

Speculative Fiction/Dystopian  
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The Sacred School  
A Short Story  
By  
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## I.

I was not the first young woman planning to escape from La Escuela Sagrada, many others had tried and failed. I learned about them once I became a captive of the revered boarding school. Like darkened legends, stories of brave souls, intent on breaking out, roamed free from one set of lips to another.

Adopting my nightly routine, I pulled the blanket to my chest and considered their turmoiled souls hurtling through hallowed stone halls as the screams upstairs grew louder.

The school's stucco and stone walls towered at the end of a barren desert road, a polishing school where girls arrived like wild hyenas but graduated like pedigreed poodles. According to the brochure, once a young woman successfully completed the school's individualized programs, she would be placed within the protected ranks of a royal staff. Mexico's wealthiest parents believed (or claimed they believed) that monarchies, and their perceived equivalents from around the world, would offer the school's pristine and prepared alumni opportunities for career, status, and marriage.

The youngest applicants entered at thirteen but cut off at seventeen years, five months, and twenty-nine days—a half year before adulthood. I once asked my mother why the school targeted teenagers, especially when the opportunity to finesse and mold could happen much earlier. She dismissed me with a bored wave.

“Liliana, you really need to assess this need for constant questions. The school is designed to prepare young women for a coveted adulthood. Why would they bother with children?”

But I'd heard otherwise.

In the days leading to my departure, I listened in as our very own staff murmured their concerns, claiming locals in the nearby colonias told stories of human trafficking and medical experiments. They claimed the spiked metal gates, standing over twelve feet tall observing the barren wasteland of the Río Grande valley was a breeding ground. They whispered about girls shuttled in white vans to shiny American factories on the riverbank, where pills and medical instruments were made for hospitals and pharmaceutical companies. Once the girls were taken there, they were never seen again.

Despite it all, my parents insisted I attend.

“It’s all nonsense,” my mother said, assuaging my continued petitions. “Please, child. We didn’t raise you to believe silly rumors of the simple. I swear from the moment you were born, your existence has served to test me at every level.”

I rolled my eyes at her then, her common expression no longer carrying the burn it once did. My mother, by her own admission, never stood suited for motherhood. She’d been candid about her failure to fulfill her duty and produce my father a son. Upon my arrival, she gave up the matter of motherhood altogether and moved on as though my intrusion in her world never really happened.

Sending me away before I’d reached adulthood finalized the matter of her sentiments. My father went along with it all, no complaint ever escaping his lips. He was equally disappointed and far too distracted to bother trying again. At the news of my acceptance into the coveted sacred school, they included me in a champagne toast, followed by a shot of tequila, celebrating my entry into a special group of elite partisans.

Still, the rumors circulated, and the eyes of our domestic staff rose with fright each time my new journey was mentioned.

At the time I still wondered if there could be any truth to the rumors. It didn’t make sense when so many prestigious parents continued boasting about the success of their daughters living abroad.

I searched for evidence but mothers and fathers in our family’s circle spoke proudly at local charity events highlighting the gallantry of La Escuela Sagrada’s programs and their extremely competitive selection process.

Now, I know the truth.

Their deception pacified the masses and allowed everyone to continue believing the lies. This, in turn, kept the purported funnel of ghosts from the school to the factories as much a wives’ tale as La Llorona herself.

But even the craftiest of deceptions couldn’t change one undeniable certainty: once Mexico’s wealthiest families dropped off their young female castaways, they were never seen again.

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My nanny, Doña Victoria, delivered me to the doors of La Escuela Sagrada immediately following my sixteenth birthday. I wasn’t at all surprised to see her alone when the day finally

arrived. She stood outside waiting to load my suitcase, serving in the role of both mother and father, the way she'd always had.

On the night I turned thirteen, Doña Victoria celebrated with too much tequila and the honesties rolled off her lips. Her words slurred, and her hands stroked my hair like a mule revealing truths my parents had strongly forbidden her to tell. She admitted to giving birth to a dead baby a week before coming to us. Desperate with grief from her loss, she sought the distraction of work.

Doña Victoria's agave-scented breath recounted her reluctant agreement.

"The last thing I wanted was to care for someone else's baby."

The words echoed her spite.

"But I needed money and a distraction. So, I agreed. And that very night you were born."

I struggled to comprehend her next divulgence, but she did not allow me to stop the cascade of words spilling from her sour tongue. She squeezed my cheeks with a ruddy, leathery hand and drew her face centimeters from mine, saying, "Liliana, once you were born and ready for feeding, it wasn't your mother's breast you were given. It was mine."

I knew what she meant by telling me such secrets. She'd claimed me as her own, an arrangement that suited my parents just fine.

Until it wasn't enough.

My acceptance into La Escuela Sagrada meant they could finally be unburdened of a headstrong, unwanted child and achieve a new level of stratum. My entry into the school's exclusive program meant my parents were now embedded within the ranks of the city's wealthiest with daughters to discard.

*A future fit for a princess*, the brochure stated.

The locals knew better.

Their eyes burned with warning watching our black Suburban travel up the newly paved asphalt leading directly to the school gates. The driver honked his horn, ignoring the cautions from the campesinos. Some dared clap against the windows as we passed, urging, "*No. Por favor. No pases. Es un peligro.*"

I tried to pretend I didn't see their warning or hear their pleadings, but my body shuddered with apprehension at the violent clang of metal closing behind us. The driver stopped

directly in front of the entrance. At the arrival of the property's inner courtyard, ambiguity ceased to exist. My options were marked complete.

Victoria and I passed through the arched, wooden entrance rising two humans tall above the stone floors.

"Aren't you a pretty one?" the school director observed, joining us in the main foyer.

I ignored him.

The entry featured stone halls on Saltillo floors, making the room feel cold. The corridors, lit by torches, cast shadows and ominous silhouettes in a glaze of the unforeseeable. My eyes searched for natural light, but none existed. As we moved ahead, closer, the shadows danced down the darkened hall, hiding at its edge to reveal a wide-stone circular staircase. A winding, iron balustrade, topped with a wooden handrail invited us up. Parotta. The golden-brown hues in the wood glowed beneath the candelabra's light.

Doña Victoria once told me parotta was toxic in its natural state, causing blindness and asphyxiation. Perhaps that was the point—except I *could see* the protective finish on the shining surface.

The wood hadn't caused the girls to go missing.

The question remained. What did?

The director refused to temper his leering gaze traveling the length of my long, thin frame. I didn't have any curves that should arouse such attention, but something about the penetration of the man's yellow avian eyes told me it wasn't my body he studied—it was my fortitude.

Victoria and I stood nervously at the door until his gaze pulled up and landed squarely on my face. I remember his words with distinct sharpness.

"I think it might be the eyebrows or maybe the cheekbones. Certainly, the fire in those catlike eyes," he said. "You remind me of Dolores Del Río. Do you know her?"

The false praise was meant as a test. The first of many. Everything uttered by the adults in the halls of this unrivaled hell had a double meaning.

"How could I not?" I answered, already seasoned at making fools of those who underestimated me. I didn't need to tell him she was one of the first Mexican actresses to break into Hollywood during the 1920s before returning to Mexican cinema and becoming one of our country's most famous and prolific.

“She’s the Marilyn Monroe of Mexico—only darker and much more beautiful.”

“That’s right,” the director said, nodding approvingly. “I’m impressed, little *yegua*. Do you see it?”

I shook my head, refusing to acknowledge a semblance I’d been told of since puberty.

His hand reached across the chasm between us as he cupped my chin with his thumb and forefinger and pivoted my face from one side to the other.

“*Indomable*,” I spat.

If he was going to refer to me as a little colt, he needed to know—it would be impossible to defeat my will.

My rebellion triggered his fingers. They squeezed tightly against my flesh, forcing a small whimper I didn’t feel escape my lips until it was too late. He heard it and smirked, satisfied.

My chest puffed in defiance, but his menacing stare left little doubt. I did not stand a chance. Not yet.

“I’ve already received the signed paperwork from your parents, Liliana. Follow me, and I will give you a tour of the grounds on our way there.”

Victoria and I exchanged a worried glance. She had not been invited.

Doña Victoria tried to save me from this juncture, including a petition to the local courts for custody. My parents had too much power in Coahuila, and following a money exchange, the law favored my parents’ dominion. My nanny had no choice but to retreat, conquered by status and money. The woman had little of either.

Her presence at my apportion was my parents’ final act of mercy. On that day, our journey as wetnurse and child, teacher and student, as priestess and parishioner, mother and daughter ended, igniting in flames. My tribulation in this unfamiliar manor began in the ashes of its death.

I wrapped my arms around the neck I’d known since infancy and kissed her goodbye. Doña Victoria blinked back her tears, her lips trembling, and breathed in sharply. She gripped my shoulders and held me at arm’s length.

“You are to be a woman soon. *Una guerrera*. The blaze of this building will only refine and sharpen the tip of your spear.”

I nodded at her. A warrior. That's who I needed to be. I pictured a golden spear clenched in my fist. I needed to be ready for battle. I thought back to a quote Dona Victoria forced me to memorize.

*If you know the enemy, and you know yourself, you need not fear the result.*

With my journey beginning at La Escuela Sagrada, I had to find a way not to disappear like the others.

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The director walked behind me, calling out directions and telling me to continue down the darkened hall. Twice I tried to stop and allow him to reach my side, but in both instances, he insisted I keep walking while he remained a few steps behind. His observations penetrated the air.

He stopped and pointed at an old brown and white photograph surrounded in a shiny silver mat and a thick ornate gold frame. The picture intentionally centered on the open gates at the entry. A plaque below the image stamped the year of the school's inauguration—1830.

"This building was a tribute to new beginnings following the war of Mexican independence," the director said. "It was Coahuila's answer to the refinement and development of our new country's young men."

"When did it change into a school for girls?" I asked, genuinely curious. "And why?"

"How officious," he replied. "The *adjustment* happened in 1992."

He didn't say anything more. Didn't need to. History has always been my favorite area of study. 1992 represented the year before the epidemic of missing women on the border began, more than a decade before a continent began to pay any attention. I wondered what role La Escuela Sagrada played in any of it. I remembered again the proximity to the border and the shiny white factories stacked side by side against the landscape. My insides trembled, and my breath grew short. I took a deep inhale to steady myself and continue on.

I turned away from the haunting image of my new home as we strolled down another long, stone hallway. This one shone with possibility, capped with light from large bay windows. As we approached the windows, the olive clay floor and pristine nets of the school's tennis courts came into view, but they sat empty as though their existence were only there for the brochures.

The director began to say something about the courts and the other amenities available to the students, but his voice faded away. I pondered the silence and the emptiness of a school supposedly filled with young women.

*Where was everyone?*

The school had been marketed as a sanctuary, and if the rumors were true, this place embraced the wild and the unloved, the crazies and the rebels, the distraught and the disgraced, as long as the parents held the proper status and could afford the premiums commanded. Money drove the competitive selections.

Something changed in 1992 since the *adjustment*. I felt the scorn and resentment in the stone walls. And yet, all of us, unwanted and cast away, continued to stumble across the arched wooden doors and into the quiet confines of this modern labyrinth, like myths in a fairy tale. Except the air felt thick, and the sconces warned you to step back. If this place was the beginning of a fairy tale, I wasn't convinced there was truly a happily ever after.

I kept Victoria's warnings tucked deep within my breath as the director and I climbed the stairs and walked down the hall. We strode silently until reaching the wooden door of my new residence.

*Indomable. I am undefeatable.*

His long, bony fingers reached across me and unlocked the door handle using a skeleton key.

I nodded politely, but my expression held firm. His escort duties ended at the door.

The leering gaze returned. "Lunch is in thirty minutes. Don't be late."

It wasn't until he turned away and retreated down the hall that I swallowed the unsettling reality of my circumstances and called out. "I'll be ready."

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My first roommate, Naomi, had jet-black hair hanging to her waist like a cascade of moonlight. Her matching onyx eyes curved low at the ends beneath heavy lids. When she smiled, her eyes squinted shut, and her lips spread wide, revealing a *chiclé*-white smile straightened by fancy braces and made brighter by the warm bronze of her skin. I only saw her smile once—the moment I walked through the door to our shared room. I didn't return it. Her lips slid shut, her eyes downcast.

"Fresh meat," she mumbled, small disks of pink dotting her cheeks.



“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I asked, a false confidence in my tone.

“You’ll see,” she smirked and resumed to lace up her shoes.

She stepped out afterward, leaving me in privacy to unpack the one suitcase I’d been allowed to bring. It lay spread open on my designated twin bed. I had little time to slip into the uniform: a white polo shirt, a navy-blue sweater vest, and a plaid skirt that hung just above my knees. While pulling my white knee socks over my calves, the hushed whispers of secret prayers rang from beyond the door.

A trail of smoke traveled like a hazy shadow thick with the piney scent of copal from beneath the door to my feet. Copal burns during the festivals for *Día de los Muertos*. The familiar scent reminded me of my grandmother’s funeral procession when I was just a girl.

My stomach tightened at the death-honoring scent. I considered Naomi’s words earlier. *Fresh meat.*

Later, when I took my place at the designated table for lunch, I caught Naomi’s gaze. She sat at the farthest edge, no trace of the smile from earlier. She nodded slowly and began to sip her *caldo*.

I waited for her to return that night. She never did. I never saw Naomi again.

For days afterward, whenever I asked about her, the attendants would shake their heads and say, “I don’t know to whom you refer.”

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Adela Lucia Valenzuela.

In English, her name meant noble light. It described her essence—a light in the dark stone hallways of a gilded cage. She laughed with a belly full of birds, waving her hands across her face and drawing everyone’s attention to her eyes—sparklers at the end of a matchstick.

Adela was assigned as my partner during our training as *escaramuzas*, female cowboys in bow-topped braids and brightly-colored *adelita* dresses draped over puffy *crinolinas*. One of the girls referred to them as “petticoats” when we dressed that morning. Everyone laughed at her attempt to sound like a gringa.

We rode side-saddle, prancing atop horses with wide-brimmed sombreros on our heads. The sport of the *escaramuza* meant executing highly choreographed, ballet-like moves on horseback, a woman’s pride at the *charrerías*, and still the rodeo’s only event where women were allowed to participate.

Adela, our upcoming captain, was a natural. I was not. It's why we were paired. They tasked her to train me. Or break me. Whatever worked best, I supposed.

One morning Adela galloped across the dirt ring during my second training session to face me directly.

"Why do you continue to take your horse in the opposite direction of the rest of us? Do you want to crash and get someone killed?"

"You act as though the horse has no mind of its own," I said. "This mare decides for herself where she chooses to go."

Adela, a young mestiza with flaxen hair and copper skin, lifted her chin with the nobility that suited her name. The satin ribbon from her sombrero gleamed beneath her jaw. "You're missing the entire point of the sport, Fresh Meat." (My nickname had already traveled the halls.) "As the rider, you are in charge. Tame her, or I will tame you."

The director's patronizing remarks at my arrival swam in my head. *Yegua*. Little colt. My lips curved, remembering my response. *Indomable*. Undefeatable. I pulled the reins and patted the horse's neck.

"*Te entiendo*," I whispered against her mane, cooing her with a promise. I did understand.

The mare whinnied and trotted in a perfect rotation before falling in line beside Adela and her gelding. The remaining three pairs of girls on their horses kept their gazes directly ahead, focused on commanding their beasts. The power of their legs was cut in half, resting only on the left side of the saddle and crippling their posture. But with the grace of their movement, it was impossible to tell.

"Good girl," Adela called back over her shoulder.

I wasn't sure if she was referring to me or my horse.

After three hours, the head coach blew her whistle. Practice had ended. We dismounted the horses and walked beside them as they cooled down. For fifteen minutes, we remained united post-battle. Our dresses stuck to our skin with sweat and sand. Our braids hung down our back like tails, swaying as we led the horses to the stable hands for grooming, water, and rest.

Despite the post-adrenaline fatigue of keeping a 1,500-pound beast in submission, we were only given twenty minutes to shower, change back into our uniforms, and prepare for lunch.

I saw Adela three days a week for practice. She yelled, she charged, she led, and she sang, but with each passing month, the worry in her eyes grew, and the urgency of her expression deepened.

One afternoon following practice, I dared to approach her, believing our shared anxieties could strengthen an alliance.

“I know you believe your time is approaching,” I said softly as we washed the sand and sweat from our faces. “If we work together, I believe we can escape.”

Her eyes widened in the mirror as she looked up. I moved my head closer, joining her reflection. I wanted her to see that I, too, shared her strength. Working together would only make us stronger.

“The horses,” I began. “They trust—”

“Stop.”

The word carried the force of a judge’s gavel. Her head moved slowly, shaking with defiance, and her gaze moved up ever so slightly in the mirror until I saw it too.

Our coach stood in the doorway, watching us both.

I shut off my faucet and dried my hands without uttering another sound.

That evening, I received word that I was being removed from the *escaramusas* at my parent’s request and transitioned to learning Arabic instead. I knew the proposal was a lie. I never saw Adela again.

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My seventh month at La Escuela Sagrada came and went nearing my completion of grade eleven. I knew better than to connect with any of the other girls. Every time I did, they seemed to disappear. I kept quiet and memorized my surroundings, counting the exits and the number of steps to reach them.

I had not yet deemed a trigger to run, but one was coming. Things in the *escuela* were changing. I could see the attendant’s darkened expressions and the rigid backs of the teachers during lectures. Something new floated through our halls like a whisper from Azrael, the Lord’s angel of death.

One afternoon during lunch, the truth revealed itself.

After three days of tamales, beans, and rice, I wasn’t expecting anything different, but after taking my assigned seat at the white cloth-covered table, I was graced by the woody

guajillo aroma of menudo. I had never eaten tripe before. The sour scent of wild game mixed with earth streamed from the bowl beneath my chin. I eyed the pig's feet and tendons boiled in. An intrusive lump of nausea pressed against my throat. But they didn't feed us breakfast that morning, and my stomach growled with ferocity. I forced myself to ignore the bits floating within the brick-colored broth.

The ring of the bell gave us the authority to begin.

Squeezing a wedge of lemon across the bowl, I tore a piece of the *bolillo*, dipping it halfway into the soup and mopping the broth. *Not bad*, I thought, tasting it and releasing the breath I'd been holding. I reached for the spoon, scooped the liquid, and raised it to my lips to eat.

"You keep looking around like you're searching for an escape route."

Yesenia, a troubled girl with the record for the longest tenure, stared at me from the other side of a silver candelabra, goading me. The ornament was one of three in the center of the long, rectangular table. I focused on it rather than giving in to my impulses to shut her up.

Recently relocated to our table, she had sat facing me for three days in silence. The unfamiliar sound of her voice startled me, especially its contrast to her tiny, underweight frame. Her growl rasped like sandpaper. I guessed her to be nearing eighteen, which explained the hostility. La Escuela hadn't yet found her spot in the afterlife.

"So, you do speak, *chiquita*," I bit back. "I was beginning to wonder if maybe you were mute."

She rolled her eyes at me. "*Pendeja*. You are stubborn, but don't worry," she smirked, "you will learn quickly. Choose your words wisely because time is everything here. Unnecessary attention makes you disappear faster than the rest."

If her voice surprised me earlier, her authority surprised me more.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked, quietly leaning forward, closer. "Disappear where? To a royal family?"

The fairy tale behind my question gripped my ribs in an armored vice.

The others at the table clanged their silverware against plates in warning and thumped their lemonade-filled glasses loudly on each side of us. It was a courtesy. Their sounds blocked our discussion from the ever-present attendants at the far ends of the room.

I looked over at them, soldiers in white cotton uniforms with red and green accents at the edges of their sleeves. They stood posted at the exits, their eyes moving across the room. But they did not notice me. Not yet.

Yesenia slurped the broth from her spoon, her head bent low, but her eyes cast up. “*Tonta*. You still think they are preparing you for royalty? Even I know better.”

She took in a mouthful, scooping a kernel of hominy that slid down her chin, then brought down her spoon and gulped the last of her lemonade. The final ring of the lunch bell filled the room.

“*Dies minutos*,” a warning rang over an intercom, echoed further by the tall ceilings and stone floors.

“Even you know better than what?” I pressed Yesenia, scooping three spoonfuls of soup into my mouth while I awaited her answer.

The girl beside me cleared her throat. A warning. I didn’t know her name, but I was grateful she remained vigilant.

“Don’t worry, *pendeja*,” Yesenia taunted with a whisper. “You’ll soon find out. Just remember I warned you when the white van pulls up and they tell you it’s your turn to get the blood tests done.”

The following day at breakfast, Yesenia disappeared. This time I didn’t ask where she’d gone. I already knew the staff would act as though I’d imagined her.

A week later, the head attendant bellowed my name during the afternoon roll call. The clock struck 1PM, and the tower bell rang in four slow sways, indicating the lunch hour had ended.

I followed her through the arched wooden doors and down the concrete walkway to the awaiting white van.

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The van already holds one occupant as I approach. I recognize Angelica, a girl in my South American studies class with long, frizzy curls, a heavy back, and legs like matchsticks. For once, she remains silent as I step in and take the seat beside her.

Angelica didn’t live on my floor. Her room was at the top, the hall reserved for the school’s most untamed. Some nights you could hear the echoing of howls like wolves from the

top floor. Although those sounds never lasted long. They were quickly and quietly cut off almost as soon as they began.

Despite the firm rule to stay in our rooms after 9PM, I once took a chance to sneak up the winding stone staircase to the top floor and crouched on the steps below. I peered slightly above the landing, my body low to the ground. My curiosity about the sounds from this part of the building itched like an open wound. I had to see for myself.

That was the first time I saw Angelica. She wore nothing but a white cotton bra and matching underwear two sizes too large, prancing like a ballerina in the center of the corridor with her eyes closed. I watched, wide-eyed, as she ran from one end of the hall to the other, jumping up in the air and kicking her skinny legs out in opposite directions. I imagined her shifting into a Pegasus, her broad back and large breasts turning into a long neck and wings.

The burning copal at the top of the stairwell created a thick haze. I sneezed and then froze. The wild girl never admitted to seeing me, but I felt her acknowledgment in the air. My body betrayed my position, lying prone on the cold, stone steps, the edges pressing into my stomach. Angelica slowly raised her arms in a crown above her head, closed her eyes, and lifted up onto the points of her toes, executing a perfect ballerina's pirouette as though a theater full of patrons were admiring her.

As I watched, a sound erupted behind one of the closed doors. The deep wail of a wolf's howl filled the darkened, candle-lit space, snapping Angelica's eyes open. She brought down her arms, cast a sharp glance in my direction, and bounced up and down. Another warning.

I knew better than to stay. The echo may have sounded like an animal, but I recognized the sound of torture in the human soul. I shuffled back down the stairs and tiptoed to my room.

That was two weeks ago. I hadn't seen Angelica since.

Until now.

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The ballerina still exists in constant motion.

Seated against the window, her seatbelt tight across her lap, my eyes move to the tapping of her anxious legs. Challenged by my gaze, her body sways back and forth, testing the seatbelt's constraint.

"Stop," I whisper, unaware I've spoken out loud until I hear my own voice.

She smiles and brings her hands up to her head. Long skinny fingers run through her hair, then shift down to touch her face. Dizzy, I watch as her hands move down her body and smooth the plaid skirt against her legs before pulling up her knee socks.

It's when I finally see it. A hidden energy field surrounds her, keeping her body in a flurry of movement. Watching her weakens me to my core. If, in all her movements, she's been constrained, what chance do I possibly have?

I sigh, reaching for my own constraint as the van door slides shut.

"And so it begins," she mutters while I buckle my seatbelt.

"Why must everyone in this God-forsaken building speak in riddles?" I ask. "Can't anyone just come out and speak the truth?"

The driver, a tiny man with thick black hair hanging past his ears and a matching mustache, ignores my question. The large mass of woman beside him, an attendant named Maria, scowls at my outburst, but she, too, remains affixed to the road ahead and ignores me.

I lean back against the headrest, wanting to ignore the anxieties pumping against my chest.

Angelica tears a corner of paper from a small notepad in her pocket, then spits it at the back of Maria's hair. It lodges into one of her dark curls like a *mosca* caught in a spiderweb.

Angelica giggles, but the pleasure never reaches her eyes.

She's afraid. Her fear settles me.

The four of us continue in silence until we reach the razor-topped, chain-link fence of the largest maquiladora in the area. They make American drugs here.

I think it's funny that they make the drugs here, but they're not easily available to get in Mexico. Instead, they're sold like gemstones.

Doña Victoria once said: *These factories are the American narcos in Mexico.*

I understand now.

I've seen the news stories of the locals trying to break in and get access to the little white, blue, and yellow pills we make for the gringos. Local dealers aim to sell them when the *farmacias* won't.

*Is that why I'm here?*

Do the girls of La Escuela Sagrada disappear because they work inside these places?

I allow myself one last moment of delusion, wondering if the school could really be lying about placement within the royal families.

The arm from the security gate rises, and we are waved on through. The van curves around the concrete barriers and rumbles over the spiked strips. They're designed to tear apart the tires of any vehicle trying to turn back.

The automated gate closes, and the driver curves around the edge of the parking lot, leading us to the far back of the facility.

I taste rust from the corner on my lip I've chewed raw. It burns with fear.

When I look over at Angelica, she twists a frizzy brown curl between two fingers, her knee bouncing with more unreleased energy. I wonder how Angelica has *ever* managed to sit in a car for more than a few minutes.

She squirms in her seat, daring to peer out the window.

"Be still, *diabla*," Maria calls over her shoulder, warning her.

"Who are you fooling?" Angelica shoots back. "We all know the only devil in this van is you—the deliverer of death."

My eyes move from Maria's sharp gaze, her lips drawn white, pressed together, to Angelica's puckered lips.

Why does Angelica continue to push Maria? If the rumors are true, once we step off the van and into the white-painted walls of the factory, we will never be seen again.

"You have a big mouth, *negra*," the driver mutters to Angelica.

"Why does he call you that?" I ask under my breath. "You aren't black. You're not even dark."

"Because I'm the *obeja negra*, his little black sheep," she answers, then draws her hands over her head in an arch, just like when she danced in the hallway. Her eyelashes flutter.

I didn't think she saw me watching her that night. Now I know she did.

"The black sheep among who? Us? The girls at school?"

"No," she says, giggling. The van comes to a stop, and the side door slides open. "The black sheep of *our family*. He isn't just a van driver, Fresh Meat. I mean, *el viejo* does work for the school, but he's also my father. And Maria, the fat woman beside him—*esa diabla* is his wife, my mother."

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Angelica's father and his wife don't watch. A grey-haired lady doctor with oddly smooth skin and a starched white coat stands in between Angelica and I, taking one of our hands into each of hers.

Two men in security uniforms flank either side of us. Their rounded chests remind me of the muñecos I played with as a girl. Chiseled and muscular. My palms dampen, slick against the woman's wrinkled, calloused hand. I look down at the top of her palm—pale, translucent skin with thick blue and green veins. I wonder why it looks so different from her face.

The van drives away; parents never once acknowledging their daughter.

Angelica dares to look over her shoulder one last time. I join her, taking in her travesty.

We share a story now. Angelica and I are two sisters in a larger legacy of truth. Abandoned. Rejected. We are daughters of parents who prefer to live as though we never existed. And now, if the rumors are true, we never will.

I don't know how I know today will be my end. But Azrael's darkened melody swirls inside of me. I waited too long. Foolish girl. I got into the van. Now, entering the maquiladora, revelation travels through my veins like blood. I'm not undefeatable. This time, it will be me howling on the top floor with madness. My disappearance has arrived.

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The fire-breathing Chimera, a vicious, three-headed mythic creature with a snake for a tail, willingly attacked itself. In *The Iliad*, Chimera devastated civilizations until finally, Bellerophon defeated him on the wings of a Pegasus.

I think of Angelica and the ballerina's *sissonne*, her body reminding me of such a creature. Everything comes together. Full circle. Angelica is by my side now. Except, the story is changing. She can't defeat this Chimera.

The Americanos have a sense of humor. I assume it is them who gave this creature such a name. Chimera is what they call the embryonic cells in the scientist's new lab experiments.

And this time, we are the hosts.

The woman in the lab coat straps Angelica and me into grey, padded phlebotomy chairs.

We can't move. Belts across our chest hold us in place. Straps wrapped around our legs match the straps holding down our arms on the chair's rests. Our hands slide into covered cuffs, no longer visible beneath the tightened leather.

Trapped, we sit side by side in the cool and sterile room. White walls and fluorescent lights hum quietly overhead while we are forced to endure the old woman's sonnets on the advancement of medical science and our prestigious and necessary role as hosts to the altered embryos.

"Now, ladies, since you are all here from La Escuela Sagrada, I know you are well-versed in English and will understand everything I say. So, I have no doubt you understand the importance of your role in our research and in saving thousands of lives worldwide for those who need an organ transplant."

Angelica bursts out laughing. The confined straps keeping her still make her crazier than the realization of the experiments we are about to endure.

"Hush now, young lady," the woman says.

I hear the growl beneath her words.

My pulse quickens. "How is this possible, *señora*? You can't just conduct lab tests on us without our consent. We are daughters, not rats. This is illegal."

The woman's face offers a pinprick of sympathy, but she blinks it away as her mouth opens to speak. The doors open behind her, her lips clamp shut.

We all turn to investigate.

My mouth opens in horror as two men in security uniforms escort two familiar faces into the room. The first is my brief roommate, Naomi.

She is wearing a long white gown, her jet-black hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. The onyx eyes now dull with fog, nearly disappear under the weight of heavy lids. I remember her face from our first meeting. The chicle-white smile that made her eyes squint shut, and her lips spread wide; this can't be her. The bronze skin I'd once admired has grown sallow. Her shoulders hang low as she follows her guard obediently to the only remaining empty chair.

Angelica laughs again, her wild cackle filling the room with terror.

"Gag her," the woman says firmly.

The security guard nods while strapping a compliant Naomi into the seat. I can't imagine how the straps are necessary. No fight remains in the young girl's body.

I want to scream. I want to fight and kick, but my eyes remain fixed on the other girl, still standing at the door with the other guard. She is wearing ballerina slippers and a matching white gown.

Adela Lucia Valenzuela. *Noble Light*. Her nobility extinguished in only a few short months, leaving nothing but a shadow, a peasant in her wake.

I shake my head violently, thrashing from side to side, realizing what her condition means. I grow sick, my heart palpitating like a drumbeat at the truth. Adela's vitality has been visibly stripped from her, and only a shell of a young woman remains. But it's worse. Much worse. The growing bump beneath her gown and the fullness of her breasts steal the air from my lungs.

The old woman confirmed it during her earlier diatribe, insisting we couldn't refuse our duty or try to fight our destiny in such important research.

"Take her over there," the woman says to the second guard, pointing to the far corner of the room. "Dr. Fox will be here shortly to monitor the sonogram and collect the blood work."

The guard holds Adela's hands behind her back and leads her to a small cot.

The woman speaks as if we don't exist. As if Angelica's humming and whistling aren't driving us all mad.

"Hurry up and quiet that girl," she instructs tightly, reading my mind.

"Please," I begin.

I spin with strategies, trying to find a way to stop this, to save myself. The thoughts collide, growing dim by the darkened realization that nothing, absolutely nothing, I come up with in the confines of this sterile white room can be done. This is happening. My parents have abandoned me. Forsaken me. They denied my belonging from birth and relinquished me to become a test pig in an illegal laboratory.

I look around at the three other crusaders in the room, their identities only a scantling of who they once were. Their only sin is being born female, illuminated, rebellious, and rejected.

"This can't be," I continue, taking in the reality of Adela's newly gaunt limbs and growing belly as she lays still on the cot in the corner, yawning.

"Please, no," I beg, my voice rising while they strap her down and start the sonogram machine. "I won't accept this."

I look back again to see a tech who followed the security guards into the room, injecting something directly into Angelica's arm.

Her head falls forward with heaviness.

Tears I never felt form spill over. I can't stop them. My heart burns with rage.

*This can't be happening.*

“Hush now,” the woman says to me. “None of this is going to hurt. But if you can't remain quiet for the recording, I will quiet you myself.”

I jealously grab my last opportunity to fight back. I stare directly into her eyes, heat burning my cheeks and lids. My lips tremble as I open my mouth and roar a resounding defiance. I want the glass to shake with the fever of my rage. I summon the loudest sound I can muster from the depths of my stomach and push it through my chest, giving it power from the air in my lungs.

My outcry fills the room, eliminating the order the woman is attempting to create and instead displays the vulgarity of the moment.

“Gag her, too,” the woman says with a roll of her eyes, reaching in her coat pocket.

The lights dim, and the tech springs into action. My seat begins to incline back at the press of the remote control in her hand.

My field of view changes, blurred by heavy tears. The glass window on the wall no longer reveals a bright white fluorescent hallway. Now, I stare at sterile aluminum ceiling tiles stacked side by side above me. My chest aches from the force of my howl, but I suck in a deep breath to do it again.

It is too late.

A hand grips me from behind, followed by the pierce of a needle in my neck. The cold infusion of liquid sears my veins and moves down to my feet, filling my mouth with the metallic scent of aluminum and sulfur.

The shivering calms, replaced by a numbing warmth. I lay fully reclined, floating in space. My legs spread from somewhere below me in a different dimension.

“Make sure the recorder is on,” someone says from far off in the distance.

“Yes, ma'am. Ready,” another gurgle replies.

The woman's voice grows muffled, but the heaviness hasn't taken over so deeply that I can't hear the words as she begins.

“This is Dr. Margaret Mengel. The date is March 23, 2023, and we are at the Rhoads Laboratory in Aguas Verdes, Coahuila, Mexico. The time is 9:00 AM. We are embarking upon stage two of the implantation of chimeric stem cells, combining equine and human pluripotent

stem cells into Embryo 12498 and Embryo 37521 and implanting them into human hosts for the advancement and development of a newly generated hepatic organ.”

Chimeric stem cells. They made us read an article during lab. The topic floats in my memories. Something about different species altering an existing embryo and generating new cells for a hybrid organism. The lady doctor said equine. They’ve created some kind of horse/human hybrid.

I’m not sure I can fully trust my ears. The air thickens following the injection, but something in my gut assures me I’ve heard correctly.

Thinking back to the article, I remember it talking about the ethics of hybrid human and animal experiments and how rats died shortly after the embryos were altered and implanted inside them. The record-holding rat lasted twenty-one days. The article mentioned this happening in Europe. It seemed so far off from Mexico at the time.

Wrong. It’s here. Now. Soon to be inside me.

“Is that my baby?” Adela asks, her voice sounding like the last refrain of a song.

“Silly, girl,” the woman says. “Of course not. This is our *specimen*. You are just keeping it safe and protected for us. Just like you promised.”

*A promise.* I’d never made such a promise. I don’t think any of us had. But that doesn’t matter. For women, in history, promises never mattered. Not the ones made for us. Not the ones we make for ourselves.

La Escuela Sagrada was once offered as a promise. A promise for advancement and placement into a new world, a new life.

It doesn’t matter.

The school will go on in its tyranny, sourcing bodies from its place on the northern edge, bordered with *Tejas*. They don’t care that the border’s defining river represents a trickling of tears into the Gulf of México. They’ve underestimated the saltwater basin collecting the country’s greatest tragedies. It will only continue to collect more.

Despite the everlasting quicksand, I once believed the Río Grande could never hold me back once I found a way out of the decorated prison. I waited too long. I failed.

The sounds in the room grow quiet while the air grows thicker. My eyes close, heavy with sleep. A warmth spreads beneath my skin, and a cold metal pressure pushes open and up between my legs. Implantation. My womb, a weapon.

Using human hosts instead of lab rats must mean the embryos last much longer. Evolving science has found its home in the bodies of the rejected and rebellious.

The invasion of my body leads me to one last thought.

They named it Chimera. A mythical beast destined for destruction with the instinct to attack itself. Chimera had to be defeated. They failed. One thing certain about history is its need to repeat itself.

I drift off, escaping into a medical sleep as the clinical tones of the white-coat humans blend together into the sounds of the ocean. The Pegasus rises on her hind legs and spreads her wings in introduction. For the first time, in my dreams, I embrace where I belong.