddess. This is Abish, the head guardian, who will help you in your preparations to serve the Spider Goddess.”

A slight breeze lifted a matted covering from the dwelling to reveal a glimpse of a huge obsidian statue with a web-like cloth wrapped around it. *No way! Her grandmother had been right all this time? The Spider Goddess really did exist?* Lupe crossed herself.

“You must be hungry after such a long journey,” said Abish. One of the women approached Lupe, carrying a clay plate and what looked like homemade tortillas. On the side were black beans and something looking like chopped up *pico de gallo*. She hesitated for a moment as she breathed in the rich smell of the tortillas. But her hunger won out. She took one shell off the plate.

She bit into the corn shell and let the warm beans glide down into her stomach.

“These are really good,” Lupe said between mouthfuls of the food, some of the beans spilling onto her chin.

Now, m’ija! You know better than that! Abuela’s words flashed through her mind about her lack of manners. Lupe looked down at the mess she was making and felt the hot flash of embarrassment. *Okay, Abuela!* Lupe brushed a stray bean off her shirt and slowed down to enjoy the food.

Another woman brought her a cup. Lupe couldn’t make out what it was before she put it to her lips. The slightly sweet taste reminded her of chocolate. She drank from the cup until nothing remained.

She felt a little embarrassed at how fast she had wolfed everything down. A slight burp erupted from her mouth. Embarrassed, Lupe covered her mouth but no one commented.

After she finished eating, Abish approached.

“Come, you must be tired. I will show you to your room.”

She then remembered Teancum and all he had done for her so far. Even if he was a pain in the butt, she knew she should remember her manners and thank him. She didn’t even want to think what could have happened without his help.

Just when she started to say, “Thank you,” she noticed an intense exchange between him and

Abish.

In that moment Lupe caught a glimpse of painful longing in Abish's large doe eyes. Lupe squirmed and felt uncomfortable being witness to this public display of affection—or *denied* affection would be a better term. Ashamed, she quickly looked away.

Teancum nervously tapped his leg. A slight hint of sweat glistened his upper lip.

"Listen to what Abish says. She'll take good care of you." Teancum swirled on his heel and left, going back the way they had both come.

Lupe froze. Panic shot through her body. She couldn't believe it: after all Teancum's promises of watching over her, he decided to just leave her with this group of strangers. *Great, now what am I supposed to do?*

The night wrapped a thick blanket of coolness around Ixtumea. Lupe heard the village's own version of nightlife, the chirping of insects, croaking frogs, and monkeys screeching in the distance.

She cleared her throat twice, hoping to get Abish's attention. "Abish, where am I supposed to go?"

"Forgive me. You must want to rest. I will show you to your room."

"Whenever you're ready," Lupe said.

Lupe followed Abish to the long stone building.

A bamboo-like wall hanging covered the entrance. One of the guardians held it aside. Dim light flickered on the walls and spot lighting a large black statue placed at the entrance. In shock she covered her mouth.

The black obsidian rock had been made into the most realistic spider statue she had ever seen, but with one creepy twist. A woman's features were chiseled into the stone. She had never cared much for spiders, but one with human traits was too much!

Draped around the edges of the statue were thin strands of a spider web. The opaque fibers reminded Lupe of mummies from Egypt wrapped in linen strips for thousands of years. Her leg felt itchy. She walked carefully around the webs, hoping not to encounter any spiders.

She made her way further into the temple. On the ground were assortments of different-sized rugs, all beige in color. On the walls were long sticks held in clay holders. *Oh, great, no electricity. But what did I expect from this primitive place? There probably are tons of bugs here too.* Just thinking about large cockroaches, snakes, and even worse, spiders crawling on the hard-

packed dirt floor, made Lupe cringe.

A soft chuckle startled her, making her jump in fright.

“You should see how funny you look.”

In the corner, a girl her age smiled. She wore the same outfit as the others, white peasant blouse with a long beige skirt that billowed in front, covering her crossed legs. Her red circles tattooed on her cheeks crinkled out around her eyes, due to the humor she apparently saw in Lupe’s predicament.

“What’s so funny?” Lupe folded her arms and glared at the giggling girl.

Before she could answer, a tight-lipped woman, behind her, yanked the girl off the ground.

“Tonantzin.” Two deep vertical creases appeared on the older woman’s otherwise smooth face. “Go, now.”

“Yes, Chiza,” Tonantzin said as she bent down to pick up a bowl. As she passed Lupe she gave her a wink.

“Oh, the gods help us,” Chiza muttered under her breath. “Lazy child.” She then left.

Abish frowned. “Do not mind her. Come, your room is not far.”

As Lupe walked around the strange spider statue, her eyes followed Tonantzin.

Good, at least someone around here isn’t old. Maybe, I’ll see her again and she can fill me in on what’s going on.

Dark stains colored the stone walls which stretched down the corridor. Smoke from the many lit torques on the wall, escaped out a hole in the ceiling. Several woven baskets and containers sat either on the floor or on wooden tables. The strong smell of herbs came from one of the bowls close to the wall. And hanging in the middle was the largest hammock Lupe had ever seen.

“Here is your room. You will want to rest before the night’s feast.” With one hand, Abish pulled a mosquito net away from the hammock and waited for Lupe to get in.

“You’ve got to be kidding. No way am I sleeping in that.”

Abish ignored her comment and waited.

Lupe shook her head in protest. The thought of sleeping in *that* swinging fabric thing made her feel sick to her stomach.

Or was it the hammock? A slight dizzy sensation came over her, causing her to bend over.

“Whoa, maybe I can just rest for a moment.” She felt like a passenger on a ship during a bad

storm, light-headed and woozy.

It's probably the food and everything else in this weird place, Lupe thought.

She glanced once more at the hammock. The large fabric bed even had pillows of some sort just waiting for her. Other people had slept this way without harm, why couldn't she?

“Well, I guess it can't hurt to take a short nap.”

Abish helped Lupe as she made her way into the hammock. Abish gently pushed a strand of hair away from Lupe's face, which reminded her of Abuela. As Abish lowered the fishnet, she hummed a familiar lullaby. Lupe recognized the melody; *Abuela* often had hummed it to her as she sat by the edge of her bed, waiting for her to finally go to sleep.

The slow swaying motion of the hammock along with the familiar tune gave her comfort, like an old security blanket of her youth. Her eyelids grew heavier until a slight movement in the corner of the room caught her attention. Small dark spots scurried toward her. *That's strange. Must be my imagination.* She finally closed her eyes, oblivious to the ring of spiders completely circling the ground below her.

Chapter Seven

Tustin, California

The hard landing on concrete knocked the wind from Concha and left her gasping for air. Going back through the web never was easy and this ordeal had proved especially painful.

“*Ay, Dios Mio.*” Concha turned her head to find out where she’d landed. She saw a large dumpster pushed against a concrete wall overfilled with the smelly thrift store trash.

For a brief moment, she thought she’d become sick. Memories rushed at her of being pushed against the same pockmarked wall and a group of *Cholos* leering at her. A flash of a pocket-knife...

No. I won't go there. I have more important things to deal with, namely getting my daughter.

Once she denied reliving her own past, she was able to focus more on her task and the consequence of returning to her world.

From head to toe, her body ached. One side of her long skirt was ripped clear up her thigh. She still had on the native dress of Ixtumea, white peasant blouse, skirt, and leather laced-up sandals. Concha regretted she hadn't had time to change but she didn't have much say in this, did she?

Slowly she pushed against the dumpster until she got to a standing position. A dizzy sensation came over her and her legs wobbled in protest. She took a couple deep breaths before the feeling passed.

A flash from a passing car blinded her. She covered her eyes to protect against the piercing brightness. She'd forgotten how alien the world could be, even to her. She missed the brilliance of the stars in the Ixtumean sky and the quiet stillness. Here, the noise and glare of artificial light were unbearable.

Her senses were especially strong here in Tustin. She detected the overly sweet smell of marijuana close by, its fumes mixing with the disgusting fried meat scent from the fast-food joint across the street.

Home. It'd been an eternity since she'd been here. Even in the darkness her eyes detected many changes since her last visit some eight years ago. Huge truck-like vehicles now were the norm and more stores had lights on, even at this late hour.

Concha walked to the corner of Camino Real. The smoked joint odor grew stronger the closer she got. Sure enough, she saw two teenagers, dressed in Goth black, making out under a signpost. Long silver chains were draped on their pants, reaching down to chunky black army boots.

The girl opened one eye and stared at her.

Playfully pushing on the boy's chest, she pointed at Concha.

"Hey, last I looked it wasn't Halloween." A large gold pierced tongue ring slurred the girl's voice.

Her boyfriend's lips left wet smacking kisses up her neck.

The girl slapped his chest to get his attention.

"Jack, check her out." He turned his head, his eyes scanning Concha body, from head to toe, lingering too long on her exposed leg. With a grin he shoved his girlfriend away and swaggered forward.

"Hey, lady, want some fun?" He moved his hand down his leg in a suggestive manner. A lecherous smirk gave her a hint of what kind of fun he meant.

Concha knew both of them were still under the effects of the drug, which would make what she was going to do easier.

She closed her eyes and searched the boy's clouded mind for an image of something so horrific, guaranteed to scare the crap out of him.

She smiled. The boy's boogey man, *la llorona*, the weeping lady, floated toward her. Just the mention of this urban legend caused children nightmares; she would apparently work her twisted magic on him, too. Concha shaped the image in his mind, using herself with a more ghastly appearance, torn bloody white gown, skeleton features, and of course the infamous wail.

Still oblivious to what was going on, the couple laughed and shouted out a string of lewd things that awaited her.

Suddenly a shriek of terror ripped the air. A horrified expression on the boy's face.

"Get the hell away from me!" The boy scrambled backward, his gaze riveted to he.. In his haste to flee, the long metal chain on his pants got tangled between his legs and he fell. Quickly he got back up, screaming into the street.

Concha glanced back at the girl, who followed the whole scene with wide-eyed disbelief. With relief Concha figured the girl would get a clue and not bother her.

“What the hell did you do?”

Concha stopped at the end of the street and turned. She caught a glint of light from the girl’s hand as she ran toward her clutching a small knife.

Concha froze, concentrating with all her might the same image *la llorona* into the girl’s mind.

The girl stopped, the knife falling from her hand. An inhuman scream erupted from her lips before she crumbled to the concrete. The combination of drugs and the hallucination proved to be too much.

Concha glared at the fallen girl in contempt. *That will teach you both to mess with something you don’t understand.*

She slammed against the girl, pushing her out of the way. Scanning the street, Concha checked for witnesses but other than a few cars that drove by, no one was around. Turning, she crossed the street, refusing for now to do yet more damage. She had more pressing things to take care of. Up ahead the apartment stood. Tattered curtains hung in the barred windows and the litter of someone’s dinner were scattered throughout the area. A few beat-up cars lined the street, yellow flyers stuck to the windshields.

Her daughter had been living in this hellhole, but Concha’s lover would change all of that. Didn’t he promise both her and Lupe a better life? For a moment, a memory of happier times flashed through her head, dancing to Santana’s latest single while Lupe doubled over in giggles.

Just as quickly the image left when a sharp pain exploded in her head. Raising her hand to her head, she bent down, trying to still the pain.

Her mother must know she was back.

Chapter Eight

An older woman appeared in one of the windows. Concha glared at the figure through her tears. The throbbing pain refused to let go but Concha pushed forward.

She knew her mother still had some powerful links to Ixtumea which included the Spider Goddess. But Concha also had protectors and she would use her powers, even if it meant killing her own mother.

The dingy apartment in Tustin had not changed. Even in the dim florescent light Concha could make out the flaking paint from the building and several missing tiles on the roof.

She caught a glimpse of her mother, Cipriana, half hidden by a sheer white drape in the top right hand window. Her mother's thoughts tried to slam into her mind, battering painfully against any resistance she could put up. The intensity increased the closer she got to the apartment.

She walked up the rickety stairs, each step more agonizing than the last. She would have gone mad if not for a small onyx medallion she clutched in her hand. The gift from Malvado had promised strength and power to the one who wore it. Concha gripped the necklace tightly as she climbed up the stairs.

On the landing she turned and found number twenty-seven, the seven dangling loosely and ready to fall. A tattered welcome mat lay next to the door along with two potted cactus plants. Concha thrust her hand into the pots, looking for the key to the apartment, oblivious to the sharp needles cutting into her flesh. She flung dirt and pots over the edge, the brown dirt splattering with the crimson of her blood.

As she kicked the mat aside the door creaked open, revealing a dark empty room. No one appeared inside, but Concha wasn't fooled. She closed the door behind her.

On the walls were the same stupid paintings of numerous saints with which she'd grown up. The Virgin of Guadalupe glowed in the middle, dark hair flowing. Her arms stretched out to the collection of other gods and warriors from Ixtumea sharing space on the wall.

Absent was the all-powerful Spider Goddess, who her mother served in this world. Concha often wondered what would happen once the god was destroyed. An image of her mother's crumpled body filled her mind. Instead of happiness, she felt a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Concha, you don't have to do this, begged her mother's voice.

Concha flicked her head to the side in an effort to exorcise this unwanted demon. Stronger voices whooshed around in her mind, battering at the foreign intruder until finally it became silent.

The pain now gone, she cackled in relief. Feeling more confident, she faced the long dark hallway and cried out, "I know you're here, *mami*. Tell me where Lupe is and we'll both leave."

Her mother strolled half-way down the staircase, clutching her black *reboza*-scarf in one hand while the other gripped the banister. Concha caught a whiff of spices and herbs, probably some charm to protect against evil.

Her mother glanced down at her with a mix of pain and anger.

"You think you can come back anytime and get her? I know what you want and you aren't welcome here. Now go, before—"

Don't listen to the old fool, Concha! You're more powerful. Voices snickered and giggled in her mind.

"Before what *mami*? You think your gods will save you?" Concha laughed.

She had heard more than her share of these stupid folktales and refused to believe any of the myths. In all her life she had never seen any truth behind the tales and wouldn't fall victim to them now. Anyway, she had seen so much more than anything her mother could possibly imagine, with Malvado promising her goddess-hood, itself, once she had Lupe and returned to his kingdom.

Her mother shook her head sadly.

"You still haven't learned, *m'ija*. You are nothing but a plaything to him until he gets the real prize—and then he'll discard you like the others before you."

As her mother made her way down the stairs, another picture caught Concha's eye. Ignoring her mother, Concha stepped closer to get a better look. A young girl looked down at her with a smile.

"Lupita." She silently mouthed the name of the daughter she had left so long ago. Images rushed through her head, giving birth to her own *milagro*-miracle, dancing to Santana, and even the sweet smile. The realization she had given up her own *hija* tore at her soul.

Concha dropped her guard before she noticed, too late, something in her mother's hand. Wisps of light escaped from her fist before she threw the object at Concha.

“Vayanse!”

How dare she tell me to leave? Concha stepped forward before she doubled over in pain. Piercing pain exploded in her head.

She screamed in agony. Drops of blood from her nose entered her mouth, the bitter salty taste causing her to gag.

“No. I will not let you.”

Through hot tears she saw her mother now totally engulfed in the bright red light. Concha swore under her breath. She had foolishly forgotten the power of the rubies.

Cipriana inched closer. Concha watched her mother’s hands move quickly in front of her.

“You will never get her as long as you are his pawn. Now leave.” A tingle started at Concha’s feet and crawled its way up her body. She wanted to get up and work out the prickly sensation but couldn’t. In horror she watched her feet dissolve, erased by the rubies. The medallion burned on her throat and she heard the voices surrender with a whimper.

You might give up but I will not!

She struggled with every ounce of strength against this unseen power yanking her back to Ixtumea. Beads of sweat fell from her as she tugged against the power of the ruby.

Her mother continued chanting.

“You are one with the night. To the night you will return. Never again stain this house with evil. This evil I send back to whence it came.”

Her mother’s light grew while Concha faded to nothing. For a brief moment she saw the Spider Goddess herself, blended with her mother’s essence until both were one.

“Bruja! Don’t think this is the end. I’ll find her and then—”

The air parted in the middle of the room before the jagged edges materialized into a glimpse of the tunnel under Malvado’s kingdom. A high-pitched wind howled through the apartment and pulled her along with other objects into the sudden opening. Novelas, sections from the Spanish newspaper, *La Opinion*, and a couple paintings of saints swirled around the apartment. She felt like a rubber band finally snapping with her mother’s parting words.

“Oh, *m’ija!* Why, do you play his game! Do you not know how this hurts me?”

These parting words stung her, chipping at her mask of indifference. Then soon she too was swallowed up in the void, the voices silent once more.

Chapter Nine

Irreantum, Ixtumea

Moonlight crept into Ixchel's temple, casting shadows behind the wooden tables, bowls, and wall hangings, giving the room a supernatural feel.

The rays slowly inched their way to the mosquito net covering the slumbering girl, escaping through tiny openings in the delicate weaving. Faint wisps of light crisscrossed her sleeping features.

As she tried to escape this terrible nightmare, the tightly woven fabric of the hammock squeaked in protest.

A moan escaped her mouth.

A small group of black spiders had invaded her dreams. Thin streamers of silk, like long blond hair, cascaded down from the roof of the room with spiders of different sizes and shapes. They hit the floor with a soft *poof!* and scampered under and around Lupe's bed.

Silent at first, the mass of spiders emitted a high-pitched squeal that echoed in her room. Outside, dogs howled, other animals joining the cry.

The words were indecipherable to humans but the meaning was clear enough. Somehow Lupe needed to do something, and do it now.

The spiders scurried and flowed into one big black mass, moving toward her. Inch by inch, until...

The thump of the woven door covering hit the wall behind Lupe's hammock, waking her.

Startled, Lupe screamed. She expected to see spiders on the ground, or even worse, crawling on her body. *Eww!*

She pushed the light cotton blanket from her torso, checking to see if any of the spiders had crawled in. A tickling sensation moved up her arms, as if someone or something brushed a feather against her. She shuddered with repulsion.

Not finding anything, she bent over the side, careful not to fall out, to see if any spiders were under her hammock. Sighing with relief, she turned her attention back to the source of the noise.

The torches had died out and it was hard to see. A familiar tangy woodsy scent filled her room.

Teancum.

“Lupe, the Revered One waits.” Next to the tapestry stood her warrior, his bulky build filling up the small space. “You need to come, now.”

“Don’t sneak up like that. You scared the crap out of me.” Lupe felt a little relieved but still wanted to let Teancum know she didn’t appreciate being wakened. The nightmare, she didn’t have to share. At least not for now. Then she remembered what he asked.

“What?”

“The Revered One has called a meeting to announce your arrival. All of importance will be there.”

“When?” Lupe rubbed the crusty sleep from her eyes. How she wished she could just roll back to sleep and find out all of this was just a bad dream.

“Now.” Teancum walked to the foot of her hammock, glaring at her, his foot lightly tapping on the ground to show his impatience.

Lupe shook her head slightly; hoping the weirdness of all this, Ixtumea and Teancum, could somehow vanish.

“For once, can’t someone come to meet me? I don’t think that’s too much to ask.” Lupe pulled the blanket over her head, the roughness brushing against her cheek.

She peeked out and saw Teancum shrug. He walked over to the back wall, picking up a shawl-like garment.

“Here: you’ll need this.” Teancum tossed the covering to her. Lupe’s reached out and touched the wrap. The material felt silky between her fingers. It was brightly colored with a design either dyed or woven into it, similar to her earrings.

Lupe pushed the blanket to the side and tried to sit up. After a few attempts, she put the cloak around her shoulders.

Teancum motioned for her to follow and quickly left the building. Her so-called warrior was a strange one. *One moment he’s telling me to trust him, the next he is cold and aloof.*

On the way out Lupe scanned the ground for bugs. She stepped lightly. The thought of squashing spiders grossed her out.

Not paying attention, she bumped into the large statue guarding the entrance. Parts of her wrap touched the gossamer webs on the bottom of the statue. She tugged on the wrap, hoping not to disturb anything hibernating underneath.

She held the wrap at arm's length and shook it, hoping no spiders were on it.

Teancum's deep laugh rumbled close by.

"You don't have to worry about spiders here, Lupe."

"Eww." The thought of one of those bugs crawling on her body made Lupe wrinkle her nose in disgust. "I can't believe you said that. Spiders are nasty."

A shiver went up her neck. Did he know about her nightmare?

Teancum crossed back over to her, his large hand reaching for the wrap. He gave it one shake and carefully replaced it around her shoulders.

"Little one, if a spider did appear to you, it means only to protect and guide you. Consider it good fortune."

"Yeah, right. Spiders equal good times. I'll try to remember that."

Teancum brushed her cheek carefully with the back of his hand. His brown eyes looked into hers and then just as quickly he dropped his hand.

"Come, we need to go to the meeting. The Revered One will tell you more."

For once she was speechless. Lupe didn't know what to think of this whole situation, the spiders, Ixtumea, the Revered One, and even Teancum. Maybe at this meeting she'd get some of her questions answered. The main thing she wanted to know was how to go home. She wouldn't just ask, heck no, she'd demand it.

Lupe followed behind Teancum.

Behind her, in the *orucula's* temple, a couple spiders slid down the fine draglines attached to the ceiling. They joined the other spiders behind the statue, waiting.

* * * *

Lupe trailed behind Teancum on the way to the meeting with the Revered One. They passed other buildings, smaller than the one she had slept in. A long boxy structure complete with guava and cherry trees popped up around the corner.

Torches in clay holders jutted out on both sides of the doorway. Two large bare-chested men with necklaces guarded the entrance. On their heads were hats with iridescent macaw feathers. The flames from the nearby torches made the plumage shine even brighter.

They both nodded at Teancum and yielded to let him enter. Strong odors escaped from inside. A zesty smell of spices intermingled with a too sweet perfume scent. A haunting melody from a pipe echoed inside.

Teancum touched her lightly on the shoulder. "Follow me." He motioned to the opening.

Another huge warrior stood guard. Curiosity got the best of Lupe, and she couldn't resist gazing at him. A strange design of red curving lines that looked like a huge spider web covered his whole chest. She moved closer. The tattoo had been carved deep into his body.

The warrior peered down at her, reminding her of some arrogant ass. She bit the inside of her mouth to stop the urge to tell him what to do with himself.

Lupe shrugged her shoulders. "Cool tattoo."

Inside, many strange men sat in a large circle. In the middle of the formation a large fire burned, the smoke escaping through a large opening in the top of the structure.

Older men dressed in bright elaborate costumes glanced up at her with curiosity and even disdain. Long cloaks in bright sapphire and purple were draped around their shoulders. Various animal headpieces were attached to top of their heads. They sat cross-legged on the dirt floor. Standing behind them were men similar to Teancum. The older men had on turquoise, ruby, and jade jewellery, not only on their necks, but also arms, faces, ears and even legs.

One of the men, bald and with a protruding beer belly, rose. "You have been expected, Lupe," he said. "I am Mulek, one of the high priests of this council. Please come join us."

He motioned for her to come closer and the many golden bracelets on his arm jingled.

Lupe searched for Teancum. He went to stand behind an older man who sat cross-legged like the others. This confused her; somehow, she thought she was Teancum's responsibility. Didn't he bring her here?

Lupe checked out everybody sitting in the circle.

Yes, the men were older and probably middle-aged, but she could tell by their expensive outfits they were rich and had some importance in this village.

She made her way toward Mulek, his double chins becoming more pronounced the closer she got. His large lips were turned up into a sneer that made her fold her arms protectively across her chest. This guy definitely grossed her out.

No way am I sitting by that creep. Lupe's heart pounded so hard she thought everyone could hear it. She looked for an escape from this jerk and all these strange men.

The music stopped, announcing the arrival of the Revered One.

Her gray hair was still pushed back into a tight bun. As she stepped to the front, her long cloak floated behind.

“Lupe, please come closer.”

The gross man’s face darkened as if he had eaten something unpleasant and wanted to spit it out. Lupe held her chin up high, while inside she had an overwhelming urge to run and hide. She glanced at the other men in the circle to see their reactions.

Their faces were hard to decipher, like Teancum’s, but she observed one man wiping his nose with his finger and a couple others avoiding her gaze.

So gordo isn’t the only one who disapproved of this meeting.

Lupe stood in front of the Reverend One. Up close she didn’t look so scary, just an older woman, but with too much clothing and jewelry.

“Yeah, I’m here, what of it?” Lupe glared at her.

The Reverend One ignored her comment and smiled. “I trust Teancum has helped you?”

“So what? You still haven’t told me why I’m here.”

“Lupe, I know this must be hard, but as I said before, you will see why.”

“Whatever.” Lupe arms stayed glued to her. “You promised you’d tell me.”

An image of *Abuela* shaking her head in disapproval of her rudeness flashed in her mind. Even if she wasn’t here, Lupe knew she should at least try to behave but found it hard to. “Can you please tell me why I’m here?”

The Reverend One nodded. “Yes. We will tell you what you need to know.” She snapped her fingers and the earlier music started up again but only faster. The beat of the drum blended with a haunting shrill of a flute.

Out of nowhere a man made his way into the circle. Red tattoos covered both his face and bare chest. The pattern came alive as he swayed to the rhythm of the music.

“Once all our lands were connected,” intoned the Reverend One. “Your world and ours. We lived in harmony.” Her words matched the dancer’s movements. Both flowed together in an intricate arrangement.

“We have women who are linked to both worlds. This includes you, Lupe.”

Shocked, Lupe stared at the Reverend One. “Me? What are you talking about?”

The music increased its tempo and the dancer whirled with even greater frenzy.

“Yes, you, little one.” The Reverend One said and put her hand over Lupe’s. “You are the hope we have been waiting for. The one who the prophecies foretold of—”

“No!”

The disgusting priest leaped up, his fat belly bouncing. The music stopped and so did the dancer.

Mulek stabbed his finger in her direction.

“You talk about prophecies. Look at this girl. How do we know she’s the one?” Mulek glared at her with bitterness. He then whipped his arm out to those seated.

“You talk about destruction and war. We don’t know this for a fact. Anyway, these prophecies are only myths children believe in.”

Lupe didn’t know what to do. The realization not everyone in this strange land didn’t like her scared her. Her whole body trembled with Mulek’s veiled threats.

“Mulek, my son...” The Revered One’s voice tried to calm him down.

“I want proof.” Mulek pointed his finger once more at Lupe. “Show me a sign you are the one in the prophecies. Until then I will not believe any of this.”

A sign? Holy crap. What did she get herself into?

Chapter Ten

The sun broke through the early-morning mist but failed to penetrate the dank palace, hidden inside one of the many underground caves. Thick foliage and more than a few wild animals outside guaranteed a safe place for the growing discord in Ixtumea as no one foolish enough would venture out in the middle of the jungle. More than a few that did time ended up becoming dinner for the jaguars that roamed throughout.

Inside the palace, the light from the burning torches, set in intervals throughout the stone chamber, cast a sepia tint to the room, giving it an antique touch.

The grating of rock rubbing against stone echoed in the room and caused more than one person to stop their conversation and cover their ears. As the noise grew louder everyone glanced toward the entrance.

A large stone door rumbled opened and two of Malvado's trusted guards came in, nude from the waist up, revealing the mark of Tezcatlipoca's followers: deep black and green lines tattooed all over their muscular backs. The light from the torches gave the illusion of snakes slithering down their shoulders.

Everyone moved aside to let the men enter. Both guards towered over the rest of Malvado's subjects, their gaze looking straight ahead. One of the guards, though, clutched and released his right hand, the only indication not all was well.

Behind half-closed eyes, Malvado watched the guards, his fingers tapping on the gold armrest, until they reached the foot of his throne. He held his hand up for silence.

One of the guards inched closer. The other man hung behind and stared at his feet.

Malvado leaned back in his chair, nodding at the approaching guard. "Mam. I see you have returned, but aren't you missing something?"

A couple of Malvado's followers snickered.

Mam lowered his head. "We almost had her, but—"

"Almost isn't good enough," Malvado growled. He leaned over to his personal servant Omni and asked, "How old is the girl?"

"Fifteen, my lord."

Malvado nodded.

“Yes, a fifteen-year-old girl. Did she beat you?”

Everyone in the chambers burst out laughing, amused at the thought of a fifteen-year-old beating two hardened guards.

Mam ignored them.

“But my lord, it wasn’t the girl. It was the Spider Goddess’s warrior Teancum. He cast one of his spells on us and took her.”

Malvado seethed inside. He snapped his fingers for one of the nameless servants against the stone wall. A young girl, her waist-length hair bound back with a leather ribbon, rushed over to him. She handed him a cup filled with octli.

Malvado reached out; his fingers skirted the cup and brushed up against the back of the young girl’s hand. He smiled, letting his hand linger on her skin.

The servant cast her gaze down, continuing to hold out the cup. A small tremor in her hand betrayed her distress, the rocking causing some of the dark amber liquid to fall on the ground, barely missing Malvado.

Malvado snickered at her discomfort and took the cup. He put it to his lips and sipped slowly. The rich elixir caused him to smile.

Smacking his lips, he pushed the cup back into the hands of the waiting servant, who left quickly. Malvado glanced at Mam and shrugged.

“Well, I understand going to my world can be trying, to say the least.” He stretched his lean arms overhead. He got up from his throne, brushing his heavy Jaguar pelt behind and swaggered close to the men.

“You can tell me this so-called spell Teancum cast on you. You can trust me.”

Mam nudged the other guard, Pacal, who slowly raised his head. “My lord, it is true. We almost did have the girl, but the demon Teancum called forth his dark magic from the *bruja*, ripping apart the sky.”

Malvado said nothing at first, twisting his long golden necklace in his hands. He looked up with a smile and wrapped his arms around both men’s shoulders.

“Well, it won’t help me to have warriors torn into pieces now, will it?” Both men stood rigid in his embrace. Malvado patted them on the back.

“Sure this is a setback, but not something that octli can’t solve.”

Nervous laughter filled the hall. During the excitement, he noticed two men leaving quietly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Malvado noted their movement for a future time.

“I suppose this Teancum was stronger than either of you, what with that *bruja*’s spell and all.”

Mam nodded in agreement.

“Yes, my lord. Everyone knows how the *bruja*, the Revered One, has given him special powers.”

Malvado chuckled. He pulled Pacal close and whispered loudly in his ear.

“Yes, we all know about her and her spawn.” Malvado shook his head and sighed loudly.

“But on the other hand, you...” Malvado paused and pointed to each guard, “...should have been able to overpower Teancum. Is not *Tezcatlipoca*, the god of the underworld, more powerful? Or is your faith lacking?”

Both men cried out at once. “Oh, no my lord! We believe in him and his power.”

Malvado shrugged and strolled over to his throne. He settled back and shook his head.

“Well, what am I to believe? You don’t have the girl, so something must be wrong.”

Malvado picked at his manicured finger and flicked off some of the red paint. “Since you have such little faith, maybe you need a reminder.”

Malvado stretched his hand at Pacal, whose eyes bulged out in fear. Malvado let out a steam of pure hot energy. Pacal burst into flames. He ran screaming for the exit. The acrid smell of burning flesh floated in the cool air.

Mam moved out of the way. A slight quiver of his body betrayed his fear.

A gasp could be heard from a couple of women in the background. Malvado sat back and observed the reactions of the rest of his subjects. He saw stark fear, terror, disgust, and strangely enough, even a few smiles. He gloated to himself, knowing he had the power to destroy any who stood in his way. He turned back and noticed Mam still standing.

“Why are you still here? Go. You know what to do.”

Mam turned on his heel and left, careful not to trip over what remained of Pacal.

Malvado grinned at the retreating back of Mam. He snapped his fingers.

Two women, dark hair tied back with leather clips, rushed in, their sandals softly brushing the ground. No expression could be read on their features.

Malvado laughed. He thought it funny how these natives refused to acknowledge the power he received from *Tezcatlipoca*, unless, of course, they were on the receiving end.

Malvado could hear the scratching of brushes against the tiles as the women tried to remove the dark ash stains of the burnt corpse. Too bad removing the Revered One couldn't be as easy. Give it time and she also would stain his floor with her blood, no longer a threat to either him or his master.

* * * *

Malvado yawned and turned his head to the side, trying to work out a few kinks in his neck. He stopped when he caught a glimpse of something moving in the shadows. He focused his attention on what appeared to be an inky dot scurrying sideways on the smooth stone wall. Squinting he could make out the delicate thin legs of a spider racing to the far corner of his hall. Malvado lifted his finger and aimed, but changed his mind. He lowered his hand and watched the spider scamper away unharmed into a niche in the wall.

Malvado snorted back a laugh. Let the bug live for the moment, he had already toasted one living thing for the day. Either the acidic smell had long since dissipated or he had become immune to the odor. He could still make out by the doorway a dark outline scorched into the beige tiles bearing grisly witness of his powers.

He turned back and glanced once more into the now-deserted hall.

Normally at noon he would expect an assortment of subjects clamoring for attention or favor, including overly powdered women, men and women wearing exaggerated dress with various priceless gems wrapped obscenely around their fat throats.

Such had been the case a few hours ago, but all his followers had left for the day; probably scared over his entertainment of the morning, burning Pacal to a crisp.

This would have been the highlight of his dreary day except for the fact none of his guards had succeeded in completing a simple task. How hard was it to get a fifteen-year-old girl?

Just thinking about his men's recent failure caused him to narrow his eyes in anger at the remaining disappointment in his chambers.

Concha was back. She knelt down on the cold concrete floor. Her long black hair covered her face. He had a mind to kill her, like Pacal. But he knew this was impossible. He still needed her to help accomplish his final goal.

Swallowing back his contempt, he stretched his mouth into a semblance of a smile.

"Concha, you don't need to kneel. Please get up." Malvado stretched out his hand. "I understand you didn't find your daughter. Perhaps you will next time."

Concha shuddered and refused to meet his gaze. Her slight body rippled with fear. She reminded Malvado of a trapped animal, cowering, afraid of being harmed. This pleased him, sending electricity up his spine, a feeling he wished he could save for later savoring. The pleasure was fleeting. Concha's terror was too shallow. He bent down and put his hand on the small of her back. His fingers moved in a slow seductive pattern, massaging the tension from her small waist up to her shoulder blades.

"Concha, you know I love you, don't you?"

He heard a soft muffled cry as she nodded her head in agreement.

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. "I didn't want to disappoint you, my lord." She choked back tears that threatened to fall. "I was so close." Concha narrowed her eyes and stood slowly up. "I won't fail next time."

Malvado bit back a retort and carefully brushed tears from her face.

As his hands caressed her smooth features Concha put her hand over his and pressed it down firmly. Malvado smiled. "Come, I know what will make you happy."

Concha peeked up through dark lashes, her mouth turned up into a smile.

Malvado took her hand, and led her to a secret door hidden behind a large tapestry. Woven into the fabric were images of him, dressed in gray metal, leading his followers to victory against The Revered One. On the left-hand side a young *orucula* bent over a large blanket, her slender hands twisting together intricate knots, rewriting the history of both his world and Ixtumea. To the bottom right, a young girl lay on a granite altar, her long raven hair fanned out, and the sunlight kissing her features as she waited to be sacrificed for his glory. And in the middle, outlined in gold thread, he stood, larger than life smiling down on scores of dark heads bowed down worshipping him.

He straightened his shoulders and for a brief moment stared at himself on the tapestry. Oh, to taste the final victory he would give anything, even...

He shook his head, nudged the drapery aside and led Concha down the stone steps. Their sandals slapped on the narrow staircase until they reached the bottom. Hazy light, emitted by a torch overhead, broke up the otherwise dark room. A slight breeze blew in the room and caused Concha to rub her arms. Malvado pulled her close to his naked chest, more for his benefit than hers.

It took a minute for Malvado's eyes to readjust to the gloom. When he glanced back up he

saw the familiar large web. Its strands were stretched from one end of the room to the next, with large gaping holes in the surface. If he looked close enough he could catch glimpses of both worlds playing simultaneously across the opaque fibers. On one side an observer could see the thick foliage of the village Irreantum, while further away a businessman and woman yelled for a taxi back in his world. Malvado even recognized in one small patch a deserted bus stop in Los Angeles, California.

One could easily be captivated by the impressions, but Malvado was only interested in one part of the web. He guided Concha to it, her hand firmly in his. Her hand felt warm and moist, betraying her true feelings. Malvado ignored the impulse to wipe his hand and pointed at the scene in front of them.

“Look toward Irreantum. I think you will see how you can help me.”

In one scene was a cave where a young girl, Lupe, sat by the Revered One in a village council. Malvado saw one of his spies sitting with his latest display of turquoise and jade jewelry wrapped around his fleshy neck. Malvado gritted his teeth in disgust at the display of Mulek and made a note to himself to deal with him later.

As Concha studied the web, a range of emotions played out over her face, longing, guilt, and even anger.

She reluctantly pulled her gaze away and faced Malvado. “Let me try once more, my lord.”

Malvado soothed a strand of hair from Concha’s face, and gazed into her large brown eyes. Oh, how easy it would be to succumb to her beauty. But he would never allow that to happen and become slave to her insanity.

“You will bring her to me.” With his one hand he stroked her thick black hair. He leaned over and whispered into her ear. “Remember, I made you and I can destroy you.”

Concha’s eyes widened in fear as Malvado seized a fist-full of hair and yanked her head back. He bent over and sealed his promise with a kiss.

Chapter Eleven

Mulek and more than a few other men, yelled and gestured in the smoky meeting room. Their bejeweled hands flew and a couple pointed at Lupe.

One by one the model-like warriors exited the room, leaving behind the overweight middle-aged men. Teancum followed the others. Just before he left the noisy room, he glanced at Lupe with great sadness.

Lupe felt sick. With Teancum leaving, she felt as if her security blanket had been shredded into a mass of strings.

Mulek stood close by with his fat hands at his waist, glaring like a malevolent Buddha. His lips were pressed tightly together, his nose wrinkled with distaste. Bright feathers tilted at an angle on top of his head reminding her of a cocky peacock ready to strike out at anyone in his way.

“What sign does she have to show us she is the one?” Mulek challenged the Revered One.

Lupe heard some of the remaining men whisper among themselves.

The Revered One raised both her hands, signifying quiet. Delicate gold bracelets slid down both her slender arms, revealing a map of blue veins covering her hands.

All men fell silent, including Mulek. Lupe dropped her gaze to the dirt ground to avoid the poison directed her way.

The Revered One pointed her finger at Mulek. “If you do not believe, then you are a fool! Did you not learn anything from our last meeting?”

Mulek laughed. “You mean the sign? Well, if anyone looks around you can see that sign is everywhere, including on you.”

A gasp rang out in the hut. Somehow Lupe figured this Mulek jerk had overstepped his bounds. Now she didn’t know what to say. She shuddered remembering how disrespectful she had been.

Mulek ignored everyone. “I do not believe these tales. Have you forgotten our corn harvest? Now, everyone, do we want to dwell on this foolishness or get back to our harvests?”

Other men nodded their heads in agreement.

The Revered One shook her head. “Mulek, if you do not believe, then you must go. We need

everyone to help in overpowering the destroyer.”

Mulek laughed louder.

“*Hasta que lo veas, no lo creas*. Until I see this destroyer, I won’t believe it.” Mulek walked into the circle and faced everyone. “Who else believes this foolishness? The destroyer?” Mulek chuckled. “Only children believe that tale. And…” He lifted his chest and stretched out his arms, “we *men* have outgrown it.

The pounding of fists and wooden canes on the ground echoed agreement throughout the room.

Mulek smiled. “Let us leave this fool’s errand. Come back with me for some wine. At least that is something we can believe in.” Winking, he added, “And we all know I make the best in all of Irreantum!”

Deafening cries erupted in the room, many of the Wise Ones agreeing with Mulek. Suddenly Lupe was afraid. Where was Teancum? How she wished he were here.

“What are we waiting for?” Mulek faced the other priests. “Let’s leave this place.”

Those who agreed with the fat priest got up, thumping each other’s backs, smiling, and yelling on their way out. A few even kicked dirt in Lupe’s direction. The heavy soil blew up into her face, scratching and burning her throat. She bent over and coughed but the sensation grew until she doubled over.

A few of the men grimaced or turned away. Mulek though had that smug look on his face. How Lupe wished she could smack it right off.

Mulek strutted over to the sacred place. As he approached the Revered One, the heavy jade and turquoise jewelry on his ankles rattled. He bent close and whispered loud enough for Lupe to hear.

“You know your power over us is weakening, old one. And you”—Mulek pointed at Lupe—”would be wise to leave. Go back where you belong!”

Lupe cowered back, inching for the only safety she felt, the presence of the Revered One.

Mulek smirked. His heavy-lidded gaze crept up Lupe’s body inch by inch. She wanted to hurl.

“If you do decide to stay you don’t have to stay with this group of fools. Come with me. Even though you are young…” His eyes lingered a few minutes longer on her chest. With a leer he added, “I have room in my warm bed.”

“Eww. Gross!” Lupe pushed herself away from him. Mulek’s eyes darkened for a moment and Lupe knew she had made an enemy.

“Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find me.” Mulek strolled out, his boisterous laughter trailing behind.

Lupe was beyond repulsed. The idea of his fat sausage fingers on her skin made her want to puke.

The Revered One glanced sadly at the retreating backs of Mulek and his followers. She then faced the few remaining men.

“Does anyone else want to go?” She scanned the room before she added, “If not, we don’t have much time.”

With her outstretched hand she touched Lupe, the light stroke on her face calming her. “Lupe, you ask why it is so important for you to be here.”

Lupe nodded. It wasn’t as if she really had any choice in the matter now. Before find out what this elderly leader knew, the faster she could go back to her own world and leave this craziness behind.

The Revered One swept her hand to a darkened side of the dwelling. A small figure in a dress-like garment with bright red circles stepped forward. The small bells on her leather sandals made a soft tinkle. As she drew nearer the light from the flames lit up her face. Lupe eyes widened with recognition.

As she made her way to the Revered One a small smile tugged the corners of the girl’s mouth.

The Revered One noticed this, “So you have met Tonantzin?”

“Yes,” Lupe replied.

The older woman smiled. “Good, she is to be your maiden while we prepare you for your duties as the *orucula*.”

Lupe did a double take. “*Orucula*? What’s that? I didn’t ask to be here, let alone have a calling.”

A small frown appeared on the Revered One’s face. “Your *abuela* hasn’t told you?”

Lupe frowned. “No, she didn’t. She told me a lot of nonsense that involved prophecies and stuff. Things I’m sure Father Michael would be uncomfortable with, but nothing about an *orucula*.”

The Revered One eyes widened in disbelief. “Your *abuela* knew her role and the importance of teaching you.” A loud sigh escaped her lips. “But all that is important is you are now with us.”

The Revered One tilted her head to the side, closing her eyes. Her lips silently moved, saying either an epithet or prayer. Lupe couldn’t tell. She leaned closer, but the Revered One’s eyes snapped open, startling her.

“Lupe, you are from the sacred *orucula* line—.”

“Sacred line, *orucula*?” Lupe took a step back. “You sound as *loca* as *abuela*.”

“There is nothing crazy about this. You and your mother are both from this line.”

Lupe laughed. “What? My mother is dead. What does she have to do with this?”

The Revered One leaned even closer to Lupe. “Do you know for a fact she is dead?”

Lupe opened her mouth to argue but quickly closed it. She didn’t know. Her grandmother never had told her either way.

The Revered One sadly shook her head. “Yes, Lupe she lives, but only her body, not her soul.”

Lupe scowled. Now she knew for sure this leader was not only crazy but delusional. “What do you mean, not her soul?”

The Revered One pointed her long bony finger at the door. “Have you seen the trees outside?”

Lupe shrugged. “So what? There are a lot of trees, and they all look the same.”

“Come, I will show you.”

The Revered One didn’t wait for Lupe to comment. Instead she strolled through the opening and stepped outside. Lupe glanced at the men who had remained, not knowing what to do. The leader popped her head back inside.

“Just you, little one. Come.”

Lupe shrugged. How much worse could it be? Once outside, the night air felt cool on her skin after the stifling heat. It wasn’t hard to keep up with the older woman, who had a slight hobble to her step.

The Revered One walked a few feet until she stopped in front of a collection of ceiba, pine, and mahogany trees. Most were tall, their towering branches stretching into the night. Lupe caught a whiff of something familiar; the scent of pine filled the air, reminding her of Christmas, and of home.

Lupe stared in awe at the magnificent trees, feeling so small and insignificant in their presence.

A smaller tree, dwarfed by the others, stood to the side. The tree stood in contrast to the others in the grove. The branches were barren. It reminded Lupe of a skeleton among all the others.

The Revered One placed her hand on the trunk and gestured for Lupe to come closer. “What do you see?”

Thin gray vines wrapped around the trunk. The vines crisscrossed in front and revealed a dark husk within its embrace.

“There’s vines on the tree.” Lupe stepped even closer. “Wait! Is that the tree inside?”

The Revered One nodded.

“Once this was the magnificent ceiba tree growing tall and proud like the others. One day, tiny vines came and crawled up the tree, wrapping little shoots around it. At first this seemed harmless, but the vines grew in number and strangled all life from the tree.”

Lupe scraped her hand against the rough bark. Dark flakes broke off revealing decay inside. The flakes fell like ash to the ground. A rotten smell wrinkled Lupe’s nose.

She glanced at the remnant of the tree and frowned. “What does a dead tree have to do with my mother?”

The Revered One touched the tree reverently.

“Lupe, we have a saying here, which I’m sure your *abuela* taught you. *El arbol se conoce por su fruta*—the tree is known by its fruit. Your mother was once like this ceiba, strong and full of promise but something wormed into her life. Slowly one little lie was overlooked until little by little she, like this tree, was wrapped in a powerful grip until—”

“Are you saying my mother is dying?”

“Not in the literal sense; but she isn’t all there either.”

The idea Lupe’s mother could still be alive was hard to take but now to find out she might as well be dead, was mind boggling. Lupe might not have seen her mother in eight years but that didn’t stop panic from consuming her.

Chapter Twelve

Concha woke with a start. She knew it must be early morning in Ixtumea, she could hear some of the servants down the corridor, talking. She stretched out her arm, searching for her watch on the table next to her bed. Squinting, she saw it was six o'clock.

Sitting up in her bed, she clutched her hand to her head. She felt woozy, her brain like cotton candy.

A nip in the air caused Concha to pull the jaguar-pelt closer to her naked skin. She hoped to rub some warmth into her body. She didn't have to look far to see both the night torches, placed on either side of the room, had long been extinguished.

But what did she expect in Malvado's kingdom? His castle carved under the ground, away from his enemies. It never got warm here. Just like his heart.

Concha scanned her suite. Two mahogany tables were pushed against the barren walls, carvings of animals etched into the rich russet grain, giving them the appearance of running, something she wished she could do.

Leaning precariously against one of the tables lay an old *khipus*-knotted string hanging from her days as *orucula*. The fraying knots ruined the symmetry of the piece. The tapestry was now a faded mess, just like her.

Concha sighed and sat cross-legged on her king-sized bed, so out of place in this ancient kingdom. The down-feather mattress and pillows were but one piece of the twenty-first century Malvado demanded. Tossed to the side were remainders of his late-night visit, his cotton trunks, leather sandals, and a half-filled cup of wine.

Concha closed her eyes and tried to block out any reference to Malvado and the tension that had been building since her return yesterday evening. The burnt bodies she found on his chamber floor last night kept pushing in, refusing to be ignored.

The charred remains and the smell of burning flesh caused the bile to rise in her throat. She had seen the remnants of his punishment after the guards failed attempt to get her daughter and knew it was only a matter of time before she would join the crimson stains in his chamber.

No, I won't go there.

When she turned her head she noticed a simple village outfit lying on the large mahogany

table next to the wall. Strange. She didn't remember placing it there.

Curious, Concha reached for her leather sandals under her bed, shaking them in case any scorpions or snakes had crawled in. Placing them on her feet she walked to the table. She picked up the outfit and held it close, savoring the sweet gardenia scent.

For once the voices in her mind were silent, but for how long? Sighing she pulled the cotton blouse over her head. She wrapped the long cotton skirt around her hips and tied the ends to the side.

She remembered what Malvado wanted her to do. She hated being his prisoner. His touch sent off impulses she couldn't resist, the urge to be with him was just too strong to deny. Just like the local drink. One taste of the liquid and he was hooked with no way to escape.

Concha closed her eyes, clutching the onyx medallion around her throat. The heavy golden chain cut into her hand and she savoured the only sensation proving she was in fact, alive.

Some days, like today, she felt useless like the discarded tapestry in the corner of her room.

A vision of her daughter appeared, young and so beautiful with her innocence.

Does she even remember me? Concha wondered. *And if she does, will she come back with me?*

In her mind she saw the six-year-old she had abandoned in Tustin so long ago. Dressed in the hated parochial uniform, Lupe was like a doll, small and so child-like. Concha could still smell the clean scent of baby soap she washed her with every night. It lingered in the air, taunting of innocence lost.

There was something different about the photo of the young teen in her mother's apartment. Concha could still feel the eyes of her daughter drill into her with questions she couldn't—or wouldn't—answer. Was she ever that young and gullible?

Enough. Concha knew it did her no good to dwell in the past. All that mattered was here and now, and fulfilling the task of getting Lupe and bringing her back to Malvado.

A tap at the door interrupted her. She finished wrapping a bright red and green *reboza* around her narrow shoulders. She took one last look at herself in the hanging mirror. Dark circles under her eyes stained the otherwise fair skin, and a few more strands of white hair disrupted the youthful image she had of herself.

Frowning at her reflection, she called out to the person behind her door.

“Enter.”

The door creaked open, revealing a young girl with a wooden bowl. Concha glared at the

servant, young and beautiful, an image of herself some twenty-odd years ago.

The fragrant smell of the sacred mushrooms rose in the air, erasing Concha's jealousy. All that mattered was the drink and the relief it offered.

The young girl must have sensed this and held out the bowl. "Your drink, my lady."

Concha reached for the bowl. A tremor caused her to spill some of the dark liquid on the ground. She ignored this and raised the gourd to her lips. The warm slightly bitter-tasting liquid burnt, like strong whiskey, as it made its way down.

She remembered the girl, who lowered her gaze to the ground. Concha handed her back the bowl.

"Go." With one quick flick of her hand, she dismissed her.

The girl quietly left, leaving a sweet floral scent behind.

Concha walked back to her bed. She sat down and waited. It only took a few minutes before a rush of thoughts ricocheted in her head.

Concha, you need to go. The voice was soft at first but grew stronger and more persistent. *Get your things and don't forget the jewel. The powers of the bruja will be useless against them.*

Concha, following the voice's directions, walked over to the far table and opened the mahogany jewelry box. The box was lined in soft leather. A collection of stones met her eyes, jades, rubies, and turquoise. One stone glowed more intensely than the others. She picked up the white onyx stone and held it close.

The stone vibrated in her hands as if the gem was waking. The onyx gave her the strength to plan her strategy: getting her daughter.

Concha visualized herself going into the village. A frown tugged at her face. No, she couldn't waltz in; people would remember her and chances were good she wouldn't be given the royal treatment she deserved.

No, there had to be another way. She racked her brains trying to think of how to get her daughter. She clutched the stone in her hands, oblivious to the escaping light that wrapped itself around her hands, spotting her smooth skin with large liver spots. Seconds later, her hands changed back.

She paced back and forth, like a caged animal, in her room and stopped. Then the obvious hit her. *Wait, why not give myself up?* Tell everyone in Irreantum she had escaped from Malvado. Add she wanted another chance.

She knew the Revered One would take her back, no questions asked. Ixchel, on the other hand...

Some of the villagers would be sceptical, a few might even want her dead. But her daughter...

The voice agreed. *Yes, Concha. Your daughter will not fail you.*

Euphoria surged through her whole body. White flashes of light radiated from her hand. Sharp pain cut through her but this only caused her to grip the stone tighter. Drops of blood plopped on the ground. She raised her bloody hand to the air and yelled out.

“Lupita, *mami* is coming!”

Laughing she opened the door and strolled out into the dark corridor, the voice in her mind laughing along with her.

Chapter Thirteen

Lupe pulled the multi-colored wrap closer, hoping the thick cotton fabric would be a cocoon against her sudden chill. Hazy mist clouded the early morning sky but this wasn't the only reason for her goosebumps.

My mother is alive! Mixed emotions ran through her, excitement that she still lived, turning to a deep anger at the thought of being deserted so many years ago.

As she tried to come to grips with this, at first she didn't see the warriors re-entering the building. Startled, she looked for Teancum, who hesitated for a minute by the opening.

Lupe glared at Teancum. His brown eyes locked with hers. Angry, Lupe turned away and stared accusingly back at the older woman. "Why do I find out now my mother is alive?"

"Let us return." The Revered One's paper-thin hand reached for Lupe. "We still have a lot to go over. Then I will answer your questions."

Lupe took one last look at the dying ceiba tree and thought once more about her mother. Numbness filled her. Lupe turned from the lifeless tree and wandered back into the building.

Inside, she shielded her eyes from the flickering flames in the fire. The intense heat was a shock after the coolness outside. No longer needing the wrap, she let it fall slightly off her shoulders.

The Revered One dropped Lupe's hand, motioning for her to sit back in the circle. Tonantzin stood to the side, holding a large clay bowl in her hands. The Revered One took the bowl from Tonantzin and held it high. "This drink will help prepare you for the next stage."

Lupe stared first at the bowl and then the Revered One. "What stage? And you still haven't answered my question about my mother."

"Lupe, you must trust us, and all will fall into place."

Lupe rose up. "That's all I've heard since I've been here. I want to know what is going on *now!*"

The Revered One quietly watched her outburst, emotionless. Then she pointed her finger at Lupe.

"Lupe, sit. There isn't enough time left for you to continue this silliness."

The Revered One's harsh words took her by surprise and Lupe found herself sitting back

down.

A lopsided smile replaced the older woman's scowl. "Good, maybe your *abuela* did teach you some manners."

Lupe bit back a smart remark.

The Revered One lifted the bowl to her mouth. She took a sip of the beverage, briefly closing her eyes. A smile came over her face and ironed out some of the wrinkles, giving her a youthful appearance.

"Aah. See, it isn't that bad. Now you take some."

Lupe curled her upper lip. "I'm not drinking that nasty stuff." She pushed the bowl aside.

"Do you not want to know why you are here?" the Revered One asked.

"How is some drink going to do that?" Lupe folded her arms.

"Just drink, and you will find out."

"Whatever." Lupe reached for the bowl and observed deep crimson lines swirling and circling around the edge. A sweet, spicy scent tickled her nostrils. She took a quick sip. The drink reminded her of Chai tea at the coffee store on Red Hill Drive back in Tustin.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and passed the drink back to Tonantzin, who stood close by.

Lupe sat back and watched everyone in the circle as they took a drink. All of the men either sat or stood motionless. Then her vision blurred. She closed her eyes and opened them. The Revered One's smile grew larger until it spread across her face.

Crap, they drugged me.

Lupe felt lightheaded. She leaned back, hoping to stop the dizzy sensation. The movement only got worse. A prickly sensation erupted in her head, like the brain freeze she got after eating ice cream too fast.

A sudden burst of heat warmed Lupe's face. The flames in the fire pit swept upward and spread out, forming something like a big screen. A shape materialized, fuzzy at first, then becoming more focused.

Lupe didn't know whether she screamed or not. Her mouth gaped open at the sight in the flames. It couldn't be, or was it?

The Revered One's words entered her thoughts. Lupe tried to push them out but couldn't.

"Yes, Lupe, this is why you are here. To help Ixchel, the Spider Goddess."

The name sounded familiar. Where had she heard it before? Then she remembered.

“Isn’t she the goddess of weaving and women?”

An image appeared before her, simmering in the hot flames. A monster spider with a beautiful woman’s face dangled down from a silken string.

Fear flooded Lupe. Help a huge spider? Even if she was a goddess, just the thought of being in a spider’s presence caused her to itch with discomfort.

“Yes, Lupe, it is the same. She appears in many forms, but to us in Ixtumea she is the weaver of the great web which connects your world and mine. And your role is to help her.”

“Help her? My God, you’re sure she won’t eat me?” Lupe whispered.

“Do not be afraid, little one.” The Revered One touched her shoulder. “You have your protectors to help you on this task.”

Lupe thought of Teancum.

The Revered One laughed. “Yes, he is your protector warrior, but there are others who will help you on this journey.”

Out of the corners of the room dark spider-like forms scurried in the direction of the circle.

Lupe tried to stand but the drug in the drink made it hard for her to get up. The dark swarm of spiders crawled nearer.

“Lupe, these spiders are your friends and will be your protection.”

The spiders stopped. A high-pitched sound filled the dwelling. First all she heard was static. Then the noise blended into the most beautiful haunting sound Lupe had ever heard. The music spoke to her, of long ago in both her world and Ixtumea, and the promises given to the *orucula* to help the goddess in weaving the *dichos*-sayings, which would bind both worlds together.

Her eyes were opened and she saw the vibrant and lush lands spread out as she could see.

A scream pierced through, shredding the web in pieces. In her world the land canopies of the jungles burst into flames. Many animals tried to escape but were caught inside the inferno. The pain of all the dying creatures ripped through her. Her eyes filled with tears, and fell on her face and upon the ground.

Lupe looked up and saw the goddess stretch forth two of her long arms. “Accept your calling, Lupe. It’s the only way.”

The heat from the fire pit burned Lupe’s eyes. Still she couldn’t look away. She watched in amazement as Ixchel’s figure was swallowed up in the flames. Her words echoed in her mind --

accept your calling.”

Lupe replayed the vision over in her head, trying to make sense of what she had seen and heard. For once words failed her. The vision of Ixchel felt so real, a giant Medusa with yellow flames licking her face. Except for one slight difference, this one was a spider. Lupe brushed her clammy hands against the roughness of her cotton skirt and scooted her bottom away from the dying embers.

Not far away Teancum was talking to another younger warrior. His chestnut hair was tied back loosely with a leather cord. Somehow he looked familiar. She had a nagging feeling she should know him but brushed the thought aside.

Lupe averted her gaze and instead glanced around the now sparse circle. A couple of the younger warriors reached for wool cloaks on the ground and wrapped the brightly woven fabric across the more slumped shoulders of the older men.

Most of the men strolled out, talking softly among themselves, a few even laughed. Lupe couldn't believe how anyone could act like nothing strange had just happened. But deep down Lupe knew she was the abnormality, not Ixchel.

Ash fell from the embers covering the area with a coat of something resembling fine dandruff. Up ahead a glimpse of light streamed into the opening, dissipating the gloomy interior. Lupe followed the beam of light to the opening. She ducked her head and stepped outside. Warm moist air slammed into her and caused her to gasp in shock.

Irreantum had felt so unreal, kind of like some of those fantasy novels her friend Roberto read. Too bad she never paid attention to his ramblings. She might have been able to put the information to good use.

A large hand touched her shoulder and caused her jump. She spun around and saw Teancum, who rejoined her. She hadn't heard him and this unnerved her.

“Jeez, Teancum.” Lupe pulled away from him. “Don't sneak up on me like that. You just about gave me a heart attack.”

Teancum chuckled. “You will do fine.” He took a step closer. “Just listen to the maidens of Ixchel and you will know what to do.”

Lupe sighed in exasperation. “How will helping this Ixchel help me to get back home?”

“You will find out soon.”

“Why can't I find out now? This is all so lame.”

“Come on.” Teancum took her elbow. “You need to rest.”

“The only place I want to go is home.” Lupe pushed his hand away. “You all talk about how I’m supposed to help you. How do you know I won’t screw up big time?”

Teancum cocked his head to the side. The morning light intensified his dark good looks. “Not everything will come easy, little one. But I trust you and so does the Revered One, remember that.”

Lupe stepped back and considered what Teancum had said. Trust? How could someone believe in her if she didn’t herself?

Still the ceremony shocked her. Moist perspiration beaded her lips, not from the humid air, but with the apprehension of what she needed to do to help both Ixchel and these people. A sick feeling lay like a stone in the pit of her stomach with misgivings of what everyone expected of her.

Lupe wanted to shout at the top of her lungs, *My God, I’m only fifteen*. Didn’t any of these people know the impossible task they set in front of her? That totally freaked her out, more than anything else did. Somehow, Tustin didn’t seem so bad after all.

* * * *

Out in the open were tons of booths with all kinds of produce and food, similar to a farmer’s market. Lupe forged through the growing crowd of villagers. Tonantzin was right in the midst of the crowd, standing by one of the booths. She said something to one of the villagers. Lupe couldn’t hear and tried to move closer which proved hard. Plus where was Teancum? Some warrior he proved to be.

Women rushed by her, carrying plates and bowls. The strong smell of chilies and tortillas caused Lupe’s stomach to roar in protest. The scene reminded her of a marketplace back in Oaxaca, Mexico. The vendors were hawking their merchandise—green, red, and yellow chilies, and corn of different hues. Squash, potatoes, peanuts, guava fruit, and avocados were carefully arranged on reed baskets. Lupe didn’t usually care for these foods but her stomach gurgling disagreed.

“Sorry about taking so long,” Tonantzin said.

Lupe glanced once more at the food. “Can we get something to eat?”

“We need to get back. I’m sure we’ll have something to break our fast with there.”

Lupe frowned. Another loud gurgling sound erupted from her stomach. She folded her arms

around her midsection and glared at Tonantzin.

Tonantzin laughed. “Don’t worry, it’s not that far.”

“I thought servants were supposed to be submissive,” Lupe muttered under her breath. “Not pushy, like someone I know.”

“Well, you never know, huh?”

“I’m hungry.” Lupe pointed to one of the stands. “If you won’t get me something, I will. I’m sure you can vouch for me.”

The vendor smiled, motioning for both of them to come.

“I’m glad someone is friendly around here.” Lupe made her way through the crowd. “Not like Teancum, who just deserted us.”

“Oh, he’s here.” Tonantzin pointed over in the distance. Sure enough Teancum hung back, seeming to blend in with the rest of the villagers.

“Wait,” Tonantzin said, changing the subject. “I’ll get you something.”

Lupe smiled. “Good, I’m starving.”

Tonantzin walked over to the vendor, saying something. The vendor gave her something that didn’t look familiar to Lupe.

“Here.” Tonantzin returned. “Eat this.”

“What is it?” Lupe took the sticky rectangular bar. It reminded her of a peanut brittle bar. She took a bite. A slight taste of salt mixed with honey made her take another bite.

“Hurry, we need to go,” Tonantzin said.

Tonantzin didn’t wait for her, but hurried past the villagers. Lupe sighed. *Boy, she’s in a hurry.* Shaking her head she finished the peanut bar and jogged down the dirt pathway.

Not far ahead the familiar rectangle structure of Ixchel’s temple came into view. With relief Lupe made out Tonantzin’s dark head among numerous maidens of Ixchel. Women rushed in and out, ignoring both herself and Tonantzin.

Guarding the entrance stood the large obsidian statue of Ixchel. Her many long legs stretched out to each end of the temple and gave Lupe the impression this was her way of protecting the maidens inside.

A couple of spiders even scurried around the base of the statue, unafraid of the maidens close by. She knew they were her protectors but she couldn’t stop shuddering.

“Oh, look who is coming,” Tonantzin whispered.

Abish, the head maiden, forged in their direction. Her white peasant blouse and long cotton skirt stood out from the more vivid colors of the other villagers. Abish's long brown hair seemed kissed by the sunlight, chestnut highlights radiated around her smooth caramel skin. Her features were exquisite except for the red spider tattoo on her cheek.

Lupe couldn't stop staring at Abish. She was the opposite of what Lupe's world considered beautiful. Her petite figure had curves like the South American singer Shosana and ended with the defined bottom similar to Jennifer Martinez. Her *nalgas* would be the envy of any of those flat-bottomed *gueras*, back home.

Abish turned and faced Lupe. Embarrassed at being caught staring, Lupe gazed down at the ground.

Abish reached out and lightly touched Lupe's cheek. "Lupe, do not be afraid to ask if you need something. You have a lot ahead of you."

Lupe started to say something but thought better of it. Abish smiled and cupped Lupe's chin in her hands. "Do not be afraid, little one."

Lupe stood and put her hand to her face, watching Abish fade into the distance.

Chapter Fourteen

Sunlight flooded the temple room through an opening in the wall, brightening a collection of wooden tables, multi-colored tapestries, and different sized clay containers lined up against the tan walls. Tonantzin had just served her and stood to the side, waiting for what Lupe assumed must be further instructions.

Lupe held a warm tortilla meal in her hand. She hoped by finally eating something, she could, at least for the moment, put her fears and concerns of the last twenty-four hours out of her mind.

Tonantzin asked, “Is everything to your liking?”

Lupe dropped the tortilla. Beans and green vegetables slide down her leg before resting on the beige mat.

“What, sorry, I didn’t hear you.” Lupe bent over to pick up the remains of her meal. She tried to push the bean mixture back into the now-cold tortilla. The beans refused to obey and spilled out, congealing on her bare legs.

“I didn’t mean to startle you. Let me help.” Tonantzin walked over and used a cloth to wipe up the greasy mess now being absorbed into the beige mat. Lupe smiled in gratitude.

The spicy smells of breakfast had her reach once more over the mahogany table for another corn tortilla. More careful this time, she wrapped the shell around an assortment of warm beans, chilies, tomatoes, and some yummy avocado. The tantalizing aroma filled the room and caused her to stop for a moment to take another bite.

“When am I supposed to meet Ixchel?” Lupe asked. She leaned closer to Tonantzin, dreading the answer.

Tonantzin, sat down crossed legged next to her, shrugged her shoulders. “I do not know. Usually she first comes in dreams or in the twilight hours.”

Lupe frowned. She didn’t know if she wanted to see this Ixchel again. It was bad enough to have witnessed her essence in the flames during the previous ceremony.

Tonantzin lowered her voice. Lupe scooted closer, not wanting to miss a word. “All the talk has been about your arrival to our village. So many things have happened that Kish of Old had prophesied...”

Lupe frowned. “Who’s this Kish dude?”

Tonantzin’s eyes flew wide open. She gasped in disbelief. “You do not know of Kish?” She sat back. “Of, course not. You would not. He was the greatest prophet of Ixtumea. And he wrote many prophecies, many are happening now.”

“What prophecies?”

Tonantzin laughed. Her laughter had a rich timbre to it. An image of her friend, Marisol, flashed through Lupe’s mind. “You coming to our village has caused a stir. Everyone wants to know more about you, except maybe—”

Lupe cut in. “You mean that gross man, Mulek, right? He didn’t exactly welcome me here.” Lupe winced, remembering how the obese Wise One had leered at her during the ceremony.

Tonantzin leaned close and whispered “Mulek is not someone you want to be an enemy of.”

Remembering the loathing Mulek had directed her way, Lupe shivered.

The soft patter of footsteps grew louder. Both girls looked at the growing shadow on the opposite wall.

“Hello, Lupe.” If Abish had sensed she’d interrupted their conversation she didn’t let on. Instead the head maiden looked at both girls before settling on Lupe. “It is time for your first lesson.”

Lupe looked questioningly at Tonantzin, who shrugged her shoulders.

Abish swept her hand at the remnants of their meal. “Tonantzin, first clean. Then I expect you to come along with Lupe to the maiden’s circle.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Lupe caught Tonantzin wrinkling her nose in disgust but then she left

A strange feeling hit Lupe at Tonantzin’s leaving. She felt a kinship with her. Maybe it had to do with the fact they were around the same age and all. Still she wished Tonantzin had stayed.

Lupe took a deep breath. “What lesson, Abish?”

Abish smiled. “Come, and you will find out.”

Holy Cow! Doesn’t she believe in waiting? Lupe turned her back for a second. A flipping second! But that’s all it took for Abish to leave her. Afraid to be left alone in this strange place, Lupe did her best to follow the retreating footsteps of Abish, down the hallway.

In passing, Lupe caught a glimpse of a delicate gold anklet encrusted with small turquoise gems. The chain emitted a faint musical chime down the corridor. The crowded pathway bustled

with activity. A couple of maidens rushed by, their colorful cotton skirts slapped against their muscular thighs...

Out of nowhere two more women whipped by. Lupe jumped to the side, barely getting out of their way. A whiff of spicy food came out of the large clay bowls the women held in their hands.

She inhaled and proceeded down the narrowing passageway. Her sandals thumped against the dirt, missing the reed mats now pushed against the walls.

Lupe turned just in time to catch a fleeting piece of Abish's long skirt disappear around the corner. Lupe followed. The building opened up. No longer were the walkways so crowded and leaning close together. A larger space appeared in front of her, with a set of stone stairs leading down into something similar to the auditorium back at her school.

She made her way down the steps, glancing at the assortment of objects hanging on the dark dirt walls. Decorative masks, various statues of Ixchel, scary weapons, and wax candles guided her to the bottom.

A group of almost identical looking maidens sat on reed mats engaged in some discussion or another. Freaky how all their mannerisms were similar, down to their white peasant blouses, long tie-dyed skirts, gem necklaces, and even red tattooed faces. That's where the similarities ended though. Some of the maiden's tattoos swirled in delicate lines around their cheeks while others had more bold lines that fanned out to the sides.

All the women faced a russet table. Carved into the wood were intricate patterns that curved around the edges and flowed down the sides. On top of the table was the largest book Lupe had ever seen. The walnut cover had an antique look to it with bright red figures written on the side. They reminded Lupe of some characters from one of the books in her *abuela's* apartment.

The maidens glanced up at Lupe's entrance. A few smiled, but some, including the maidens Tonantzin spoke to earlier, lifted their chins and turned away. Lupe gazed down at the floor and clicked her nails.

These women were only showing her what she already knew; she didn't belong here. Didn't they know she would do anything to go back to Tustin?

Lupe took a tentative step closer to the group but stopped. Tucked to the side, another large table stood filled with a collection of stones, gems, food, and other items. It reminded Lupe of the *ofrenda* her *abuela* had in her bedroom, but much larger. Curious, she wandered to the

shrine.

Abish placed her hand on Lupe's shoulder. "Do you not have these in your world?"

The head handmaiden's touch startled Lupe.

"Yes," Lupe said. "My *abuela* has an *ofrenda* in her room with photos of people, like my mother and grandfather. Nothing like this."

Abish stared blankly back at her. *She probably doesn't know what a photo is.*

Lupe took a deep breath and decided to be bold. Figuring the shrine honored loved ones of Ixtumea, Lupe pointed to a small triangular shaped object. "Who did that belong to?"

Understanding crept into Abish's eyes. She reached over and picked up the obsidian stone. "This is from Kish, prophet of old." Gently she rubbed her fingers against the hard surface. "He loved fishing in our river. And a good cup of wine at the end of the day."

To the side of the table something bulged out behind a large golden goblet. Lupe reached over, hoping for a better look.

A pair of identical ruby earrings stared back at her. The slightly tarnished filament around the stones cheapened its true value. The rubies still sparkled, leaving a crimson stain on the corner.

"Those are like mine." Lupe touched her ears and turned to face Abish.

Someone coughed behind Abish. She sighed. "Lupe, we place something of those who have left us, including..."

Chiza stood up and gestured at the table. The fat under her chin did its own version of a wiggle dance. "Not all of us agree with putting something from her on our holy offering." She spat the words out in disgust. "This table carries the taint of one who has betrayed all our people. She chose the way of darkness, I say we leave her there."

Who was this person Chiza speaking of? Ohmigod. Lupe stepped back away from the table. A sick feeling hit her. No way. It couldn't be her mother, could it?

Abish eyes narrowed for a brief moment, then cleared. Calmly she retrieved the earrings. "Yes, not all agree, but still we leave this for Lupe's mother in the hopes she will come back and away from the one who deceived her."

Both women were so different from each other. Calmness radiated from Abish while Chiza boiled like an overheated pot ready to explode.

Abish picked up a small piece of paper hidden underneath the earrings. Red scribbles filled

the square. Lupe remembered the day she had drawn this, back in kindergarten, so long ago.

Abish smiled and handed the paper to Lupe. “Yes, this was something close to her heart.”

As Lupe glanced at the paper another vision appeared. Images of her mother flooded her mind but she didn’t look like Lupe remembered her. No: this woman, still striking, looked worn down. Her torn clothing exposed purple welts on her thighs. She was rushing somewhere, and talking to herself in thick, dense foliage that appeared to be a jungle.

In a daze, Lupe looked around the circle at the women, wondering if they had also witnessed this. Apparently they didn’t. Some put their heads down but Chiza and a few of the others argued back and forth. She couldn’t make out their words as they blended together into a jumble that sounded like the teacher in a cartoon video. *Blah, blah, blah.*

Abish, ignoring the chaos the paper had generated, walked to the table in the middle of the circle. She picked up the book and dropped it. A crash vibrated in the room and stopped the arguing. Abish closed her eyes and raised her hands to the ceiling.

“Enough of this. We need to begin.”

Chiza’s mouth opened and then snapped shut. Before she sat back with the other maidens she turned and glared at Lupe.

Lupe felt herself shrink under the venomous gaze of Chiza. *Why does she hate me so much?*

Abish motioned to the corner where Lupe stood. “Come, Lupe. We will begin with your first lesson on the prophecies of Kish.”

Lupe glanced once more at the fading drawing and put it in her pocket. She had a strong urge to rip the square into a thousand pieces, but feared the consequence of such a rash action. She took a deep breath and slowly walked to the circle.

Chapter Fifteen

Everyone stared at Lupe, waiting for her to join them in the Maiden's circle. Though no words were spoken, opinions of Lupe were bounced around the circle—a few smiles, a slight raise of an eyebrow, forced coughs, to a lifted chin. Everyone had an impression of her. And Chiza didn't disappoint with her trademark scowl, but what did Lupe expect?

Novocaine numbness shot through her body, deadening any feelings she might have had. What was her role here in Irreantum?

Like, I want to be here? Lupe bit her bottom lip in frustration. She wanted so badly to say something, anything to put her back in control of an awkward situation. This is when her usual smart-ass comments came in handy. *Don't even go there*, If the recent visions were any indication, any sarcasm would backfire in her face.

What was it with these visions, anyway? When someone mentioned visions they usually conjured up images of a phony Jamaican psychic dressed in a dark flowing shirt, turban, and gaudy 99-Cent Store earrings.

Puh-lease, don't let that happen to me. Lupe grimaced at the unflattering image.

Abish must have sensed her discomfort and pointed to a narrow opening close to the table and the huge book. The women moved over, careful not to tangle their long wrapped skirts. Lupe wandered over, avoiding Chiza's gaze.

Abish nodded her head. "Good. We will begin with the words of Kish, the great prophet of Ixtumea."

With reverence, Abish touched the text, careful not to tear the sacred pages. Her actions reminded Lupe of her *abuela*. Just thinking of her grandmother made Lupe homesick.

Abish looked up. "The day will come when all will change. Your harvests will become famine. Your land will become barren. The great web will be—."

All sound ceased. Lupe couldn't hear anything; no shifting of maiden's bodies, coughing, outside noise, or Abish reading. Nothing.

Abish's mouth moved like a marionette puppet but minus the puppeteer's voice. *Is this some kind of joke?* Why couldn't she hear Abish?

The movement on the table was so slight Lupe almost missed it. The oversized book started

to move, vibrating at each end, and hit against Abish's fingers. Thump, thump, thump. Abish didn't notice. Lupe watched in morbid fascination as the book shook violently with no one, except herself, being witness.

The ancient text slid to a sudden stop. *What the...?* A thin strand of smoke came out of the stilled pages of the book.

Wisps of smoke grew, snaking around the faces of Abish and the other women. The cloudy haze swirled around, filling one end of the room to the other. Stale smelling fumes caused Lupe to gag.

She rubbed her stinging eyes. When she lowered her hands she gasped in shock. An older man with long white hair had joined them. A brightly colored wrap hung from his bare upper body.

The elderly man glanced at Abish, still reading from the text, and shook his head impatiently. "You'd think after all this time they would get this right."

Oh my gosh, that's Kish! The dead guy. She had never seen a picture or anything of the prophet, but she didn't need to. She just knew it was him, standing close and very much alive. *Or as alive as a ghost can be.*

The man turned and winked at Lupe. *Ohmigod, he just tried to come on to me. Eew, that's nasty!* Lupe grimaced. If the man sensed her disgust he didn't show it. Instead he smiled, revealing a gap where his two front teeth should have been.

"Finally, after all these years you come." His words ended with a light whistle. "Lupe, is it? A fitting name for one whom will save us all. Come, I have much to tell you."

He stepped toward her. Lupe shrank back, afraid of this stranger.

"Abish!" Lupe screamed. "Help!" But the head maiden didn't answer. None of the women did. All stood motionless like mannequins in some Halloween costume window.

The older man chuckled. "They can't hear you. Only you can see me."

Lupe's heart raced. She stared in horror at the ghost standing only a few feet in front of her.

The man cocked his head. "Do not tell me you do not wish to know why you have been called to our land?"

Lupe stuttered. "Wh-oo are yo-ou?"

The man puffed his chest. "Me? I am whom they in this world call Kish. A true servant of Ixchel and guardian of the prophecies."

Lupe covered her face. *If I count, maybe this figure of my imagination will vanish.* One, two, three, *Oh, my gosh please don't be there,* four, five, six...but even with her eyes closed she knew he hadn't left.

Slowly Lupe opened her eyes.

The man laughed. "I am sorry, I do not go away that easy."

A large callused hand reached for Lupe. Lupe tried to scream, but no sound came out. Her mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton balls. She wanted to gag but couldn't.

Kish touched her shoulder. Lupe jumped. A shock pulsed through her body. *I thought you couldn't feel dead people.* Lupe's heart raced so fast she thought it would explode.

She blinked once and found herself outside in the jungle. A flock of colorful macaws squawked overhead. She glanced over and saw a large boulder not far away. Sitting on top was none other than Kish. Patting the rock, he motioned her over.

"Ah, see, this is not that bad. Oh, how I miss the sun and this land." Kish sighed. "But that is not important. You, on the other hand, are."

Fear tugged at Lupe, she tried to open her mouth but still nothing came out. The overwhelming urge to flee from this place pulsed through her.

"Wh-hy am I here?" Lupe finally said.

Kish smiled. "You are a child of both worlds. Yours and here. Though your blood runs the blood of *oruculas*, seekers, ones who have the gift to bind with their hands the knots that help Ixchel weave the web between both worlds. Without you, the web would dissolve, and balance between the worlds will be shifted."

His calm manner caused Lupe to forget her anxiety. "What do you mean, child of both worlds? I'm not from here."

Kish shook his head. "Ah, but you are. Your mother, before you, had the sacred calling. Her warrior, Balam watched over her. Just as Teancum is doing with you."

Lupe scrunched her face in confusion. She knew about her mother but nothing about Balam.

Kish continued. "Ah, Lupe. How do you think you came to be? Have you never wondered why you hear things, or why you see the revelations you have seen?"

"How do you know about that?" Lupe frowned. "Hey, wait a minute here." An image of a man, similar to Teancum, appeared. She recognized him from an earlier vision she had in Tustin at the bus stop with Diane. The man stood by her mother and in his hands he held a child. Lupe

covered in mouth in disbelief. *Her father was from here?*

Kish nodded. "Yes, but Concha threw it away for the Deceived One from your world."

Lupe sat in shock.

Kish leaned over and touched her hand. "You, Lupe have the gift. It flows like water in your veins. Your *abuela* taught you the stories but feared for you once your mother turned to the destroyer. In doing so, she did not tell you all the truth."

"Oh my..." Lupe bent down and cradled her head in her hands. *She didn't tell me the truth. Boy that sure was an understatement.*

"Lupe, you are needed here. You have a great task ahead of you. You will be protected by Teancum, your warrior, and of course Ixchel and her followers."

Kish got up off the rock and stretched. "Ah, that felt good." He looked at Lupe. "You will return to the Maidens. Listen and follow what is within you. Do not take your calling lightly." Kish glanced once more around him and sighed with sadness. "Remember, all will be swept away if you fail. Your father tried to warn you of this. Do not let his death be in vain!"

Before Lupe could open her mouth, Kish placed his hand on her forehead. The vision she had earlier returned where a trail of darkness scratched out all light and beauty.

"*No!*" Lupe cried out. In shock, she found herself back in the maiden's circle. More than a few women wrinkled their noses in disgust at Lupe's lack of manners.

Lupe eyes bulged with horror at the visions and now the revelation of a father she never knew. *Why me and why now?* As if in answer to her question, a tiny black spider crept up on her. But instead of revulsion, peace wrapped itself around her with the certainty of what she needed to do.

Lupe glanced once more at everyone in the room. All the women stared back with questions in their eyes. Then it hit her. Oh, my goodness. These people needed her. They really, really needed her.

Concerned, Abish walked over to Lupe. "Lupe, what is wrong?"

An image of the head maiden among the dead in her visions made her sick to her stomach. *No, I won't let that happen. Not if I can help it, anyway.*

Lupe inhaled deeply and, calling on all her inner strength, answered, "Abish, please tell me what I need to do. I'm ready."

Chapter Sixteen

For once the voices were silent. The onyx stone had ceased to glow. And so had she. The euphoria she had felt back in Malvado's palace had long evaporated. Now, sober, Concha plodded through the endless Ixtumean jungle on her quest to get her daughter.

The jungle canopy blocked out the late morning rays. Brilliant jewel-colored parrots flew overhead. Their screams pierced the thick foliage. Concha ignored them.

She didn't know which was worse, the multitude of annoying and deadly creatures or the thick, pungent, green vines growing everywhere.

The heavy tendrils twisted together, forming what looked like a living briar fence. The plants braided in and out and blocked her way. Concha pushed, tugged, and cut the offending vines with a machete. The combination of heat and humidity made any effort fruitless.

Concha cursed under her breath. One of the leaves broke away and smacked her face. A slimy residue from the plant dripped down her chin. She pushed the vine away, some of the ooze sticking to her hand.

"Damn!"

Concha brushed her hand against her skirt and staggered back onto the trail.

As she pushed forward, hoping to get to the village Irreantum before midday, she ran scenarios through her head on how to pursue her daughter and get her to return with her to Malvado's kingdom.

Lupita. The name alone pierced through any defenses she had pulled up. Concha smiled thinking of the youngster she had left behind, who'd been so trusting of her. Concha knotted her eyebrows together and frowned. How could her daughter ever forgive her?

Concha stopped and leaned back against a tree trunk. In answer to her question a vision of Lupe in the Maiden's circle tucked away in Irreantum came to her. Lupe stood in front of a large table filled with trinkets, jewels, and other useless items. Concha laughed out loud. *What good does it do to leave things for dead people?* This was one tradition she'd never understood.

She squinted to get a better view. Her daughter held something in her hands. Concha could make out a square piece of paper and...

Her eyes widened in recognition. She still remembered the day she had taken the juvenile

drawing that had hung proudly on the old refrigerator door with the other mismatched collection of Lupe's kindergarten artwork.

Did Lupe remember it too? Odd, how some bright scribbles could evoke painful memories.

When she looked again she froze. Lupe turned and now stared into her eyes. A chill ran down her spine. For within the depths of her daughter's gaze a range of emotions battled: confusion, fear, anger, and even hatred.

Concha felt punched in the gut with the realization of what she had done, not just to the villagers but to her own flesh and blood. The desertion and the years Lupe might have longed for a mother. *What kind of monster am I?* Maternal feelings came over her; she wanted to protect, touch, and embrace her daughter. Concha stretched her hands out toward the apparition floating in front of her. *M'ija!* Her cry tore at her very being.

Then the cursed voices started up in her head. *Oh, come off it, Concha, Don't forget why you are here.*

The voices replaced the image of Lupe with the boyish grin of Malvado.

Yes, you will never have true happiness if you fail in giving Lupe to Malvado.

For a moment anger overcame her. *I won't do this. She's my baby.* Concha wanted to run from the voices that mocked and teased with promises they had yet to fulfill.

But, she didn't run. The image of Malvado tugged at her, igniting sensations she tried to block but couldn't.

She found herself stroking her arm and fantasized about her last encounter with Malvado. She blocked out the horrors of the burnt remains of Pacal and Malvado's veiled threat, but instead enjoyed the intoxication of his touch. Soft and seductive, his hands played her body like a fine-tuned violin. He knew her secret parts that cried out for more.

Yes! Isn't that better? Laughter rang in her ears while replaying the promises Malvado had whispered to her in the middle of night. She only had to do one small thing. Bring Lupe.

Any motherly sentiments she had felt vanished. A deep hunger filled her. Concha trembled and she knew she needed to find Lupe, and do it now.

Chapter Seventeen

Lupe leaned against a stone pillar inside the temple. A breeze from outside stroked her face. She closed her eyes and let the coolness play over her. A few strands of hair broke free from her braid and tickled her nose. With regret she felt the breeze leave, vanishing with the sunlight. How she wished she could blow away, too.

Today had been so overwhelming, the Maiden's circle, the appearance of Kish, and the recent revelation of a father from Ixtumea.

She wanted to know more about him. So many unanswered questions swirled in her head. She longed to find someone who had known her father and find out about this hidden piece of herself.

In the background, the maidens of Ixchel lit the torches, careful not to drop any kindling on the ground. Bright red, turquoise, and orange clothing mingled together, refusing to be dulled by the fading light.

Lupe turned and watched the women clean up for the day, taking out the dirty bowls, cups, and even utensils. It surprised her there were spoons and forks here. She'd kind of assumed everyone ate with his or her fingers.

Tonantzin tapped her shoulder. "Come, you need to rest."

Startled, Lupe jumped. She kept forgetting the villagers around her moved quietly. She really needed to ask Tonantzin about that skill sometime. But now wasn't that time.

"Now?" Lupe didn't feel tired, if anything she wanted to explore more of this foreign world. Sleep so wasn't on her mind right now.

"Can't I look around some more?"

Tonantzin continued to wait, for what Lupe didn't know. This whole waiting thing got to her. She almost wished her maiden would come back with a smart aleck remark, anything but the standing around at her beck and call.

"So I guess I have no say on this, do I?" Lupe asked, wanting to break the sudden awkward silence.

"No, you do not. We need to go back to your room." Tonantzin didn't wait, but turned around walking in the other direction.

Lupe figured she didn't have any other option but to follow. The hallways had emptied. The torches on the walls had been lit and cast long shadows everywhere.

"What I wouldn't give for a real light bulb right now," Lupe said.

"A what?"

Lupe sighed. "Never mind. No way you guys would have light bulbs here anyway."

A few other maidens passed by, glancing in curiosity at Lupe, who only looked away. Back in Tustin she'd have given anything to be noticed and to be the center of attention but it got old real fast.

They turned another corner and were back to her room which was nothing like the one she'd left in Tustin. She almost missed the Pop star posters that had been scattered all over her walls in her grandmother's condo. A lone table, a tapestry of some kind on the wall, and of course a small spider Goddess figurine brought her back to her senses. This wasn't Tustin. She glanced over at the swaying hammock in the corner.

"You know, maybe I am kind of tired." Lupe stretched her arms overhead.

"First, drink this." Tonantzin picked up a ceramic cup from one of the plates on the table and placed it in her hands. "It'll help you for tomorrow."

The familiar sweet scent of honey and chocolate from Tonantzin's cup caused Lupe to brighten up. She smacked her lips in anticipation.

"What's so special about tomorrow?"

"You'll find out."

"Secretive, much?"

Tonantzin only smiled. "I cannot tell you about tomorrow. All I can say is this will help." She offered Lupe the drink. "You have had a long day, for one who is new to our ways."

"You can say that again."

Lupe put the cup to her lips and took a sip. The warmth tickled her throat with a rush of sweetness and a slight aftertaste of nuts.

"Tonantzin, did you know my father?"

"Balam?" Tonantzin glanced at her with surprise. "I did not know him but have heard many things spoken of him."

Lupe knew she probably shouldn't push it but she wanted to know. Hey, she had the right, didn't she?

She lifted her eyes and looked at Tonantzin over the rim of the cup. “Can you tell me something of him?”

Tonantzin tilted her head to the side. “He was here before I came to Irreantum. I only know he was a great warrior. Nothing more.” She reached for the empty cup.

Lupe felt a twinge of disappointment. She had hoped Tonantzin could give her a little information.

“You know, my grandmother never told me anything about a father. Only that we needed each other once my mother left.” Lupe glanced at Tonantzin. “You are not from here, either. Where are you from?”

Tonantzin’s fingernail clicked against the cup. “Another village not far from here. But...” Tonantzin leaned close to Lupe. “You can ask Abish or the others about your father tomorrow. I am sure they can tell you more. Come, you need to rest.”

Curious, Lupe added, “Okay, tell me more about where you used to live? Maybe we can share stories?”

Tonantzin frowned. “Yes, maybe.”

Of all the people in this strange land she felt the most comfortable around her. Tonantzin’s eyes seemed to dance with amusement whenever she glanced at her. Hiding something made her even more interesting. Lupe couldn’t help feel a strange kinship to her.

Tonantzin’s leather sandals barely made a sound on the reed mats outside of Lupe’s room. She carefully put the gourd on a mahogany table next to the door. She walked over to the hammock to straighten the multi-patterned blanket and puff up the pillow.

Lupe yawned again and pulled her blouse over her head. So many questions rushed through her head. Who was her father, and why hadn’t anyone told her about him? Lupe remembered the vision of the man, bleeding and pleading for help. What could she do? Sure, Abish had read to her from the prophecies and even Ixchel had appeared to her. Now, she had to wait for the goddess and try to do what everyone expected of her.

Tonantzin took the shirt out of Lupe’s hands. “Here, put this on.” She held out a light cotton shift.

The white semi-transparent gown felt like silk and hugged Lupe’s body. She left her underwear and bra on so she wouldn’t be totally naked. Tonantzin smiled but she didn’t make any comments.

Lupe lifted herself up gently into the hammock. The slight rocking movement calmed her frayed nerves. She could imagine herself in a tropical jungle, with the nocturnal life playing a soothing melody, erasing all worries from her mind.

“We are,” Tonantzin glanced at Lupe, “what do you say? Quite a pair.”

Lupe laughed. “For someone not from Tustin, you’re kind of cool in your own weird way.”

Tonantzin grinned.

Lupe closed her eyes. In the background her maid hummed some nondescript melody. The high-pitched whistle of flutes came out of nowhere and blended with Tonantzin’s voice.

As Lupe started to fall asleep she thought she heard *Abuela* whisper in her ear. “*M’ija, no te preocupas!* Don’t worry. The gods will watch over you.”

Lupe smiled. The thought that maybe her grandmother could watch over her in this strange land comforted her.

Chapter Eighteen

Concha stopped to rest. At this rate she'd never reach the village of Irreantum by nightfall. She didn't want to be in the jungle alone at night. It was too dangerous.

Though she knew the consequences of slowing down, her body still refused to cooperate. Everywhere around her, insects, animals, and dense foliage hummed with life. But not her. She stumbled through the jungle, each step more agonizing than the last.

Her right hand continued to twitch, making it hard to hold onto the machete. With each step, the buzzing in her head increased. The mushroom drink did have that unpleasant side effect.

The piercing sunlight, heat, and noise intensified the unpleasant side effects. A single leaf or blade of grass felt like needles scraping on her skin. She wanted so much to scream but feared the outcome of such a rash action.

With great difficulty, Concha held her head high and tried to forget the pressure drilling through her head. Perspiration dripped down her forehead. She disregarded the unclean sensation and pushed herself harder.

Up ahead, hidden behind some trees, was the welcome sight of a lake. She sighed with relief and pushed the branches out of her way, sneaking another quick look. Concha stopped and stared at the cool blue water. Her earlier discomfort and stress of knowing what she needed to do, turn herself in to the villagers, vanished. The appearance of the large lake was better than the *menudo* she used to use as a home remedy for the after effects of the mushroom drink.

She didn't wait. She sped down the mossy slope, steering around large boulders and stones in the way. Kicking off her sandals, she rushed into the lake.

Bending down, she splashed the water on her face, her long skirt fanning around her. The clear fluid felt like heaven, washing away her emotional pain. She cupped her hands and let the liquid run through her fingers. The after-effects of the mushroom drink still lingered in her body. Everything around her, from the water to the tall trees were crisper, more vibrant, and sweeter. She wanted to laugh. Her spirits were finally lifted.

But her pleasure was cut short. A rustle of leaves caused her to stop. A prickly sensation worked its way up to the base of her neck. She turned and gazed back toward the shore for the source of this intrusion.

She knew her presence had alerted the guards posted close to Irreantum. She should have been careful, it was too late to worry about that now.

It would be suicidal to run. Arrows would shoot her down in seconds and she hadn't come this far only to fail.

Concha inhaled deeply. She waited for the voices within to give their advice, but for the moment only silence answered.

How she wished for another mushroom drink! Her body shook with anticipation and longing. It took all of her strength to quell the growing uneasiness and pull the drugs had on her. A brine taste coated her tongue, she wanted to spit it out but instead swallowed the bitterness.

Concha took more deep breaths until the dizziness left.

She rose up, shaking the water off her body. Both her shirt and skirt conformed to her body, revealing much to the men; however, she refused to be intimidated. Holding her head high, she waded from the lake and started back up the trail.

The foliage parted, revealing four archers pointing their arrows at her breast. All dressed in loincloths, with bright feathers on their heads. Smears of red dye on their faces gave a sinister appearance of half-dead men or even worse, cannibals. Concha wasn't impressed. None wore the telltale signs of privilege and wealth. She scanned the motley group once more. Somehow this made her able to push her fear aside. She lifted her chin up in disdain to hide the dread that bubbled inside.

"Well, Concha. You've decided to come home, have you?"

One of the men addressed her. She vaguely remembered him during her time in Irreantum. He spoke with a slight lisp. Most of his teeth were missing, probably from some skirmish with other intruders.

The other men snickered. They reminded her of a pack of hyenas, laughing just before the kill.

Concha raised her hands in front of her. "I have escaped from the deceiver's presence and wish to speak to the Revered One."

The one warrior spat on the ground. "That is what we think of you and your request." He stepped closer. "Do you think we have forgotten your part in Balam's death? He might have trusted you but we will not make the same mistake."

He turned to the other warriors. "Let's kill the *witch* and get it over with."

Another warrior, slightly taller than the others, snickered. “I say let’s have some fun with her, since that’s all she’s good for. Then dispose her.”

Concha’s heart raced. This wasn’t going the way she’d wanted. She tried another tactic. She lowered her gaze in submission. “Please, can you take me to the Revered One?”

The tall warrior grabbed for her wet blouse, yanking her close. A blast of sour wine combined with his leering face almost caused Cocha to lose it. She struggled to break free from her would-be assailant. She pulled, yanked, and tugged against the warrior’s hold. A sickening wave of terror welled up in her stomach. She refused to be abused by any man, again.

Ripp...her blouse tore open. The cotton fibers rubbed against each other. Silence filled the small circle, but still the hand on her shirt held steadfast, refusing to release her. Her captor’s callused knuckles scraped roughly against her skin.

He pulled her closer, teasing her. Her blouse ripped even further, exposing part of her chest. He grinned. Concha’s heart raced but she refused to show any fear to the *tonto* holding her captive. She lifted her head and glared back into his eyes. The warrior might have been handsome if not for the ugly sneer painted across his bronze face. His gaze alone told her all she needed to know. He wasn’t done with her—yet.

Oh, Mother of God! Concha felt sick. Once more she was in Tustin, pinned against a cold concrete wall, the hot breathe of a *Cholo* inches from her face.

No, she wouldn’t be violated again!

“Let her go. This is not the way to deal with this.”

Concha’s heart continued to beat hard against her chest. The man holding her loosen his grip. Hope fluttered in Concha’s heart.

“But she is the reason for the evil that has come to our village.” Spittle flew from his lips onto Concha’s face. She winced in disgust.

While chuckling at Concha’s discomfort, a hand came out of nowhere and pushed him aside. His eyes bulged like a bullfrog before he fell aside. Concha stepped back and wrapped her arms around herself to quell her trembling.

The bright sun made it hard to get a really good look, but apparently her rescuer held some power, given the sudden rigid stance of the other warriors. No longer did the warriors make crude gestures with their hands or describe in graphic detail what they planned to do with her. No, the only taunts she heard now were the howls from distant spider monkeys.

As he got closer, a warning signal went off in Concha's head. Something about him looked familiar—but from where? Then a sick realization hit her. She knew. Her eyes widened in recognition. Could it really be...? Walking toward her, her late warrior's younger brother, Ammon.

Concha's mouth opened in shock. She'd been the reason for his brother's death. She didn't expect Ammon to be here. This complicated things. Ammon ignored her, addressing the other men. "No, we will take her to the Revered One. She will know what to do."

Her tormentor got up from the ground and rubbed his bruised arm. "I didn't mean her any harm. I just..."

Ammon glared. "Be silent." His eyes scanned the other men. "Do any of you have problems with this?"

The men shook their heads, glancing away from Ammon throwing dark glances her way.

He then turned and gazed at Concha. A flood of emotions played over his face. Curiosity, disbelief, and finally anger. He took a deep breath before his face dropped back to an impassionate stare.

Ammon walked up to Concha. He stopped a few inches from her. "What are you doing here?" His voice soft but firm.

Concha bit her tongue. She should be thankful for his help. She wished she knew Ammon's thoughts. His dark brown eyes were clouded over, refusing access inside. Maybe he could help her? Somehow she had to chip aside his man-made barrier and use him to her advantage.

Ammon's eyes narrowed. Turning, he snapped his fingers. A short muscular warrior rushed over. "Kinichi, you will take her to the Revered One."

Kinichi thumped his chest. "Yes, captain." The bright green quetzal feathers from his shield waved in agreement.

Ammon glanced once more at Concha. "You will follow these men," He leaned close to her. "And you will do what they say."

The combination of heat, nervousness, and withdrawal pains made Concha desperate to get on Ammon's good side. How she wished for the advice of the voices in her head; but, strangely, they had ceased.

Concha twisted a lock of her hair, ignoring the tremble in her hands. Instead of being seductive the movement came off as clumsy. "Ammon, surely you jest. You can't be serious."

She strolled up to Kinichi and wrinkled her nose in disgust. He reeked of sour body odor and stale wine. The warrior glared back.

“These are only lowly men.” Her voice deep and husky. “I deserve much more.” She strolled up to Ammon, making sure her hips swayed. Too much and she would appear a fool. With her finger she stroked his chest. “If you take me, this I can see.”

Concha smiled coyly. She looked him over. She couldn't believe this was the brat who trailed behind Balam, so many years ago. Time had been good to Ammon. The awkwardness of his youth had melted away, leaving long muscular limbs, broad shoulders and tight abdominal muscles. His hair shone like gold. His locks were tied back in a thong. Somehow this only intensified his good looks.

A longing came over her, one she had hoped had died with Balam.

She pushed the urge aside. What was she thinking, anyway? Ammon might not be her former warrior but he still had a lot of the same traits. A look of revulsion covered his face. Slowly, he loosened Concha's hand off his chest. Grimacing, he wiped his hands against his thighs. Each stroke drove the point across, she was dirt.

Concha turned away and caught more than a few of the guards snickering at her discomfort. Anger came over her. Who the hell were they? If anything, they all should bow down to her, the future goddess of all of Ixtumea.

Ammon turned his back to her, dismissing her. He pointed toward Irreantum. “Let's go.”

One of the archers frowned. “You cannot be serious, Ammon? She is nothing but trouble. Why do we need her? Now that we have the new *orucula*...”

New *orucula*? That caught her attention.

“What? New *orucula*?” When no one answered, Concha smiled. “You have my daughter, Lupe, don't you?” Concha walked back up to Ammon. “Are you her warrior?”

Ammon glared at her.

“Oh, that's just sweet.” Tears ran down Concha's face. She wiped her face and sneered. “Does Lupe know who you are?”

For a brief moment, Ammon's eyes narrowed. Then he glanced away. The warriors mumbled among themselves. A few obsidian spears were pointed toward her chest.

But the weapons didn't faze her. “No, of course not.” Concha grinned. “You are just like your fool of a brother. I bet you even—”

A slap cracked across her face. Concha's hand flew to her face. She glared with venom at Ammon.

"How dare you!" She reached inside her blouse for her trusted stone to use against him.

One of the men threw her to the ground. The onyx slipped from her fingers.

Struggling, Concha spat at Ammon. "You might be Balam's younger brother but you will regret what you have done. I curse you—"

A rough cloth shoved into her mouth cut off the rest of her words. How could she have let her guard down?

Ammon glared down at her before moving away. "Tie the *bruja* up and take her back to Irreantum. I will not fall prey to your spells," Ammon said. "The council of wise men will listen to you and judge you for what you are."

Concha narrowed her eyes in anger. Hot rage boiled through her. She'd been willing to turn herself in to these men and this is how they treated her. She vowed when she got back she'd make sure they pay for how they treated her. Not just these sorry excuses of warriors, but the whole damned village.

Chapter Nineteen

Lupe woke in her room. The hairs on the back of her neck rose. She sensed the presence of someone watching her. Torches lining the earthen walls had long since burned out. The glare of the full moon filled her room with a supernatural glow. A heavy tapestry replaced the door she'd had back in her room in Tustin. The fabric swayed to the side, exposing someone's feet.

Lupe gripped the thin blanket in panic. She looked for something to use against the intruder. All she could see were woven baskets, reed mats, and mahogany tables. They were useless and too far away to help her. She grasped the medallion of the Virgin of Guadalupe she wore. *Not much, but still something.* She unhooked the clasp and removed the necklace. Clutching it in her hand, she pushed herself off the hammock.

A familiar cough came from the entrance. Squinting, she made out Teancum's broad shoulders.

A weird sensation came over Lupe; relief it wasn't someone who meant her harm, and something else. Moonlight played over his narrow nose and full mouth. For a moment Lupe saw why her mother might have thought a warrior from Ixtumea could be attractive. Teancum had Latino good looks...olive skin and dark brown eyes with shoulder-length hair, similar to one of the heartthrobs on any Spanish channel. The darkness intensified his mystery. Add to the calm that oozed from his being, this would make any girl swoon.

He walked toward her.

"Lupe," Teancum whispered. "The goddess waits for you."

His sudden closeness erupted thousands of goosebumps on her skin. Embarrassed of her transparent gown, she pulled her blanket up closer.

"What should I bring?" Lupe blinked. "Do I have to bring something special? It's not every day a girl meets a goddess, now, huh?"

For a moment anger clouded his features. Lupe knew she'd pushed him too far with her sacrilegious comment. Wouldn't she have felt the same way if he'd made a snide comment about the Virgin?

"Sorry," she muttered under her breath. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Teancum only shrugged and walked to a table where her clothes and a bright red striped

reboza lay. Picking up the light shawl, he draped it gently over her shoulders. The silky material against her bare shoulders sent electric shocks through her. Lupe pulled the *reboza* tight to her body, uncomfortable with the sensation.

Slowly she made sure to cover herself from Teancum's gaze. She made her way to a small mirror prompted up against a mahogany table and peered at her reflection. *Eww!* Lupe frowned. Disheveled hair. Eyes crusty with sleep along with darkened circles gave her the whole OMG look.

Teancum placed a large calloused hand on her shoulder. His warmth seeped through the thin shawl, bathing her with a longing she'd never experienced before. Glancing up at Teancum, her mouth opened in surprise. Instead of arrogance lining his face she saw a softening of his features. Maybe she was more than just some kid he had to baby-sit. Now she knew she had been watching too many *telenovelas*.

Lupe brushed the thought aside. "Come on, Teancum. Can't I at least wash my face?" She didn't want to look awful when she met Ixchel. She wished she had some makeup to put on.

Teancum sighed. "We have no time. And anyway..." His hand brushed against her face "...you do not need it."

Lupe's heart pounded. Talk about killing a moment! Her earlier impressions of Teancum being a hottie were dashed. She frowned.

"What do you mean, I don't need it?" Lupe stared at him. "Are you saying I'm ugly?"

Teancum laughed and hurried out. Lupe wondered whether she should be offended or not. She didn't know if he thought she was attractive, but deep down she hoped he did.

Even though Teancum was a warrior hottie, he annoyed her. He probably was eighteen or nineteen and like her friend's older brothers thought her more as a kid. Yet another reason not to think of him. Anyway she couldn't fantasize about him, no matter how hot he looked. She had to concentrate on her meeting with Ixchel.

* * * *

After Lupe changed, she rushed out of her room. She didn't want to lose sight of Teancum. As she made her way down a well-beaten path, she could make out the shapes of the village women finding corn to prepare for the morning meal. The sweet smell of chocolate hung in the air, causing her stomach growl. She longed to follow the women and ask for food, but knew Teancum had packed something for the journey. She didn't want to meet the goddess on an

empty stomach.

Lupe ran along the dirt pathway, careful not to stumble. Morning fog coated the ground and made it hard to sense her surroundings. Cold air stung her face and made her pull her *reboza* tighter.

Teancum waited for her. One of the village women handed him some tortillas. He placed them in a red cotton cloth. Hoisted on his back was a leather container, similar to a backpack.

“Can I have one?” Lupe asked. “I’m starving.”

Teancum handed her a corn tortilla, putting the remaining shells and cloth back into his backpack. “Come, you can eat on the way.”

Lupe rolled her eyes. She knew she was being rude but some habits were just too hard to break.

Teancum lead Lupe through the thick foliage. Even though she had seen the goddess in a vision, the thought of meeting her still made Lupe sick to her stomach. What does one say to a goddess, anyway? But the vision of yesterday, along with the visit from the prophet Kish, refused to be ignored. Images of death and destruction replayed in her head. And the scary thing was the thought she’d be responsible for thousands or maybe even millions of lives. If that thought didn’t humble her, what would?

As Lupe moved further away, thicker vegetation swallowed up the village. Soaring trees, vines, and other plants erased civilization.

The lush carpet of green cushioned her feet while she tried to keep up with Teancum. She was amazed at how he moved so quickly through the area. She tried to keep her gaze on his broad back.

Around her she watched large jewel-tinted hummingbirds buzz next to colorful hibiscus. Flocks of macaws screamed overhead. A large snake slithered around a huge tree trunk. She shuddered in disgust.

Teancum strolled through the endless vegetation and halted. Lupe saw thinner tree trunks with smaller branches.

Teancum touched one of the branches and signaled her over. “You need to continue on the path before you.”

Lupe took one step and stopped. Her eyes widened in surprise at what lay hidden below.

Chapter Twenty

Oh my God! Lupe couldn't believe what she saw. A different world lay hidden behind a grove of zapote trees. It was as if she'd stumbled onto a concealed movie set; only she knew this backdrop was real.

Tall mountains materialized out of the mist. Pines crowded the rocky crevices. A long stream of water tumbled down the edge of one mountain, emptying into a lake below.

Slowly Lupe inched forward, afraid the image would disappear. But the picturesque scene held still.

Mesmerized, she gazed at the panorama. No clouds ruined the effect. Hawks soared overhead, the tips of their feathers flashing a fiery orange.

"Is this where Ixchel lives?" Lupe whispered.

"Yes," Teancum nodded. "She awaits you."

The place had a sacred feel, like an open cathedral, minus the stuffiness of a closed building. *Yes*, Lupe thought. *I can see a goddess living here.*

A touch to Lupe's shoulder bought her to her senses. No sooner did she twist around than loose rocks broke free from under her sandals. Lupe fell backward, getting a really good glimpse of the drop below.

Oh my...

The loose gravel gained momentum, adding dirt, shrubbery, and assorted rocks. The earthen mixture slid down the cliff, exploding at the bottom into a dust cloud.

Whoa, that could have been me! Horrified, Lupe replaced the shattered remains with an image of her broken body. Not a pretty sight.

With the help of Teancum, Lupe pulled herself up. Fear replaced her earlier calm.

"You expect me to go down there?" Lupe hoped Teancum would change his mind. Couldn't she meet the goddess somewhere else? Like a place without deep ledges where someone, namely herself, could fall to their death?

Teancum reached into his leather bag and pulled out a rope. "Have a little faith. Then you will see this is only an illusion to protect the goddess and yourself."

Lupe scowled. "An illusion? You mean this," she said, sweeping her hand out "isn't real? It

sure looks real to me. And I, for one, don't want to test it out."

"I will watch over you, little one." He walked toward the zapote trees and tied the rope around one of the furrowed trunks. He looked like a Mayan god, every muscle emphasized as he tugged on the thick cords. The warm rays of the sun kissed his bronze skin. Now, like one of *Abuela's* ancient legends of Mexico City, all he needed was the fabled *aguila-eagle* with a *vibora* in its mouth to complete the picture of the god proclaiming this area as a holy place.

Or instead of a disgusting snake, why couldn't he hold her? She wouldn't squirm in *his* hands! She fantasized flinging her arms around him, and kissing his luscious mouth. Full and tasty, waiting for her to...

What am I thinking? Jeez, the sun must be frying my brain. Being close to Teancum triggered these embarrassing feelings. Yeah, she definitely had to lay off watching *Abuela's telenovelas*, or she'd have to do some serious confessing.

Teancum gave the rope a final tug. Lupe turned her face away, embarrassed Teancum might have caught her gawking.

She'd just die if he knew she had these thoughts. Couldn't he at least show her some interest? Yeah, he'd only laugh and ruffle her hair or do one of those annoying big-brother things, brushing off any kind of interest as cute or worse, embarrassing.

How could he be so calm? Sometimes being in the presence of a stoic warrior could be a royal pain in the butt.

Teancum tossed the rope down the cliff. The cord slapped the earth, loosening some gravel.

He passed Lupe a section of the rope. "Here, you will need to go down."

She took another glance downward. Tops of massive trees jutted up, waiting for her to fall and be impaled on their sharp branches. Her heart dropped to her stomach like a massive brick. She'd never liked climbing, or heights for that matter. In middle school gymnastics, climbing that rope was the worse experience of her life. She had to been the only one who couldn't climb up. How would this be any different?

"You're kidding, right?"

Teancum gave the rope an extra jerk. "You need to go. It's not hard. I will hold on." He flashed his dazzling white smile her way as if that would help.

"Seriously, there is no flipping way I'm going down that steep slope. My gosh, I'll break my neck."

“Lupe, look at me.” Teancum cupped her face in his hands. “I will not leave you.”

His words melted her stubbornness. It was so unfair he could do this to her. But he seemed so sincere. How could she not believe him?

Lupe rolled the coarse rope in her hands. She quickly spoke to avoid the tension budding up inside. “Okay, how am I supposed to banish my fears?”

“Believe in yourself and the power within. You will see all is not what it seems.”

Lupe’s eyebrows rose in disbelief. “You expect that mumbo jumbo talk to make me feel safer?”

“Do not worry.” Teancum placed his large hand over hers. “I will hold on and make sure nothing happens.”

His touch sent electrical shocks up her spine. Startled, she grabbed the rope and avoided his gaze. She hoped the fibers would burn away the conflict growing inside.

The rope burned her skin, causing a warm sensation. Lupe glanced downward once more. *Not a good move.* Vertigo came over her, making her woozy. *I will not let this get to me...* She muttered the mantra under her breath. All the while, hoping and praying she wouldn’t break her neck.

She took a hesitant step backward. A puff of dirt rose up. She closed her eyes. She found it easier to keep her eyes shut. That way she wouldn’t get dizzy on the descent.

Teancum’s words drifted into her thoughts. That all wasn’t what it seemed. She hoped he was right.

Her sandals touched first one rock, then another. With each step she felt a straining in her shoulders. Though painful, she continued to hold herself against the rope and cliff. Cautiously, she opened her eyes and watched Teancum as he held on to his part of the rope. Somehow knowing he meant what he’d said, about taking care of her, made her feel better.

For a brief moment the crevice wavered and was replaced with a gentle hill with only a few scattered rocks. *Hey, maybe this won’t be so bad after all.*

She bounced from one rock to another, without any problems. But no sooner did she loosen up then some bushes scratched her ankles, breaking her concentration.

Where did those come from? Lupe tried to kick out of the way the bristly plants. It didn’t help.

The thorns cut into her skin. *Ow!* Losing her grip, she fell. She seemed to go in slow motion.

She felt like one of those hang gliders she had seen on some news station, flying like a gigantic bird, except she didn't have any wings to help.

Her mouth opened wide. She couldn't hear anything, no scream, nothing. The only sound she heard was the loud pounding of her heart.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lupe wasn't screaming any longer. Her throat burned like someone had shoved a handful of cotton balls into her mouth. Her lips were so swollen she couldn't close them.

Still she fell, with the wind slamming against her body. Beneath her, the earth swirled out of control. Bushes slapped at her, rocks slipped by dangerously close. The ground rushed toward her, and a blue flash told her a lake spread below her. Terror rushed through her, until she thought she'd hurl the contents of her stomach below.

Reality had replaced the illusion. No longer did gentle hills blanket the area.

As she spiraled downward, only one thought went through her mind. *I'm going to die.*

Snips of images flashed through Lupe's mind. Her friend Marisol's ridiculous bows in her wild hair, *Abuela* bending over the *ofrenda* in their Tustin apartment, even Teancum's dazzling smile. One thing kept interrupting these memories. The belief she'd failed in her purpose of saving Ixtumea and her world.

All this vanished when she plopped on the ground. Dirt flew into her face. Vibrant vegetation covered the land. The grass cushioned her fall like a huge jungle pillow.

She didn't move, afraid she might be hurt. She waited for a moment before trying to move. Even she knew how dangerous a fall could be. Who knew if she had a concussion or something worse? But it wasn't as if there was a hospital nearby. She closed her eyes, saying a silent prayer. For some reason she felt the need to get up. First though she flexed her toes. She moved her fingers. Nothing seemed to have been broken.

I can't believe this. Lupe thought. *I fell such a long way down!* She couldn't believe she hadn't been smashed like a bug.

Where is Teancum? She glanced toward the clifftop but couldn't see her warrior. Disappointment swept over her. For a moment she thought she'd cry. *He said he'd look out for me.*

Lupe waited to regain her breath. She recalled Teancum's parting words...all was not what it seemed. She felt compelled to look once more. She turned her head back toward the ridge. A dark shape appeared. Lupe gave a startled gasp.

"Lupe!" The prickly sensation came again. *"Do not worry. Go to the goddess."* Teancum's voice, but how could that be? She glanced once more and froze. A fuzzy image materialized

close to the ridge, revealing the presence of a large man.

Ohmigod! Lupe's hand flew to her mouth. That's Teancum! His body drifted up in the air, similar to one of those *duendes* in her *abuela's* Mexican fairytales.

"Go, little one. Nothing will harm you." Then he vanished.

Lupe slowly got up off the ground, shaking her head in disbelief. She felt as if she'd woken from a weird dream, but the painful scrapes on her body told her otherwise.

The goddess? I don't see Ixchel. Lupe clasped her medallion, staring once more at the place where Teancum had just stood. Nothing remained of his presence.

A dull empty ache gnawed at her. She wanted Teancum. She missed his touch, his smile. How could she find Ixchel without him?

Something to the side caught her attention. No, it couldn't be. Shielding her eyes, she took another look.

A crumbling rock building came into view. It looked old and forgotten. Two pillars guarded the entrance. Rust colored rocks lined the sides. On the ground scattered flower petals trailed toward the collapsing building.

Curious, she picked up a petal. When she rubbed it between her fingers she got a whiff of licorice.

She followed the trail of marigolds. A stone door stood slightly open revealing an off-white granite structure with broken up cobble stones.

Her curiosity piqued, she approached.

A humming echoed in her ears. Lupe touched her earrings and flinched. They burned her fingers. *So she's in here.* Her earrings vibrated even louder.

What might be lurking inside? She trembled in fear. Lupe inhaled deeply and ventured in. Cold air hit her, shocking her body. Darkness disoriented her for a moment. Her eyes readjusted. The dripping water echoed.

She touched a wall and encountered a slick finish, slimy and wet. She put her hand to her nose. A rotten egg scent made her pull back and grimace. She didn't want to rub the offensive substance on her clothes. How gross would that be? She'd probably smell like fermented egg salad by day's end.

As she removed her hand, loose dirt and pebbles slid down the wall. She leaned over and caught a glimpse of faint light. She followed the flickering beams, hoping to find the source.

Small dark forms hung further down the walls. Lupe took a tentative step. A flutter caused her to look up. As her eyes adjusted she made out groups of something huddled together.

One detached itself and flew overhead. *Eww!* Hundreds of bats covered the walls. Their membrane wings beat frantically together. The bats protested her disrupting their sleep by emitting a shrill cry. Lupe ducked as other bats followed, screeching upward.

She wanted to run out, away from the disgusting things. Didn't they carry rabies or something? *Okay, I'm really starting to freak out.* But once again Kish's warning flashed through her mind. How both Ixtumea and her real world depended on her.

She grimaced. *Okay, I'll do this, but I don't have to like it.* She moved on.

Farther down, a large hole appeared in the ceiling. Hazy light radiated from the gap. Everything had a yellow tinge to it, intensifying the creepiness. Lupe followed the light into the cavern. Her sandals sloshed through liquid. The narrow pathway opened up. She stepped into a cavern, the darkness making it hard to see all the walls. A giant spider-web stopped her in her tracks.

She stared wide-eyed at what hung down from the ceiling. A huge web, its thin opaque strands, funneled down onto a small lake. The ends barely touched the black water of the underground lake.

Omigod, Ohmigod! She felt the blood drain from her face. If she hadn't seen it herself she wouldn't have believed it. The gigantic web reminded her of one of *Abuela's* lace tablecloths which covered the *ofrenda* back in her bedroom.

Intricate patterns weaved back and forth, cascading gracefully. Gaping holes were shattered throughout, destroying the symmetry of the design.

The damp cave gave Lupe chills. Rubbing her arms to get warm, she stared at the massive web. Dew glistened like jewels on the strands. In the middle of the web a large shadow appeared. It looked like a huge stain on otherwise pure fabric. The black shape glided down the thin strands, making its way toward her!

Her heart seized in her chest.

A voice called from within the spider web. Like an older woman's voice, deep pitched and soothing, it called, "Do not be shy, Lupe. C'ome c'loser."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The web rippled and exposed the source of the voice. A large spider! The creature's movement sent off a tingling from her earrings. This warm sensation spread to every part of her.

Ohmigod. Ohmigod. Ohmigod. Hanging right in front of her was the goddess herself. She knew Ixchel was a spider; but instead of having eight eyes, a woman's face peered back at her. Lupe shouldn't have been surprised. She'd already seen Ixchel in visions, but still, seeing the real thing took her breath away.

Ixchel's face had a timeless beauty, bronze skin, wavy brown hair, and the most exquisite, coffee-colored eyes lined with thick black eyelashes.

She slid down from a transparent dragline. The rest of her body out of place for her otherwise perfect features. Red circles curved the top of Ixchel's bronze-colored abdomen. Lupe recognized them as the design covering everyone from the Revered One to the pattern of her own earrings.

Lupe stood still in awe. How often did someone stand inches away from a goddess, who just happened to be a giant spider, and not wonder if they had been hallucinating?

A light chuckle rang in the cave.

"I have been waiting for you." Ixchel swung down from her dragline.

Lupe stumbled backward until she bumped into a wall. Her earrings throbbed, keeping in rhythm with Ixchel's pulsating stomach, which glowed bright red the closer she got.

Lupe's heart raced so fast she believed it would leap from her body.

Ixchel moved nearer, her legs lightly touching the ground. The fine black hairs on Ixchel's slender legs seemed to wave back.

"Lupe, we need to start." Ixchel inched closer. She smelled of sweet licorice and freshly cut grass.

In a daze, Lupe didn't know what to say.

Ixchel stopped and glanced back at her. "I am surprised. Do you not have any c'omments?" The goddess laughed. Her laughter sounded like bubbles exploding out of a shaken soda bottle.

Lupe stammered. "I-it's not every day I meet a talking spider." Then feeling more confident she added, "And a huge one at that."

“Yes, you are like your mother. Quick with a c’omment.” Ixchel’s final word ended with a slight popping sound. “C’ome, we need to start.”

Lupe moved sideways against the slick rock in an effort to get away.

Ixchel watched with amusement in her large brown eyes. “Do not be frightened. I will not hurt you.”

Lupe didn’t know whether to scream or cry. Closing her eyes, she crept back toward the wall. Something about the goddess reminded her of *Abuela*. Her eyes, voice, and movements felt familiar. How was that possible? *Abuela* wasn’t a spider.

“What do I call you?” Lupe whispered. “Ixchel or your holiness?”

“I am c’alled many things,” the goddess smiled. “You c’an c’all me Ixchel.”

Something about Ixchel melted any fears Lupe had. Sure, her stomach fluttered, but for some weird reason, gazing into Ixchel’s large liquid eyes calmed her. She sensed goodness. Lupe wasn’t sure why.

Lupe’s lips curved into a smile.

“Okay,” Lupe gulped. “Ixchel.” She still didn’t feel comfortable calling a goddess by her first name. Wasn’t that disrespectful?

She lowered her gaze. “What do I do? You probably know that I’m new to this *orucula* thing, but I’m willing to learn.”

With one leg, Ixchel motioned to the side of the cave, where some half-finished blankets lay scattered on the ground.

Lupe walked closer. *Those aren’t blankets*. Fanned out on the ground were long strings filled with different kinds of knots, both large and small.

“Wow. What are they?” Lupe reached down for one of the knotted garments. She looked back at Ixchel. “Is it okay, if I...”

Ixchel smiled. “Touch them.”

Lupe made her way to the knots, careful not to get too close to the goddess. She picked up and fingered the strings. The thick fibers felt coarse with colors unlike anything she’d ever seen before—vivid purples, crimsons, aquas, and yellows melted together. The knots were knit tightly together.

“These are beautiful.” Lupe glanced back up. “But what’s this have to do with me?”

“Ah, Lupe,” said Ixchel. “Everything.”

The cords slipped from Lupe's grasp and fell to the ground with a thump.

"Did I just hear you right, these—" Lupe pointed to the tangle of colorful knots at her feet "—have something to do with me? No offense, Ixchel, but I don't see how."

Ixchel cocked her head. "Why are you surprised?"

Lupe bit her tongue to hold back a comment. She was so sick of everyone here speaking in riddles. Why couldn't they just answer a question without going around in circles? But one look at Ixchel quelled any further snotty words. It wouldn't be too cool to tick off a goddess. She closed her eyes and tried to think of another way to address her concerns, which were starting to add up.

"Okay." Lupe inhaled deeply. "Why do these knots concern me?"

Ixchel cocked her massive head. The movement was subtle and fluid. Her whole body moved continually, a shift of her abdomen to the side, one of her legs bending, and her eyes scanning not just Lupe but the cavern. Ixchel's eyes drilled into Lupe, breaking through any barriers she had put up. Lupe tried to hold her gaze but couldn't. She knew she couldn't lie or hide from Ixchel.

Ixchel's lips were pressed in a straight line. She sighed. "I think it is time for you to see why this all is important."

Ixchel crab-walked back to a large hole in the web tapestry. She stopped with one of her long legs hovering over the gap. Black tinged the edges, giving the exposed area an ugliness that spoiled the overall beauty.

A sizzling sound caught Lupe's attention. She rotated around, trying to find the source of the noise. Adrenaline flowed in her body, causing her heart to race. *Is the web on fire?* She wanted to bolt and get away from any danger.

But no, it wasn't fire she had heard. The noise came from within the web itself. Gray and white static appeared.

An image played on the opaque strands. Towering black stems of trees were grouped together. Ash rained down covering the area in desolation. The strong smell of sulfur caused Lupe to cover her nose.

"Yes, you see it too," Ixchel sighed. "The words in the *kipu* will help all."

So that's what this group of knots is called.

Lupe couldn't turn away from the display of horror. The previous time she had witnessed

something like this was back with the Revered One. That image also had been of destruction. A sense of foreboding filled her. Lupe knew she had to stop all this. But how?

Lupe frowned. "What do knots have to do with that?" She glanced at the discarded cords lying at her feet. If anything, they looked like some macramé project her *abuela* had been working on. How could these objects help Ixchel?

"Woven inside the knots are messages of hope for our people." One of Ixchel's hands brushed against the strands. The earlier scene left and was replaced with men on horses. The men reminded her of the Conquistadors she had seen on the History channel.

"The invaders crushed and killed us. All but one. A Revered One of long ago. She saved some messages."

Lupe glanced once more at the burly yarn. "You mean this other Revered One used this *hipu* to save the messages?" An image of another Revered One flashed through her mind. This woman, not unlike *Abuela*, was helping her people while others sought to slaughter them.

"Yes."

Lupe scrunched her face. "What were the messages?"

"The words of Kish and the prophets. Words the Revered One will teach you. Do you not remember the book?"

Lupe nodded. How could she forget the large leather book covered with red designs similar to the words on some of *Abuela's* books? Didn't her grandmother stress the importance of these sayings? Lupe had always brushed them off as some old Mexican thing. She never knew how important they were.

"Yes," Ixchel said. "Now you see why they are important."

Lupe shrugged, more in deference to the goddess than anything else.

Ixchel scurried back down. "Now we will begin." With one leg she motioned to the cords. "Take the *hipu*."

"Hey, I said I kind of understood how important this might be but that doesn't mean I know how to do these knot thingys."

Ixchel cocked her head in a weird spider-like way. This didn't make Lupe feel much better. All she knew is she didn't want to tick off the goddess and end up in her huge web.

"Have faith, little one." Then she scampered to the other side of the cave and watched.

Goosebumps covered Lupe's body. She sighed and stared at the arrangement of knots. She

still found it hard to believe this was the answer to the oncoming battle. How she wished she had paid more attention to both the Revered One and her *abuela*. Maybe then she could do what was expected of her. *Please, Our Lady or whoever is listening, help me.* The sinking feeling came back, reinforcing the doubts she had of ever being able to fulfill her calling.

Glancing down once more at the knots she added, “Because I don’t know how I’m ever going to do this.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Why can’t I do this?” Frustrated, Lupe hurled the half-completed hanging against the cavern wall. She had hoped this would make her feel a little better. But it didn’t.

Many strands of dyed cotton string now lay in a jumbled mess. She resisted the urge to kick the whole lot into the murky lake.

She had been willing to learn, really she had. But the whole experience had become one trying ordeal. Somehow she couldn’t master making a knot. *Why did it have to be so complicated?*

First, she started with the lightest shade of green to the darkest, crossing the string from the upper right to lower left. She made four such knots. When she thought she might be getting the hang of it she then had to reverse another set of knots. Right to left or was it left to right? Too much information made her head ache.

She glanced back down at the ruined *kipu*. Lupe winced. Hardened bulges lined the remaining pieces of yarn.

An old Spanish saying kept playing through her mind. *Con paciencia y un ganchito, hasta una fortuna se alcanza*. She doubted even patience could help her now.

She sat back down cross-legged on the ground and looked at her botched attempt to make a *kipu*. Thick fibers of both cotton and wool stared back at her. Flustered, she placed it over a boulder. The vivid colors shone like a misplaced rainbow in the sepia-lit cave.

Ixchel must have sensed her frustration. Lupe had forgotten all about her in her failed effort. She chuckled out loud. *How can anyone forget a giant spider goddess?*

Ixchel slid down from the top of the web, where she probably had been watching the whole thing. Lupe’s face flushed with embarrassment at her lack of self-control. *Some orucula I am. She probably thinks I’m some big baby throwing a tantrum.*

Ixchel showed no emotion as she made her way over. Lupe stared in amazement. The sight of Ixchel continued to take her breath away. For a monster spider, Ixchel had the grace of a ballet dancer. Her legs glided down the dragline with delicate precision.

As she continued downward, Lupe noticed something strange. Another gap appeared in the web. This shouldn’t have struck her as odd. There were many other holes throughout. But this

one stood out from the others.

Fine strands curled around the opening. Blackness singed the ends. The obscene mark, though offensive, made it easier to see her world.

For a moment Lupe forgot her failure and gazed through the exposed hole. It still seemed incredible an image similar to one of those 3D movies could be played in this ancient world. In a way the whole experience freaked her out.

An azure sky filled the space. She couldn't make out the place; nothing looked familiar to her. Somehow she knew it was back in her own world. Large SUVs dominated the roads. Everyone rushed around in a hurry.

Lupe sighed. *How she wished she could be one of those faceless persons, only worried with their own concerns.*

"Lupe." Ixchel's voice caused her to remember what she had to do. Lupe sighed and turned away from the familiar sights of her world. Homesickness tugged at her, but unless she finished making the knots, she might as well kiss Tustin goodbye.

"You seriously think I can make one of these?" Lupe didn't want to offend Ixchel but she couldn't fathom how she would ever make the other knots.

"Tie the knots and say the *dichos*." Ixchel's stick thin arm pointed to the large battered web.

Lupe glanced once more at the strings. Anything had to be better than this, but all it took was one look at the shredded web for her to feel shame in how she had been acting. *These people have been through so much. Yes, this is hard but who am I to give up?*

Still she couldn't resist muttering, "You got to be kidding. I don't know how to do this." She touched the cords, the texture cutting into her fingers.

"Close your eyes. Listen within." Ixchel's voice had a hypnotic feel. The sound of ocean waves lapping against a beach pier filled Lupe's ears. The cry of seagulls blended with the music of the water. She could taste the saltiness too.

She closed her eyes. She wanted to savor the moment. After all the craziness, she welcomed the calm.

Another image appeared. She found herself back in the Maidens' dwelling place. Lit torches shone on the blackened earthen walls.

Lupe felt as transparent as the spider webs she had seen so much of in Ixtumea. Wispy and paper-thin, she floated down the corridors like a balloon that had escaped from its owner. A

tugging sensation guided her down the empty passageways. Usually Maidens rushed with food, baskets, clothing, or other items, but not today.

Lupe caught a whiff of the remnants of dinner, roasted corn tortillas, spicy chilies, and the tangy smell of onions. The smell grew fainter as she made her way to the marble stairs.

She flew downward until she came at last to the Maidens' circle. A faint light radiated amidst the darkness. Why had she been brought here? Her curiosity aroused, she moved in closer.

A toneless hum came from within the light. Lupe could hear a few words sprinkled in with the sound of yarn rubbing against someone's hand. She couldn't make out the words. She leaned over.

Abish!

In the head handmaiden's hands were the same cords Lupe had fumbled through not long ago.

Lupe observed Abish. She took two pieces of string, one thicker than the other. Her hands danced across the fibers. Up and over. First one strand then another. Her hands created poetry with yarn and not words.

A strong urge came over Lupe. *Si, se puede!* Yes, you can. The words came out whisper soft, quiet and faint. The message burned strong and filled Lupe with the courage to try again.

With renewed purpose, Lupe opened her eyes and reached once more for the yarn.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The torches inside the cave dimmed. Elongated shadows licked the sides of the walls, stretching upward near the ceiling. The opaque strands of the hanging web glowed in the fading light.

Lupe had lost track of time. Nothing mattered except completing her task of making a *kipu*. The yarn welcomed her touch.

A rush of energy surged through Lupe, and she tingled from head to toe. She expected sparks to fly out of her fingertips. While that didn't happen, something better did.

The knots were easier to make. Her fingers found a life of their own. Without any effort, the knots were formed, perfect and without blemish.

Now, if she could get the sayings right. She squeezed her eyes shut. A flood of words echoed in her head. Some were English while others were in Spanish. Funny how the words conjured up *Abuela*. Lupe could picture her in the cluttered kitchen amidst clusters of lemon balm, ginger, anise, and other herbs. She used these for a tea that could cure just about anything. A whiff of the licorice-smelling beverage circulated in the cave.

One saying came to her. *No tengas como vano el consejo del anciano*—Don't consider useless the advice of an old person. Lupe hung her head in shame. *Abuela* had tried to teach her the *dichos*, but had she listened? No, she had pushed her away. Her grandmother didn't fit the image of what Lupe at the time considered perfect—blonde, Anglo, and anything not Mexican.

Lupe sensed her grandmother close by. A whiff of jasmine made Lupe long for *Abuela* with her graying hair in a bun and the deep-etched lines of wisdom, something she had tried to share with Lupe. This time, Lupe swore to herself, she would listen.

Spreading the completed section of the *kipu* apart, she marveled at the delicate beauty. Somehow she knew her *abuelita* would be proud of her.

Lupe glanced up. *Ixchel* hung suspended in midair over the newest rent in the web. Her humongous spider body occupied whatever empty space was left in the cave. She reminded Lupe of one of those prehistoric animals in an amusement park back in Southern California. Maybe those creatures weren't that much off the mark. Who knew, maybe there had been spiders as big as *Ixchel* during the dinosaur age.

Ixchel's long hands blurred as she wove invisible silk over the tattered fibers.

Lupe looked once more at the knots in her hand and back at the now repaired hole. She smiled. *Maybe I can do it!*

Her stomach rumbled, breaking the spell that had been cast on her. Darkness had now permeated the cave along with a slight chill in the air. She must have been with Ixchel for hours.

Lupe put the half-completed *kipu* aside. Her stomach growled even louder. *Maybe I can ask Ixchel for something to eat or if I can leave for the day.*

Suddenly a man's face appeared close to another hole. The web rippled in protest.

All thoughts of eating left.

A weird sense of *déjà vu* came over Lupe. She could tell he wasn't one of the villagers. He didn't have the telltale mark of the Spider Goddess tattooed on his skin. No, his fair skin and light brown hair speckled with gray paled next to the richness of the Ixtumean natives.

The fine dark hairs on her arms rose up. Yes, the man was good-looking like one of those Hollywood actors, but the only warmth came from his dazzling smile.

He glanced impatiently around the cave, his arms folded, searching for something. *What is he looking for?* Lupe wondered to herself. He must have sensed her as he stopped and glanced her way.

Lupe leaned against the hard wall surface, trying to blend into the shadows. No such luck. As he gazed down at her, his eyes crinkled at the sides.

Ohmigod. Lupe gasped. *He can see me!*

Lupe scooted back in a vain attempt to get away. She clutched her medallion of the Virgin. *Ay, Dios mio!*

The man laughed even louder. No warmth touched his eyes. His glance was cold as ice.

"You will leave now!" Out of nowhere Ixchel scurried toward the man. Her many legs blended together.

Tilting his head to the side, he watched Ixchel with a bored expression.

"Oh, puh-lease." He pointed his finger at Ixchel. "Look at you. It's only a matter of time before both you and the web are destroyed."

He leaned in closer. "Why do you fight me so? You know your power is failing. Why not give me the girl and maybe I can help you too."

Lupe turned to look at Ixchel and gasped in horror.

Why hadn't she noticed this before? Lupe thought the fading light had played tricks with Ixchel's appearance, but that wasn't the case.

No longer did the goddess move without effort. A shallow hue washed out her features. Instead of shining like gold, a sickly yellow covered her body.

Is she...? Lupe didn't have to ask. She knew. Ixchel was dying.

Hot anger surged through Lupe. She clenched her hands together, her nails cutting into her flesh. But she was oblivious to any pain. The continual laughter of the stranger riled her and she wanted nothing more than to gore his electric blue eyes out.

Out of nowhere a thought came to her. If she could use *dichos* to reweave the web, maybe she could use one to send him to away. But which one?

No longer did he strike Lupe as attractive. She remembered a picture of the devil from a catechism book. He also was stunning and charismatic. Why? He had to be, in order to have a third of the host of heaven follow him. Only after the lost spirits fell did he reveal his true colors. In reality the man was nothing but an ugly and warped person. Just like the stranger mocking both her and Ixchel.

Lupe summoned all her strength. "*Venga el diablo.*"

"No, Lupe." Ixchel's long legs wobbled back to the web. She was cut short when the man directed all his attention back to Lupe.

His gaze suddenly shifted to the side. His eyes widened as if something frightened him. Her ears tingled. The warmth of the rubies raced down her chin, neck, and throughout her body until her whole being was engulfed in fire.

The stranger watched her with apprehension. It was as if he was waiting for her to do something.

A large feral smile covered his face. "Ah, come on, Lupita." His mocking voice, teased her.

The familiar way he said her name made Lupe cringe. "Is that the best you can do? I can see you still have much to learn."

Lupe gnashed her teeth in frustration. Her hand betrayed her fear with a slight tremor.

"*Mentiroso.*" Pulling all her strength she tried once more. "*Hierba mala nunca muere.*"

"Now I'm a liar and a devil?" The man smirked at the comparison. He tapped a finger to his mouth. "I thought, Lupita, you of all people, would be above such superstition. Tsss. I don't have time for this foolishness." He pointed his finger at her. A flash of white ripped through the web.

Lupe screamed. A bolt of hot energy hit her in the chest, knocking her off the ground.

The cavern swirled around her. In her attempt to help rid the cave of the man she'd forgotten about Ixchel. The spider goddess, now closer to the apparition, closed her eyes. A one-tone note echoed in the cavern. It reminded Lupe of a mantra she had once heard from a yoga tape.

With great effort, Lupe lifted her head. She could see Ixchel deep in concentration. Ixchel lifted her front leg, panting with the effort. Wet tears fell down Lupe's cheeks. She wanted to help, but knew Ixchel had to do this on her own.

The man hissed at Ixchel. "You fool!" His earlier humor had dissipated.

He turned his attention back to Lupe. His face filled with hate and rage. He stretched out his hand, which grew larger and larger until it filled the entire web. Lupe squeezed her eyes shut, afraid he would rip through the gossamer strands and crush her.

Ixchel's tune increased in tempo, growing louder and louder. The ground pulsed along with her, vibrating underneath Lupe. The whole cave pulsed with energy.

White noise hissed throughout the space in the web, bit by bit erasing the stranger. He cursed at Ixchel. The words fizzled into nothingness.

His message was clear. He wasn't through with Ixchel yet.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lupe stared in horror at the web. Her pounding heart drowned out her thoughts. She wanted to run, to get away from the cave, but fear the stranger would return paralyzed her.

Remnants of the fight between Ixchel and the man were everywhere. The remaining fibers around the hole were singed black. The flakes crackled as they rained down on the littered array of broken gourds, yarn, and other items. The particles burned Lupe's eyes and blurred her vision.

His presence echoed still in the cave. A breeze circulated around the cavern, disrupting the ashes. Where it came from, Lupe didn't know. An overwhelming scent of something rotten and foul now filled the area.

Lupe shuddered. She crouched down and tried to hide behind a boulder. Still she felt vulnerable.

She glanced once more overhead. She stared in wonder. Though battered, the remaining gossamer strands shone in the inky darkness.

Something bugged her. With a growing sense of unease, Lupe realized something was missing.

Where is Ixchel?

A twinge of guilt crept over Lupe. How could she have been so selfish to only think of herself?

When the goddess had vanquished the stranger she must have used an immense amount of energy. Some kind of voltage on the web. Lupe still could feel the heat.

"Ixchel?" Lupe cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled even louder. "*Ixchel!*"

No answer. Lupe's words echoed back a second later. They sounded harsh and foreign to her ears.

She scanned the cavern for any sight of the goddess. "Where are you?" Lupe tried to reassure herself gods couldn't die. Well, they didn't, did they?

The *kipu* she had been working on earlier in the day now lay half-buried under a boulder. The once-vibrant cords were shredded and coated in dirt. She fought back tears. No, she wouldn't go there. All that mattered right now was Ixchel.

The remains of the torch holders crumbled down the side walls. Lupe panicked. *My God,*

what am I going to do?

A jaundiced glow tainted the cavern and gave it a supernatural feel. How could she maneuver around loose debris and hope to find the goddess without getting lost in the meantime?

Lupe breathed deep and clutched her medallion. *Qué Dios me bendiga. Because I could sure use some help right about now.*

She took a step forward. The eerie light from the web helped guide her but she knew she couldn't rely solely on it.

Inch by inch she moved through rock, dirt, and dust. A heavy layer of dust floated everywhere, in the air, on the ground, and on her. As the particles filled her nose Lupe sneezed. Glancing up she could see a lone torch.

She pushed herself with strength she didn't know she had. *I can do this.* She muttered this, over and over again, while she inched toward the wall. As she got closer she noticed a pile of rock below.

Lupe hoisted herself up, careful not to fall. The torch hadn't been extinguished yet. A few sparks gave some light. She stretched her hand and tried to grab the wooden end.

More fine gray powder rained down on Lupe. With her one hand she brushed the flakes from her shirt.

A slight movement came from a low dark corner. Euphoria filled Lupe.

"Come, Lupe." Ixchel's voice faded with a soft puff.

A faint white light pulsed not far away. Lupe sighed in relief. The glow would help her find Ixchel. Lupe slowly got down from the rock. The raspy breathing of Ixchel grew louder and more labored.

As Lupe approached a dark round circle of spiders scurried away. She had to resist the urge to hurl. She knew spiders guarded her but they still gave her the heebie jeebies. Apparently, they also protected Ixchel.

Then she came upon Ixchel. The sight of the goddess startled Lupe. The goddess's usual fluid movement had been stilled. Ixchel looked so unreal up close. Lupe felt as small as an ant next to the goddess. She swore to herself after today she would never crush an ant again.

Some liquid dripped down from Ixchel's hard exoskeleton giving it a slick finish. Lupe leaned in closer and put her hand on the goddess's back. Her hard skin was cool to the touch. A slight tremor rippled under her hand. Lupe sighed in relief. It's only sweat and not blood. But

that didn't lessen the trauma Ixchel must have gone through.

She turned to Lupe. The huge luminescent eyes filled the goddess's face. Coffee brown pupils shifted to hazel and then back again. Lupe sensed Ixchel prod her to see if she could handle the truth even if she didn't want to hear it.

"Yes, I will die. But not now," Ixchel said, her voice whisper thin. Lupe only heard one thing. The goddess wouldn't die. Not yet, anyway.

"Ah, Lupe," Ixchel said. "All die. Even me."

"But you can't..." Lupe said. "Come on, even I know gods don't die. Right?" Lupe did know some of those gods in Greek stories did, but Ixchel wasn't like them. Well, for one thing, she wasn't Greek. And most of those gods had major attitude problems, but not Ixchel. Beams of goodness radiated from her, similar to all those paintings of the Virgin back in her Tustin apartment. Good couldn't be destroyed, could it? At least that's what Father Michael said in one of his sermons. Never mind that from her priest's point of view, Ixchel probably didn't count.

"Look at web." Ixchel glanced back to what remained.

More holes were scattered throughout the web. An image of Lupe's success with the web came back to her. Ixchel had been strong, beautiful, and vibrant. But now...

Lupe remembered the goddess when the stranger had ridiculed her. She had appeared sickly, just like now. If Lupe wasn't mistaken there had been more holes then too.

Somehow, Lupe couldn't help but think there was more to all this than the failing health of Ixchel. Images of the last three days ran through her mind—the visit of the dead prophet Kish, the visions of saving a world, to successfully reweaving the web, herself. Maybe, just maybe, she had a bigger role to play in all this than she even thought.

Ohmigod! It's not Ixchel! It's me! Why all the messages, visions, and urgency, if not to guide Lupe to her purpose in not just this world but her own.

Remember, m'ija, the goddess Ixchel appears in many different ways.

Abuela's teaching of the goddess resurfaced. Once more Lupe glanced at Ixchel. Her dark eyes seemed so familiar, just like...

Abuela.

It couldn't be, could it?

Lupe shook her head. *No way, that would be just too weird.*

"Yes." Ixchel humor crinkled her eyes. Once more Lupe caught a glimpse of *Abuela* in the

goddess's face.

Lupe clutched her fists. "I can't do anything without you."

She pushed aside the still small voice reaffirmed what she had been thinking, that somehow *Abuela* and Ixchel were connected. This whole time they had been guiding Lupe toward her destiny.

"Oh, Lupe," Ixchel said. "Why do you doubt?"

Talk about a heavy burden! Lupe wanted to cast this responsibility into the bottom of the murky lake. Still the voice was persistent.

"Why?" Lupe changed the subject. "Why do you have to die because of the web? It's so unfair."

"What is unfair?" Ixchel asked. "This is my destiny. I accept it." The goddess bent down close to Lupe. "Accept yours too."

Lupe stepped back. "How can I be this so-called *orucula*? I'm only fifteen! Just a few days ago the most pressing problem I had was choosing between which song I wanted to play."

"Listen within."

That's what Kish had told her.

Once more the stranger's mocking smile flashed through her head. Somehow he had a major role to play in all this too.

"Who was that guy?" Lupe asked. "He has something to do with all this, doesn't he?"

Lupe wished she had been able to help Ixchel. Her measly attempt only made the stranger mad. As if saying words would actually hurt him. Too bad she couldn't be like one of those vampire slayers in both books and movies. Instead of slaying vampires she could kill the man who threatened Ixchel and this world. Lupe crossed herself. Boy, if or when she got back to Tustin she would have to spend a lot of time in confession.

"You ask many questions." Ixchel started to rise, her huge legs trembling with effort. Her legs alone were taller than Lupe. She couldn't help herself, she jumped back. Ixchel shook herself and a little bit of color came back into her face.

"He is Malvado. He has deceived many, including your mother."

Lupe raised her eyebrows in surprise. "My mother? What does he have to do with her?"

One of Ixchel's arms touched Lupe. The coldness made Lupe flinch. But slowly her shoulder grew warm.

“Go, Lupe. Eat. Rest. We will start again tomorrow.”

Lupe’s stomach roared in agreement. “Ixchel, if what I do will help I can wait. Really, I can.” Lupe couldn’t bear to leave Ixchel. “Can’t we like order something? You know talk to one part of the web where the maidens or Teancum are.”

Though weak, Ixchel smiled. “No. Teanc’um waits for you. You can finish tomorrow.”

As if on cue, Teancum entered the cavern. No longer did he appear the stoic warrior. His hand clasped an obsidian club attached to his side. His eyes scanned the cave until resting on Lupe. Relief covered his face.

Lupe’s face flushed. She fought back an urge to run and fling herself into his arms.

“Hey, where were you a minute ago? We could have used your help, you know.”

Ixchel’s huge spider face scowled. Lupe glanced down, but not without muttering, “Just like a guy, never around when you needed him.”

Ixchel ignored her. Teancum on the other hand refused to glance in Lupe’s direction.

Wow, was that regret? Somehow that realization didn’t make her feel any better though.

“Go,” Ixchel said. “Finish tomorrow.”

Teancum scowled. “Great mother, what has happened?” He bent down and pulled a ruined *kipu* from a rock.

Sadness filled Ixchel’s eyes. “Danger c’omes.” She glanced back at Lupe. “Her mother has returned. You need to go bac’k to Irreantum.”

Lupe put her hands on her waist. “Maybe I shouldn’t leave. I can stay and—”

Ixchel rose up. “Go. You are needed in Irreantum.”

“Come, Lupe.” Teancum put his hand on her shoulder. “We must obey the goddess’s wishes. Tomorrow we will return.”

Lupe glanced once more at the web. She hoped the ruined strands were not symbolic of what would happen to her.

Chapter Twenty-Six

News of Concha's arrival had traveled fast. Small groups of villagers lined the cleared areas. Old, young, male, and female, all came to witness the return of the *duende*. The apostate Wise Ones relished whispering, in Malvado's chambers, the stories each passing day grew more exaggerated.

The tales hinted of Concha ripping out the essence of her victims and tating them into a massive *kipu* lay hidden behind Malvado's mysterious tapestry. Rumor had it a person could hear muffled screams reverberate behind the hanging.

Those who believed such tales now stood together like frightened sheep. More than one of the villager's necks was weighed down with leather bags bulging with *curios*. As she got closer she got a whiff of the cure-all for banishing evil, copal. The strong woody scent clung on their bodies. *Superstitious fools! Did they really believe the sap of a tree would protect them from evil?*

Women clutched their young children close to them. As Concha walked by, a few older men motioned with their left hand behind her, warding off evil.

Not all of them showed fear. Concha could feel the prodding eyes of these villagers. An older woman pulled her tattered *reboza* closer. As Concha passed, the old crone spat on her. The heavy phlegm dripped down her face.

Hay viene la bruja. Death to the witch. Their words slammed into her like a brick.

As she lifted her head she noticed Chiza, her old servant, far in the distance. Chiza hadn't changed. Stout and with a permanent scowl, her eyes never left Concha.

In an effort to pass the growing crowd, Ammon jostled her along. Bodies started to press up against her. The smell of copal, and other *curios*, made her dizzy.

Concha lost her footing and toppled into the crowd. Out of nowhere a pair of arms grabbed her. She looked up, assuming it was Ammon but it was someone else. She stared into the face of the person who had shown some kindness. A dark cloak hid all his features except for the telltale mark of a worshipper of the god Tezcatlipoca.

A blow to her lower back made her stumble in pain. She slowly climbed to her feet, the cloak of the follower whipping behind him as he vanished into the crowd.

More people pushed forward. Concha closed her eyes, expecting blows. When nothing happened she opened her eyes. Ammon glared at everyone, daring anyone to try to molest her. Most of the crowd fell back.

On she went, past the empty marketplace, homes, and deserted temple. The rocks and pebbles cut into her torn sandals, leaving behind a crimson trail. The rattle of the *ayayote* bells guided her. Up ahead the ground leveled out. Concha would have sighed in relief if not for the gag in her mouth. The pathway cushioned her feet. She entered the grove of sacred ceiba trees. Not much further.

She continued on the cleared pathway to the Revered One's sacred dwelling place. Deep matte-blue dye covered the structure. At the entrance the huge obsidian statue of the Spider goddess stood; her ruby eyes burned into Concha, appalled at the audacity of her return.

Two rough arms stopped her from going any further. Concha forgot her earlier notion of being submissive. She struggled to break free, only to have her arms pulled higher.

Hot pain shot through her shoulders. *Ay, Dios mio*, will this never end?

Then silence. The warriors stood at attention. Even the once hostile crowd fell silent.

All stared at Ixchel's temple. The rustle of beads at the entrance announced the presence of the Revered One.

A warm flush covered Concha's face. Ashamed, she looked down. Even though she despised the elderly leader, Concha's sins against this people haunted her. The ghost of Balam followed her, through the chilly corridors of Malvado's kingdom, and the humid Ixtumean jungle. He demanded an answer for her betrayal that led to his murder at the hands of her lover, Malvado.

The pounding of the leader's wood cane on the gravel pathway came closer to Concha. She raised her head.

The Revered One had aged considerably since the last time Concha had seen her. Her thinning white hair refused to stay fixed in a tight bun. She stood regally, dressed in an amber gown with a necklace of magic jade stones at her throat.

Two young servants stood on each side. Both girls looked like babes next to the prophetess. The Revered One's mouth stretched in a thin line emphasizing the lines of time. Her watery eyes appraised Concha.

With a sad smile the Revered One raised her hand. "Concha, you have returned."

With great difficulty, Concha lifted her chin. Her shredded dress crept up her thighs, exposing a trail of purple lacerations. Every step through the jungle and village had been agony. Though every part of her body ached, she refused to show any kind of weakness to her former leader. No, that wouldn't be fitting for someone of Concha's status, priestess and lover of the man in Tezcatlipoca's good services, who would soon become a god himself.

Snickers in the background conveyed what she already knew: she had some nerve facing down the holy leader of Irreantum dressed in filthy rags. Even the friendly barkless dogs stayed downwind from her stench.

The Revered One shook her head sadly. She snapped her fingers. A servant rushed to her side. "Please remove her gag and rope. I am sure she would like some refreshment."

A young boy around Lupe's age walked to Concha. A line of perspiration trickled down his naked chest. The boy refused to look at her. With shaky hands he fumbled with the bindings until they fell to the ground. The fibers from the rope cut once more into her wrists. Piercing pain shot through her arms.

The boy rushed forward, reaching for her gag, but he wasn't quick enough. Concha bumped him to the side. She couldn't wait to remove the dirty rag from her mouth. The boy fell to the ground. His eyes followed her movements.

Ay! As she yanked the cotton binding out of her mouth a burning sensation caused tears to stream down her face. The pain was too exquisite to bear.

Remember why you are here. Concha repeated this mantra to herself. Otherwise she would go insane.

A young girl servant approached her. Her long raven hair framed her otherwise plain face. The red tattoo of a small spider on her right cheek made Concha cringe. She could still feel the burn on her face where her own loathsome mark used to be.

The young girl lowered her gaze. In her tiny hands she held a small wooden gourd. Concha took a sip. *Aah!* The cool water tasted sweet and quenched the fire in her mouth.

When she finished, she threw the gourd on the ground. A few remaining drops of fluid were quickly absorbed back into the earth.

Looking out at the restless crowd, Concha noted the wide array of emotions playing out on each face; confusion, shock, and bewilderment at the reaction of their leader to her return.

Concha had played her cards right. The elderly woman's feelings for her clouded her

judgment. She could see this in the slight slouch of her bony shoulders and the sadness in her milky eyes.

Yes, the others wanted quick justice for her betrayal, but the Revered One had the final say in the sentence. All Concha had to do was play on the motherly instincts of her former ruler. And maybe she could leave with Lupe without donating her skin to one of their nameless gods.

Concha glanced back at the Revered One. The older woman's eyes had never left her. Concha could feel them prod deep within, searching for the real reason for her return. One thing was certain; she couldn't lie to her former leader. Too much history had passed between the two of them, history she didn't want to repeat.

"Conchita." The Revered One's use of her name of endearment startled her. "You know the penalty for what you have done."

Concha shook her head in amazement. "What would that be?" She pointed her hand into the crowd. "Leaving this dump or Balam's unfortunate accident?"

Ammon's face turned red with outrage. Some of the other villagers muttered at her apparent lack of respect. *To hell with them*, Concha thought.

With renewed confidence, she walked toward the Revered One. She swayed her hips with each step. "Balam was a fool! He never understood my true purpose and calling. He expected me to bow down to you and lap the crumbs from your side. Tezcatlipoca trains the true person to be god of this land—Malvado."

A loud gasp rang out through the crowd.

Ammon's eyes bulged in outrage. "Why do we listen to this *bruja*?" He turned to the Revered One. "Holy One, you know what she has done." He glared with loathing at Concha. "She used our sacred words to tear apart the great web. Each hole harms the great Spider Goddess. My brother only tried to stop her. And for this he was killed. Why do you receive her back with grace?"

The Revered One sadly shook her head. "Oh, my son. What good does it do to strike back at the snake just because it has bitten? No, we will follow the laws of our land and have the Wise Ones and Maidens judge."

The Revered One glanced back at her. "Concha, I am saddened by the choice you have made. For this you will face the council and pay the price."

Shouts erupted in the crowd. Around her many, including Ammon raised their fists to the

air. And all were chanting the words: “Death to the *bruja!*”

If the villagers thought she would bow down to their threats, they were mistaken. Concha turned and raised her hands high. “I have come back for my daughter. I will not allow her to be trained in your lies. If I have to face this old crone’s farce of a trial, so be it.” She turned and stared at Ammon. “Yes, some died, but more will unless you break away from the Revered One’s puppet rule.”

With satisfaction she noticed Ammon clutching his hands until his nails bit into the fleshy part of his palms.

Concha walked up to the Revered One. “I give myself to you. Do what you will. I warn you though, unless I get my daughter, more than a few will perish.”

“Oh, Concha. Why do you believe this *mentiroso*? He has cast lies on you.” The Revered One shook her head sadly. “You do not know how much this pains me.” She motioned to the side. “Please take her.”

Two warriors drew near. No expressions were on their tattooed faces. Their muscular chests rippled with each movement. Their large hands pushed her in the direction of the dwelling hut.

Concha lifted her head in defiance. She stopped suddenly and yelled out to the crowd. “Remember this day, for it will surely come back to haunt you. As Tezcatlipoca and the future Jaguar god are my witnesses! Whatever you do to me will come back one thousandfold!”

As the crowd murmured, one warrior hit her in the back with the end of his wooden club. Instead of letting it stop her, she threw her head back and laughed. Her raspy laughter rang out in the early afternoon air. A hush came over the crowd. Some crossed themselves against evil while others shook their heads and spit on the ground.

As she approached the prison, she saw Chiza crouched behind a ceiba tree. Her large body somehow blended in with the surroundings. Concha caught a glimpse of her former maiden’s hands: she was signing out a message.

Concha smiled. Help was on the way. She could sense her daughter’s presence somewhere in this area. The slight burning of the onyx grew stronger the closer she got to Lupe. Concha found herself searching in the grove, pathway, crowd, and huts for Lupe. Nothing.

Still, she didn’t give up hope. No, it was only a matter of time until she had Lupe in her hands. And once that happened nothing else would matter. She would replace the withered Revered One, not only as priestess, but goddess of all Ixtumea. If the villagers feared her now,

wait until she had the ultimate power! One of their stupid *dichos* came to her, *el tiempo es justiciero y vengador*. Yes, time is just, but she would be the avenging angel, not them. An image of her former warrior brother's flayed body made her smile. Yes, just wait.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Clumps of infested ceiba trees formed a half circle around the prison like a jaw with gaps in its teeth. Evidence of killer vines crisscrossed the trunks. A pungent odor of death scented the air.

Concha shivered with an ominous foreshadowing. All thoughts of vengeance fled. As she stared at her new surroundings the seriousness of her situation sank in.

For once she was really frightened maybe she had pushed this whole thing with the village too far. They really would kill her. If she allowed them to do this, everything she had fought for would fail.

An image of a forgotten time flashed in her mind. She was Lupe's age and on a trip to Mexico City with some friends. She remembered loving the great murals, especially one on the walls of *Palacio Nacional* by Diego Rivera, depicting the Spanish conquest of Mexico. In this painting a beautiful Mayan woman stood out amidst the carnage around her.

When she asked about this woman, the answer surprised her. Most of the citizens said Maliche's name as an epithet, a whore who had caused the great downfall of the great Aztec people. Concha saw a proud woman of her culture refusing to bow down to foreign rule. She trembled with the realization maybe she had become like the woman in the mural, *la chingada* of her time.

She knew the penalty for turning against Ixchel and the Revered One. She had heard of others who had been caught and executed. She had witnessed, through the web, an apostate Wise One lashed to a tree, screaming in agony while flames burned him alive. His prayer for Tezcatlipoca to release him went unanswered. Concha shuddered in remembrance. His cries haunted her to this day. What made her think she would come out of all of this unscathed? Cortez left Malinche to her demise; would Malvado do the same to her?

The snicker of one of the warriors brought her back. "You don't like this?" He laughed. "Too bad."

The other warrior sneered in agreement. Taller and more built than his companion, he folded his arms and looked down his long nose at her. A scar across his cheek deepened. Take away the loincloth, feather headdress, and obsidian club, replace them with long rider pants, chains, and tight t-shirt, and he could easily be one of the Cholos back in Santa Ana. Just as dangerous too.

“Welcome back, Conchita.” His use of her familiar name sounded vulgar, like a curse. With one hand he roughly pushed her inside the opened door.

She collapsed on a large clutter of dry grass lay heaped in the middle. Rat feces littered it along with the foul stench of something foul and rotten.

Both men laughed. “Lay in your kingdom of filth, *bruja*.”

Concha flushed in anger but she refused to rise to their bait. She needed to stay calm and wait for the help she’d been promised.

The door slammed shut behind them.

Concha gazed around her. No windows or openings were inside the rectangular holding cell. Darkness filled her small enclosure, closing in on her. She closed her eyes, refusing to let the claustrophobia to clamp down on her.

No, she was better than that.

Concha massaged her sore wrists. Black and blue bruises marked her skin. The thought of once more having the scratchy rope around her hands made her physically ill.

Her gratitude was short-lived. The rank scent of the past forty-eight hours made her want to gag. How she would have loved to clean her filthy body. The closest thing to a bathtub was a cracked wooden bowl in the corner.

Concha got up off the ground and walked three paces to the end of the room. She gazed down into the bowl and gasped out loud. *Who is this stranger?* Her reflection showed a dirty wild woman. Vegetation, sticks, and gravel were knotted in her long hair.

She paced back and forth in the enclosure, trying to think of a way to get to her daughter. Lupe was here, but where?

She clutched the useless onyx medallion around her neck and closed her eyes. A hunger burned inside for the sacred drink and the voices that came with it. Maybe the Revered One will show pity and lace her final beverage, that way she wouldn’t feel the heat during her execution as her flesh peeled off her charred body.

No! She refused to accept she might have failed. But what else should she think? She missed the soothing voices and Malvado was nowhere in sight.

Damn him to hell! Concha threw the bowl against the wall. Why did she even listen to the *mentiroso*?

The grating of stone on dirt made her stop pacing. She froze in place.

Two figures entered the small holding cell. Piercing bright light from outside caused her to shield her eyes. She could make out the bulging gut of Mulek, the priest. His round stomach rolled out of his colorful tunic. With one hand he held a silken cloth to his nose and gazed around. The other hand held something covered under a black piece of fabric.

He strolled into the room, his immaculate purple cloak trailing on the dirty floor.

“What’s wrong? Is the lofty Mulek afraid a spot of dirt might touch him?”

Mulek glared at her.

The guards on the other hand rushed toward her. She tried to escape but one of the guards seized her arm and tightened his grip. He scowled and then spit in her face. The spittle dripped down her face. She refused to show any reaction to this gorilla or any of the others. She was higher than any of them. “Wise One, let us deal with the *bruja*.” The other guard whipped his sword out and pressed the blade just enough against her skin to cause discomfort. All the while he glared at her with venom, daring her to complain so he could press harder.

Concha held her breath, afraid maybe she pushed it too far.

Mulek’s face changed. Snickering, he dismissed the guard with a wave of his hand. “You can leave us.”

The guard dropped his sword. Concha shrank back, not trusting if the guard would change his mind and stab her through the heart.

“Wise One, she is dangerous. I should stay with you.” The other guard whispered in his ear. “You do not know what spells this *bruja* can cast.”

Mulek chuckled. His triple chins shook with laughter. “She does not frighten me.” He narrowed his eyes. “Remember who I am.”

The guard stuttered. “Forgive me, Wise One. If you need help I will be outside.”

Concha watched the exchange with amusement. She still found it hard to believe a fat aging priest could hold these villagers in awe. That or the others would do anything to protect their innocent daughters from his grasp.

She rubbed her chest, glaring back at the priest. “Took you long enough.”

Mulek laughed. “What did you expect?” His eyes danced as he surveyed her surroundings. “Oh, how far the mighty have fallen!”

Concha ignored his snide comment. Instead she grabbed the gourd from his hands. The bitter taste of crushed marigold seeds made her wince. Not long after, the drug warmed her cold

body.

She smiled. *If the fool only knew what he had brought.* She closed her eyes to savor the feeling for she knew it wouldn't be long before her companions, the voices in her head, returned.

Opening her eyes she caught Mulek smirking at her in turn. "Do you like what I bought you? Maybe I should come more often."

Concha seethed. *The nerve of the gordo. He actually thought she would lower herself to him?*

She tried hard to mask her growing repulsion. "Where is my daughter?" she asked.

Mulek leaned against the wall and gazed at her with half-closed eyes. "Where do you think?"

Concha shook her head. "You know what you were supposed to do." Smiling, she added, "Unless this task was too much for you."

Mulek stretched out his palms. "Concha, who is in the dark room? Me? Oh, no. You forget who holds your life in the palm of his hands."

She placed the half-drunken mushroom drink on the ground and strolled over to him.

"Why, you of course." She took one of her fingers and ran it slowly across his broad chest. Holding back her disgust she leaned close. Mulek's heart raced rapidly. His mouth parted. She had to close her eyes in order not to pass out from his foul breath.

"You forget who has power over you." She smiled and whispered into his ear. "What did Malvado say he does to those who disappoint him? Let me remember." Concha pressed her finger to her mouth. "Oh, now I remember. Something to do with burning."

Mulek's eyes bugged out in horror. With both hands he shoved.

She almost lost her balance. Instead she folded over and laughed.

Mulek hugged the wooden wall, refusing to look her way. "What do you want me to do?" he whispered.

"Find out where my daughter is and let her know about me." Concha turned. "And make it soon. You know how Malvado hates to wait. And if I were you, I wouldn't want to be the bearer of bad news, now would I?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The sun faded to a brilliant collage of orange, red, and yellow. Usually Lupe would stop and admire nature's beauty, but not now. How could she, after what she had just learned?

Lupe found renewed energy on the return trip to Irreantum. Her body kicked into the mode runners often wrote about. The jungle, hills, trees, and macaws flying overhead blurred as she passed by. The evening breeze kissed her face, her long brown hair whipping behind her.

Up and over she went, racing past giant mahogany and ceiba trees, spongy vegetation, and sharp ferns.

Her feet barely touched the ground. She closed her eyes and marveled in the coolness of the air. The chirruping of insects didn't even bother her. And on both sides of the dusty pathway the familiar black spots of spiders gave her comfort, not fear.

Lupe felt invincible. Nothing, besides the demise of the web and Ixchel could get her down. For once in her short life she found a purpose. She wouldn't let all of those who had faith in her down. No, she would make all of them proud!

* * * *

An eerie silence hung over the village. As Lupe and Teancum approached, she couldn't see one soul. It reminded her of one of those haunted towns on late night television.

Well, something must have happened in the short time she had spent with Ixchel. Evidence lay everywhere. Heavy imprints of sandals indented the passageway. Bits of tortilla, cloth, and fragments of a bowl littered the entrance to the village.

A breeze whistled through Irreantum, cleaning away some of the mess. The wind blew Lupe's hair into her face. She pushed it aside. Goosebumps rose up on her exposed arms. She wished she hadn't thrown her *reboza* on the ground. The thin cotton peasant blouse proved not enough protection for the coolness of the night.

Lupe rubbed her arms to get warm. She glanced around her, not sure what to make of it all. Even the usual bustle and noise of the marketplace was oddly quiet. A few vendors remained covering or removing their baskets of food and other objects.

"What's going on?" Lupe asked.

Teancum's smooth face crinkled with worry lines.

“Wait here. I will go ask.” Before she could say anything, he had already sprinted into the empty marketplace and confronted one of the villagers. The balding older man didn’t look too happy. His hands were loaded down with wooden baskets. Teancum had interrupted him from leaving. Lupe didn’t care what Teancum had told her. She rushed into the marketplace.

“What has happened?” Teancum asked.

The mushroom vendor sighed, giving his things to his servant who staggered under the weight of all the goods.

“Have you not heard?” The man asked. “The *bruja* has been captured. Praise the Gods.”

“The *bruja*?” Lupe frowned. “Who are they talking about?”

The villager leaned in closer and whispered. “Malvado’s spy. Now maybe the killings will stop.”

Bruja? Spy?

Then it hit Lupe. “He’s talking about my mother, isn’t he?” Deep down she prayed this wouldn’t be the case though inside she feared it was true.

The villager turned and stared hard at Lupe. She squirmed under his gaze. “You are her daughter?”

His servant wasn’t as hesitant on his feelings. “Good. Now she will taste the fire.”

Teancum glared at the villager, who quickly looked away. He bowed his head. “Sorry to offend you.” He pushed his servant and they both rushed away. A few pieces of fruit tumbled out of the servant’s baskets.

“I need to get you back to Ixchel’s temple. Abish will be waiting for you.”

“Didn’t you hear him? My mother is here. Ixchel was right.” Lupe pushed Teancum away. Looking around she asked, “Where is she? Hasn’t she done enough damage?”

“Do not worry about her. Abish will take care of you. I have to return to the Revered One.”

“No, I’m going with you.”

“If you are worried about the fire...”

“No, she’s done enough harm to these people.” Lupe glanced back at Teancum, daring him to disagree.

Teancum only shrugged. “It is not up to us but rather the Revered One’s decision. Do not worry, little one, nothing will happen to you.”

Flustered, Lupe clicked her nails together. “Well, I don’t want to see her, okay.”

Teancum gently cupped Lupe's chin. He lifted her face up. "Lupe, she will not get to you. I will take you to Abish, where you will be safe."

Lupe melted in his embrace. "Let's go."

What good would it do to argue with him? Plus being outside alone gave her the willies.

She followed behind Teancum until she caught a glimpse of the familiar obsidian statue of Ixchel standing to the side of the temple. The entrance's beaded hanging parted and out stepped Abish. A frown creased her forehead. This changed into a smile when she noticed them approaching.

"You have heard, haven't you, Teancum?" she asked.

"Yes, I hurried back as quickly as I could. Ixchel told us the same thing not long ago. How long has Concha been here?"

"Only a few hours. They took her to the holding area. She didn't go without a fight."

"Well, I am not surprised. You know the sentence for one who has committed treason against Ixchel. Death," Teancum said.

Abish shuddered. "I do not think she cared. She showed no fear of her betrayal, of turning against Ixchel and the Revered One. No, she flaunted it. Her arrogance only proved to people what they have whispering all along, that she is a *nagual*, one who can change into the dreaded *duende* to suck out their souls."

"Excuse me." Lupe stepped forward. "What are you both talking about?"

"I am sorry, Lupe. I did not mean..." Abish said.

"So are they going to," Lupe gulped, "kill my mother?"

Abish and Teancum glanced at each other. That answered her question. The problem was she didn't know how she felt about that. Right now numbness seized her heart.

Teancum put his hand on Lupe's cheek. "Listen to Abish. She will help you."

Abish walked up to Lupe. "Come, let's go inside."

Lupe turned back to say something to Teancum but he had already left.

She knew she should go back into Ixchel's temple, but one thing still bothered her.

"Abish, are they really going to burn my mother?" An image came to Lupe of the witch burnings in Salem. Would these villagers do the same thing to her mother?

Abish drew her close. "I have only seen the sentence for treason carried out once. It is something I will never forget. The offender is buried alive. Your mother has done even worse

than the others who had left to follow the fallen one.”

Though Lupe feared the answer, she still had to ask, “What?”

“Your mother is proclaiming herself higher than even Ixchel. She’s claiming to be the consort of Tezcatlipoca himself. She will not rest until all is destroyed and she is crowned goddess over a whole new world of both their making. A world they will create out of our ashes, a world too horrible to imagine.” Abish shook her head. “And the penalty for that is death by fire.”

Lupe felt a warm sensation on her earlobes at the mention of fire. Once more the sick feeling came back, in full force. She sensed her mother’s presence, reaching out for her. Lupe resisted the urge to seek out her mother. For one thing was sure, their reunion would not end in one of the happily ever after fairytales she had loved as a child.

No, if she went to Concha, only certain doom awaited.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Outside Lupe's window tiny prinks of light illuminated the ebony sky. Before she came to Irreantum, she had never noticed stars. Whatever was left of any natural beauty in Tustin had been covered with something harsher and more artificial.

She turned from the window. Her ears still hurt. Rubbing them only dulled the pain. In her dreams she saw her mother; dirty but still beautiful in some dark medieval type room. Why couldn't she leave her alone!

Ow! Lupe tossed over to her side and put a pillow over her head. The slight movement caused Tonantzin to moan. Lupe forgot how close her maiden slept by her. She leaned over and stared at the reed mat on the ground. How could anyone sleep on that thing? Lupe felt guilty having Tonantzin sleep there. Her comments to both Abish and the Revered One on the sleeping arrangements fell on deaf ears. She would be more careful on how she maneuvered on her hammock so she wouldn't disturb Tonantzin's sleep.

Lupe! The voice grew stronger, as did the pain. She found herself glancing around, trying to find the source of the voice, hoping upon hope it wasn't her mother. Deep down inside she knew the truth.

Now wide-awake, she sat up in her hammock. She couldn't ignore it any longer. She had to see her mother.

She knew she told Abish and everyone she didn't want to see her. Okay, she lied, all right? How could she not want to see the person who had haunted her dreams these past eight years? When her mother had left, she took a part of her. Never ending stomach-wrenching pain was all that remained.

Lupe couldn't lie to herself any longer. She wanted, no she demanded to know why her mother had deserted her. She still had nightmares of that day in kindergarten. How she sat on the cold school bench waiting in vain for a mother who had no intention of returning.

She thought about asking Abish, but charged her mind. Who could she trust to take her to her mother? Her body made the hammock swing back and forth. The movement caused Tonantzin to open one of her eyes.

"Ay, Lupe. Go back to sleep," Tonantzin yawned. "It is late."

“I need to see Teancum now.” Lupe jumped off her hammock.

“What?” Tonantzin rubbed her eyes. “Can you not wait ‘till morning?”

“No.”

“What is the big hurry?” Tonantzin got Lupe’s sandals and gave them to her.

“I want—I mean, I need to see my mother.” Lupe bent down and slipped her sandals on.

Tonantzin sat back and stared at her. “I thought you did not want to see, what did you call her? The *bruja* from hell? Why do you need to see her tonight?”

Lupe gritted her teeth in frustration. How could she even begin to explain the reasoning behind her sudden desire to see her mother?

“I need to see her, okay?” Lupe sighed. “If it makes you feel any better, that’s why I want Teancum to be with me. Being that he is my warrior and all. Does that make you feel better?”

Tonantzin shook her head. “No, it does not. Why not ask Abish?”

Lupe frowned. “No, it can’t be her. Because...”

“Because you know she will forbid this crazy idea.” Tonantzin finished her sentence.

Man, she sure could be obnoxious sometimes. Never mind it probably wasn’t a good idea. Still...

Lupe tried another tactic. She lowered her eyes. “Please! I promise I won’t be such a pain in the butt.”

Tonantzin sighed. “All right. I will have someone get Teancum, but I know he will not like this either.”

Chapter Thirty

A full moon lit the sky and made it easier to maneuver through the thick ceiba grove. An orchestra of insects chirped along with the howling of monkeys and other nocturnal animals. Lupe pulled her reboza closer, ignoring the chill from both the wild life and the cold shoulder of Teancum. She knew he wouldn't be too happy but she didn't expect him to go all stoic on her either. Lupe bit back her usual smartass comment, following behind him on their way to the prison. It hadn't been easy to convince him she needed to visit her mother. After promises to behave, her warrior relented but that didn't mean he was thrilled with this. A frown replaced his usual smile.

The prison was hidden behind the rectangular temple. Lupe shivered. Small and creepy, a Halloween-like atmosphere oozed from the enclosure. A huge warrior, holding an obsidian club, guarded the entrance. Once more she was glad she had talked Teancum into taking her and not gone alone.

Around the wooden structure were a collection of *curios*, some clay Ixchel statues, beads, and marigold petals. Something dripped down both sides of the building. Lupe covered her nose at the overpowering woodsy scent.

A hard-looking guard stood at the entrance. As they drew closer, the guard swung his large obsidian sword in their direction.

"You know the rules." He scowled at Teancum in disdain. Even though she stood behind her warrior, Lupe shuttered under the guard's harsh gaze.

"We need to talk to the captive," Teancum said.

The guard's expression didn't change. "Sorry, but none are to see the *bruja*, not even you."

Lupe stepped forward, ignoring Tonantzin hissed warning. "I need to speak to her."

The guard's eyes widened. He dropped his sword and stepped aside. "Of course, *orucula*."

Lupe didn't know what to think. Teancum only frowned. She didn't care what he or any of the others thought. She needed to speak to her mother. Now.

As the guard opened the stone door, her earlobes burned.

Darkness filled the room. A shuffle of something in the corner caught Lupe's attention. As her eyes adjusted she could make out the silhouette, which stood up at the sound of their

entering.

Oddly her earlobes stopped hurting. Lupe was oblivious to this; instead she couldn't stop staring at her mother.

After all this time she still looked the same. Tall and slender, she held herself like some kind of royalty, even amidst the dirt and grime of her surroundings. Anger overcame Lupe. How could they throw anyone, let alone her mother, into this pig sty?

"Mami, is it really you?"

Her voice had regressed back to when she was six years old, high pitched and whiny. She didn't know whether she should embrace her mother or run far away.

"M'ija. Please come here, I want to see you with my own eyes." Concha stretched her arms for her. Her slender hands hadn't changed much in the last eight years. The only changes were a few brown spots and chipped nails. This must have bothered her mother, considering how much she valued the long acrylic nails.

Lupe felt as if an invisible force pulled her forward. She took one step, then another, longing but still fearful of this reunion.

"Mami?" She had so much to ask her. She had run through this scenario so often in her dreams, but now that the moment had actually come, she didn't know where to begin.

"Don't be shy. Come, I want to touch you."

Lupe took a couple more steps and stopped. Tears ran down her mother's face. Stretching out her arms, she grasped Lupe's hands.

"You have grown into a beautiful young woman."

Lupe scanned her mother's face and noticed a few angry purple spots that marred her overall perfection.

"Mami, did they hurt you?" Lupe felt torn. One part of her hated what her mother represented—the death of innocent people, destroying the web, and even hurting Ixchel. But on the other hand, this was her mother. She had often fantasized about this moment, but she knew deep down inside that unlike her dreams this reality probably wouldn't end happily.

"Lupita, still worrying about others," Concha said. *"I'm okay, considering I'm still alive. Forget about me, how are you doing?"*

Lupe gazed down. *"Okay."* She shuffled her feet. Lupe knew she had to ask the one question that had haunted her, but found herself tongue-tied.

“Lupita?” Her mother cupped her chin and lifted her face.

Lupe gazed into her mother’s dark brown eyes. For a moment recollections of good times flashed in her mind. She could vividly picture her mother dancing along with her to the latest Gomez song, and sharing a banana split, with extra whipped cream and nuts, at the corner ice cream store.

Then, she saw herself cloaked in some kind of priestess gown, floating down an enormous hallway, lined on both sides with people dressed in silks and jewels. The clanging of bells and the pine scent of opal filled her senses. She was drawn to some kind of stone altar. A tall man cloaked in black stood waiting for her. As she approached she caught a glimpse of a woman kneeling down. Her long hair covered her face. She held a large clay bowl in her hands. Figures of people seemed to dance around the corners. As Lupe got closer the woman turned her way. *Ohmigod! It’s Mami!* Crimson liquid stained the edges of the bowl. A sick realization hit her like a thunderbolt. There’s blood in there!

Lupe jerked away. The man was going to sacrifice her! She caught a glimpse of a smile on her mother’s face. *No way! The villagers were right! She is a witch.*

Furious, Lupe spun around. “What did you just do to me?”

Concha shrugged her shoulders.

“Come off it, mother.” Lupe fumed. “I tried not to listen to everyone about how bad you are. But now I can see they were right. And anyway, why should I believe you when you are the one who left me.”

Teancum clamped his hand on Lupe’s shoulder. She brushed him off. “No, I need to know.” She turned to her mother. “Why did you leave me? Why?”

Concha shook her head. “That was so long ago. Let’s not dwell on the past, Lupita.”

Lupe stared at her mother in amazement. “What? Not dwell on it? You left me, and never once did *Abuela* or I hear from you. The least you owe me is an explanation.”

Concha tilted her head to the side. “Lupita, do you think I wanted to leave my baby?”

Lupe snorted. “Yeah, I do. You never did want me, did you? All you talked about was leaving Tustin and *Abuela*’s crazy tales. Well, her tales weren’t so crazy, were they?”

“No, they weren’t.” Concha eyes softened.

Her mother agreeing with her only made her madder.

The anger welled up inside and nearly choked her. “Where were you when I needed you?”

Like the times I thought I was losing it, what with the voices and images...”

Concha eyes widened. “You hear voices?”

Lupe glared at her mother. “Like that should surprise you? Why didn’t you tell me? Oh, let me guess.” Lupe walked up to her mother and lowered her voice. “You were too busy screwing that other guy and letting him kill my *father!*”

Lupe stared at her mother, waiting for a comment, anything. But her mother only shrank back, refusing to look back at her. Lupe felt bad she had exploded but she wanted to lash out, to hurt her mother, like her mother had done to her.

Teancum put his hand on her shoulder. “Lupe, do you not remember some of what the holy one taught you?”

Concha glared at Teancum.

Teancum ignored her. “*Cortesía de boca mucho consigue y nada cuesta.*”

“Yeah, as if nice words would really help.” But she knew Teancum was right. Arguing would not help and she needed to concentrate on helping Ixchel, not fighting with her mother.

“Good-bye, Mother.” Lupe turned away.

“Lupe, don’t listen to these people. Please, I know I messed up with you, but please, if anything, listen to me. Don’t trust these people. They’ll only use you.”

Lupe stopped in her tracks. She couldn’t believe this woman! Teancum reached for her, but she pushed him away.

“I can’t believe you actually expect me to believe you. I’ve seen what you have done. Believe me, whatever the Revered One and her council decide is probably not good enough for you.”

“Lupita! Come back here!” Concha rushed forward but the guard held her back. “Do you not know who you are? Help me and I can help you fulfill your true destiny. Something my mother failed to do.”

At the mention of her grandmother, Lupe stopped. “*Abuela* failing? You are the biggest failure of all time. I thought you died. Well, you want to know something? I *wish* you were dead.”

Teancum pulled her close. “Do not listen to her, Lupe.”

Did Teancum know what her mother had tried to do? For once Lupe decided to follow her warrior’s advice and do nothing. For now, anyway.

“Lupita!”

Lupe followed Teancum out. Her mother’s screams rent the early-morning air. Lupe refused to listen. She didn’t have the luxury. Too much was at stake. As she walked back to her room, her façade crumbled. Tears stung Lupe’s eyes, reminding her how bad a liar she was.

Chapter Thirty-One

Lupe waited until Teancum had left, then her mask of indifference dissolved into tears. No longer did she fight them: each drop represented every year of pent-up sadness, loneliness, and anger against her wayward mother.

The painful realization of what her mother had become crashed down on her. She was an evil *bruja* right out of the pages of some twisted fairy tale.

With a gasp, Lupe slid down to the ground, the horror of what she had witnessed finally sinking in. Pain filled her whole body.

“Lupe, are you all right?” Tonantzin asked. Worry lines covered her face. “Let me get Abish. She will know what to do.”

“No, I don’t need anyone.” Lupe pushed Tonantzin’s hand away. “Especially Miss Ixtumea Barbie.”

“What?”

“Nevermind.” Lupe shook her head. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“If I do not, then I know who will.” Tonantzin put a *reboza* around Lupe’s trembling shoulders. Then she left.

Lupe didn’t care. She doubted anyone could help her now.

When she had first heard her mother was alive, she didn’t know what to think.

The mother she remembered as a child was dead and a stranger had taken her place: someone, though still beautiful, tried to ensnare her own daughter in her deadly web.

“Lupe?” a familiar voice broke through her concentration.

Abish walked up behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Your mother’s presence troubles you.” She brushed aside a strand of Lupe’s hair. “Do not worry, she cannot harm you.”

Lupe wiped the remaining tears from her face. “I’m not afraid of that.” Turning to Abish, she added, “Her hurting me, that is.”

“What bothers you?” Abish asked.

“Abish, why is my mother acting this way? I mean, I haven’t seen her in ages. I thought she was dead.”

Maybe it would have been better if she never found her mother. The fantasy she carried within

had crashed violently with reality. *My mother is a freaking fruit loop.*

A sudden rage boiled inside her. Lupe glanced around for something to hit, throw, or destroy. A clay bowl on a table caught her eye. She grabbed the container and threw it against the wall. The fragments flew everywhere. As she watched her morning tea dribble down a wall, something broke inside her. Once more tears ran down her face.

“I know I should hate her. I mean, who wouldn’t?” Once the words came out, she found it hard to stop. “But still she is my mother.” The thought of someone, anyone, claiming to be a witch, and relishing doing evil, chilled Lupe to the bone.

Abish shook her head. “Lupe, I do not know what to tell you except to remember the wisdom of the Revered One.”

“But she must have been good at one time, right?” No, Lupe refused to believe her mother had always been evil. The present-day image faded to the mother she remembered, of long ago, dancing to Tejano music during the big Independence Day festival in Los Angeles. Dressed in tight jeans, white t-shirt and a leather vest, her mother had refused offers from other men and instead pulled her into the crowd to dance. And her laugh! Her mother’s belly laugh had warmed Lupe’s soul. No, she couldn’t be pure evil.

Abish shook her head. “No, Lupe. No one is born bad. I never knew your mother. I came to Irreantum long after she had left. The Revered One never spoke ill of her. Your mother chose to deny her calling and now pays the price.”

At the mention of paying a price, a sick feeling hit Lupe. Why hadn’t she seen the obvious?

If my mother abused her calling and is becoming a bruja does that mean it could happen to me too? Lupe still remembered the few times her mother had lost it, her slim figure crumbled in the bathroom, screaming obscenities or tearing the room apart while *Abuela* tried to calm her. Not a pretty picture.

“Ohmigod, Abish.” Lupe gasped. “Will I become like my mother, too?”

Tonantzin shook her head vehemently. Abish ignored her.

“Lupe.” Abish cupped Lupe’s chin. “Remember, you are not Concha. You are Lupe, *orucula* of Ixtumea. It is up to you whether or not to accept your calling. Whatever happened to your mother was her choice. I am here to help. So are Teancum and the Revered One. Do not be afraid.”

Through tear-filled eyes Lupe stared at the Head Maiden. “Abish, do you really think I can

do this *orucula* thing?”

“Yes. And I know you do, too.”

Lupe wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. How could everyone here in Irreantum be so trusting of her?

Her face burned with shame. What she had learned in the short time she had come to this world made her realize how foolish she'd been. The rich culture was everywhere; from the air she breathed, the tingle of an anklet bracelet on one of the Maidens' legs, the sweet taste of the chocolate beverage, and even Teancum's smile.

Over the last few years she had developed a hardened shell to deflect any emotion she might feel toward others. If she wanted to take her calling seriously, she needed to believe in herself to succeed. And succeed she would, if it took every last drop of sweat and blood she had.

“Come, let us study the prophecies.” Abish dropped her hand. “For they hold the answers to your questions and will give you the strength you will need.”

“Do you really think that will help?” Doubt filled Lupe, she hoped something, anything, would give her the answers of her mother's betrayal along with her presence here in Ixtumea.

“Yes.” Abish nodded. “But we need to go now. Before the others awaken. We will have time to ourselves.”

“Okay. If it'll help. I can't sleep anyway.”

Lupe took one last lingering look outside. She glanced in the direction of her mother's prison. Funny, even though she couldn't see her, she still could feel her presence. A warm tickling sensation filled her whole being.

Then the image of the dying ceiba tree came back to her, the one the Revered One had shown her on her first visit to Irreantum. *El arbol se conoce por su fruta.*

Yes, she would try her best. And even though she knew her mother was a monster, maybe the old book of prophecies and *dichos* would hold something to help her mother.

No, I won't become like you, Mother. I will try to help this, I mean my people. A shiver went down her spine. *Did I just think that?* But the words seemed right.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Lupe followed Abish and Tonantzin down the hallway, passing a few other maidens, more marigolds, and reed mats lined against the walls. She was surprised to see anyone up this early in the morning. The few she did see didn't stop and chat. Relief filled her body. She didn't want to stop and talk to anyone, and she hoped *gorda* Chiza wasn't in the prophecy room. She couldn't handle another outburst from her.

Lupe turned to the left and stopped. Though she had already been here, the sight still took her breath away. The narrow granite staircase dropped precariously downwards. She felt sick to her stomach. Never one for heights, the sight made her woozy. She hesitated only for a moment.

"Lupe?" Abish stopped and waited.

"Uh, do we really have to go down there?" Lupe glanced down the gaping hole and regretted it. The vertigo increased. "Couldn't we have someone bring us the book?" Even as the words came out of her mouth she knew the answer. *Well, it didn't hurt to ask.*

"Lupe, you have nothing to fear." A light touch on her shoulder from Abish reassured her. "Follow me."

Abish took one of the torches from the wall. A few black flakes of ash swirled past Lupe's face.

"Do not worry, Lupe." Tonantzin grabbed her hand. "I will help you down."

Lupe smiled. "Thanks."

Abish lead the way. As they went down, Lupe kept close to the wall. The other lights elongated their shadows, stretching and pulling the shapes until they filled both walls.

The constant dripping of water echoed up to them. The combination of dampness and darkness made Lupe wish she had brought something warmer to wear. Wisps of the familiar spider web hung like drapes on the cold walls.

"Abish, is it okay to come down here now?" Lupe asked while maneuvering down the steep steps.

"Yes. We will be the only ones. This will make your studying easier."

As they got closer to the sacred chambers, Lupe tried thinking of something else, hoping that would help her not get too nauseous. She tried to remember some of the teachings she had

learned from the Revered One and Ixchel. She never had paid much attention to *Abuela* but words and phrases came back to her. The words slid off her tongue, like ice cream on a hot summer day. Excitement and fear bubbled inside her. Even though the descent had scared her, she found herself outpacing Abish, with Tonantzin dragging behind. A deep yearning tugged at Lupe to get to the book.

Abish laughed. “Do not worry, Lupe.” Somehow she didn’t seem too surprised at Lupe’s change of heart. “We will get there soon enough.”

A huge auditorium appeared out of nowhere. It seemed so unreal. How could this big of a room be hidden in this temple? It reminded Lupe of her high school stage where all the assemblies were held in, minus the heavy velvet curtains and Father Michael’s large presence.

“Abish?” Tonantzin whispered. “Is someone else here?”

“This is strange,” Abish replied.

Lupe glanced back at Tonantzin, and then scanned the deserted room. The room glowed with the sepia light, meaning someone either forgot to put the flame out or was inside.

“Tonantzin, stay here with Lupe. I will see what is going on.” Urgency laced Abish’s voice.

“Be careful,” Lupe said.

Abish touched her face. “Do not worry.”

Though she said this, Lupe couldn’t deny the icy fear that gripped her.

The head maiden turned and walked into the chambers. Her back faded into the darkness.

Lupe folded her arms. The whole building was black without the benefit of modern technology. How she wished for a single light bulb or flashlight. It gave her the creeps being alone in the empty room with only Tonantzin.

“Ayy!” A scream cut through the silence. Heart clutching, both Tonantzin and Lupe ran into the room. She stretched her hands out in front of her, hoping not to fall or encounter whomever had made that gut-wreaking sound.

“Abish? What’s going on?” Something on the ground caused Lupe to lose her balance. She fell to one knee. A warm sticky substance oozed under her.

She slowly put her finger on the liquid and lifted it to her nose. *Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod.* The ferric smell of someone’s blood made her sick to her stomach.

A bright light blinded her. Shielding her eyes she got off the ground and wiped the blood on her skirt. As her eyes adjusted she could make out two figures by the book. Abish lay on the

floor, a pool of blood around her. Lupe's hands flew to her mouth. She wanted to scream but nothing came out.

To the side, a cloaked person held a struggling Tonantzin.

"Lupe, get out of here!" Tonantzin screamed.

Before Lupe could act a hand was clasped over her mouth. She tried to jerk around to see who had attacked Abish. A pungent smell of garlic entered her nose, making her wince. The room rotated around, but she couldn't keep her gaze from the immobile form of Abish. *Who would want to harm me? And why?*

Another dark cloaked figure stood next to Abish's body. She pushed off her hood. Lupe wanted to scream. Of course! Why shouldn't she be surprised? Chiza kicked the prostrate form.

"*Bruja*. Now everyone will see the *huafanita* for who she is!" Chiza wiped the obsidian knife against her wool cloak. The crimson stain stood out on the gray background. It wasn't hard to see the resentment her mother's former maid had toward being passed over for the title of head maiden. But Lupe was shocked at how much hostility and hatred Chiza had inside her.

"How can this orphan from nowhere become the Head Maiden when it should have been me?" Once more she kicked Abish, who moaned.

"Leave her alone!" Tonantzin glared at Chiza.

Chiza glanced up. "Leave her alone? Your guardian is now dead. You have no one to protect you now."

She took a step forward, whipping the bloodied knife in the air. Flecks of Abish's blood flew everywhere. Lupe cringed.

"Leave the girl alone." A familiar voice said by her ear. Mulek! What is he doing here with Chiza?

"Give me the knife," he said. "Let's get out of here before anyone else comes."

Lupe struggled. But the fat priest was stronger. "Do not do that again or I will..." With his other hand he pressed the cloth even harder on her face. Lupe thought she would vomit.

Chiza hissed. "You will do nothing. Tezcatlipoca wants her. Why, I do not know. If you harm her he will burn your sorry self to ashes."

Mulek chuckled. "Maybe when he is done with her he will give her to me."

Now Lupe knew she would get sick.

"Don't worry, *mi querida*," Mulek's lips brushed her face. "I do not want to damage one that

I will soon have to myself.” With the tip of his tongue he licked her cheek.

How disgusting. Lupe tried even harder to get away but this just made Mulek chuckle louder. Lupe wanted to hurl.

“Leave the brat alone.” Chiza lowered her voice. “Can you not keep your hands off a girl for even one minute? You are pathetic.”

Mulek laughed. “You only say that, my dear Chiza, because you only wish for something you know you will never receive.”

Chiza looked at him with disgust. “Lucky me.”

She threw another cloak to Mulek. With his free hand he tossed it over Lupe. The fabric scratched her skin. Lightheaded, Lupe tried to think of one of the *dichos* to release her but any words she remembered were jumbled into an unrecognizable mess.

“What do we do with the other girl?” Chiza asked. “We do not want the others to know about us.”

“Bring her,” another voice replied. The voice sounded like her mother’s. A shiver went up Lupe’s spine.

Lupe fought to get out of Mulek’s grasp. She had to get to Teancum. He would know what to do.

“Do not fight so. We do not want our present to Tezcatlipoca to be unclean, now, do we?” Mulek’s words echoed in her ears. As she slipped into oblivion she couldn’t help but feel betrayed again. Once by her mother and now by those she had decided to call her own.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Through half-closed eyes, Lupe found herself tied to a tree in the middle of the night, far from Irreantum. The pungent smell of vegetation hung in the air. She'd never slept outside. The buzzing of beetles, scream of spider monkeys, and the guttural growl of a panther, warned she wasn't alone. She pressed against the zapote tree, frantic to escape. The rough bark scratched her already bruised skin, reminding she couldn't go anywhere.

She had to get away or else she would go mad. With all her might, she strained to push her elbows together, trying to wiggle or squeeze out. Whoever tied her to the tree trunk had done a good job as the heavy cords wouldn't bulge.

A burning sensation shot up her arms. The rough fibers sliced into her skin. Even the effort of breathing became painful.

Next to her, a bruised Tonantzin slept. Thank God, she's alive! Lupe had worried her friend had been killed too.

Ugggh. Another sound erupted close by.

Lupe trembled in fear. Knowing her luck, some hideous *duende* lurked close by, ready to tear her soul from her body.

The moaning increased but didn't move closer. The human sound felt familiar, she knew she'd heard it before. Still afraid, Lupe turned to look.

Oh no! Not someone else! Lupe gasped in horror.

Over to her side, another body was bound with cords. The groaning increased in volume. As her eyes grew accustomed to the night, she recognized the fallen person.

"Teancum?" Even in darkness she noticed one of his eyes was swollen shut. He had been hurt. Lupe's heart sank. Of course he must have been following both Abish and her. Then he knew the head maiden had been killed. Guilt pulsed through her, with the painful reminder yet someone else had been hurt since her arrival to Ixtumea.

"Lupe?" Teancum whispered. "Are you all right?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. How could he think of her when he had obviously been hurt?

"I'm as okay as I can be, considering I'm tied up." Lupe winced. She didn't mean for her comment to come off harsh.

Teancum made a snort sound. “Good. You still have your fighting spirit.”

“Well, well.” Chiza’s sarcastic voice cut through the air. “What do we have here? The fair maiden and her warrior prince. Except I do not think this prince will be much help, considering how he’s tied up at the moment.”

Lupe flinched. Each of Chiza’s words stung. It only reinforced how much the maiden hated and despised her.

As much as she feared Chiza someone else scared her more. Mulek’s sparkling gems and ornate clothing didn’t disguise his repulsive body. Greasy strands of hair were crisscrossed over his balding head. Even from here she caught a whiff of his sour breath.

She could feel his eyes undressing her. That thought alone made her feel dirty and violated. She could still feel the sliminess of his touch on her face. *Gross!*

Lupe shrunk back against the tree. Fear flooded her body. She glanced back at proud Teancum. A sick realization came to her. They had mentioned they needed her, not Abish. They’d killed her. Would they do the same thing to Teancum and Tonantzin?

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could make out one more figure, covered in a cloak, sitting apart from the other two. Who could it be?

“Hey, our *orucula* has finally wakened from her beauty sleep.” Mulek’s deep laugh had her struggle once more to break free from her binding cords. He snickered.

“Oh, stop it, Mulek.” Chiza said in disgust. “Leave her. Tezcatlipoca has plans for her.”

Tezcatlipoca?

“Won’t he, Concha?”

“Yes, leave her.”

Mother. My God, she is a bruja. Goosebumps crawled up her spine.

The strange sensation Lupe felt back in the prison cell, that somehow her mother could read her mind, returned.

“Lupita, are you okay?” Concha walked over and caressed Lupe’s cheek lightly.

A shiver went up her back. “*Mami*, why are you with these two? They killed Abish and hurt Teancum.”

Concha stepped back and glared at Lupe. “What are you talking about?”

Lupe cringed.

“Why do you worry about someone who was of no importance to you or anyone else?”

Lupe stared wide-eyed in shock at the sudden change in her mother. One moment she had showed warmth, the next icy indifference. Lupe felt sick to her stomach.

“What about this warrior?” Chiza asked. “Tezcatlipoca does not want him. Or the other girl either.”

Mulek agreed. “No, he does not.”

She was right! Images of Abish dead flashed through her mind. *No, they can't kill Teancum or Tonantzin.*

Lupe glanced over at Tonantzin, fearing for her safety. Her friend stared in the direction of Teancum. A horrified expression appeared on her face.

Laughter filled the darkness.

“Good, then Tezcatlipoca would not mind me having a little fun,” Mulek said.

Lupe watched in horror as the large man approached her warrior. His cloak thrown back, Mulek exaggerated each step he made. He seemed to be playing some kind of game. It reminded Lupe of a cat with a mouse. Except she doubted Teancum would ever play that role, not now or ever.

“What is wrong oh, mighty pawn of the Revered One?” Mulek sniggered. “Not so high and proud are we, without that *puta* ruler behind you.”

Teancum stared straight ahead. Lupe noticed his eyes flash with anger.

“Men don't hang onto the cloak of women.” Mulek's eyebrows rose. “There is only one thing to do with a cloak of any woman. And that is to climb on top of it.”

“You would know, wouldn't you, Mulek?” Concha said.

“Well, Teancum can't do that any longer, can he, Mulek?” Chiza laughed. “Considering where her holiness now lies.”

Lupe burst into tears. These people were pigs! And her mother was one of them. How could they say such disgusting things?

“Do not listen to them,” Tonantzin whispered.

“Do not think you will get away with this,” Teancum said.

“Oh, but we already have.” Mulek opened his hands. “Where is your savior Ixchel? Tezcatlipoca will replace her with someone worthy of his honor. The Jaguar King. Too bad you fight against us. I am sure we can use you for something.”

“Let me have him,” Chiza intervened. “I can teach him a thing or two, but maybe he is not

man enough for me.” Chiza squeezed her ample breasts and smirked.

“You two are disgusting,” Lupe retorted.

Mulek stole a quick glance at Chiza. He mimicked back her words. “You two are soooo disgusting.” He rolled his eyes for added effect.

Too late, Lupe realized her mistake.

“Oh, the *orucula* burns for her warrior.” Chiza sneered. “Maybe you should have her, Mulek.”

Lupe’s face burned with embarrassment.

“Even though I resent having to deal with this *child*, she is still my daughter,” Concha said. “And you will have nothing to do with her.”

Mulek laughed. “Well, we will see what Tezcatlipoca has to say.”

Lupe couldn’t believe her mother. Stunned, she felt as if her mother had torn her heart out and thrown it into the flames.

“Leave her alone.” Teancum struggled and glared at both Mulek and Concha.

He wants to protect me. Maybe he does care about me more than just some responsibility he has to fulfill. His words gave Lupe hope maybe all was not lost.

“Oh, brave words from one that is bound.” With that final comment Mulek slammed his fist into the side of Teancum’s head.

A sickening thump echoed in the air. Tears fell down Lupe’s face.

“Nooo!”

She wanted someone, anyone, to stop the fat priest from hitting her warrior. Each blow felt as if God was punishing her for any unclean thoughts she had about Teancum. Didn’t Father Michael say impure thoughts were evil?

“Hit him again! Hit him again!” Chiza squealed in delight.

Lupe couldn’t handle this. No, she had to do something.

“Leave him alone, *gordo*.” Lupe closed her mouth in disbelief.

Mulek’s scrunched his face in anger. “You brat. Let me show you what we do to those who disrespect the priests of Ixtumea.”

With one final kick to Teancum’s side, he made his way toward Lupe. For someone so fat he moved fast. His cloak billowed behind. An ugly sneer painted his face, while his eyes danced with delight. Sobbing, Lupe cowered against the tree, horrified maybe this time she had gone too far.

“Mami!”

Between gasps of breath and heavy sobs, Lupe screamed for her mother. Concha ignored her. Instead she glanced down and inspected her nails.

Lupe thrust her chest against the heavy cords in a frantic attempt to break them. But the rope didn't budge.

“Keep fighting, Lupe. I like girls with spirit.” The Wise One slowed down for a moment. He seemed to be enjoying her discomfort.

“Noo!” Images flashed through her mind of Mulek ripping her clothes, groping, and molesting her. Ohmigod, why didn't anyone help her?

“No one will help you now!” The priest took advantage of her mother's disinterest. An ugly sneer lined his face.

Pure terror exploded within her. Did it all boil down to this? To be assaulted by an old priest while her mother looked on?

Then out of the blue, Teancum hurled himself at Mulek. Too late, the priest saw his mistake. So intent on getting to Lupe he had forgotten about her warrior. He opened his mouth in surprise.

But it was too late. Both bodies collided with a sickening smack.

Lupe stared in wide eye amazement. She had witnessed her warrior being beaten. She couldn't believe he had any strength left.

“You will leave her alone.” Teancum glared over at the crumpled form of the priest that lay not far from him. Teancum pushed himself back up, each movement causing him to wince in pain.

Mulek took advantage of this. For a fat man, he scrambled up, away from Teancum.

“Watch out!” Lupe screamed out to warn her warrior. But she was too late.

A flash of white whipped through the air. “You son of swine.” Mulek grabbed the fallen Teancum by his hair.

A twisted expression covered the priest's face. “I will teach you.” Jerking Teancum's head back, he placed his obsidian blade beside the younger man's throat.

“*Enough!*” Concha pointed her finger toward both men. “You will not kill him.” She glanced at Teancum. “Not yet, anyway.”

“He dared to touch me,” Mulek grumbled. “I am one of Tezcatlipoca's chosen. No one molests one of my calling.” He forced his knife harder into Teancum's throat, “including a dog

warrior of an *orucula*.”

Teancum didn't flinch. Drops of crimson blood fell from his injured face to the ground.

“Release him,” Concha said.

“Do not think I am done with this.” The Wise One tossed the warrior aside. “Or with you either, *oruculita*.”

Lupe cowered, avoiding the priest's gaze. Within his eyes loomed the promise that even though her mother and Teancum had come to her aid, they wouldn't be around her all hours of the day.

He reinforced his threat by wiping his blade against his cloak. With each swipe he glared at her. She flinched with each scrape.

She didn't doubt his promise.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Lupe seethed inside. Why hadn't her mother come to her aid sooner, instead of acting like it was one big inconvenience? She hated Concha and all she stood for. She definitely was the mother from hell.

Concha rolled her eyes. "You think a Wise One would act his part and not behave as a child."

Mulek glared at Concha but she didn't back down. A look of loathing and hatred covered the priest's face. Lupe knew the priest despised her mother. That didn't surprise her. *Who wouldn't hate her mother?*

But this didn't faze Concha. She only smiled. The Wise One dropped his gaze. As he struggled back to the fire pit he muttered under his breath. "...*bruja*, wait until..." Lupe only caught a few words. What little she understood made her dread the priest's wrath even more.

Concha ignored Mulek.

"You should know better than to taunt Mulek," Concha said. "I will not allow the old fart to harm you. But you, dear daughter," she leaned over close, "need to watch your mouth."

Though Concha smiled, her gaze was granite hard.

"Not hurt me? What do you call this?" Lupe nodded at her cords. "If you didn't want to hurt me, it's kinda late for that, don't you think?"

"Tsst." Concha rolled her eyes. "Lupe, believe me if I wanted them to hurt you, you would be like your warrior over there." She nodded toward Teancum.

Lupe felt torn. Her mother hadn't stopped Mulek. No, it was her warrior. A weird feeling came over her, could it be like what she'd read in some of those cheap romance novels, one of devotion and...could she even think it? Love?

Her mother on the other hand...whatever she felt for Concha wouldn't be in the same category as Teancum. Not by a long shot.

"Why bother protecting me?" Lupe asked. "You act like you can't wait to get rid of me."

"Lupe," Tonantzin whispered. "Leave her alone."

Concha cocked her head. "Did I not come to get you away from the village? It's not my fault the villagers put me in prison."

"But you killed someone," Lupe said.

“Oh, you mean my own warrior? No big loss.” Concha shrugged. “It’s not like you knew him, anyway.”

Lupe stared in amazement at her mother. “Didn’t know him? He still was my father. You had no right to take him away from me.”

Her mother whirled around and approached her. Lupe recoiled back against the tree. She thought for sure Concha would strike her.

Her mother cupped Lupe’s face and brought it up close. “Lupe, forget about him. We don’t need anyone except ourselves. You know I care for you. You are *m’ija* after all.”

Lupe shivered as she gazed into her mother’s eyes. She scared her. She didn’t know how to act around her mother. Like right now. A large smile plastered her face but her eyes were icy cold. Just like her soul.

“They were right. You are crazy,” Lupe whispered.

Concha turned and cocked her head to the side. “Depends on what you call crazy, *m’ija*.”

Chiza put her hands on her hips. “Do not talk to your mother that way.” She shook her head. “I told you this child was a problem.”

Concha raised her hand. “Leave her alone. She is new to this world and it will take her time.”

“Time?” Mulek asked. “We do not have time to train her. Tezcatlipoca will not like this. On the other hand I have a gift with girls. Let me take care of her.”

“Didn’t you hear my mother?” Lupe wanted to barf. No way was she going to have that slimy priest touch her, especially after her mother told him off. “Leave me alone.”

Mulek smirked. “You have the nerve to order me? When I’m done with you...”

Concha shoved Mulek. His fat body smacked hard against a tree. She pressed her hand against his chest. “Did you not hear me, or are you deaf? What part of *leave her alone* do you not understand?”

“Ah, Concha,” Mulek’s voice purred. “I only mean to serve the holy one and his servants. If you will not give me the *orucula*, maybe I can have the other girl.”

Concha’s eyes narrowed. “I have no time for this. Your sweet-talk might work on others, but not me.”

She removed her hands from Mulek, who let out a loud sigh. Concha tapped her finger to her lips, and turned back to face him. “Do you not recall our little chat in Irreantum?”

Her gaze moved from his face to his throat.

Mulek's smirk faded.

"Good, I can tell you still remember," Concha said. "You both will leave both my daughter and her servant alone."

She squatted close to Lupe. "And you, my dear daughter, will be quiet."

Her mother pointed at Tonantzin. "Do your job and you will be spared from any harm. If not, I'll let Mulek have his way with you. You mean nothing to me."

"Yes," Tonantzin whispered.

Lupe turned her face away, not daring to look at her mother another moment, afraid the disgust and revulsion she was feeling would show.

Concha rose. She leaned over and gently brushed Lupe's hair aside. "Don't worry, *m'ija*. You'll be fine."

Lupe didn't believe her. Why should she?

Lupe shuddered at her mother's touch. She pushed herself back against the tree trunk, anything to get away from the evil that radiated off her mother.

Her mother jerked back, surprise flashing across her face. Then with half-glazed eyes she sneered. "Why do I bother with you anyway?"

The others in her group laughed.

Concha folded her arms. "The only one who matters is Tezcatlipoca and the true ruler of this land, who will be called the Jaguar King. Not you."

"No, *mami*." Lupe burst into tears, again. "You can't mean that." Her mother's comment stung. Didn't she care for her at all?

Concha smiled. "But yes, I do, little one."

Lupe flinched. "*Mami*, you can't be bad, you can't." She wanted to believe her mother had some redeeming qualities. All right, maybe she'd have to take a pickaxe and chip away at the stone encasing her mother's heart. Still this was her *mami*. Didn't all mothers love their children, regardless of how much they were a pain in the butt?

"Lupe," her mother whispered. "You don't even know the meaning of bad. Just do what I say and maybe if you're lucky that yummy warrior of yours might still be boy candy. Don't listen and well, you'll see how crazy I can be."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Damp and cold, Lupe struggled to keep up with her captors. Every one of her muscles ached. She felt as if she had walked forever! Her stomach growled, reminding her it had been awhile since she had last eaten.

Lupe's present discomfort distracted from her real pain, the betrayal of her mother, who showed no empathy toward her. She was no different than the others who had killed Abish.

Thick vegetation pressed down on her, along with the heavy air which made it hard to breathe. Drops of dew dripped off the huge tree leaves. Insects buzzed around. Lupe flinched each time a bug whizzed by. A burst of sunlight pierced through the jungle canopy. Blinded by the light, Lupe stumbled.

Tonantzin tried to help, but Concha shoved her out of the way. Tonantzin fell back.

"You okay?" Lupe asked.

Tonantzin got up, and smiled. "Don't worry about me." Her smile faded when Concha glared back.

"Not much longer, Lupita." Her mother bent down to help Lupe up. "And then we will be home." Her hand brushed the dirt off her back.

"We're going back home to Tustin?" Lupe asked.

"No, somewhere even better," Concha said. "We're going to our rightful place, where we will be given the respect of true royalty."

"Royalty?"

"What do you think an *orucula* is, anyway, Lupita?" Concha folded her arms and glared. "Not some hoochie waitress at the corner bar/restaurant where you have to fight off balding white businessmen who want an easy lay. No, my daughter, we are much more. This is something *our* world will never understand, even if it bit them on their fat *gringo* asses."

Lupe knew better than to question her mother any further. Better to stay in her good graces than to have the mother from hell swept down and tear her to shreds.

They continued on the twisting trail, past massive ceiba trees, coiling vines, and brilliant clusters of flowers. Colorful tree frogs lined some of the branches. Also humongous hummingbirds, who long slender beaks slipped in and out of flowers.

Lupe wanted to speak with Teancum. But that proved to be impossible. Mulek put his body between Teancum and her the whole time.

She vowed she would find an opportune time to speak to her warrior. She felt as if the tables had been turned. Now Teancum had to have someone look out for him.

Giant boulders lined the area. To the side Lupe could make out a gaping hole.

This was where the trail ended.

“Welcome to Tezcatlipoca’s kingdom,” Chiza said.

Lupe stared in disbelief at the dark opening.

“Finally, we are back.” Mulek wiped his face with a piece of cloth. “I never thought we would get here.”

This was the kingdom of the Tezcatlipoca? Lupe couldn’t believe it. The way everyone was going on she thought this leader had a huge castle with thousands of warriors. All she could see was some crevice with a large hole.

“This is it?” Lupe asked. “Where is this great kingdom everyone has been talking about?”

“Sshh,” Tonantzin whispered. “Do not get them mad.”

Mulek glared at Lupe. “What do you know of power? You are nothing but a...”

“Be still.” Concha stared at Mulek. “I will not warn you again.”

Mulek glared back, refusing to back down. “Yes, your *holiness*.”

She waved him aside, not falling to his sarcastic comment. “Step aside.” Concha strutted over to the gaping hole.

Two large warriors guarded the entrance. Naked from the waist up, their muscles glistened in the sunlight. Bright tattoos covered both of their bodies. Long raven hair fell past their shoulders. Neither one smiled.

“Do you have the signs?” One of the guards asked.

Concha rolled her eyes. “Do we need to go through this? You know who I am.” She thrust her chest out and glared at the man.

“I don’t care who you are. Show me the signs.”

Concha hands moved quickly to her throat and back down. She stepped toward the guard on the right and whispered something into his ear.

Curious, Lupe leaned over and tried to hear the words. Chiza yanked her back.

Stone-faced, the guards lowered their arms. “You can pass.”

Concha turned to Lupe. “Now you will see what power and glory comes to those who follow the god Tezcatlipoca.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Concha guided them through the underground cavern, a large torch in her hand. Lupe stayed a few steps behind, with Tonantzin trailing close by. Lupe rubbed her arms to stay warm while keeping away from the blackened walls. Drops of water trickled down the sides. Shadows scurried on the ground. She cringed as one ran over her feet.

Though her mother was happy to return to this hidden cave, the others didn't share the same sentiment. Mulek kept wiping his forehead, jumping at the slightest noise. Lupe expected Chiza to ridicule the priest but her sharp tongue was silent. If anything the maid grew more subservient to Concha; her shoulders rounded, and more than once she would defer to her mother.

As Lupe made her way inside the cavern, a weird sensation came over her. She felt this wasn't the first time she had visited this place. A huge granite stone appeared up ahead.

Her mother stopped. Concha motioned to Mulek. "Open it."

"Do you think I am a slave?" The fat priest glared at her mother. "Ask the girl."

Concha narrowed her gaze. "Don't argue. Just do it."

Mulek removed his cloak and threw it at Chiza. She stepped aside and let it fall to the ground. Lupe glanced at his out of shape body in disgust. His potbelly stomach made him look pregnant. Rolls of fat hung under his armpits, seeming to wave with each movement.

The priest muttered under his breath. He put his hands on the stone while glaring at Chiza. Straining he pushed the stone. The granite creaked and groaned under the dirt.

A sliver of light burst out, filling the area. *What's behind the stone?* Curious, Lupe leaned over to take a better look but Mulek's fat, out of shape body blocked the view.

Her mother snuffed the torch out. With her hand she reached for Lupe. "Welcome home, Lupita."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Lupe took one step inside and stopped. Hidden inside the cave were people that looked like they'd stepped back from time which in this case could have been an ancient Aztec movie. While the villagers in Irreantum were dressed in more earthy colors, these people's outfits were flamboyant with outlandish displays of color and plumage. One even wore what looked like a jaguar head for a hat. All that was missing was the sacrificial altar and bowl.

Sweat dripped down Lupe's face, her neck, and back. The humidity of the room and the overpowering scent of flora, smoke, and overdressed people made her head reel.

Then she saw him. The same man who'd taunted her and had hurt Ixchel. She knew she should flee but her mother's tight grip on her arm let her know she was a prisoner. Still her head beat like a hummingbird's wings. Only she couldn't go.

Malvado looked even more handsome up close. A multicolored robe opened to reveal his naked chest. His light tanned skin emphasized his muscular build.

Though her stomach twisted into knots, she found herself drawn to him. His thin lips were turned up in a half-smile. She could see why her mother was attracted to this man. He oozed of charm and sexuality. She felt the urge to reach out and trace her finger around his mouth.

Don't trust him, a voice that sounded a lot like *Abuela's* whispered.

Lupe grimaced and took a step backward. *What was I thinking?* Clutching her hands to her chest, she shook her head in disbelief. How could she be attracted to someone who had caused so much pain and suffering?

Her knees shook. The fear came back doublefold. She had to get out of here now! She thought her heart would burst, it raced so fast. The black jaguar sitting by the throne snarled, increasing her agitation.

"Lupe," Malvado said, "you don't have to be afraid."

Smooth and comforting, his voice drew her to him. The attraction she felt intensified, making it so much harder to resist.

For a moment she let her guard down. How could anyone be that bad? His flawless appearance added to his appeal. The forbidden sensation brought out the rebel in her. She pushed aside the blaring warning bells in her head and took a hesitant step toward him. Malvado smiled

and stretched his hand forward.

Don't believe him. Turn around and look! The warning pierced through her soul, each word adding to her previous foreboding; this ruler was nothing but a *mentiroso*. For once she listened. Malvado's carefully crafted lies might have trapped others, but not her. His spell broken, Lupe glanced back at the others in the chambers.

Everyone around her had thrown themselves to the ground. Everyone that is except her cruel mother, who Lupe doubted feared anyone. Even though her mother still stood, Lupe noticed a slight tremble in her hands. Beads of perspiration emphasized the fine lines on her forehead.

This man scared everyone in the room. Though Malvado's smile never left his face, his eyes were hard and cold.

"Concha, you've done well," he said. Though he addressed her mother, his eyes never left Lupe.

This didn't please Concha. She directed a hateful glare her way. Lupe felt as if her mother had punched her in the stomach.

"I told you I wouldn't fail." Concha took a few steps toward the throne. Her head held high, she reminded Lupe of a queen going to her rightful place, at the side of the king.

Apparently Malvado thought differently. With half-closed eyes, he watched her mother, like a cat ready to spring. When she got up the first step he lifted his hand. "Not yet."

Startled, she stopped. Lupe could tell her mother wasn't used to this treatment. Concha's eyes pleaded with Malvado.

Malvado caressed the head of the jaguar. "You assume too much, Concha."

Her mother's shoulders drooped and she quickly bowed. "I didn't mean to offend you, my lord."

Now Lupe was confused. Why did her mother bow to this man? This just reinforced her belief this ruler couldn't be trusted.

Malvado's eyes narrowed. Goosebumps covered Lupe's body. She could sense he was not someone to tick off.

He turned away from Concha, dismissing her presence. Her mother staggered backward, her eyes never leaving him. A few snickers could be heard in the chambers.

For a moment Lupe felt for her misdirected mother. She knew she shouldn't care, but oddly enough, she did.

Malvado rose from his golden throne. “Welcome to my kingdom, Lupe.” He took a step toward her.

Lupe dropped her gaze. This man mesmerized her; each one of his steps made her heart pound harder, until she thought it would burst. She couldn’t understand this sensation. Never had she felt this way about anyone, including Teancum. She refused to succumb to his charm. One look at her mother and the others in the chambers reinforced how deadly that would be.

She struggled against his magnetic pull, which tugged her back and forth until she thought she would be torn apart.

“Why am I here?” Lupe swallowed hard.

Malvado chuckled. “Why, my dear, we had to get you away from those who meant to do you harm. You saw what those ignorant villagers did to your own mother, didn’t you?”

Don’t trust this man. Once more *Abuela’s* warning came. Jarred to her senses, anger replaced Lupe’s earlier fear. What right did he have to talk about others harming her?

Lupe raised her head and stared at him. “How can you say that? Everyone, including Ixchel, has been good to me. And my mother,” Lupe grimaced “only got what was coming to her.”

Malvado’s eyes danced with amusement. “Lupe, Lupe, Lupe. How can you say such a thing?” he asked.

He walked behind her. With one hand he brushed a strand of hair off her face. His hand caressed the side of her cheek. Each stroke felt like an electrical current. She flinched.

Malvado chuckled. “Do I make you uncomfortable?”

What is wrong with me? This man is way old and with my mother! Lupe couldn’t believe how easy these forbidden feelings could come. He repulsed her but at the same time she melted with one stroke of his hand.

Her face flushed with embarrassment. She would go to hell for sure. She said another silent prayer to her patron saint, the Virgin de Guadalupe, pleading for the strength to resist him.

Still laughing, Malvado smiled at her mother while his hand brushed against her earring. The sensation she had in Ixchel’s cave returned. Her ears tingled with warmth. Apparently the leader didn’t have the same experience.

When his hand touched her earrings, he recoiled and screamed out a curse. His face turned beet red.

“Concha!” he hollered in rage. “Why is she wearing *those?*” His face puckered as if he had

eaten something foul.

Concha flinched. “I tried, my lord—”

“Tried?” His voice thundered throughout the chambers. “Is that the best explanation you can give? You tried?”

Gut-wrenching fear tore through Lupe’s body. She cowered, half expecting him to rip the offensive earrings out. All the other subjects trembled in the chamber.

Her proud mother wilted under his gaze. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You’re what?” Malvado asked, through clenched teeth.

“I’m sorry,” Concha said. “I will take care of this.”

Lupe finger touched the ruby gems in her ears.

Images came back to her; the vision she had shared with Diane, her classmate, the tattoos on the Revered One and Teancum’s face, the look of fear that had covered this man’s face while in Ixchel’s cave, and the whispers of those here in this chambers.

Yes, Lupe! The voice validated what she felt. She needed more than sacred knots and religious sayings to save her people from destruction. The answer to helping Ixchel and the others was in the power of the ancient ruby earrings her *abuela* had given her.

How could she have been so blind?

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Lupe sighed and glanced around at her new surroundings. Well, she had to give this Malvado guy credit: at least he had some sense of style. Lush tapestries lined the walls, ornate designs were carved on the mahogany tables, and a golden jaguar statue stood next to the doorway.

Lupe's eyelids drooped. Afraid to go to sleep, she fought the urge. She didn't want to let her guard down. Who knew what could happen to her?

But she lost the battle, and the dream-world took her.

Lupe found herself outside Malvado's stone palace. A gray mist swirled around her feet. It snaked out, directing her somewhere.

Instead of being apprehensive, she welcomed this vision. She wanted to know how to use the earrings. What were their powers? Limitations? Maybe someone would help answer her questions.

Would Kish be waiting for her again? The dead prophet had told her of her father and her ties to this land. He had given her the charge to take her calling as orucula seriously but didn't go into specifics. Would he now fill in the missing pieces?

A sad and haunting melody guided her through the lush jungle vegetation. The music became part of her, tingling and yet peaceful. She found herself humming along with the mysterious music while strolling through the jungle. The trailing vines and huge branches parted.

Strange. Other than the flute, the jungle was silent. No humming of insects, howling of spider monkeys, or chatter of parrots filled the night.

A long dark line scampered on each side of her. Narrowing her eyes, she could see the many long legs of a variety of spiders scurry by. Funny, instead of them giving her the willies, she felt a warm comfort. She remembered what the Revered One had told her not so long ago; spiders were her protectors.

A lone figure, covered in a red cloak, stood overlooking the mountains. Lupe moved closer and stopped. Her eyes widened in surprise. It was Abish! Relief came over her. But how this could be, she wondered. The head maiden was dead.

"Yes, Lupe." Abish lowered her hood. "It is me." Her long raven hair fell down her back.

Her whole body glowed. The white light softened her features and intensified the small spider tattoo on her right cheek.

“But how? I mean, I saw them kill you! No way can you be alive.” Lupe shuddered, remembering all the blood covering the marble floor. It wasn’t humanly possible Abish could be alive after that.

“Lupe, I am here to help you.”

Excited to know her captors hadn’t succeeded in killing her friend, she wanted to throw herself at the maiden.

Shivers went up Lupe’s spine. She remember Father Michael saying the only spirits that tried to communicate with you were either saints or from Satan. There was no way Abish could be from the latter. Goodness radiated from her. The spiders formed a ring around her, too. Could it be possible she was this ancient world’s version of the Virgin?

Lupe stepped back, not sure how to react to Abish. She opened her mouth but found it hard to speak. “Who are you?”

Abish laughed. “No, I am not what you would call the mother of the chosen one. I have been given a mission from the prophet Kish. I am to help you call on your powers within.”

Powers within. Why did everyone, including spirits, persist on telling her this?

“I don’t understand, Abish. I mean, the one time I tried to help Ixchel, Malvado laughed at me.” An image of her captor striking out at her came back. If Ixchel hadn’t stepped in, who knows what would have happened.

“But you doubted yourself. Am I not right?”

“How can you believe I can save anyone?” Lupe asked.

“Something can help you. You had it this whole time,” Abish replied.

“Are you talking about these?” Lupe pointed to her ears.

Abish nodded.

“I knew there was something about these earrings.” She frowned. “But how do I use them?”

“Think back to the times you had called onto them. The earrings sensed your trouble.”

Once more she saw herself yelling out at the Jaguar King in Ixchel’s cave and how she’d caught a glimpse of fear on his face.

“What do I need to say or do in order for them to help?”

Abish walked up and touched Lupe’s face. Her hand felt feather-light. “Only you will know

what to say, little one. Remember the teachings of your *abuela* and the Revered One. Do not let pride cloud your judgment. Only then will your questions be answered.”

Lupe felt frustrated. Why did everyone here speak in such *adivinanzas*? *Abuela* loved to use riddles with her. She said they would help her remember her culture and Mexican heritage. They only frustrated Lupe. Couldn't they just spell it out?

“I need to know more than that,” Lupe whined. “Just tell me what I need to do! I don't have time for all these riddles.”

“Focus within yourself, Lupe. Do not be concerned with time. Remember I will be with you. *Abuela* and *Ixchel* will guard you too; as the one cannot stand without the other.”

Huh? Lupe scrunched her eyes in growing frustration. *Abuela* and *Ixchel*? Together?

An image of *Ixchel* back in the cave flashed in her mind. Though a spider, she could sense *Abuela's* presence in the spider goddess's large brown eyes. She had brushed the sensation off as being too bizarre. But she had thought the same thing of *Ixtumea*. A fantasy world—an old tale from an old lady who spoke in riddles.

“What is this about my grandmother and *Ixchel*?” Lupe asked.

Abish only smiled. The mist circled around her until she faded into nothingness.

“Hey, you can't leave me now,” Lupe yelled with all her might. “Come back!” She had been so close to finding out the jewelry's secret. She didn't want to lose the one person who might know the answers.

* * * *

“Wake up, Lupe.” *Tonantzin* shook Lupe's body. “We need to get ready for a ceremony.”

Lupe struggled to open her eyes. Though still half asleep, her heart ached after the bizarre dream with *Abish*. Seeing her again made Lupe realize how much she missed her *Irreantum* friend.

“Oh, *Tonantzin*, I just had the weirdest dream. I saw *Abish*, and she said—”

“*Abish*?” A loud snort in the background caused Lupe to jump.

“That fool is gone. And both of you will join her if you don't get ready.” *Chiza* folded her arms, her eyes narrowed and her lips were a straight line. “Why he wanted you, I do not know. But you need to get ready.”

“Yes, *Chiza*.”

Tonantzin kept her gaze on the ground. Her hands trembled as she took the sheer gown from

Chiza's hands.

"Hurry up." Chiza gave Lupe a withering stare. "I do not want to miss anything." She stormed out of the room.

"What's her problem?" A cold feeling came over Lupe; something about this ceremony couldn't be good.

Tonantzin shrugged but didn't answer.

Lupe got off her bed and touched the gown. The sheer material felt like silk.

"I'm supposed to wear this? You can see right through it!"

"Come on, Lupe. We need to go." Tonantzin held the gown out for her.

"Why are we here? And where is my mother?" Lupe had so many questions.

"I do not know. Seeing Abish must be a sign. Listen to her, Lupe," Tonantzin whispered.

She touched Lupe's earrings. "You need to put these somewhere safe."

"But you remember what he said."

Tonantzin motioned to Lupe's bra. "Here, let me help you."

Lupe took the earrings and shoved them inside her bra. The backings pinched but she ignored the discomfort. She knew the earrings had some kind of power. If she had to suffer a little pain, so be it.

Tonantzin stepped back and smiled. "You look like a princess."

"I do?"

"Come, we need to go."

Tonantzin took Lupe's hand and gave it a quick squeeze.

"Remember what Abish said. You are stronger than this Malvado."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Lupe walked down the castle's red-carpeted hallway. The plush material looked out of place in this underground cavern and couldn't hide the coldness. Her stomach twisted and rumbled until she thought she would get sick.

Once she had left her room, a guard had taken Tonantzin. Lupe hadn't seen where they had gone. The loss of her friend had added to her growing anxiety.

She had seen her mother in the growing crowd. Lupe wanted to call out to Concha but one glance stopped her cold in her tracks. Her mother's brown eyes stared straight at her and her lips twisted in disgust. Lupe stepped backward. Pure hate radiated off Concha toward her.

The rest of Malvado's followers didn't seem to share her mother's sentiment. Laughter, merriment, and an overall party atmosphere filled the palace.

Numerous greenish blue containers embedded with pieces of jade were placed up against the walls. Large crystallized chunks burned inside, emitting a piney sweet smell that circulated around the room.

Though the ruler hadn't told her much, she knew she was to be part of some kind of ceremony.

Lupe squared her shoulders and held her head high. A line of perspiration dripped down her back, reminding her how truly frightened she really was.

She prayed for a *milagro*. *Abuela* had to be listening. Didn't Abish hint she would be close by? Lupe dropped her sweaty hands and rubbed them on her dress.

Then she saw them.

Thick tapestries covered the walls. Vibrant colors and images were splashed on the panels. The light from the overhead torches gave life to each form.

Woven within the strands were men holding clubs with serrated blades, knives, and slingshots. One whole panel held the form of a man covered in metal. He looked like a human armadillo. A slit in his helmet revealed topaz eyes. Tiger-like they spoke to her. Lupe shivered. Below his feet flowed a river of tiny black dots.

Those aren't dots! Lupe gasped. The closer she got she could make out the hundreds, if not thousands, of people kneeling before the ruler.

A not-so-gentle nudge to her back broke her concentration. She swung around only to meet the glare of one of Malvado's guards. His bulky body filled the area. His eyes narrowed and he jerked his chin forward.

She took one last look and then continued on.

The huge web filled the end of the procession. No longer was it pristine white. All that remained was a charred skeleton of its former glory.

Bonng!

A huge circular bronze gong hung from the ceiling. A servant hit it with a wooden mallet.

Bonng.

With each strike the gong emitted a deep thunder sound that grew louder the closer she got to Malvado.

Bonng.

She couldn't see him, but could feel his presence. Strong and vibrant, his power drew her to him like an invisible cord.

The sweltering heat, crowds of people, and heavy hangings pressed down on her. She wanted to scream and run far away. But she couldn't.

A strange humming broke through her thoughts. The eerie melody gave her the creeps.

She glanced up. Her eyes widened with shock. Individuals cloaked in black stood on both sides of the chambers. Their long robes fell to the ground and revealed nothing except their alabaster hands folded together in prayer.

Goosebumps erupted on her body. A cold foreboding hit her hard. Their prayer had nothing to do with any God she prayed to.

A rectangular granite table completed her journey. A woman knelt at the foot of the table. Her long raven hair covered her features. And in her hands was a bowl.

Lupe gasped. She covered her mouth to stop the scream from coming. *Ohmigod. Ohmigod.*

Chapter Forty

Lupe froze. An urge came over her to do something—run, yell, or fight back; but she couldn't. Her gaze was transfixed on the ornate bowl in the woman's hands. An image rushed through her mind of warm blood plopping into the container until it flowed over and stained the ground.

Not anyone's blood, but her own.

This can't be happening!

Her heart pounded hard against her chest.

Only then did she get a glimpse of the huge tinker-toy-like structure behind the granite table. Most of the web's strands were singed. Blackened flecks drifted down.

To the side of the cave the rustle of a heavy cloak revealed the presence of Malvado and the shadow of the demon. His red eyes glowed in the darkness.

Two identical Ixtumean princesses, oblivious to the evil presence hovering over their ruler, held each of his hands. Sheer gowns covered their thin bodies. Dark kohl lined their eyes, which were empty of any emotion. As he stepped up to the granite altar, the women faded into the shadows.

Lupe looked up only to catch the amused gaze of the ruler.

A huge feather headdress covered the ruler's head. A large gold medallion hung on his naked chest. A slight paunch ruined his overall good looks.

"My people, we will begin." He raised his hands to silence his followers.

"Bring the chosen one forward." Two guards dragged Lupe toward the granite altar.

"Let go of me!"

She struggled but the men were too strong. She didn't want to go anywhere near that table.

She searched her memory for a glimpse of some saying that would help her.

But nothing came.

A rustle in the crowd caught her eye. Two guards thrust a bruised Teancum forward. Battered, the warrior's skin resembled a purple mess. One eye was swollen shut. He elbowed the men aside.

"What have you done to Teancum?" Lupe asked.

“Oh, how gullible are the young.” Malvado smiled. “Done to him? You are asking the wrong question, Lupita. How about what has he done to you!”

“Done to me?” Lupe shook her head. “He hasn’t done anything except help me.”

“Oh, that’s where you are so wrong, little *orucula*.” Malvado put his hands to his sides. His robe opened wider and revealed more of his stomach. “Your warrior has deceived you ever since he found you back in that pathetic city of Tustin.”

Teancum pushed his way forward. “His master lies to him as we speak.”

A gasp filled the room at the warrior’s insolence. Lupe felt a sudden chill, almost as if something else had snuck into the chambers. Though she couldn’t see anything, she just knew this presence reeked of darkness and wasn’t of this world.

“Whatever are you talking about?” Malvado cocked his head. A smugness flashed across his features. “You sure you haven’t drank one of those mushroom drinks? Maybe it’s muddled your brains.”

The chill increased. The villagers muttered among themselves and made the sign to ward off evil. If Lupe could and if she thought that would help, she’d make the same sign similar to crossing herself. But even she knew that couldn’t help her now.

“Do not listen to him, Lupe,” Teancum warned, then pointed to the side of the cave. “There’s Malvado’s real master.”

All heads turned.

Lupe glanced over and gasped. A willowy shadow rose over Malvado. Opaque at first, the inky shadow grew until it hit the cave’s ceiling.

Oh, my...

Lupe’s mouth gaped open.

A gust of wind blew out the torches and knocked over some of the copal containers. Bird feathers flew everywhere.

The shadowy form stretched, towering over Malvado. Crimson eyes glowed in its face. Shrieks of terror rang throughout the hallway. More than one woman fainted. Lupe thought she would too.

“What are you waiting for?” The demon hissed at Malvado. Spittle oozed from his mouth. “Kill the girl now.” He pointed a skeleton finger at her. “And join me.”

No flippin’ way! Malvado wanted to sacrifice her in order to become like the creature beside

him. Was that even possible? It went against all her beliefs, but didn't Satan tempt men? Why should this ruler be any different? She muttered a prayer under her breath. *Dios ayúdame.*

"Lupe, remember what your *abuela* told you." Teancum raised his chains. "You have the power to send this *diablo* back to his darkness."

A wind hissed in the chambers, making it hard for her to understand Teancum.

"I can't do it!" Tears streamed down her face. "Just tell me what I need to do!"

A warm tingling swept over her. *You know what to do, m'ija. Believe.*

Lupe closed her eyes. Pictures flashed through her mind; coming to Irreantum, the Revered One's council, Mulek's refusal to accept her, Ixchel's training, Abish, and Teancum's patience throughout this whole ordeal.

Now all the teachings of *Abuela* and Ixchel made sense. She needed their teachings in order to save not only herself but Ixtumea too.

What do you want, little one? Abuela whispered. The web rippled above. *Visualize it and it will take place.*

"What are you waiting for?" The demon hissed at Malvado. "Kill them now!"

Guards charged out of the audience. Wielding clubs, the muscular tattooed men all rushed toward Teancum. The rest of the villagers squealed and tried to get out of the guards way. One club slammed into the head of an overly dressed apostate man. A sickening soft thunk resonated in the cave. White matter splattered all over the guard, who only flung it off.

"Lupe!" As Teancum hurried up the steps to Lupe, he pushed and kicked at the men.

Being bound with chains didn't stop Teancum from lashing out at his captors. One of the guards screamed as metal slashed his face.

Lupe inched backward. She wanted to get away from the chaos in the chambers.

Lupe squeezed her eyes shut. *What do I want, what do I want?* She repeated the mantra to herself.

In answer to her prayer a warm sensation burned between her breasts where the earrings lay hidden. It grew warmer and warmer.

White light erupted out of her chest, piercing the darkness. It swirled around growing larger and larger. A hologram image materialized, hanging in midair.

No!

The demon shrieks filled the chambers. Static filled the circular globe to reveal the face of

the woman of her beloved *Abuela*.

Within her grandmother's ears were a similar pair of ruby stones. They clanked open revealing a 3-D story. Spanish conquistadors appeared, raiding villages, and burning thousands of books. Screaming villagers rushed everywhere. Swords slashed at anything that moved. Then a dark cave appeared. Lupe recognized Kish, the prophet of old, blessing a baby with the promise of saving Ixtumea. In the child's ears were the same earrings Lupe now wore. Kish gave the baby to a woman, who he also blessed. Around them were men chanting over a huge leather book. Women repeated *dichos*-sayings while knotting tapestries. *Lo que bien se aprende, nunca se pierde*. What well is learned never is lost.

The people's urgency wasn't lost to Lupe. She knew if they didn't complete the ritual all would be lost.

The woman with the baby paused at the white web. She gave her baby a gentle caress, then glanced back to Kish. He nodded. The woman took a couple steps and passed over. The web erased her completely. It was as if she'd never existed. Ixchel scurried over and filled in the hole.

Yes, little one. The blessing is your birthright. The earrings give you the power to resist the destroyer. Remember the blessing.

Once more she was at Kish's side. She heard his words and felt the strength of the blessing.

"Remember your heritage and draw strength from your ancestors," he said. "The blood of gods flows in your veins. The sacred stones will be your armor against evil. You can use them to vanquish anything that threatens your people. But only if you believe."

Yes, of course, Lupe thought. She could see all the oruculas throughout time smile down at her, from the first to *Abuela*. *Yes, I can do this, for my people.*

No longer afraid, Lupe stood straight and raised her right hand toward the demon. *Dichos* rushed through her mind, but one stood out from the others. *Quien tiene lengua, a Roma llega*. Ask and you shall receive.

"Oh, gods reweave the sacred web." Lupe felt a surge of energy rip out of her body. "Destroy those who wish my people harm. Let it all be as before."

Her body snapped back like a humungous rubber band, before she crashed to the ground into blackness.

* * * *

"*Noo!*" Malvado screamed. "This can't be happening." He'd been so close to sacrificing the

orucula. She couldn't have known her purpose. Somehow she'd figured it out.

The young girl's body crackled with light.

His eyes widened. The rubies! Didn't he tell Concha to get rid of them?

The gems sizzled with laser-hot energy, cocooning Lupe in crimson. Malvado shielded his eyes in fear of being blinded.

He dropped the obsidian knife. Shock and numbness filled his body. His hands still itched to kill the orucula. But he knew that wouldn't happen now.

Rage quivered through his body causing his hands to tremble.

He'd been so close.

Taking one last look at his failure, he fled.

A deep rumble vibrated underneath. Cracks covered the cavern walls. Wise Ones and other dissidents no longer worried about mingling. As they made a frantic attempt to exit the cave, bodies were shoved roughly aside.

Not everyone tried to flee. Teancum butted his upper torso into the guards. Herculean strength took over. Arms and limbs of guards were twisted like broken dolls, blood oozing out of their wounds.

A loud ripping sound echoed through the hall. In shock, Malvado watched as one by one his tapestries were severed from the walls. The hangings collapsed onto the ground in tatters.

He faced the altar. Next to his former spot of honor lay two gigantic pieces of granite. The crumpled bodies of two of his guards were shattered around the broken table. In death their eyes were glazed in terror.

Another tremor caught him off guard. He lost his balance and fell to the ground. Glancing up he beheld an intense brightness.

The web! Strands were reweaving themselves. The charred bits and pieces were now a pristine white.

His eyes widened in growing disbelief. Hanging on the repaired gossamer fibers was Ixchel. The spider goddess stared down on him, her huge eyes filled with sorrow. Each glance tore at his soul. He could suffer anger, hate, or even contempt. Anything except pity. It made him sick to his stomach. He walked backward, clenching his hands into fists. He threw his head back and wailed.

He clenched his jaw. "You won't win, *bruja!*"

He searched his chaotic chambers for his mentor. *He will know what to do*, Malvado told himself. He wrung his palms together while perspiration dripped down his forehead.

Then he found him.

Tezcatlipoca no longer wore a smile. His lips were curled back in a feral smirk. Crimson eyes chilled with revulsion. Malvado cowered with fear.

He now knew who stood before him. Tezcatlipoca was no different than the Satan from his world. He never intended to confer godhood. Lies coated his tongue. And Malvado had fallen for it all.

Pain erupted in his chest. Gasping for air, Malvado clutched his heart. Agony filled his whole being. *No!*

He struggled to find the words that might deliver him. Any prayer would be useless. Didn't he ask for the creature's guidance? Who would save his sorry ass now?

The demon enjoyed his discomfort. Malvado tried to avoid his gaze. But couldn't.

The apparition laughter penetrated through him. "Did you really think I would make you a god?"

The demon's raspy voice, filled his ears. "Your father is right. You are a *broma*, a joke."

More debris flew overhead but Tezcatlipoca was oblivious. "I am a patient god. There still is one thing you can do."

Chapter Forty-One

Cries of terror crammed the hallway. Concha clung to the back wall. Men and women fled in her direction, pulling and shoving anyone foolish enough to stand in their way.

She slammed herself against the human stampede. Each jolt bruised her. She ignored the pain.

Only one thought filled her mind: she had to get to her daughter. Maybe she could redeem herself. That was if her daughter was still alive.

She groped toward the web and her daughter.

When she got close, Concha fell to her knees in amazement. Lupe's whole body glowed. A halo of crimson beam light surrounded her daughter's face. An opaque long string-like substance connected Lupe to the web. The charred strands reweave themselves.

Tiny holes pockmarked the cavern ceiling. A goeey white substance slid out of the holes. Concha grimaced in disgust. Cascading down the slippery lines were tarantula-sized spiders. Their legs blurred as they wove a protective cocoon around Lupe.

Concha stared in morbid fascination.

"So the *bruja* claims her spawn." The abrasive voice made her jump. Tezcatlipoca often taunted, ridiculed, and had even given her words of false encouragement. Once more she craved a sip of the mushroom drink to dull his words from drilling into her mind.

No beverage would save her now.

Concha's heart pounded. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of Malvado on bent knees, pleading with Tezcatlipoca. "Master, please don't do this."

Her eyes widened in horror. Never had she seen her ex-lover grovel. If this demon could reduce Malvado to a whimpering fool, what would he do with her?

"Damned spiders." Anger tinted Tezcatlipoca's features a charcoal gray. He punched his fist through the cocoon. Nothing happened. Streams of gray vapor swished right through the protective encasing, showing his impotence. Without a physical body he could do nothing.

A glimmer of hope came to Concha. Maybe she could still save her daughter from Malvado.

Tezcatlipoca turned his rage back to Concha. "I might not be able to kill Lupe, but you can."

Pain exploded in Concha's skull. She clasped her hands to her head. *You know what to do.*

An image of the obsidian knife came to her. An urge tugged at her to grab the weapon and plunge it into Lupe's heart.

No! Concha screamed. *I won't do it.*

Blood oozed out from her left ear. Excruciating pain tore through her body. She longed to cry out for help, but to whom? Who would help her now? It was too late.

The spirit of her mother whispered to her. *You still are of worth. Do not listen to him. He is nothing but a mentiroso.*

She shivered and wished she'd held the medallion of the virgin close to her heart though she knew she was past redemption now.

Ash grey clouded his features. His eyes blazed in anger. "You dare to defy me, *bruja!*" A putrid smell of sulfur emanated from Tezcatlipoca. His spirit grew and towered over her.

Concha recoiled in horror. Another shock of pain shot through her body. A faint impression came to her. In the vision she gazed upon the features of her youthful boyfriend, Jorge. Once more the juvenile sensation of love bubbled inside her while darkness surrounded both of them, waiting to burst her innocence.

"No!" Concha's nails tore into her thighs. Tears streamed down her face. She fought against reliving this part of her past. She couldn't go there again.

Tezcatlipoca grinned at her discomfort. Her pain gave him strength. "You will do what I ask."

"No!" Concha whimpered. "Please, no."

The vision came back. She was in a dark alley, taking a shortcut to her apartment. A group of Cholos staggered out of the shadows. Shaved heads tattooed with their gang names stared back at her. The leader, Guillermo, drew out his pocketknife and held it against her throat.

"Dear God, no!" She had heard rumors of how boys tricked their girlfriends into being part of the initiation rite of the Tustin homies. But she never thought Jorge would lower himself into wanting to join this gang.

She turned her head to block out the horror of the beatings, but still they came. One after another they kicked, punched her, leaving behind the pungent smell of marijuana and Corona beer. She pleaded with Jorge to do something, but he only watched. A look of disgust colored his otherwise good features.

Just when she thought it couldn't get any worse Guillermo flung the knife to her boyfriend.

Jorge swaggered over and pointed the weapon at her chest. “Why don’t you use your *dichos* now?”

“You know I can’t.” Concha sobbed. Nothing could hurt worse than his betrayal. She couldn’t believe he had used her as a way to get into the gang. She welcomed the thought of death.

“I thought you were so powerful,” Jorge whispered.

The others sneered at her reaction. Catcalls rang out in the air for him to finish the job. Concha closed her eyes for the final blow.

Jorge slammed his fist into her stomach. “Some seeker you are.” As his friends left, he took one last kick at her body.

She curled into a ball and whimpered in pain. Her body felt like a filled ashtray, the filthy butts contaminating everything they touched.

Where were the gods when she needed them?

They had died, just as she had inside. Never would she trust or love again. Never.

“If that is true, kill your daughter,” he hissed. “Or maybe she needs to learn the same lesson.”

A surge of motherly emotion swept through her.

“No!” She threw her body over her daughter in a vain attempt to shield her.

She longed to rectify her part in bringing Lupe to Malvado. Nothing was worth her daughter being abused. Not godhood, not immortality, nothing.

Tezcatlipoca sneered. “Oh, I can’t have you getting self-righteous on me now.”

Another vision came. One of the guards she had betrayed in Irreantum rushed at her with his obsidian knife. She threw her arms up to protect herself but to no avail. Even though she knew this was only an illusion, she could still feel the pain. Down the blade sliced until it hit bone.

Concha screamed in agony. *I can’t bear this!*

She slumped on the ground in defeat.

“*M’ija.*” A familiar voice made her glance back up.

Her mother’s face appeared over Lupe. “*Concha, where is your rage? It still isn’t too late to fight back.*”

* * * *

The world around Lupe ceased to exist. Bits and pieces of Malvado’s kingdom flew all

around; huge granite stones crumbled into a fine mist, and the gaudy tapestries were ripped like banana peels from the cavern walls.

Through the chaos, Lupe didn't fear for herself. Wrapped within the silken gossamer strands the spiders had woven around her, she felt safe.

Lupe surrendered to the sensation pulsating through her body: one of warmth, comfort, and peace. Lightheaded, she observed a few spiders crawling on her body. Their tiny legs tickled her skin.

Images of her ancestors, former oruculas, played through her mind like some kind of history documentary. Only this history was hers. Bits and pieces of Ixtumean heritage and culture now made sense. She once more experienced her people hiding their precious traditions, culture, and language from the invading *conquistadores*. She knotted the *kipus* into simple tapestries, while whispering sacred *dichos* into each knot. As she watched the invaders toss the sacred books into a huge bonfire, she wept.

Now this would change. She was the promised orucula foretold of in Kish's prophecies. Though this knowledge at first felt like a heavy weight on her small shoulders, she could, with the help of the earrings and belief in herself, once more reweave the web between Ixtumea and her world.

A gut-wrenching scream pierced through her protective bubble.

Reluctantly, Lupe gazed through her cocoon to find the source of the noise. She saw her mother a few feet away. Hunched over, Concha's body shook with convulsions of grief.

Lupe couldn't understand what could be causing her mother so much anguish.

Then she remembered.

The sacrifice.

Not long ago, she had cried out to her mother to stop Malvado from plunging the knife into her chest. Across the hallway she had seen Concha, hiding from the others in the crowd. Her mother had ignored her pleas for help.

One person hadn't abandoned her. *Abuela*. Her grandmother's voice had guided her to find the strength to draw on the ancient ruby earrings. Never in her wildest dreams had she thought the stones were the talisman to unlocking the power to redo the damage of Malvado's to the giant web and Ixtumea.

Concha's wails grew louder. Lupe stared in amazement at her disheveled mother. Concha's

long raven hair hung matted and unkempt.

What had happened to cause her mother to fall into such a state?

She didn't leave you, Lupe, Abuela's voice whispered to her. She tried to rescue you.

What? Lupe couldn't believe what she had heard. *Save me? No way would that creature save anyone, let alone me.*

She glanced back up and saw her mother throwing her body on top of her. Lupe gave a startled gasp. Could it be true? Did her mother really want to save her from Malvado and the demon?

No sooner did she come to grasps with the strange behavior of Concha then the scene morphed into a darkened alley back in Tustin. Her mother appeared younger. She cowered in a corner while a group of Cholos surrounded her, snickering while kicking, punching, and slamming their fists and feet into her body.

A wave of horror welled up in Lupe's belly. She turned her head to avoid seeing any more, but she couldn't keep out the screams. She put her hands over her ears to block out the horrific scene.

"Stop!" Lupe screamed.

The vision ended.

She gazed once more at her mother and saw her in a different light. No wonder her mother acted the way she did. She had been a victim of abuse too. How could anyone survive that and be sane? *Oh, Mami, why didn't you tell me?*

Tears streamed down Lupe's face. The woman in front of her had every reason to hate. But some good must have remained in Concha because she had tried to save her. Lupe couldn't even begin to know how much that had taken out of her mother.

A foreign sensation came over Lupe, a feeling she thought she never would have for her mother. She longed to reach out and comfort her. *I'm okay, mami, really I am.*

How she wished her mother could be a part of all she was experiencing within the cocoon. But she knew Concha had to make a crucial choice in order to save herself from the same fate that awaited Malvado.

Please, Mami. Lupe pleaded silently. Believe.

* * * *

Concha stared at her mother. No longer did her mother appear elderly. Her features slowly

morphed into her other essence, that of Ixchel, Spider Goddess. Petals of marigolds were scattered around her. A pleasant licorice scent quenched the earlier odor. Her body hung from a dragline attached to the ceiling.

As each limb appeared, more light filled the cavern, revealing Malvado clinging to a back wall.

“It isn’t too late.” Her mother’s soft voice filled the hallway.

She glanced again at the cocoon, lying close to her side. Deep down, Concha longed for redemption, another chance to be with Lupe, to make up for all the years she had wasted.

With a renewed purpose, she crawled to her feet and struggled toward her mother.

* * * *

Lupe couldn’t see much while in the cocoon, only the faint outline of her mother, taking a few hesitant steps toward the web.

She heard bits and pieces of the conversation between her mother and her *abuela*. What she had heard made her heart soar.

Thank you, Abuela! Elation filled Lupe’s being. *Maybe, just maybe Mami will deny all this craziness and we will be a family again.*

A contemptuous laugh brought her back to reality. Tezcatlipoca!

As the demon approached her mother, chills went up Lupe’s spine. Concha might be strong but she was no match for him. Lupe feared for her mother’s safety.

Tezcatlipoca towered over Concha, his eyes blazing crimson. “Don’t listen to the old fool. There is no forgiveness for you.”

Concha crouched low to the ground, avoiding his stare.

“*M’ija*,” Ixchel pleaded. “C’ome back. Don’t listen to the *mentiroso*.”

“*Mami*, don’t give up,” Lupe screamed. “Not now.”

Her mother hunched her shoulders and sobbed.

Each sob ripped Lupe’s heart. Besides the visions of her calling, the cocoon made her feel all the sensations of those close to her. At that moment, her mother’s pain became her own.

How could she stand this? Lupe had never felt such gut-wrenching agony. Oh, how she wished she could comfort her mother and make the pain go away.

Lupe stretched her hand to Concha, but the cocoon met her with resistance. She couldn’t believe the strength of the spider strands. The fibers refused to budge.

I have to get out of here! She slammed her fists against the cocoon, trying to get out. No longer did her encasement feel like an oasis amidst the terror in the cave. No, she felt like a prisoner, powerless to help.

She feared for her mother. Oh, why couldn't she get out?

"Yes, you are right, Concha," Tezcatlipoca taunted. "You don't deserve a second chance. After all, wasn't it you who gave me your daughter?"

Concha flinched. He was right.

"And you know what you still need to do."

* * * *

Lupe couldn't believe what she was hearing. Once more she hammered her fists against the cocoon.

"Get me out of here!" Lupe cried out in frustration.

A wisp of vapor entered her small space. Around and around it swirled, leaving an opening only inches from her face.

Abish appeared. Lupe blinked in surprise. *Why is she here? Maybe she came to help me escape with some mysterious saying.* But that thought quickly left Lupe's mind with one look at a serious Abish. Her brows were furrowed together.

Lupe, you know what to do. Abish's voice was edged with tension.

Oh, great. Lupe thought. *If Abish is worried then we're in big trouble.*

You have to help Abuela. Your mother is not strong enough.

"But how?" Lupe asked. "I don't know how to get out of here."

Abish touched her ears. Her hands felt paper thin. Then she vanished.

* * * *

Concha's heart ached. She had lost. Tezcatlipoca had battered her bit by bit, from reliving her painful past to using threats. Through it all, her mother had refused to give up. Concha longed to grasp the line of hope her mother threw her way but each time she tried it slipped from her hands, to the amusement of Tezcatlipoca.

Once more her mother called to her from the web. "Concha," her mother said. "You know what to do. Use your power."

Tezcatlipoca interrupted. "Concha, know what to do?" He sniggered. "She's no use to anyone, including her daughter."

Concha wilted under his gaze. His words stung. They were true.

“No, *m’ija*,” her mother said. “You are strong. Pull within yourself. *Donde hay gana, hay mana*—where there is the desire, there is the ability.”

Concha wanted so desperately to believe her mother, but something still nagged at her.

She glanced at the destruction around her; the dead and injured only testified to the evil she had helped bring about.

“*M’ija*,” Ixchel’s voice broke through her darkness. “C’ome back. Do not listen to the *mentiroso*.”

“What do you want me to do?” Concha cried out. “There is no hope for me.”

Her mother shook her head. “There’s always hope. Believe in yourself.”

“No.” Tezcatlipoca roared. “There is no hope for you now, unless you shed your daughter’s blood.”

“Leave, Tezcatlipoca,” her mother said. “You have no power over us.”

“What?” He roared in anger. “I am god of this land. I do what I want.”

A strong wind whipped through the cave, throwing debris around. Concha crouched low to the ground to avoid being hit.

Tezcatlipoca flung his hood back and his true character shone on his distorted face. Pustules covered his features, oozing an angry red. The stench of decay circulated in the cave.

“Can I help it if my servants are *tantos*?” he sneered.

“No, you are the fool.” Ixchel said. “Depart.”

“Get out of my face, old one.” Tezcatlipoca snarled. “This isn’t your concern.”

Ixchel motioned to the evil being. “Depart from me!”

Tezcatlipoca laughed. “You can’t make me leave.”

Ixchel shook her head. “Yes, I c’an.” She closed her eyes. A beam of light burst out of her right leg, hitting Tezcatlipoca with a loud thump. He toppled backward. The explosion rocked the cave.

The blast brought Malvado back to life. “No, Master. No.” He jumped up and ran to his fallen god.

Concha watched in horror as Tezcatlipoca grabbed her former lover’s leg and hurled him into the web. A hole opened up and sucked him in, leaving only his high-pitched screams that reverberated through the cave.

He wasn't the only casualty.

The explosion drained Ixchel. Her exoskeleton turned a sick rusty color. Droplets of liquid dripped out of her body, staining the web.

Concha's hand covered her mouth in horror.

Tezcatlipoca only laughed.

* * * *

As Lupe watched her grandmother's limp body fall into the web, her eyes widened in horror.

"*Abuela!*" Lupe's voice became hysterical. "Please, don't be dead."

Lupe reached into her shirt. Her hands trembled as she tried undid the fastener of one of her earrings.

Please don't drop.

She put one then the other earring in her ears. At her touch the gems buzzed in her ears, waiting for her to release their power. A power she knew could save her *abuela*.

Still she froze. Fear paralyzed her. What would happen if she failed like the last confrontation she'd had with Malvado? He was nothing compared to Tezcatlipoca, the devil. Could she stand up to his evil in order to save *Abuela* and Ixtumea?

Drip.

Lupe's eyes were drawn to the noise. As the blood of Ixchel trickled to the ground, Lupe could feel each drop. She knew if she didn't do anything the crimson stains of other victims would be added to the web.

Could she live with that?

Anger replaced her shock. No way would she stand by and let him hurt *Abuela*. One of Father Michael's sermons on battling evil came back to her: with faith and prayer, one can overcome anything.

Lupe's face flushed in shame thinking of how much of a brat she had been with *Abuela*. She swore the first thing she'd do if she could save her grandmother, would be to beg for forgiveness.

She glared at Tezcatlipoca. Rage boiled inside her until she thought her body would explode. Someone had to do something to this monster.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She had to calm herself. She mustn't fail. She said a silent prayer; she had to believe in herself in order to release the power inside the gems.

Her wait wasn't long. Warmth traveled from her earlobes until her whole body felt like a

warm electric blanket. The feeling felt right and good.

She surrendered to the pulses of energy being released from her earrings. A strange humming filled her cocoon.

“*Sí, puedo hacerlo,*” Lupe said softly. “Yes, I can do it.” Her whole body tingled. Electrical shocks filled the cocoon, crackling and hissing. It reminded Lupe of a laser beam burning a way out.

A small hole appeared. Lupe pushed. The intense brightness blinded her, but she continued to push until...

Rrrrip.

The cocoon split in half.

At first the darkness outside of her encasing disorientated her. She felt naked and alone. But the feeling passed.

A surge of energy pulsed throughout her body, similar to drinking tons of caffeine, only better. She felt superhuman. Glancing down, she noticed the fine hairs on her arms were standing straight up. Each hair came to life. The sensation made her feel woozy with confidence.

She kicked the encasing out from under her feet and faced Tezcatlipoca.

He snickered. “So, you want to play now, do you?”

“Listen to *Abuela* and get out of here, *mentiroso.*” Lupe flung her hand out. A beam of crimson light erupted from her body and hit Tezcatlipoca.

The blow caught him off guard. He staggered backward.

After she released the bolt of energy, Lupe snapped back. Somehow using her power drained her. She pushed this thought aside. She couldn’t stop now.

Tezcatlipoca regained his composure. His spirit fanned up and out, similar to one of those parachutes she had played with in kindergarten. A creepy smile crept up the sides of his face.

“You really think you can defeat me, brat?” he snarled.

A cold fist closed over her heart. *Ohmigod. I’m going to die!*

“So you figured out how to use the earrings,” Tezcatlipoca chuckled. “Too bad you didn’t discover the energy you draw comes not only from the gems from you.”

Lupe wanted to hit herself. How could she have been so stupid? She’d seen it numerous times; whenever Ixchel or Abish had used their powers the light had dimmed in their eyes.

Tezcatlipoca smile intensified. Though he smiled, his eyes were dark and cold. “See what it

feels like to burn.”

A blast of light hit her chest. The blow lifted her off the ground and slammed her against the wall. She crumbled to the ground. Excruciating pain tore through her body, worse than anything she had ever experienced.

Gasping for air, Lupe prayed for the pain to stop. Where was *Mami*?

She saw Concha crouching low to the ground, watching her.

“*Mami!*” Lupe screamed. “Do something!”

* * * *

Concha watched her daughter’s failed attempt at banishing Tezcatlipoca in numb horror. Oh, how she wished she could vaporize this demon into nothingness! Her own fear of being destroyed which was stronger. So she did nothing.

Concha scrambled to her feet and scuttled further into darkness. The blackness only erased some of the horror inside the chambers. The screams of others around her meant nothing. She was strong after all. She turned, zigzagging around a crumbled former wannabe lady of the court. Her fine gaze dress now torn into shreds. Concha snickered at the moaning of a few others who stretched out their hands, begging for help.

Then another high pitch scream pierced through the darkness.

“*Mami*, where are you?”

Concha squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the sounds but the shrill cries of her daughter kept coming. Concha’s heart pounded hard. How could she desert Lupe, how?

“Too bad I have to kill your daughter.”

Tezcatlipoca had rejoined her. His presence lit up the chambers, revealing untold horrors. Crumpled bodies littered the hallway. He flicked his hand toward a lone Wise one deserter, who turned into ashes.

Her daughter huddled in a corner but gazed back at the god. “Leave us alone!”

How Concha wished she had half that courage.

Tezcatlipoca smirked. “I find your courage arousing.”

He continued to stare at her daughter. Lupe’s face paled. Her pain filled eyes pleaded with Concha. “*Mami*, we can get rid of him together. Don’t let him win!”

Tezcatlipoca grasped at Lupe. Once more her screams filled the cave.

Concha covered her ears. Tears streamed down her face. *I can’t fight against him. I’m not*

strong enough.

Yes, you can. Her mother's weak voice fluttered against her consciousness. *Believe.*

Concha knew she had to make a choice, whether to stand by and do nothing or to help Lupe.

Another vision flashed through her mind. *All the past oruculas, including Abish, stood in a circle outside of Ixchel's temple. Concha had known Abish as a child and had been part of the betrayal of her village. She expected hate or bitterness to cover the former Maiden's countenance. Instead she smiled and motioned to an empty area.*

"One space is open," Abish said. "We await your presence. Por temor no pierdas—do not lose honor through fear."

The rest of the oruculas nodded.

Then it hit her. Lupe was right. Yes, she could come back. Peace flooded her body. Yes, I can do this.

Concha gathered up her courage. She knew what she had to do. Calmness replaced her earlier fears. No longer did death scare her. If anything, she welcomed it.

She took another look at her daughter writhing in agony on the ground. "Oh, *m'ija*. Forgive me."

She walked toward Tezcatlipoca, who hadn't left her daughter's side. Concha hoped to take advantage of his distraction. Slowly she quickened her pace. Thoughts were jumbled in her mind. What phrase would be enough to vanquish this demon?

One dicho did stand out from all the others. *A Dios rogando y con el mazo dando.* Well, she would be the hammer that would banish this devil.

"Depart, evil one!" Screaming these words, Concha rushed at Tezcatlipoca and flung herself on his back. On impact she exploded into fire.

The blue flames licked Concha's skin, traveling up her arms until she became a human torch. The fire seared through her soul, burning away the evil she had harvested in her heart.

Oddly enough, she felt no pain. She did have one regret. How she wished she could touch her daughter once more. But somehow she knew Lupe would understand her decision in time.

With this last thought she hurled both herself and Tezcatlipoca into the web. A sucking noise filled the cave.

Then silence.

Chapter Forty-Two

Lupe couldn't move. Her mind refused to register what had taken place between her mother and Tezcatlipoca. If she did, it would mean only one thing. Her mother, who she'd only rediscovered, was...

"*Mami!*" Lupe let out a strangled cry. No one answered.

The hole her mother had fallen through began to reweave itself; fiber by fiber until nothing remained of her final sacrifice except a few scattered ashes.

Embers rained down on the ground. Then it hit her. *This is all that is left of Mami.*

Lupe fell to her knees and wept. Her sobs racked her whole body.

"Lupe!"

She glanced up.

Tonantzin darted over to Lupe, running zipzag through the fallen bodies scattered everywhere.

Her servant and friend looked worse for wear. Snoot caked her face and hair. Dark stains were peppered on her outfit but she was alive!

"You're alive!" Lupe jumped up and hugged Tonantzin hard. Both cried.

She opened her eyes and saw her warrior, Teancum standing to the corner. Ashes continued to rain down on him. Relief hit her that at least two of those who'd stood by her had survived this nightmare.

Then it hit her again who hadn't.

"Lupe?" A familiar voice called to her. Lupe pulled away from Tonantzin and wiped her tear-stained face with her torn sleeve. Tonantzin smiled, pointing to the singed web.

Her *abuela* hung over both of them, her larger-than-life spider form no longer dull. Bit by bit her wounds were being erased until once more her body was whole.

"Oh, thank God!" Joy surged through Lupe's body. "You're alive!" Then she remembered who hadn't survived. Guilt replaced her earlier joy.

"Praise the gods!" Tonantzin jumped up and day, tears streaming down her blackened face.

"Lupe," her *abuela* whispered. "This was the only way. The sacrifice redeemed your mother."

“Why?” Lupe didn’t like how her voice sounded whiny. Once more she was the abandoned six-year-old. All her earlier feelings resurfaced: sadness, loss, and fear.

Lupe glanced back up. The web shrugged off the ashes. The repaired strands billowed in whiteness and purity like the mantel her abuela used for holidays.

“Do not be sad,” Ixchel said. “You suc’ceeded in your task.”

Lupe shook her head in disbelief. “Succeeded? How can you say that? *Mami* is dead because of me.”

Ixchel cocked her head. “No, *m’ija*. Remember. *No hay amor mas grande que el dar la vida por un amigo*—there is no greater love than laying down a life for a friend.”

Lupe clutched her hand to her heart. “*Mami* loved me?”

“Yes,” Ixchel said. “Oh, yes.”

Shocked, Lupe stared at Ixchel. Could it be true? Her mother actually loved her? Warmth pulsed throughout her body with this realization. *Mami* loved her, not as an Ashley Snow wannabe but as the child of both Ixtumea and her world.

Ixchel scurried across the repaired strands. “Look,” she said. With one of her right legs she pointed into the web. “Ask her.”

Lupe turned and viewed the web. Static crackled through the strands. It cleared to reveal a lush green area. A large temple stood in the background. Water trickled from an elaborate granite fountain. A statue of Ixchel stood to the side. Next to the temple was a circle of women, standing together. They all smiled at Lupe. And one of the women was her...

Mami!

Her long raven hair fell to her shoulders. She wore a traditional orucula’s outfit—bright reds, yellows, and oranges were woven in the long dress and a *reboza* wrapped her slender shoulders. A headdress set with jade and turquoise topped her head. And in her ears were the same ruby earrings Lupe possessed, radiating a crimson halo around her face. The sight of her mother filled Lupe with joy.

Light filled Concha’s countenance. Her beauty outshone all the other oruculas. Lupe could sense her mother no longer suffered from her pain and delusions. Lupe knew she should be happy for her mother. But her heart ached. She wanted *Mami*. Why did she have to die and leave her again?

“Lupita,” Her mother stepped closer. “Don’t be sad. *Mas vale dar que recibir*—it is more

blessed to give than to receive. You were worth more than any gift Malvado or Tezcatlipoca could give.”

Concha reached out and touched her daughter’s cheek. Lupe closed her eyes. She leaned into her mother’s palm. Memories came back to her; dancing in downtown Los Angeles during the *Cinco de Mayo* fiesta, singing off-key together, and snuggling against her mother during a rainy Saturday afternoon. All these feelings were good.

“Forgive me, Lupita?” her mother asked.

A heavy weight lifted from her chest. All the hate and anger she’d held against her mother’s abandonment left. Lupe felt lighter and happier.

“*Mami*,” Lupe said. “I never hated you. I just wish...”

“I know.” Concha smiled. “I will always be with you, *m’ija*. Remember that.” Her mother then leaned over and kissed her. “It is time for you to go home. Listen to Abuela.”

“What? Don’t I have to stay and help?” Lupe couldn’t understand why she had to go back to Tustin. Not after all she had gone through.

“You have much more to learn back home,” Concha stepped away and went back into the ring of oruculas. “Don’t worry, *m’ija*. We will meet again.”

“Wait,” Ixchel said. “You need one more thing.”

Ixchel slid down her dragline. “Hold out your hand.”

Lupe opened her palm. Her grandmother placed a small white ball in her hand. Lupe glanced down. Puzzled at the object she looked back up. “Why did you give me a spider cocoon?”

“She will help you,” Ixchel said.

“Help me with what?” Lupe opened her mouth to question the purpose of a spider cocoon but quickly closed it. Memories of her time in her own cocoon came back—the training and warmth of the former oruculas. If her mother had joined the other oruculas, wherever that was, then she would gladly take the gift. Maybe it would be a link to *Mami*.

“Come, Lupita.” Her abuela beckoned to her. “Walk through.”

Lupe was hesitant. Her first reaction was fear; after all, *Mami* had been killed going through the web.

“No,” Ixchel said. “You will not die. Go home.”

Lupe turned and glanced at Tonantzin. “Will you be okay?”

“Silly. Yes, I will. I will wait for you.”

Teancum wandered over. Lupe's heart filled. Here was the warrior who had given everything for her. He'd always hold a place n her heart.

Lupe walked toward him.

"Be careful, little one."

"Don't you get into any more fights while I'm gone. Promise?"

Teancum's eyes crinkled. "Never."

With that Lupe threw her arms around him and hugged him. "I'll miss you," she whispered.

Teancum pulled away. "I will be here when you return."

When you return. For some reason she knew she would. But for now...

"Lupita," her grandmother's voice brought her back to what she needed to do.

Go home. She glanced back at the web. Static crackled until the familiar hamburger on Red Hill Drive appeared. Further down, she could see the elementary school and the apartment building where she lived.

She felt a tugging. She found herself walking closer and closer, until she thought she could touch her apartment doorknob. She could see the battered Welcome Home sign, and the small cactus plants were still next to the door. The warm Santa Ana winds whipped her hair from her face. The tangy sweet smell of her neighbor's mole poblano filled her senses.

Lupe turned one last time and glanced around the cave. She wished she had a camera. She never wanted to forget. So much had happened in her short time in Ixtumea. No longer was she ashamed of her culture and her *abuela*. The teachings of Ixchel filled her head; the ancient sayings helped her remember her past and future. She couldn't wait for her next phase of training. Who knows? Maybe she would come back here again.

"C'ome, Lupe," *Abuela* said.

Lupe took another step and then walked through the web.

About the Author

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