

*Excerpt from the short story "Seeds" by Kira Hayen*

Coyote came in the earliest morning hours, hailed by the crackle of the paper bag in the crook of their arm, the same arm as the hand that held a carrier of two coffee cups. The janitor's ring of keys at Coyote's hip jingled, and their entrance emanated a bouquet of baked vanilla, coffee, and weed.

The naked woman was lying dead on the balcony in a pool of her own blood, the balcony door open. The breeze stirring the curtains was dewy with pre-dawn.

Coyote strolled to the doorway, their Doc Martens rasping against the concrete floor. Standing over her, they could see that she had punctured her left wrist and left thigh, accommodating the slight incline of the balcony so that the blood would pool and be pulled away from the door and off the balcony by gravity.

Coyote plucked the blunt from their lips, the blunt damp with saliva from being held in their mouth too long, and they thumbed a bit of tobacco leaf from their bottom lip. Coyote smiled at the way the woman's loose, black mane and blood pooled around her as she slept in death, and they commented, "What a tidy little saint."

Coyote placed the blunt back into their mouth, went inside to the couch, grabbed the folded Pendleton there, and then returned to the balcony. They plopped the blanket to the wet concrete, and as they stepped onto the blanket, crossed their legs, and sat, the wool gave a gritty squelch. Coyote laid their offerings down on the blanket and placed one of the coffees in the hollow of their folded legs. They removed the lid, and then lifted the cup to their mouth, the steam lapping their face. They blew on the black, liquid surface, looking towards the skyline of the neighborhood, overlooking the cultivated jungle of plants hanging from every spare surface

of the balcony's railing. The trees, the birds stirring to sing, the lavender dawn, the glittering frost sugaring every surface the light touched.

Once Coyote was satisfied that the coffee had cooled some by taking a few sips, they looked to the woman's mutilated wrist, circling the cup in the air a few times to be certain of the trajectory, and then poured a little splash into the coagulated mess of tendons and torn flesh.

The woman jerked, hissing through her teeth, "Fuck."

Even though she had jerked back to life, she only had the strength to move herself a little, moving her arm a few inches before settling back into her position.

Coyote lifted the coffee back to their mouth and took another sip, their eyes still trained on the woman, murmuring over the rim of the cup, "Ha'ahut tsi-ah-ya-ti."

The woman looked up and into Coyote's eyes for the first time and said, her voice hoarse and low, as expected of someone that had just killed themselves, "You're an asshole."

Coyote winked at her over their coffee and said, "And you're Keekah." They asked, pulling the cup away from their face, "Would you like a blanket?"

Keekah rasped, tilting her head from side to side, gingerly, "No."

"No?" Coyote asked, shifting their coffee to their hand holding the blunt so that they could stroke the ridge of Keekah's nose with their knuckles. "Sah-kah-mint-ah kahpi, widishtsi kutsah?"

"Ahay," Keekah reproached with narrowed eyes, "But in my mouth."

The corner of Coyote's mouth twitched and they reached forward, supporting her head by cupping her skull like a bowl and bringing the rim of the paper cup to her mouth at the slightest of angles, cautious not to overwhelm her as she took deep sips. Coyote settled her head back onto the concrete then untucked their hand, pulling it back to themselves.

Keekah exhaled, her chest and eyelids falling. She asked, “A hit?”

Coyote pinched the blunt between their thumb and forefinger and brought the blunt down to her mouth at a vertical angle. She drank in deeply, then exhaled the plumes from her nostrils. Keekah lifted her hand upward, her half-lidded eyes hazing over Coyote’s face. Her wrist and back of her hand shone like crude oil, the wound at the wrist already coalescing, the black blood already pilling, becoming the most fertile soil on earth, riper than any of the bread baskets or volcanic valleys of the world. In a few hours, Keekah would have a cigarette as she swept the blood-soil off the balcony into the garden bed below, as she always would after this ritual.

Keekah brushed her fingertips against the thin, black fabric of Coyote’s shirt and then sank her hand into the folds, seeking out Coyote’s body. Keekah felt the protruding roots of Coyote’s ribs with the flats of her fingers and thumbed their nipple, hardened with cold. Keekah breathed a chuckle, “What’s up with the tits lately?”

Coyote shrugged a shoulder. Coyote took a visual inventory of her, and she continued to explore their body with a platonic but unembarrassed curiosity. For much of their millennia-long situation, Coyote would delight her with the countless ways they could break the pottery of their body, re-work, and then fire themselves as a new creation designed for Keekah’s consumption. For example, Coyote would spoil her with the body of a man with the tongue of a dog, any combination of human gender or myth-creature, or a snake so they could join in her oldest form, mating in tall grasses, the sun warming their endless skin. Keekah would play with Coyote with her own sensual delights, such as her astride, keeping them coupled by the pressure of her hips and the hooks of her ankles scooping up their thighs, her fangs digging in their flesh, Coyote bucking and writhing in the orgasmic tension between venom and death and sex. For centuries, they had never bored of the crucible of their pleasure struggles.

But now Keekah would only devour Coyote sparingly— the last time the two had coupled, Keekah stopped grinding against Coyote mid-experience and when she began to bite, Coyote had hoped for one of her old games and had lain docile. And then she had clamped down on the tender flesh between their exposed throat and shoulder and had not released, with no intention of a sophisticated texture play in mind, murdering them without explanation as they died inside of her. The next morning, Coyote had awoken alone from death with a splitting migraine in the apartment, and they had taken this as their cue to put on their pants and leave.

Coyote still visited. Keekah had shifted, away from them, away from anything. In recent visits, Coyote had visited exclusively with the body of a woman, and Keekah took their lack of capacity to penetrate her as some sort of peace offering.

Keekah rebuffed them as a coward, and Coyote kept visiting.

Coyote responded to Keekah's silence by withdrawing their pocket knife and a concha pastry from the paper bag, cutting it in half and then breaking off a piece, dipping it into the coffee, and then bringing the sopping bread to Keekah's mouth.

Keekah opened her mouth and accepted this offering, chewing and swallowing, licking the droplets of coffee from her lips. Keekah commented, "The bread and coffee are fresh."

Coyote nodded, brushing the powdery sugar crumbs from their slacks.

Keekah asked, "Are you going to tell me how you got Oaxacan coffee and warm conchas before any bakery opens?"

"By daybreak, the bakers have already long since started their days— it's just that the bakeries themselves have not opened."

Keekah thought of the possibilities of how Coyote acquired the coffee and conchas— imagining Coyote taking the baker from behind over a table powdery with flour and ingredients,

or perhaps Coyote taking advantage of an unlocked back door during the baker's smoke break, collecting a bounty while the baker drank coffee and smoked cigarettes outside, seated on a crate. Both thoughts made a laugh bubble in Keekah's chest: the thought of the baker's chest and cheek floured white from bracing themselves against the table as Coyote earned their breakfast, as well as the other possibility of Coyote indifferently slipping past the seated baker's tableau of the human condition, the baker analyzing someone's social media account as the blue, futile glow of their screen illuminated their crumpled features, their longing. Coyote had always had a subversive nature since the beginning of everything, and watching how Coyote chose to subvert the circumstances was the majority of the joy of keeping them around.

“So you won't tell me.” Keekah concluded.

“No. Will you tell me why you did this?”

They dragged their fingertips through the blood-soil as though “this” needed explanation.

A silence drawled, and the birdsong swelled as the world blued to daylight.

Coyote looked out over the balcony railing at the tops of yellowing trees as they took the last drag of the blunt, stubbing it out in the blood-soil, taking a gulp of coffee. As Coyote looked down to tear themselves a piece of concha, they said, “I miss when the birds could actually sing. Talk, tell stories.”

Keekah looked up at the birds in the trees, and while her pupils had been round in the lowlight, her pupils narrowed to slits as she looked toward the sunrise. A sigh hitched in her chest, and then she let it go. She said, “Me too.”

Coyote chewed and swallowed his mouthful, and then they fed another coffee-stained piece of pastry to Keekah.

Coyote asked, “What are your plans for the day?”

“Plans, no. But I suspect I’ll receive a visit from the mother of a boy that pissed himself in front of my steps.”

“Does that have to do with the broken corn plant in your garden?”

“Yes.”

Coyote nodded. “So you made him piss himself and he left. Why would the mother visit?”

“Because I told him to feed the corn he broke off to his cancer-ridden grandmother or I’d stop selling her pain medicine to his mother. Revealing my eyes probably didn’t help matters.”

Coyote looked at her for a long while and said, “You know, I met a human the other day that could see me, regardless of my form.”

“Oh?”

“I was hopping from house party to house party around here on the South Side, maybe perusing for something to snatch or a sight to see because why not— and in a back room on a couch, I found a human ODing. Laying on her side, breathing gourd rattle, pinprick pupils, not a drop of naloxone in sight. Her friends were on the other side of the house, hadn’t even noticed her gone. They wouldn’t hear a thing over the music even if she could scream for help, and she couldn’t scream, too far gone.

“I crouched in front of her and when she saw me, she was gasping for air. I looked her in the eye, and when my pulse felt hers through our eyes, I knew she was Hasinai. One of ours. And I think she could see me because she was Hasinai. Their heart beats sing our songs— how could they not?”

After a silence, Keekah asked, “What then?”

“Her lips were blue. I held her hand, already death-cold. I told her I would not harm her. I promised that I would hold her hand until it all went dark. She looked me in the eyes, unblinking, but her breath was calmer. She couldn’t speak, but I told her that her ancestors were waiting on the other side of the river. I told her it was going to be safe and warm, where she’s going. I held her hand until the life went from her eyes, because she never looked away.

“You know, a long time ago, when I interrupted the people’s immortality ceremony to bring their dead people back, thereby making them permanently mortal– that was not the way humans used to die. I never imagined there would come a time in some distant future that it was common for our people to die poisoned blue, cold and alone.”

After a moment, Keekah said, “And you wonder why I slit my wrists and thighs from time to time.”

Coyote smiled and shook their head.

Coyote wiped the blade of their pocket knife on their slacks, folded it shut, and then tucked it away in a pocket. They arranged the cups in the drink carrier, and then brought the stub of a blunt to their lips and killed it off with one last drag as an afterthought, flicking the last bit away over the edge of the balcony. They gathered the drink carrier and oil-stained pastry bag in their hands, pushing themselves to their feet with their arms full, teetering a bit before straightening. Coyote gazed at Keekah for a moment, more comfortable with looking at her now that her wounds had closed. Coyote indulged in the rich darkness of her nipples and pubic hair and then looked away.

Coyote went inside to place their now-chilled breakfast on the bedside table and then returned to gather Keekah up, corralling her to the bath with an arm tucked underneath hers.

They bathed her, they talked more.

At one point, as Coyote grew their nails longer as they scrubbed Keekah's scalp, Keekah picked up the comment Coyote had made earlier, "I think I miss the rain the most."

"Oh?"

"And the sun."

Coyote rinsed her river of black hair in great pitcherfuls and after Coyote combed the last of the soap suds out, they began to lather their hands with oils. "It still rains," Coyote said, raking their oiled fingers through her hair, "The sun still rises."

Keekah turned her chin to show Coyote her profile, "But we both know it's not the same."

Coyote gathered Keekah's slick coil of hair around their arm and guided Keekah backward. She drifted back until Keekah leaned against the wall of the tub closest to Coyote. She rearranged her legs to get comfortable, bracing her feet against the opposite side of the tub. Coyote wrapped their arms around Keekah's shoulders, above her breasts, and they were surprised she allowed it, even resting her head on their shoulder and reaching up to hold their forearms with her hands. Coyote could not resist the crook between her throat and shoulder, and they nipped her with just a glance of teeth.

Coyote pressed their cheek to hers, "Yeah, we know."

Keekah drew Coyote into the bath with her and then peeled away their wet clothes, a second skin. They remained entwined and slick in the water until it cooled, and then rose from the water, toweling off briefly before retreating to the bed to burrow in the blankets, their wetness dampening the sheets.

The ancient sun ached into the room through the slips of curtain, witnessing the abandoned breakfast on the bedside table, flecked with grease and coffee stains, the sopping pile



of wet clothes discarded in the doorway of the bathroom, the puddles of water leading to the bed where a large lump tangled underneath piles of quilts, the two beings with the covers pulled over their heads, only wet, black hair pooled on the pillows visible, shining in the sun.

Later in the afternoon, the boy's mother did come.

She came marching down the street wearing a sad bun and salmon pink scrubs as Coyote swept blood-soil from the walkway, and Keekah sat in a lawn chair in the driveway with her head tipped back, sunning her throat and chest in the unseasonably warm afternoon sun. Coyote was busying themselves with chores. They had already swept and done some minor gardening in the impressive garage-turned-greenhouse underneath Keekah's apartment in hopes to stay in Keekah's good graces. Coyote continued to sweep the mostly clean driveway, grateful to not have been banished when Keekah opened her eyes and was well enough to care for herself.

A tension pulsed in Keekah's throat, and Coyote knew that she knew someone was approaching.

Coyote murmured in Hasinai, "She is not smiling."

Keekah slowly lifted her head, rolling out a crick in her neck before slowly blinking her eyes open, "No. She is not smiling."

The woman lost steam in her approach as she realized Keekah was staring at her, her green eyes unconcerned. Coyote also stared, their wrists folded over the rounded end of the broomstick, their mouth still but their eyebrows amused.

The woman stopped at the end of the driveway. She tried to maintain her glare on Keekah, but kept glancing to Coyote as though to say—this butch woman was familiar, but hadn't there been a man? Coyote's mouth lolled into a grin.

By the time the woman spoke, her accusation fell like a dull statement to the driveway's pavement, "You threatened my son."

After a moment, Keekah's mouth twitched into a smile and she indulged the woman with a reply, "Yes."

The woman frowned, her eyebrows working. After a moment of silence, Keekah helped her by adding, "And? He shouldn't have killed my corn."

"He was just a little boy playing with his soccer ball— boys will be boys, and it's just corn for Christ's sake."

Keekah breathed out a chuckle, tonguing her teeth, "Huh. Then why are you here?"

"What you said to him— it's sick, you shouldn't talk to children like that."

Keekah cocked her head to the side, sprouting a pleasant smile, "And what did I say to him?"

"You said," The woman said, stumbling but powering through, "You said you were going to kill his grandma."

"Now, now. That's not what I said. I told him to feed his grandma my murdered daughter, or that I was going to stop selling you Grandma's pain medicine."

The woman corrected, "And you wouldn't tell him if it would hurt her or not. And calling a corn plant your daughter is a psycho thing to say."

"You call me psycho but you think you're going to intimidate me into selling you my pain medicine by yelling at me in my own driveway."

The woman closed her mouth like a shocked fish.

"You call me a psycho, but you don't get to determine what is a living thing or not. You're not God. And if I'm such a psycho— why not just put Grandma on opioids?"

The woman opened and closed her mouth again.

“But I’m guessing from those scrubs– you have seen what opioids do. Maybe you’re not so clueless. But you should know– your son kicked his ball into my corn plants on purpose, twice, to break them. And then he called me a ‘fucking witch’. And you call him ‘a little boy playing with his soccer ball’. But I do assume that he learned ‘fucking witch’ from you.”

The woman paled. After a moment, she whimpered, “Please.”

Keekah yawned, stretching her shoulders before settling back into her seat. She told the woman, “No. I won’t be doing anything for any of you until you feed Grandma that corn. I hope you didn’t throw it away.”

Keekah took a theatrical glance at the bare skin of her wrist and said, “And I would do it soon. Time’s ticking, and that last paper sack of medicine ran out this morning.”

The woman blew out a shaking breath, tears bubbling and dripping down her cheeks, “My mama didn’t do anything to deserve any more pain. Ma’am, please.”

“Your son started crying and begging too, before he pissed himself. You all must love her a lot.”

“Please, have mercy–”

“I already do. In the old days, I would have taken your son’s life.”

The woman blinked and inhaled snot, surprised out of her crying. Keekah gazed into the woman’s eyes and explained, “You see, Marisol, I am very, very old. I am older than the saint hanging around your neck or even the concept of a ‘fucking witch’.”

Unblinking, Marisol asked, her eyes wide with terror or awe or both, “Are you going to take my mother?”

“As I told your son– it’s not much of a punishment if you knew what the punishment was. But go home, kiss your mother. Pray to your God. You’ll need it.”

Marisol blinked, feet planted but swaying a little, then turned and began her walk back, her crying obvious not from sound but from the way she wiped her face repeatedly as she strode on.

When Marisol was down the block, Coyote looked down at Keekah, but Keekah did not look up.

“Are you really going to kill the grandmother?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You’ve never killed before. You only send snakes to bite greedy children picking immature crops in the tall tales parents tell their kids. Why start now?”

“Why not?”

“Why not? That’s all?”

“Look at the world, Ta’sha.” Keekah pushed herself to stand. She repeated the question as a statement as she walked into her greenhouse-garage, “Why not.”

Later, Keekah knocked on the door to the crooked addition to the back of Marisol’s house. Keekah heard shuffling, and as she waited for the old woman to reach the door, she took inventory of the patio– the hand-laid stones with weeds coming through the cracks, the sun-worn metal chairs and table, the wilting flowers in the flowerbeds lining the sides of the addition.

An old woman wearing a floral turban opened the door with squinted eyes that then narrowed when she focused on Keekah.

The old woman offered a chilly, “Buenas tardes.”

Keekah replied in Spanish, a polite flourish of *usted*, “Good afternoon, Doña. May I come in?”

The old woman frowned but stepped to the side to open the door wider, “Pásale.”

The old woman made a gesture for Keekah to sit at a small table with two chairs. The old woman teetered to a kitchenette and offered to make coffee, which Keekah accepted. Keekah took in the neat compactness of the room which managed to fit the kitchenette, the small table, a dresser, a bed in the corner, a nightstand, and a loved-soft bible with a re-tied rosary for a bookmark.

Keekah said, “This apartment is charming. Did Marisol arrange it?”

“Yes, bless her. The Lord knows we need space from each other.” The old woman put two mugs with water in the microwave to heat, and then carried the Nescafe, spoons, and paper napkins to the table.

Keekah wanted to offer to help, but knew the old woman was the type to take offense. Instead, she asked, “What do you call yourself?”

“María Carmen.” She called over the sound of the beeping microwave, the sucking gasp of pulling the microwave door open, “But I prefer Carmen. And you?”

“Keekah.”

Carmen wrinkled her nose as she carried the mugs over with trembling hands, “What kind of name is that? Are you hispanic?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then why do you speak Spanish?”

Carmen eased the mugs onto the table with a ceramic scrape and then surrendered to the chair with a sigh.

“I’ve been alive a long time.”

Carmen raised her eyebrows, spooning coffee powder into her mug, “Don’t look it. The sugar is in that bowl there.”

Carmen pushed the Nescafe across the table to Keekah.

“No, I don’t. But trust that I am.”

Carmen pursed her lips, “Then when is the last time you laid down with a man?”

Keekah grinned, “Lie down? Or do you mean fucked?”

Carmen waved a dismissive hand, “A boyfriend, then. When’s the last time you had one?”

“When’s the last time you had one, then?”

“Last year, and that’s when I got old. You’re truly old when you give that up. I gave up *chile*, and then I got old, and then I got cancer. Marisol says that it’s the years of inhaling cleaning chemicals while cleaning houses that got me— but I know it’s because I stopped giving up the spirit, if you know what I mean.”

Keekah huffed then barked then cackled, a surprised lawn mower of a laugh being yanked to life after a long time. When Keekah collected herself, she said, “I have had someone on and off over the years, but they’re not a boyfriend.”

Carmen raised her eyebrows again at the use of the word *someone*, not even *partner* or *friend* to describe a lover— a sly side-step to avoid gender or romantic warmth or both— but went on, “You see, that means you truly are old. When you stop having boyfriends, you’re old.”

Keekah took a sip and set the mug down.

“Do you know why I’m here?”

“I thought you would visit me— they’ve been saying you want to kill me.”

“It wasn’t very polite of them to not explain everything to you— the deal was, your grandson killed my corn, and he has to feed it to you, or I will stop selling your medication to your daughter.”

“Ah.” Carmen sighed, leaning back into her chair. “I heard about those kinds of deals a few times, when I was young.”

“Oh?”

“Well, it was Mexico, and things were different back then. It was a different world. We lived, worked, and died on the land. There was violence then, but not like now— almost all the people left the town and narcos have claimed the land like it’s theirs, now. People used to resolve things amongst themselves, mostly. But of course, there were fights, there were brujas, and curanderas, too. It’s just the way it was. So deals were made.”

“What do you think of the deal I made with your grandson?”

“It’s fair. More than fair. But my daughter and my grandson— they don’t know about these sort of things. They don’t know anything about what brujas can do, have done.”

“Do you think I’m a bruja?”

Carmen tilted her head to the side, regarding her for a minute, “Maybe. Maybe a curandera. Maybe both. But you told Marisol that you’re older than the Virgin.”

“Mary, at least.”

“How old?”

“I was there when the Great Healer brought the people out of Mother Earth. The people needed to eat— I was tasked with seed distribution.”

“You’re as old as God?”

“Oh, no. Of course not. I’m just their pharmacist— food and medicine, that’s all.”

“What’s God like?”

Keekah leaned forward and placed her elbows on the table and asked, eyebrows knitted, “You’re not offended?”

“Why? That you’ve met God?”

“That I say I’ve met God.”

“Well, you don’t have a reason to lie. What’s he like? I’m going to meet him soon, and I’d like to make a good first impression.”

Keekah leaned back in her chair, eyebrows raised, but smiling a warm, little smile, “Carmen, it was so long ago, you’re closer to God right now than I have ever have been.”

“Ah.” Carmen thought on that, sipped her coffee, “So you haven’t heard from him in all this time?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to deliver a message?”

Now Keekah thought. She took a sip of her coffee and said, “Tell them that Keekah said, ‘Fuck you’.”

Carmen raised her eyebrows, “Anything else?”

Keekah went back to drinking her coffee, “That about covers it.”

“May I ask why?”

Keekah was silent. Then she reached for the plastic, clear Nescafe bottle between the two of them and lifted it like a ceremonial object, “This plastic just might never break down completely. It will be in an ocean or landfill in one year, ten years, fifty years. Maybe it’ll break down into microplastics and enter your great grandchildren’s blood streams– but it will still be here. It never re-enters nature, only destroys it. In the history of time, the history of plastic is just



a blink, but some scientists think it will never decay. And I will still be alive. I'll be alive so long I just may outlive this Nescafe bottle. The Great Healer won't talk to me or heal me or let me die— everyone else has the privilege of dying. Except me and that someone I mentioned. We'll both be here when the oceans are nothing *but* plastic and not a single plant has bloomed for a hundred years.”

Carmen stared into Keekah's eyes and said nothing, but she seemed to have listened.

“Do you love your someone?”

Keekah frowned, eyebrows low. “Why?”

“You have said that you don't have the privilege of dying— but loving is the privilege of living. And if you live forever, and you are not loving forever, what are you doing with all this time on your hands?”

Keekah shook her head and laughed, “You're not going to say something maudlin about loving those crass descendants of yours beyond the grave? Clearly you believe in having an immortal soul.”

“Of course, I will love them forever, beyond the grave, in this world, the next.” Carmen waved her hand in the air as though she were batting her immortal love away like flies, “But one day I will die, and I will not be able to brush my little girl's hair. One day I will die, and I will never watch fútbol with my grandson again. But I've already been here a long time, and I want to go before they do, because I'm selfish. But your someone is immortal, like you. What's the problem, God's pharmacist? Are you bored?”

“They killed my sons.”

Carmen was stunned silent, slowly lowering her hand.

Keekah went on, “I had two sons. I buried them centuries ago– I haven’t been as lucky as you. This person, Coyote– they are the reason humans are mortal. They decided to ruin the ability to bring people back. Sickness has always existed. Death has always existed. But people, you used to be able to bring them back seasonally– like plants. They would just be dormant a while, and could be called back with ceremony, like the land. And then Coyote ruined that ceremony, making human mortality permanent. Coyote hadn’t imagined my sons would just die like any other humans– but they had been fathered by humans. And they died, and stayed dead, just like their fathers. I kept their bodies until they became bones. But they never came back.”

Carmen said, “And you never forgave.”

Keekah realized this was not a question, that Carmen as another mother would not preach forgiveness, and her shoulders relaxed. Keekah looked away, at a small pair of abandoned, muddy soccer cleats by the door. Keekah’s eyes were dry, and they were both quiet together. Keekah added, “My grandchildren, too. And then their children. And their children. And their children. Each generation as mortal as the last, maybe more so. I held those descendants on their first days and last days. And then I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

Keekah heard a sliding whisper on the surface of the table, and she glanced up to see Carmen pressing the back of her hand on the table, palm up. It took Keekah a second to realize that Carmen was offering to hold her hand.

Keekah raised her hand, and then let her palm float down to meet Carmen’s. Keekah asked, “Do you want to live?”

Carmen smiled, her eyes crinkling, “Oh, no. Life is pain, my dear– you already know. My daughter is very much keeping me alive against my will because she’s not ready. Because

she's young and she thinks that one day she'll be ready to lose her mother. But we're never ready for that— sometimes, we're ready to die, but we're never ready for anyone we love to die.”

Keekah nodded as Carmen rubbed the back of her hand with her thumb, giving her hand a squeeze before letting go.

Carmen said, pushing herself up and away from the table with a groan, “You should go rest. Do you want me to send you with some conchas for you and your friend?”

Keekah nodded, and Carmen then watched Keekah walk down the road with a tupperware of pastries in hand. Carmen had thought her visitor had arrived to her home unannounced and had not bothered with bringing a gift— but the next morning, Carmen had stepped out onto the patio into the cold blue to sneak a cigarette. She had shuffled into her slippers and struggled with her bathrobe, not bothering with the turban before opening the door. She saw that the withered marigolds lining the flower beds of her addition had re-bloomed like wildfire overnight, out of season, and she smiled.