

DAUGHTER
OF
FIRE

A Novel

SOFIA ROBLEDA



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FOR GOD, GLORY, AND GOLD

Alvarado led the conquest straight to the K'iche'.

In 1524, following a successful two-year onslaught against the Mexican Empire, the ruthless Spanish commander advanced south into present-day Guatemala, along with the Tlaxcalans and other Indigenous allies. The land was populated by several competing Maya kingdoms, each with its own system of stratified rule, language, military, and advanced civilization.

The K'iche' were the dominant Maya group, and their capital city, Q'umarkaj, was situated in the rocky Guatemalan highlands.

Like all the other Indigenous people the Spanish encountered, the K'iche' put on a brave and prolonged fight. However, against a population ravaged by smallpox and other deadly diseases brought over by the newcomers, and with the advantage of steel swords, firearms, and horses, the Spanish were soon victorious.

After this apocalyptic clash of worlds, a society of violent extremes began to forge a new identity. A new mixed race and class structure emerged, with the Catholic Spanish on top, dictating whom and what to believe in. The newly relegated lower class of Indigenous people, however, continued to resist and strive to preserve their rights and culture, including their great works of literature, of which the *Popol Vuh* stands above the rest.

CHAPTER 1

Santa Cruz del Quiché, Guatemala
Summer 1540

When I was a child, Mother would tell me bedtime stories only when Father was away. They were secret stories, forbidden stories. Mother always said I had to be careful not to tell anyone about them, not Cook, not Beatriz, and especially not Father. She said if anyone heard about them, we'd end up like the twitching *Indígena*, the one who'd died with a rope tied around his neck.

I couldn't see why I had to keep the stories from Father. I thought he would've rather liked them, and I would've liked to have been the one to share them with him. They were much like the stories he loved to tell us whenever he came home. After giving my mother a kiss and his other daughter—my half sister, Beatriz—a warm embrace, he'd sit me on his lap and begin. He'd tell us stories of powerful gods. Of creators, shape-shifters. Stories of love forbidden, of wounded heroes, and tricks of war.

Father's story gods had names like Hephaestus and Hera.

Mother's were Auilix and Xbalanque.

One such night, after Beatriz had dressed me for bed, combed and braided my hair, and sang me to sleep in her honeyed voice, and probably many hours after she'd herself gone to bed, Mother entered my room and woke me up again.

She showed me a dance from one of her stories, a dance called the Armadillo, and after I'd shown her that I could do it just like her, I asked the question burning in my heart. "Mother, why can't I show Father how well I dance?"

She stared at me with a sad expression, then walked to the four-poster bed. A long, rough, rectangular piece of bark paper lay folded on the mattress. Our ancestors had named it the *Popol Vuh*, the *Book of Council*, though it had many other names. Mother called it "our hidden treasure," and it was filled with colorful symbols and pictures I loved to stare at.

One day she'd teach me to read all the symbols. One day I'd know all the stories inside it by heart, just like she did.

I pointed at the book. "Why can't I tell him the story of One Death and the mighty twins?"

She gestured at me to come close. We were in my chamber. I was only five, but I remember that everything except the burning fireplace was made of wood and iron—the large chair, the dressing table, the trunk at the foot of my bed, the floorboards, and the candlesticks—all timber and metal. Nothing was remarkable, though I knew we were not poor. Only the green woolen coverlet and the walls were a different shade. If the curtains had been open, the layer of white lime plastered on the walls would've made them shine, even in moonlight.

Mother made me sit on the mattress with my back to her. With tender fingers, she undid my two braids and pulled me into an embrace. I compared my arms to hers. They were much shorter but the same color, tawny brown and bronzed from our day spent out in the sun. I watched the flames as they twitched and fluttered. We needed to add another log or soon they'd die.

"Our world is full of stories," she whispered in our secret language. It was a real language. Other people used it all the time, other K'iche' Maya like my mother. But I wasn't supposed to know it; we spoke it only when we were alone.

“People are always arguing about which stories are true and which are not. It’s a pointless argument, for all contain a speck of truth about our world and ourselves. The only thing that matters is this: some stories are protected, safeguarded, and others are left to fade with time.”

I didn’t know why she was telling me all this, or how it answered my question, but I breathed her lingering fragrance, the echo of incense caught in her hair, and allowed myself to enjoy the sound of her voice. It was low and clear and strong, like a current in a dark underground river.

“Some people, like your father and sister”—her voice was measured—“would disagree. Others are even worse than them. They see only one truth, one story, and they take it so seriously they’re willing to kill those who think differently.”

“But they’re only stories,” I said, and ran a finger over the cherry-red thread framing the edge of her white cotton blouse. “Zeus doesn’t strike people with lightning, and Plumed Serpent didn’t create the world out of mist; God did.”

She sighed and walked to the window. I felt the absence of her warmth on my back and regretted that my words had pushed her away.

Mother pulled the curtains, opened the wooden blinds, and said, “Come. Look outside.” I ran to her, relieved, even though an odd note had caught her voice. I forgot that quickly, for I was tall enough that I didn’t need her to pull the chair to stand on anymore, and this filled me with a spark of pride. The view from my room was of a wild field of grass, shining blue in the night and waving with the breeze.

“The two mounds you see on the field were made by men. They are pits, deep burial pits. One for those murdered during the war with Alvarado, and another for those killed by the plagues he brought. Thousands of dead K’iche’ were flung in there.”

My heart felt as though a vicelike grip had taken hold of it. As if a skeleton hand, like one of thousands concealed by the swaying lawn, was shaking it against my ribs. I threw my arms around my mother’s waist and buried my face against her belly. She held me tightly, but what she said next did nothing to soothe my terror.

“My mother and father are in there, my older brothers and their children. Our entire family. I was four years old when Alvarado rode in with his mighty horse, his sword, and his golden cross. He was one of those single-minded men who believe in one story, and even though we were one of the great K’iche’ families, we were not spared. Every family suffered, no matter how high or lowborn. I survived only because I was led to safety by Cook.”

“Cook?” I looked at her with wonder.

Mother nodded. “She gathered as many children as she could and took us to a secret cave in the ravine. When she wouldn’t tell the Spanish where we were, they . . .” She averted her eyes and stared back out the window. “They hurt her very badly. That is why you mustn’t tell her about the *Popol Vuh*. You mustn’t burden someone who already carries a heavy load.”

I said nothing. I knew I ought to have felt sorry for Cook, and I did, but mostly I felt a selfish pang of frustration. Here was something I was great at, and I wanted Father to see it. I wanted him to see how I shone, and I wanted him to be proud of me. In the end, I couldn’t help myself. I mumbled, “So, I can never tell him I’m learning the *Popol Vuh*, ever?”

Mother turned, and I could no longer see myself in her dark, angular face. “No. Never.” Her voice was rough. Her eyes, usually black and beautiful, flashed with flame so real it sent a barb of fear through my core. She saw this and her lips set. She knelt down and grabbed both of my arms.

“It’s our family’s sworn duty to protect this book. It’s a dangerous thing, but it keeps our ancestors alive; it is a way to honor them—”

“I know, but Father—”

She growled, “Your father wouldn’t understand. No Spaniard does.”

“But—”

“No buts!” She covered her mouth and glanced at the door. “Stay,” she whispered, then tiptoed toward it, placed her ear against the grain,

and waited. She opened it a fraction and peeked into the shadowy hall before shutting it again.

She walked back to the bed and lifted the *Popol Vuh* into both of her hands with petal-like fingers, as though it were made of quetzal feathers and written in molten gold.

“Listen to me.” She knelt to my level and took a heavy breath. The warm scent of cacao and sapote lingered as she exhaled and said, “A long time ago our family was entrusted with keeping this book safe. The god of our house, Lord Hacauitz, commanded it so. He said his Sons of Fire would never fail him.”

I nearly rolled my eyes. I knew this story already. But then she added, “The book should’ve never come to me. There are no more Sons of Fire. Hacauitz has but two daughters left. You and me, and one day, perhaps soon, perhaps not for many years, I will be gone.”

I stuck out my bottom lip and gave her a petulant frown. “No, Mama.”

“Nature is cruel, and people are worse.” Her gaze pierced into mine, her face softened, and her voice wavered. “I *do* hope to have many, many years with you, little bird. But if something were to happen to me, I need you to swear that you’ll guard it . . . with your life.”

My frown deepened. I didn’t know the name for what I felt in that moment. It was a new sensation to me, the weight of her words upon my slender back, the lengthening of my young spirit as it plunged itself into the future and saw the dark, tangled, desolate road ahead.

She placed the book between my hands and spoke my secret name. She was deadly serious then, for she rarely used it, even when we were alone. Usually, she called me by my Christian name, Catalina.

“Ab’aj Pol,” she whispered. Her tone was urgent. “Promise me.”

Her eyes suddenly shone with a film of tears. The awful, strange new feeling disappeared and was replaced by the need to make my mother happy again. I knew just what to do. I smiled my bravest of smiles and kissed the book to show her I meant what I said next.

“Yes, Mama. I swear.”

CHAPTER 2

Santa Cruz del Quiché, Guatemala
Autumn 1551

Eleven years later, it was my sixteenth birthday party, and like any good and proper lady, I should've been sitting on one of the benches arranged around the hall, waiting to be asked to dance.

Instead, I hid in part shadow by the door to the kitchen and tried not to fiddle with the frill collar tickling my neck. I smoothed down my green silk gown and avoided eye contact with all. This was not unusual.

As the only legitimate mixed-blood child in town, the only Mestiza, I was used to being set apart. No one quite knew what to make of me. When I was a child, Father had always said I was one of a kind, and I'd fancied myself a mythical creature, a sort of griffin, hovering above Spaniards and K'iche' alike with my eagle wings and jaguar's tail.

But life was different now. My childhood was gone. It had come to a swift, brutal end almost seven years ago, although this party today marked my official entry into adult society.

I knew any moment I'd be asked to dance, yet I couldn't bear the thought of it, even though I dearly loved dancing and the cheerful tune was much to my liking.

The musicians were most impressive. Father had brought a whole band—guitar, tambourine, bells, cornet, and castanet players—all the way from Santiago, the capital. They played in the corner of the long

inner patio by a pillar that supported one of the four white archways. The crowd danced under the stars and by the light of the many flickering torches, which infused the fresh pine air with the pungent smell of mutton oil.

My guests made two lines in the center of the red tiled floor. Limbs, skirts, and capes swished and circled in perfect harmony. Every step and pointed toe were memorized by heart, and each face appeared delighted, eager to shine. Everyone who was anyone in the little town of Santa Cruz was there. I knew I might not have an opportunity to enjoy myself like this again for years. I told myself over and over to sit.

But I could not, for I was fighting a battle no one could see, one I was losing. Two of the most important people in my life were missing from my party, and it was impossible not to think of them. It was impossible not to hear Beatriz's chiming voice greeting each guest, or picture Mother, avoiding notice, yet still standing proudly by my side. Neither of them had been mentioned in over seven years. Beatriz was still alive, though I knew not where she lived. But my mother was worse than dead.

It was as though she'd never existed at all.

Everyone pretended as though I'd sprung fully formed from my father's head, like Athena. Even I sometimes found it easier to pretend, because thinking of her made me ache for her, or worse, picture the last time I saw her, when those hooded men—

I gasped as the memory hit me, fresh and raw and gutting, and I drew closer to the shadows so no one could see my face.

"Don't cry, don't cry," I muttered, "it's not real. Breathe." I pinched my forearm so hard I knew I would be bruised the next day, but I had to remind myself of where I was. I forced myself to look at the dancers again. I went through their moves in my head: step left, twist, step right, bow, again. When I felt stronger, I whispered a silent prayer too. Slowly, the familiar Latin words grounded and soothed me.

My breath had just returned to normal when the doorman, who stood by the arched entrance, banged his staff on the floor and yelled out, “Lord Juan de Rojas of House Kaweq, Cacique de Q’umarkaj.”

I nearly choked. Even the music stopped as Lord Juan stepped into the room, proud and scowling. Son of the Jaguar. He would’ve been *ajpop*, king, my mother’s king, if the Spanish had never come. But the red cape draped over his shoulders and cotton vest, while most impressive, was frayed and patched. I shifted and tried to hide the frown on my face.

Poor man.

I sighed, for nothing could be done. I couldn’t help him, or any of my mother’s people, who were my people, too, though I couldn’t freely admit it. I wished I could do something, anything at all really, to change the way things were, to give them back some of what they’d lost. But I had no money, no say, and no power.

I was only a girl, and a half-Spanish one at that. With my thick black hair, brown skin, and defined nose, I might’ve looked K’iche’, but I dressed like a Spaniard, spoke Castilian with a courtly accent, and rode on the back of a fine Andalusian horse with more flair than a Moorish princess. There was no doubt in my head that I’d never be fully trusted, even if I could do more than just give alms and pray all day long, which is all I ever felt I did.

Even in that moment, I prayed. *God, help them, help the cacique. Keep him well and grant him good health. Send him a good woman to care for him and give him children.*

For an outrageous, yet rather thrilling moment, I pictured myself as his good woman. My gaze fell on the bright-red loincloth that jutted out from under his short white skirt, and then I blinked and shook my head. What was the matter with me? It wasn’t like I’d never seen K’iche’ regalia before, so why was I staring like a common wench?

I huffed and decided I’d best begin my silent penitence in advance. *Ave Maria, gratia plena.* The first one of at least ten I’d probably need

to say, and there would be more if I didn't keep my eyes off the cloth, or his beautiful, powerful, bare legs.

It was hopeless. I studied each curve and vein until I reached his sandals. There they were, finally, on the floor, close to hell, where I'd surely be going. From the way some of the other women were looking, it was clear I wouldn't be going alone.

Perhaps they were just surprised, though. No one had expected Lord Juan to come to my party. He'd received an invitation, of course. Father couldn't overlook him. He was much too important to the *Indigenas*, and they weren't on bad terms, all things considered. But he'd never responded, so we'd assumed he wouldn't come.

Why he wanted to come was beyond me. This land was his birthright. This house, the president's country home, had been given to my father, who was the head of government in all of Guatemala and Nicaragua—but it ought to have been Lord Juan's. We should've all been bowing down. Instead, all reverence and honor went to my father, who, I'm afraid to say, was no blood noble, unlike my mother. Shameful, it was.

Still, Lord Juan knew things could've been worse. Before my father had come, the young cacique had been little more than a slave, along with most of the Maya in Q'umarkaj. Illegal slaves, of course, for our Holy Emperor had decreed that all his native subjects be free, their labor paid, and any mistreatment be punishable. The emperor's unpopular New Laws had been in effect for more than ten years, but Father was the only leader in all the Indies who'd bothered to implement them. That is, with the exception of Viceroy Vela, who'd been murdered for his efforts in Peru.

Father's zealous reforms had earned him widespread hatred. At least two Spaniards had tried to kill him. But there he was, alive and older than most, walking up to Lord Juan. They shook hands and Father gave him a genial pat on the shoulder. The cacique's whisper carried throughout the hall.

"I thank you for the honor of your invitation, Don Alonso."

“The honor is ours, Cacique. I’m sure I speak for my daughter when I say we’re both delighted you’ve graced us with your presence.”

The Spaniards muttered. A compliment from my father was as rare as a pink quetzal, and he’d just paid it to a K’iche’. Father smiled at the sound, as if he’d drawn four of a kind in primero. Lord Juan ignored them and scanned the room. I didn’t know what devilry possessed me, why I wanted *him*, out of everyone, to see me, but I stepped into the light.

He found me with ease, for I’d inherited Father’s mountainous height. There was a tiny flicker of something in his gaze when he looked at my face, something ardent, and I burned in response. I bowed my head and hid my features. Even though my brown skin rarely betrayed me, this heady rush of triumph felt too powerful to conceal.

I took a breath to compose myself and lifted my chin. He was halfway through nodding in what seemed an elegant, congratulatory gesture, when he froze.

I gulped and tensed in response.

“I beseech your permission to dance with your daughter,” Lord Juan said. He did not take his eyes off me, nor did he wait to hear my father’s response.

I should’ve been exhilarated by those words, and a part of me was, but my pulse also spiked in terror. Not because every face, including my father’s surprised one, had suddenly turned toward me. No, it was because for some unfathomable reason, Lord Juan was suddenly vexed . . . with me! In a blink he’d led me to the open floor, and I felt certain I’d not imagined it. The man was livid. I knew because I’d studied him most of my life, even though until tonight, he’d never looked at me twice.

“Is anything amiss, my lord?” I whispered, but he didn’t respond.

We bowed to each other, and I glanced up at his eyes. They were normally a shade of caramel, but now they were black and fixed down on my neck. His fresh warm breath hit my face in rapid gusts, and his calloused hand shook as he held mine.

The other dancers lined up in a row beside us and the music started.

Thank goodness it was a sober, graceful pavane. After a few beats, I felt its soothing effect on him, and when he spoke, his voice was low, a soft growl.

“You’re wearing a most unusual shade of jade, Ab’aj Pol.”

My jaw came loose at his use of my Maya name. Stone Orchid. My secret name. The name Mother whispered to me but twice, and never again used for fear of Father’s wrath. How did he know? She must’ve told him, but why? When? I had no response. My head spun.

“The necklace, was it a gift from your father?”

I looked down. I wore a long, heavy necklace of fat jade beads. A birthday gift from my father indeed. I had no idea where he’d gotten it from, but I nodded with the beat to disguise the fact that I was answering him. He smiled, but for some reason, the change in his countenance did nothing to ease my discomfort.

“There is a story about a necklace just like it. Would you like to hear it, Ab’aj Pol?”

“I beg you, my lord, use my Christian name, Catalina.”

His smile died. I looked up into his eyes again. They were deep, clear, cold pools, and I was swimming in them, drowning in them. When the music brought us closer, he whispered in K’iche’, “Would you like to hear the story?”

I shook my head. No one except Mother had ever told me a story in K’iche’. No one else had spoken more than a few words to me in that language in years. Many had tried, for my features gave away my lineage as clearly as the sun gave away the day. I usually responded with a grimace of apology, pretended not to know what they were saying, and endured the disappointed shakes of their heads. I told myself it was safest. In truth, I also did it to keep my crippled heart from dwelling on her too much, from breaking apart again.

“I see . . . well, it is a mighty treasure. It seems you hold two such treasures in your possession. One you are not worthy of. The other does not belong to you.”

I was unsure what to make of his tone, but a spark of anger lit inside me at his words. We spun away from each other, round the room, and faced each other again.

“This necklace belonged to Waqib’ Kaj, Lady Six Sky, an ancient queen. One of my great- great-grandmothers.” We pivoted and our hands brushed again. His touch seared beyond my skin, and I nearly missed what he said next. “It is said that she was held in high favor by the goddess Xkik’, the Lady Blood.”

I reeled and he tightened his grip on me to keep me standing. To call upon Lady Blood! To say her name! He must’ve been stone mad! He stepped away from me and danced toward the other ladies. He did so without smiling and returned to me, led me in a circle again, and whispered, “It is said that only the heirs of Lady Six Sky may wear this necklace, for all others shall be cursed by Lady Blood with a slow and painful death.”

The necklace suddenly weighed down on me. A tight feeling squeezed my neck, and between the music and the staccato and hush of a language I wasn’t meant to know, I feared I would faint. Terror gripped me at the thought of our enemies, hidden in plain sight, for they’d say we spoke of evil things, and they’d brand me a pagan witch and sentence me to death.

He smiled, as though he knew the effect his words had on me. “Perhaps I could help you, though . . . if you were willing to help me back.”

My eyebrows knotted. His words riled me and broke whatever spell his fingertips had laced through me before. My voice was hoarse, but I responded, “How could I help you? I have no gold. And even if I did, what makes you think I’d entertain these fanciful notions?”

The music rose, and the piece neared its end. He took both my hands and we swayed.

“I do not wish for gold. But I shall have the necklace, for it is mine by rights. And I have come to ask for something else. The treasure of your mother’s lineage,” he went on. “The Dawn of Life. The Light

from Beyond the Sea.” He paused to enjoy whatever look of horror was crossing my face, then struck true. “The *Book of Council*, the *Popol Vuh*.”

I stumbled back, speechless. The music came to an end. The room burst into applause, and as we bowed to each other, he looked me in the eye and whispered, “We shall speak on the matter again very soon. Until such time, you will see how fanciful my notions can be.”

His pupils turned pitch black. Even the whites of his eyes faded. The blood drained from my face. I stepped away, dizzy, back across the hall into the outer courtyard. There was enough moonlight to illuminate the fountain at the center, surrounded by Father’s orange trees, which were loaded with fruit. Several couples sat around the fountain’s edge, but I was so quiet no one noticed me in the shadows. I took out my fan from my purse and tried not to gasp for air while I fought the urge to tear the necklace off. Its weight seemed to increase by the moment, and I was sure I’d soon topple into the ground.

I did what I could. I prayed, *Father in Heaven, I renounce this blasphemy. There is but one God and no others. There is but one Holy Trinity, one Savior, one Christ!*

But . . . just in case, Lord Jesus, if Lady Blood should be out there, oh please, please save me from her wrath.

For I knew with absolute certainty.

I’d been cursed.



I couldn’t recall the walk back to my bedchamber. I couldn’t remember when I changed and climbed into bed. My curtains were open, and moonlight streamed through the shutters, bright enough to illuminate the swirling flecks of dust. I followed the slanting beams, and jolted when the damned necklace came into focus, glittering lilac in the silver light. Someone had placed it on a cushion on top of my vanity.

I stared at it, and it seemed to stare back. An owl hooted, right outside my window.

The dust slowly spun into a shape, arms, and a head. A woman! I bolted upright. Her gray, terrible face was clouded in shade, but I knew it was Lady Blood. She was a creature of Xibalba, the underworld, a creature of the night.

Her fingertips trailed along the surface of the necklace. The owl hooted again.

“Daughter of Fire, you’re no daughter of mine,” she whispered.

My body felt warm, too warm, and my throat itched to scream, but I was frozen stiff. I felt sure someone would hear my thundering heart and come running.

No one did.

She floated to the foot of my bed, in part shadow, part moon.

I trembled and whimpered, “Forgive me, forgive me!” My tongue spoke the K’iche’ words instinctively, over and over.

She hovered above me.

“I’ll—I’ll give it back, I swear! I’ll give the necklace back to him.”

Her gray eyes sank into my soul. An icy cold feeling, like a hand, gripped my stomach.

“Please, no! Stop! Mama, Mama, save me!” I cried out, dreading the sting of death. It would arrive at any moment. It was inevitable. I wouldn’t survive the night.



The moment the cock crowed, I sat straight up, touched my cheeks, arms, and belly, and looked around my room, though I purposefully averted my gaze from the necklace. Dawn light filtered through the wooden blinds. Too feeble, I needed more of it. I stumbled out of bed, nauseated, and struck the window open, then gulped in the misty, cool air, all the while praising God, for I’d been spared. I’d survived!

There was a light rain. Before long, the damp and cold began to seep into my forearms. I turned and grabbed my mother’s cotton sarape, then wrapped it across my shoulders. It was red with zigzag stitching,

a pattern typical of her people. I opened the door and tiptoed barefoot over the cold tile floor into the kitchen.

Cook turned, and I fell into her arms.

She shushed me, and I knew she would've loved to say more words to comfort me, but it was impossible. She had no tongue to speak with. She sat me down on my favorite stool and started crushing roasted cacao beans into a paste. She scooped the paste into a clay mug, added boiling water and cornmeal, then handed it to me along with a jar of honey. She always refused to add any to mellow the bitter taste, but she had learned to forgive my weakness. I breathed in the steam and took a sip. Frothy and heartwarming. Cook served it only in dire circumstances.

I wiggled a little closer to the edge of the table. My back was to the fireplace, and I didn't want the soot and smoke to ruin my shawl. I stared at the loaves in the basket in front of me, but found I wasn't hungry. In fact, I was developing a pounding headache.

"Perhaps I drank too much wine," I muttered. I'd been permitted two full glasses the night before, whereas normally I might've had a sip or two at most.

Cook huffed and began to grind maize with her stone tools at the edge of the table. Every so often the mano and metate collided with a grating sound that made my teeth clench. Whenever this happened, she winked at me and gurgled a laugh. I pouted at her in return.

For all the aches in my body, though, there was a part of me that was relieved to have a body at all. I'd come so close to dying, and this was only a reprieve. She'd be back. I needed to make amends, fast. Now, I could not possibly give Lord Juan the *Popol Vuh*, but perhaps I could find a way to return the necklace to him and hope it would be enough.

How I'd manage to do that was another question. Father never let me be seen in public without him. He read all my letters—not that I sent many. Whenever he went away, he locked up the ink and took the key so I couldn't write at all. He used to say it was because he didn't wish to come back and find he didn't have enough to do his work, but I knew better. I wasn't even allowed to attend church when he was gone.

We didn't live in the new town, Santa Cruz. Our villa was about a mile west, across the plateau on a hill, closer to the ravine and ruins of the ancient K'iche' capital, Q'umarkaj. When I stood on the veranda, I could see glimpses of them both—the white cross atop the bell tower to the east, and to the west, the canyon with the colorful, crumbling walls of the temple of Auilix, goddess of the moon. To her left, I could also see the tip of the pyramid of Hacauitz, god of the fire mountain, god of my mother's house.

I wondered if he would still protect me, let's say, if I slipped away to see Lord Juan on a cloudy, dark night, while Father was away. Perhaps there had been some misunderstanding; perhaps we could start over. My heart fluttered and I felt the imprint of his hand on mine again, the rush of pleasure from capturing his gaze in that first, brief instant.

¡Hija!” I was jolted back into reality by Father's booming voice and spilled lukewarm chocolate all over my hands. What was the matter with me?

Cook shook her head and handed me a cloth. Father burst through the door.

“Why are you here?”

My brows crumpled; I was confused by the question. I was always there.

“You're no longer a child, and you're certainly not a servant. The kitchen's no place for you. Do not let me find you here again, understood?”

“Yes, Father,” I whispered.

“Now—give me a hug.”

I rushed to him and he held me close. I inhaled his scent: horsehair, charcoal, and ink.

“That was a good party last night. The turkey broth was magnificent, Cook.”

Cook nodded. Her real name was too difficult for Father to pronounce, so he'd always called her Cook. It was his favorite English word. Probably the only one he knew.

“And how about the music, eh?” Father continued. “You’d be hard pressed to find a guitar player like that Luis, even in the emperor’s own court! I’ll have to thank the lord treasurer for the tip. Anyway, did you enjoy yourself, daughter?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

He let me go, but before I could take two steps back, he grabbed my chin and forced me to look up at him. I blinked in shock, not at the rough gesture, familiar like blue skies in May, but at his round, wrinkled face and silver beard, at his speckled white skin, so different from mine that if it weren’t for my height, I would’ve doubted I was his.

“The cacique showed great interest in you. Tell me, what was he whispering about, during your little dance?”

I hesitated and tried to pass it off as confusion. “I’m not entirely sure, for he spoke to me in K’iche’, and I felt too ashamed to say I could barely understand.” I blushed a little, both at the memory and at the blatant lie, which he didn’t seem to quite believe.

“Is that so? Well, what *did* you understand?” He squeezed tightly enough to hurt.

I frowned. The guilt I’d felt from being dishonest evaporated. “I would like to answer, but I can hardly feel my tongue with that grip upon my face.”

He flinched and let go immediately, murmuring something about arthritis making it difficult to control his joints.

I rubbed my jaw and let him feel his discomfort a moment longer before responding, “Well, I can’t be certain what he said, Father, but I think he complimented my dress.”

“Is that all?” He stared as if he’d burn a hole through me, but I made my face as open as possible and nodded. A frown tugged at his lips. “You should’ve said you didn’t understand him. You should’ve said it loud for all to hear. Half the room thought you were talking back.”

I looked down. “I felt sorry for him, sir. I didn’t want him to feel foolish.”

“Softhearted girl. Well, I suppose he was foolish enough to come—and dressed like a savage too. Does himself no favors, or me for that matter. I’ve told him, ‘You’re nearing twenty now, you must start acting like a man.’ Cook—fetch me water, will you?”

The old woman moved like the wings of a hummingbird, the colorful flowers of her huipil blurring before my eyes. Even though Father always spoke to her as gently as his nature allowed, her speed stank of fear. Not for the first time in my life, I felt a twist of hot shame, a surge of anger at what she must’ve lived through, to feel the need to rush so. I knew better than to say anything, though, to either of them. She might crumble. He would burst.

“At least the other one had enough sense to stay away,” I said, thinking it might amuse him and maybe even throw him off asking me any more questions.

“Ha! There would’ve been blood if that ruffian had come.” He took a gulp of water.

We spoke of the other king of the highland Maya, whose Christian name was Don Juan Cortés, also known as Juan “El Grande.” He and the cacique, Lord Juan de Rojas, would’ve ruled together, like their fathers and grandfathers before them.

They would’ve been brother kings, twin kings, like Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who defeated the lords of Xibalba before transforming into the sun and moon.

I started at the voice, as vivid and clear as the glass of water Cook had placed in my hand. I swayed, light-headed. My vision darkened, and my hands grew numb.

“What in heaven?” Father rushed to me and sat me down on the stool.

“Pardon me, Father. I believe the wine from last night has done me ill.”

Father frowned. “Little wonder you went to bed so early last night.”

“Oh, sir. I must’ve shamed you.” I covered my face and took deep gulps of air to settle myself.

“Let this be a lesson to you, do you hear me? There is nothing more repugnant than a woman with a taste for drink.”

“She should be avoided and detested like an ill-omened apparition,” I whispered, quoting from Vives’s *The Education of a Christian Woman*, which he’d asked me to memorize a few years back. In reality, I thought about Lady Blood again.

“Indeed! Now, finish that water and return to your chamber to sleep it off.” He held out his arm. I didn’t want to go back to bed, but I recognized an order when I heard one, so I did as he said and let him guide me down the hall, which was decorated in his spartan taste. There were no carpets covering the red tiled floor, no tapestries on the white plaster walls, no portraits, paintings, or relics of any sort.

Only one large wooden crucifix hung opposite my door.

“In you go.” He stroked my cheek gently this time, his way of making amends.

I hesitated, then blurted out, “Father, the jade necklace—where did it come from?”

His eyes narrowed. “Why do you want to know?”

I thought quickly. “It seems quite old, and valuable.”

He shrugged. “Bishop Marroquín had it in his collection. He gave it to me as a token of welcome when I first arrived. Said it was a symbol of leadership. I thought you’d like it.”

“Oh, I do—I really do.” I beamed, and a spark of pleasure lit his eyes too.

“Go rest now,” he said.

I curtsied before closing the door. My room was almost as simple as the rest of the house. The only furnishings were a four-poster bed with thick green curtains, a wooden vanity with a small silver looking glass, and a chair with carved animal paws at the base, a furry fox’s maybe, or a jaguar’s.

Something gave me pause. I’d left the wooden shutters open. I studied the room, and a sick realization started to sink in.

The velvet cushion was still there, but the necklace was gone.



I looked for it everywhere. My hands shook both with fury at the violation and fear of the repercussions. It wasn't just Father who'd be upset. My mind turned again and again to the Lady's hovering gray eyes, enveloping me in a storm of dread. I tore my room apart first, then spent the rest of the day surreptitiously opening drawers and cupboards everywhere else, but it was truly gone. I cried myself to sleep and woke up in the middle of the night. It was windy and raining, and I'd somehow twisted the sheets into a tight knot around my legs. It felt like a net was pulling me down to the foot of the bed.

I kicked off the sheets and tried to ignore the throbbing in my belly and the eerie sensation like my spirit was being drawn to the right. To the side where, lying under a layer of carpet, floorboard, and loose stone, was a flat wooden chest containing the ancient manuscript I swore as a child to protect with my life. I almost laughed—who in their right mind made a child swear to something like that?

It was absurd.

A chill ran through my bones, as if my K'iche' ancestors were rallying against me, chiding me for my insolence. Then I heard her voice again.

Ab'aj Pol, you must love the Popol Vuh and keep it safe. This book is our history, our treasure. Without it, our people are lost, for it is the Sight of our ancestors, who saw everything. Yes, they knew everything, whether there would be death, whether there would be famine, they knew it for certain. They wrote their knowledge here, their Sight, which passed beyond trees, beyond rocks, through lakes, through seas, through mountains and plains, the first families, molded from corn flour by Grandmother of Day and Light. Kaweq, Nija'ib', Ajaw-K'iche', they were gifted, they were thankful.

I sat up on the bed, shaking, and looked around. "Mother?"

A bead of sweat fell down my temple as I waited for her reply, but she said nothing else. My jaw loosened in partial relief, for no matter

how I missed her, I was not thrilled by the prospect of a ghostly call. I did not wish to be haunted by anyone, not even her.

The sound of heavy rain splattered against the walls. Why visit now, anyway, after all this time? Was it because I'd cried out to her last night?

And why remind me of the vow? I didn't need her to. It was impossible to forget.

I rubbed my face. Could this all be part of the curse? Not to die from Lady Blood's wrath, but to hear Mother whispering stories to me, like she used to when she was alive and Father was away? Or perhaps Mother was here to punish me. After all, I hadn't been as diligent in my study of the *Popol Vuh*; I hadn't burned incense for her in years. Once, I'd even prayed to God to make me forget her, although I'd felt so nauseated with guilt afterward that I hadn't been able to sleep for days.

Or perhaps it went even further back. Perhaps she was angry at me because I'd disobeyed her last order. The memory engulfed me and latched my throat shut.

"Close your eyes!" she'd yelled. Her hands were bound behind her. A fierce wind whipped her dark, glossy hair over her furious, defiant face. Everything else was a blur, except her face and the male fingers, a stranger's, which dug into my collarbones and held me in place. Unlike me, she didn't scream, shout, groan, or tear her windpipe crying.

No other sound came from her mouth again.

"Stop!" I stood up and went to the mirror, looked at myself, and slammed my palms down on the wooden surface of the vanity. The searing, prickling pain brought me back to my senses. I thought of seeking out Father, the only family I had left. Sometimes he comforted me, on days when I had difficulty reining in my mind, but it always troubled him deeply.

"You'll unlearn whatever she might've taught you," he'd said. They'd come for Mother when he'd been far away, unable to help us, to save her. He'd returned from Santiago with a head full of chalk-white hair, and sunken eyes that would not smile again for a year.

“If it’s not in the Bible, it’s not in your head, you hear me? I’ll not have you ending up like her.” He never spoke of her again.

With quaking fingers, I wiped my wet cheeks and crossed myself.

If this was the curse, I had to break it somehow, but the necklace was gone.