

Lion and Juana

Juana

We'd been building Ciudad de la Nueva Esperanza, the city we'd *literally* fought for in a giant battle, for all of three years before Lion wanted to leave it.

"I'm going away for a while," he said casually that night, as he helped me clean up after Cece's sixteenth birthday dinner. It was *supposed* to be Kit and Ocelot cleaning, but they'd made the excuse that they had cooked all day in the same hot kitchen with Mamá. So yeah. Now it was our turn.

"Oh yeah?" I asked, as I dried a plate. "Where exactly?"

I didn't suspect anything special. Sometimes the criatura crew—that's what Cece liked to call our amigos now—sometimes went into the desert beyond the town to scout, or find other criaturas and humans who needed to come to our growing sanctuary. I wiped down a plate and breathed in the lingering smell of chile, and the sounds of our friends and familia outside. Beyond the window in front of us, I could just catch a glimpse of Cece and Kit practicing dancing for the upcoming festival. Coyote watched them from a nearby stone bench, his eyes following Cece the whole time with a lazy smile. Ocelot, nearby, clapped her hand to keep rhythm, trying—unsuccessfully, so far—to keep Cece in time. Alejo span Cece a couple times and Kit encouraged her to keep trying even though she was no dancer.

"Santos wants to train me to be the next chief of police, so he said I should apprentice under a few friends he has in other cities to get experience," Lion said as he handed me a dish he'd just washed. I plucked it from his fingers, dried it, and placed it back in its cabinet. He continued: "That way, I get more experience than him. Nueva Esperanza is going to be a city unlike any other. It's going to need a chief of police to match."

"That makes sense I guess," I said, and took the next plate he offered. "You want to do it?"

His mouth quirked up on one side. Lion had a crooked smile now, one that usually only showed up for me. My chest warmed a bit as he glanced at me sideways, his red eyes crinkling with the warm expression.

"Yeah," he said.

"I'm pretty sure people would be terrified to make trouble in a city where the great Black Lion was the chief of police." I moved to place a plate with the others. "How long until you come back then?"

"A few years," he'd said. "I'm thinking maybe three."

The plate in my hand slipped and clanged on the tiled counter. Lion scooped it back up and offered it to me, but I stared at him, frozen. When he said he'd leave to apprentice, I thought it would be *months*. But years?

"What?" he'd asked. "Are you going to miss me?"

I snatched the plate back. "Why would I miss an annoying gato like you?"

His smile just widened. My stomach twisted. Right, he was happy about this. Lion was a close friend of mine now—I needed to be happy for him. Even if I wasn't.

Wait.

Why wasn't I?

It shouldn't matter how long he was gone. Lion was my friend, and sure I'd miss him, but why did I suddenly want to reach out and grab his arm, as if he were going to disappear right now?

Three years. I rolled the thought around my head. In three years, he'd be nineteen. I'd be twenty-one. I'd miss growing into an adult with him.

Lion washed the next dish and offered it to me. I clung to the one he'd just given me, unmoving. His plate dripped into the sink between us, drawing a line. His eyebrows pulled together in concern as he waited.

"Juana?" he asked.

I swallowed and placed the dry plate back into the cabinet, turning my back so he couldn't see my face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

His voice was deeper than it used to be. In three short years, he'd grown to my height instead of the short kid who used to grouch at me. How much more would he change in another three years?

He'd vanish out of my life, and what if he was completely different when he came back?

What if he didn't care about me anymore when he returned?

No, I told myself. That was a silly fear, right? We'd gone through Devil's Alley together. He'd fought in a battle with me. He'd even comforted me when I was worried about my curandera powers before we'd faced Catrina. He wouldn't forget that.

I squeezed my fingers together. My own Papá had forgotten about us. The man who'd told me stories growing up and said he was proud of me. The man who once said he'd loved me more than anything. He'd left despite it all.

I straightened my back. No. I had been alright when Papá left. I would be fine if Lion did the same.

"That's great," I said, because I could feel Lion's red eyes burning a hole through my back. "Um, I think I need to get to the forge. They like me to stop by and help feed the fire before bed."

I turned around. Lion's eyes met mine. I smiled for him. His black brows stayed tight across his forehead, even as I stepped away, turned, and headed for the front door.

His hand caught mine.

My stomach flipped. I turned and looked at him, heart fluttering with mariposas.

"I'll come back," he said. "Stronger than before. So . . . I can protect the people I love."

His hand was warm. A bit sweaty. My heart felt hot as fire, but not the kind that burns. The kind that gives light, like the lamps I lit for the nocturnal builders in the city. In Lion's grip, my nails flickered.

"You promise?" I asked him. "Really promise?"

His lopsided smile swung up again. "Sí, Juana."

"Juana!"

We both jumped, and our hands separated. Through the kitchen doorway, where we could see the front door, we found Cece, Coyote, Kit, Ocelot, and Axolotl waiting.

"Axolotl wants to see you feed the forges!" Cece beamed.

“Be careful,” a voice floated from outside—Damiana, just out of sight. “Your eyes are better in the dark. Juana is so bright, she could blind you.”

I laughed a little. I walked away from Lion, feeling the warmth of his hand still tingle on the edge of my own. “Okay, okay. I’ll show you how to keep the light burning even in the darkness.”

Lion Three years later

When I finally returned to Ciudad de Nueva Esperanza, it was even more beautiful than I remembered.

It wasn’t hard to be, honestly. Three years ago, we’d basically had city walls and one full street of fully finished, furnished, and inhabited adobe houses—the main street. Plus the foundations of a few important buildings we’d planned for the future, like the city hall and Cece’s new school. In previous lives, I remembered adobe houses going up a bit faster. But all this new “plumbing” stuff, and gas piping, slowed things down.

Now, as I walked up to Nueva Esperanza, the city walls were covered in beautiful murals. Sweeping flowers, a few old curandera sayings, the image of criaturas being born and Coyote giving Naked Man fire. I paused as I closed in on the center gate. The image of Coyote stood at the center of us all—I remembered that day, even if it was over a thousand years ago now. I felt it pulse in the soul in my chest. I smiled a little.

It was strange. All my memories were clearer now. But they also still felt like different lifetimes. Like a me I didn’t know how to be anymore. I rubbed my chest, over my soul. It felt great to be complete. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. But it also came with new challenges like finding a place in the world—when I’d spent my childhood thinking it would vanish. Like being a ship adrift on the ocean after a storm.

“Lion!”

I turned to look past the open gate. Cece, Juana, Coyote, Kit, Santos, Ocelot, and Axolotl were all waiting there, with a big sign:

BIENVENIDO, EL LEON NEGRO!

Heh. They actually wrote out my full name. Warmth spread through my soul and tingled in the tips of my fingers. I grinned. Cece waved. Juana met my eyes all the way across the distance. She lifted a single hand and saluted me.

In that one gesture, I found my anchor again. I didn’t know how to be the Black Lion from the old stories anymore. And I didn’t need to be.

I knew exactly where I belonged now.

“Hola!” I called, and strode inside the city we’d made together.

“Lion!” they all called again.

Cece, Kit, and Coyote all took turns hugging me. Santos reached over and patted my shoulder. I remembered when he used to pat me on the head like that—but I was too tall for him to reach it now. Axolotl asked if I’d brought her anything. I rolled my eyes but handed her the book I’d gotten her in Costa de los Sueños. She gasped and clutched it.

After a few moments, the crowd cleared.

And then it was me and Juana.

We stood four feet apart. She stared up at me—my heart thundered—and didn't blink. She looked almost exactly like I remembered, just older and somehow even more beautiful. My palms felt sweaty. I could feel her presence like a fire in my chest. All around us, our friends hushed.

"I'm back," I told Juana.

She stared. Nodded.

"Glad to see it," she said.

Then suddenly bolted the opposite direction.

I stood there, nearly gaping, as Juana booked it down the street and vanished around the nearest corner.

Cece, Coyote, Kit, Ocelot, Axolotl, and Santos all watched it happen too. Cece slowly turned back to face me, clearly trying to repress a wince. Which didn't help me feel better about watching the girl I'd liked since I was *thirteen*—and had been writing to for the last *three years*—run away at the first sight of me.

You would've thought I was a natural disaster.

"She's probably late for something . . ." Cece said, grinning awkwardly to try and hide the obvious.

She was as bad at hiding her feelings as I remembered.

Coyote rubbed the back of his head. "She actually does have a shift at the city hall right about now."

Kit leaned on my shoulder. He lowered his voice, so quiet no one without criatura senses would be able to hear. "For the record, she's been talking about you coming back for days."

That was even more confusing.

"Like, talking about me in a dreading-the-sight-of-him way?" I mumbled.

Kit squinted. "It seemed positive at the time."

"I have an idea, Lion!" Cece clapped her hands together. "You're probably super tired, right? Let's get you in to our house for a nap. Then we can show you around everything we've been building!"

I smiled a little. There was a small stitch in my heart, but it was nice to be surrounded by amigos again. Being around these amigos—mi familia—was as natural as breathing, even after years apart.

"Gracias, Cece," I said. "But I'm not tired yet. Have any of you seen Jaguar? I want to visit her before I see the town."

Coyote smiled softly. "She's on the northern side of town, last I saw of her. That part's not built-up much yet, so you should find her easily."

Ocelot nodded. "Around this time of day, she's usually at Metztlí's memorial."

Ah. That made a lot of sense.

"I'll see you all in a bit, if that's okay," I said, and started heading north on the road.

Cece beamed. "We'll meet you back here in about an hour then!"

Coyote and Kit waved. Ocelot's eyes crinkled in a smile.

Yeah. It was good to be home.

I wandered through the town, sniffing and catching whiff of my sister's scent. Her trail wound through all the strange and tasty new odors of the panadería, the market, the new

homes and houses of people I'd never met. A lot really had changed in just a few years. They'd made this place more than a small gathering of rehomed people. It was the start of a real city now.

Huh. A city where criaturas and humans alike lived. In all my past lives, that was one thing I'd never seen. Now, I got to live it.

I found my way to the north, where there was a small patch of cerros curving above the nearest buildings. There, at the top of the largest hill, stood Jaguar.

Jaguar had her back to me, looking at a large stone. Metzli's name was carved into it. Jaguar's braids blew in the breeze as she stared into the resting place of the woman she'd put there.

It hadn't been Jaguar who'd done it, though. Just her claws.

I hoped she knew that by now.

I made my steps noisier than usual as I came up behind my sister. She could've heard me already by now, but with her faraway look, more time to adjust to someone's approach was better. Finally I stopped beside her. She didn't look up, but her arm came around my back as easily as if I'd never left Nueva Esperanza.

"Good to see you, hermano," she said.

She leaned her cheek on my shoulder. I smiled and wrapped an arm around her in return. It was strange, how small she felt. For years, she'd been the big sister I literally and figuratively looked up to. Now she had to look up to me—physically, at least.

"You okay?" I asked, and took in Metzli's name on the granite headstone we'd made for her years ago. I still remembered the day we gave her a proper memorial. Cece had cried her eyes out. So had Jaguar.

I'd cried when I'd watched Cece and Jaguar hold each other through it.

Don't tell anyone that, though.

"I like to come here to show her I honor her memory," Jaguar said, "even if I was part of cutting it short."

"Cece said Metzli was happy to be with the other curanderas in the Great After."

"Sí." She nodded. "I'm glad of that."

We watched the gravestone for a moment, in a silence that felt like coming home.

"Are you back in the Ciudad for good, then?" She looked up at me. "Juana's been miserable without you."

I balked. She grinned, a wide, feline one, and I scowled at her.

"Don't joke," I mumbled. "She basically ran away when I got back. She barely said hi."

"So you do like her!" she poked my stomach.

"Of course." I shrugged. "I thought she at least cared about me as a friend, but after *that* welcome party, I think I'm lucky not to be singed." I scoffed.

Jaguar scanned me up and down. Then frowned, reached up, and pinched my cheeks. Like I wasn't nineteen years old already.

"Hey," I growled.

"Did you grow up at all while you were away?" she asked, then patted my cheeks too hard—obviously on purpose. "You're acting like a wet kitten."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"How long have you known Juana? What's she like when she's feeling vulnerable?"

“What’s with the interrogation?”

She squinted her yellow eyes at me, then pointed at my nose. “Little Lion, if you haven’t learned to see her, and approach with questions instead of assumptions, you’re not ready for more.”

My cheeks flushed. Her eyes narrowed. For a second, I wanted to bite back. All the heat in my chest wrestled and fought. It was hard, to love and admire and want to reach out to someone who you thought didn’t care anymore.

But I took a breath. Long and slow in the intake. Even longer, even slower, on the release.

Jaguar’s face softened. “You and Juana are like sunlight and fire. Both warm and bright, but able to burn if you’re not careful.”

I smiled a little. No one could deny that. We’d always been a lot alike. I understood what she’d gone through. She understood me. She’d fought for me. I’d fought for her.

And if that was true, maybe I needed to be willing to fight my own fears—my own insecurities—for her now too.

“You’re right,” I whispered.

She nodded. “Always, sí.”

I side-eyed her. “You’re right *this time*—I know Juana. She gets harsher the more vulnerable she feels. Maybe she feels awkward because it’s been so long. I need to reach out so she knows I still care, at least. We’ll see where things go from there.”

Jaguar nodded, waving me along. “And?”

I tilted my head. “And . . . I’ll tell her how I feel. Eventually. When the time is right.”

She patted my back. “That’s my Little Lion.”

“Stop calling me that.”

She just laughed. The wind blew, and the smell of sweets and spices from the growing market drifted over Metzli’s grave. I smiled at her name. Maybe I was imagining it, but for a moment, the air felt warmer there, like Metzli was laughing too.

Juana

That night, the fiesta was in full swing by the time I’d finished my rounds.

Cece, the criatura crew (minus Lion, obviously), Damiana, and I had all taken shifts around the city to protect it, since we had another raid of banditos come through about a year ago. It wasn’t uncommon in unpopulated areas, and we had made sure they regretted coming to our safe slice of the desert. But we still had to keep watch, to protect the younger members of the city.

That would all get a bit easier, once we had our new chief of police in office.

And that started tonight.

I waited on the edges of the fiesta. At the center of the new town square, in the shadow of the new—and still unfinished, because finishing buildings takes *forever*, even with Damiana making the foundations so quickly—city hall. Lion stood at the center of the square, with Don Santos.

“ . . . and I am so proud to say that, with Black Lion’s return, I will be handing over my responsibilities to him!” Santos wrapped up his welcome speech. It was strange, to watch the way Lion towered over him by a good four inches. “Salud, Lion!”

“Salud!” rang the crowd.

I lifted my glass to him as well. It may have been my imagination, but I thought I saw Lion look directly through the thick crowd and meet my eyes. He raised his glass. My heart did somersaults.

Ugh, why was he so handsome and mature now? It’s like he was doing it on purpose.

“Felicidades!” Mamá’s voice rang out.

The dance began. I made sure to slip farther to the back of the crowd, to put good space between me and Lion. He probably didn’t want to ask me to dance after all this time anyway. But if he did, I was pretty sure my nails would blind everyone. And I couldn’t handle that.

Across the way, Coyote and Cece danced together like they were one wave of the same ocean. Cece’s eyes lit up with the most unabashed joy as she laughed with him. It had taken me a while to warm up to Coyote, but watching the way he seemed totally at peace, completely content with life, when he looked at my sister? That had made me see exactly why he was the best person to build a life with her.

I’d never remembered Papá looking at Mamá the way Coyote looked at Cece. I rubbed my arm as I watched everyone celebrate. An ache grew inside me as I watched the two betrothed dance with each other, so cocooned with joy that I was jealous. Not unhappy for them. Just—longing for a little of that pure happiness too.

I peeked sideways, through my hair, where Lion now stood on the other side of the square. He was with Santos and Mamá, discussing something animatedly with them. He seemed so different now. I couldn’t help taking him in again: so tall, so strong. So confident.

My heart hiccupped in my chest, and the old scar on my soul ached. I clasped a hand to my chest.

“Something wrong, Juana?” Damiana asked.

I nearly jumped as she appeared on my right. I quickly tore my eyes away from Lion, but she caught the direction of my gaze. Her smile softened into something knowing. I frowned.

“My chest hurts,” I said, with a cough, to try to sound more convincing. She raised a doubtful eyebrow, and her light wrinkles pulled with it. “I think I’m going to turn in early.”

“But Lion only just came home,” she said. “Don’t you want to stay? You two have always been close—”

“It’s been three years,” I snapped. “How can we still be close when he’s been off all over the place?”

She looked a bit taken aback. Agh. I tried to soften my expression. I couldn’t take out all of my insecurity on other people. I’d learned so much about embracing my warmth, not my burning, over the last few years. Building a new home, being invested in making something new and beautiful with everyone, had really helped with that.

But I couldn’t explain out loud to anyone how scary it was, to look at Lion, and finally realize I loved him.

I’d missed him for three years, embarrassed and uncomfortable the whole time because it was ridiculous that I had only realized how I felt when he left.

He’d been a good friend before that. Now I could barely look at him at all.

“Juana,” Damiana whispered softly. “Closeness isn’t always about physical distance. Don’t you think?”

I nodded, because she was right, but I didn’t say anything, because it didn’t make me feel any better. I was uncomfortable. Fearful thoughts banged on the side of my head.

So I did what I usually did when I was upset.

I went to work.

The city hall was still under construction, but I’d been helping to build it with everyone else. I moved around the square, towards it, determined to finish painting the mayor’s room that I’d been working on with Mamá all week. She was the mayor, after all. I should be the one to get it ready for her.

Before I could step inside the building, a soft voice popped up behind me. “Juana, what’s wrong?”

I froze, wincing. Ah. I turned and looked back at Cece. That soul-language of hers could be really aggravating sometimes. Her warm eyes danced with the party lamps, and her face softened. It was strange sometimes, to see Cece as a grown woman. But her wedding with Coyote was soon, so I would have to get used to it.

I sighed softly. “Cece—no se.”

She squinted at me. “Wait. Is that a ‘I don’t want to talk about it’ kind of ‘I don’t know?’”

I nodded. “I need to deal with this one by myself. Quietly. Por favor.”

She shuffled closer and lowered her voice. “Is it about Lion?”

I glanced over her shoulder, at where he was talking with Kit now and laughing. I nodded, cheeks warm.

“Okay,” Cece said. She wrapped me in a short, warm hug. “Just remember. Not everyone’s Papá. And you’re loveable, every inch.”

Tears pricked the back of my eyes. Sometimes, my hermana knew exactly what to say. Too well, actually. I cleared my throat, smiling a little, and Cece retreated. She waved as she went back to join the party and her fiancé. I waved back. Watched her go. Treasured it, just for a moment.

Then I slipped into the solitude of the unfinished building.

I went up the coiling stairs, passing the finished first floor, the almost finished second, and entering the bare, and not-quite-complete, third one. I rolled up my sleeves, tucked back my dress, and reopened the paint. The brush felt good in my hand. I lit the candles around the room with my free one, the wicks sparking between my fingers tips. The room was warm, glowing low and steady, as I went to work on the back wall, where we’d reserved a place for the stained glass window Dominga del Sol was working on. I got into a steady rhythm for a while—until something disturbed it.

Footsteps scraped the floor behind me. “You left my party. That’s kinda rude.”

I jumped and whirled around, brandishing the paintbrush like a knife.

Lion stood in the doorway of the unfinished Mayor’s office, his broad shoulder outlined by the candlelight. My stomach flipped. He eyed the paintbrush, then smiled that wry, crooked smile he always used to give me. Like no time had passed at all. Like he was still him, and I was still me, and we were still Lion and Juana.

“I was going to make fun of that stance, but I bet you actually could find a way to stab someone with a paintbrush.” He grinned and folded his arms.

My heart raced, and heat flushed up my chest. Ugh. I hated this feeling.

"You bet I could," I said, with a weak smile.

He laughed. It was deeper than I remembered, and robust. I swallowed, dipped my paintbrush in the paint, and went back to the wall.

His footsteps neared me. "You going to keep ignoring me? I thought you said in your last letter you were excited to see me again."

I had said that. Stupid past Juana.

"I am excited to see you," I said. It wasn't a lie. I just wished I hadn't told him.

It was funny, really. I remember, back when I first met him, that I hated how strong he was because it made me feel weak. Now I hated how much I cared about him, for the same reason. Except it wasn't weakness. It was vulnerability. Something Cece had always mastered so well, and I kept having to relearn and relearn and relearn. Because it was scary to love someone, and possibly lose them.

Lion's shadow came up behind me, and it curved around me and the wall like a blanket. I peeked up at him over my shoulder. His red eyes were a softened crimson now, concerned and watching and trying to understand.

"Your heart's racing," he murmured softly. And my heart quickened even more. "You're not . . . scared of me now, are you?"

I shook my head—then froze. I guess I was scared. Not of him. But of how I felt about him. I laughed a little, and dropped the paintbrush weakly into the bucket.

"Silly, right?" I whispered.

His face fell. "Is that why you ran away from me earlier?"

I nodded. "It doesn't make sense, of course. Lo siento. It's not how I wanted to greet you, and I know you'd never hurt me."

"Then why are you scared?"

"No se," I said. I took a breath, finally straightened up, and turned to face him properly. I had to look up at him. Would I ever get used to that? "I guess I'm still not as grown up as I thought." I patted his face, the way I used to when he was shorter. "But I'm still older than you, kid."

He rolled his eyes but couldn't smother a smile. "You're only *two* years older. Get over it already."

"Never," I said, grabbing at the lighter atmosphere. "You're taller than me now, so I have to use every advantage I have left."

I went to pull my hand back from his cheek. Lion's hand lifted suddenly, took mine, and pressed it back against his soft skin. My heart leapt in my chest again. The scar on my soul didn't hurt as bad this time.

Lion's red eyes met mine through the low light. He had thick, black lashes, and his narrowed gaze made my toes tingle. He could speak with eyes like that, even without uttering a word.

"Are you glad I'm back?" he asked.

I almost swatted him and went back to painting. But there was a catch in his voice, at the end. Like he was genuinely afraid I didn't care at all.

I swallowed. I didn't want to tell him that I loved him, but I couldn't keep hiding it if it hurt him. So I split the difference with a shrug. His brows pulled together, and the concern deepened in his face. His hand loosened its hold on mine. He started to pull back.

"I'm really happy to see you," I whispered, hard and fast. He paused. I traced the slope of his cheek with my thumb. "I don't know why you had to leave. For *three* years. You missed Cece starting the school. You missed the library I helped plan. Look at you! We missed growing up together—" my throat tightened.

Before I could say another word, Lion's arms wrapped around me. It was terrifying—and everything I wanted. I closed my eyes to soak in his warmth, and, holding my breath to be brave, laid my head on his chest.

"I missed you," I finally said the first fully honest words I'd spoken since he came back.

"I missed you too," he said, without hesitation. "I thought of you the whole time I was gone."

I squeezed him close. I hoped he understood what that meant. I'd gotten the skill Cece had, to feel other people's souls the way she did. But sometimes, it felt like Lion's soul and mine still understood one another's. He rested his chin on the top of my head. My heart fluttered, and the heat burning my chest simmered down into warmth. Comfort. Peace.

"Juana," Lion said. "I came back because this is my home. But I also want you to know it's my home . . . because you're here."

I looked into his eyes, and replayed that moment back in Mamá's kitchen all those three years ago. When he'd said he was leaving, so when he came back, he could protect the people he loved.

My heart lifted with hope. I pulled back slightly and squeezed his hands. Lion met my gaze, steady, stable, here with me again just like he'd promised. He'd been out to all the world, and instead of choosing somewhere easier like Papá had, Lion had come back. Here. For us.

For me.

So even though I was scared, scared to love openly, scared to have feelings so big—I took hold of them, and offered them the best I knew how.

"Lion . . ." I whispered. "Te amo."

His eyes widened. My heart sped up to race-horse speeds, but I didn't pull away, and I kept my gaze locked with his.

His face softened. He smiled, and it was flush with relief and exactly the kind of joy Coyote had whenever he looked at Cece. My stomach filled with mariposas.

"I love you too," he whispered.

Then Lion kissed me, our heartbeats synced, as the candles around us brightened and dispelled the darkness.