

1.

"What's wrong, Lea?" Racquel asked. "We've been out of school for almost a month. You haven't been around, and when I do see you, you don't say much."

Lea kept her eyes on the flowers. The field Racquel and she walked through blossomed with vibrant colors. San Diego County had been blessed with heavy rain over the winter. Wildflowers of every shape and color littered the weedy thickets along the path.

"Dime chica," Racquel said, softly. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"Rafael," Lea whispered. "I miss Rafael."

Lea felt Racquel's arm resting against her before she finished saying her brother's name. A strong but kind hand squeezed her shoulder. Neither girl spoke. They just walked, enjoying the beauty of the afternoon, the solace of a friend's love.

After a while they reached the end of the trail. A lake fanned out in front of them. Eucalyptus and Pepper trees embraced the banks of the calm water. A lazy streak of light lay across the lake, perhaps a dragon basking in the late day's warmth. Tiny insects, backlit by the sun, buzzed in impromptu patterns around the girls. Racquel guided Lea over to a bench. They sat, a private time of relaxation until dusk shaded the sky.

Racquel took Lea's hand. Lea squeezed her fingers. She felt the love and let the tears come. Racquel said a silent prayer.

"It's been a year and a half," Lea said, sniffing. "It still hurts."

"I'm so sorry," Racquel said. "We all miss Rafael, but you're his sister, his little sister. I can't imagine."

"He watched out for me. I'd get mad if he went too far, but he always had my back." Lea wiped her cheeks. She brushed her hair back over her ear. "Sometimes I wish he'd lived and I'd gone down that snake's throat."

"Don't say that," Racquel said. "Don't ever say that, Lea. He did what he did because he loved you. He protected you, just like always."

Lea rolled her head onto Racquel's shoulder. Closing her eyes, she relived that shocking moment when Rafael had slammed Misterioso into her dragon, Valiente. She couldn't help but think about it; she woke nearly every night wide eyed and out of breath. The dream never changed. Well, almost never. The stone snake coming for her seemed to grow larger as time went on. And Rafael and his dragon shrank. Now in the dream they looked like toys zooming over the top of a roller coaster. A dark, endless tunnel replaced the snake's mouth. She always screamed. She tried every night in the dream to call out to Rafael.

"I know," Lea said. "I just want him back."

"We all do," Racquel said. "How's your Mom doing?"

"Pretty good. I think she's had a lot of pain in her life. Losing her son is just one more thing for her to pack away. I wonder how she'd feel if she knew the truth?"

"That Rafael got swallowed by a snake that wasn't alive while riding a gigantic dragon five hundred years ago?" Racquel asked.

"Yea. I don't know how they do it. Magnifico, I mean, and Estrella."

"Do what?"

"Make people believe things that aren't true."

"I don't know either," Racquel said. "They convinced my whole family that I'd stayed with my aunt and attended private school for a year. It doesn't matter much anyway. Everyone knows now."

Lea smiled, remembered that story. Even Racquel's sisters believed it. They were more than a little jealous. "It's better this way, besides being the only thing that works. What's terrible is that my Mom will never give up hope that Rafael might come home someday."

The sun dipped in the western sky. Both girls knew darkness would take them soon. Lea stood, wiped her face again and shook herself back to the present. "We'd better start back. You know how our mothers freak if we're out after dark. Especially since we told them we planned to go hiking."

"C'mon," Racquel said. "I'll race you back to the trailhead."

"It's five miles," Lea said.

"Afraid I'll win?"

"I'll smoke you and you know it," Lea said.

"Good," Racquel said. "Loser buys at Cold Stone."

2.

"Esteban?" Alejandra asked as she placed her purse and keys on the kitchen counter. "Esteban?"

"I'm in Diego's room, mamá. Be there in a second."

"I need you to get some bags from the car. Just go ahead and grab them and bring them inside." Alejandra pulled the book from under her arm as she walked to the table. She sat down, opened it, and listened for any movement. "Esteban?"

"I'm on it," Esteban said. Alejandra relaxed as she heard him coming down the hall. He opened the door without slamming it against the wall. She smiled. How many times had she heard it crash when he wasn't paying attention? During the troubled times. His teen years were rough, but with Catalina's caring guidance, he'd come far in a few years. She dismissed the dark times as she flipped lazily through the pages of the book, glancing at photographs here and there.

Esteban came through the front door carrying three bags of groceries. He set them on the counter closest to the refrigerator, watching them for a second to make sure they didn't topple over. He went back and closed the door tightly before checking on his mother. "That everything you need, mamá?"

"Sí, mi guapo hijo."

"You sound like Catalina."

"And I should. You've grown into a handsome young man. I bet girls come into the market even when they don't need a thing. Just to ask the assistant manager where a certain product is located."

"Now you sound loco."

Alejandra smiled. "Is she still coming for dinner tomorrow night?"

"Of course," Esteban said. "She's coming early, too, so she can learn another one of your recipes."

"Anyone can bake salmon," Alejandra said. "You could do it, Esteban. It's the dressing that matters. And how long you let it broil before turning off the oven."

"Exactly, and only you have the magic touch. Just give her some of your secrets, that's all. She promised she won't think you're interfering. She wants to learn from you."

"That's what all girlfriends and wives say," Alejandra said. "At first, anyway." She closed the book and walked into the kitchen. "Any progress with the wedding?"

"Mamá!" Esteban said a little too excitedly. "I haven't even asked her to marry me."

"You will. I see the love between you when you're together."

"I know. We have to be careful, that's all."

"Sometimes you can be too careful, Esteban. Your father and I married young. We struggled, but it's your love that gets you through the tough times. Look at us now. We have two wonderful sons, a nice home, and your father's business is doing well."

"It's doing *too* good. He keeps bugging me to quit the market and come work with him."

"Doing *too well*," Alejandra corrected. "And you should give some thought to that. His company might turn into something big. Your father isn't book-smart, Esteban, but he has a head for business. Anyone can see that."

"The market has benefits, mamá, and in a few months I'll be vested. Profit sharing. That place might grow too, you know?"

"What does Catalina think?"

"She supports whatever decision I make."

Alejandra gave her son *'the look'*. One eyebrow slightly raised, her forehead tilted in his direction.

"What?" Esteban asked.

"If she truly feels that way, then fine. But Catalina is a bright girl. She's been a tremendous help to you. Ask her what she feels. Share your life with her, truly. It doesn't mean you must bend to her every wish. If you think your way is best after hearing both opinions, then make that choice. You may find that sometimes she comes up with good ideas."

Esteban smiled. "Okay mamá. Oh, and by the way, she mentioned that it might be a good idea for us to move in here with you, Dad, and Diego as soon as we can. With the baby coming, you know."

Alejandra looked at her son and beamed. She slapped her hands against her cheeks, then threw her arms around Esteban's neck. "Oh mijo, when did you know?"

His smile grew wider. "I'll let you know when it happens."

Glee shifted to shock. "What!" She pulled her arms back, grabbed his ears, and shook his head. "Pequeño diablo! How could you do that?"

"You deserve it," Esteban said. "You were laying it on a little thick, don't you think?"

"Ooh, I'll get you for this. Wait until Catalina hears about you!"

"Mamá, no!"

3.

Diego, José, and Ricardo lazed around on the grass field at Escondido High. All three had removed their cleats; Ricardo rubbed his toes and instep. Ten minutes ago, they'd finished their second practice of the day. Summer club soccer wasn't a picnic anymore. They used to have fun, but now the coaches wanted nothing but hard work, and plenty of results.

"My feet are dead," Ricardo said. "I don't even feel them anymore."

"Órale," José said. "Enough of these crazy side sprints up and down the field. How is that going to make us better soccer players?"

"Maybe it'll keep you from tripping over yourself like you did today," Ricardo said to José. "I laughed so hard even I almost fell over."

"Shut up, Bobo."

"Stay on your feet then."

Both boys smiled. José motioned to Diego. Ricardo looked at their friend and carefully took his socks off. He balled them together loosely and tossed them at Diego. The filthy toes drooped over his forehead.

Diego flung them back at Ricardo. "You wanna eat those?"

"Like you could make me."

"I'm not that tired," Diego said. "Keep it up and you'll be sucking on those things."

José made a terrified face at Ricardo, then hugged himself in fear. A second later both boys jumped on Diego and began slapping him silly.

"Get off me, estupidos!"

Both Ricardo and José rolled to either side of Diego. Each one of them grabbed an ankle and dragged their friend along the grass. Diego's shirt slid up to his shoulders as he tried to stop.

"Ramirez scores!" José yelled, laughing while watching Diego.

"He celebrates with a victory slide!" Ricardo said. "Goal, goal, goal, gooooooal!"

Diego finally flipped himself over, snapped his feet in opposite directions, and sent his friends' arms flying. A second later he'd scooped up Ricardo's socks, separated them, caught up to Ricardo and jammed one against his teeth. He turned to find José, but he'd taken off the second Diego got to his feet. Half the field separated them.

"Forget it, you'll never catch him," Ricardo said. "He gets faster every year. And no matter what he says about our drills, they're doing him a lot of good."

"Yea," Diego said. "But I'm still gonna nail him."

"I'll let him know."

"Do whatever you want. It won't change anything."

"Órale," Ricardo said, holding out his fist. Diego tapped his knuckles. They walked another ten yards before Ricardo looked over at his friend. "Hey Diego."

"Yea?"

"You ever feel anything strange, like you did a few years ago?"

"Like what?"

"Power, the sun, something, I don't know."

Diego dropped his eyes, shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it."

Ricardo let it go for a bit, but before they reached the bleachers, he grabbed Diego's arm and held him back. "No really. José and I have been talking about it, what we saw you do to that dark lord, or whatever he was. The sun seemed to blast right through you. Kinda creepy, you know? We've been wondering if you're okay."

Diego put his hands on his hips. He looked to the sky, half expecting an army of dragons to pour out of the sun. "I said I didn't want to talk about it."

"Es no bueno," Ricardo said. "We're your best friends."

José popped his head out of the locker room. He saw Diego and Ricardo and got ready to run.

"C'mon," Diego said. "You know I'll catch you somewhere later."

"Yea," Ricardo said. "Órale, c'mere."

José jogged over, keeping his eyes pinned to Diego's hands. His feet were faster, but soccer players didn't mess with those. He came up, danced around behind Ricardo.

"Que coño," Diego said, laughing.

"Not against anyone else," José said, "but I'm not going up against someone with magic powers."

Diego smiled uncomfortably.

"C'mon," Ricardo said, "we're dyin'. Can't you just answer a simple question?"

"Idiotas. Alright, over here."

They walked to the bleachers. Diego lagged behind a little, just enough to let Ricardo guide José ahead of him. Then he jumped forward quietly and kneed his friend in the kidney, just hard enough to hurt.

"Ow," José said, bent over and rubbing his side. "That's playing dirty, D."

"Yea, and tomorrow at morning practice, when you bobos are laughing it up because I can't stop trying to scratch my back, that's not dirty?"

Ricardo scraped some leaves and a bit of grime from one of the benches and sat down. Diego and José did the same. None of them spoke for a bit.

"So what's the deal?" José asked after a couple minutes. "You gonna talk or what?"

"Guess I don't have a choice."

"Sure you do," Ricardo said, getting up from the bench. "See you tomorrow."

After watching José jump off the bench, he clenched his fists and stood. "*Alright*, yes. I do feel it sometimes."

José and Ricardo sat back down, leaned forward a little, and looked at each other.

"I don't like it," Diego said. "I don't know what's with me, why the power's here, you know, in our time."

"Maybe something's going to happen," José said. "Maybe you'll need it."

"To do what?" Diego asked.

"Who knows?" Ricardo asked. "You haven't been acting weird or anything. We're your buddies, we have to look out for you. Right, chico?"

"Sí, Diego," José said. "Friends forever." He held his fist out and both boys bumped it.

"Órale," Diego said. "It scares me, you know. Sometimes I'll be in the pool doing nothing, and all of a sudden I'll feel like I can heave all the water over the fence."

"Dope," José said. "Let's go to your house and go swimming. I want to see it happen."

"Shut up, bobo," Ricardo said.

José reached around Diego and slapped his friend on the head. Ricardo jumped up a second later and yanked José off the bleachers. The two boys pulled and kneed and punched until both felt themselves jerked away from each other. They flew a dozen feet in opposite directions, skinning their elbows on the sparse grass. Both sat dazed for a second or two, then looked at each other and smiled.

Diego got up and started walking away.

"Whoa," José said. "Do it again, D."

"Yea," Ricardo said. "Hold on. We'll walk home with you."

"C'mon, Diego, give," José said. "That power doesn't come alive every once in a while, does it? You've got it all the time."

"Leave him alone," Ricardo said.

"Yea," Diego said quietly. "At first it came and went, but now I can use it anytime. It's almost like it wants me to use it. Sometimes I can feel the power pressing against my fingertips, pushing. It can't wait to come out."

"Is it like fire?" José asked. "Like dragon fire?"

"No. It's this weird invisible force. Energy. What you guys felt. I can move things. Anything. No matter how big."

"Let's go get the In 'n Out burger and move it next to my house," José said.

"I'm feelin' one of those right now," Ricardo said. "Why don't we go? We don't need to change, Diego. Let's carry our cleats and put them on when we get there. We can kick them off after we sit down in a booth."

"Yea, let's go!" José said.

"Can't," Diego said. "Catalina's coming for dinner tonight. I think she and Esteban have an announcement to make. Maybe they're getting married. Anyway, my Mom told me to ask Racquel."

"Maybe *you two* are gettin' married." José said.

"Time to lock you down, Diego. Into the 'no fun zone' for you."

"Oh Racquel," José sang. "Mi un solo. I will love you all the days of my life."

"At least I have a girlfriend. All you guys got is each other."

"Yea, that's right," José said. "And we're goin' to In 'n Out for dinner. Later, chump."

Ricardo waved, smiled, and laughed along with his friend.

4.

"Are you completely mad?" Estrella asked.

"Watch your words," Magnifico said. "You're fouling the flames." The enormous dragon rolled away from his mate, curling a sturdy wing over his head. The sun's fires roared around the tough leather. He snarled happily as the heat soaking his body increased a hundredfold.

"Don't try to ignore me," Estrella said. "I've gone along with just about every one of your crazy schemes, but this time you've gone too far. Giving a human boy that much power is dangerous."

A muffled murmur escaped the flames.

Estrella bit his neck, and not just a love bite. She let him know she wouldn't be ignored.

The wing unfurled slightly. A piercing, red eye rolled in her direction. "Why is it dangerous?"

She pulled back, released the soft skin. "Nathan taught Diego how to fight. How to defend himself. He did it correctly, by teaching him about dragon fire. Diego learned how to see the world as it is, its basic structure, the elements that hold everything together."

"Is there a point to this discussion?" Magnifico asked.

"You've given him too much power!"

"Nonsense. He is..."

"Only a boy," she snapped.

"A human boy, perhaps, and not even that anymore. Diego is a young man, and growing quickly, physically *and* spiritually."

"Your best hope, that's true, for you have bestowed upon him the hidden powers of Sol's chamber."

"He claimed them for himself," Magnifico said, "the moment he defeated the Dark Lord and warned the ancients never to bother his people again."

"And if he is tempted?" Estrella asked.

"He's been tempted before," said Magnifico, "and sorely."

"There is no comparison. Vipero offered him the past, nothing more. A life with the girl he loved in a place that held great meaning to his people." She reached out, pulled the wing toward her, and met the bloody eye with one of her own. "With what you've given him, he could have all that and more, at any time, with anyone."

"In dragon years he is barely a pup," Magnifico said. "You're making too much of this situation, Estrella. Lie back and enjoy our recovery."

"That is exactly my point," Estrella said, gripping her mate's wing so hard her talons pierced the skin. "Imagine a young, undisciplined dragon with the power of a full-grown, fully trained warrior. Even a small chance that those skills might corrupt her would be too much."

"A pup like that would have the mentoring of all the sun dragons. She'd never be allowed to escape Sol's kingdom."

"Do I need remind you that Nathan is gone?" Estrella asked. "Diego is alone, in an unpredictable environment, discovering abilities that at best will confuse him. They may even excite him. We can't risk that."

"I'm counting on him to be thrilled. I want him to experiment, to see how far he can push himself. I'm wondering if he can handle the responsibility."

"And if he can't?"

"Then we'll have the battle of a lifetime," said Magnifico.

"You *have* lost your mind!"

"I am the Lord of the Sun Dragons," roared Magnifico. "I do what I must for the good of the galaxy, and I will not be questioned by anyone other than Sol."

"Or Celestina," said Estrella. "You owe allegiance to her as well. Never forget that."

"I am aware of my duties, and my commitments, Estrella. You offer helpful advice. For that I thank you, but my thoughts are pure, my actions worthy of your silence. At times I don't understand the words Sol sends me. But I trust him. How could I not have faith in a presence that risked his life for me?"

"You cannot share what you know with your mate? Would it be too much to ease my concerns?"

"No, and yes, the cost might be high. It is best that I keep my own counsel until I'm sure no one could be hurt by the knowledge." Magnifico rolled over, flapped his wings, and rose. "I must see the Sol Dragones. You may join me if you wish." Sol's flames filled like curtains next to an open window as he lifted himself away from his mate.

"Go on ahead," said Estrella. "I know you need time to yourself. When I think you're ready I'll find you."

"You are wise, dragon. Small wonder you were raised to be my mate." He pulled away through the fire, enjoying the temperature of the sun spots. After rising with the explosive currents and free-falling back toward his star, he sent a call to his army. Soaring like a pelican over an ocean's waves, Magnifico listened for the answers he knew would come. First only a few, then the voices grew in number. Dozens, hundreds, and then thousands of dragons answered his command.

Some sounded different, not at all like the sun dragons. Indeed, the calls lifting through the heat came from those that remained from Sol's journey through the six houses of the Xibalba. More than half of the gigantic army of dragons had returned to their origin. A great number, though, stayed to rebuild Magnifico's army.

At first they stayed by themselves, alone, separate from the Sol Dragones. Magnifico felt the split in his heart as Estrella pushed him to put an end to the division, knowing how damaging it might be. If pressed again by some unknown evil, the dragons under his command would either fight as a family or risk being destroyed.

Some of his favorite soldiers, among them Zephyer and Furtivo, climbed toward him like bullets. Others paced themselves, following but saving their strength for an unplanned drill. Spirito and Soldado came abreast, looking like wings attached to Magnifico. The four of them roared wildly, eager for an audience with their Lord.

The Lord of the Sun Dragons did not disappoint. As he had years ago, he dipped toward the sun, turned his body upside down, and tucked his wings tightly against his sides. After one final peek at his soldiers, he closed his eyes and gave himself over to Sol.

Zephyer, Furtivo, Spirito, and Soldado shrieked with delight. Dive-bombing toward, under, and around Magnifico, they brushed each other's wings and called out challenges again and again. Zephyer, by far the swiftest, dodged every attempt at capture or injury, while slicing into her opponents.

They soared freely around the star, the five dragons, trailed by hundreds who enjoyed their own mock battles. Here and there, a dozen or more swooped into the small pack, lunging and nipping as they zoomed across their path.

Magnifico, completely at one with Sol, allowed the star's energy to stream forth from his lungs. With a color never before seen, he fired balls of flame so dense they cut through the scorching gases of the sun like pellets through paper. They continued on, flaring in all directions. His dragons, overjoyed at the sight, sped after them. Even Zephyer, with her amazing speed and agility, failed to catch one.

Magnifico turned inward toward Sol. A simple command told the others to follow. He led them to Sol's chamber, toward his throne, where he knew Estrella would be waiting.

"I see you've brought a crowd," she said, after he pulled up and grasped the dense columns of fire.

"They come of their own will, my mate," Magnifico said. "During times of peace, my dragons go where they please."

The others settled about the king and queen. Thousands of dragons, of every description and color, fought each other for position. Zephyer and her three friends flew to the very front and remained there. No dragon challenged their decision.

"Are you happy, friends?" called Magnifico.

His army trumpeted their answer. Some took flight again, rocketing around the assembly before resettling among their fellows.

"We'll fly together this day," he roared. "Our recovery is complete. It is time for the Sun Dragons to begin training. We must be strong, prepared at all times. Who will soar into space with me?" He finished the sentence with a huge blast of fire over his army.

If that many dragons could have planned a coordinated response, they couldn't have given a more perfect signal. The fire exploded from their throats at the exact time their voices rose as one. Estrella felt their love so deeply, she joined the chorus of voice and flame.

Sol's chamber glowed. He greeted his dragons with unspoken affection. The light from the inner temple flowed outward, surging over and through them, bathing their wings, scales, throats, and claws with an essence beyond fire. The Sol Dragonesses and their Lord and Lady withdrew their flames, became silent. Their voices dissolved into the love of their god. Every dragon, hypnotized, bowed his or her head in tender submission.

"Yes," said Sol. "You will fly, dragons." Another wave of energy rolled softly from the chamber. "I release you into the capable claws of Magnifico and Estrella, your Lord and Lady. Enjoy your training. Build your strength, find new ways to fly, to defend yourselves, to attack your enemies. May we never lose one of you again.

"All those who joined my galaxy after following me here, I invite you to become one of our pack. Truly one of our own, to enjoy the brotherhood and sisterhood of the Sol Dragonesses. You fought bravely in the battle for the guide's ancestors. Many of your kind sacrificed themselves so others might live. Others from your sun, and still others from Magnifico's army. At that moment, we became one pack, one army, one family. We accept you as Sol Dragonesses.

"Before you depart, I hope you'll join me in an ancient custom. We have no flowers here, no sweets, altars, and no homes to where we can invite our dead to visit us. But we have our hearts, and our memories. As you stand quietly before my chamber, I wish for you to remember your siblings, those who fought beside you and fell. If they remain alive in your minds, they will always live in your hearts.

"Think of as many as you can. When you've done that, remember one in particular, a longtime friend, or a dragon that gave everything for all of you. Hold that vision, and then grasp the talon of a

dragon next to you. Remember always that we are family. If we hold that loving bond, nothing will ever separate us. Even in death."

Magnifico looked into the past. Recalling Misterioso, his caretaker after the battle for Tenochtitlan, he closed his mind to everything else. He remembered the giant dragon as a pup, after Vipero found him in a cave, alone, shivering, afraid. Vipero called to his brother, and Magnifico landed before the mouth of the cavern and walked inside.

Although newly born, and slightly bigger than a horse, Misterioso snarled at the huge strangers. He didn't yet know friend from foe. To him, the two huge dragons, one fire red and the other coal black, represented danger. They had entered his cave, and he would defend his lair.

With eyes closed in deep meditation, the tiny scales around Magnifico's jaws peeled back in a mischievous smile. He saw Misterioso in his mind, leaning forward, growling and spitting what fire he could, which emerged mostly as fierce puffs of smoke. With mostly mono-color scales, he didn't yet have the ability to disappear or shift colors at will.

Vipero had crouched down, assumed a sphinx position. Misterioso snarled anew, seeing that the intruder intended to stay. He charged Vipero with wings too small for flight. Instead, he ran up Vipero's leg, grabbed his wing, and vaulted onto his nose. He bit down with every bit of strength he had.

Vipero had actually cried out, more out of surprise than pain. He and Magnifico burst out laughing, scaring Misterioso from the attack. Trying to jump to the back of the cave, the little dragon stumbled across the rocky floor.

Misterioso righted himself, came up snarling, spitting fire this time. Something must have fueled the flame; rage, embarrassment, neither Vipero nor Magnifico knew, but a healthy stream of dragon fire rolled over their front paws.

"This one is a fighter," Vipero had said.

"Fearless," answered Magnifico. "Do you think he'll let us take him back to Sol?"

"We have no choice. As ferocious as he is, he'll be killed before he can grow large enough to fight hungry opponents."

"Which of us will carry the pup home?" asked Magnifico.

"You are the Lord of the Sun Dragons," said Vipero. "Besides, he's already taken a chunk out of me. It's your turn."

Misterioso charged at first, then backed up against the far wall. Flames shot forth again, this time combined with wispy, white smoke. The tiniest roar rang out.

Magnifico relaxed, hoping the little dragon would follow his lead. He began growling quietly. The black dragon crouched, set his jaw on the floor of the cave, where he continued his soothing mantra.

Slowly, Misterioso lost his aggressive stance. The fire died out. After a while, he too calmed down. He collapsed to the floor. Imitating Magnifico, he stared unblinkingly at his new Lord. As best he could, he let his stomach rumble along with Magnifico.

Their breathing became one. Neither of them noticed Vipero joining their gathering. The three dragons came together as a pack. Breathing, thinking, bonding, when they finally opened their eyes Misterioso no longer saw them as intruders. The threat had become friendship.

When Magnifico extended his paw, Misterioso chirped before walking toward it. He jumped onto one of the massive fingers, barely covering it.

"Look, my brother," said Magnifico. "Only a sprite."

"Someday," said Vipero. "He will outgrow the largest of us. I see it."

"And he will have powers the likes of which we've never dreamed."

"Let it be so," said Vipero.

"Come, little one," said Magnifico, as he lifted the happy dragon to his new perch. "From this moment forward you shall be known as Misterioso. A befitting name for one bearing such a mysterious destiny."

Vipero and Magnifico glanced at each other, smiled on the way back to the sun. Misterioso, enjoying flight for the first time, called out to the skies and scenery around him. When they reached the darkness of space, he crouched low next to one of the spikes on Magnifico's back. The tiny eyes darted every which way, even looking to Vipero for reassurance.

Magnifico's smile faded. His thoughts shifted to his brother. A traitor to the Sol Dragones, Vipero tried to destroy his dragons and kill both Estrella and him.

He'd begun as a benevolent general in Magnifico's army. The Dark Lord had poisoned his mind, however, and in his sickened state Vipero killed thousands of dragons and built a massive army obedient to his rule.

Magnifico crushed his eyes shut. He missed so badly what he could never forgive. He and Vipero had been born hours apart, sons of an immense, respected dragon. Both parents cared for them, loved them equally, trained them in the art of war and leadership. Taught them what it was to think, to be of good character, and to pardon those who needed understanding.

He could forgive any other crime, and had for the sake of the sun. During the years after the battle for the rift, he had tried to dismiss his own failing. He needed the courage to give new life to his brother. Vipero's spirit existed somewhere. Enemies that die in battle were not awarded the road to the underworld. Only Sol knew where Vipero currently drifted, perhaps longing for forgiveness. Or maybe he still embraced his hatred, refusing even now to admit his mistake.

Nevertheless, Magnifico invited Vipero into his consciousness. He welcomed his brother, asking him silently to share his memories. The red dragon did not disappoint.

Hunting with their father. At first, flying at his wingtips, mimicking every move, learning to dodge and dive and position themselves for a quick strike. The power of flight on windy days. Small scales fluttering, eyelashes tickling, fangs whistling as the gusts sliced through them. Turning into the draft, pumping their growing wings hard, harder, calling out to each other over their father's massive back. Cutting with the wind again, tucking wings, checking each other to see which dragon held the quicker, more perfect line of flight.

Then together, fully trained, alone, soaring over the sun, down to different planets, flying for sheer enjoyment. Taking prey, settling at the top of a low mountain. Sharing their kill, talking about how they would rule the Sol Dragones together. How they would make their parents proud. They would provide for their mother, make sure she had a dozen servants, anything she desired. And their father, the revered dragon, Hotsnot, would want for nothing.

Magnifico snapped his head up, shook it, tore the memories away. None of those plans came about, because Vipero had killed his parents after falling into Satadon's spell.

"You will never be welcome here, brother." He bit off the last word, spitting it from his mind as well as his mouth. It pained him to do so; he wanted badly to forgive Vipero, but he would never pardon him for the heinous act. The screams of his mother still echoed in his ears. His father's valiant efforts to save his lady flickered through his mind.

Vipero had outgrown him, in strength and cunning. Hotsnot provided a mighty test. In the end, though, his son overcame and destroyed him. Afterward, he turned his sickened rage against his mother.

"I proved myself to Satadon with the murders," he'd said. "He promised me unlimited power, a vast kingdom, and control of the greatest dragon army the suns had ever known."

His rule lasted centuries. In the end he'd fallen, a victim of his own lust. He wanted everything, Magnifico's guide, mastery of the rift, and total dominance over every dragon in the galaxy. He nearly reached his goal. The Dark Lord, though, seeing failure approaching, abandoned his slave and watched Vipero perish.

Perhaps that is where he lies, thought Magnifico. Buried within the molten rock that once formed his throne. With the rift sealed forever, Vipero might not be able to answer the call even if they invited him into their souls.

Even with the seething hatred cloaking any shred of mercy, Magnifico at times became overwhelmed by his desire to invite Vipero to the celebration of life. How many members of the Sol Dragoness cleared their minds before thinking about a friend, brother, or sister who'd served under Vipero. They found no difficulty forgiving them. Why should their leader bear such a stubborn, unwilling attitude?

Again, Magnifico shoved the memories aside. Opening his eyes wide, he called to his dragons, all of them.

"Rise, my friends. Activate your senses. Place your friends and family in the most cherished part of your hearts. Your spirits will keep them company."

Estrella stepped forward, smiled at the assembly. "Remember, my children, soon we'll have a festive service for all who remain dear to you."

"For now, though," said Magnifico. "Fly!"

5.

"Did you bring your suit?" Diego asked, as he held the door open for Racquel.

"Of course. I wouldn't miss the chance to swim in the only pool in California with real dragon dust on the walls." She gave him a light kiss on the lips, and just then Alejandra came through the kitchen door.

"Mm-hmm," she said. "Hello Racquel."

"Hello Mrs. Ramirez," she said, displaying an innocent but dazzling smile. "Thank you for inviting me to dinner tonight."

"You're always welcome here, querida. Why don't you and Diego change and go to the pool. Esteban and Catalina are already out there."

"When's dinner, mamá? Diego asked. "I'm starving."

"Your father isn't even home yet. Don't you want to wait for him? Go swim for a while, work up an appetite. Racquel, you can change in my bathroom."

"Okay, Mrs. Ramirez. Thank you."

"Alejandra. Please call me Alejandra."

Diego came out of his bathroom wearing an old pair of trunks. His mother badgered him to get another pair, even went to the point of bringing home new ones, but he wouldn't budge. His fit right, the material was soft, and he liked them.

"Diego, are you in there? Can I come in?"

"Yea, c'mon."

When Racquel walked into the bedroom, Diego almost knocked *himself* back a dozen feet. She was cute in middle school, but now she'd grown up. Exactly as tall as Diego, and very fit. She ran all the time, played soccer at school, did light training in the gym.

"You like it, Diego?" she asked.

He blinked a couple times before looking at her eyes again. "Sorry. Yea. I like the color."

"Me too. It's lavender, at least that's what they call it. C'mon, let's go swimming."

He followed her through the sliding glass door in his bedroom. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Hi Racquel," said Catalina.

"Hola chica," said Racquel. "¿Como esta?"

"Bien. How are you?"

"Yea, Diego," said Esteban. "How *you* doin'? You look like you never seen a girl in a bikini before."

Diego smiled shyly and tossed their towels on a chair. Catalina walked up the stairs at the shallow end and gave Racquel a wet hug. She turned to Diego, gave him a hug as well and grabbed her towel.

"You're getting out?" asked Racquel. "We just got here. C'mon, swim for a while longer."

"Don't worry," said Diego. She's not getting out yet."

Catalina backed away from him. "Diego Ramirez, don't even think of it."

Esteban pulled himself out of the pool before she'd finished speaking. He grabbed Racquel and Diego grabbed Catalina. A lot of screaming followed, and both girls went into the water, Catalina with a towel in hand.

Racquel flipped her hair over her head. "Typical," she said. "Boys never grow up. Always trying to be macho." She started shoving water toward Diego. Soon all four of them engaged in a huge splashing contest.

"Incoming!"

Four pairs of eyes turned toward the living room door. Alvaro was already airborne and tucked into a huge cannonball. Diego and Esteban tried to pull Catalina and Racquel away, but their father had snuck up on them perfectly.

A second after Alvaro thumped the water, the red sea parted. Both his sons and their dates watched a wall of water crest over their heads. Diego held onto Racquel's waist as the swell pressed them toward the pool edge.

"Holy crap, Dad," Esteban said. "They have contests for that, you know. Fat guys doing belly flops in lakes."

"Yea," Diego said. "You'd win for sure."

"Esteban Ramirez," said Alejandra, standing in the doorway to the living room. "How dare you say things like that about your father."

"Hey Dad," Esteban said. "Doesn't mamá look hot to you? She's been in the kitchen all afternoon."

"Yea," Diego said. "Looks that way to me."

"Don't you dare!" Alejandra said. "I've just had my hair cut today." She slammed and locked the living room door.

"Don't count on my help," Alvaro said. "I've seen that woman when she gets upset."

Diego and Esteban exited the pool. Diego ran to his bedroom door, grabbed the handle just as his mother reached the other side. He yanked the door open, and he and Esteban rushed in.

"No!" Alejandra shrieked. She ran down the hall toward the kitchen. Esteban grabbed her arm before she got halfway.

"Go unlock the living room door," he told Diego.

"They'll be no dinner for anyone except the girls!" she warned, struggling like a wildcat. She nearly broke Esteban's grip twice.

When Diego reached her, they easily pulled her through the door.

"Alvaro, make them stop!"

"Knock it off, guys," he said, softly, a mischievous grin on his face.

"Diego," Catalina said. "She's not going to be happy."

Alejandra stopped struggling once they had her by the edge of the pool. "Go ahead, then. Chicos estupidos."

They let her go.

"Fine, mamá," Esteban said. "It's too bad. You used to be fun."

"Yea," Diego said. "What happened to you? You got old on us."

"I told you," Alejandra said, suddenly feeling a thick hand reaching over her beltline. "Alvaro!"

Catalina and Racquel cupped their hands over their mouths when Alejandra fell backwards. Alvaro caught her before she went down completely.

"See, cara, your hair is still perfect," he said.

The shocked look on Alejandra's face set everyone laughing. She struggled briefly, and after looking at everyone else in the pool, smiled a little. "What an example *you* set for your sons."

"All you have to do is change your clothes," Alvaro said.

"And we might be eating an overcooked meal," Alejandra said. "Now help me out of the pool."

Diego and Esteban jumped out of the water, reached out to take their mother's hands.

"Are you loco? Do you think I'd trust you again?" She turned to Catalina and Racquel. "Girls, if you please."

They got out, pushed their boyfriends aside, and helped Alejandra from the pool. Racquel grabbed a towel and handed it to her.

"Hey," Esteban said. "That's my towel!"

"Girls," Alejandra said. "Grab *all* the towels. You idiotas can drip dry for all I care."

*

"Mmm," Racquel said. "Mrs. Ramirez, this is so delicious."

"Thank you, dear, and please, it's Alejandra."

"Maybe someday, but right now I feel better using your last name."

"That's right," Alvaro said. "Racquel's a good girl. Her parents raised her right. If she wants to use señora, she should be able to."

"Alvaro, look at your son!"

"How come he's always my son when he's doing something wrong?"

"Forget that for now," Alejandra said. "We have two beautiful women as guests at my table, and your son can't stop his fork from moving. He hasn't even taken a sip of water."

"Mamá, I'm hungry!"

"It's okay, Mrs. Ramirez," Racquel said. "I'm sure in time he'll learn to eat like a gentleman. Like Esteban. Right Catalina?"

"He's come a long way," Catalina said. "But it took some doing."

"Yea," Esteban said. "All you've seen is Catalina the sweet and sincere. I've seen the other side, the hot-tempered and horrible."

"What!" Catalina said. She smacked him on the shoulder. "Take that back. Ahora!"

"Better do it, mijo," Alvaro said. "If your brother opens *his* mouth, we'll have tres mujeres locas at the table."

Diego kept shoveling food into his mouth. Racquel reached under the table and pinched his leg.

"Ow!" He looked over.

Racquel held her sweetest smile. "Catalina, did I hear that you and Esteban have an announcement you'd like to make?"

"Esteban?" Catalina said. "Do you have anything to tell your parents?"

"No, nada."

"Esteban," said his mother. "You'd better learn to treat your girlfriend better, or she's going to find a man who will."

"She's not my girlfriend anymore," Esteban said.

Alvaro watched his wife's face twist into a mask of surprise and frustration. "Cara, let him speak. You know what he's going to say, and if you don't, I do."

Alejandra placed her fork on her plate, then her cheeks in her hands. She flicked her eyes between Esteban and Catalina.

Catalina mimicked her movements exactly. When she laid her hands on her cheeks, Alejandra cried out with delight.

"We're engaged," said Catalina. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Alvaro clapped a hand on his son's shoulder. "Congratulations, Esteban. You've found a fantastic bride and given your mother and I a wonderful daughter-in-law."

"When do you hope to marry?" Alejandra asked. "Have you set a date yet?"

"Not yet," Catalina answered. "There are a few things we'd like to get settled."

"She means she has a few things she'd like to get settled," Esteban said.

"You're learning, mijo," Alvaro said. "Just remember, the secret is to let them think they're running things."

"Silencio," Alejandra said. She turned to Catalina. "Don't you listen to that old bear."

"We're thinking of a Spring wedding," Esteban said. "It's a new beginning in the cycle of life, and we'd like that to represent our lives together."

"That's a lovely idea," Alejandra said. "Don't you think so, Alvaro?"

"Actually, I'm thinking about dessert."

"We also want to wait until after Dia de los Muertos," Esteban said. "There are people we need to honor with the celebration."

"I hope we can spend part of the day with Lea and her mother," Racquel said. "They both miss Rafael so much. It would be wonderful to help welcome Antonio and him into their home."

"We were talking about our wedding, si?" Esteban said.

"Diego," Alejandra said. "Why don't you ask Alma and Lea over for dinner soon. We can all talk about our plans for Day of the Dead."

"We must include Marisol in our celebration," Catalina said. "She will always be a part of Esteban's life, and a part of this family."

Racquel flicked her eyes to Diego. She smiled.

"Boys," Alejandra said. "Will you please clear the table? I think dessert is just about ready."

"We'll help you, Mrs. Ramirez," Racquel said.

"Please, dear, it's Alejandra."

6.

The heart of the underworld embraced the darkness. Winds, if one could name them so, spoke softly, nervously, pressing against and around other forces, natural and supernatural. Sounds of the dead, hopeful and wanting, tested the borders between regions of existence.

Many struggled through the long trials to reach their resting place. The unsettled nature of the underworld did little to help their passage. Access points between levels, like heart valves maintaining a body, opened and closed with little warning.

The Lady of the underworld's mysterious eye looked upon her province, as if seeing it for the first time. She extended a loving hand, helping the exhausted souls reach their goals. She looked upon a large group, gathered together at the end of one stage. The dead tried unsuccessfully to attempt the next journey, having earned the right by crossing a frightening path.

She felt a presence moving through her, around her, without permission or obstruction. Several owls, loyal servants for generations, perched along her arms and shoulders. Upon hearing their tales, the Lady of the underworld vanished, returned to her throne without pause.

"Our underworld, Mictlan, is disturbed, my husband."

"Tell me," Mictlantecuhtli said. "What do you feel?"

"I am fearful," she answered. "The underworld trembles. It dares not speak, but it calls to me. I must protect it. *We* must."

"You will succeed, my queen. Nothing can overcome you."

"Perhaps not," Mictēcacihuātl said. "But something strange drifts within the currents of the souls. It is evil, more so than anything I've felt before. It should not be allowed in this place of peace."

"Draw it forth," the Lord of the Underworld said. "Challenge it to face you, to face us. If it exists, there is only one reason it stays hidden."

"I will not act rashly, my Lord," the Lady said. "Listen. The tide of spirits rushes in all directions. Even they fear the unstable energy. It occupies the underworld without invitation, without taking the essential journey. Worst of all, it travels alone."

"No spirit companion?" the Lord asked.

"None. Perhaps the evil devoured it. Perhaps none came forth to volunteer. The life of the evil one might have been so foul, those who buried it decided it would journey alone. If it could."

"You are the Lady of the Underworld," Mictlantecuhtli said. "Mictlan is your domain. Call upon the Lords of the Night. They obey your every command. Order them to seek out what troubles you, to confront it. It will see the power that exists within our realm."

"I no longer feel the presence of the nine Lords. It is as we feared so many years ago."

"They exist," her husband said. "They are here with us, and they will answer your call."

"And if they are here, what if they've been swept away?" she said. "Who will stand before us then? The heroes? The gods? Who will brave Mictlan if the choice puts them in jeopardy of never returning to their own realm?"

"I will stand with you."

"You are brave, Mictlantecuhtli, as I am. But I fear the combined strength of Mictlan will not keep this danger away."

"We have ruled the underworld since the beginning," the Lord said. As his anger swelled, their servants rushed forward. Soon the thrones swarmed with spiders of every description. The darkness

around them bloomed with owls flying, perching everywhere. Two owls posted themselves on either side of the Lady's head. They grasped her shoulders tightly. Blood seeped down her back and breasts as the birds screeched their threats.

"My servants have warned me," the Lady said.

"Maybe it wishes only to pass through our realm," the Lord said. "No war has broken out. None of our heroes have come to warn us. The gods are at rest."

"But Mictlan speaks," the Lady said. "In many ways, and in many forms. You've said this yourself. Something horrible has entered the underworld, and without our consent. Let us hope it takes what it wants and leaves."

7.

"What do you think of this design, Lea?"

"I like it, mamá. The flowers are so pretty."

"We'll make such a wonderful home, Rafael will ask others to accompany him here. With all of our extended family, our celebration will be the talk of the barrio. We'll invite everyone."

"I'm so happy, mamá," Lea said, and she was. Her mother had grieved for too long. Rafael was her only son, her pride and joy. Of course, she loved her daughter. *Now more than ever*, Lea believed. Losing Rafael had ripped out a chunk of her heart. *Perhaps, Lea thought, maybe the two of us could make memories and build a new life together, one of love, closeness, and remembrance.* "Of course, we will, mamá. We'll go together, invite people personally. That will show the devotion to our dead, and to those of other families."

"Do you remember Rafael's favorite sweets?" Alma asked.

"Of course, mamá. The cookies you made only on special occasions. I loved them too."

"As a small boy, he would wait in the dining room until I put a fresh rack of cookies on the counter to cool."

Lea laughed. "He didn't care if they burned his hand. After waiting for you to leave the kitchen, he would steal some and run to his room."

"He thought I didn't know," Alma said. "I let him get away with his pranks, though. How could I not, with such an innocent smile. He would come out of his room, his lips smeared with chocolate. Even his hand, the one he tried so carefully to wipe the gooey mess away with. Bless his heart." Alma signed her forehead, shoulders, and soul.

Lea watched her mother smile. It made her heart sing to see it, but Alma's eyes told a different story. Always a little distant, as they'd been whenever she talked about her husband. Now she had two losses to remember. Both of the men in her life. *How can she show such a strong face to the world?*

"And papá?" Lea asked. "Will we make something special for him, mamá?"

"Of course, just as we always have, hija."

"He loved to garden," Lea said. "Remember the beautiful flowers you showed me?"

"El toque mágico, that's what we called him before you and Rafael came along. We'll have candy and cookies for Rafael, and an entire bed of flowers for Antonio."

"Will we visit the gravesite again, mamá?"

"Si, hija," Alma said. "If you find someone as strong as your brother to watch over you, I'll let you stay until morning. You can invite our dead to follow you home. That's a very important part of our celebration."

"I'd love that, mamá. Thank you so much. I know Jesús and Mateo will go with me. We'll have a big group from school, I'm sure of it."

"I'm glad," Alma said. "Isn't it wonderful that we have a tradition that began over five hundred years ago. First with the Aztecs, and then when they refused to let the Spanish rip it away, they blended their ceremony with Catholic beliefs."

"Where will we buy the flowers this year?" Lea asked.

"This year we will do our men a great service and pick all of our decorations."

"That many? It'll take forever!"

"Which is why Rafael and Antonio will be so eager to visit," Alma said. "Trust me, hija, when we're finished, and our home displays the brilliance of our love, you'll feel so proud. We'll sit and close

our eyes, listen for their footfalls. If we're lucky, we might even hear them speaking to us." Alma grabbed her daughter's hand. "I don't know how I could have made it through the last year without you, child. Thank you."

"You're welcome, mamá. I'd do anything for you. Tell me, please, where will we find our skeletons and skulls?"

"I held it back," Alma said, "but I'll tell you now. We're taking a trip to see your Aunt Kasandra, in Mexico."

"Really?" said Lea, excitedly. "How fun!"

"Yes, and while we're there, we'll stock up on everything we can't bake or pick for Dia de los Muertos."

"Oh mamá, I can't wait. I love tia Kasandra. She tells the most amazing stories, and she always takes us on incredible trips to the countryside. The ranchos, the caballos, and the sunsets. She knows exactly where to go every time."

"Si," Alma said. "That is true, and this time you can ask her to tell you stories about your father. I think you're old enough."

"Do you think she will?" asked Lea.

"Of course she will," Alma said. "She knew him long before I came along. Perhaps I'll learn a thing or two about Antonio as well."

They giggled together, two schoolgirls sharing a secret. Lea hugged her mother. Alma returned the gesture, squeezing her daughter tightly.

"You're my life, hija, my very life."

"I love you, mamá."

"And I you, Lea. More than you know." She released her daughter, turned toward the hallway. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. Alejandra called. She's asked us to dinner at their home this weekend. What should I tell her?"

"What would you like to do, mamá?"

"I'd like a night off from cooking dinner, so I'll tell her we'll be there."

Lea smiled. "Something else to look forward to, right mamá?"

"Si," she said. "I'm going to lie down for a while, Lea. Wake me if you need anything."

"Okay mamá, get some rest. I have schoolwork."

8.

Hot beads of sweat tickled Diego's eyebrows. Ninety-three degrees with sixty percent humidity. Second practice of the day. Not a wisp of wind.

"This blows," José said.

"C'mon, Diego," Ricardo said, hands on hips. "Do something about it."

"Like what?" Diego asked. "You think I can change the weather now, too?"

The jóvenes drank from their water bottles, poured some of the lukewarm liquid down their necks. The relentless sun bore down on them like an angry father.

"Tell Magnifico," Ricardo said. "He can do anything. At least ask him to fly over the field a few times, give us some wind."

"Yea, Diego," José said. "Órale, get a hold of those dragons."

"Right," Diego said. "I know exactly what Magnifico would say. 'Certainly, the guide to the leader of the Sol Dragones can withstand a little hot weather', or something snotty like that."

"What about his girlfriend?" José asked. "Maybe she'll do it for us."

"I don't think it matters," Diego said. "Looks like our break is over."

They emptied their water bottles and tossed them next to their gear.

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"Okay boys, I want three lines, starting at midfield. Go row by row and take off as a unit, on my whistle. Passing, dribbling, and striking. Make up your own plays. Use a little creativity, and if I see so much as one group not going full speed, I'll tack on another hour to today's practice."

Diego, José, and Ricardo watched the other boys handle their lines. For two more weeks, they would be together, practicing and playing. Once school started, some of them would stay with Diego and his friends. Others would leave for their respective campuses. What they remembered from summer league would help them when they played against each other during the season.

Their line, up next, gouged their cleats into the grass. The coach's whistle cut through the dry air like a hawk's call and José took off in a spray of green blades. The ball bounced lazily toward them.

José faked a dribble and skipped right over the ball. Diego hustled around Ricardo, picked up the ball and dribbled it toward goal. He slip-kicked to José who passed it back to Diego. Diego ran onside, dribbling, his two friends close behind. He faked a kick toward goal and left the ball for Ricardo. Ricardo blasted the ball by the goalie for an easy score.

The boys ran back to the end of the line.

"I wish we had Conor with us," José said.

"We're good right now," Ricardo said, "we'd be unbeatable with him."

"Yea, well, he's not here," Diego said. "Let's focus on what we have."

"Okay, Coach Ramirez," José said. He skated his cleat across the grass, decorating Diego's socks.

"Hey you, bobos!" Coach Morales yelled. "Your line's up. Why do you think I'm blowing this whistle?"

José imitated himself blowing a whistle. puffed his cheeks out, bent over at the waist.

"You stay after practice," Morales said. He blew his whistle again, sending the boys down the field. José took the ball in stride and raced down the field. Before Morales could touch the whistle to his lips again, he'd fired the ball into the net.

"It's a good thing you run like a demon," said Morales. "Or I'd bust you down to junior varsity in a heartbeat." He waited until Diego and Ricardo caught up to José. "Now line up and do it right this time. No less than five passes before anyone takes a shot on goal."

The whistle blew when their turn came. They executed the coach's plan to perfection. Diego became the goal scorer for this run, after five passes, just as coach had instructed.

"Amazing what you can do when you follow orders," Coach Morales said. "Alright!" he yelled. "Let's bring it in!"

About thirty players crowded around the summer league coach. None of them looked winded, but their clothes clung to their skin like they'd just come from the showers.

"You young men have worked hard this summer," began Coach Morales. "I want to thank you for the effort you put in over the last seven weeks. Be proud of yourselves. I know this will help every one of you when fall comes around.

"Some of you will stay with me when school starts at Escondido High. Those that'll be at other schools, I want to make sure you know you can always drop by my office, call me, email me, or text me. I don't care what the issue is, even if you just need an ear. Believe it or not, I was fifteen years old once. I remember how tough it is to survive high school. I also know what it means to thrive there. You have a good start by competing in varsity athletics.

"Don't be afraid to get involved in other things. I know you have friends, some of you even girlfriends, but that shouldn't keep you from learning new things."

"Like what, coach?" one of the jóvenes asked.

"Like knitting, for you, vato," Ricardo said. The group erupted.

"Or maybe getting your ass kicked, puto," said the young man.

"Try it now, joto," said José.

The group fell into a scuffle immediately. They squared off by schools. Coach Morales managed to break it up before it moved beyond shoving and more name calling.

"Damnit! Are you guys brain-dead? You've been out here all summer training together, supporting each other, and that's how long it takes you to go at it?"

"They started it, c..."

"Quiet!" said Morales. "That's ten laps for everyone."

"C'mon, coach." said Diego.

"Twenty! You wanna try for forty?"

Order had been restored.

"That's it then. Get moving, and if I see anything resembling a fight, I'll call every one of your parents and tell them you asked to run all night!

"José, report to me after you finish your laps."

Ten laps in and the guys regretted it. At least he hadn't ordered them to run on the track. Their feet would've been ruined for the year.

Even though the coach had left the field, not one of the players skirted inside the appointed running lane.

"Dammit, Diego," Ricardo said. "We'd be done if you hadn't opened your mouth."

"Yea, it's my fault. Now, if you feel better, can we finish our run?"

"You shoulda blown those guys off the field," José said. "Then we could be in the shower instead of workin' up a bruised hamstring."

"See why I didn't want to tell you jerks anything?" Diego said. "Now it's going to be 'Diego, do this' and 'Diego, do that'."

"Órale," the player who wanted a piece of Ricardo said. "What are you guys talkin' about? Diego should have blown us off the field."

"Great," Diego said. "You bobos explain it to him."

"Diego can turn into un gran viento," José said. "He can huff and puff and blow soccer players off the fields."

"Bebé. Is that the kind of story your mamá reads to you every night?" Some of the players laughed. "Mamá, mamá, leelo de nuevo, por favor."

"Shut up, Juan," José said. "I can run until the sun comes up. Can you? I'll bet you don't make the next ten laps without puking your guts out."

"In n' Out," Juan said. "You buy for Barrio, Martín, and me if I make it."

"And you buy for my buddies and me when you don't."

"Bet."

"Ready to run?"

"I'll follow you, chump," Juan said.

"All the way to the end," José said.

The two boys took off. Diego shook his head as Ricardo smiled. If there was anything José loved more than In n' Out, it was free In n' Out. Ricardo knew he'd run to the ends of the earth for it.

Diego saw Racquel waiting by the field gate. She'd long since finished her run and had already showered. As the group of soccer players ran by her, Diego smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Whose fault is it this time?" she asked.

"It's your boyfriend's fault," Martín said. "Coach gave us ten laps and dumb-ass Diego tried to get us out of it."

"Your idiot buddy got us into it," Diego said.

"Both of you shut your mouths," called out Coach Morales. "All I want to see is running. No talking, anyone!" He stopped next to Racquel. "The guys are working hard, but they're also trying to look tough, too."

"Boys will be boys," Racquel said.

"For the rest of eternity," the coach said. "Afraid we'll never change." He looked at her athletic bag. "How's the running?"

"It's going well," she said. "I've cut my time in the four-forty split. Coach is pretty happy about that. She wants me to run longer distances, but I don't know."

"Might help with soccer. Nothing wrong with being able to run for hours."

"Except for what it does to your body. I'd like to be pain free later in life. Plus, I think I'm going to focus on track this year."

"Jeezus," said the coach. "You're not even old enough to drive. Why are you worrying about that?"

"Sports medicine has come a long way," she said. "It's not how much pain you're in now. It's more about what you'll feel later in life."

"Guess that's true. I wish they'd been studying that during my high school years."

"Is that why you growl so much at your players?" Racquel asked, showing a coy smile. "Because of the pain?"

The pack came around again. Morales gave each of them a hard stare as they passed. "I snarl at players so they'll be afraid of me."

"Not a whole lot these guys are afraid of."

Morales stared across the field for the longest time. He knew she spoke the truth. "Yep. I don't know if that's bad or good."

"Good if it will help them later in life. Bad if it keeps them from seeing the rest of their lives."

"You're right, Racquel. I love these guys. Heck, I love every player I've ever coached. They're all good kids, every one of 'em. Too bad society places them in the wrong light. They get marked at a young age and it's hard for them to shake it. Soon they start to live it. Some of them anyway.

"You got a good one in Diego. I think he's going to do great things."

"Me too," Racquel said.

"Just make sure he drags his two buddies along with him," Morales said. "Ricardo's probably safe, but I worry about José. He's always ready to jump. Doesn't take a whole lot to make him spark."

"As you say, though, they're all good guys."

They watched the group scamper by, a little faster than anywhere else in the oval. Not one of the players made a sound.

"Course they are," the coach said. "They'd do anything for each other, and I'm sure they love their families. The challenge is out there." He waved his arm in a wide arc. "Damn city. Excuse my mouth."

"You made it, right?" Racquel asked.

"Yea, I made it." He stared at nothing, said nothing for quite some time.

"And to answer your question," the coach finally continued, "it isn't so much that they're afraid of me, they just want to play soccer. I have the power to take that away, and they know it."

"C'mon coach," Racquel said. "These guys love you like an uncle, or a big brother, or even a father. You're not just a coach to them."

"Yes. But I can't cross that line completely. When I drop the hammer, they have to step up, and I mean immediately."

"Yea," Racquel said. "So I've seen."

"It's why I coach K-12. Once they get past high school, some players start falling in love with a self-made legend. Think they know everything and don't have to listen to the coach anymore."

Racquel waited to comment. The group approached again. "How many laps do they have left?" she asked.

"How many laps to go, girls?"

"One!"

"Only two more, coach!"

"One more!"

"Six more laps!" roared Morales. "And you better pick it up. I want to see you girls running, not plodding along like a bunch of old milk horses."

"What's a milk horse?" asked Ricardo with a smirk.

"Quiet!"

"Shut up, Ricky," whispered Diego.

Juan and José ran up behind the pack. Bario did his best to trip José, but the quicker player skipped over Bario's outstretched foot and slapped his head as he skirted by him. Juan tried to take advantage and run ahead of José, but José had had enough. He skipped into a new gear, blew by Juan, and raced toward the other end of the field.

"Knew it," Ricardo said. "Juan'll never catch him now."

"He wants to make him puke," Diego said. "Juan's just stubborn enough to do it."

José ran as if they'd just hit the field for practice. He looked fresh, strong, and ready for a number one combo at In n' Out. Juan did himself proud, keeping a strong pace. In the end, though, the prediction came true.

The rest of the players circled around for the last time. Passed by Juan, who stood bent over, hands on knees, dry-heaving what remained of his stomach.

"Not a word," Diego said. "Any more laps and I'll be standing right next to him."

9.

"Whew," Racquel said. "You guys stink."

Ricardo flapped his jersey at Racquel. "You practice two-a-days all summer, then run twenty laps. See what you smell like."

Racquel waved away the odor as best she could. "You better go shower, all of you. You walk into In n' Out like that and they'll throw you out before you can order."

"We'll let you go in first," José said.

Racquel smiled, then turned to Diego. "You want me to wait for you?"

"Yea, if you wouldn't mind."

"Oh Diego," Ricardo sang. "I would wait for you all day if it meant I could see you for only a moment." His voice rippled off the locker room walls as he walked inside.

"Estupido," Diego said. He pushed Ricardo.

"Hey," José said as he walked in behind Diego. "I heard Esteban and Catalina are getting married."

*

Racquel held her phone, texted Yesenia. She laughed when she received a response, then quickly sent another. This time she got a bunch of emojis.

Suddenly she received a very different message. She turned off her cellphone, slid it into her right back pocket. She stood still, cleared her mind.

"Are you there, my guide? Racquel, are you there?"

"Estrella?"

"It is I, Racquel." The golden dragon spoke silently in her guide's mind. "We must meet, and soon."

"What is it, my Lady?" Racquel asked, quietly. "Is it urgent? I sense trouble in your voice."

"Nothing as of yet," Estrella said. "But there are things we must discuss, the four of us."

"Magnifico and Diego as well?"

"Yes, my dear. You must tell Diego. We will all meet at Hellhole Canyon."

"That's pretty far, Estrella, from either of our homes."

"Jenna will come to collect you and Diego. You will be transported to the canyon as easily as if you've walked out your front door. Tell Diego to wait with you at midnight tomorrow. Jenna will be there. I promise."

"We have school the next day," Racquel said. "And our parents..."

"Will never know a thing," Estrella said. "Both of you will be safe at home well before the sun rises."

"As you wish, dragon." Racquel waved at a few friends that walked by her on the sidewalk. "Can you tell me anything?"

"Not at this time, guide. We've received visions, but the message is blurred, filled with shadows. Magnifico left Sol a short time ago. He intends to visit Mictlan. The Lord and Lady of the Underworld wish to consult with him in the land of the dead."

Racquel stuffed her hands into her jeans, bowed her head low. "You're scaring me, Estrella."

"Don't be frightened, guide. Be joyful. Love your family. Give your heart to Diego. Take care of him as you would your very own."

The soft voice faded just as Diego, José, and Ricardo bounced out of the locker room. Juan and his buddies followed, announcing the trip to In n' Out. "Are you coming, Racquel?" asked Juan.

"If you're paying, I'm going with you." She slid her arm into Juan's and walked with him along the sidewalk. "We'll be the first ones in."

*

Fifteen minutes later the group walked into In n' Out Burger on Valley Parkway. Diego held the door open, bowing like a servant to Racquel and Juan. The others followed, Ricardo and José pushing Diego as they entered burger heaven.

Just like the line of cars snaking around the building, the line to order food inside stretched all the way to the door. Juan and Racquel scrunched in as far as they could, giving the rest of their group room to let the door close behind them.

"Every table is taken," Martín said.

"Place's busy," José said. "Don't worry. Something will open up by the time our number is called."

"Maybe we can sit outside," Racquel said.

"And breathe in gas fumes?" Diego said. "No way."

"Guest 39!" shouted an In n' Out worker. "Guest 39, please!"

"We're probably going to be in the fifties," Ricardo said.

"So?" Barrio said.

"So, I'm hungry now."

"You're gettin' a free dinner. Shut up and love it. It's going to taste that much better."

They'd moved nearer to the front of the line.

"I just heard the cashier call those people's order number," Diego said. "It's fifty-nine."

"Sucks to be us," Juan said. "But it's not like none of us has never been hungry before."

"True that," Martín said.

"Diego," Racquel said. "There's a family getting up from a big table. Go grab it."

"I'm on it."

"What do you want to eat?" Racquel asked.

"Guest 40, 41, and 42," shouted a different worker. "Guests 40, 41, and 42, your orders are ready."

"What do I always get here?" asked Diego.

"Number one combo?"

Diego showed a thumbs up. He'd reached the table and stood holding one of the chairs. "Grilled onions with one slice of cheese."

Racquel nodded her head once, watched Diego grab a bunch of napkins and wipe down their table. He slid a free-standing chair over, making enough room for seven.

The rest gave their orders after Racquel had done so. She moved quickly over to Diego, sat down next to him. "Estrella contacted me today. We have to meet them tonight."

"Magnifico too?" he asked.

"Yes," Racquel said. "Something's wrong. She couldn't really explain it, but she said Jenna would come to my house tonight. She'll take us to Hellhole Canyon. The dragons will be waiting."

"No choice in the matter? Sounds just like Magnifico. One of these days I'll ignore his request, see what happens then."

"But you *will* be at my house tonight?"

"Yea, I'll be there," Diego said.

The group sat, dumped two dozen ketchup packets on the table. José took a handful of salt packets from his pocket and tossed them in the middle. "Anyone like extra salt?" Juan's two buddies each brought four mini-cups of ketchup with them. "We're going to get sodas," said Martín. When they returned to the table, Racquel and the rest of the group went to fill their cups.

"What did you get?" Diego asked.

"Burger, protein style," Racquel said. "Like always."

"And tea, I bet," said Juan. "How come no soda?"

"Just like tea better," Racquel said. "And by the way, here's to Juan for buying dinner."

"Órale!" everyone said.

"And to José," Ricardo said, "for running him into the ground."

"You put up a good fight, Juan," Diego said. "Someday you'll beat him."

"Jeezus," Ricardo said. "I'm going to die before I get my food."

"Get over yourself," José said. "Just think how much better it's going to taste when you finally crush that first bite." He made a face imitating Ricardo with half a burger stuffed into his mouth. Everyone laughed.

"What's our number?" Martín asked.

"61," Juan said. "Now I'm starting to feel like Ricardo. I see people biting into burgers and fries all around me. Can't take it much longer."

"Go grab some ice and chew on that," Racquel said. "You'd think you guys haven't eaten since last weekend."

Juan flicked a ketchup packet at her. "Get a hold of your girlfriend, Diego. She can say that kind of crap to you, but we don't care if she gets mad at us."

Diego let his fist fall. It hit another ketchup packet perfectly. Juan looked down at his jersey, saw a huge splash of red all over his chest. He pulled his head up and everyone burst out laughing. "What the?" he asked.

"If I only had my camera ready," Racquel said. "We could share this picture for the rest of our lives." She started laughing again. Everyone else joined her.

"Órale," Juan said. "Keep looking over your shoulder, homie. You'll never know where it's coming from, or when, but I'm going to get you for that."

"I know," Martín said. "Let's get one of those gallon bags of ketchup from the dispenser by the napkins. Keep it for a few weeks so Diego'll forget all about it. Then after a game, *definitely* after a shower, we'll wait outside the locker room."

Ricardo looked down, catching Diego in his side-vision. He wondered if his friend was thinking about forcing all the ketchup back up at them. His lips spread into a devilish grin.

"Racquel," asked José. "You going to play soccer for school this year?"

"You bobos need her on *your* team," said Juan. "Then you might have someone who can actually score a goal or two."

Diego made a stupid face. "That's as funny as you are ugly."

"I don't think so," Racquel said. "I want to focus on running, and coach told me one tackle that's too rough will take me out of the track season completely."

"Typical girl answer," José said.

Racquel spit an ice cube at him. It hit the table, skittered right into his lap. "Shut up, pendejo. If you couldn't run so fast, you'd still be on junior varsity."

Every guy at the table fist bumped Racquel.

"Heck, I bet Lea could beat you in a park race," she added.

José scoffed. "Just name the time and the place."

"Guest 56 and 57 please. Guest number 56 and 57, your orders are ready."

"Órale," Ricardo said. "Almost time for our food."

"Guest 58 and 59 please. Guest number 58 and 59, your orders are ready."

"That's me," Diego said. He slid out of his seat, scooted up to the counter. As soon as he sat back down, a dozen hands shot into his meal box, grabbing for fries. "¿Qué pasa? You'll get your own in a minute." He sat there watching half of his meal disappear. "Mierda," he sighed.

"Diego!" Racquel said.

"Mi novio!" Martín said. "*Such language!*"

Diego grabbed a French fry. He bounced it off Martín's head. Martín caught it before it hit the table, wolfed it down, smiling.

"Guest 60, 61, and 62 please. Guest number 60, 61, 62, your orders are ready."

The rest of the table rushed to collect their food.

"Grab mine, will you, Ricardo?" Racquel asked.

"You won't have any fries left by the time he gets back with it," Diego said.

"Do you want some more soda?" she asked. "I'm going to get more tea."

"No, Yo sereno."

The other players almost ran Racquel over as they made their way back to the table. They sat quickly. It seemed as though a prayer meeting had begun. No one spoke while they ate. Diego reaching for others' fries was the only action at the table.

"Anyone hungry here?" asked Racquel. She sat next to Diego and began eating her burger. She became equally as quiet when she suddenly realized how hungry she felt as well.

The meal lasted all of four minutes. Ricardo balled up his wrapper first, made a swish in the trash can. He looked around at the others, seemingly for the first time. All of them chewed or pressed huge burger bites into their cheeks. The law at In n' Out ruled; you had to take the biggest bite you could every time.

"Órale," José said. "Muy bueno, eh?"

Three more players shot their crumpled wrapper into the trash.

"I'm impressed," Racquel said. "Nobody missed yet."

"Wait until Diego shoots," said José. "He couldn't hit water if he fell out of a boat."

Martín got up to get more soda. He dunked his wrapper in the trash on his way.

"Only way you'll ever make the shot," José said.

Martín flipped him the bird on his way. José kept an eye on him, especially when it took Martín time enough to fill three cups of soda. A handful of ice flew across the table when he got back. José stood quickly, let the cubes go right by him and into Ricardo's lap.

"He shoots, he scores!" José said. "Goal! Goal! Goal goal goal goal, gooooooooooal!"

Racquel sneered. "Why do boys *always* have to act so immaturely?"

"Look who's talking," Juan said. "You shot first!"

"So, he had that coming."

Diego quietly balled up his wrapper, cocked his arm and prepared to shoot. As soon as it left his hand, five others reached up to block the shot.

"Told you he'd miss," José said.

Racquel rolled hers up, faked a shot to get everyone up to block, and smiled sweetly at a ten-year-old girl walking by their table. "Will you toss this in the trash for me, please?" She passed it off before any of the boys could stop it.

"Muchas gracias," she said after the sweet girl slammed it into the trash can. "Let that be a lesson to you bobos. An extra pass can mean the difference between a win and a loss."

"Órale," Martín said. "Let's get outta here before I hurl."

"That's no bueno, Racquel," Juan said. "A girl giving boys coaching advice? Please."

"The girl who tied for the lead in most goals scored last year, by either team," Diego said. "Maybe you ought to listen."

"That's right," Racquel said. "And who was it that tied me?"

"Conor," Diego said.

"Yea," Ricardo added. "Like I said, I wish we had him back this year."

"I'm glad you don't," Juan said. "That boy had Pies mágicos."

"Órale," Bario said.

"You won't even know he's gone when I fly by you," José said. "Even the track coach is bugging me. He wants me to run sprints for him."

"Right," Martín said. "One race against the guys on our team and all you'd be seeing is the backs of their jerseys."

Diego smiled at his friends. He felt lucky. Nothing like having a bunch of buddies who gave each other crap all the time.

Still, the talk about Conor made him think about his friend. Diego missed Rafael a lot. He thought of him almost every day. He remembered Conor, though, the Irish kid who popped in and out of their lives in so short a time. A different kind of guy, for sure, even without his amazing animal friends.

He recalled how easily Conor eased right into a friendship with Diego, José, and Ricardo, and then into their larger group of friends. He remembered Rafael testing him. Conor got in a few licks, but at the end Rafael gave him a pretty good beat down. A minute later Rafael helped Conor up, had his arm around his shoulder, telling him they'd have to fix him up if Conor wanted to date his sister, Lea.

"Diego," Racquel said. "You still here?"

"Yea," he said quickly, blinking the memories away.

"C'mon, everybody's leaving."

Diego leaned over to get out of the chair, felt a French fry bounce off his nose.

"I owed you that one," Martín said.

Diego bent over, picked up the dirty fry. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm not gonna toss this one in my mouth."

Estrella led the dragons away from Sol's chamber. Magnifico remained, awaiting a private session with his master. He sat, sphinx-like, head resting on his forepaws. Sol would address him when he felt ready. Magnifico meditated, recalling his first meetings with Diego.

After a while, Sol spoke. "Tell me, my son, what concerns you?"

"Mictlan, my Lord. There is trouble there."

"You are certain of this?"

"I know what I feel."

"Tell me," Sol said.

"It is more the Lady of the Underworld. It is she who senses something. I feel her emotions."

"The Lord and Lady rule the underworld. It is their province. They have many resources available to them. Do you believe the threat is that great?"

"I do," Magnifico said. "or I would not bother you."

"You are never a bother to me, my son. I have loved you since before you emerged from the stars. You must always feel welcome at my chamber."

"Thank you, my Lord."

Sol enjoyed a moment of quiet thought before continuing. "You wish to travel to the underworld?"

"It would be wise," Magnifico said. "If something disturbs the underworld, we must know its origin. We cannot leave ourselves unprepared."

"The underworld is not for the living," Sol said. "If I allow you to cross over, you will be at the mercy of any spirit that occupies the realm. You will be violating its rules by not passing through the nine levels, as all who enter the underworld must do."

"The risk is mine alone."

"I will make the appropriate preparations. Please sit, meditate further about Diego and your adventures together."

*

After some time Magnifico opened his eyes. The heat of the sun no longer warmed his body. He sat uncomfortably, on uneven rocks, cool to the touch. As he stood, his paws chafed on unfamiliar ground.

Before inhaling, he knew he'd lost his dragon fire the instant he passed into the underworld. Staying still for some minutes, his eyes darted to and fro, inspecting whatever he could see through the muddy mist. The heavy air seemed like liquid. He inhaled through his nose, catching odors never before sensed in his realm.

A river swelled around his paws. As it did so, the sky cleared, as if the river drew away the sky's energy to sustain itself. Magnifico blinked his blood-red eyes, peered across a great distance. Mountains loomed ahead, great peaks that seemed unstable, almost dancing with each other.

"Allow the river to take you toward the hills."

Magnifico settled his body in the water. The riverbed fell nearly fifty feet, almost covering him. Currents began pressing against his scales. Tiny rivulets tickled his jaw. He watched the direction of the flow as he began riding the slow wave.

"Let your head fall beneath the water's surface."

He did so. His speed increased after tucking his wings.

"Close your eyes, my son," Sol said.

The sensation shifted. He felt exactly as he did when soaring through Sol's flames. The river's water changed again, becoming like air. Even less than air, it felt like oblivion. Magnifico rolled upside-down, as he would do when flying around his sun. He entered a state of mindfulness, completely at one with himself and the river.

It ended as abruptly as it had begun. The depth of the water decreased until Magnifico could feel his wings dusting the bottom. Exploding through the surface, he flew away from his eerie transport. The mountains that collide loomed ahead.

Magnifico understood that he was rapidly moving from one level to the next. A journey like this could take years. Sol had cleared his passage with the Lord and Lady of the Underworld. They awaited him at Chicunamictlan, the place where souls found rest.

He flew with great caution toward the mountains. They could shift, bounce, or move in ways he'd never understand. If he couldn't adjust his flight at any moment, for any reason, he might never see Diego again.

Magnifico recalled Tenochtitlan. The rumbling mountains. The final battle with the stone snakes. He wondered if the mountains ahead had once towered over ancient lands on that continent. Had they given their loyalty to the wrong god? Was their presence here, in the underworld, a form of punishment? It seemed everything lived in a cycle, not only from birth to death to remembrance, but in life's relevance in relation to the sky, earth, and underworld.

He began to climb, soaring higher as he approached the mountains. He sensed apprehension, if nature could express such emotions. From where it came he couldn't imagine. Something pecked at his mind, though, telling him it had to do with the Lord and Lady of the Underworld, and their concerns about their domain.

The mountains stirred. *Moved toward him.* Or toward the path of his flight.

"They wish to block my way," he whispered.

"Fly forward, my son," Sol said.

"Through mountains?"

"Battle tactics. Remember your training. How you've trained the Sol Dragoness."

"Master, that is used to fight other drag..."

"Trust me, as you always have."

Magnifico raced toward the base of the nearest mountain, skirting trees so closely the tips of the dead pines flicked against his scales. A deafening rumble rolled over every other sound. Magnifico felt certain a landslide would bury him any second. At the last possible moment, he pulled hard on his wings, tipping his nose toward the sky. Twirling his body like a dancer, he saw in his mind the intent of the mountains. They moved almost as swiftly as he did.

Then it happened. The mountains released themselves. Huge waves of loose rock, trees, and giant boulders swept down toward him. The dragon had been waiting for this exact moment, and he struck the instant he saw the first tree flutter at the beginning of the onslaught.

He located the largest of the boulders, landed on it, used its great speed to propel him beyond that which the mountain could catch him. The titanic sounds of trees, rocks, and massive amounts of land swarming together nearly overwhelmed him. He tucked his wings to his body, his body to his paws, and willed his eyes to remain open through the blizzard of tears. Gripping the rocky surface with his mighty talons couldn't keep him from skittering sideways at times.

Magnifico's faith in Sol didn't smother the fear coating every scale on his body. If he fell from the boulder he would surely join the dead in this dwelling.

When the rock reached its fastest pace, Magnifico launched himself away. He stayed tucked, streamlined, using the incredible speed to outrace the avalanche. The mountains couldn't shift their strategy fast enough, and soon he could see smaller hills approaching. The remaining slides had no chance. Magnifico roared mightily while outpacing the thundering mountains.

The scenery flicked, then flicked again. In a flash the mountains vanished. Nothing remained. No sky, ground, water, nothing appeared before him. He existed in a milky white nothingness.

Far ahead, a speck penetrated the void. Then another, and soon, many more. Milky white turned to blood red, with black shapes dotting the scene. Magnifico couldn't make anything out through the vast distance. He continued on his forward path, facing the objects head on.

An instant later the distance between the dragon and the shapes changed. What once loomed a mile away now streamed all around him.

Hard, pointed flints and arrowheads slammed into Magnifico's face, wings, and paws a hundred at once. Alone, the flints could do no damage. Because they existed here, though, they carried with them a mysterious capacity to injure, even kill. They pierced the skin without falling away. Rubbing his forepaws against his chest did nothing to remove the stinging needles.

The dragon cried out. The pain increased every second they remained in his body. He couldn't fight it because he didn't understand them. He desperately needed his fire. The tiny pellets would melt away like teardrops in the fury of his flame.

If wings were all he had, he'd use them until he fell. Pulling himself into a steep climb, he kept them away from damage as best he could. Spinning, diving, scrambling in every direction, at least he kept the remaining flints from doing harm. Still, the pain increased until...

Freezing wind scratched his ears. Snow lay everywhere. It covered the ground, coated the trees springing up in the new environment. The wind carried blankets of snow and sleet. Magnifico could see nothing, but praise Sol he could feel nothing either. The flint's burning poison dissolved as they fell away from his throbbing body.

Magnifico smacked into something white. White and hard. Whap! His tail slapped something while passing another unknown location. He stopped, floated, looked in every direction, trying to find a way out. The hills circled him completely. They hadn't moved, yet, but Magnifico prepared himself.

Something flashed by his head. Much larger than a flint. Even in the snow, it gleamed as it cleared his vision. Another came, then another. Magnifico realized the danger.

The hills circled him. The wind blew in all directions, and snow was not all it carried. Knives the size of swords came at him from everywhere.

He shot straight up. Perhaps they wouldn't follow him to the sky. Like an upside-down funnel, the knives followed. They would not allow him to escape.

He turned, dove, twisted, twirled. Then the insanity in his mind took over. The underworld took control, forced him straight to the snow.

The whiteness exploded. Knives shot in every direction. Trying to follow Magnifico, the eruption of the flurry gave them no victim to chase. They crashed against each other, ricocheting this way and that. They stayed aloft long enough to realize their target had escaped. Instead of falling, they returned to their origin. The hills called them back to wait for another victim.

Magnifico burst not through snow but sand, sands of an underworld desert. They spread for miles, hundreds of miles, carpeted by bogs and moors. The dragon perched as best he could on a steep mound, began cleaning himself. Inspecting his chest and paws, he pecked at the small incisions that remained from the flints. Shook his body like a dog, tossing snow, water, and sand to the sides, front, and back. Cleared his throat harshly, blasted his nostrils as if they still could shoot fire.

Up he went, above the desert, the bogs, the moors, until he could see something flapping in the wind. Shook his head in wonder. *Who would post a banner of allegiance in this forsaken place?* The fluttering material, attached to poles in the sand, made no sense to Magnifico. Banners showed marks of a kingdom or of territory. Or of a crest people followed. These were like nothing he'd ever seen.

He flew closer. The banners were made of people. Not cloth at all but pressed human flesh. He reared up in shock and disgust.

"This is not the underworld you spoke of, master."

"Of course it is, my son," Sol said in a soothing whisper. "Never judge what is important to another based upon your own beliefs."

"Even the spirits of the sun had a final stage of life, and then deliverance through Diego's sparkling torch. Here they have nothing but the wickedness of eternal humiliation."

"That is your explanation, Magnifico, not the underworld's."

The dragon coasted along miles of flapping bodies. He would take his master's side, but the scene disgusted him. He flew faster, then faster still. *Please, he thought, let me pass through this level.*

Sol granted his wish. Or the Lord and Lady of the Underworld drew him closer.

He landed softly on a welcoming trail. Finally, he thought, a level where nothing attacked the dead.

He sensed something motioning him forward and walked steadily for some time. Stillness surrounded him. He breathed out slowly, stopped for a moment, and rested.

His paws felt the soothing touch of something close by. Tiny hands glided their fingers around and through his scales. Cleaned them, one-by-one, removing anything left over from other levels. Soon, the hands moved up to his legs, then his body.

Magnifico breathed in softly, then exhaled slowly. Sol must have sent the healing hands to ease his travels. When they'd finished with his paws, he crouched down, eyes closed, completely relaxed.

They struck swiftly. Arrows of every description tore into his flesh. His scales deflected nothing, it seemed they had disappeared. The dragon roared, or tried to, because when his eyes looked to the sky, the hands sent hundreds of arrows toward his throat. They slammed home, nearly choking him.

The arrows were meant for those already dead. A living creature couldn't withstand the attack. Magnifico rolled, crashed to the ground. His huge body shook the arrowheads slightly, freed them just enough. Magnifico rolled, jumped, and forced many clear of his skin.

"Sol, save me!"

A sun burned just beyond his eyelids. Lifting his damaged forepaws, he covered his eyes. It did nothing to lower the stinging light and heat.

Wild animals yipped all around him. He could tell they sought the dead, sought to take them down and tear into their bodies. The heart was sacred in the realm of Mictlan. The hungry beasts ripped into flesh, bone, and muscle. None cried out, and Magnifico curled himself tightly together, in case the raging pack found him appealing.

The sounds of hideous death faded away. The dragon remained alone on the bewitched path. He stayed silent, hoping, until he felt certain of his safety.

He cracked an eyelid, pulled his forepaw away. Saw nothing but thick fog everywhere. Placing his paws on the ground, he stood, tried to get his bearings. He looked in all directions.

"Sol forgive me. I am truly lost."

The voice of Mictēcacihuātl called out. "Welcome Magnifico."

"Who speaks to me?" the dragon asked.

The fog revealed its obedience to the Lady of the Underworld, or its concern at upsetting her. It looked as if a god had blown the fog away. Yet there, in front of Magnifico, stood a lone woman. She waved her hand in front of her, across her body, like a command. Misty swirls cleared the way, so they could speak.

"It is I, leader of the Sol Dragones. I welcome you to the realm of the underworld."

"And I also, servant of Sol," Mictlantecuhтли said.

Magnifico turned, looked behind him. The Lord of the Underworld stood firmly. Neither he nor his lady wore brilliant clothing or jewelry. They approached Magnifico in the colorful fashion of festival, more human than dead.

"I beg forgiveness for this intrusion," the dragon said as he bowed to both of them.

"Rise, dragon," the Lady said. "You have responded to my call, my concern. We are in your debt."

"I have felt the discomfort of the underworld. Sol has expressed the same feelings. Thank you for granting me passage through the nine levels. I'm certain no one before has made the journey so quickly."

"Only one other, that we know of," the Lady said. "It covers its tracks well."

"It?" Magnifico asked.

"We don't know its origin," said the Lord. "Nor its purpose. But we do know it is very powerful. Otherwise it wouldn't be able to move between levels so easily."

"You have seen this?"

"We have sensed it, dragon," the Lady said. "On one occasion it made it into the fog. We rushed there with our servants. Before we could attack, it vanished."

"Back to the level before the fog?" Magnifico asked.

"No," the Lord said. "As my Lady told you, it vanished. We searched, we sent servants to all levels, they found nothing."

"Then perhaps it is gone."

"No," the Lady said. "It remains. Perhaps if you stay long enough, you will sense its presence as well."

"I *have* sensed it. That is why I came."

The Lady of the Underworld glanced at her husband.

"No, Magnifico," the Lord said. "Or perhaps only partially. Certainly you have not felt it as strongly as we."

"Then tell me," the dragon said, "what do you feel?"

"Anger," the Lady said. "wicked anger."

"A thirst for revenge," the Lord added. "It is eager to kill."

"It is a hideous thing," the Lady said. "It sickens me to know it floats freely about our realm."

Magnifico closed his eyes, fell into a deep trance. He focused on the Lady of the Underworld, on her mind, her thoughts. He reached into her past, traveled with her through everything she'd sensed in the last month. The creature came and went, in and out of levels, trying to find an exit. It wanted to use Mictlan to transfer itself back to...

"No." he roared. "No!"

"Magnifico! What is it?"

"Something I'd hoped had been destroyed forever." He turned to the Lady. "Has anyone ever escaped the underworld? Gone somewhere to be with the living?"

"That is not possible," the Lady said. "The gods prepared this realm thousands of years ago. This is a place for the dead. No one has the power to transfer to the land of the living."

"Not even a dark lord?" Magnifico asked. "An evil wizard with who commands horrible magic?"

Once again, the Lady sought her husband's opinion.

"No," the Lord said. "It has never been done. Once the dead find their place of rest, they remain there. Only the ceremony of Dia de los Muertos can invite them home. Even then, they are trapped in spirit form, and must return once the festival is finished."

"Dia de los Muertos?" asked Magnifico.

"Yes."

"And how long does the celebration last?"

"For two days," the Lady said. "It can vary, but mostly it begins on the first day of November and ends the second day."

"And you say the dead are trapped in spirit form as they visit family members?"

"They are called back to their homes, yes," the Lord said.

"What if the dark lord took the form of a gentle spirit? Could it then pass through the underworld to the lands of the living?"

The Lord and Lady of the Underworld forgot about Magnifico for a moment. They stared at each other, lost in a trance of focus, concentration, concern. Their eyes closed at the same time. Magnifico felt what they sensed. Evil, terror without conscience, death, torture, a need to escape, to find...

"Diego," Magnifico said.

"Your guide?" the Lady asked.

"Yes, the one true guide. The dragon master, the son of Sol."

"And how does he fit into the rumblings of the underworld?" asked the Lord.

"It is Diego the spirit seeks. Somehow it lives, and its name is Satadon."

11.

Diego raised his eyes to the night sky. He loved being outside late, or early in the morning. The peaceful atmosphere calmed him. Compared to the chaos of daytime, the quiet allowed Diego to think about his life.

Four years ago he'd written an essay about soccer. When he'd heard about the district writing contest, he knew exactly what his topic would be. It seemed so easy for him. His teacher had congratulated him on picking something he felt passionate about.

"That's one of the keys to writing, Diego." she had said. "Good for you."

Nathan Sullivan had visited his school, given Diego the black dragon statue. He'd become a mentor to him. He'd taught him about dragon fire, stood strong as a shield between Magnifico and Diego. It hadn't been easy in the early days.

"I think of you a lot, Mr. Sullivan," Diego said aloud, "I hope you're okay."

He turned off Washington onto Racquel's street. Every home looked dark, locked up tight for a good night's rest. Streetlights lent an eerie glow along the sidewalks. Diego came up to Racquel's house. The porch light set the steps aglow, but Diego didn't see his girlfriend anywhere.

He jumped when he felt Racquel's arms slide around his waist.

"Nervous?" Racquel asked. "The great guide to Magnifico?"

"Never," Diego said. "You know how to be quiet, that's all."

"Obviously she paid close attention to her conduit's training."

They both turned at the sound of Jenna's voice. "Where were you?" Racquel asked.

"Waiting for you to arrive," Jenna said. "Diego, you're looking well."

"Gracias, señora."

"We're so sorry, Jenna, for your loss," Racquel said. "We loved Mr. Sullivan too."

Jenna stood briefly, closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she appeared ready to travel. "Well, shall we honor Nathan?"

"Yes, Racquel said. "Let's go meet our dragons."

"Follow me."

Racquel fell in behind her conduit. Diego followed both of them. He looked past Racquel's hair, Jenna's shoulders, and watched the street scene fade. As the image blurred an energy field moved through him. He felt his eyebrows prickle, his scalp twitch, even the small hairs on his arm shuddered. Within one breath he looked upon a roughly carved trail. Rocks lined the path on the right. A rough dirt hill, dotted with weeds and taller than Racquel, ran along the left side of the route. Diego ran his fingers over the coarse dirt, wondering how many years had passed since the trail had been cut.

No moon shone in the sky. Racquel and Diego could have foreseen that before the dragons called the meeting. The city closed Hellhole Canyon after dark, which meant they'd be alone. The presence of two giant dragons would be concealed by the shadows as well.

Racquel slipped. Immediately, a light appeared behind Jenna. It didn't come from anywhere, or anything, she hadn't brought a flashlight with her. To Diego it looked like dragon fire without the flame. It merely existed, and it helped them pass the difficult parts of the path.

"Not much farther now," Jenna said.

"This trail must end soon," Racquel said. "I can't imagine meeting the dragons on this skinny path."

"Don't worry."

Diego listened to his feet scraping against the ground. He grabbed a low branch, pulled it over his head. He nearly walked into Racquel's back as they crested a small hill. Jenna stood at the top. She gazed out over a grand basin full of trees, bushes, and thick grass.

"We're here," she said.

"Where?" Diego asked.

A voice boomed around the canyon. "One might think Magnifico's guide would know the area of his favorite park."

"Show yourself, dragon."

From across the small canyon, a dark cluster of rocks shifted position. The crimson eyes opened. Diego knew that look like his own reflection.

"Magnifico!" He dashed across the soft dirt. Magnifico changed to his original form as his guide came closer; scales, bubbling fire, muscles bursting with attitude.

Diego ran up one of the huge paws, planted himself astride his dragon's wings. He let himself fall forward, lying prone on Magnifico's head. He scratched the dragon's ears, eyelids, even his nose, as far as he could reach, anyway.

"You've grown, guide," Magnifico said. "But still a child at heart."

"That's the great thing about being human," Diego said. "You don't have to be dead serious all the time."

"You could take a lesson from him, my love," Estrella said, emerging from behind a tall stand of rocks. "A little laughter might do you some good."

"Hmph," Magnifico said, a blast of sulfurous smoke bubbling up from his lips. Diego hadn't been prepared for it. He tried unsuccessfully to hold his breath long enough.

"Very funny." Diego jumped off Magnifico's shoulders, dropping to the ground easily. Racquel wrapped her arm around his waist. "Still a grouch."

"I've lived a thousand human lifetimes. Of course I'm the same."

"Are you two finished?" asked Estrella. "One would think after such a long absence, you'd be thrilled to see your guide."

"We have no time for reunions," the leader of the Sol Dragones said. "There is trouble in Mictlan. Soon that danger will cross over to earth. We must all be prepared."

"What is it that disturbs the underworld?" asked Jenna.

"Tell us, Magnifico," Racquel said. "Why are we here?"

"A presence roams free in the underworld. The Lord and Lady of that realm sense its evil intent. They cannot trap the spirit, it moves swiftly between the nine levels of Mictlan."

"Mictlan is the land of the dead," Diego said. "Is it not?"

"Very good, guide," Estrella said. "Think hard. Who would be the worst threat to the underworld, or to us?"

Magnifico watched his guide. Awareness swept across his face like a wave splashing over a sandy beach.

"No," Racquel said, wide-eyed. "It can't be. Diego destroyed him. We all saw it."

"Death and destruction are not the same, guide," Estrella noted. "Satadon held powers we might not understand even now. If the smallest shred of his being remained, he could have regenerated."

Diego stomped his foot, sending a circle of dust out from his shoe. "I don't believe it. Whatever's gotten into the underworld, it couldn't be him. There might be any of a hundred demons, or a thousand. Satadon is gone, wiped out. No way he's coming back."

Magnifico exhaled a blast of fire. "He may already be here. Whatever the case, you'd better act as though he moves among you."

"We'll never be rid of him," Jenna whispered. "Nathan gave his life for nothing."

"Never say that," Estrella commanded. "Do you consider *yourself* nothing? Nathan loved you. He went mad after losing you in the temple. He gave his life trying to save you."

Jenna looked up to the stars.

"We'll never forget Nathan, conduit," Magnifico said. "Remember, when your tears overwhelm you, we remain by your side."

"Thank you, dragon."

"What do we have to do?" asked Racquel.

Magnifico turned his black-scaled head in Diego's direction. "Finally, someone who's ready to take action."

"Quiet," Estrella said.

"I only meant..."

"Shut up," Diego ordered.

Magnifico flicked his eyes back to his guide. "Who are you to..."

"I said *shut up!*"

The dragon's eyes became redder still. He squinted at his guide. "Perhaps we should leave, Estrella, and allow our hero the chance to win the battle himself."

"Nonsense," Estrella said. "Go back to Sol if you wish. I will stay with Jenna and the guides. We have much to discuss."

"If I may be allowed to speak." Magnifico bowed low to his guide.

"Just stop being a jerk."

A short growl preceded the dragon's next comment. "We plan to send two dragons to earth, Zephyer and Furtivo."

"Mateo and Jesús's dragons."

"Very good," Magnifico said. "They will remain here in Hellhole Canyon, for your protection. They are small enough to stay hidden. You can call to them at night, should you need them."

"Are you sure about Furtivo, my love?" Estrella asked. "He gave Misterioso endless fits with his pranks. He is, what would you call it, Racquel?"

"A pain," Diego said. "Just like another dragon I know."

"Perhaps dragons and humans aren't so different after all."

Diego picked up the biggest rock he could throw and launched it at his dragon. It smacked Magnifico below his eye, bounced off one of his claws and rolled on the ground. The guide stared at the scaly face without saying a word.

Magnifico could have flicked the tiny rock back at his guide at ten times the speed. Or perhaps hurl a rock twice Diego's size at him.

"Hmm, apparently the guide hasn't learned how to use his newfound powers."

A second later Magnifico flew sideways through the air. When he slammed against the canyon wall, it shook everything; trees, rocks, dirt, debris, even Estrella, Jenna, and Racquel.

"Magnifico!" Estrella gasped. "Are you hurt?"

The black dragon's left wing fluttered slowly. He extended it, waving it a bit faster. The claws reached out, grabbed a sturdy tree trunk, what remained of a huge oak before his body cut it down like a toothpick.

Magnifico got his legs underneath him, stood, checked his body for injuries. "Well, guide," he said, "it appears you still have a temper."

Jenna cupped her hand over her mouth to hide her smile. Racquel shoved Diego toward Magnifico.

He walked toward his dragon again. Magnifico shot thin streaks of blue fire over and around his wounded scales. They melted, then reformed, healing quickly.

"It is good to see you, Diego. You look more like a man than a boy. This is an important turning point in your life."

Diego walked closer, picked some sharp stone's from Magnifico's tiny facial scales. "You mean the part about growing, or about Satadon coming after me again?"

"Both, since one will feed into the other over the next few months."

"How?"

"If it is Satadon, and he presently moves through Mictlan, then he must be looking for a way into your world. He cannot touch you in the land of the living if he remains with the dead."

Diego continued grooming his dragon. Racquel joined him. Soon after that, Jenna came abreast of her guide and helped. They worked calmly, smiling at the dragon's rough purr.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of gale force winds rocketing through the canyon. Diego turned, waiting for Satadon to appear.

Out of the starless sky came Zephyr. She streaked downward toward Estrella, landing perfectly at her feet. Her wings steadied her; she looked at the gathering with eager eyes.

"And where might your cousin be?" Magnifico asked.

"Behind me, somewhere, I'm sure," Zephyr said. "You know Furtivo."

"Yes," the dragon said, his mood changed.

"He'll be along."

"I'm sure he's close," Estrella said. "I doubt the noise came from you, my dear."

Diego and Racquel searched the sky. They'd almost given up when Jenna took hold of Racquel's arm. She steered her finger and eyes toward a point above the highest part of the canyon. Just when Racquel saw Furtivo and pointed him out to Diego, the rushing winds returned.

Furtivo sounded like a hurricane when he finally swooped down. The blurring movement altered its flight five feet above the dirt floor as the streaking dragon soared around and around the inside of the canyon walls.

Magnifico lifted his huge body as Furtivo came about for his sixth pass. Turning sideways and beating his wings as fast as he could, he grabbed the smaller dragon's wings with his talons. Slamming Furtivo to the ground, he stomped on his body, scolding him.

"You *fool!* Would you have the entire city know you're here? Misterioso spoke truth. You should never have been paired with a guide."

Furtivo laughed as well as he could under Magnifico's weight. The leader of the Sol Dragons stepped away, disgusted with his charge.

"As I already said, a little laughter might do you some good."

"Estrella's right," said Zephyer. "We need Furtivo's good-humor. If I can put up with him, surely you can."

Jenna kneeled next to Furtivo. "Are you hurt, happy dragon?"

"Of course not. Magnifico would never damage his best fighter."

"Pah," Magnifico said, fiery smoke shooting from his nose. "Only a marginal soldier claims to be the best. You should focus on making those around you better."

Diego helped Furtivo up. "Jesús will be happy to see you, dragon."

"And I him. Once bonded, a dragon is not complete when separated from his guide."

"Or hers," Zephyer added.

"I'm so proud of you," Estrella said. "You've both grown, you look very strong." She smiled. "You'll have to warn Mateo and Jesús before letting them climb aboard again."

"Yea," Diego said. "I'd hate to see a repeat of Jesús's crash landing on Furtivo."

Racquel burst into laughter. Jenna smiled as she watched Furtivo's facial scales shift into an evil grin.

"Let us hope your pranks don't include a few passes outside the canyon," Magnifico warned. "I'll personally burn you to a crisp if I hear of you soaring over Diego's home."

"Don't listen to that old grouch," Estrella spit fire at her mate.

"Of course we wouldn't do that," Zephyr said. "You will tell Mateo and Jesús to come visit us, won't you?"

"As soon as we see them at school," Racquel answered.

"Quiet," ordered Magnifico. "Now!"

The six of them obeyed. Furtivo lost his smile, focused on Magnifico completely. The huge dragon raised his black head an inch at a time, looked over each ridge in the canyon.

"Flashlights," Diego said.

"Where?" Jenna asked.

"Coming up the trail. Look!"

"Oh my God. Estrella, you and..." She'd turned to warn the dragons and saw nothing. All four of them had vanished into the trees and gaps in the rocky walls. She looked back to the trail and saw two men cresting the path. "Stay calm," she said to Diego and Racquel. "Follow my lead."

The flashlights found them. Orders followed. They stayed where they were, a grown woman and two high school students.

"You shouldn't be here," said the first ranger. "This park is closed at night."

"I know," Jenna said. She smiled at the two men, winning them over before they could stop in front of Diego, Racquel, and her. "These are two of my best students. They asked me if I'd take them to a good place to watch the meteor shower. That's why we're here."

"What meteor shower?" the other ranger said. "I didn't hear anything about a shower tonight. Did you, Luis?"

"Not a word," Luis said. "Are you sure you have your dates correct?"

"Very sure," Jenna said. She hushed a laugh as she watched Zephyr and Furtivo soar silently into the sky behind the rangers. She chanced a look at the canyon wall and saw Magnifico and Estrella peeking over a ridge.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter," the first ranger said. "You can't be here. It isn't safe at night. You never know what might be lurking about."

Racquel smiled at Diego, her eyes gleaming.

"Couldn't we stay a little longer, sir?" he asked. "This could mean the difference between an A and a B."

"It's a report we have to write for school," Racquel added. "We chose the meteor shower as our writing project."

"Young lady," the ranger said, "I'd really like to help you, but number one, we have to escort you out of the canyon, and number two, I'm very sure there isn't going to be any..."

"John," Luis said, craning his neck so he could stare at the sky. "Look at that!"

"Wha?" the first ranger said. He looked at his partner, the two students, and their teacher, all of whom looked at the streaming lights above. He raised his eyes. "I don't believe it!"

One after another, high above Hellhole Canyon, small spurts of flame streaked across the sky.

"That's not a meteor," John said, tracking one of the flames.

"Of course it is," Jenna said. "This is a very rare event, gentlemen. Sol's stars appear only once in a generation. The fire you see in the sky is actually an image of sunspots reflecting off Venus. You are witnessing one of the galaxy's true celestial tricks."

The rangers watched as the bursts shot around the sky, blinking in and out.

Jenna motioned to Racquel and Diego, asking them silently to follow her. In five steps the three of them disappeared into the mist.

"Well," John said as the sky darkened again. "Show's over. I guess we'd better..."

"Where'd they go?" asked Luis.

"Hey," shouted John. "You three. I don't know what you're trying to pull, but we can't stay here all night looking for you!"

No response came from the silent canyon.

"Luis, you head north for a hundred yards. I'll check the trail south. They couldn't have gotten all that far. Meet back here as soon as we can."

"Okay John. I'll whistle if I find anything."

Magnifico watched the two men hurry along the trail in opposite directions. He lowered his head, motioning Estrella to do the same.

"Are they gone?" she asked.

"For the moment," Magnifico said. "They'll be back shortly."

"And then?"

"We'll wait for them to give up the search and leave the canyon."

"Then we can leave?" Estrella asked, "and go back to the sun?"

"After I speak with the meteor shower," he seethed.

The dragon raised his head again, peered over the tall stand of carved rock. He closed his eyes, listened. After a bit, he heard the one called Luis jogging lightly back toward the meeting place. He would arrive in seconds. The other he couldn't place. For a moment he became concerned. Could the man have stumbled upon something?

"Luis!" John yelled. "Luis! I'm back on the trail a bit. I've turned my ankle."

"Coming, John." Luis trotted through the canyon basin, over the south ridge of the trail. "I see you!"

Magnifico watched the younger man as he helped his friend to his feet. The man tried walking with one arm over Luis' shoulder.

"How does it feel?"

"Hurts," the older man replied. "But I can make it. Once we start moving it should loosen up. Let's head back. It's only a quarter mile or so."

"Do you think he'll make it?" Estrella asked.

"Yes," Magnifico said. "Humans have a toughness about them. Perhaps that's why Sol convinced us to pair with them."

"The prophecy spoke truly."

"Indeed. Diego is not the only one who can handle a dragon."

"Racquel and Lea as well," Estrella said.

"The prophecy indeed spoke truth," Magnifico said. "Too bad it didn't warn us about childish dragons."

He turned his head in a flash, caught Furtivo sneaking up behind him. When he turned back, Zephyr and Estrella stood side-by-side.

"Tell your cousin to stand forth," he growled menacingly.

"You heard him," Estrella commanded.

Hoping to avoid a nasty slap, Furtivo scooted around the giant dragon as quickly as he could. He stood next to Zephyr, eyes down and wings tucked. Estrella moved across and next to Magnifico, presenting a united front of discipline.

"Just what did you think you were doing?" Magnifico demanded.

"Helping Jenna and the guides?" Furtivo said.

"Yes," Zephyr added. "We overheard Jenna's explanation."

"So we thought we'd try and make it come true."

"And in the process alarm half the security stations in this part of the world? For the sake of two minor officials?"

"This canyon is the perfect place for the two of you to hide," Estrella said. "Or perhaps I should say *was* the perfect place."

"It'll be swarming with people tomorrow night," Magnifico said. "Investigators, scientists, meddlers. Where will you go now? How will you protect the guides?"

"We meant no harm," Zephyr said. "We tried to help them, that's all."

"You aided in their escape," Estrella said. "You should be commended for that."

"And that is all," Magnifico said. "Return to the sun at once. Wait for us there."

"We wish to remain here," Furtivo said. "To help Diego and Racquel, and our guides."

"Go, now," Magnifico said. "Tell Sol what you did. Perhaps he can explain your foolishness in a voice you'll understand."

Furtivo glanced at Zephyr. She nodded once. The two dragons, upset by their mistake, rocketed into the sky. They circled each other, zooming toward space.

12.

"Diego," Alvaro called. "Get the door!"

Diego ran down the hall from his bedroom. He slid the last ten feet on the tiled floor in his socks. A second later, he grabbed the door handle and pulled it open.

"Hola Lea. Hola Señora Navarro. Please, come in."

"Buenas Noches, Diego," Alma said, as she followed her daughter into the Ramirez home.

"Hi Diego," Lea said.

Diego gave a Lea a quick hug. Just then Alejandra floated through the kitchen, the scent of a delicious meal following her to the front door.

"Hola. I'm so glad you could come for dinner."

"Thank you for inviting us, Mrs. Ramirez," Lea said.

"This is for you, Alejandra," Alma said. She handed her a basket wrapped in a thick kitchen towel.

Alejandra held the basket to her nose. "Mmm, some of your delicious tortillas. Gracias, Alma, they'll go perfectly with dinner."

"See mama?" Lea said. "I told you they'd love them."

"Hush child."

"Of course we love them," Alvaro said as he walked down the hall of their home. After he put an arm around his wife, he bent at the waist and gave the basket a manly sniff. "Sweet Jesús, Alma, I could eat all of them right here in the hallway." He wrapped his strong arms around Lea and her mother. "Welcome, welcome to our home."

"Gracias, Alvaro," Alma said. "Twenty minutes in the oven should make them nice and warm, Alejandra."

"I'll hide them in the kitchen so el oso doesn't find them."

"Just one?" Alvaro asked, reaching two fingers and a thumb toward the basket. Alejandra made a move to slap his hand away, but Alma beat her to it. "No!" she snapped, a coy smile on her face.

"Is she like this at home, Lea?" he asked.

"She likes having a man to boss around."

"If she makes tortillas like these, she can boss me around anytime. Diego, why don't you and Lea go sit by the pool? It's a nice night."

"Okay, papá. C'mon Lea."

The two of them went through the living room door. Diego slid it closed behind them.

"Well, Alma," Alvaro said. "What can we get for you?"

"A small tequila might be nice."

Alvaro reached into a high cupboard, where they kept things only adults could find. "Ah, here it is."

Three tall shot glasses found their way to the kitchen counter. Alvaro deftly poured equal amounts into each one. "What shall we drink to?"

"Alma?" asked Alejandra.

"To Rafael," she said. "And to Antonio."

"Rafael," Alvaro said.

"Antonio," added Alejandra.

Alvaro threw down the entire shot. The ladies demurely sipped about a third from theirs as Alvaro uncorked the bottle again.

"Uh-uh," Alejandra warned.

"Cara, I only want to make certain the first taste wasn't just dumb luck. Cheers."

The glasses chinked again. Alvaro repeated his performance, but this time he left the bottle alone. "What do you think, Alma?"

"Mmm, delicioso. Gracias."

"Denada, con placer."

"Lea's growing up, Alma," Alejandra said. "Just like our Diego. Soon they'll be heading off to college."

"Si," Alma said. "And what a sad day that will be."

"I know, Alma, but you're always welcome here, and I can introduce you at the senior center. There are lots of volunteer activities for someone with a kind heart like yours."

"Thank you, Alejandra. That means a lot to me."

"Well," Alvaro said. "Why don't I leave you two to the kitchen. I have some paperwork to catch up on."

"Come, Alma," Alejandra said. "You can give me a few tips for tonight's meal."

*

"Your Dad was right," Lea said. "It is nice out."

"This is my favorite time of year," Diego said. "Late summer, early fall. The sun is still warm, but when the clouds fill the sky a cool breeze carries away the heat."

Lea looked at every door and window facing the pool, making sure they were shut tight. "Diego, what's up with the dragons? Racquel told me Estrella contacted her."

"That's right," Diego said.

"What did she want?"

"For Racquel and me to meet them in Hellhole Canyon."

"What did Magnifico tell you?"

"He couldn't say exactly. Something's creeping around, at least that's what he thinks."

"What?"

"He doesn't know. But he did say that it's trying to find a way back to our world."

"Not Satadon," Lea said. "Not the Dark Lord."

"Maybe," Diego said. "I don't know, but I can't believe it. We all saw what happened at Tenochtitlan. I wiped him out."

"Yea, and then you did some other crazy things. Even I felt a little scared, Diego. I've never seen anyone with that much power."

"There's something else going on with me, Lea."

"Tell me."

"You can't say anything to anyone. Especially not your Mom."

"Of course I won't," she said.

"I can move things now."

"You mean like fire?"

"I mean like anything," Diego said. "People, dragons, cars, who knows what else."

"Show me," Lea said.

Diego looked at her eyes. "Watch the pool."

She turned just in time to see over twenty thousand gallons of water rise up out of the deep end of Diego's pool. It looked like a wave about to break on a shoreline. The shallow end and half of the midpoint of the pool lay dry. As fast as it happened, the water slid slowly back into place, guided by Diego's thoughts.

"Okay," Lea said. "That's dope."

"It just happened one day," Diego said. "Can't remember what we were doing, but suddenly I went to kick a soccer ball, and it flew away from my foot before I got close."

Lea laughed. "Imagine what you'll be able to do this season."

"Yea, like moving opposing players out of the way."

They both laughed, then turned when they heard the sliding glass door of the living room.

"Dinner in five minutes, you two."

"Okay mamá," Diego said.

"Thank you, Mrs. Ramirez." Lea added.

"Lea," Diego said. "How are you doing about Rafael. Are you okay?"

"Racquel talked to you, didn't she."

"Yea. Don't be mad at her. She cares about you. So do I." Diego put his hand on her forearm. "I miss him a lot, too."

Lea sat quietly. She waited for Diego to change the subject.

"What are you and your mother doing for Dia de los Muertos? Something special for Rafael, and for your father?"

She smiled immediately. "We're going to visit mi tia Kasandra, in Mexico."

"Sounds great. I'm happy for you."

"We get to buy lots of Day of the Dead trinkets that you can only get in Mexico."

"They have tons of stuff up here," Diego said. "Not the best, though. I can't wait to see what you bring back."

"You should meet mi tia, Diego. She is so funny, and she tells the best stories." Lea stared at the waterfall in the deep end of Diego's pool. "She has the most beautiful smile, and an even better laugh. I swear, Diego, she must be the happiest person on earth."

"That's cool, Lea. It's fun to hang around people like that. What stories does she tell you?"

"She told me a story about the sun once, about how it burns so hot that it has to drop into the ocean every night to cool off."

"What about in the morning?" Diego asked.

"I can't remember exactly, but it seemed simple, like after it sank deep into the ocean all night, it came up again much cooler in the morning. She said every living thing helped it wake up, and by the time it soared high in the sky, it became so happy it beamed brightly, with a huge smile."

Diego smiled.

"I remember every time we visited, I'd ask her to tell me the story of the sun. She's the best storyteller anywhere."

"Okay you two," boomed the voice of Diego's father. "Anyone who wants dinner better get to the table before I do."

"And then there's my Dad," Diego said, smiling.

"I love your Dad," Lea said. "Everybody loves him."

"I know. I'm pretty lucky."

*

Lea clutched Diego's shoulder with both hands. "Oh my God, dinner smells incredible!"

They sat around the table, Alvaro at the head, Alejandra opposite him. Diego sat on his father's left, with Lea and her mother to his right.

"Alma," Alvaro said. "Will you offer thanks?"

Alma thanked the Lord for their good friends, the splendid meal laid out before them, and for the celebration soon to come. "May you guide Antonio and Rafael to our home, if our altar honors them enough."

"A wonderful prayer, Alma," Alejandra said. "Thank you."

"Of *course* your husband and son will visit your home during the celebration," Alvaro said. "Just as we will, to pay our respects and share in the stories you tell." He selected the tortilla basket first, respecting their guest. "Mmm, these are wonderful, Alma." He took a few and passed the basket to Lea.

All of the food plates circled the table. Alejandra watched her son closely. Still a growing boy, he had a habit of digging too deeply into the first round. Then he got lost in his food, forgetting they had guests. When he looked at her and winked, she knew he'd caught her silent message.

"What will you do for Day of the Dead, Lea?" Alvaro asked.

"Mamá and I are driving to Rosarito Beach soon."

"How fun!" Alejandra said.

"We'll be visiting Antonio's sister for a few days."

"Kasandra?"

"Si," Lea said. "She's my favorite aunt. Mrs. Ramirez, this dinner is amazing, isn't it mamá?"

"Muy delicioso, Alejandra. No wonder Alvaro is such a happy man."

"And such an hombre grande," Diego said.

"As you will be too, someday, chico, if you're lucky enough to marry someone who can cook like your mother."

"Maybe Racquel?" Lea asked, smiling coyly.

"Racquel is a wonderful girl," Alma said, "but Diego and she have a lot of life to live before they think of such things."

"What do you think, mijo?" Alejandra asked.

"Mas?" Diego asked, lifting his empty plate off the table.

Alma laughed quietly. "Oh, Diego. Bless you. You remind me so much of Rafael. Sometimes I wondered if there would be enough left for Lea."

"You may have more after our guests have filled their plates again."

"Es muy bueno, mamá. Papá's right. You're the best cook anywhere."

"Just remember, you two," Alejandra said. "Only the freshest tortillas could have made this meal as good as it is."

"Your mother is being generous, Diego," Alma said.

"Don't be modest, Alma," Alvaro said. "The tortillas are delicious."

Diego snatched another one from the basket. "I better make sure." Before his mother could stop him, he grabbed the carnitas fork and scooped a healthy portion onto his plate.

"Diego!"

"Let him be, Alejandra," Alma said. "There's plenty of food, and I'm full as it is."

"Good thing we have a healthy boy to clear the table and clean the kitchen," Alejandra said.

"I'll help him, Mrs. Ramirez," Lea said.

"You're our guest, Lea," Alvaro said. "Diego knows his chores."

"May I please have another helping of this delicious rice?" Lea asked.

"There now," Alejandra said. "Did you hear, Diego? That is the proper way to ask for seconds. You could learn from Lea."

"And from Racquel, and even Catalina," Alvaro said.

"I'll help you with dessert," Alma said.

"Diego?" Alejandra asked. "Will you sit with your father and Lea while she finishes her dinner?"

"Si mamá. Maybe papá can tell us about what's going on at work."

"Why would you want to hear such boring tales?" Alvaro asked. "Maybe Lea would like the story of how I wrestled un toro all by myself to save your mother."

"Try not to spit your rice on the table," Diego said. He got up, started clearing plates and glasses to the sink.

"Oh please," Lea said after swallowing quickly. "Won't you tell me?"

"Of course," Alvaro said. "It happened when Diego's mother was pregnant with Esteban. We'd decided to fly south for the bullfights at La Monumental in Mexico City."

"You've been to the stadium?" Lea asked excitedly.

"Si, and you must go someday. It is the largest bullfighting arena in the world. It is something when you hear forty thousand people cheer wildly for el toro o el matador."

"Did you fight in the great arena, Señor?"

Diego nearly tripped with an armful of plates.

"Not in the arena, niña," Alvaro said. "In the fields, where there was no one to help me."

"Holy Mother of God, what happened?"

Alvaro began waving his arms around, making wild gestures in order to suck Lea into the story. "We'd rented a car to take us to the festival, Diego's mother, a dear friend of hers from school, her

husband, and me." Alvaro turned his body, so he could face Lea. "We decided to leave early in the morning and have a picnic in one of the fields outside of the city."

"Can you imagine, Lea," Alejandra said. "Diego's father was quite romantic in his youth."

"Tell me more," Lea said.

"A more beautiful morning you've never seen," Alvaro said. "The brightest sun, but only warm. It became hot only when it reached the top of the sky. Gerardo ruffled the quilt and laid it on the soft grass for the ladies. Soon he and I had everything placed just so. Fruits, pastries, juices, even a little Sangria in case we stayed long enough."

"Not for me, of course," Alejandra said.

"I always wondered what happened to Esteban," Diego said.

"Bite your tongue. Let your father finish."

"Yes, please," Lea said. "Go on. When did the bull find you?"

"Happily the beast waited until we'd eaten a fine meal, prepared for all of us by Alejandra and her friend, Maria." He spread his arms as wide as they would go. "A true giant, it came over the crest of the hill and stood there, staring us down. It must have smelled our breakfast. Gerardo and Maria began putting everything away, when suddenly, I heard my wife cry out. "It's coming," she said.

Lea sat with wide eyes, hypnotized by Diego's father. The rice on her plate sat undisturbed.

"Only then did I realize that our quilt was made of material as red as that of the Mexican flag!

"El toro trotted through the field, trampling flowers with each heavy stride. Soon we heard and felt the great hooves clumping on the hard dirt."

"What did you do?" Lea asked. "You must have been terrified."

"I must be humble and tell you that I was indeed," Alvaro said. "But my wife and unborn son needed protection."

"Surely you didn't stand up to the beast alone."

"A friend would never let another face trouble alone. Gerardo stood with me. We waited as the bull began to run faster. I told Gerardo that after I led el toro away, he should go to the car and drive the women to safety."

Alejandra placed a hand on Alma's forearm. The two ladies smiled together as they saw Diego sneak out of the kitchen. He circled around the doorway into the living room.

"The time had come to make a decision," Alvaro said, leaning in so his eyes were the only thing Lea could see. "If I had to give my life for my family," I said to myself, "so be it." I wrapped the red quilt around my body, ran as fast as I could away from the car. As I knew it would, the bull turned and followed, chasing me as it had been trained to do."

"And then?" Lea asked.

"I turned at the last second, bellowed at it like un oso. I kept screaming as loud as I could. At first the animal looked confused. It stopped, unsure of what to do. Then, like all champion bulls in its line, it raked the ground ahead of it. The sturdy hooves worked up quite a cloud, and then, whoosh, it came at me for the final time. I braced myself, held my breath, waited for the end to come."

Alvaro closed his eyes, acting out the scene for Lea, who sat unmoving.

Just then, Diego silently ran into the kitchen from the entrance hall. He held his thumbs in front of his head, like two horns, and jabbed them into his father's kidney.

"Ooowuu!" Alvaro shouted, as much from shock as from pain. The kitchen exploded with laughter, all except for Diego, who dashed through the same door he came in.

"El oso is coming for you, Diego!" his father roared.

Lea looked at Alejandra and her mother. They both shrugged, leaving the decision to her. After a moment, noise broke out in all parts of the Ramirez home. Diego's laughter and shrieks, Alvaro's continued roaring, his determination to catch his son greater with every breath.

Diego had no idea where to run. For his size, his father was remarkably quick. He closed and locked his bedroom door, although he knew his father could break through it with little trouble. At least, he felt, the delay might give him the precious seconds he'd need to get away.

He threw the curtains in front of his sliding glass door aside, flipped the lock, and yanked the door wide.

"El oso is coming in, whether you like it or not," Alvaro yelled.

Diego looked back in time to see the flimsy flip-lock on his door start to give way. Then his father burst through, chest heaving and face beet red.

Diego skipped down the stairs by the bushes. He looked back, let a single thought enter his mind, and hoped his father wouldn't rush too quickly through the sliding glass door.

He didn't stick around to find out.

Alvaro used a beefy arm to vault over his son's bed. A second later he jumped through the door.

And then stopped. For no reason. He blinked his eyes, tried to understand.

He planted his feet firmly on the top step. Flexing his powerful calves, he surged forward. Nothing held him in place this time. His momentum took him over the coping and directly into the pool.

"What was that?" Alejandra said.

"Sounds like Alvaro caught Diego and tossed him into the pool," Alma said.

"I don't think so," Lea said.

"Alejandra!" Alvaro roared.

13.

"Have you packed your hiking shoes, hija?" Alma asked.

"No," Lea said. "I'm planning to wear them to tia Kasandra's. She may want to take us to the fields right away."

Alma could see how excited her daughter felt about their trip. Collecting items for their Day of the Dead altar from the homeland was great in its own right. Seeing her tia again really made the trip special. Kasandra loved her niece and nephew, but she'd always held a special place in her heart for Lea. Alma loved Kasandra for that, and for the connection to Antonio, Lea's father.

"Perhaps she will show us a new canyon," Alma said, "Or a new set of tide pools down by the coast."

"Do you think so, mamá?"

"Of course. Kasandra loves you. Nothing makes her happier than seeing her favorite niece."

"Then why doesn't she ever come here, mamá?"

"No se, mi flor."

"Please mamá, won't you tell me? I'm your daughter. I know when you're holding something back."

Alma dropped the sweater she was folding, turned to look at her daughter. "I really don't know, Lea. Kasandra is a mysterious woman. Perhaps she will tell you if you ask her."

*

"Can we stop at Tacos el Gordo?"

"Perhaps," Alma said. "If you put on your seat belt."

Tacos el Gordo had been serving the real thing for nearly fifty years in Chula Vista, National City, and Imperial Beach. If Americanized tacos or Mexican fare was what you wanted, you could find dozens of stands and restaurants all over San Diego County. For true fans of real Mexican food, though, the line outside the simple restaurants told the story. They were the favorites of late-night partiers who wanted to stock up on good grub before heading home.

"Okay, mamá, I'm ready."

They drove for a bit in light traffic. Alma moved the car deftly toward the 5 freeway. "Are you starving, Lea, or can we wait until we get to Imperial Beach?"

"I can wait if you can."

"Good. After we eat I want to be as close to the border as possible. I think we might be able to cross fairly easily today."

She turned off J Street onto the interstate 5 onramp. "Okay everybody, here we gooooo!"

Lea laughed as her mother stepped on the gas pedal. She said the same thing every time she increased the speed of the car. It was from her favorite ride at Disneyland, Peter Pan.

Alma avoided a distracted driver, too intent on his cellphone to pay attention to anything else. She flipped on her blinker and moved three lanes to the left.

"Someday I'll borrow the Disney movies from the library. We'll watch them all together. Then you can ask a friend and we'll go to Disneyland."

Lea immediately thought of Conor. She'd heard about the last moments at Tenochtitlan, about the strange warrior that looked exactly like him. Ricardo had talked about his age, and how his personality was so different than the young Conor they all knew from school. She smiled, thinking of his happy-go-lucky attitude. At the same time she felt a pang of longing. So much different than for Rafael, her brother. She missed both of them a lot.

"What are you thinking about?" Alma asked.

"Oh, nothing," Lea said, quickly adding a smile.

"You said it before, hija, we know each other too well. Please tell me."

"When you said I could bring a friend to Disneyland, I thought of Conor."

Alma looked over at her daughter's profile. "He was a good boy, that one, and a very good soccer player."

"He had the bluest eyes," Lea said. "I loved looking at them."

Alma looked again. Her daughter had blossomed into a young woman. It seemed to happen at that moment. "I'm glad, hija. I guess it's time for you to be dating boys."

Lea jerked her head to the left. "Mamá, I'm fifteen years old. Of course it's time."

"You will keep talking to me, won't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean when you start dating a boy seriously. I want you to be able to come to me about anything, Lea. Love can be tricky, and the heart is nothing to fool with."

"Of course I will, mamá."

"I'm glad, hija. With girls it's different."

"Why, because boys only think about one thing?"

"Who told you that?" asked Alma.

"I'm in high school. We talk about everything."

*

Alma turned into the Tacos el Gordo parking lot. "Now that we're here I'm feeling hungry," she said.

"Me too, mamá. I know exactly what I want."

"What?"

"The Azteca with extra cilantro and lime. And a Pepsi."

"Mmm, that sounds so good."

"What about you, mamá?"

"I love their Lengua so much, but I'll wait until I can look at the menu."

They sat quietly, enjoying the wonderful food. Lea watched her mother bite into her Lengua, smile, and close her eyes. She smiled too, always delighted when her mother felt happy. She took a long sip of her drink, scraped together another bite of her thick taco shell.

"Mamá, this is so good."

"Sí, niña, es muy bueno."

After a bit longer they finished, emptied their baskets in the trash and tossed them on the counter. "Muchas gracias," Alma said.

"Gracias, mujeres!"

Alma took two dollars from her purse and gave it to Lea. "Put this in the jar on the counter."

Lea walked up, dropped it in, and gave the cocineros a wide smile.

"Gracias, bonita," said the one carving fresh meat.

Back in the car they snapped their seat belts in place. Alma turned the key, revved the engine, and turned to Lea. "Next stop, Aunt Kasandra's!"

"Oh, mamá," said Lea, "this is so much fun!"

14.

Magnifico padded softly among the flames leading away from Sol's chamber. An audience with his master always left him tired, but in a good way. It felt similar to the peace of mind after a hard training session. It drained his body but cleared his mind.

"Well?" Estrella asked. "What is Sol's counsel?"

"Leave me be, dragon," Magnifico said. "Can't you see I'm exhausted?"

"Too exhausted to talk to your mate?"

Magnifico's red eyes shifted slightly. He glared at Estrella. Then he straightened his neck and body, stretching his muscles. His wings flared, almost as if he was preparing to escape.

Estrella stepped forward, blocking his way.

"I don't intend to run, if that's what you're thinking."

"Tell me then," she said. "What did Sol say?"

"He left it to Celestina. Her choice is to send them back to the canyon. He agrees with her."

Estrella barely contained her joy. "I knew it!"

"It is still *my* decision," Magnifico said, "and I am against it."

"What about Mateo and Jesús, their guides?" Estrella pleaded.

"Those two dragons were in the canyon for less than an hour and nearly exposed all of us."

"By doing what they thought would help Jenna."

"And what will they think next time? Will they become bored with the canyon? Perhaps they will strike out for the park to meet their guides, only to scare the life out of everyone there."

"You're being paranoid."

"Am I?"

"They wouldn't do a thing after the way you spoke to them. Don't you think sending them back to Sol hurt them enough? Don't you remember how excited they looked when you told them they'd be watching over Diego and Racquel, and their friends?"

"They're impulsive, and reckless."

"Just like you when you were a young dragon."

"That's different."

"How? How is it different?"

"I was born to be a leader. My decisions affect all of our dragons. Their escapades endanger only themselves, and any humans that happen to be around, of course."

"They realize they made a mistake," Estrella said. "Let them make up for it."

Magnifico walked around his mate. She fell into step beside him. They went on this way for a while, allowing Sol's fire to tickle their bellies. Estrella let him consider his thoughts as she waited for the two dragons to appear.

"You're up to something," Magnifico said. "I can tell."

"You're dreaming again, my love."

"No. I can *always* tell. It's where your eyes point. You're looking around, waiting."

A second later Furtivo split the flames in front of them. Soaring straight up, he finally turned, spun, and dove down just as Zephyr appeared from the fire below him. At the last second, they veered away from each other and then joined again on an even flight path behind Magnifico and Estrella. Slowing, they swooped overhead and settled before their Lord and Lady.

"Outstanding!" Estrella said.

Magnifico stared into space as if he'd seen nothing.

"Tell me you didn't see that," Estrella said. "They performed the maneuver perfectly, just as you described it to me."

"I wonder where they got their training, *and* how they knew about it."

Furtivo and Zephyr stood quietly, heads bowed, eyes closed.

"That's not the point! They worked very hard to perfect the movements. They've agreed to work with the others."

"Is this true?" Magnifico asked.

"Zephyr looked up. "Of course, my lord. Whatever you desire."

"I'm not concerned about you, Zephyr. Your cousin, however, is another story."

Furtivo smiled. Just as quickly he wiped it from his jaws. If Magnifico caught even a glimpse they were finished. He raised his eyes to his lord. "I promise to be good."

"Sometimes the simplest of comments are best, Furtivo," Magnifico said. "Very well then. Return to Hellhole Canyon under cover of darkness. Estrella will pass my decision on to Jenna and Racquel. With luck you will see your guides soon."

"Thank you, Estrella," Furtivo said. "And you, Magnifico."

"Many thanks to both of you," Zephyr said. "We will not fail you this time."

"See that you don't," Estrella said somewhat sternly. She gave her dragons a little smile after her comment.

"Don't make me regret my decision," Magnifico said. "You are both excellent warriors, but you need to show restraint when the situation calls for it."

The two dragons bowed one last time before zooming away. They disappeared into Sol's flames amid cries of happiness and purpose.

"Thank you for that," Estrella said.

"As I said, they are good dragons, but something worries me."

"I'm sure they won't make another mistake."

"That's not it," Magnifico said.

"What is it?" Estrella asked.

"A feeling, that's all."

"Perhaps we should send others along with them. A small battle group?"

"They can defend themselves against anything Diego's world can throw at them," Magnifico said.

"Then let them go and set your mind at ease."

"Maybe you're right. As you said, I'm being paranoid."

15.

"Those kids are good."

The Fallbrook High team looked well coached, *and* in shape. Coach Morales watched his players rush up and down the field, matching them stride for stride. The temperature on the grass had topped a hundred degrees by game time. Both teams looked good, tired, but good. He knew his boys still had lots of reserves.

Seven minutes to halftime. Score - Fallbrook 2, Escondido 1.

"Ramirez," he yelled. "Stay with him! Don't leave your player!"

Diego hustled after the Fallbrook player. Sure enough, a pass came their way. His man would be first to cross the line. If he dribbled the ball, they'd be ready to strike.

He saw the Fallbrook winger speed up. He knew the senior could outrun him. In desperation, Diego took three quick strides and slid toward the ball. His right foot lashed out. At the last second, just before the Fallbrook player would take the ball into the penalty box, he kicked it away. Making solid contact, he sent the ball back toward the center line.

José took it in stride. With blinding speed, he raced downfield toward the Fallbrook defense. He heard wingers calling to him from both sides. He also knew that Ricardo trailed him by only ten feet.

A shudder overtook him. He remembered the day he and Diego ran the play he was about to execute. He'd disappeared from the field without a trace. A second later he awoke five hundred years in the past.

"José!"

Ricardo jolted him from the memory. He cut right, left the ball where he'd been, and Ricardo took it from there. A fake to the left and a hard pass to the right sent the ball to their best senior forward.

Two Fallbrook defenders charged the Escondido player. He turned toward goal and instead fired a brilliant pass across field. Only the Fallbrook goalie stood between the net and the other Escondido forward.

Halftime. Fallbrook 2, Escondido 2.

"Ándale," Coach Morales said. "Dig in and grab a water bottle." He looked at each player, trying to see signs of heat exhaustion or dehydration. "Any of you feel dizzy out there? Maybe like you'll pass out or something?"

No one responded.

"I mean it. This is serious, hombres. People end up in hospitals because of getting overheated. It's not a sign of weakness. Neither is honesty. If you begin to feel lightheaded, I want you off the field right away."

José took a long chug from his water bottle. He looked over at Ricardo, who caught his eye perfectly. The silent message came through loud and clear- no way they were coming out of the game.

Diego drank a bottle and drenched himself with another. His jersey looked soaked even before he'd doused himself. Shaking his hair out, he flicked it to and fro, drying it as well as he could.

"Dion's off the bench, coach," he said. "I see him warming up. If he comes in the game we lose our advantage with José."

Morales looked across the field. " José, take a breather. Anton, you're in at midfielder."

"What?" asked José. "What are you doing, coach?"

"Coaching," said Morales. "And thanks for reminding everyone who's in charge."

The players looked up and down the bench. Diego finally spoke up.

"They bring in their speed and we take ours out?"

"We're saving José for the end of the game. Dion will be dead tired when José comes back in. Get it?"

"Yeah."

"José?"

"Órale."

"Alright, then here's what we're going to run in the second half."

Dion, the only non-senior on the Fallbrook team, dribbled the ball slowly as he called out a play. The forwards charged past midfield, crisscrossing in front of Morales' players. Dion left everyone behind as he faked to a striker and tore down the field toward the Escondido goal.

"He's taking it himself!" screamed Morales. "Watch out for a corner play! Let them kick it out!"

They fell for it, kicking the shot away. It sailed out of bounds beyond the goal line, setting up a corner kick for Fallbrook.

The assistant referee placed the ball, back-pedaled, and blew his whistle. The Fallbrook player wasted no time. His coach knew Morales' plays, and had told his players where to put themselves in case of a corner kick.

The shot came in like a cannonball. Twisting in midair, it bent toward the net like it had a mind of its own.

The goalie never had a chance. A perfect header sent the ball rocketing toward the net. It ricocheted off the bar, shooting back into play. The Escondido players' relief was short-lived, though, as

it bounced straight toward a Fallbrook striker. He fired a shot and scored. The Fallbrook team celebrated as they ran toward midfield.

Fallbrook 3, Escondido 2.

Diego's mother almost asked Coach Morales to take her son out. Whatever strength he had left seemed to sag along with his shoulders after the Fallbrook goal. She didn't like the way he looked as he made his way toward the center of the field. He wasn't the only one, either. Most of his teammates looked dead on their feet.

Anton, José's replacement, dribbled the ball slowly away from center field. The Escondido players all screamed different plays toward each other and to Anton. The Fallbrook coach tried to warn his players about their strategy, but the Escondido boys' voices drowned out everything.

Morales watched his team execute the new play. He knew the Fallbrook team had his boys beat before the game even started, so he'd included some unusual ideas. This was one of them. Having his boys running around the field screaming confused the Fallbrook players. They didn't know what to do. They also couldn't communicate with each other.

One of their midfielders dashed toward Anton and made a sloppy attempt at a tackle. Anton easily skipped around him, only to find another player sliding straight for his feet. Anton faked a pass to the right and jumped the tackle. Now with two less players to defend, and every Escondido player shrieking like a banshee, Anton went wild. He faked to Diego, fired a pass to Ricardo. Ricardo ricocheted the ball right back to him. With the yelling, the passes, and the jukes, suddenly Morales' boys had a huge advantage. The seniors took over, made the Fallbrook goalie look foolish when they tied the score again.

Fallbrook 3, Escondido 3.

The Fallbrook coach's arms flailed around so hard they looked like they might fly off his body. Spittle flew as he scolded his team for allowing such an easy score.

Morales watched him lose his cool as he changed up his team. Diego, Anton, and Ricardo came out, José, fresh because of the breather, returned to the line-up. A junior and senior player fell in behind José.

Dion took the ball forcefully off the midfield stripe. He dribbled to the right, in the direction of their strongest striker. After the Escondido defense started that way, he shot the ball left, hoping to catch them off guard.

They'd been ready for just such a play. A senior intercepted the ball cleanly and found José in stride with a perfect pass. José's rested legs took over. He left both teams behind. He rocketed around the last defender, raced toward the goal. It looked like a breakaway from beyond midfield.

Fallbrook's goalie, a senior, had seen fast players many times. In practice, his coach told his best and quickest players to charge the net one-on-one.

He rushed out to meet José in front of the goal box. The two players heard nothing as they closed in on each other.

José punched a fine shot toward the south end of the goal. The Fallbrook net minder seemed to grow another six feet as he stretched out to block it. His gloves touched the ball just enough to deflect it over the bar. José turned immediately, ran back to defend.

"Who do you think you are?" Morales bellowed. "Ronaldo?"

"I had a free run!" José said. "Would you be mad if I scored?"

"Wait for your team next time. Run a play!"

José nodded but did not answer. Diego and Ricardo cheered him on from the sidelines.

Dion didn't wait for them to figure things out. He dribbled the ball for two steps and then blasted it over everyone's head. It seemed to be going in the direction of an Escondido defender. At the last second, a Fallbrook striker sprinted into the play. He took the ball and drew the defense toward him as he closed on the goal box. Escondido's goalie saw two more Fallbrook players coming in from either side. All he could do was guess which way the striker would send the ball.

Fallbrook 4, Escondido 3.

Alejandra breathed a silent thank you.

"Come on in, boys," Coach Morales said. "Grab some water and we'll have a sit down."

Diego patted José on the shoulder as he came to the sidelines. "You did good, Chico," he said. "That shot should have gone in."

José shrugged it off, as he did when Ricardo added his comment. He didn't need encouragement. He needed to get away from his coach.

"Brush it off, hombre," Ricardo said, trying again. "We almost beat a great team."

"Almost doesn't cut it," José said.

The players sat in a semi-circle around their coach. It took a few of them longer than others. They couldn't accept the loss so easily.

"You guys did good today," Morales said. "That team over there is probably going to win league this year, and you just took them all the way. I've never seen Coach Neuer so panicked in my life."

"Next time we'll beat them, right coach?" a junior midfielder asked.

"Ain't gonna be no next time for you, the way you played."

"And you looked like a tree the way their guys ran around you all day."

"That's cause I didn't know which way to run after your man left you in the dust!"

"Knock it off!" yelled Morales. "You bobos are a high school varsity team, not a bunch of first year club players. We lost. Get over it." Morales, hands on hips, stared down his team, daring any of them to say another word. "Yeah, we need to work on a few things, but overall, as a T-E-A-M, you played pretty darn well."

Diego saw his Mom walking toward his group. "Coach, can I go? My Mom's pretty wiggled out by the heat. I'm sure she wants to get me in the car."

"Down a bottle of water and you can go," Morales said. "I mean everybody. Drink a bottle of water, grab your gear, and go home. No activity tonight. I want you guys to rest."

"Órale, see you guys," Diego said to José and Ricardo.

"See you at school," they both said.

"How do you feel, mijo?"

"Fine, Mamá."

"Diego?" Alejandra asked, her eyes turned a certain way.

"Just tired."

"Hurts not to win the game, huh?"

Diego stopped walking, stared at his mother.

"Can't I be concerned about my youngest son?"

Now he walked up to her, looked *down* into her eyes, smiling. "Sure you can, mamá."

"Don't give me that look, Diego Ramirez," she said. "You'll always be my niño."

"Great," Diego said.

"C'mon, let's get you to the car."

"*Diego!*" Dion was running toward them. "Hey, good game, I mean, hola, Señora Ramirez."

"Hola Dion," Alejandra said. "How is your mother?"

"She's fine. I'll tell her you said hello."

"Thank you." She turned to her son. "Diego, I'll be sitting in the cool car. Bye, Dion."

"Bye." He turned to Diego. "Hey, a bunch of us are going to Hellhole Canyon tonight. Why don't you and Racquel come meet us?"

"If I can."

"C'mon, it'll be fun. There's no moon tonight."

"Then I'll definitely try," Diego said. "Hey, you guys played strong today. Congratulations."

"Thanks, but you wouldn't think so, the way Beuer was spitting words in German a few minutes ago." Dion held his hand out.

Diego slapped it. They fist-bumped. "You'll lose next time."

"You wish, estúpido," Dion said. He waved at Diego's mother, then ran across the field.

Diego jumped in the car, pulled the door closed. "Feels good in here."

"Here," Alejandra said, passing him a bottle of water. "Drink this for me."

"I had a bottle after the game."

"Please, Diego, for me?"

He grabbed it, twisted off the cap, and guzzled the whole bottle. "Okay?"

Alejandra smiled her thanks. She looked at her son. He stood as tall as his father now, and only fifteen years old. Before she knew it, he'd be following Esteban out of the house. It seemed only yesterday he took his first communion at church. He'd looked so small and handsome in his blue suit, his hands placed together in prayer. *How she loved her sons!*

"Dion said a bunch of our friends are going to the park at Hellhole Canyon tonight. I'd like to go if Racquel can go with me. Would that be okay?"

"Oh Diego," Alejandra said. "You just had a big game. I'm sure your father will ask you to help him around the house this afternoon. Don't you think that's too much?"

"No, but if you don't want me to go, it's okay."

"Uh-uh, don't play that game with me," Alejandra said. "We'll ask your father when we get home."

Diego smiled. He knew his Dad would let him go. "Okay, Mamá."

16.

The Dark Lord inhaled the power of the underworld. He'd traveled through all nine levels and back again. He absorbed the challenge at each level, making them his own. It was no longer a place of comfort for departed souls. Under his control, it would become an arena of torture and death. He would bring Diego here, a place where he would finally perish. If Magnifico's powers didn't work in the

underworld, the guide would be defenseless. Satadon felt the strength of his surroundings fuel his desire to see Diego die.

He would send a message, one he knew the Sol Dragones would recognize. The fools. Did they really think he couldn't use the underworld for his own plans?

He'd dispatched the rulers of the underworld after a horrific battle. They sat before him, locked in their own ruling chamber, their servants unable to help them. They would help him when the time came, or their precious kingdom would dissolve just as their resistance had.

"You will never defeat Magnifico," Mictlantecuhtli said.

"Pah," Satadon said. "You saw it yourself. Here he is without his flame."

"He has other weapons," Mictēcacihuātl said. "Of that you can be sure."

"Then let him bring them forth. I don't fear any of the sun dragons. I brought their leader down with a single bolt in the ancient city. He would lie dead there still if not for that blasted Misterioso. Thank the rift he was taken in the battle with the snakes."

"He and his guide," Mictlantecuhtli said. "Are you proud to be a killer of children?"

"I, a child murderer?" Satadon asked, cackling like a demon. "Magnifico sent them into battle! How much blame should you cast upon him?"

"You sent the stone snakes after the Sol Dragones," Mictēcacihuātl said. "Only you bear the blame for the guides' deaths. When final judgment is given, there will be no dominion for you, Satadon, no existence. Only those who lived honorably deserve such consideration."

"Honorably!" Satadon spat the words out. With a wave of his ghostly hand he silenced the Lord and Lady of the Underworld. "Your time will come. You will do as I command. Afterward, it is you who will occupy emptiness." With a wicked smile painted across his lips, the Dark Lord vanished.

17.

Alma turned the car into the shaded part of the driveway.

"Tia Kasandra!" Lea screamed after seeing her aunt breeze through the door of her simple home. She ran to her niece.

"Mi Lea," she said. "Mi little Lea! Only you're not so little anymore. Not little at all!"

"Oh tia," Lea said after throwing herself into her aunt's arms. "I'm so happy to see you!"

Kasandra hugged her as hard as she could. "Careful, hija, you might crush me." She looked over her niece's shoulder at her sister-in-law. Both of them smiled at Lea's joy.

Lea finally released her aunt. Kasandra and Alma hugged, kissed each other's cheeks. "Well," Kasandra said, "let's get your bags into the house. I have a surprise for you, sobrina."

"For me?" Lea asked. "Already? A surprise?"

"Yes. She is waiting for you just inside the front door."

Lea's eyes went wide. She ran toward the house.

"What is it?" Alma asked.

Lea's shriek gave her mother the answer. She walked with tia Kasandra, carrying the bags toward the house. They entered and found Lea on the ground, a squiggling puppy in her arms. Lea laughed as she stuck her nose toward the puppy and it licked her face.

"Where did you find her?" Alma asked.

"A shelter," Kasandra said.

"Here? In Rosarita?"

"Sí. It is my shelter."

"Since when?" Alma asked.

"Since I decided I couldn't take seeing stray dogs everywhere I went. About a year ago I posted signs with a phone number to call. In three days I had twenty dogs under my care. Now I have over fifty. I can't take anymore until I make some adoptions."

"Oh, mamá," Lea said. "Can we take her home? Please?"

Alma shot a troubled look at Kasandra.

"Perhaps you can play with her while you visit," Kasandra said. "There are many more at the shelter. I'm sure every dog would love to meet you."

"But this one is so cute," Lea said, scratching the dog behind its ears. "What's its name, tia?"

"She doesn't have one yet. None of the dogs at the shelter do. It's up to the people that adopt them to give them good names.

"Why don't you take her out in the yard, Lea," Kasandra said. "I'm sure you two will have fun running wild with each other."

"What do you think, little one?" Lea asked the puppy's eyes. "Would you like to go play in the yard?" She laughed like a child when the little dog answered with a cheerful 'yip'. As she drew close to the screen door, the puppy became more excited at the prospect of outdoor play.

Kasandra lifted Lea's bags. "Come, Alma, let's get you settled."

A half hour later, the two ladies sat with tea, watching Lea and the puppy get acquainted. "She is quite an athlete now," Kasandra said.

"Yes," said Alma. "She runs track for the high school. It's only her first year, but already she's been moved up to varsity. She's faster than all the girls on the team, and she has more endurance than most of the boys."

"That should help her when they start chasing her around for dates," Kasandra said. Both women laughed a little.

"She had one boy who showed interest over the last couple of years."

"Really? And you allowed this?"

"It was all purely innocent. They all hung out together, a group of friends."

"Who was this boy?" Kasandra asked.

"An Irish boy named Conor."

"A white boy?"

"They don't get any whiter than Irish," Alma said. "He was a wonderful companion for Lea. She liked him a lot."

"What did Rafael say?"

"Rafael challenged Conor to a fight as soon as he found out. Apparently, Conor had some training, from what Lea said. He kicked Rafael in the face, split his lip wide open."

"Mother of Christ," Kasandra said. "Wasn't there anyone around to stop it?"

"It's the school's way of settling disputes. They let the boys fight under supervision. I guess it works."

"What happened between Rafael and Conor?"

"They beat each other pretty badly," Alma said. "Then Rafael knocked Conor out. He tried to hit him again, but the wrestling coach grabbed his arm."

"Rafael was a strong boy."

"The wrestling coach at the middle school is short but very wide, un toro grande, that one."

"I bet Conor and Rafael never spoke a word to each other after that," Kasandra said.

Alma shook her head. "They became good friends. After Conor woke up, Rafael helped him to his feet, nearly welcoming him into the family. Lea told me he wanted to test Conor, to see how well he could fight. He knew other boys wouldn't take his relationship with Lea very well."

"Hmm," Kasandra said. She sipped her tea. Alma did the same. They sat quietly, watching Lea with the puppy. The little dog ran as fast as she could, trying to catch Lea. Finally it would lose its step and tumble all over itself. Lea would laugh, scoop her up in her arms and smother her with kisses.

"Mamá," she called out across the yard. "We have to take this puppy home. I even thought of the perfect name for her."

"What do you want to call her?" asked Kasandra.

"Mia," she shouted. "I want to call her Mia!"

"Lea and Mia," Kasandra said quietly to Alma. "You'll have a hard time denying her now. She's already named her."

"And I have you to blame for it," Alma said.

"Hermana, she needs her. She lost her brother. Give her some happiness."

"Perhaps you're right."

*

Lea sat reading a new book her aunt had picked up before they came to visit. It was about Dia de los Muertos, a sort of half picture book and half novella. She seemed fascinated, the vibrant colors, the people of all ages shown on the pages. She read each word to her new friend, Mia, who'd collapsed on her lap the instant she'd sat on the couch and opened the book.

"They use marigolds in great numbers to decorate their homes and the altars they construct for their family members. The more beautiful the altar, the more welcoming the home becomes."

Mia stretched a little. A tiny squeak escaped her mouth. She adjusted her position and fell fast asleep again. Lea didn't dare move. She wanted the moment to last forever. Mia felt like a baby in her lap, one with cream colored fur and brush of darkness across her tiny jowls. When she felt certain Mia had fallen asleep, she continued reading.

"Grandmothers and mothers teach young girls how to make special foods for the displays. Bread of the dead, sugar skulls, and skeleton cookies decorate the tables and altars of all the families. If they wish, families can cook the favorite foods of the dead. Whether candy, steak, tamales, cookies, or other specialties, if they feel the items will persuade their friends and family to come home for a little while, it is worth it.

"Family members sometimes go to the gravesites of their relatives. Perhaps they can escort them to the homes. Maybe they just want their departed to know they are there, hoping to celebrate with them."

Alma walked into the living room. She sat and listened proudly as her daughter quietly spoke the words of the book. Mia's tiny tummy rose up and down, her small breaths telling mother and daughter that all was right with the world.

"Their favorite music is played in the homes. Although the living may know that their dead may not really be there, they can feel their presence, sense how delighted they are with the celebration.

"Dia de los Muertos can last for two or three days. If one really wishes to enjoy the joyous occasion, they should travel to the small towns of Mexico. Asking permission to join the celebration is not only polite, it might gain one admittance to a personal, private experience."

"Very good, mi sobrina," Kasandra said. "I see that your new friend enjoys your reading. I've never seen a puppy so content."

"She's so beautiful," Lea said. "She looks like an angel when she sleeps."

Kasandra flicked her eyes to Alma. She smiled.

"Just as you are when you sleep, hija," Alma said. "And your brother, Rafael. Such a big, tough boy, trying so hard to be a man. When he slept, he resembled a little cherub." Alma's eyes stared at the beautifully colored rug, but Kasandra knew they focused on a place far away from her home.

"Well," Kasandra said, "perhaps we should have an early dinner, and then take a ride to the shelter. The dogs are mostly tired after a long day. They won't fall all over you like an avalanche of fur."

"We don't have to go to the shelter," Lea said softly. "I love Mia." The little dog squirmed in Lea's lap, giving a sign that it heard Lea's comment. It stretched, long and lovingly, then curled back up on Lea's lap. "Of course, if you approve, mamá."

"Let's enjoy our stay, Lea," Alma said. "Have fun with your new friend. We'll let Mia decide whether she wants to come home with us."

"Of course," Kasandra said. "A wonderful idea. There are many dogs at the shelter who need your loving touch, Lea. Would you deny them the joy of your beautiful smile and spirit?"

"No, Tia," Lea said. "Of course I'd love to go. Let me help with dinner."

"No, no," Kasandra said. "Stay and read some more. I can already tell Mia likes it. Your mother and I will cook something."

"Okay," Lea said. She whispered to her puppy. "You see, Mia, everyone knows we are meant for each other."

*

"How far is the shelter?" Alma asked.

"Not far," Kasandra said. "maybe twenty minutes."

"Do you think it is safe to travel at night?"

"Of course, tonto, this is Rosarita Beach."

"Yes, you are right. What was I thinking?"

"You are wise to be cautious, hermana."

"¿Por qué?"

"I feel, scared. I can't say exactly what it is, but something will happen soon."

"What?" Alma asked. "What will happen?"

"That's just it. I don't know 'what'. I just know something's not right. Whatever it is, it will strike within the next few weeks."

"Now you're scaring me, Kasandra. Tell me everything you sense. You must."

Alma's sister-in-law took a few tamales from the refrigerator, placed them on the cutting board to warm. She gave Alma some rice she'd cooked before they arrived. A cooking dish appeared next. "Lay the rice out and place the tamales in the center. I'll cut some fresh onions, tomatoes, and cilantro."

Alma put the rice and cooking dish on the counter. She grabbed Kasandra's hand. "Tell me, please, before Lea comes in and demands to know as well."

"It will happen during Dia de los Muertos."

"What?" demanded Alma, chills crawling along her flesh.

"I don't know!" whispered Kasandra harshly. "I'm sorry, hermana. I'm frightened."

"Even you?" Alma asked. "How can this be?"

Kasandra leaned back, looked into the living room to make sure Lea still sat with her puppy. When she felt sure she wouldn't move, she stepped up to the counter again. She spoke without looking at Alma. "Something horrible is lurking in the underworld."

Alma shuddered. If anyone knew of these things, Kasandra would know.

"It is both evil and powerful," Kasandra said. "And its intent sickens me."

"What does it want?"

"Revenge."

"Against whom?" Alma asked.

"That I cannot see. I only sense something dark and menacing. For all I know it has taken possession of the underworld. If that is true, then anyone celebrating Day of the Dead could be in great danger."

"That's only two weeks away," Alma gasped.

"Yes," Kasandra said. She opened the oven door, placed the dish inside, and closed it. After setting the temperature, she turned and took Alma's hands into her own. "You and Lea, you must stay here until after Dia de los Muertos."

"What? Lea has school, and I must work or we'll have no food and no place to live."

"I have money," Kasandra said. "I can pay your bills for a while."

"And when I lose my job? What do I do then? It's not easy for women of color to find decent jobs in America."

"What is more important to you, your job or your daughter's life?"

Alma's face shrank with fear. All but her eyes, which grew larger with a lengthy breath. "How can you say such a thing? What is this creature? How can it threaten us from a place of such promise for our families?"

"I only wish I knew," Kasandra said. "But this I do know. If you stay with me I might be able to protect you. Protect Lea. She is what's important now."

A soft voice came from the living room. "What are you two talking about? It sounds serious." A few seconds later Lea came around the wall and into the kitchen. "Mamá! What is it?"

18.

After dinner, Diego grabbed a coat and zipped himself up. He knew he wouldn't be that cold, but his mother would insist. In a very short time he realized the best way to handle a situation like that. Grab a coat, thank his mother for reminding him, and then drop it by the side of the house on his way out.

"I still don't like the idea of you and your friends going into the park after hours," Alejandra said. "Who knows what kind of trouble you could find."

"Mamá," Diego said. "Everyone goes, and besides, you used to let Esteban go when he was in high school."

"Don't start with me, young man, and besides, Esteban was sixteen at the time, not fifteen."

Diego crossed his arms, leaned against the kitchen door frame. "I won't go if you tell me not to."

"Cara," Alvaro said. "He's not going by himself, or even only with Racquel. He's joining a group of his friends there, right, Diego?"

"Yeah."

"Don't you remember when we were young, cara?" asked Alvaro. "It's fun to explore, to cross the line sometimes."

Alejandra remembered the 'fun' she'd had in Tenochtitlan, along with all the other captured spirits. Still, she knew Diego was a good boy. "Alright, mijo, but remember our agreement."

"Nine o'clock, mijo," Alvaro said. "Not one second later."

"Okay papá, nine o'clock."

"Don't make me drive over there. I'll be nice and relaxed by nine, in my chair in front of the TV."

"I won't, promise."

"All of your homework is finished?" Alejandra asked. "Your room cleaned?"

"Yes, mamá."

"I see you had the good sense to take a jacket. Have a good time and say hi to your friends."

"Okay."

*

"What are we gonna do if the rangers show up?" Mateo asked.

"Run like hell," Jesús said. "Like we always do."

"Look at the stars," Racquel said. They shine so brightly without the moon to weaken them."

"It's a good night for a walk," Diego said. "Let's get going. I have to be back in a couple hours."

Jesús took the lead. He held back an old section of fence so everyone could enter the park. After all had safely passed through, Mateo and he leaned on the chain link, pressing it into its original position. A dozen students then did what young people usually do, go where they're not supposed to, and hike where the rangers would prevent them from hiking.

"Watch the branches," Jesús said, as he walked into the lead again. "They're hard to see at night. Make sure you hold them long enough for the next person to grab."

"You wouldn't want to get slapped in the face with eucalyptus leaves," said Dion. "Right Mateo?"

About a dozen of them walked along the trail. A few joked around a little at first, but soon all walked in a loose, single-file line, following Jesús to their destination.

Racquel reached out and grabbed Diego's hand. She looped her index finger through his, felt him curl his finger around hers. They walked quietly together, still with the others but also in their own private world. "Look at the constellations," she whispered into his ear. "I can see nearly all of them tonight."

"I'd rather watch the trail," Diego said.

"Look up," she said again. "I'll watch out for you."

Diego did as she asked. Now that they had trekked about a quarter-mile into the park, everything looked dark except for the sky. It looked like a perfect bowl, cut horizontally. They walked on the bottom half, and the stars shone above them. Racquel spoke truthfully; she really had seen the constellations. Orion, Ursa major and minor, big and little dipper.

"Watch it here, Diego," Racquel said. "We're coming up on another rise."

"Thanks," he said, squeezing her finger a bit.

"Oh Diego," José said, mimicking Racquel in a sing-song voice. "If only we can stay connected for the rest of our lives."

"Si, mi único amor," Ricardo said, acting as Diego. "Wherever we are, I want to hold only you."

The group laughed quietly. A few, including Dion, slapped José and Ricardo on their backs, or punched their shoulders.

"Don't listen to them, Diego," Dion said. "Racquel was the prettiest girl in middle school, and now she's the most beautiful woman at Escondido High."

"Dion," Racquel said. "You say that like you have a crush on me."

"Always have and always will," Dion said.

"Watch out, hombre," Ricardo said. "Pretty boy's got eyes for your girlfriend."

"Doesn't stand a chance," Diego said. "He knows it, and so does everyone else."

Racquel slid her hand into Diego's, squeezed hard. Closing her eyes for a second, she slowly inhaled Diego's love.

"Jesús!" shouted one of Dion's friends. "How much farther?"

"Quiet!" Mateo said. He'd been their rear guard the whole way. "Someone's behind us."

Everyone stopped immediately. Mateo signed to Jesús that he would fall back. Diego gave Racquel a quick hug and followed Mateo. The two boys snaked their way along the trail, making almost no sound. They stopped at the first rise, peeked over the hill. Diego felt someone behind him. He turned

and saw Dion crouched near them. His friend shrugged his shoulders, held his hands up in a questioning manner. Diego motioned for him to stay there.

"Look at that!" whispered Mateo.

"I don't see anyone," said Diego.

"Shh. There's something there."

Diego looked back along the trail. Suddenly he saw it, too. A swirling mist, a light dust moving slowly toward them along the trail.

"It's just the wind," Dion said, now crouched behind Diego.

"There *is* no wind!" whispered Mateo harshly.

Diego looked along the trees lining the trail. Not a wisp of wind disturbed the leaves. His skin rippled as he looked back to the trail. The eerie cloud had stopped in place. It hadn't settled, or collapsed, it merely ceased all forward motion.

"Christ," Mateo said. "It's staring at us."

Dion tapped his friends on their shoulders, motioned for them to follow him back to the others. If it was more than a dust cloud, and it appeared to be just that, they'd better warn everyone. He turned to head up the trail, Mateo trailing him by a few feet.

"Run!" Diego shouted. "It's coming!" He stood his ground, stared down the bizarre dust cloud. He flashed a look over his shoulder to make sure his friends had gone.

"Stop," he said. "Whatever you are, get away."

The mist came forward at twice the speed. It would be on him in seconds. Ten feet from Diego it slammed into an invisible wall. The dust spread flat, trying to find a way around Diego's defenses. Small particles began darting around the edges, but Diego walled off the cloud by reshaping his energy. Soon he'd trapped the creature in a clear globe.

"Diego!" Racquel yelled as she came down the trail.

"Wait!" Diego said. "Wait there."

She ignored him. He felt her hands grasping his arm. "What is it?"

"I don't know," Diego said. "Do me a favor and keep the others away. I stopped it for now but it might find a way out."

"I'm not leaving you here alone."

"Mother of Christ, Racquel, do what's right."

"I am," she said, gripping his arm tighter. She yelled behind her. "Mateo, Dion! Keep everyone back!"

"Whatever you are," Diego said. "Leave us alone. Go back where you came from."

"Look!" Racquel yelled, pointing her finger toward the sky. "Dragons!"

Diego took his eyes off the mist for a second. He saw two dragons racing down from the stars. "Tell them to keep away, Racquel, tell them to turn back!"

"I can't. They're too far away."

Zephyr and Furtivo raced to Hellhole Canyon. They'd seen the dust cloud, sensed its intelligence and purpose, and shot toward Diego and Racquel. Furtivo allowed his cousin to take the lead and flew directly in her wake.

"What's happening?" Racquel yelled. "The dragons!"

Diego chanced another look above them. The two dragons couldn't control their flight. Something had grabbed their wings, twisting them around their bodies. Racquel and Diego heard the horrible shrieks as Zephyr and Furtivo fell toward earth. Some unknown force, maybe the same one that controlled the mist, squeezed their jaws, claws, and tails against their bodies.

A second later they both crashed against the canyon floor.

It happened so quickly, Diego and Racquel could only watch. Their nerves jolted when they heard several bones break upon impact.

"The mist," Racquel said. "It's gone."

Diego whipped around, saw she was right. His energy field held nothing. "A trick, nothing more, meant to take our attention away from the real threat."

Jesús and Mateo ran up the path, stopped near their friends. "Our dragons!" Mateo said. "What happened?"

"Zephyr!" Mateo bellowed.

"Furtivo, no," Jesús said, rushing past Diego and the rest.

"Stop," Diego ordered. Jesús' forward motion ceased. "You'll get hurt if you go out there."

"My dragon," Jesús said. "He's dying!"

Furtivo's agony confirmed Jesús' terror. The two dragons shrieked continuously, each cry more prolonged and painful than the last. Their scaled bodies, squeezed beyond their original shape, seemed to collapse in on each other as they forcefully spun in the dirt.

"Let me go!" Jesús said, struggling against Diego's power. "Let me help him!"

"You can't," Diego said.

By now the rest of the group had gathered around Diego, Racquel, and Dion. All but Diego looked on in horror as the dragons rolled and screamed.

"Diego," Racquel said. "Do something. Please."

"I don't know what *to* do," Diego said.

"What happened to the mist?" Dion asked.

"A diversion," Diego said, "nothing more, meant to distract us from the attack on Zephyr and Furtivo."

"It's more than that now," Racquel said. "Look!"

Eerily, the mist had reappeared. It swarmed angrily over Zephyr and Furtivo, smashing them together like a couple of sparrows in a spider's web.

With a deafening roar, the earth ripped open beneath them. By an unknown command, the dust overpowered the two dragons, dragged them down out of the guides' view.

"No!" Mateo yelled.

"Diego!" Jesús screamed, sickened by what he saw. "Bring them back."

A second later all lay quiet in the park. It seemed as if the cloud and the dragons had never arrived. Tears flowed; the brutality of the events left all of them in shock. Mateo and Jesús had seen the fight torn from their dragons.

Diego walked out from behind their protected area. Without looking, he waved Racquel back. He knew she'd follow him, he wanted everyone to wait until he felt sure the attack had ended. He grazed the toe of his shoe over the area where Zephyer and Furtivo had vanished. No mist swirled up to grab him. Nothing happened at all. He looked back at Racquel.

She rushed to his side. As he had done before, she skated her foot over the ground. Nothing. Not a trace of the dragons. "Oh, Diego."

"I know. And worst of all, I didn't do anything. I didn't even try to save them."

"You couldn't," Racquel said. "It happened too fast."

"Mierda!" hissed Diego.

Racquel threw her arms around him. A second later he felt other hands patting his back and shoulders.

"It's all right, hombre," Mateo said. "We'll get them back, right?"

"Damn right we will," Jesús said.

"I can't believe it," Diego said. "How can this be happening? I know who's behind it, but I destroyed him. Has he come back to life?"

"No," Racquel said. "Not Satadon!"

"Only he would attack so viciously," Diego said.

"Hey everybody," José said. "Rangers! Beat feet. Meet back at the gate!"

Diego burst through the front door of his house. "Mamá, papá, I'm home!"

"In here, Diego," Alvaro said. "Now."

He wanted to go to his bedroom and get in touch with his friends, but Diego knew that tone. He marched into the living room prepared to give an explanation.

"It's after nine o'clock, mijo."

"I'm sorry, papá, it's just that..."

"What should his punishment be, cara?"

"Perhaps no contact with Racquel outside of school for two weeks?" Alejandra suggested.

"Or contact with anyone, except at school," Alvaro added. "Give your cellphone to your mother, Diego."

"But papá!"

"Oh Diego," Alejandra said, a smile beginning to break. "You should see your face."

Alvaro exploded with laughter. "Got you, mijo."

"What?" Diego stepped up, punched his dad in the shoulder. "What's up with you two?"

"We can't have a little fun with our son?" asked Alejandra. "You were only ten minutes late." Again, she laughed at Diego's expression.

"I'll be in my room." He turned and marched down the hallway.

"What's with him?" asked Alvaro. "He's always such a good time."

"I'll talk to him in a while," Alejandra said. "Something seems to be bugging him."

"He's fifteen, that's the problem."

"Believe me, marido, it's more than that."

"Then you must tell me, after you speak with him tonight."

*

Diego pulled his cellphone out as he jumped on his bed. He tapped out a text to everyone who'd been at the park.

evry1 ok? evry1 mak it hm?

ok here, texted José.

im ok, responded Ricardo.

mateo? wrote Diego. jesús?

home, not ok, texted Mateo.

Jesús didn't respond.

ok, but frkd out, texted Dion. wht hppnd?

R? typed Diego.

im ok, wrote Ricardo. just shook up. u?

nt ok, said Diego. Zephyer, Furtivo, stl cnt blv it.

ok hr, wrote Dion's buddies. n shok.

evry1 is, said Racquel. yr nt alon.

Jesús finally tapped a note. We hv 2 fnd thm, sav thm.

we wll, wrote Diego. promis. Its tlk @ skool tmorw.

k, texted Racquel.

k, wrote the others. 1st tbl @ nutritn.

evry1? tapped Diego.

All of them signed off with agreement to meet. All except Racquel.

diego? she asked.

yea?

wht r we gona do?

idk. fnd r drgns.

Racquel waited a breath, then typed. Diego, wht if?

no, dnt thnk it.

c u tmorw @ skool.

k, wrote Diego.

Racquel tossed her phone on her bed. She walked down the hall and out the front door.

"Hija?" called her mother.

"Si, mamá?"

"Where are you off to now? It's late, and a school night."

"Just to the driveway, mamá. I want to look at the stars again."

"Five minutes, and then back inside."

"Okay, thank you, mamá."

She walked as far as she dared, then looked up at the heavens. "Estrella, tell me you're safe. Please, let me hear your voice. We're in trouble."

Five minutes and still she heard nothing. Mariana peeked outside the door, called her in.

"And without a jacket. Come inside this instant, mujer joven."

Racquel passed through the doorway and into Mariana's arms. "Is everything alright, hija?" Her mother hugged her, then held her at arm's length. "Racquel, you're shaking, and you're pale. What is it?"

She burst into tears before Mariana could finish her question.

"Oh, mi dulce niño." her mother said. She hugged her daughter fiercely.

Estrella soared into the nourishing flames surrounding Sol's chamber. As dense as it was, she could see Magnifico's outline within the inner fire. Her mate crouched in a deep trance before his master. Whether receiving instructions or strength for a new mission, no dragon would dare disturb the communion. She landed quietly and waited.

Estrella had felt Racquel trying to reach her some time ago. Her words were unclear, and even worse, she'd been unable to break through and speak to her guide. Hopefully, Magnifico knew of the development and was speaking to Sol about it.

The doors of the chamber brightened. The sacred light cast a shadow on the fires of the sun. Everything surrounding Sol's chamber dimmed next to his power. Finally, Estrella saw Magnifico rise and turn. His head emerged from the inner chamber, then out to where she waited.

"My Lady," he said with a slight bow of his coal black head.

"My Lord. Are you well enough to speak?"

"Give me a minute to stretch my muscles. I am getting old."

"You're barely a hundred thousand years. Don't play games with me."

"Quiet, dragon." Magnifico rolled on his side. He stretched his legs, paws, and talons for a good minute, then reversed his posture and did the same on his left side. He stood, rolled his shoulders back and forth, then his neck, around and around. Opening his jaws like a cat yawning, he clacked his teeth together. Two tiny spouts of flame shot from his nostrils. "Well, what brings you here?"

"Our dragons, Furtivo and Zephyr."

"What has that fool gotten his cousin into now?" asked Magnifico. "I knew letting them return to the canyon was a mistake."

"Are you finished?"

"Where are they? Have you summoned them back to Sol?"

"No."

"Why not?" Magnifico roared.

"Because they're gone!" Estrella bellowed right back at him. "They're missing, and no one can find them!"

"Blast that Furtivo," Magnifico said. "If this is one of his tricks, I'll exile him to the deepest reaches of space."

"In the meantime, perhaps we can travel to earth and find out exactly what happened, or don't you think our dragons are worth the trouble. Zephyer and Furtivo fought bravely in Tenochtitlan, in the rift, and they stood ready to fight in countless other wars. They fought for the Sol Dragones, and for you, my Lord."

"How can you be sure they're in danger?"

"Because I can't speak to them, even sense their presence. Furthermore, my link with Racquel has been broken. Something is wrong, Magnifico, terribly wrong."

"Yes, you're right," Magnifico said. Sol has informed me. This information confirms it."

"What did he say?"

"There's a dark energy in the universe, the likes of which he hasn't felt since the rift wars. He can't pinpoint it, but he does know that it's close to being fully formed. I fear for our dragons, and for Diego."

"Then we must go to them, now!"

"You will go to Hellhole Canyon to look for Zephyer and Furtivo."

"And you?" asked Estrella.

"I must visit the lord and lady of the underworld. I fear for them as well. If something has taken over Mictlan..."

"And at this time of year," gasped Estrella.

"Yes, we must move quickly. Assemble your personal guard. Have them escort you to earth. Make certain your movements are screened; no one is to see you. Take no chances with your life or the lives of your dragons."

"Magnifico, what did Sol say?"

"Beyond all rational explanation, Sol thinks Satadon might have somehow restored himself."

"Impossible," Estrella said. "We all saw Diego destroy him."

"And where do the dead travel after leaving the world of the living?"

"The underworld, to a place of rest. But he would never be allowed entrance. It would be against everything we believe in."

"Rules are only important to those that choose to follow them. And if it is Satadon, he's arrived only weeks before the celebration."

"But the Lord and Lady of the underworld would never admit him to such a sacred dwelling."

"Of course not," Magnifico said. "Perhaps they had no choice."

"What about your dragon guards?" asked Estrella. "Will they accompany you?"

"No. I must move as Misterioso did when he fought with us."

"You cannot become invisible."

"But I can move without sound, slow my heartbeat, my breathing. Hopefully no one in Mictlan will know I'm there until after I've arrived."

"But you must have protection," Estrella pleaded.

"If it is Satadon, it won't matter. He might have his hands full with me, but he could easily snuff out the life of a lesser dragon."

"And my guardians? What of them?"

"Listen to me, Estrella, and heed my advice. Hellhole Canyon is haunted by something more than Satadon. A different force lurks there. Perhaps not as powerful, but certainly no less cunning. You'll need all the protection you can bring with you."

Magnifico looked around, as if expecting something eerie to vanquish the sun. "I fear for Zephyer and Furtivo. Go. See to their safety."