

THE FOREST KNOWS YOUR NAME

Alaitz Leceaga

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PART ONE: FIRE

THE INVISIBLE THREAD

I was eleven years old when I felt the fire for the first time. Our grandmother Soledad threw herself off the cliff behind our house that very same afternoon. My sister Alma could already speak with the dead before our grandmother was swallowed up by the freezing cold waters of the Cantabrian, but I had to wait until that afternoon.

Alma and I had gone out to explore the forest in front of our home, as we often did when the days grew luminous and clear again after the endless winter. Even though we had memorized every ancient oak tree, every root that peeked out between the dried leaves on the ground and the hoof prints left in the damp earth by wild boars, Alma and I would slip out of the mansion every afternoon—after the nap our mother forced us to take—and we would walk hand in hand, losing ourselves in the forest until night began to fall.

“You’re bleeding, Estrella,” Alma said without turning to look at me.

The night I was born, a comet crossed the sky leaving a trail of fire, ice, and broken stars in its wake. And that is the name my mother chose for me: Estrella, meaning Star.

“Be careful,” she added. “If you stain your dress, Mama will scold you again. You know full well that she and Carmen don’t like us playing in the forest, they think it’s not proper for young ladies.”

“That’s not why, it’s because of the wolves: Mama and Carmen are afraid they’ll eat us alive, leaving only our torn clothes and little shoes in the thickets, all stained with blood,” I replied, trying to scare her.

“Yes, just like the town’s schoolteacher little bastard child. They couldn’t even give the poor girl a decent burial with what the wolves left of her. A shame,” added Alma, in a tone that didn’t sound compassionate in the least.

Just like everyone else in Basondo, I had heard that story many times, but now, thinking about the teacher’s daughter torn to pieces, a cold shiver ran down my back.

“You’re still bleeding,” added Alma in a singsong voice.

I looked at my right hand and saw the cut on my index finger: it was an irregular wound that went all the way down to the start of my nail.

“It’s nothing, just a scratch from a branch,” I replied grudgingly.

The afternoon sun could barely reach us through the forest’s highest limbs, which were woven together to form a kind of green dome. I noticed the blood escaping my wound and running down my hand: bright red and so hot that I felt an invisible burning beneath my skin. I’d never been frightened by the sight of blood

before, but just then I found it horrible, almost unbearable. My stomach clenched in disgust and I shook my hand, trying to get rid of that scarlet thread traveling across my skin. A few drops fell onto the forest floor but most of it landed on the skirt of my blue dress.

“I told you to be careful,” insisted Alma as she walked around the trunk of an enormous pine tree and continued along her path. “And cut it out, you’ve been sulking since we left the mansion. I’m bored. You’re no fun when you’re mad, Estrella.”

“I’m not mad,” she muttered. “It’s just that sometimes you’re insufferable.”

“Insufferable? But I’m Alma the Saint,” she replied in a cloying voice.

My sister’s supposed “saintliness” was an open secret in Basondo. Some neighbors believed that Alma was some sort of chosen one, able to put them in contact with their loved ones beyond the grave.

“Mama won’t find out we were in the forest if you don’t tell her,” I responded, looking at the treacherous drops of blood splattered on my skirt. “I’ll have Carmen wash this dress. I’m sure she’ll keep my secret, not like you.”

Alma turned to look at me. Her yellow eyes always seemed brighter when we were in our forest. “I’ll keep your secret too, silly.”

My sister would often spend long hours lost in her own universe, her gaze fixed on some empty corner of the house. It didn’t usually bother me because Alma was my twin sister and I always knew what she was thinking, always, except when she had that bewitched expression on her face. We were six years old when she confessed that she saw people who “no longer existed” living in our house. Ghosts.

She told me that some of them spoke to her and others cried silently in the empty rooms and long hallways of Villa Soledad, the mansion named for our beloved grandmother.

“Have you seen any spirits lately?” I asked her, trying to feign indifference to her answer.

Alma avoided a twisted root that was sticking out of the forest floor. The first time we went into that part of the woods my sister’s feet got tangled up in that very same root and she fell down onto the carpet of dried leaves. She cut her forehead in the fall, but then told Mama that I had pushed her when we were playing in the mansion’s side garden. I was punished for two whole weeks because of her.

“I can assure you that speaking with the dead isn’t as much of a gift as it seems,” she replied when we had almost reached our secret clearing. “Carmen says that always being around the deceased attracts ill fortune, and Mama, well, Mama refuses to let me mention ghosts around her, so you are the only one I can even talk to about these things.”

I brushed a lock of black hair from my face. Despite the cold floating in the forest air, I was sweating from the walk and my hair was sticking to my forehead.

“I don’t really care anyway, forget I even asked,” I replied disdainfully. “In fact, I don’t believe you truly can see them. You’re just a liar who’s got everyone tricked into thinking you’re special.”

I was jealous of everything Alma could do and I couldn’t. She made quite sure that was the case. However we shared a bedroom and some nights I heard her whispering when she thought I was already sleeping: Alma would have long,

mysterious conversations in the wee hours with people I couldn't see. Sometimes she would laugh quietly, other times she cried into her pillow, depending on which ghost visited us that night.

“Don't be jealous, Estrella.”

“I'm not jealous in the slightest, thank you very much,” I lied. “You can fool other people into thinking you're special and can talk to the dead, but I'm your sister and I know the truth: you and I are identical. ”

Alma stroked the ivy that climbed up the trunk of the last oak tree. Some wild blue flowers grew amidst its leaves, just like a pearl necklace.

“Yes, we are twins, but we aren't identical. Your eyes are two different colors: one green and the other yellow,” she reminded me. “And mine are both yellow.”

“Petty details. We're identical in everything that matters.”

We had almost reached the clearing. I knew because I recognized the twisted beech trees we'd already passed and the ferns with large, lustrous leaves. From where we were I could already hear the water running briskly in the brook. After passing through four pine trees as tall as watchtowers that rise up in an almost straight line, I saw the meadow of high grasses and wildflowers. It was bathed in sunlight the same bright golden color as Alma's eyes, and the air smelled of fresh flowers and grass that had never been cut. A few dandelion seeds floated among the rays of afternoon sun and vanished into the dark forest on the other side of the brook.

“If you're so afraid of the dead, why don't you talk to Father Dávila about it? Maybe a few Our Fathers will cure you and you'll stop seeing ghosts,” I said rudely.

“Confess everything? No one would believe me, or worse: they would believe me and they’d burn me at the stake as a witch,” lamented Alma, sitting beside the bank with her legs crossed. “No, I can’t tell anyone.”

Alma covered her face with her hands as if she were sobbing, but I knew she was faking it.

“This is 1927, Alma, they don’t burn anyone for witchcraft anymore,” I assured her. “Besides, Carmen once told me that they only burned poor women at the stake, and you and I are nobility. No one in their right mind would dare accuse us of witchcraft, much less burn us in the town square.”

I laughed at the thought but Alma’s distress was clear in her reply, “What do you find so funny? Have you forgotten the story of Joan of Arc that Miss Lewis told us? I had horrible nightmares for weeks after that, of flames devouring me.”

I dreamed of the fire as well, but unlike Joan of Arc or my sister, the fire in my dreams was inside of me, crackling beneath my skin.

“No one is going to burn you at the stake, Alma,” I declared as I sat down beside her. “You’re said to be the good sister, so if one of us is in danger of being devoured by flames, it’ll be me.”

Alma smiled and seemed strangely relieved by my comment. It was then that I knew that she, like the others, also thought I was the expendable sister.

“I once read in a book that when one twin dies the other feels like they are missing an arm, a leg, or an eye for the rest of their life,” I started to say. “Can you imagine? Walking around your entire life feeling like you’re missing a body part? I

certainly don't want to go through that just because you had the stupid idea of telling the priest you can see the dead."

"It was your idea," Alma reminded me, plucking a blue wildflower that grew beside her patent leather shoes. Then she placed it in her hand. "So if they kill me now it'll be your fault."

A shiver ran down my spine but it had nothing to do with the cold rising from the damp, spongy ground beneath me. No. There was something dark in Alma's words: a premonition, a sinister promise between sisters. *If they kill me it'll be your fault.*

I stared at the blue flower in the palm of her hand and for a moment it seemed as if it began to move. At first I thought it was the north wind, traveling through the forest to find us. The same freezing wind that rose from the sea along the cliff and snuck through the windows of our bedroom on the nights the dead visited us, but it wasn't the wind. I felt a tingling beneath my skin, a feverish heat that was born in the center of my chest and spread quickly through my veins like hot venom. Then the little flower began to spin on its stem with the delicacy of a tiny ballerina in her music box.

"Are you doing that, Alma?" I asked her, my mouth dry. "Is that you?"

Alma was already special, it didn't seem fair that she also had the power to make flowers move.

"No. I think it's you, Estrella," she whispered, watching the flower dance in her hand.

It was spinning faster now, floating in the afternoon air an inch over Alma's palm.

"I don't believe you, it's you, you're doing that to mock me. Stop it!" I shouted and as I did, the flower spun even more. "Stop it, I said!"

The angrier I got, the faster the flower spun. I felt the burning tingle running beneath my skin like an electric shock until it reached the palm of my hand, identical to a magnifying glass concentrating all of the sun's heat in a single point.

"It's you, Estrella. You're doing magic."

"It's not me, it's the fire."

I had waited eleven long years while Alma, with those impossible yellow eyes of hers, talked to the dead and ferried messages from the great beyond to the living, who cried with emotion and hugged her tightly when they heard the words of their dearly departed. Until that afternoon.

We left our forest and went back to the house taking the longest path, the one that snaked beside the cliff on the other side of the road.

“Don’t worry so much, if that fire you claim to feel is real, surely you can do it again,” Alma challenged me, loudly enough to be heard over the roar of the waves.

I glanced at my hand surreptitiously, expecting to see a burn or my skin split by the flames, but all I saw was the cut I’d gotten on my finger on the way to the clearing, nothing more, not a trace of any blisters or burns. And, yet, I could still feel the fire’s hotness beneath my skin, inside of me, like the residual heat given off by embers even after they’ve been put out: the memory of the fire.

“You have no idea how the fire works, so stop talking like you know everything,” I said, even though I had no idea either. “I’m your older sister, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Only by two minutes,” mumbled Alma with a scowl.

“Two minutes is plenty, get over it.”

I was expecting Alma to keep arguing but then her expression changed and she stopped in her tracks and stood paralyzed, staring at the metal loading platform that emerged from the cliff. It was used to lower the iron ore down from our mine to the ships that couldn’t approach the rock wall.

“Grandma Soledad is there,” she said suddenly.

I looked around, thinking perhaps our grandmother had gone for a stroll by the cliff and seen us coming out of the forest, where we were not allowed to play.

“What? Where is she?”

“Right over there,” replied Alma. “Standing on the dock, right on the edge, as if she were going to jump into the sea. You can’t see her?”

The loading platform was a few steps further on, but there was no one at the end of the iron ledge.

“Grandma Soledad isn’t there, you idiot. She must be sipping her Amaretto Sour in the greenhouse, like she does every afternoon before supper.”

But Alma’s cat eyes were fixed on the dock, seeing something that was invisible to me, as she struggled to contain her tears.

“I can see her as clearly as I see you,” said Alma, her voice growing fragile as she began to understand what that meant. “Her silvery hair is wet and looks longer now than it did this morning, past her waist. Now she is looking at me, she’s wearing her pearl necklaces and one of her elegant long dresses of Mexican silk, the color of blood. You really can’t see her, Estrella?”

I stormed decisively over to the very edge of the precipice, even though my legs were trembling and my stomach turned over as I grew closer to the abyss. The smell of salt was intense there and it crept deeper into my nostrils with each breath I took, leaving me as if I’d been knocked over by a wave.

“You’re lying, you’re just a liar, jealous of me because you can’t feel the fire.”

“I’m not lying. Grandma Soledad is right there, on the dock, right in front of you. Now she is saying something.” Alma was silent for a second, as if listening. “She

says that she's tired of living here, far from her beloved homeland, from where Grandpa snatched her as a child, forcing her to live here all these long years. She couldn't take it anymore."

I was only eleven years old but I knew full well what that meant: our grandmother was dead.

"Grandma says she's very sorry," continued Alma, no longer able to hold back her tears. "She's sorry for leaving us alone but she wanted to return to her country, to her homeland. She knew that if she died of old age here, in Basondo, Papa would have her buried in our cemetery as a Zuloaga, and then she'd never be able to return home, to her true home."

"This is her home. Shut up!" I shouted. "Grandma Soledad is at home, and she's fine. I refuse to listen to you any more."

"Grandma wants you to know that she left you the emerald pendant, the one you've always liked so much. She knows you try it on in secret when she isn't around and that you look at yourself in her dressing table mirror to see if it matches your green eye. She left it on your pillow, it belongs to you now," said Alma in between sobs, then she shook her head in silence as if she were listening to something terrible. "No ..."

"What's happening? What else did Grandma say?" I asked her, with the salty taste of tears trapped in my throat.

Alma blinked twice and then lowered her eyes. I knew without asking that Grandma Soledad was already gone.

“One of us will be reunited with her before we turn fifteen years old,” responded Alma, like someone voicing a curse in a fairytale. “One of us is going to die.”

I moved away from the cliff edge and walked back to where my sister stood.

“Did she tell you which one?” I asked, holding my breath in fear of both possible answers.

There was a slight pause before Alma’s reply. “No. She didn’t say.”

I knew she was lying, I could tell as soon as I saw her eyes drowning in tears.

I took off running through the high grasses towards the house, crossing through the side yard and the mansion’s vestibule without stopping, my lungs burning as I climbed the spiral staircase to our bedroom on the top floor. But I had to see it with my own eyes to be sure. When I finally reached my bed, there it was, laying on my pillow, right where Alma had told me it would be: the necklace with the emerald pendant that Grandma Soledad had left for me before jumping into the sea.

And that was how I discovered that my sister Alma truly could speak with the dead.