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A NOVEL

# MALINALLI

VERONICA CHAPA

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# MALINALLI



## VERONICA CHAPA

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*For my grandmothers, Adela & Jesús Maria  
my parents, Marcella & José  
and my husband, Bruce*

# BOOK I





## A SORCERESS'S NAME BECOMES MINE

Long ago, our world, with all its mystery and magic, was carried on the back of a crocodile. One misstep and we would all plunge into darkness. By the time I was born, the earth had already been created and destroyed four times.

The land of my birth rested near a winding river called the Coatzacoalcos. Water was everywhere. Silty creeks. Clear streams. Turquoise lagoons. Our house sat within palms of green so deep with color that the leaves appeared blue.

My mother's pregnancy had been a difficult one, and my grandmother, mindful of the capricious natures of the gods, had requested that the wisest of the midwives tend to Mother. And so it was Toci who prepared the opossum tail broth for my mother to drink, who carried my mother into the sweat lodge. Bathed in sweat, the two women roared like Jaguar Knights on the battlefield, their war cries shaking me free.

But as I wailed my first damp breaths, my mother continued to scream. After swaddling me in a cotton blanket and setting me on the earth, Toci returned to my mother and guided my brother into the world.

Upon hearing the news of our creation, a few of the duller villagers ran into the jungle to hide. In small, faraway towns, parents were often so fearful of the power possessed by twins that one of the babies was put to death. In my village, most people believed that twins were the creators of order. We were the monster slayers. Quetzalcoatl—the Feathered Serpent, benevolent god of wind, had been born a twin.

I was the daughter of Jade Feather and Speaking Cloud, and the twin sister of Eagle. The blood of the Toltecs ran through my veins.



My father, Speaking Cloud, a learned nobleman and warrior, believed it a sign of great favor that the gods had entrusted twins into his keeping. His ancestral line included magicians—the firstborn of every family attended the House of Magical Studies in Tenochtitlan—so he understood the deep meaning of such occurrences.

Toci had related all of this to me when I was old enough to understand. With her wrinkles, crown of silver hair, and deep-set brown eyes, she appeared older than time. I never tired of hearing the story or the prayer she invoked at my birth:

“My beloved daughter, my precious jade necklace, my treasure. You have arrived, captured by your brave mother, to live on this earth, this vast and lonely place. Let the gods hear your cries! You have come to tend the fire, to sit by the hearth. Your world is here, within these strong walls.”



It was our tradition that within days of being born, a child would have his or her fate read by Crooked Back, the town’s calendar priest. After accepting my parents’ offering of twenty lengths of white cloth, the old seer turned to his sacred books of names and destiny. The air crackled as the priest unfolded the stiff pages until they covered the ground. He then consulted another book of divination, then another, talking to himself as he studied the painted symbols, the figures of the gods and spirits that had been in attendance at the exact time of our births. He fingered some pages carefully and stabbed at others, turned the books this way and that, peering closely one moment and backing away wide-eyed the next.

When, at last, Crooked Back was satisfied with what he’d seen, he proclaimed that our formal name would be Malinalli, Wild Grass, and that due to godly influences and the position of the stars, my brother and I were doomed to be “carried away by the wind” and live “miserable lives” far from home.

Alarmed, Father challenged the priest. Old Crooked Back sputtered with indignation, for no one had ever questioned his authority before. Committed to improving our fate, and by combining their strengths of will and through magic, my parents moved time: they changed the moment of my brother’s entry into the world so he could take the day-

sign name Eagle, Cuauhtli. To shield me from my fate, my father decreed me Malinalxochitl.

In Nahuatl, it means Wild Grass Flower. A name filled with sunlight.



For Eagle and me, the world seemed wide and open. In our home, white stucco rooms led from one into the next, with high-beamed ceilings. The finest rooms were decorated with paintings of gardens and colorful shrines dedicated to the gods—all faced a courtyard shaded by rubber trees. Pots brimming with epazotl and iztauhyatl and flowering jasmine and sunflowers colored the air with their scents. There was a sweat lodge and a granary, where we stored the harvested ears and kernels of elotl. Our house was an endless palace, and the wilderness beyond it was our empire.

We tumbled through cornfields, crawled in mud, ran between grasses that soared over our heads, and splashed through lagoons and swamps governed by mysterious forces and the beasts of our dreams. I was easily distracted. Butterflies, hummingbirds, snakes, croaking frogs, and birds in the trees all called me to come play. Eagle was never without a stick in his hands and a plan in his mind. He poked and prodded holes and dark crevices, waved that stick as if he had already achieved the illustrious rank of Jaguar Knight. He always took the lead, shouting, “Sister! Sister! Follow me!”

Seeing the light dancing in his eyes filled me with such joy, it was as if I were being lifted off the ground. Peering into still water at the river’s edge, two reflections greeted us, two identical faces framed by dark hair.

Like most children, we played tricks on each other—sneaking up like shadows to scare, hiding a favorite toy, cheating at patolli, our favorite game. Eagle was always the honorable knight; his tricks were obvious and teasing. I, however, liked scaring him. Knowing how much he hated snakes, I hid their skins in his clothes and set loose live creatures beneath his sleeping mat. He was quick to forgive me.

We spoke a special language that no one else could understand, not even our parents, who spoke Nahuatl—the language of the nobility—and Popolucan. By the age of two,



Eagle and I mimicked these sounds like parrots. But when we River Twins were alone, we preferred our secret words.



Aside from Eagle's dislike of snakes, we were fearless. Much of that invincibility we owed to our father. Not even the shape-shifters on the darkest of nights frightened him. He was knowledgeable about demons and monsters despite the fact that he never attended the famous magicians' school; he wasn't firstborn. He said nighttime was the time favored by Tezcatlipoca, the trickster god, who enjoyed disguising himself as a shrouded corpse. That was when the Blood Drinkers emerged from the shadows with their sharp teeth bared. Whenever Father told these stories, he'd jump and growl at us, clawing at the air. He would open his eyes wide, then scrunch them up, contorting himself to make us laugh. My father wanted to put us at ease with the dark. Eagle and I would shiver with glee as he recounted tales about the horrors that awaited us outside. We desired nothing more than to venture into the night, but our mother forbade it.

My mother, Jade Feather, kept an obsidian knife in a bowl of water near the door to keep us safe from night demons. She believed that such an arrangement could destroy these creatures.

To distract us from our fascination with the dark, she would sometimes let us look at her amatl-paper books. The one Eagle and I favored most was a wondrous creation made up of large, many-folded sheets of crushed fig tree paper containing red-and-black paintings that represented our calendar's twenty day signs—crocodile, wind, house, lizard, snake, death, deer, rabbit, water, and so on—and images of the gods. We would tuck ourselves against her on a reed mat plumped with pillows and, holding our breath, wait patiently for her to turn back the cover. With each unfolding, the thick pages crackled like my grandmother's knees on a rainy day. Some of my mother's books opened into sheets so long, they stretched across the hearth room.

While snuggling against my mother and twirling strands of her rose-scented hair between our fingers, we discovered gods and goddesses dressed in all of their finery: feathered headdresses, nose rings, earpools, and thick-soled sandals. Eagle and I would

carefully point to our favorite drawings. His was an Eagle Knight dressed for battle in a padded vest with feathery wings and a helmet with an eagle's beak. I favored an image—smaller than all the other pictures—of a woman in a long black cloak painted with stars. Underneath, she was dressed in a white huipilli and skirt, and her long hair was held back with a circlet made of heron feathers.

The first time I saw her, my mother said, “That is the sorceress Malinalxochitl.” Hearing my name filled my heart with pride, but a harsh tone singed my mother's words. I leaned closer as my brother teased, “Look at *you*, Malinalxochitl,” which I did, for as long as I could.

When I was young, I knew nothing about my name except that the villagers of my town spoke it with fearful reverence. Later I would learn that in the time of the ancestors, the first Wild Grass Flower was a mighty sorceress. She was the older sister of Huitzilopochtli—Southern Hummingbird—the god of war. She was his equal, the ancients said, who saw through the darkness of men's minds. And though the people in my village had stopped honoring her long ago, the memory of her avenging nature still lingered. She frightened them. Along with the stories, a question had taken root in my mind: What had she seen that upset her enough to make her seek revenge?

As if my mother knew that I longed to touch the sorceress's image, she'd whispered, “You are not the same.” Then, turning to my brother, “Guard your tongue, my son. You, too, daughter. The gods don't enter human life.” She'd pushed our hands firmly to our sides. “Malinalxochitl wears the Mantle of Magic and must not be disturbed. You must never make light of the divine ones, lest you provoke their wrath.” She meant to show us that we were powerless to the gods' whims. I quietly repeated the words *this is the sorceress Malinalxochitl* as if they were a charm.

That book served my mother's purpose, discouraging us from running wild into the dark. But it also piqued my curiosity. I'd asked both my mother and father if the sorceress was able to overpower monsters and other scary beings. Surely her magic could make such creatures disappear, I'd said.

My parents shook their heads and claimed they didn't know. That's how they answered all of my questions about her.

Despite my parents' tales of the darkness, I was never frightened. Listening to my mother sing and being carried in the crook of my father's arm made me feel safe. At the

marketplace, which teemed with people and sounds, and at the temples where priests with soot-stained faces prayed, I was at home. The sun rose every morning. The god of rain favored our land. The elotl grew, was harvested, and became food to fill our bellies.

We were blessed in many ways. My mother was the great beauty of our village, with her blue-black hair and amber-colored eyes. She was the descendant of a noble family. They were Tolteca, from the northern kingdom of Tollan, known for their art and wisdom. “My people invented the healing arts and read the secrets of the earth so well, they could uncover mines of turquoise, amber, crystal, and amethyst just by running their fingers through the land,” she’d say proudly, her voice full of a feeling that drew me close.



The rhythm of my days began to change when I turned four, when my mother taught me how to sweep the house and ground corn into cakes. Each day my mother, grandmother, and our servants gathered in the courtyard to spin and weave.

“Cloth is our treasure, more prized than gold,” my mother often said to me. Our village was known throughout the land for the exquisite quality of our weaving. The women were required to create three hundred bundles of embroidered cloaks and blankets of diverse colors, and five hundred white embroidered loincloths. It was said that the tlahtoani Moctezuma, the Revered Speaker, wore white cloth that had been made and embroidered by my mother. I dreamed the cloth I wove and embroidered would someday be as prized, but my fingers, and my patience, felt too small to complete the task.

Wriggling and dreaming suited me much better. In fact, being still and silent while the servants moved busily around me was the hardest task of all. Luckily for me, I could always stare at the shrine that adorned our home. It was filled with idols carved of greenstone, wood, and clay set on a carved ledge of cedarwood. I would stare and imagine them sitting beside me: beautiful Chicomecoatl—Seven Serpent—the goddess of maize; Tlaloc, god of rain, google eyed and ever watchful; with Huehuetectl, the old fire god, guardian of the hearth and fire.

My mother had a way of knowing when my thoughts were leaping across a limitless sky. “Someday you shall have a home of your own, a hearth to tend, food to make ready,”

she advised as she paced the courtyard one day. “Your husband will expect much from you.” Her voice was soft yet filled with thorns. I could not stop thinking, *What husband?* I was going to be a magician! As firstborn, in a few years I would be attending the House of Magical Studies, where I would learn how to turn bullying children into toads. Where I would learn how to protect my family. Where I would be invincible. But I dared not speak a single word of this. The silence I offered in response bore down on me like a mountain of stone.



When we were five years old, my brother and I attended our first sacrifice at the main temple in our village. My lip was tender from a maguey spine piercing inflicted by my mother when she'd caught me staring at an extravagantly feathered Mexica tribute collector at the marketplace.

The sacred calendar of days was filled with rituals that honored the gods of rain and wind, and goddesses of the earth, corn, and rivers. The world had already been destroyed and reborn four times by tempests, floods, jaguars, and windstorms, and now we were living in the time of the Fifth Sun, which was destined to end with a rumbling of earth so great that it would swallow everything that lived, even in the sky. Our gods provided protection and guidance, and many ceremonies included offerings of blood to help strengthen Huitzilopochtli—the Mexica sun god of war—in his battle to light the earth.

After the Mexica invaded and subdued the regions along the river—in the time that preceded the birth of my grandparents—they placed Huitzilopochtli above all other gods. He was responsible for keeping the sun on its course through the sky and victory in war. In return, he demanded offerings of blood and the human suns that beat within our breasts. He was the most bloodthirsty of all, just like the men who served him.

My mother and father taught us that life is precious and doesn't last forever.

I thought I understood what this meant.

On the day of the ritual, during the eleventh month, also known as the Month of Sweeping, we dressed in our finest garments. My beautiful mother held one of our hands in each of hers, and together with Father and Grandmother, we walked in silence to the

temple precinct. We were one family out of many, hurrying to the center of our village. I noticed that people stepped aside to let us pass. At first, I thought it might be because we were dressed so finely, but that wasn't it at all: they moved for the twins, in case the stories of us possessing special powers were true.

I had visited the temple many times before this day, but now I felt the air shivering with an anticipation that made everything look new. Even the music of drums and flutes pounded overhead more loudly, and quickly, than I'd ever heard. The white stone pyramid and the temple that crowned its summit loomed in front of me. I let go of my mother's hand. Stepping carefully, holding the hem of my skirt, I moved to stand at my brother's side. Eagle was squinting up at the temple. I was not tall enough to see what had caught his attention. Just then, the music stopped, giving way to flights of whispers. As Father pulled us back, I felt a shift in the air.

Priests appeared along the western edge of the sacred precinct. As they walked toward us, their long dark hair and black robes reminded me of crows. They led a girl dressed in royal turquoise to the temple's stairs. Her hair swung in braids that brushed my skin when she passed in front of me. Her eyes were dark and shiny and closed off. I could smell her—a mix of copal incense, the perfume of marigold flowers, sweat, and what I thought was the scent of fear. Earlier that day, a friend from the village told my brother that the offerings were always given something special to drink to bind them closer to our gods.

Slaves or war captives were chosen for our rituals, but now and then, someone we knew walked the divine path. When my grandmother was little, her friend was drowned to honor the rain god. To be chosen was an honor, and the girl's family was highly regarded thereafter. However, people said something happened to Grandmother when she learned her friend had died. They said it was as if a hard rain had washed her spirit away. I was secretly grateful to not have known the girl about to be offered. But I still couldn't look at her face. I felt like my stomach was clawing its way to my mouth.

I swallowed the knot in my throat and squeezed my brother's arm. I could suddenly see in my mind what was about to happen. I felt the urge to go home or to somehow grab the girl by the hand and run to Eagle and Mali's secret hiding place, where we would share something good to eat.

In the gold light of the sun, I finally turned my face up and watched the girl climb the stairs to the top of the pyramid, where she was met by more priests. She lay on the stone

that was there, her robes hanging over the edge.

I fought to control my breathing as the priests lifted and pulled the girl by her arms until her head hung back, off the stone. The music stopped. I squeezed my eyes shut and hid my face in my brother's shoulder. I knew one of the priests held a knife. In my imagining, the blade caught the sun as he raised it to strike the girl's naked chest to cut out her heart.

I clung to Eagle. I felt nauseated and could feel myself start to sink to the ground. *No, no, no. Stand up. You are the daughter of Jade Feather and Speaking Cloud. Eagle is your brother, and you are safe.* But when I went to straighten myself, the looseness in my limbs threatened to give way to a faint, until I felt Eagle's arm tighten around me.

The pressing silence could have signaled the end of the world. I reminded myself that the ritual was to honor the sun and the renewal of light and life, not just death. This offering of a heart and blood was necessary.

But it was no use. My stomach pitched again, but now with a new thought: Could I be cut open like that, when my body grew as tall as the girl's?

I wriggled away from my brother, questions gathering into a storm cloud in my mind, until a light of certainty flickered: *I will never be thrown across a stone altar. It is impossible. I am destined for magic!* For assurance, I looked at my parents. My mother's face was smooth and calm, her eyes closed as if in prayer, and my father stood with his stone-faced stare. I interpreted their steadiness as a sign that I was right and had nothing to fear.

Everyone around me stood quietly, so I did, too. But even with my brother's hand around mine, I felt alone. I rubbed my temples to soothe the ache in my head, but the throbbing persisted. The heat and the smell of other people's sweat were making me dizzy again. When I looked up at the pyramid, the priest was lifting the girl's heart into the air. I held my breath. With great ceremony, he saluted the sun. Then he tossed the heart into a large stone bowl. I could not look away.

A drumbeat began, shaking the people out of their paralysis. With sighs of relief, they began to leave the temple precinct and return to their homes. I jerked my head around to get a closer look at their faces. Why weren't they crying? My neck flared with heat as if a knife had struck me, and water streamed like a great river from my eyes. I remained in place until my brother looped his arm around my shoulders and led me away.



The memory of what we had witnessed bound Eagle and me together in a new way. We picked at it like a scab. My brother assured me again and again that we were safe. I wanted to believe it, too. But just in case, my five-year-old heart made a sky-high promise: once I was at the magician's school, one of the first spells that I would learn to cast would be the one that would make us live forever.

## BALANCED ON THE BACK OF A SLEEPING CROCODILE

**Y**ou will be an Eagle Knight and win all of your battles,” I pronounced one day as Eagle and I were playing in the marshes, in our secret spot near the giant stone head, “and I will sit at home and weave enough cloth to shield all the stars from the moon.”

I was joking, of course. These days, we found time to escape to watch the constellations form in the night sky. Eagle would whisper their names to me, while I would imagine changing their shapes with my magical powers. Sit home and weave cloth? Never. My destiny shined brighter than that. But a bitterness tinged my words. Eagle and I had just celebrated our eighth year, and this seemed to be all I did with my time. But not for much longer.

At this age, the children of nobility always began their lessons in religion, astronomy, the calendar, and history at the school for noble youths. But I knew my life would soon be different. I wouldn't be learning anything as boring as that! At any moment, my father would announce that it was time for his firstborn child to journey to the House of Magical Studies in the magnificent city of Tenochtitlan, and I would be on my way to the magicians' school, where I would become a great sorceress.

I was destined to learn the spells that call the rain and stop the wind. I would hear the magical stories of the first Malinalxochitl and finally get answers to everything I wanted to know. After mastering the sorceress's spells, I would follow in her footsteps and enact justice by rooting out all those with dark intentions. I would be my family's shield. My life as a magician would not involve lying in wait.

Yet a special kind of magic was already mine. By this time, I could imitate everything from the noble speech of my father to the coos and soft murmurs of my grandmother, the strange dialect spoken by traders from the Hot Lands to the droning intonations of the priests. I could speak to the parrots in the jungle and howl and grunt greetings to

white-tailed monkeys. At the House of Magical Studies, I would learn to command entire armies to do my bidding.

My brother said, “Yes, I can picture you, sister, at your loom with a few brats squalling at your feet.”

I pushed him away. But then the thought of us turning old filled me with sadness.

“What will I do without you, brother?”

“What will I do without you?” He paused to lick his lips. “The time of my departure approaches. I am to go to Tenochtitlan.”

“Oh, to the school there?” *Why was I not told?*

My brother shook his head. “Not that.” He swallowed as if his throat had suddenly dried up. “The House of Magical Studies,” he mumbled.

“Where?” I thought he must be confused.

“The House of—”

Oh, but I’d heard him. Suddenly, the sound of the ocean was roaring in my ears. “No!” I jumped to my feet. “Not you! I’m the one!”

For a moment, I saw my brother as my enemy. How could he steal my birthright? Rob the calling that had been singing my name since I was born? How could I learn the universe’s secrets if I was to sew and rock babies for the rest of my life? His betrayal choked me, then set fire to my throat. I watched as his face knotted up, but I didn’t want to hear whatever he had to say.

“I am firstborn. Me!” I shouted.

“But you can’t,” he said.

I took a step closer, and he shrank back.

“You’re a girl,” he explained in a small voice.

I leaned in. Had he gone soft in the head? I tried to laugh. “Yes. And so why—”

“You can’t be a girl. They do not allow girls at the House of Magical Studies.”

I felt as if my brother had struck me with a slab of stone. I rocked on my feet before regaining my balance.

I didn’t understand. *How can this be? Where do the goddesses and sorceresses develop their crafts? The women magicians who heal hearts, divine fortunes, and conjure universes? Is there a place for us, for me, in this world?*

*This isn't happening.* I always thought I would be the one to cast spells, wear a special mantle, and guide Moctezuma and his people toward a righteous path. That I might become great, like... *her*.

I looked away and caught the flight of a bird in the trees, and for a moment I had a thought: Maybe both of us could go. Yes, why not? And since we were twins, our magic would be twice as powerful. Together we would be invincible.

Something inside me had softened. Apologies and my plan were forming on my lips, but when I turned back to my brother, the words died in my throat. I stared at Eagle but saw only an obstacle.

I screamed at him, a horrible sound, like a nightmare unleashed. The force of it knocked him off his feet. I couldn't stop. He ran. I continued until my voice grew hoarse and large white spots danced in front of my eyes. I felt my body whirling off into the dark, as if the power of my anger was propelling me into the Underworld to live among the dead.



For the following three nights, creatures haunted my dreams, and I imagined holding everyone around me in a cage, or worse. Some of the things that I pictured terrified me, as if I had summoned the demons of the fleshless realm to rise up and rain terror on all of us.

But soon after my brother and father departed for the House of Magical Studies, I shook myself free of fantastical imaginings, preferring the relative safety of loneliness. Eagle and I had never been apart from each other. I felt as if I'd lost half of my body, and most of my heart and spirit as well. When I had to, I did my work, shuffling from one chore to the next, grinding the maize, fetching water, and sweeping. I was ready to collapse at any moment.

*Who am I without my twin? What am I supposed to do now?*

Upon his return, Father was shocked to find me sitting in shadows, haggard and listless. But he showed me great mercy by leaving me alone. The day I finally summoned the courage to leave my home to go to the market, whispers followed me everywhere, like

the twittering of sick birds. I imagined they were saying things like *She should be ashamed to ever think she could study magic in Tenochtitlan. She is bewitched, and her mother should hold her face to a flame.* I did hear someone recall the calendar priest's promise that the wind would carry me far from home. They tossed my name around carelessly. Our neighbors and the townspeople, even the hairless little dogs gawked at me.

I searched for something to do that could help me forget my brother. My embroidery needle, untouched since that awful day of his departure, called out to me in a tiny, curious voice. I took a corner of the courtyard and set to work there. In the beginning, I was my usual all-thumbs self, but then it was as if the cloth and my needle had been waiting for me to join them. All kinds of creatures began to sprout beneath my tireless fingers—serpents with powerful jaws and teeth like jaguars, their bodies curled, green as bile. My hands could barely keep up, driven as I was by my anger over being left behind. I sat alone and sewed scales that looked like they could cut fingers and flaming tongues that scorched small holes in the cloth. If not for my embroidery needle and pattern of serpents, I would have choked someone.

I felt annoyed whenever the women's voices grew too loud or someone laughed, worried I might be tempted to look up and lose my way stitching. It didn't matter; they stayed away. My new skill frightened these women. I ignored the fuss, keeping my head down and my hands busy with needlework, bewitched. Still, during the following years, word of my strange ability with needle and thread spread throughout the surrounding villages and to places along the river.



Where once I had roamed the wilderness with Eagle, golden and happy, I was now inside almost constantly. Sewing snakes all day made me sullen. Four long years had passed, and now I was twelve, a pale and bony creature with no friends, who spent her days embroidering cloth after cloth. Sometimes my mother had to take my needle away from me. "That's enough, Mali. You're squinting again," she'd complain. "A hump is growing on your back. Go with the servants to the market," she would command.

Oftentimes between stitches I would stare at the walls. Ever since my brother's abandonment, I had been having visions. It was as if I had drunk from a cup of sacred wine and been blessed with special powers of my own. I saw the magicians' place—carved with fifty-two serpent heads, mouths opened to bite the air. A blind hunchback stood guard, armed not with weapons but with a length of red cotton cloth in one hand and a broom made of heron feathers in the other. I watched my brother exchange his fine garments for those made of maguey fiber, and I could feel him trembling before he lifted his chin and followed the magician into the school.

Our bond was so strong that every now and then I could hear my brother explain what I was seeing. *Look there, sister, at the small boy on the sleeping mat next to mine. His name is Copil. He was born in the land of the Maya, and two of his teeth are pointy and sharp like a jaguar.* So went my brother's voice one night, not long after he had gone to the magicians' place. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I felt his warm breath upon my cheek.

*Look up at the ceiling. There is an opening for a hawk and an owl to fly through each night. I have heard that they are shape-changers, teachers with the power to turn themselves into birds. And there are ghosts, Mali!*

I admit I was jealous. I grew up hearing tales about headless apparitions, skeletal spirits, and the woman in white who roamed the streets mourning her lost children. But to actually see one? Why had I been denied this?

Then lo and behold, through my brother's eyes I saw the specter of the ruler Axayacatl wander the halls of the House of Magical Studies, reciting poetry in gold sandals and a turquoise cloak.

The light shifted as I watched Eagle follow the magicians' instructions to catch and burn spiders and scorpions, then mix the ashes with tobacco, seeds, and handfuls of soot. A cold fear within me took root. The sorcerers smeared their skin with the paste, ready to embrace the shadows. The same mysterious and silver-infused glow held my brother as he shared spells with me for transforming river pebbles into beetles, conjuring tortoises to fly, summoning Underworld shifters to haunt dreams, and a trick that unleashed the gift of invisibility. Above all else, he gave me a charm that would unlock a power meant to be mine alone. *You must not tell anyone,* Eagle said, *for it is forbidden to give such things to*