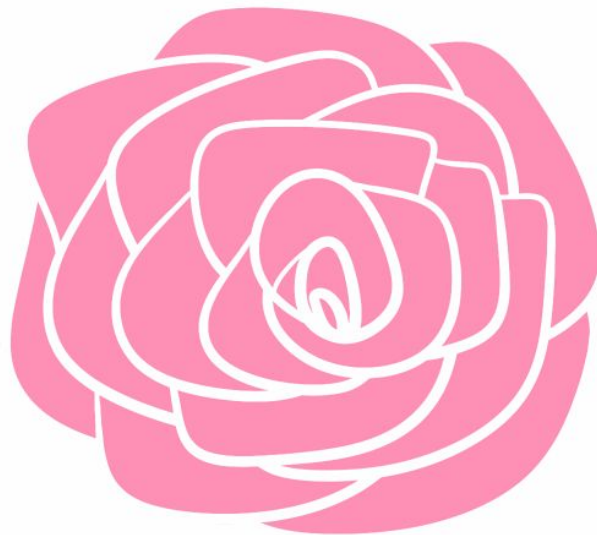


Us Lovely Corpses



One Year Later

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novella contains MAJOR SPOILERS for Us Lovely Corpses, and is intended to be read after completing the visual novel. If you have not played Us Lovely Corpses, you can learn more about it and download the game here → <https://dmlicea.itch.io/uslovelycorpses>

Please keep in mind that this novella contains many similar themes to the original visual novel and is also intended for audiences 16 and over. [More detailed information re: content is available here.](#)

-D. Licea

“Alejandra?”

There’s nothing but silence on the other end of the call. Straining my ears, I can just make out the sound of soft, uneven breathing. The tell-tale sign of someone trying to hold back tears.

“*Mija? Qué pasa-* is it Marisol?” My stomach knots. “Did something go wrong?”

I wait, and wait- and finally, I hear a slight crackle. The sound of dry lips parting.

“No... it went fine, Marisol’s fine, but...”

Alejandra sighs, and she suddenly sounds much younger.

“Lela... I messed up.”

Part 1: Past

They name the baby after me. Alejandra. When she finally finishes crying, we can study her features. Solid toes and fingers. A strong, well-shaped head. Already, healthy brown curls are delicately etched on her crown, as if ready to spring into three dimensions at any moment.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Claudia’s eyes are still tired and swollen from lack of sleep, yet I can see the fondness in them, a sparkle at the edges when she looks down at her new daughter.

I nod. “Yes. You can see the both of you two in her. She has your eyes.”

And, because even after sixty-some years I have never learned when to shut my mouth- because at some point I became the grandmother that tells the “bad” jokes- because, perhaps, I feel an ache in my heart, a desire to make my daughter-in-law smile- I go on: “well, one of them.”

“Mama.” Even before Alfonso’s voice warns me from the other side of the room, I know it was the wrong thing to say. Claudia’s eyelids press together tightly, and this time I know the glimmer is tears. Alfonso comes over to soothe her, careful not to disturb the baby. He gives me a look- not even anger. Exhaustion.

I look down at my granddaughter. Alejandra de Rosa sleeps like any other newborn, peaceful, dreamless. She is oblivious to the tiny rosebud that sprouts from her right eye.

“A-*bwe*-la.”

My granddaughter’s dark eyelashes flutter, her gaze unmoving from the television as she nods. “A...”

I lean in. “A...?”

“Ah-*lela*.”

Despite myself I chuckle. “What about Alejandra?” She twists her lips, and I laugh again. “Come on, it’s *your* name too. You’re going to have to learn this one eventually.”

“A...”

“Ah-*le-hand-ra*.”

“A... *lela-ah*.”

“Yes yes, you love that ‘lela,’ don’t you?”

She nods. "Le-la."

Just as Maria Alejandra Urbieto had become Maria Alejandra de Rosa, Maria Alejandra de Rosa became *Doña* de Rosa- only to skip right past Abuela to become Lela. Likewise, Alejandra became Alex - although, of course, she eventually learned to pronounce it.

Alejandra does her best to keep up in Spanish, but some words still evade her. Writing and reading isn't so bad for her, but full conversations take all her concentration. I see her eyebrows twitch as she dives deep into the pit of memory, pulling out verb tense. The blush that touches her cheeks when her tongue turns goes clumsy on certain syllables.

From the moment I learned about Claudia's pregnancy, I had a feeling this would happen, in this country, in this time. I feel sad at times, watching her, but not as sad as I think I might have once felt. It is a complicated feeling. Perhaps it's just getting old.

The fact of the matter is, Alex has more pressing matters than her Spanish.

"What's wrong with her face?"

Three days after her tenth birthday, Alejandra comes downstairs to ask her parents and I if she can stay home from school for the day. Her voice is more quiet, more grave than a child's should be. A look passes between our eyes as she waits for our answer.

Alejandra's eyes don't meet mine as I pass my hand over her forehead. I don't find a fever. If anything, she feels cold to the touch.

I purse my lips for a moment before speaking. "Is it your throat, *mija*?"

Her eyes don't leave the floor. "I guess."

"Sounds like a cold," I say over my shoulder.

Claudia looks at me a moment, frowning. "Are you sure?"

I don't say anything. I just hold her gaze for a moment. Her lip twists, but she doesn't object.

After a moment, Alfonso pats her shoulder reassuringly. “Lela knows what she’s doing, honey.” He walks over to Alejandra, crouching down to ruffle her hair. “She’ll take good care of you today, okay Alex?”

“Sure.”

After Claudia and Alfonso leave for work, I take an egg out of the refrigerator. She used to giggle when I did this, trying not to squirm when I rolled it over her body. Sometimes when she was younger she’d beg me to have an “egg rub” even when there was nothing that suggested she needed it, watching with rapt attention as the yolk dispersed in a glass of water afterwards. Today, Alejandra is stock-still, silent, even when the chilled eggshell touches her bare skin.

When I roll it over her face, I accidentally brush the rose. I do my best to not flinch when the outermost petals contract.

Alex says nothing as I crack the egg in a glass of water. My eyes flicker between her and the yellow mass billowing in the water like smoke.

“Why don’t we get you some VapoRub,” I say, enunciating the last word carefully. I remember how she used to fidget as soon as I brought the little blue tub out, wriggling and grumbling when I spread the ointment on her chest.

“Sure, whatever.”

I look at her for a moment, before looking back at the egg yolk. No matter how much I strain my eyes I can’t find a single shape in the glass.

“Well, what do *you* want to do, *mija*?”

“Nothing,” she mumbles. “I just wanna sleep.”

So I lead her to her little bed and tuck her in. After closing the blinds tight, I linger at her side a moment.

“*Mija*... Alex, if there’s anything you want to talk about, anything you don’t want to tell Mom or Dad-”

“There’s nothing.”

My lips linger around the shape of my words. It almost feels like she snapped at me, except her voice lacked any sort of bite. It was as if they were just words stamped into the air.

“...it just sounds like you’re feeling down.”

Alejandra flops over on her left side, leaving the flower to point straight at me. “I don’t feel down.”

I can’t rip my gaze from the rose. For a strange moment, it feels like a real eye, staring unblinkingly at me.

“I don’t feel...”

Alejandra’s voice trails off. It seems like she can’t figure out how to end that sentence.

I leave her to sleep. After I turn off her light, I linger in the doorway to I look back at her. She looks tiny, swallowed up in her sheets. I can’t make out her face very well, but the rose catches what little light manages to seep in the room.

The petals twitch.

It feels as if something has dragged its hand down my neck. I shut the door, pausing to catch my breath, and I walk down the hall as fast as I can.

I run away from my granddaughter.

After Alejandra turns eleven, she seems to grow quieter with every passing day. Her teachers begin to call the house. It’s not even that her grades are dropping- she’s simply not doing the work anymore.

“Are those kids still giving you trouble?” I ask on another day she stays home with a false cold. “The ones you told us about a while back?”

“No.”

“Because the teachers were supposed to talk to them, about not bullying you, if they’re acting up again the school can punish them-”

“No one’s bullying me.”

I wait as she stares at the floor. I roll the egg in my palms, half to warm it, half to keep from pacing.

“No one’s bullying me, they just...” Alejandra folds her arms, grasping at the sleeves of her sweater, as if the kitchen is cold, as if it wasn’t an unseasonably hot day in April. “I don’t know.

They're just weird. They whisper when they think I'm not listening, and they look at me- stare at me. But they talk to me, and they're always nice, they ask me to come to the movies and stuff..."

"Well, why don't you go with them?" I try to speak kindly. "It could be fun, right? Making some friends?"

Alejandra's rose twitches.

"I don't like it."

"You don't like what?"

"The way they talk to me. Like I..." Her fingers flex around the fabric of her sweater. "Like I'm a little girl."

"...Mija..."

"I know, I know I'm a little girl, I mean..." She sighs, tossing her head as she shifts on the chair. "Like I'm something small, like... like the way..."

The rose twitches.

"What? Alejandra, tell me."

Alejandra digs her teeth into her bottom lip.

"Like the way you talk to me."

The sweat on my skin suddenly feels cold.

"...what? What do you-"

"Like the way you, you and Mom and Dad talk to me." Alejandra's neck bends so her face is covered by her brown curls (just as fluffy in three dimensions as I had thought they would be the day I first saw her). "And the way you talk when you think I'm sleeping. Like I'm, like I'm small, and sad, and..."

A noise rasps in her throat.

"I *hate* it."

"...mija-"

“I hate this. Why don’t the eggs work anymore, Lela?” Even under all her hair, I can tell she’s crying. “Why aren’t I getting any better? Why does everyone look at me weird? Why do you all talk to me weird?”

“Alejandra,” and I reach a hand to touch her shoulder. “It’s-”

She jerks back like I’ve burned her with an iron. “*It’s not okay!* I know it’s not okay! I’m not stupid!”

“Okay-”

“Stop talking to me like I’m stupid!!!”

“I know you’re not stupid!”

“Then stop talking to me like that!!! Stop pretending I’m sick all the time when you know I’m lying! Stop acting like the egg rubs work! Stop talking to me like everything’s alright! I hate how you talk to me! I hate-”

Somewhere in the middle of her words Alejandra has gotten to her feet, her tiny hands balled into fists.

“I hate...”

She runs to her room before she can find an end to her sentence.

“What does ‘pity’ mean?”

“MOM!”

Alfonso is a few months away from 37, but when his voice jolts me awake in the middle of the night, it’s with the desperate panic of a little boy. I register his terrified eyes before the rest of my vision unblurs. “Mom, it’s Alex-!”

I stand up. My briefcase is in my hand and I’m halfway down the hall before I’m even entirely awake.

But when I look inside Alejandra's bedroom, I almost wonder if I'm still dreaming. The scene that greets me feels like a nightmare- not something like a monster, or like a room full of blood and bodies. It is a nightmare in that it feels too, too real, yet unreal. Claudia is rocking Alex's limp form, muttering words too soft to hear, alternating between sobbing and pulling at her daughter's throat.

"Claudia, what-?"

Alejandra's head tumbles backwards, and it feels as if all my bones have left my body.

Black vines. A black so dark that shape and shadow are swallowed. They hug my granddaughter, an embrace so tight they leave her skin pale from lack of blood flow. And her neck....

Two thick vines crisscross on her throat, forming an X.

And from the center sprouts...

"Pity. Pity. Pity. Pity. Pity. Pity."

...a single black rose.

A single black rose with perfectly square white teeth.

And suddenly, I realize Claudia wasn't the one muttering.

"Help me," a voice hisses. Claudia is staring at me, eyes rimmed red. Her hand flies to Alejandra's throat once more, uselessly pulling at the vines. I see blood dribbling from her fingers. "Maria, *DO SOMETHING!*"

I kneel mechanically, my body going through the motions before my mind can catch up. My fingers snap my briefcase open before I even know what I'm going to try.

I remember what the witch told us the day Alex was born. *We recommend enlisting the help of witches who practice the universal witchcraft.* Her voice was carefully polite, as if walking on uncracked eggshells. *We still haven't fully documented the effectiveness of the more (a curl of her lip, imagined or?) traditional methods on OR.*

Traditional, I had thought that day.

Universal, I had thought that day.

Please work, I think as I open my briefcase, pulling out the incense, lighting it before even thinking. Please work, please work, please for the love of God work-

The vines tighten around Alejandra's neck. "**PITY-**"

I shove the burning incense down the rose's mouth.

The room smells like burning flowers and blood. A garbled scream rings out.

It can't take any longer than three seconds, but it feels like three eternities. The flower wilts, and the vines go limp. Within a few heartbeats, they're nothing but rings of ash around my granddaughter's body.

Alex opens her eye to find us staring down at her with tear-streaked faces. For a long, long moment, she looks up at us, before she shuts her eye, sighing.

"Why did you do that."

"Alex... do you know what 'depression' is?"

I swallow my pride. I take a course with a nearby school that teaches the "universal" method. I get a honorary license to be an official practitioner of the "universal" method. All my regulars are surprised when I mention it, but it's always muted. I think they think it's so I can get more customers. Only other Mexican families trust a *curandera*, after all.

(I actually do end up getting more customers. I try not to think about this too hard.)

Really, it's so I can learn all I can about Ocular Rosaceae. My mother taught me everything I knew, God bless her, but she never taught me words like *depression* or *comorbid*. If she was alive today, if she saw us taking Alejandra to a therapist, she would have laughed until she dropped. *Depressed?* she would have scoffed. *The child's twelve years old! What does she have to be depressed about?!*

I might have been said the same thing, maybe, before I saw my granddaughter's body try to kill itself.

So I study. I learn the different rose colors, and I learn the "official" spell to enchant a blade.

But I don't forget. I burn candles and incense in Alejandra's room everyday.

I add a pair of hedge trimmers to my briefcase.

I research papers on magical ailments. I read statistics.

I try not to think what it means that witches of the universal school increase every year, while the number of witches like me seems to shrink everyday.

I try not to think about how my father (God bless him) told me once that mental illness was a myth invented so spoiled kids could get by with no work.

These days I do a lot of not-thinking. The thing I think about is Alejandra. The thing that's important is helping Alejandra.

Alejandra spends most of her days in her room. When she leaves it she carries the smell of incense and crowns of thorns in her hair.

"Red," I say, almost sing-song, as I cut the vines. "Red for passion, but also anger. Yellow for..."

"Cowards," Alejandra mumbles.

The license was good for getting my hands on a pair of trimmers. But not for much else.

Alejandra is crying, arms clutching her crown as if she's trying to decapitate herself. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

The bloom of the white rose lays on her bedroom floor, startlingly beautiful yet somehow looking for all the world like the head of a poisonous snake. "It's... it's okay *mija*," I pant. My heartbeat is still pounding in my skull.

"I didn't mean it Lela, please..."

"I know, I know, *mija*." I swallow, trying not to think about what the rose said. "Shh shh shh..."

She sobs as I rub my hands on her shoulders. "God," she chokes out. "Why can't I just be normal?"

Word spreads across town about how effective my methods are. *A blend of traditional and modern witchcraft*, that's what they always say, like I'm some trendy new restaurant. So new, so innovative! As if I haven't been here for years. As if half these new customers hadn't always politely passed me over before I got the damn license.

But the damn license gets me into bigger, nicer houses. Houses with richer customers and heavier paychecks. More money to pay Alejandra's therapist, I tell myself. More money to keep Alfonso and Claudia afloat if there's ever an emergency.

My newest customer is that kind of rich, the kind of rich that gets you a house big enough to need housekeepers. One of them, a short stout woman with a tight bun, offers to bring me a drink as I wait for the customers in the sitting room, and it immediately makes me self-conscious enough to nearly fall out of my chair.

They're a man and a woman about Alfonso and Claudia's age. The man is some sort of doctor, the woman a librarian. They both speak English smoothly, but after a few moments of chatting with them I can pick out the faintest traces of accent. Cuban. Not born in the states, but they must have come at fairly young ages. The man mentions meeting in Miami, and I can already start to piece together their backstory before they even explain it. Immigrants from humble backgrounds, working for the American dream. Uplifting. Oscar-worthy.

"Ah, but that's a story for another day," the man says. "I'm sure you're curious about our daughter."

I nod politely, my eyes on the expensive carpet. "Is she here?"

"Ah, yes." The woman's feet shift in their spots. "Um, before we get her, I should say... it's good to meet you. We've heard a lot of good things."

My blend of traditional and modern witchcraft, right? I shut my eyes for a moment.

"It was really a relief... you were the first witch we heard of who specifically treats OR."

I open my eyes.

"OR?"

"Ah, right." The woman blushes. "That's what we always call it..."

The man laughs.

"*Ocular Rosacea* has always been a bit of a mouthful for us."

The girl that walks into the room is Alejandra's age. She's plump, a bit on the tall side. She wears a pair of Mary Janes, a beautiful dress the same color as her salon-perfect hair, and a dull look in her lone eye.

Dark vines as thick as her forearms drag on the carpet behind her.

"Say hello, Marisol."

Alejandra hasn't cut her hair in months. She has to peek up from under her bangs when she looks at me from the couch as I get ready to go visit Marisol.

"You've been taking less of the usual stuff when you go to clients."

That makes me pause. It's not only the first time she's spoken to me all day, it's her acknowledging her something about me. Granted, it's something I've been doing for months, but beggars can't be choosers. "That's right." I nod. "A lot of my newer patients prefer more modern methods."

"So no incense, no egg rubs?" She rolls on her back, and gravity pulls her bangs down as both her eye and the rose stare at me. "Why's that? Why are you doing the new stuff now?"

When I open my mouth, something between a laugh and a sigh comes out. I should be thrilled that she's trying to hold a conversation with me, but she's asking something far too complex to try to explain to a twelve year old in the handful of minutes left before an appointment. What could I tell her?

*Well mija, people in this country get a little **funny** when it comes to my kind of witchcraft, which sure is **funny** because they're okay with other kinds of witchcraft, but I guess it's not polite to point that out. But at the same time I have to learn this stuff because the women who taught me my brand of magic thought things like 'mental disorders' were just fancy ways to say "a major bummer." So here I am stuck in the middle becoming one of those curanderas I used to laugh at for trying to pretend to be a gringa, becoming exactly what I told myself I'd never ever be, but knowing this is what I have to be because there's no 'proper' way to treat your condition with the magic I was taught, but now that I bring it up, isn't it **funny** how none of those fancy 'official witches' ever deigned to tell us common folk about ways our magic could be used for things like OR, no, just told us to learn things their way or hire one of them or*

I take a deep breath.

"*Barridas* don't really work on Marisol," I finally say, and it is true. That's enough for now.

“Marisol...” She purses her lips. “You’ve talked about her a few times. So you can’t sweep her stuff out?”

“No, it’s a little too... deep-rooted to just sweep out.”

Alejandra looks at the floor. “Like me, huh...”

“Yes...” I hesitate. I’ve been dying to bring up Marisol’s condition to Alejandra for weeks now, maybe even the possibility of them meeting. But there were still things to take into account. Marisol still wasn’t responding to my treatments well, and her condition wasn’t quite the same as Alejandra’s (*Comorbidity, I think with a bitter smirk. All that studying for my license finally paid off*). At times, she could be volatile- which meant the manifestations of her condition could be volatile as well.

As much as I hated to think it, Marisol sometimes scared me.

Soon, I think. Turning back to Alejandra, I clear my throat. “Why do you ask?”

She gives me an upside-down shrug. “I dunno. Guess I was just curious.”

She sits up.

She fusses with her bangs a bit, gaze on the floor.

“...and I was thinking, magic might be interesting to learn about.”

I almost drop my briefcase.

“What? You’re serious?” In a startlingly small number of steps I’m in front of Alejandra, who goes from apathetic to alarmed as I grab her shoulders. “*Mija*, you’re serious? You want to learn to be a witch?”

“I s-said it might be interesting...” she mutters.

I laugh. I almost punch the air, remembering my briefcase at the last moment. “That’s great-Aleja, that’s great! I can teach you- I can put you on a lesson plan-”

“Lesson plan?!” She looks like she regrets opening her mouth. “I already have school!”

“This will be great for you, *mija*, something to look forward to, something to give you goals...”

“Lela, you’re gonna be late for your appointment...”

I practically skip out the door like a schoolgirl. “We’ll talk more when I get back!” I call over my shoulder. “You won’t regret this, Alejandra!”

Two weeks later, I think we’re both regretting this.

I hadn’t realized *teaching* magic was far different than *doing* magic. What’s more, I hadn’t realized my granddaughter could be such a lousy student. All we’ve managed to accomplish this past few days is a collection of scrawlings on a skin of paper that coats the kitchen table, a useless mess we can do nothing with except clean off every night before dinner.

“Okay,” I mutter, trying not to look like I’m losing my cool as I realize I’ve lost the pile of notes I’ve prepared for tonight. “So, to recap.”

Alejandra yawns.

“M-magic:” I say it like a textbook. “‘the power of apparently influencing the course of events by using mysterious or supernatural forces.’ Supernatural: ‘that which is attributed to some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature.’ So, magic is that which cannot be explained by the laws of nature. In other words...”

The only magical thing I’ve accomplished tonight is how I’ve accidentally seem to have made my notes disappear. I shuffle through the mess of papers while trying to make it look like that’s not what I’m doing.

“I-in other words...”

Alejandra rests her head in her hand, eyeing the pencil she twirls between her fingers.

“...You can think of magic as...”

She puts it in her mouth, absently gnawing at the wood.

In other words...

Other words...

“... you can think of magic as the world finding new ways to talk with itself.”

She blinks.

Alejandra tilts her head up, her face looking about as surprised as I feel. She boggles at me, her pencil perched in her lower lip like a dog with a bone.

“The world is... everything is, everything has energy in it. And things are always, always exchanging energy in it some way. And in some ways, that’s basically a conversation.” My lips feel like they’re moving without my brain’s guidance. “And the world, it finds new ways to have these conversations. To burn or move energy. If the movement of energy is like communication, then there’s things, like language, new phrases, sayings, slang- all those things.”

Alejandra isn’t blinking.

“The world finds new ways to talk to itself. So we have to find new ways to talk to it. And you can only start a conversation by being willing to meet the other person halfway. Do you know what that means, *mija*?”

“... you have to listen?”

“Right. You have to find new ways to not only talk to the world, but to listen to the world. That is the basis of magic.”

The kitchen is quiet. Both of us are quiet.

Every night, I pour over my notes. Not just for Alejandra’s lessons, but for my treatments of Marisol. The words I said to Alejandra over the kitchen table that one evening race through my head as I pour through my writing.

You have to find new ways to listen to the world.

I *had* found a new way to listen. The “official” school of witchcraft, yes, that was what i had thought was the new way.

But.

But, why did it have to stop there? Why couldn’t I learn more new ways? Why couldn’t I... why couldn’t I make a new way?

Different rules for different colors of roses.

Turning treatments into games for younger patients.

Making a “scenario” to complete for each sessions.

Listening. Communicating. Conversing.

Every night, I pour over my notes. If I strain my ears, I can hear Alejandra's snores from down the hall.

"I changed my mind."

I almost drop my briefcase.

"What? *Mija*, I don't- what happened?"

Alejandra is perched on the couch. Her bangs hide her face, but I know her gaze is on the floor. "Nothing happened. I just don't wanna learn magic anymore."

"But- but we just made a breakthrough! We were finally getting somewhere!"

"Barely," she scoffs.

"You're, you're just telling me you've suddenly lost all interest in magic? In learning to be a witch?"

"Yeah." Her shoulders lift- a listless shrug. "Sometimes that just happens to me."

And it was true. For the last few years Alejandra had a habit of dropping things she loved out of nowhere. I knew it as well as she did- I just didn't want to believe it. "Alejandra, this could be so good for you- you have magic in your blood already, and you're the one who told me you wanted to do it-"

"And now I don't."

A spike of anger surges through me. "This was the only thing you've shown any interest in for the last- I don't know how long!"

"I know."

"You can't just- you can't keep living like this! Not doing anything, not being interested in anything- it's like... it's like being dead!"

"Well maybe-"

Alejandra closes her mouth.

“...what?”

She looks away. “Nothing. Forget it.”

“Alejandra, what were you about to say?”

She looks at me.

The buzz of my cell phone startles us both. I pull it out on instinct- my mind catching up a half-second later to force me to look back at Alejandra. “*Mija-*”

She’s turned towards the wall. “Answer your phone. It’s probably important.”

“This isn’t more important-!”

The screen catches my eye.

FLORES: DONA DEROSA PLEASE RESPOND IMMEDIATELY

The rest of the message is too long to display. I half-turn my body away from Alejandra, opening the text. My eyes scan numbly through what feels like pages of disjointed words.

“M... Marisol,” I mutter. “Something’s wrong. Really wrong.”

I don’t expect Alejandra to answer, and it almost startles me when she does. “See. Told you.” When I look back, she’s staring at the wall. “You should go help her.”

I stagger a bit in place, as if Marisol is physically in the room with me right now, as if I have to choose between my patient and my granddaughter. “B... but...”

But what? The people who I’ve sworn to help have an emergency. But I can’t ignore what my granddaughter has just essentially admitted. Words are swimming in my head, thoughts of what to do, what I could do, what I should do...

Two girls... two girls with the same condition.

New ways to communicate.

Listening. Communicating. Conversing.

I dig my teeth into my lower lip.

“Alejandra. How about this- I promise I’ll drop the witchcraft talk. I’ll never bring it up again.”

After a moment, her head swivels towards me. “...if?”

“If you come with me.”

When we hit a red light, I’m able to turn towards her. Her jaw is slack.

“L-like me? She’s the same- we’re the same?”

“Not quite the same, but...”

“But we both have Ocular Rosaceae, right? And you’ve been treating her all this time?!”

Despite the urgency, I can’t help a small smile. “Well, I thought you weren’t interested in my work.”

“But this is beyond witchcraft- she’s my age, right? What’s she like?”

Out of the corner of my eye, the light turns green. Alejandra jerks slightly back as I hit the gas.

“A handful. She’s my most difficult patient yet.”

I think for a moment.

“But she’s pretty.”

“I don’t want you to come up.”

Marisol’s parents watch me with waiting, anxious eyes as I listen to the phone. Alejandra lingers in the background, her gaze shifting from me to them to the fancy wallpaper of the foyer.

I take a deep breath. “Marisol,” I say carefully. “I understand you’re not feeling well, but you have to understand, if I don’t let me see you, if you don’t let me treat you, it could be very bad for you.”

Alejandra’s eye darts back to me.

“I don’t want to scare you, Marisol, but if your vines are untreated-”

“I don’t care.”

I bite my lip.

I look back to Mrs. Flores. “You said she’s in the attic, yes?”

“Yes, but... but it might be locked.”

“Might be locked?”

“It’s just like-”

We both look to Mrs. Flores. She’s not looking well. “She... she used to have this game, when she was younger. She’d pretend there was something with her, in the attic, and we had to come ‘save’ her, and...” She rubs her left temple. “I’m sorry, I don’t even know why I’m talking about this- there’s keys, is what I’m trying to say. There’s locks, and you need keys... we keep them in our room, but sometimes she would hide them...”

I keep half an ear on her. My eyes fall on Alejandra, who watches the vines writhing along the wall.

“A... are you still there?”

Marisol’s voice is in my ear. My mind is turning.

Communication. New ways to talk.

Different rules.

Making scenarios for each session.

She used to have this game.

A game, for younger patients.

“B-because if you are, I told you, I don’t wanna talk. You should just go.”

“Marisol.”

She pauses.

“I have... someone here with me. A girl your age.”

Alejandra looks up.

“What?”

“She really wants to meet you.”

“W-what?” Alejandra sputters. “No I don’t! I didn’t say that!”

“And she really wants you to come down.”

“I didn’t say anything like that!” Alejandra raises her voice, trying to get Marisol to hear her.
“She’s lying!”

“And I think you’d like her,” I say, raising my voice above Alejandra’s. “But before you can talk... I need to treat you.”

There’s hesitation at the end of the phone.

“So how’s about this?” I interject before she can even think to pretend rejecting the idea. “We’re going to do something different today, something like a game...”

Behind me, Alejandra’s footsteps halt.

I turn to look down at her. She’s halted a few steps below me, her gaze locked on the vines that intertwine the staircase banister.

“...these are bigger than mine,” she says quietly.

“Yes.” I can’t help a smile as I point to the rose blooming a bit further up. “The flowers are bigger too.”

She winces. “G-geez...”

“Do you remember if these are safe to listen to?”

Alejandra looks at me suspiciously.

“...Red for passion, but also anger,” she says quietly, a blush spreading on her cheeks.
“Yellow... yellow for...”

Despite everything, I laugh. "Take notes. We'll review as we work."

"I don't have a pencil! Or paper!"

Shaking my head, I open my briefcase. I'm fine with parting with an old notebook, but as always, somehow, a pencil is harder to find. Finally, I come across a box of crayons. Something I had kept in case I had younger patients, but unopened until now.

"Here. You can even do color-coded, like the smart kids do..."

Marisol Flores looks at Alejandra de Rosa.

Alejandra de Rosa looks at Marisol Flores.

And despite the past hour,

despite the way I had seen her shrink away from the vicious mouths of the roses

despite her trembling knees as she followed me down dark halls towards the quiet shuffling of vines

despite the quiet "what if we're too late?" that had dropped from her mouth, in a voice she thought was too soft for me to hear, just before I had opened the attic door

the smile my granddaughter gives the girl with a rose in her eye

is the brightest I've seen on her face for a very, very long time.

"My name is Alex! I'm here to save you!"

"She *is* like me! She really is just like me!"

Alejandra is shining like a star. She can't stop smiling, hours later, even on the car ride home in the dark of night.

I can't remember the last time I've seen her this happy.

...so that's why I don't ask her why she never once showed Marisol her rose.

Months pass. Sessions with Marisol pass.

Alejandra begins to stand straighter. She gets more lively. She starts cracking jokes. She asks me about magic again.

(Her hair is still messy and in desperate need of a cut, but now it's in the name of artfully-uncaring style, and not apathy.)

Marisol still has her bad days. But she always looks happier after getting to talk to Alejandra. Mrs Flores tells me that she spends more time out of her room.

They become friends.

They become good friends.

Alejandra does not show Marisol her rose.

"Alex, I..."

I linger outside Marisol's room, my back against the door, my eyes on the opposite wall.

"...you know there's no monster, right? It's me... it's been me the whole time."

"...yeah... yeah, I know, Mari."

Marisol exhales.

"I just... I think it's really awesome you want to go to the same high school, but I just... I dunno, I want you to know... you've only seen my in my house, I may seem different at school."

"Marisol!" I hear the mattress creak. I imagine Alejandra shifting to grasp Marisol's hand. "You won't be *different*, trust me. I'm still gonna be your friend."

It's a moment before Marisol speaks again. "It's just... I really try, Alex. I really try to be normal, but it's hard, and I know people think I'm weird, or intense... and sometimes I just, I get so angry... and you're just, you know, really cool, and talented."

Marisol sighs.

“You’re... you know, normal.”

I close my eyes. I can picture Alejandra’s fists clenching around Marisol’s bedsheets.

In high school, Alejandra gets quite the reputation. The amateur witch. The cool funny girl. The girl who’s grandma still practices “old” magic.

In any case, she’s popular for the first time in her life. For her background, for her attitude, and at least in some part for the cool way she wears her hair to cover her right eye.

“Please,” she begs.

“Alejandra.”

“Not yet. Please, I need to be the one who tells her.”

“It’s been almost two years, Alejandra.”

“I know, I know, I just...”

I sigh.

“*Mija*. Remember how happy you were when I told you I knew someone who had your condition?”

“I know, Lela...”

“Don’t you think Marisol deserves to feel that too?”

“I-I know,” she sputters. “I want to, I want to tell her, but I waited too long, and I didn’t mean to, but I did and now it’ll be weird...”

“And the longer you wait, the worse it’ll get.”

She finally looks up from the floor. “Lela, I just... I’m *normal*. I’m normal for the first time in my life. I’m not the weird girl anymore.”

“And Marisol?”

“I’m not saying she’s not-!!” Her lone eye sparkles with tears. “I just-”

She looks down again.

“Please... I just need some more time before I’m ready to tell her. And it *has* to be me who tells her.”

After a long stretch of seconds, I sigh.

“The more time passes, the worse it’ll be, Alejandra.”

“I know.” Her voice is so small. “She’s gonna be mad.”

“I don’t mean Marisol, *mija*.”

Alejandra says nothing for a moment.

“I’m going to tell her,” she finally says. “I promise I will. Soon.”

Alejandra is fifteen. “I swear, I’ll tell her soon.”

Alejandra is sixteen. “I swear, I’ll tell her soon.”

Alejandra is seventeen. “I swear, I’ll tell her soon.”

Alejandra is eighteen, and her voice is so small on the phone. “Lela... I messed up.”

Part 2: Present

Alejandra is eighteen, but at this moment, nervous and shuffling on the Flores' porch, she looks like a child who's hit a baseball into the neighbour's window.

"Relax your shoulders, Alejandra," I murmur. "You're a witch, not a plank of wood."

Just as I'm about to ring the doorbell again, the door opens to reveal an unfamiliar face. A slim, pale woman who can't be that much older than Alejandra greets us with an open, nervous expression. "H-hello? Can I help-" Her wide eyes flicker twice between me and Alejandra before she starts. "Alex! Uh, I mean, Miss de Rosa? What are you doing here? Is-" She looks up, then behind her shoulder, as if trying to see if she missed any giant vines. "Do you need to see Marisol again?"

Alejandra begins to answer before I cut in. "We're sorry to bother you. It just seems that my granddaughter received a disconcerting text from Marisol this morning, and we wanted to check up on her."

"Text? Wait- granddaughter?" The woman's eyes jump between me and Alejandra once more. "Wait- ma'am, are you-"

Alejandra laughs humorlessly. "Yeah." She gestures to me. "Betty, meet the witch."

Andrea meets us halfway up the staircase. "Maria." She aims a respectful nod to me. "Good to see you."

Her eyes linger on Alejandra a little too long.

"Alex," she says, carefully.

Betty pipes up: "Um, they're here because they're worried about Marisol." She bites her lip as she looks further up the staircase. "She... she seemed fine today, right? I mean, she hasn't left her room this morning, but- um..." Betty darts a glance back at us, as if unsure if she should be letting us hear this. "That's um, not really unusual for her."

Andrea folds her sturdy arms. "Marisol seemed fine today, yes. And I did talk to her a little while ago. She seemed a bit down..." Her folded arms and firm voice don't match the slight wince in her eyes. "And she told me that if Alex came by today, I wasn't supposed to let her in."

Alejandra sighs. "Oh boy."

"Well!" I clap my hands. "She didn't mention anything about not letting Alex in if she was with me, right? Then we're good to go!"

Andrea eyes the two of us.

"What happened yesterday, Alex?"

"That's what I'd like to know." I give my granddaughter a look. "Though I think I already have an eye-dea of what issues a-rose."

"*Abuela*." Alejandra looks to the heavens. "For the love of fuck."

"Um, I'm confused." Betty interjects, looking between the three of us. "Am I missing something here?"

Alejandra pushes her bangs back. Betty's legs wobble, and Andrea only just manages to keep her from falling down the stairs.

Knock knock knock.

"Alejandra, I told you, I don't want to talk to you."

"Oh thank god," Alejandra says with a surprising lack of irony. "She *is* alright."

I knock once more. "Marisol, it's me," I say, technically not lying.

"..*Doña* de Rosa?"

We hear a latch unlock. "Wa-wait, Lela, maybe I should wait downs-" The door to Marisol's bedroom swings open before Alejandra can finish her sentence.

Marisol wears an unironed black t-shirt and blue jeans, her hair still messy and loose. Her eye shifts between me and Alejandra.

"H... hi, Mari," Alejandra says meekly.

Marisol glares at her.

"Good morning, *Doña* de Rosa," she says pointedly.

"Good to see you, Marisol!" I say brightly. "With pants, even!"

Alejandra sighs.

It's oddly unfamiliar to be in Marisol's bedroom. We usually end up meeting her in the attic. Her room smaller and sparser than one would expect- or perhaps, exactly as small and sparse as someone would suspect. Marisol sits on her bed. I sit on the lone chair she graciously offered me. Alejandra stands between us like a lost dog.

"Okay," Alejandra sputters. "Marisol, I know you said you didn't want to see me, or talk to me, but you have to understand, when I got your reply, I was still like half asleep and I was... was worried it might mean you were feeling bad again. Like... yesterday bad. I was worried. That's the only reason I would ever ignore something you said, okay?"

"Okay," Marisol says with surprising diplomacy.

"Okay..." Alejandra fidgets so hard she manages to make it halfway to the door. "Okay, so now would be a great time... for me to respect your wishes, and let you two talk, while I wait outside-"

I don't even turn to look at her. "Come back, Alejandra."

Silence, then shuffling footsteps.

"Don't look at me like that," I say, once again not looking at her. "You've put this conversation off for long enough."

"Could stand be a little longer," she mutters under her breath.

"Marisol. I think you should be the one to start."

Marisol nods, but of course, the dramatic in her can't allow her to start right at once. She spends a good half-minute looking coolly at Alejandra, leaning on her arms and shifting glacier-slow into the proper pose for a good, elegant scolding.

Alejandra fidgets so hard she'll probably leave marks on the floor. I'm about ready to start fidgeting myself when Marisol finally opens her mouth.

"You know, Alex, I was so happy yesterday. Finding out you were like me. Realizing you weren't some perfect little angel."

"Right!" Alejandra laughs, running a hand through her hair. "Little Miss Not-Perfect, that's me."

“I was so happy. I was happy right until night fell. I was happy right until I got in bed, and I started thinking.”

“Thinking. Haha.” Alejandra’s laugh is fake and wooden. “Always dangerous.”

“...”

“I mean. I wasn’t, implying that you don’t think-!”

“I was thinking. I thought and thought about how we’ve known each other for years.”

Alejandra sighs. “Right.”

“How I’ve always been the one showing you my worst points.”

“Right- I mean-”

“How I’ve told you for years how I’ve always felt weird and alone and gross-”

“Right, and- okay, I know, it seems, pretty bad, when you say it like that-”

“Oh, it doesn’t just *seem* pretty bad, Alejandra,” Marisol says cheerfully.

“I-”

“You were basically lying to me- you’ve been lying to me from literally the minute we’ve met.”

“I... I didn’t lie!”

“You just neglected to tell the truth, then.”

“...”

“That’s pretty fucked up, Alex.”

“...yeah.” Alejandra sighs. “Yeah, I know.”

Marisol watches Alejandra as her head droops. After a moment, her eye shifts over to me. “You could have mentioned something earlier too, you know.”

“Mari, look,” and Alejandra steps in front of me, as if to shield me from Marisol’s chilly gaze.

“Don’t bring my grandma into this. This was all me. I was the one who told her not to tell you. If anything, she was the one pushing me to be honest.”

“Six years of pushing, I might add.”

Alejandra sighs again. “Thanks, Lela.”

Marisol looks back to her. “Okay. So this was all you, Alex? Then explain. Explain what six years worth of lying was for. Explain what six years-” Marisol’s voice creaks a moment, but she goes on. “Explain what a *lifetime* of me, feeling alone and scared and small and stupid was for.”

“I didn’t mean to make you feel alone, Mari!”

“Then what DID you mean, Alejandra.”

She doesn’t even sound angry. Marisol sounds tired. And perhaps that’s what makes Alejandra finally deflate.

“I meant... I didn’t mean anything, Mari. When we first met, I was in a really bad place. Had been, for a while. I wasn’t thinking a lot about anything, most of the time, so the day we first met, it didn’t hit me until way later that I hadn’t shown you my rose. If you want to know what I was thinking, it wasn’t anything. It was just dumb, teen thoughtlessness.”

“Alright. And then?” Marisol prompts. “What about after that.”

“And then... after that...” Alejandra fidgets, her arms grasping each other. “Then I did start thinking. I was thinking about how I had a friend, for the first time in a while, a friend who didn’t know what I was usually like. If you want to know the truth, I just wanted... to pretend, for a little while. I wanted to pretend I was normal.”

Marisol nods. “Normal, and better than me”

“NONONO,” Alex sputters, waving her hands with such force I worry they’ll go flying off her wrists. “Not *better!* Not, anything, in relationship to you! I wasn’t thinking about you at all-”

“Obviously,” Marisol and I say at the same time.

For a brief moment I have to fight myself from walking over and giving her a high five, if only because the other person is my granddaughter. It’s still a difficult urge to fight down.

“It. Was not.” Alejandra grits her teeth. “It wasn’t... about trying to be better than you, Marisol. That’s what I mean. I was stuck in my own head. I was just thinking about how good it felt... to feel normal, and liked, and not like a mental case or a ticking time-bomb...”

“Must be nice,” Marisol says, toneless.

Alejandra bows her head like a kicked dog.

“...and I did realize, eventually. I realized it was fucked up to feel good about not being alone when you still felt that way. I knew I had to tell you- I *wanted* to tell you,” and Alejandra looks up, looks Marisol directly in the eye for the first time since we walked in. “Marisol, please at least believe that. I knew I should tell you, and I did want to... but by then, time had passed. I missed the right moment to bring it up. I knew once I did tell you, it would be awkward, and you’d be... well...” She gestures to Marisol’s cool glare. “Upset. So, I just... put it off.”

Alejandra sighs.

“For years.”

The room is quiet a moment.

“...but,” Alejandra takes a deep breath. “That’s an explanation, not an excuse.” She turns to face Marisol head on. “I’m sorry, Marisol. It was stupid of me to keep this from you, and I knew it. You don’t have to forgive me, but I just want you to know... I wish I could go back and tell you. I never...”

She swallows.

“I never wanted you to feel alone.”

Again, a swallow.

“And I never wanted to be the one to make you feel alone.”

For a moment, Alejandra simply stands there. Her hands open and shut at her sides, her eye squeezed shut. Marisol tilts her chin towards the ceiling. Her bangs obscure her eye.

“Okay.”

Alejandra opens her eye.

“Okay? Okay, what, ‘okay’ as in ‘okay so what,’ or-”

“Okay, I forgive you.”

Both Alejandra and I blink.

“Uh... really?”

“Are you complaining?”

“No! Nope!”

Marisol slouches to rest her elbow on her thick thigh, her chin perching on her hand as she gives Alejandra a look.

“Alex... let’s get one thing straight. I am still pretty mad.”

“Okay! Understandable!”

“I’m mad... but I get it.” Marisol blows her bangs out of her face. “You were a dumb kid. Dumb kids make bad decisions a lot.”

“Kids are famously pretty dumb!”

“And I can’t act like I wouldn’t have hidden my OR from other people. If I could have, I would have, absolutely, in a heartbeat.”

Alejandra is quiet.

Marisol watches Alejandra a moment, her gaze going a little softer. “If anything... part of the reason I’m mad is because I realized, that once again, you were hiding your problems. You were pretending you were completely fine when you were suffering.”

“I wasn’t... suffering, Mari. You’re way worse off than I am-”

“Alejandra. Look.” Marisol’s voice goes clipped. Alejandra shuts her mouth. “I’m already in a bad mood today. Do you really think I want to hear you turn our mental illnesses into a fucking competition.”

“...No. Yeah. Yeah, okay.” Alex runs her hand through her hair. “Sorry.”

Marisol eyes slowly turn gentle again. “...You hid it all these years. All your ‘bad days’ and everything.”

“I had a lot of support. My folks, and Lela... a-and, I’m not, for real, I’m not trying to downplay my problems, they really helped, a lot. And harnessing my magic too. It helped a lot.”

“But not completely.”

“... not completely.”

Alex looks at her hands.

Marisol straightens up. “Alex, look. I get it. And I’m going to forgive you... but you need to think about what all this means. You need to start being open. I know it’s hard, but I don’t think this...” Marisol gestures vaguely in the air. “This... basically, dishonesty. This dishonesty about what you really feel and what you’re going through- it’s not good for you.”

“...yeah.”

“I mean it, Alex... you need to be honest. Upfront... you can’t hide stuff like this, in a relationship...”

There’s a pause. A look sort of passes between them as they shuffle a bit. It takes me a few seconds to realize they’re both looking at me.

I blink. “E... eh? What’s wrong? Something on my face or...”

“No, it’s not...”

They look at each other again, seeming to hold some silent conversation I can’t manage to read.

“Girls, seriously, what’s-”

“Lela...”

Alex straightens her shoulders, taking a deep breath.

“...I’m gay.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...ah.” I blink, again. “Ah, ah.”

Well, hell. What was I supposed to say? Something big and smile-y? *Somehow I had a feeling you two were together since junior year?* Or perhaps less delicately, more truthfully, something like *yeah, no fucking shit?*

I nod. "Ah, I see. It's like that."

"I'm... I'm gay, and Marisol is too," Marisol nods. "A-and... we're together-"

Again, a little late for the train, mija...

"We- we are together, right?" Alejandra stammers, looking back at Marisol. "After, after what we talked about yesterday-"

Wait, are you telling me you only got together yesterday????

"We are- I mean, if that's what you meant- that's what you meant, right?" Marisol stammers.

"When you said 'let me be that person for you, can I ask you to do the same'?"

'I-I mean, if you want to...'

"I'm fine, if you want to be together, but it's okay if-!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay- as long as you're okay-"

"Okay, it's okay!" I clap my hands smartly. "It's all okay! You two are dating, and that's okay!"

They look at me, and I feel something wash over me. Perhaps, if the word *oh* had a physical form, it would feel like this.

"It's okay." I repeat gently. "It's more than okay." I step forward, gently resting a hand on each of their shoulders. "It's great. I couldn't be happier for you two." I give my best grandmother-y smile. "*Mi nieta*, and her little lovebird."

"Lela," Alejandra blushes, fiddling with her hair. "Oh my god."

"What? Whaddya want from me? You either get sappy Lela or doesn't-give-a-shit Lela." I ruffle her hair hard enough to remind her not to underestimate me, before giving her a half-hug, slapping her back. "I'm *happy* for you, Alejandra," I whisper into her ear, before pulling back. "I'm happy you were able to sort all of this out."

"So am I," Marisol murmurs. I look back to find her smiling. Darting a glance back at Alejandra, I find her looking at Marisol with a look of honest, warm relief.

"...well. If that's all there is," and I step away from them. "I am going to go downstairs, and I am going to ask Andrea if I can make a rum and coke."

"Lela, it's like, barely noon."

“Time’s relative once you pass sixty, Alejandra,” I call over my shoulder. “Remember that!”

I let the door close behind me, but I can’t help lingering a little.

“...she took it pretty well.”

“Yeah. I mean, I wasn’t too worried. I know at least two of the *curanderas* she knows are, like, you know... sort of married.”

“Hmm.”

“...she’s cool, you know? She won’t tell my parents, or yours. We can figure out about talking to them whenever. It’s gonna be okay.”

“Mm.”

“...argh. I just realized I completely forgot to ask her about you being a witch.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll remember to bring it up eventually.”

“... wow, Mari.”

“Maybe sometime before we turn eighty.”

“Ha. Joke’s on you. You just basically admitted that you want to stay with me for years and years. I bet you feel so embarrassed now.”

“...”

“...wait, Marisol, I was just joking, it’s not weird if you... uh... think that. I d-don’t mind or anything-”

“Thanks for owning up to it.”

“...yeah. It’s literally the least I could have done.”

“...it’s funny. I thought today was looking like another ‘bad day.’ But now you’re here...”

“...and what? It’s fantastic? Monumental?”

“It’s pretty okay.”

The sigh I let out feels like it’s been waiting in my lungs for years.

Part 3: Future

The clouds pass.

I had been fretting all day, trading darting looks between the weather app on my phone to the sight of the sky from my bedroom window. But as noon passed, the worst of it slowly seemed to leave. All that was left was an empty sort of grayness. Not ideal date weather, but a fair for an unseasonably cold day in March.

I take a deep breath.

The outfit I've chosen for today is one of my favorite dresses (the pearly-pinky white one that she mentioned she like) paired with a shawl (a little more "church" than I would have liked, but it would keep me warm). I smooth it once, twice.

I look in the mirror.

It's me.

It's my own stupid face.

It's my one boring eye with a droopy eyelid, and my hairy eyebrows, and my big nose, and my chubby cheeks, and my fat face and my fat everything and you've pretty much got a double chin now you stupid stupid god why are we even going out why are you making people look at you you disgusting-

I take a deep breath.

I grabbing for the little notebook I keep by the mirror, opening it and pulling for a pen. I put a timer for thirty seconds on my phone.

I write until I hear the alarm.

When I've switched it off, I close the notebook. I lean forward into the mirror, my nose all but bumping against the glass.

"You are not committing a crime by going outside."

Hearing those words bounce off the walls of my room-ringing loud in my best self-help tone-makes my face go red. But it helps. That's what's important.

I grab my white sun hat right before I leave my room.

I linger in the kitchen, watching the waiting screen of my phone. Betty is there, finishing what remains of her lunch. "Oh- heading out, Marisol?"

"Yeah," I say without looking up. "I'll probably be out for a few hours."

"Cool, cool..."

I hear an sort of anticipatory undertone in her words. I look up at her. "Is something wrong?"

"No no, nothing's wrong!" Betty fidgets. "I just, uh..."

"What is it?"

"It's nothing..."

I wait.

"...It's just-" She takes a deep breath, playing with her ponytail. "There's, um, this group. That I'm a part of. This sort of drama group. And there's this thing we've been working on the past few weeks. Um, a play. That's the thing we've been working on. It's like, Romeo and Juliet, the idea is Romeo and Juliet, but we're playing at like, a meta level, because it's a production of Romeo and Juliet that goes off the rails, in-universe, like we're all playing fictional versions of ourselves, playing Romeo and Juliet, but things keep going wrong, in-universe, and we all end up-" Her lips sort of clamp shut around her words. "Well. Maybe I shouldn't... give away what happens, in case..." Her fingers grip her ponytail "You... wanna see it. For yourself."

It takes me a second to process that. "Betty, are you inviting me to come watch your play?"

"I-if that's not weird!" She almost sputters. "It's, that's not weird, right?"

"N-no, not at all!" I say. I do my best to push my voice, so I don't come off as weird or toneless like I sometimes do. "I think... I'd love to see that."

"Ah... cool."

Silence.

"Um, I'll ask. My group next time. I'll tell you when we're gonna put it on, the right date and time and everything."

I give her a small smile. "Sounds good."

We're left hovering in a short awkward silence- until, like an angel, my phone sounds with a text alert.

I'm out of the kitchen in a flash. "ByeBetty," I manage to aim back over my shoulder, right before I open the front door.

Alex is standing there, hand frozen a few centimeters from the doorbell. She wears the exact same ensemble as she did exactly one year ago: that same gray coat, those same gray pants, and that same crooked smile. The only differences are the fact that her hair's a little longer, her coat is buttoned up, and her briefcase is swapped out for a light pink tote bag.

She gives me *that* grin. "Good to see you too, Miss Monster."

The park is nearly empty, which is in some ways a shame because it's actually such nice weather- cool without being unbearably cold, no wind. On the other hand, I always feel less anxious the less people there are, and we definitely don't have any trouble finding a place to set Alex's blanket down.

The grass is olive green and dry- almost crunchy- underneath us as we sit and munch our sandwiches.

"-so I'm going to be doing my dissertation on *curanderismo*- I told you, right? About the stuff Lela learned in her hometown."

"Mhm. Right."

"I want to start incorporating it into my witchcraft- I like all the stuff I've learned, of course, but I want to keep the stuff *she* learned alive."

I smile. "That sounds like you."

"And not just *curanderismo*! The international school of witchcraft, there's so much traditional magic it ignores- the stuff practiced by the Native North Americans, before the Europeans came, Shinto from Japan- soooo much stuff, and most witches basically pretend it doesn't exist, because it's seen as less reliable, or more 'hokey', even though it's all just as real as the witchcraft we're taught!"

Alex waves her half-eaten sandwich around as she talks. "They tell us it's to spread a more 'universal' witchcraft, so everyone is equal, but it's more like they're trying to smooth out all the parts that aren't as pretty..."

She sighs. “My guess is that it’s an attempt to get the non-practicing world to be more accepting of witches. Like trying to say ‘oh, but we’re modern witches, we’re not like those primitive brown weirdos with their fake egg magic mumbo-jumbo...”

I listen like a hawk, the remains of my food forgotten on my plater. It’s a little hard to say such a serious topic is ‘fun,’ per say, but it’s definitely drawing me in.

Basically anything that comes out of Alex’s mouth has a good chance of captivating me.

She sighs once more. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up such a heavy thing. It’s just... important to me, is all. I really want to help change some things.”

“I’m sure if anyone can do it, it’s you.”

Alex smiles gratefully at me... before she shifts to a sneakier look. “And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“I can tell there’s something you’ve been dying to tell me. It’s written all over your face.”

I try to look innocent. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Marisol...”

I laugh.

Alex gapes at me.

“Holy shit?”

“I know, right?” I release my hold on the tiny bit of magic I had called up, and the flower in my hand wilts. “It was because I told my mentor about how I had a lot of control over my vines sometimes, we both had the idea at the same idea! It still needs a lot of work, but...”

“But holy shit, Marisol- plant magic!” If Alex wasn’t kneeling down, I feel like she might be skipping in place. “This is huge! There’s so many ways you could apply it, it’d be super useful if you tried pursuing herb-based stuff, there’s, there’s gardening magic... hell, I wonder if you could use it on other people with OR!”

We’re both silent for a moment.

“Uh... by which I mean, to help them. I guess that sounded a bit more shady than I meant.”

I grin at her slyly. “Or maybe I could do battle against them.”

“Eheh... seriously, you’re not going to go *Highlander* on me, right?”

“Hmm.”

Alex laughs, but then goes quiet when she sees the look on my face. “Uh, I was just kidding, for the record, I know you’d never...”

“No, no, it’s okay,” and I chuckle despite myself. “That’s not it. I’m just thinking.”

After a pause, she reaches into her tote bag, pulling out an opened bag of chips and holding it out towards me.

“Snack foods for your thoughts?”

Laughing, I bat away the bag. “I’ll tell you for free.”

My laughter turns thoughtful as I flop down on my back.

“Just thinking how it’s been a year.”

“... yeah.”

I hear a *fwomp* next to me. Straining my eye, I can see Alex has mirrored my position. Her face is pensive, and her bangs have shifted enough to expose her nose.

“A lot has changed.” I scratch at my cheek. “But a lot’s stayed the same, too.”

“Mm.”

“But I’m glad, you know? For the changes. And even the things that stayed the same, in a way.” I gently reach out to tap my pinky against her open palm. “I’m glad I’m here for those.”

Alex’s laugh is a little too forced. “Ha! Yeah. Definitely better than the alternative.”

A silence, and her hand turns to grip mine.

I let out a little chuckle that feels more like a sigh. “Alex... I really wanted to tell you today that I’ve stopped having... you know, days bad as that one, a year ago. I wanted to be able to tell you that honestly.”

She squeezes my hand.

“But I can’t lie to you.”

“...yeah.” She blows at her bangs. “It’s not... I’m not mad or anything, Marisol. It’s not like some sort of failing. You’ve done so much and tried so hard in the last year.”

“...and yet, I’m still the same.”

“But you’re different, too!” Alex’s voice seems to startle us both. “...I just mean, you shouldn’t beat yourself up just because you’re not this, this perfect picture of mental health after a year of work. You can’t just discount all the progress you’ve made just because things aren’t 100% better.”

“...yeah,” I murmur, closing my eyes. “Yeah.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

She doesn’t say anything for a moment, and I’m about to ask her if she’s okay when I feel something warm roll onto me. I open my eye to find a rose looking back.

Alex has flipped herself so she’s right on top of me.

“Okay?” She asks again, but softer, more gentle this time. The tip of her nose brushes mine. “This is supposed to be an anniversary, not a due date. You’re going to have all the time in the world to get better, Mari. You...”

She swallows.

“You’re gonna have the rest of your life.”

Alex squeezes my hand once more, and I feel so many unsaid words in the strength of her fingers.

“...okay,” I murmur. I squeeze back.

“So promise me.”

“You know I promise.” I look down. “Alex...”

“Yeah?”

I swallow. There’s so much I want to tell her, but there’s too many words. The strain of them feel like they’re burning my throat.

“...thank you,” I whisper. “For everything.”

She laughs. “I didn’t do anything, Mari.” Her lone eye is shining. “The only thing I did was take five years to show you a rose.”

I chuckle even as I feel tears begin to well up. “And you saved my life.”

Alex manages to keep her voice steady even as I can see a tear make its way down her cheek. “You did that yourself, dummy.”

And finally I let out a real, unrestrained laugh. “You’re right. Thank you to me.”

She bends her neck down. “Thank you to you.”

Her lips are soft as always. The feathery warmth of her rose brushes my closed eye, and my petals feel the tickle of her eyelashes.

After a moment, Alex pulls away. It seems like she’s about to say something else, but she pauses, sitting up and blinking like an owl towards the sky. I prop myself up a bit on my elbows, turning my head to look at the grass around us.

Alex laughs. “I thought- for a moment, it looked like the sun had come out. It would have been, like, the most perfect thing ever, right?”

I let out a guffaw.

She flushes as my shoulders shake. “Oh come on! I know it’s corny, I just...”

Alex trails off, realizing I’m not laughing at her, or even looking at her. She follows my gaze down to the grass...

“...oh. Oh my-”

I let myself fall back on the blanket, my hand covering my eye. My face is pink and my laughter is beginning to sound more like a horse whinnying.

The grass has sprouted... the grass is almost *sparkling*... with tiny pink flowers.

“Wow. Wow.” Alex mutters half to herself, her cheeks going apple-red. “Talk about corny.”

I laugh and laugh and laugh until tears are rolling down my cheeks. When I finally, finally get a hold of myself, I open my eye. The sky is flat, gray, and cloudless. I shift my gaze a few inches to find Alex looking down at me. Face still burning red with embarrassment, her smile is warm and gentle as she leans down once again.

Today’s a pretty good day.