

SECRET OF THE MOON CONCH

David Bowles and Guadalupe García McCall

Praise for the Book:

★ “An excellent romantic fantasy woven with timeless themes. The authors juxtapose historical aspects of Aztec civilization with today’s current events, calling attention to strains that migrants experience in modern-day detention centers. Young adults will thoroughly enjoy this riveting, long-distance love story.” —**Booklist**, **starred review**

“By turns heartfelt and heart-pounding, this story will grip readers to the final pages.” —**The Horn Book**

“Two Mexican teens in separate timelines fall in love via a magical conch shell in this sweeping fantasy.” —**Publishers Weekly**

“The Magical realism and decolonial specificity with which Bowles and McCall infuse their settings and characters put this novel in a category all its own.” —**BCCB**

About the Book:



Even 500 years can't keep them apart . . .

In modern-day Mexico, a teen, Sitali, is all alone after the death of her beloved abuela. Targeted by a dangerous gang member, she flees to the United States to find her father. The night before her journey, she finds an ancient conch on the beach and takes it with her as a memento of home.

In 1521, an Aztec teen, Calizto, is trapped in the city of Tenochtitlan, which is besieged by Spanish invaders. He has fought valiantly, but hope for his people is running out. Desperate to escape, he takes up his mother’s sacred conch and sounds a plea to the gods.

The conch holds magic neither Sitali or Calizto expected, allowing them to communicate across centuries—and find comfort in each other as they fight to survive. With each conversation, they fall deeper in love, and as the moon waxes, they become more present to each other. But as danger threatens at every turn, will they ever find a way to be truly together?

Award-winning authors David Bowles and Guadalupe García McCall craft a beautifully epic story of love across centuries.

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When what was broken is healed
and she who is destined to wield
and he who is commanded to shield
hold the conch in their hands
in two different lands
and each other in their hearts
though leagues and eons apart—
then will I reveal to the staunch
the secret of the moon conch.

In quin in tlactli moyectlaliz
in quin occan intlalpan in tecciztli
immac quitzitzquizqueh
inyollohpan motzitzquizqueh
in cihuatlapitzcatzin, in oquichtli
in nahuatiloc in quimalhuiz
intlanel nehuan huehueca yezqueh:
in ihcuac nehhuatl niquinextiliz
in ichtacayoh in metztecciztli.



Historical Figures from Tenochtitlan, Capital of the Aztec Empire, 1521

Mexica Nobles and Military Personnel

Cuauhtemoc (24). Last emperor of the Triple Alliance of Anahuac or Aztec Empire.

Tecuichpo (16). Cuauhtemoc's wife, the empress.

Moteuczoma. Tecuichpo's father, former emperor. Died a Spanish prisoner at age 54.

Tlacotzin. Prime minister of the Triple Alliance of Anahuac (the Aztec Empire).

Axoquentzin. A captain in the army of Tenochtitlan.

Cemiquiz. Calizto's page.

Acacihztzin. Commander of the Otontin Knights.

Ehcatzin. A captain of the Otontin Knights. Head of Calizto's unit.

Poloc. Calizto's squad leader in the Otontin Knights.

Spanish Invaders, Their Allies, and Their Support Staff

Hernán Cortés (36). Leader of the Spanish invasion of Anahuac.

Malinalli / Marina (17). Indigenous translator who helped Cortés ally with Tlaxcallan.

Pedro de Alvarado (36). Second-in-command for Hernán Cortés.

Chichimecatl. Commander of the Tlaxcaltecah forces during the siege.

Gonzalo de Sandoval (23). A lieutenant of Hernán Cortés.

Andrés de Tapia (24). A lieutenant of Hernán Cortés.

Alonso de Ojeda. A lieutenant of Hernán Cortés.

Cristóbal de Olea (31). Spanish soldier.

Miguel de Palomares (21). Spanish priest.

Gods and Legendary Figures

Centzonhuitznahua. The four hundred gods of the southern stars.

Cihuacoatl. Goddess of childbirth. She and Quetzalcoatl created humanity.

Coyolxauhqui. Goddess of the moon.

Huehueteotl. God of fire.

Huitzilopochtli. God of war who protects the sun. Patron of the Mexica.

Iztaccihuatl. A Nahua princess who became a dormant volcano after her death.

Mayahuel. Goddess of the maguey plant.

Popocatepetl. An active volcano that was once a Nahua warrior.

Quetzalcoatl. God of order and creation.

Tecciztecatl. God who tends to and protects the moon.

Teteoh innan. Mother of the gods.

Tezcatlipoca. God of chaos and destruction.

Tlaloc. God of rain.

Tocih. “Our grandmother,” a title of Teteoh innan.

Tonantzin. A divine title meaning “our beloved mother.” Also used for the Virgin Mary.

Tonatiuh. God of the sun.

Xochipilli. God of art, games, dance, flowers, and song. Patron of LGBTQ+ folks.

Nahuatl Terms

Calmecac. An elite school for children of the nobility.

Calpoleh. Leader of a calpolli.

Calpolli. A neighborhood or clan.

Caxtiltecah. Spaniards.

Chinampa. A floating garden.

Coatepetl. The Great Pyramid at the center of Tenochtitlan.

Cuauhpilli. An honorary knight, whose military record has won him nobility.

Macana. A wooden sword with a shape like a cricket back or an oar.

Maccuahuitl. A macana with obsidian blades imbedded along its edges.

Mexica. Nahua people from the isle of Mexico. They control the empire.

Tenochcah. The residents of Tenochtitlan.

Tlatelolcah. The residents of Tlatelolco, the sister city of Tenochtitlan.

Otontin. “Otomi warriors,” an elite order of Aztec knights.

Telpochcalli. A neighborhood school for working-class teens.

Telpochllahtoh. “School master,” one of the principal teachers.

Temillotl. A topknot worn by seasoned warriors.

Tepoztopilli. A weapon like a spear or halberd.

Tiachcauh. Head boy, an older student put in charge of younger ones.

Tlaxcaltecah. The main enemy of the Mexica. Allied with the Spanish.

Map of the Isle of Mexico - TK

Map of Sitlali Route to the US and Calizto's Route
to the Sea - TK

SECRET OF THE
MOON CONCH

PROLOGUE

CALIZTO

I crest the low bluff, and the vast ocean spreads out before me, jade green and sparkling. I have never seen so much water, though I have dreamed of the ever-flowing skirt of Mother Sea, twining itself around the world, swaddling us in her watery embrace.

I would stare like this for hours, but the Spanish are still on my heels, reinforcements converging from the city they established at the mouth of the Huitzilpan River.

Gripping the moon conch against my chest, I begin my descent toward the beach, feet slipping clumsily on the tricky sand.

I am a child of the highlands, son of mountains, born to live and die close to our Father the Sun. But she needs me. She must receive this sacred shell, this tenuous thread of magic that connects her heart to mine across expanses of space and time.

Clinging to rock and root, I make my way down. A rod or so from the bottom, I let go and drop to the sand, resting for the briefest of moments.

Movement catches my eye, and I glance up the strand.

A hundred Spanish soldiers are rushing at me, some mounted on horseback. At their head stands the priest, his eyes wide as he sees the conch in my hands.

There is no time to lose. I cannot fail her. She must find it.

Without it, she will despair.

Without it, she will not have helped me.

Both of us will be lost.

Both of us will die.

“Goddess, give me strength!” I cry as I burst into motion, my feet pounding the beach, driving me toward the sea.

Their harquebuses spit lead balls into the sand around me. An arrow grazes my stomach, leaving a long and bloody groove.

I do not stop. Ignoring enemy fire, I plunge into the foaming waves, the conch held high.

“Take it, Mother Sea! Take this sacred shell and place it in her hands!”

And with all my strength, I fling the pink spiral into the swells.

Moments later, unexpected hands haul me from the water.

PART ONE

WAXING MOON

CHAPTER ONE

Sitlali.

June 1, 2019



The crescent moon wavers and fades upon the black mirror of the darkest sea. Away from the city lights, the calm water looks black as tar and just as thick. I am afraid to think of what might happen if I should dive into it. Nothing good could come of that.

I've never been to Boca del Río at night. When I was very small, before my father left, I was afraid of the ocean. Mami used to try to make me strong. *Always challenge the darkness. Ask the ancients to help you stay strong!* she used to say.

But Mami has been gone for almost seven years. She died the summer after I turned ten. Her broken heart couldn't keep her alive anymore, not when she refused to nourish herself to spite Don Nicolás, the drug lord who wanted her to marry him and let him take my father's place in her heart. At her funeral, the women of Zongolica said Nora Morales was like a cardinal, the red bird that would rather perish than be taken captive.

I saw a red bird die in my father's hands when I was five years old. The poor thing had flown into our house by mistake, a frightened,

confused flurry of fiery feathers. It flittered from floor to ceiling, looking for a way out until my father lifted a bedsheet high over his head and flung the cloth over it. Carefully, he took it from under the sheet and held it in his left hand.

Mami begged him to let it go before it tensed up and died. But my father was hell-bent on keeping it. “I caught it for you,” he said. “To remind you of my love while I am away.”

I think the bird died because it knew my father would not return. Maybe it knew his love was untrue. I want to say I miss my mother, but how can I? When my father left, it was like she left with him. I tried getting close to her. I hugged her and kissed her and told her I loved her. But I was too late, her heart had seized up, and there was nothing I could do to save her.

I shake off all thoughts of my mother and sit on the sparse, sandy grass off the shore, away from the laughter of my school friends. They are too young and self-absorbed to understand what I must do. This is how they decided to spend our last night together before I depart. But, while they came here to ask the moon to find them new boyfriends, I came to get away from the predators taking over our neighborhood.

Like carrion birds, gangs of angry young men congregate in our streets. Veracruz is infested with them. And now that they are moving up into the mountains, Zongolica is not as safe as it used to be. If my father were still here, if he had not gone to the States . . . but that is not worth considering. With his strong character, he might have already met with violence. And then I would be a true orphan.

Before she passed away, my maternal grandmother, Lucia, who’s been my caregiver all these years, prepared me for this journey. “Repeat her information, full name, address, and phone number again,” she asked, quizzing me daily.

“Tomasita Ruiz, 1847 Prairie View.” I repeated the address she had me memorize. “Von Ormy, Texas. I know it by heart, Abuela. Don’t

worry.”

“She will take good care of you,” Abuela Lucia said every time I repeated the foreign words. “Tomasita is your madrina, your mother’s best friend in the world. It is her job to take care of you when I am gone.”

For months after the gangs made it necessary for me to quit my job at the bodega, Abuela Lucia and I lived on the calditos I made from the vegetables I cultivate in our garden. After a while, though, she stopped taking nourishment. I took her to a doctor. He said it wasn’t the meager diet or our poor living conditions that were taking a toll on her.

“She is old,” he told me. “It is just her time.”

I know we all have to die, but my wounded heart twists in my chest when I think of her now. Without my grandmother, I have no one to run to, no one to guide me, no one to love.

Looking back, I see Abuela Lucia was right; it’s time for me to leave this place. Because even if I were to get a job in Zongolica, I wouldn’t be safe living alone. I have no other choice. I have to go to los Estados. Maybe, with her knowledge of that foreign country, my madrina Tomasa can help me find my father. Because I don’t know how to begin looking for a man I haven’t seen in over twelve years.

“Sitlali!” Esmeralda calls out to me from the beach, where the girls are all dancing around and chanting an ancient song to the moon. I can barely make out their words as they move rhythmically over the sand.

I pick up my sandals and run down the incline to join them.

“Sing.” Matilde grabs my hand and pulls me into their dance. I look up at the moon as I chant half-heartedly, because love is not a priority for me. I want the moon to see me safely out of Zongolica. A gust of wind hits us. My long black hair swirls and wraps itself around my face and neck.

“Sing!” Esmeralda cries over the roar of waves. “Come on! It’s no good if you don’t mean it!”

So, I sing.

“Nochan. Nochan. Home.” I let go of Matilde’s hand and walk toward the moon’s reflection in the water. “I just want to feel safe again.” I wipe roughly at my cheek because I don’t like to cry. That’s not the strong woman my grandmother raised.

That’s when I see it; an iridescent, crescent-shaped sliver of moonlight rolls in with the tide. Slowly it comes to rest before me, gleaming softly at my feet. I squat, pick it up, and shake the water out of it, marveling at its luminescence.

“What’s that?” Esmeralda looks over my shoulder.

“A conch.”

“It’s beautiful.” Matilde squats beside me and tests the thorny horns with her fingertips.

“It’s got some kind of markings,” I say. “Can you read that?”

“Nahuatl?” she asks. “No.”

“My grandmother could have,” I tell her, turning the conch over in my hands and tracing the glyphs. “I only know enough to get by.”

“Well, if it is Nahuatl, that makes it valuable,” Matilde says. “We should wait for the tourist shops to open so you can sell it.”

Esmeralda turns away from us. “We have to get going. We don’t have time to waste trying to sell that trinket.”

I examine the conch again. “It’s not a trinket,” I say, weighing it in my hands. “It’s old. I can tell by the wear on the hieroglyphs.”

“Chale. I know dozens of people who could make marks like that.” Esmeralda rests her fists on her hips.

“You know people who can carve the old language into seashells? Seriously? Because I don’t,” I say. “Most people I know can’t even write. And they’re never going to learn because they can’t walk to school safely!”

Esmeralda's face tightens. Then her lips soften, and she reaches out to touch my shoulder. "And you think selling this thing is the answer?"

"I do." I hold the conch tightly within the circle of my arms.

Esmeralda's eyes glisten in the dark. "Life doesn't work that way, Sitlali," she says. "Things like long-lost treasures and ancient relics don't magically appear for people like us. We have to fight for everything we have."

I caress the curved lip of the conch in my hands. "I don't care what you say. I'm taking it to the museo de arte today. I need to collect as much money as I can. It's my only way out."

"You don't have to go." Esmeralda's eyes glisten as she appeals to me. "My brother can protect you. He has connections now."

I shake my head and look away, because I don't want to tell her that her brother's connections are the reason I have to go.

"Whatever." Esmeralda turns away. "I'm catching the first bus back to Zongolica."

"Hey!" Matilde calls. She is running down the beach, getting farther away from us. Behind her, the sky is beginning to lighten. "Let's finish our song! Before the sun comes out and chases the moon away."

Esmeralda rushes after her.

I look at the conch in my hand. In the dawning light, its surface is radiant, almost magical. Then, for no reason at all, I pull the shell up to my face, press it against my cheek, and ask, "When will this darkness end?"

Then, because there is no use waiting for an answer, I run to the incline, tuck the conch into my backpack, and turn back to chase after Esmeralda, who is gazing at the moon and chanting along with the girls.

"Will you wait for me?" I ask her. "When I go sell the conch?"

“What conch?” Esmeralda asks.

I sigh, because I was really hoping she would support my efforts.

“Never mind,” I tell her, “I’ll catch up with you after I make the sale.”

“You’re nuts—you know that? But I love you anyway.” Esmeralda gives me a quick hug and then rushes off to join our group.

The girls start dancing and singing again.

Before me, sunlight torches the heavens, singeing the sky with red-and-pink strokes that shift and swirl until they fuse together. Then the sun breaks through the horizon. A newly formed day is born, and I run down to the shoreline.

“Come on! It’s time to go!” Esmeralda calls to me from the incline.

I dig my heels into the sand and shake my head, because no matter how much I try to pretend it isn’t so, it really is time for me to move on.

CHAPTER TWO

Calizto.

Day 9-Eagle of the year 3-House (June 4, 1521)



Once the younger students have finished whitewashing the telpochcalli, we make them drill with lances. Only one dares complain, muttering about his parched tongue. Ce Mazatl strikes him with a switch.

We're all thirsty. Nine days ago, our enemies destroyed the aqueduct that has for a century brought fresh water from distant Chapoltepec Hill to Tenochtitlan, the once mighty city in the midst of brackish Moon Lake. The well of this school has gone dry. Lines at the only spring on the island of Mexico, despite its bitter water, stretch up and down the canals.

Thirty thousand people. Trapped. Under siege, with little food or water.

Haunted by the loss of fifty thousand friends and family.

The sky glows golden at this late hour. A few clouds rush westward, desperate to plunge after the sun into the Underworld.

Tlaloc, I whisper in my heart. Lord of Rain. Let the Green Time come early.

Masking despair, I correct the stance of a few students. Maximum thrust is needed to pierce the armor of the enemy. There's no doubt in my mind. We'll all be called upon to fight soon, even this minor *telpochcalli* in a muddy neighborhood on the lakeshore.

Our *telpochtlahtoh* emerges from the school, looking grim.

"Fall in!" I shout. Like *Ce Mazatl* and *Ayotochtli*, I serve as a *tiachcauh*. At seventeen years each, we are the oldest students at our humble commoner school, watching over and training the newer boys. They obey us without question.

"Yes, Older Brother *Calizto!*" they shout as they line up, lances resting on their shoulders. We three older brothers turn and stand in front of them.

Master *Miquiztin* adjusts his white cape.

"Men of *Metztionalco*," he begins, using the name of our *calpolli*, the minor house to which we all belong, "word has come from our *calpoleh*. Chief *Itzcoyotl* instructs us to take up a position upon the southern causeway at first light."

The air becomes tense. Cortés has taken *Acachinanco*, the landing site and staging area just a few dozen rods south of the city. From the fortress there, he keeps us from leaving and goods from arriving.

And for the past two days, he has attempted to force his way up the causeway. Our warriors have repelled his army, but at a great cost.

"Earlier today," *Miquiztin* continues, "the enemy blew open a breach in the causeway south of *Acachinanco*. Four ships moved through it to the west side of the lake. Then the fleet advanced on each side of the embankment as the mounted *Caxtiltecah* and their filthy allies pushed toward the city, forcing our soldiers back."

The master of our school pauses, eyes red with emotion.

"Those bastards set houses alight. Fierce Mexica indignation rose in our heroes, who pushed them back on the causeway and in the water. Tomorrow they'll come again. But we'll be waiting. Our school

will erect breastworks and dig pits, removing wooden bridges so the enemy cannot enter the city again. There will be no dancing or singing today, little brothers. Go home. Eat supper with your families, if they yet live. Return here to sleep. We need you nourished and rested in the morning. Dismissed!”

The students stow their weapons and disperse. Once they're gone, I walk along the hard-packed dirt street beside my two friends.

Ce Mazatl is the first to bid us goodbye.

“Coming back after dinner?” Ayotochtli asks with a wry smile.

Ce Mazatl laughs despite the gloom that hangs over us. “You already know the answer, Brother. I've a rendezvous planned with the lovely Quetzpal. We have needs, and this may be the last night of my life.”

As he walks away, his words bore into my heart. *I cannot die tomorrow. Someone depends on me.* The thought is cowardly, shameful. But my father made me swear an oath. I am honor bound.

“And you?” Ayotochtli asks.

I have much to consider, much to do. I may not be able to sleep at the telpochcalli tonight, no matter the rules. So I claim the one unspoken exception.

“I'm also meeting someone,” I mutter.

“What?” he demands, grinning. “You? The most pious and self-restrained of us all? Who is she?”

I tell a lie he can't investigate. “A Huitznahuac girl. Saw her in the marketplace on Seven Reed. We agreed to meet in an empty house in her neighborhood tonight.”

Ayotochtli slaps my back. “Lucky bastard. Why didn't you say anything? Ah, foolish question. Well, good to see you're human after all.”

He laughs and heads for his uncle's home. Though the smallpox has orphaned him, he has some family left.

All of mine are dead. Yet I'm still responsible for one living soul, kin to no one, enemy of all I hold dear. It's my duty to sustain him.

I walk through my neighborhood of Metztonalco. Twilight deepens into night. A new moon. Only stars emerge, first Venus, celestial protector, and then the rest, constellations glittering in the canals as I pass over rickety bridges.

My father's house stands silent at the lip of the city, lake water just a stone's throw from the courtyard. Crouching at the edge of the canal, I scour our bedraggled chinampa garden for any vegetable I may have missed this morning. I breathe a sigh of relief when my hand finds a stunted yellow squash. We'll stave off hunger one more day.

If I survive tomorrow, I'll try the marketplace. But I have little left to trade, and while Emperor Cuauhtemoc filled this city with warriors and weapons, he neglected to stockpile food.

The thought of escape rises in some craven corner of my mind. I shrug it off and climb the ladder to the platform built by my grandfather and uncles.

All of them dead, though their footsteps and voices echo in my heart like lingering ghosts. A sob wrenches free from my clenched jaw as I stand before our once teeming, happy home. Now as silent as a tomb.

Punching my chest to keep from weeping, I enter.

"Finally!" a voice cries out in the foreign tongue I have been learning for nearly a year. "I've been sitting here in the dark, Calizto, worried for you."

His stomach grumbles.

"Hunger," I replied, the alien sounds twisting my lips. "Not worry."

At the center of the living space rest the hearthstones, lifted by a statue of Huehueteotl, the old god of fire. I stir the ashes, find a single

glowing ember. In moments, flames illuminate the adobe walls and the features of my guest.

He is darker than me, resembling the Chontals who sometimes visit from their seashore kingdom. His hair is tightly curled, however, like none I've ever seen.

Though two years older than me, he's often impish, immature, and needy. Like my little brothers Ixconan and Huitztecocol once were.

I squeeze my mind shut against those memories and focus on my charge.

"Hello, Ofirin," I say in the language of his former masters. "Is there water?"

He picks up a clay container, sloshes its contents. "A little, yes."

"Good." I take it from him, set it on the fire. With a sliver of obsidian, I slice the squash. The pieces make satisfying plops. I add a handful of chili peppers.

He looks at me expectantly, starved for conversation, but I wait. As he spoons the meager chayohmolli into his mouth, I consider our situation.

When we drove the Caxtiltecah—the Spaniards—from our city last summer, raging at the death of Emperor Moteuczoma, hundreds died, many drowning in the canals, weighted down by their ridiculous armor and the gold they covet.

The following day my father, Omaca, helped to dredge the waterways and remove the dead.

He discovered Ofirin, clinging to a chinampa garden, near death. In secret he brought the strange young man into our home, where Mother nursed him back to health after consulting her astrological charts.

By fall, we were learning Spanish as Father prepared to sneak Ofirin to freedom.

Then the plague came.

For sixty days it ravaged the island of Mexico, reaping life after life throughout the sister cities of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. Ofirin was impervious. He took care of us as we suffered, unable to rise from our beds, covered with boils that thrust hot shards of pain into our nerves with the slightest of movements. At night he picked vegetables from the chinampa and prepared us food.

All around, the screams fell silent as our neighbors, our friends and family, began to die.

In this house, my younger brothers succumbed, first Ixconan, then Huitztecocol. A day later Mother passed, but not before wheezing out a command with her last breath: "Maintain the shrine, my precious Calizto. It contains a tool of great worth."

A week later I had nearly recovered, pustules fading to scars on my chest and arms, when my father called me to his side and commanded me as well: "I leave our guest in your care, beloved son. Perhaps the blessed Moon will light you a path out of this city. Perhaps you will be executed as a traitor. But our enemy enslaved this man, stole him from his distant homeland. Treat him with honor and dignity."

There could be no burials. Tens of thousands were dead. The city itself would have become a graveyard. No, my dead would meet the afterlife like nobles. They had earned that right.

I bundled them all. Brothers. Parents. Grandparents. Uncles. Cousins. Sisters. Brothers-in-law. Nephews. Nieces. Trembling with emotions no words can describe, I prepared the pyre.

I was not the only one. The sky above Tenochtitlan was thick with the smoke from thousands of funerals. No family member remained to say the old words. I didn't bother to look for an elder of my calpolli. My mother was a priestess of Coyolxauhqui, goddess of the moon. I knew the prayers.

In one single mighty blaze, everything that mattered to me was effaced from the world.

Ofrin can see the turmoil in my eyes. I've barely eaten.

"They're coming, aren't they? Cortés and his men?"

"And their thousands of allies. Yes. Along every causeway. In their water houses as well, their boats. Tomorrow I join my fellow soldiers in repelling them. I can't guarantee that I'll return in the evening. If I don't, you have to swim out to them."

Ofrin sets down his wooden bowl. "Are you mad? I've told you—they took Narváez prisoner. There's no one to advocate for me. I'm a dead man. A runaway. Colluding with the Indians."

"Mexico," I correct, my voice cold. "This is Mexico, not the . . . Indies or wherever you fools thought you were going. And if you think the Spaniards will treat you badly, trust me, you don't want *my* people to discover you here in the heat of battle."

Emotions play across his face. He is worse at hiding what he feels. "Then I'll pray that some god—my people's, yours, theirs—will keep you safe, that your warriors drive those bastards out again."

Prayer. Ofrin's words ring true. All that I have left is prayer.

"I'll return shortly," I announce.

He stares at the crucifix still hanging around his neck, running the beads through his doubting fingers. The Spanish forced their resurrected god on him, making him abandon his own. But I still have mine.

The shrine is not far. Always open to passers-by. Three walls of volcanic stone. A thatched roof. Inside, the altar, carved with conch glyphs. I bow to the stone head of Coyolxauhqui, the copper bells on her cheeks glowing as I light copal incense.

A broom stands in one corner. I sweep the flagstones till they gleam as white as the absent moon, white as a spiraling shell upon a starlit strand.

No hope. Every avenue despair.

I set aside the broom, kneeling. Once more, as I have done nightly since my parents' deaths, I whisper a prayer.

“Ah, Coyolxauhqui, Mother Moon, broken and then made whole again. And you, Tecciztecatl, son of Tlaloc, Lord of the Shell, immolated to protect her. I cannot see a way forward. My eyes perceive only destruction, only grief. Grant me some solace, I beg you. Send me aid in this my darkest moment.”

Something tells me prayer won't suffice.

A rustling sound draws my attention to the altar. Quick as lightning, a white-flanked jackrabbit bolts away along the nearby canal. I examine its hiding place beneath the altar.

A wooden box sits nestled inside, out of view. My mind tingling with intuition, I reach in and draw it out, setting it atop the altar and lifting the lid.

Inside, cushioned by cloth, rests a large mollusk shell, pink and spiraled. I take its pale and ancient curves into my hand, and its name springs to my memory.

The moon conch. My mother's priestly trumpet.

Hundreds of stars have been carved into the shell. Glyphs from the time of giants glimmer inscrutable in the dim.

A dangerous impulse seizes me. My limbs tremble at the notion. As I hesitate, my breath quickens. What I would do is forbidden to anyone but a lunar priestess.

Yet these are desperate times, when courage must push custom aside and seize at destiny, no matter the cost.

I lift the moon conch to my lips and blow.

The sound. Oh, gods above, the sound. It blasts through the moonless night, echoing along the canals, shaking the withering chinampas. Surely it can be heard in the ceremonial center, atop the Great Pyramid itself.

And I remember.

My mother standing before a gathered throng, blowing a haunting melody through the pink-tinged spirals. All of us entranced at the touch of the goddess.

How could I forget that tune, the instrument from which it arose?

Why can I remember *now*?

A shudder underfoot. I grip the shell to my chest.

Standing, I turn to look out across the water. The white sails of Spanish brigantines flutter in the night breeze. Beyond them, in the eastern mountains, the rim of the volcano glows red with fury.

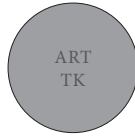
Popocatepetl is answering me. A warrior transformed by the gods into that mighty, smoking peak.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Your will be done. I place myself in your hands.”

CHAPTER THREE

Sitlali.

June 4, 2019



Abuela Lucia's spirit sits in a corner, watching me as I light a fire in the hearth.

"I found a conch," I say, pointing to my mochila, which I haven't used since I left school last year. It has hung in the corner of the room from the head of a rusty nail for months, empty and sad as a dry cornhusk until today, when I filled it with the bulk of my clothes and the pink shell. "I was going to sell it to the museo de arte. But they were closed."

I throw one last log on the fire, put my hand on my knee, and push myself up.

"I'm leaving tonight," I tell her. "Don Efrain's nephew, Martín, is going to drive me up to the border in Coahuila."

Unlike my mother, who claimed she could perceive her family on the other side, Abuela Lucía is the first spirit I've ever seen. At first, I was scared of her, but then I got used to her sitting around with me. Her presence in this house breaks my heart because I don't know what she wants. She's come every night since her death.

On the day of her own funeral, she sat in the same corner and watched me cry. I don't know if the dead can talk. Maybe they do, just not in a way we can hear. But there are so many things I want to ask her. So many things I need to know.

"Have you found my mother yet?" I've asked her this question every night, and, as usual, she shakes her head.

Something stirs outside. The shrubbery rustles a warning, and I jump away from the window. Every muscle in my body tenses, and I pat the small bulge under the cloth at my waistline, where I keep my mother's knife.

There is no knock, only a hard bang and the door flies open. It hits the bench where my grandmother is sitting. She opens her mouth to scream at the intruder, but nothing comes out.

Esmeralda's brother, Jorge, steps into the kitchen. The light of the fire throws dark shadows across his face, and his silhouette wavers long and lean on the wall to the left of him, like a tall praying mantis.

"What the hell?" I ask. "I know your mother taught you to knock!"

"Esme says you're leaving." He pushes a strand of dark hair out of his eyes.

I inch my fingers past the cloth waistband. I know what he wants, and I tell myself he doesn't stand a chance. The reality is that he can disarm me, perhaps even hurt me with my own mother's weapon. But I can't think like that. I can't let him scare me. So, I wrap my hand around the hilt of my mother's dagger. The slim, wooden handle is warm against my palm, ready to slice through flesh and muscle, pierce to the bone if need be.

"Well?" he asks.

When I don't answer, Jorge walks toward the hearth. He reaches over and grabs my mochila off the wall.

"Stop!" I rush around the table, but I am too late. He's disemboweling my bag, spilling its contents onto the packed dirt

floor. Hairbrush, toothbrush, and a framed picture of my mother scatter all around. I lunge at him, but he moves away, turns to the chimenea, and throws several articles of clothing in. The fire spits and snarls as it licks at my shirt and pants lying over the bright red logs.

I pick up my mother's picture and set it on the table.

"Come here," he says.

I move toward him and, before he knows what's happening, I swing at his face. His arm snakes out and grabs my arm. The mochila dangles in the fingers of his left hand and he squeezes my wrist. His grip tightens as he looks into my eyes.

"I didn't come here to fight," he says.

I pull myself free and step away from him.

"What's this?" he asks, reaching into my mochila to pull out the conch I've wrapped in a shawl.

"Nothing," I say, and I put my hand out to him.

Instead of giving it to me, Jorge throws the mochila aside and examines the conch. "Esme said you were going to sell something. She couldn't remember what. Is this it?" he said. "What happened? Changed your mind?"

"I'm keeping it," I say. "As a memento, something to remind me of Zongolica."

My grandmother's spirit glides across the room until she is standing in front of Jorge.

"No te hagas pendeja," he says. "I know you're not that attached to this place. You wouldn't be leaving if you were."

"There's no reason for me to stay," I say. "Not anymore."

"Marry me."

He holds the conch under his arm, like a warrior's trumpet. Only he's no warrior. He's just a kid trying to act like a grown-up.

Abuela Lucía turns to me and shakes her head.

"I can't," I say, and I reach for the conch.

“Why not?” Jorge asks, pulling his chin up.

I take a deep breath. “Because you’re too young for me. I used to take care of you when you were little, remember? You used to cry because you wet the bed and you didn’t want your mother to find out. So, I used to sneak you out and bathe you while Esme washed the linens.”

“Don’t fuck with me!” Jorge throws the conch down. It hits the floor with a thud and rolls away from us.

I move to retrieve it, but Jorge puts his arms around me and pins me against his chest. Three dark figures rush into the room.

“You brought your thugs?” I ask.

“You okay?” one of them asks. I recognize his voice. His name is Pedro, but they call him La Mano now, because he’s Jorge’s second-in-command. I’ve seen him lift his hand to make everyone stop and listen. It’s pathetic, how they’ve gotten the whole neighborhood afraid to do anything because they’re tethered to the bigger monster, the narcotraficantes who’ve taken over Zongolica.

Jorge leans over and buries his face against my neck. He presses a kiss right under my jawline. “Well?” he asks. “What do you say?”

My mother died because the wrong man touched her. She turned into a little red bird and flew to heaven. But I am not my mother. I won’t let a man’s hand send me into a fright.

“You’re a pig,” I tell Jorge, wrestling against him as he tightens his arms around me.

La Mano steps forward.

Abuela Lucía lifts her arms and a strong gust of wind rushes into the room. It slaps the door back and forth against its frame and rips the threadbare curtains off the window. The cloth lands over the fire, smothering it for a second before the flames begin to eat through the fabric. The room fills with a dark, blustering smoke that makes Jorge’s men cough and flail their arms.

“Come on, Jorge,” La Mano yells. “We’ve got more important things to do than mess with this bitch.”

“Shut up!” Jorge yells at La Mano. “Get out of here.”

La Mano turns to the others. “Let’s go,” he says.

When they leave, I twist out of Jorge’s embrace, take my mother’s knife out of my belt, and raise it over my head.

“Really?” Jorge laughs, but I am not afraid of him. He’s a mocoso. When he first told me I was to be his girlfriend, the day before my grandmother died, I ignored him. The second time, I was gathering quelites in the backyard and he came up and tried putting his hand on my hip. I slapped it away and told him I was not interested. He didn’t believe me then, but I hope the knife shows him I’m serious now.

“Don’t do this,” he says. “I can take care of you. You would be my queen. I would worship you.”

His vulnerability takes me by surprise. I want to tell him I could never marry him because we are too much like family, that he is a little brother to me. But Jorge is different now. Hunger and poverty have changed him. He wants to protect his family, to provide for them.

“You need to go,” I say. “Go on. Get out of here.”

“You’ll be back,” he says, and he wipes at the tears gathering on the rims of his eyes. “Broken, hopeless, penniless, but you’ll be back. I won’t marry you then. I’ll let my men have you—when I’m done with you.”

I look at my grandmother floating beside me. Every wrinkle on her face is furrowed, and she has that glint in her eyes that says, *Don’t let him treat you like that!*

I step forward and slice the air between me and Jorge in one swift motion. He jumps back, barely avoiding my blade.

“Go!” I scream. “Before I gut you and roast you in this fireplace!”

Jorge kicks a chair aside and walks out of the room. Abuela Lucia

lifts her hand, waves it sideways, and the door slams closed behind him.

“Thank you,” I say, and she floats forward and puts her hands over the roaring fire, tempering it until it is a warm flicker of light casting soft shadows between us.

I sit on the floor and pick up the conch.

“It’s ruined.” My voice trembles because the pretty shell is chipped at the tip. The broken piece is under the upturned chair, and I wipe at the tears burning at the corner of my eyes before I pick it up.

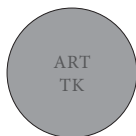
Abuela Lucía floats over to my cot and pats the thin mattress. With the conch in hand, I lie down for bed, cover up, and close my eyes. As I drift off, just as I am about to fall asleep, I think I hear Abuela Lucía humming a quiet, ancient lullaby. In my dream, the conch in my arms vibrates and hums, echoing my grandmother’s soft, susurrous song. The sound of ocean waves lulls me to sleep, takes me to a different place, a different time.

Rest, a voice whispers in my dreams. *Your journey will be long and arduous.*

CHAPTER FOUR

Calizto.

Day 11-Movement of the year 3-House (June 6, 1521)



I wish to linger in this dream. A young woman's voice whispers, slipping between Nahuatl and Spanish. Her voice is like moonlight: insubstantial, silver, intoxicating.

Nicitlalin. The word makes me shudder. *I am a star. I am Sitlali.*

But I cannot cling to her fading murmur. Duty and training wrench my eyes open.

I sit up with a groan. My muscles ache from digging trenches and flinging spears and loosing arrows. Still, I'm alive despite breaking tradition and sounding the very moon conch I had forgotten.

I stand and stretch, wincing at the popping of my joints.

In the ashes of the fire, a clay pot still contains a bit of the hominy I brought home last night.

As I crouch and spoon the cold, nixtamalized corn into my mouth, Ofirin clears his throat from the corner where he has been sleeping.

"How did it go? You were too tired to speak last night."

I swallow. "We pushed him back to the fortress. He'll be at it again today."

“Any news of the empress?” His foolish gaze and trembling lip almost make me laugh. I’m reminded of lovesick youths inquiring about their first crush.

I’m curious about this reaction, so I feign indignation. “Why should you care about Lord Cuauhtemoc’s young wife?”

He rubs sleep from his eyes, silent.

“Ofirin? Come, I deserve an answer.”

He stutters, looking away. “I-I met her when sh-she was a captive of the Spaniards. Before your people expelled them. Very sweet.”

I nod, understanding. During the Night of Victory, when we routed the Spaniards and Tlaxcaltecah, we also rescued Princess Tecuichpotzin, now our empress.

Of course, the two have met. Our empress is indeed noble of spirit. And beautiful. I cannot blame Ofirin for obsessing over her.

“As far as I know,” I answer, “she is well.”

His sigh of relief is almost comical.

I’m tempted to tease him, but I have dawdled too long. I stand, pulling my hair into a temillotl, tying it in place with a strip of red fabric. Then I slip on my quilted vest.

“That won’t stop a Spanish bullet. Or cannonball.”

Grimacing, I stare at him. “It’s not meant to, Ofirin. Where’s my maccuahuitl?”

“Your what?”

“My sword. Wooden macana, razor-sharp obsidian blades all along its edges, able to slice through Spanish armor like an oar through water?”

He gives a wry chuckle. “Oh, you’re trying to make a point.”

“Your former masters have horses and cannon and steel. But they’re nonetheless outmatched. The Mexica are the chosen people of Huitzilopochtli, god of battle.”

Ofirin laughs weakly. “Everyone thinks there’s a god on their side.

My people did, too. I suspect we're all wrong, Calizto. But there's your sword right there, leaning against the wall behind you. Your shield's strapped to it. I wish you luck. That's all it is, my friend. Chance."

I sling the shield and sheathed maccuahuitl upon my back as I leave.

The light of dawn is smeared across the eastern sky, pink reddened by the volcano's angry glow. The sun approaches with his retinue of fallen warriors, transformed into birds and butterflies. I breathe a quick prayer to him, despite Ofirin's doubts about the gods.

Others are exiting their houses. We make our way in silence along the biggest canal—Xoloco—trying not to look down at the abandoned chinampas snarling with weeds. There is no more time for gardens. No one can be spared to tend them. Emperor Cuauhtemoc has made clear our singular goal.

"Women," he cried out to a crowd two days ago, "when your men fall, pick up their swords, take up their spears, notch their arrows, and fight to your last breath!"

We reach the first canal running north to south. At the wooden bridge, everyone nods at the guards and crosses.

Waiting for me on the other side are Ce Mazatl and Ayotochtli, along with a handful of our students.

"You're almost late," Ce Mazatl remarks with a knowing grin. "Did a certain girl rob you of sleep?"

I laugh. He is righter than he knows. "I can hear her still, whispering to me."

Ayotochtli grabs my shoulder. "You crafty son of a bitch. Who would have figured you for a lady's man? So serious all the time. Tell me . . . does she have a sister?"

"One that doesn't mind ugly young men of low birth?" Ce Mazatl adds jokingly.

A few students snicker. I shut them up with a glance.

The last of our group soon crosses the bridge with Master Miquiztin, fierce in his elite eagle battle helmet and uniform. He signals the three of us older brothers.

“Fall out! The Caxtiltecah won’t just sit in that fortress waiting for us to get our carcasses in place, boys!”

At his gesture, I take the lead, trotting double-time to weave through the last block of buildings and cross the final bridge onto the broad causeway.

The sun is emerging from behind the eastern mountains. To my right, northward, I see the Eagle Gate and beyond it the towering pyramids and temples of the Sacred Precinct, to be protected at all costs.

To my left, southward, over the heads of several hundred men and women already fortifying our position upon the causeway, two stone buildings loom: the Fortress of Xoloc, teeming with Spaniards and their allies the Tlaxcaltecah.

Our sworn enemies.

The Tlaxcaltecah have resisted conquest by the Mexica for a century. Now, with Spanish weaponry on their side, they have tipped the scales. If they reach the center of Tenochtitlan, the city will surely fall.

Determined to stop them, our canoes ply the waters on either side of the causeway, heavy with warriors and arrows.

Closing on them are the Spanish brigantines, cannons already trained.

I find a place for our school. We dig in, sharpening stakes and carving a trench into the heavily packed earth of the causeway.

Then the Shorn Ones come running up from behind us, screaming, swords drawn. Their faces—painted blue on one side, red on the other—twist in snarls of rage as they rush to the vanguard. Already the enemy is approaching, having spent the night filling in the great

pit we dug yesterday to keep them away. But these elite warriors of ours—banners and quetzal feathers fluttering majestic from poles on their backs—feel no fear. Defying musket and cannon blast, they berserk preemptively against the Tlaxcaltecah.

Chaos explodes.

All around me is the sound of battle. The hiss of arrows, the grunts and shouts of warriors hurling spears, the explosions of Spanish guns and artillery.

Our school is at the back, but we do not shirk our duty. Should the enemy make it this far, we must be ready.

So we dig. We sink sharpened sticks into the earth at an angle, creating a defensive palisade. At some point a group of children brings us water and hard tortillas. We eat quickly and continue our work.

Though I resist, the phantom voice of my dreams comes whispering into my thoughts.

North, I manage to make out. *Father. Coahuila.*

I must be going mad. Coahuila? I don't recognize the word. Could it be "coahuilani"? Who is it that "crawls like a snake"?

My eyes are drawn to the water of Moon Lake, upon which legendary chieftain Tenoch established this city generations ago. Some say the goddess Cihuacoatl—Serpent Woman—dwells in its depths. It was not even two years ago, in fact, that my younger cousins, *all of them now dead*, rushed to me when I came home from my first day at the school, whimpering that the goddess was walking the streets of our city each night, crying out in a spectral voice, "Oh, my children! What will become of you! Your doom is at hand!"

Signs. Could this lovely voice be a sign? Could it be the goddess herself, stirred to anger at my violation of sacred law? Is she snake-crawling her way across the lake bottom, coming to exact vengeance on me?

My hands begin to shake, but there is no time for fear. Not two

rods ahead of me, a group of Tlaxcaltecah leap over a gaping pit and begin hacking at our warriors, screaming.

“Now, boys!” bellows Miquiztin, unstrapping his shield.

Without another thought, I unsheathe the sword my father left me upon his death.

Coahuila. The voice is louder, distinct.

“I do not know what you ask of me, goddess, but I will defend your city with my life today!”

I have spoken aloud. Ce Mazatl looks up, surprised.

An arrow slams into his chest. He tumbles into the trench, dead.

The Tlaxcaltecah who killed him are upon us, slashing through the palisades.

Howling, I leap to meet them.

I swing my father’s sword. It bites flesh, passes through cartilage, nicks bone.

The world goes red as rage and horror and oh so much sorrow overwhelm me, and I fling myself headlong into the fray.

Long moments of chaos.

Cacophonous cries: “Castilla! Castilla! Tlaxcallan! Tlaxcallan!”

Then her voice again.

The conch. Broken. Worthless?

“No!” I scream. “Not broken! Not worthless!”

Her shock fills my mind, makes me recoil from the beast rearing above my head.

My eyes clear just in time. A mounted Spaniard swings his sword. I lift my shield, fire-hardened wood and salt-soaked leather in layers.

His steel shatters it.

I wheel aside. I could cut the legs of his horse out from under him. A blow of last resort.

A horse? Kill a horse? No!

Though the goddess is now shouting in Spanish, I cannot bring

myself to disobey her. Instead, I slice upward, ripping through the Spaniard's leather armor, opening the skin and muscle of his arm in a spray of blood. He drops his sword and screams.

Then the horse's hooves smash against me, and I go tumbling off the causeway.

Midair, I lose consciousness.