



THE  
SUNBEARER  
TRIALS

AIDEN THOMAS



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS  
NEW YORK

A Feiwel and Friends Book

An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC

120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271 • [fiercereads.com](http://fiercereads.com)

Copyright © 2022 by Aiden Thomas. All rights reserved.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by email at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

First edition, 2022

Book design by L. Whitt

Interior artwork by Mars Lauderbaugh

Feiwel and Friends logo designed by Filomena Tuosto

Printed in the USA

ISBN 978-1-250-82213-0 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-88771-9 (special edition)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*For my friends, my muses, my  
knights in shining armor:*

ALEX

ANDA

AUSTIN

BIRD

EZRAEL

KATIE

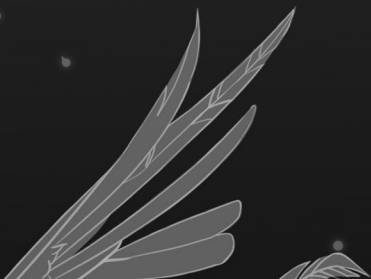
MAX

MIK

RAVIV

SAMANTHA

TEDDY



## FIRST, THERE WAS ONLY SOL AMONG A SEA OF STARS.

Alone, they formed the world by gathering stardust in their hands. From the dust pressed between their fingers, mountains grew. From their tears of loneliness, oceans and rivers flowed. From the water, the desolate earth grew lush trees and jungles.

And from the new earth, Tierra was formed, and Sol was not alone.

The world was beautiful and exciting, but the couple was alone in the universe with no one to share it with.

They decided to create a race of godly children.

First, Tierra brought forth gold from deep within the earth, and Sol shaped it into the Golds.

The Golds were powerful but vain. They wanted only to test the limits of their strength, busying themselves with their work instead of spending time with their creators. And so Sol and Tierra tried again.

Next, Tierra brought forth jade from the caverns where the ocean met the shore, and Sol shaped it into the Jades.

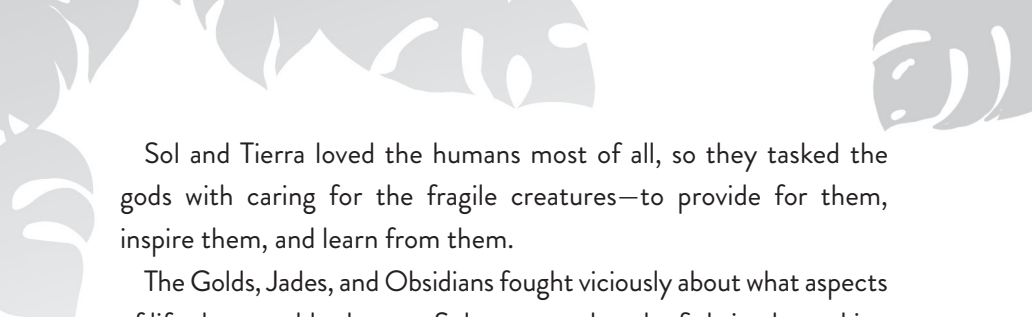
The Jades were kind but focused. They were so immersed in finding new ways to bend and channel their powers, that they had no thoughts of their family. And so Sol and Tierra tried again.

Last, Tierra brought forth obsidian from the edges of the earth's hottest flames, and Sol shaped it into the Obsidians.

The Obsidians were passionate but selfish. They sought only destruction, not the development of their home.

Eventually, Sol and Tierra grew tired of shaping gods. Sol went down into the earth and planted their heart deep beneath the ground, to be closer to their beloved. Sol's heartsblood mingled with the humble dirt and, unexpectedly, humans were born.

The small mortals were welcomed, and given a home in Reino del Sol. By nature of their short existence, the humans held more compassion and empathy, loved more fiercely, than any god could through an eternity.



Sol and Tierra loved the humans most of all, so they tasked the gods with caring for the fragile creatures—to provide for them, inspire them, and learn from them.

The Golds, Jades, and Obsidians fought viciously about what aspects of life they would rule over. Sol put an end to the fighting by making a seven-pointed star out of clay and filling it with all the powers the gods could possess.

All the gods took turns hitting it with a stick, but it was a Gold god, Luna, whose blow cracked it open. From the broken clay, stars rained down.

The Golds grabbed the brightest stars, containing the greatest responsibilities. The Jades searched among the smaller stars for the ones most precious to them. The Obsidians snatched their stars from the dust and hid them deep in the earth, where the broiling heat and the pressure of their greed turned their gifts black and brittle.

Agua took stewardship of the oceans and all the life within. Pan Dulce guarded the hearth and gave her name to the mortals' favorite treat, sweet and soft and colorful.

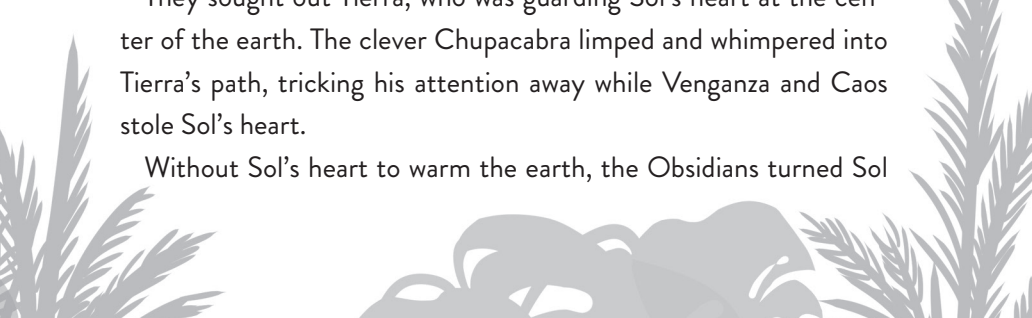
Fauna made all the animals, Guerrero made the great cats in their own image, Quetzal made the birds in hers, and they were all beloved.

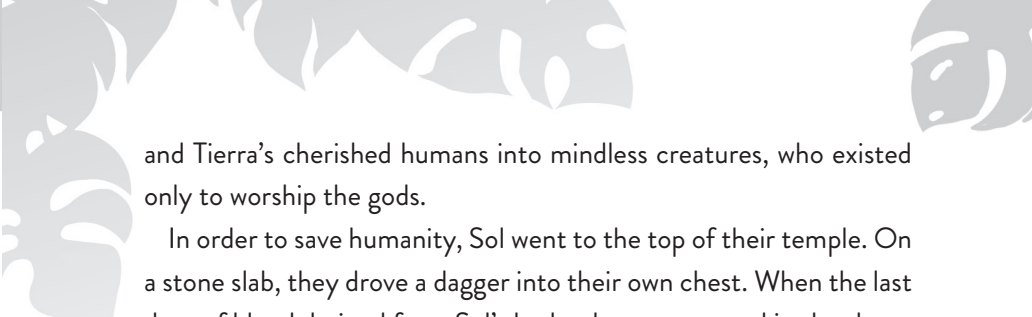
The Obsidians—Venganza, Chupacabra, and Caos—grew angry. They were jealous of how Sol loved the humans. Instead of celebrating human life with the other immortals, the Obsidians wanted humans to serve and worship them.

Caos longed for the world before this rigid structure. Chupacabra thirsted for blood. And Venganza crafted a plan to center himself above all others.

They sought out Tierra, who was guarding Sol's heart at the center of the earth. The clever Chupacabra limped and whimpered into Tierra's path, tricking his attention away while Venganza and Caos stole Sol's heart.

Without Sol's heart to warm the earth, the Obsidians turned Sol





and Tierra's cherished humans into mindless creatures, who existed only to worship the gods.

In order to save humanity, Sol went to the top of their temple. On a stone slab, they drove a dagger into their own chest. When the last drop of blood drained from Sol's body, they reappeared in the sky as a burning, brilliant star. As the sun, Sol was able to trap the traitor gods in the sky within celestial bindings.

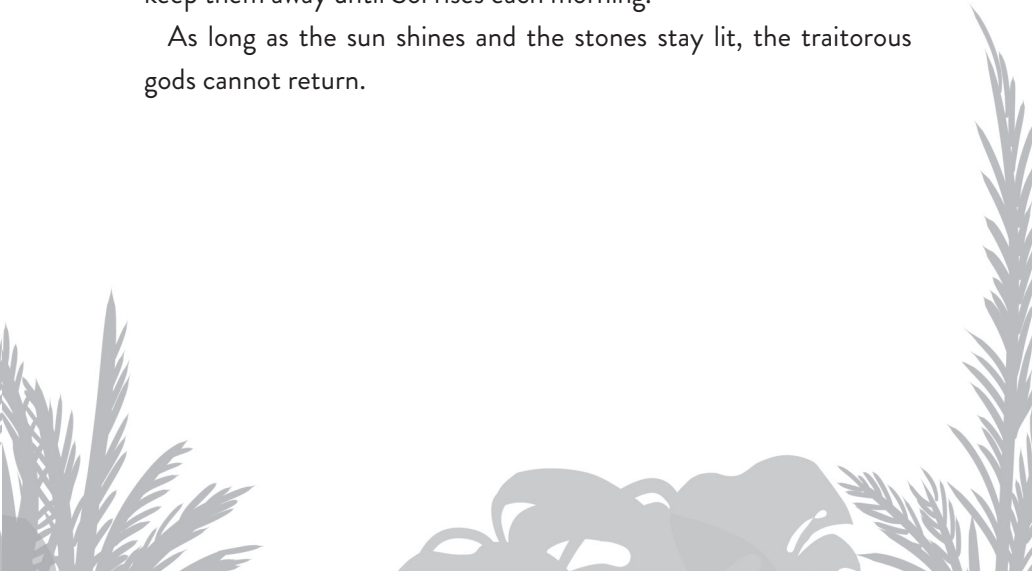
Back on earth, Sol's body turned to lava, burning on the sacrificial slab. While Sol could keep the Obsidians trapped during the day, there was nothing to keep them away during the night.

Tierra stepped forward and took his beloved's molten body into his arms. Even as it burned his skin from his flesh, Tierra formed Sol's skull into the Sol Stone, which shone brightly at the top of the golden temple. He then took the rest of Sol's body and turned it into smaller Sun Stones. Each of the remaining gods took one stone and placed it at the top of their temple to keep the Obsidians from returning to Reino del Sol.

Sol ascended as the sun, watching over the earth and locking the Obsidians within celestial prisons among the constellations.

Every night the betrayer gods try to escape, but the Sun Stones keep them away until Sol rises each morning.

As long as the sun shines and the stones stay lit, the traitorous gods cannot return.





## CHAPTER 1

Careful! We don't want to fuck up and get caught again," Teo whispered as muffled voices bickered inside his backpack. Finally released from his usual stint in detention, Teo was eager to put the plan he'd spent the last two days concocting into action.

Bracing himself, he jogged across the street to where the target of today's prank loomed. The Academy advertisement was unavoidable, plastered on a brick wall of the school. In large gold letters, it read:

**Come See the Academy's Best Compete in  
THE SUNBEARER TRIALS**

Tall figures stood in an arrow formation on the black background of the poster, power posing and smiling for the camera. Teo recognized the woman standing in the center as Brilla, who had been crowned as Sunbearer in the last trials. Flanking Brilla were other past Sunbearers, recognizable by the golden sunburst crowns they wore on their heads.

It made Teo want to barf. He figured since he was forced to see it every day, the least he could do was add his own artistic flair.

Unfortunately, the poster was at least as tall as Teo—who was a proud five foot ten, thank you very much—and well out of his reach. Which was where Peri and Pico came in.

Most people in the city of Quetzlan had a bird, but they were more than just pets, they were companions. It was a lifelong bond between

bird and human. But only Teo and his mom—Quetzal, the goddess of birds—could communicate with them directly.

Or, in Teo's case, occasionally team up for some light defacing of school property.

"Coast is clear, come on out you two," Teo said as he unzipped his backpack. Immediately, two birds poked their heads out. "You remember how to use these?" Teo asked, pulling out two of the smallest cans of spray paint he could find at the store.

*Of course!* Peri chirped.

*I love these!* Pico said, expertly popping the cap off with his beak.

The two young caiques were Teo's partners in crime and always down to clown. They'd agreed to help Teo before he even offered up the dried mango in his backpack.

*What's the plan?* Pico asked, tipping his head to stare up at Teo.

"I think they could use some humbling," Teo said, eyeing the Golds. "Maybe some funny faces?" he suggested. "I'm open to your artistic interpretations."

*Great idea!* they agreed before taking off.

"Try to hurry!" Teo called after them, checking the time on his phone.

*You can count on us!*

The best part of this prank was by the time anyone found his latest work of art, he'd be long gone to Sol Temple.

The Sunbearer Trials were the biggest out of all the holidays in Reino del Sol—a competition of the very best semidioses that kept the sun fueled and ensured the safety of their world for the next ten years. What had started as a sacred ritual thousands of years ago was now a televised and sponsored event that took over the cities. And Teo and his mom were required to attend.

As a simple Jade, Teo knew there was no chance he'd ever be chosen by the omniscient Sol to compete—something he was constantly



reminded of by the posters that had been hung on the sides of buildings and light posts for weeks. They were all over social media, too, making it impossible for Teo to escape.

Like their parents, the kids of Gold gods were stronger and more powerful than Jade demigods. Some could produce and control elements and even move mountains. They went to a fancy academy and had fancy uniforms and got fancy training from the age of seven to be the Heroes of Sol. Whenever there was an emergency or disaster, the Golds were summoned to help.

Meanwhile, Teo and the other Jades weren't deemed powerful enough to attend the Academy, so they got stuck going to public school with mortal kids. Quetzlan High was held together with duct tape and glue, and the only uniform Teo was ever given was awful lime green gym shorts and a gray T-shirt that didn't fit. While Golds traveled around Reino del Sol saving lives, the most interesting responsibility Teo had was judging the yearly Quetzlan bird show.

He was tired of every privilege Golds received getting rubbed in his face.

Pico and Peri used their talons to hook into the advertisement's canvas, giving them something to hold on to while they wielded the cans of spray paint and got to work.

*I'm getting good at this!* Pico said, repeatedly banging his head on the nozzle as he sprayed light blue paint haphazardly across the beaming faces of the Gold semidioses.

Peri's focus was solely on Brilla. When Teo asked what she was drawing, she proudly announced, *You said to give them funny faces. Nothing's as funny-looking as a cat!*

"That's *very* clever, Peri," Teo agreed.

The graffiti was messy and definitely looked like two birds had done it, but damn was it satisfying to see those smug expressions covered in paint.

“Time for the final touch!” Teo dug into his pocket while Pico and Peri glided down to perch on his shoulders. He unfolded a piece of paper he’d scribbled on during detention. “Can you write this across the top?”

*Oh, that’s a good one, Son of Quetzal!* Pico chuckled before plucking the paper from Teo’s hand and taking off.

*What does it say?* Teo heard Peri whisper as she flew after Pico with her can of spray paint.

*I don’t know, I can’t read!*

Peri held the paper while Pico tried his best to re-create the words. What Pico produced was absolute gibberish. Teo laughed behind his hand, not wanting to hurt the bird’s feelings.

*That’s supposed to be a loop, not a squiggle!* Peri said.

*It is a loop!*

Peri huffed. *Will you fly up and show him, Son of Quetzal?* she asked.

*Don’t ask him that!* Pico snapped, nipping at Peri. *You know he’s sensitive about his wings!*

Teo pretended he didn’t hear them, even as his wings flexed against their bindings beneath his shirt. “It doesn’t have to be perfect!” he said. They needed to be in and out before anyone saw.

The spray can hissed, coating Pico’s white chest in sticky blue paint. Teo winced. “Not so loud!”

*My feathers!* Pico squawked, flapping his wings in dismay.

“Teo?”

*We’ve been caught!*

*Abort, abort!*

The spray cans clattered to the ground as Pico and Peri flew off, bickering all the way. As the sound of footfalls approached, Teo scrambled to grab the cans and shove them into his backpack.

Dreading who he’d see, Teo turned toward the voice. Luckily, it was just Yolanda, one of the city’s mail carriers, accompanied by a red-lored

parrot on her shoulder who delivered letters to residents through their open windows.

*Hello, Son of Quetzal!* the bird sang with a respectful nod of his head.

“What are you still doing at school?” Yolanda asked.

“Just running to meet Huemac!” he said, securely yanking the zipper of his backpack shut before jogging to meet her.

Yolanda pursed her lips into a knowing look. “No you weren’t.”

Teo flashed her a toothy, not-at-all-innocent grin. “Well, now I am?”

Yolanda chuckled and waved him off. “Get going, and try to be on your best behavior at the trials. Huemac’s not as young as he used to be.”

Huemac and the people of Quetzlan had raised Teo. His mortal father had died when he was a baby, and his mom was busy with the responsibilities of being a goddess. So the city had become Teo’s family. Even though he was seventeen now, they still looked after him. Sometimes a bit too closely.

“I’m always on my best behavior!” Teo called over his shoulder as he darted to the other side of the street.

“Spoken like a true troublemaker!” Yolanda’s voice carried after him.

Every city in Reino del Sol was devoted to a god. The ones in the center were larger, nicer, and devoted to the Gold greater gods like Agua and Tierra. Meanwhile, smaller cities placed on the outskirts were dedicated to Jade lesser gods, like Quetzal.

Teo jogged through jungle trees interspersed among buildings draped with vines. From the outside, Quetzlan looked like a city that had lost its battle with nature and been swallowed by the dense foliage. But though it was a bit run-down, Quetzlan was a proud city lovingly maintained by its people.

The defining characteristic of their city was the abundance of tropical birds that dotted the trees like brightly colored fruit. They were everywhere you turned, living in happy companionship with their human

counterparts. Here, people and nature were intimately and inextricably linked.

Teo pushed through the crowd as he crossed a pedestrian causeway that went over one of the many canals where merchants hawked their goods from boats and canoes. As he passed the laundromat, Teo held his backpack over his head to protect himself from the gem-colored hummingbirds dive-bombing passersby who got too close to their streetlamp.

With the Sunbearer Trials officially starting that night, the streets were filled with even more excitement than usual. Signs reading “Watch the Sunbearer Trials here!” hung in the windows of bars and restaurants along pictures of Sol-themed desserts and drinks inspired by the diose. A large group of people loitered outside the electronics store, watching the TVs on display. Clips of Gold Heroes flashed across the screens.

Teo tried to sneak past without being spotted, but almost immediately, a hand caught his backpack.

“Teo!” A round-faced man grinned, dragging him into the group. “Who do you think will be chosen to compete?” Mr. Serrano asked, gesturing to one of the displays.

Some Golds posed and smiled in their crisp uniforms alongside clips of the semidioses saving people from various disasters. Their stats were listed in the corner of the screen.

“The best of the best, I guess,” Teo replied, trying to sound polite through a mouthful of resentment. Luckily, everyone present was too busy theorizing to notice.

“Guerrero’s kid for sure,” Miss Morales replied, scratching the neck of the lilac-crowned amazon resting on her shoulder.

“Agua’s boy is far more impressive!”

“Ocelo could squash him in one blow!”

“Sol doesn’t only care about strength!”

Teo rolled his eyes and used their arguing as a chance to slip away. He

just couldn't escape them. Even kids at school swapped trading cards of the Gold Heroes and placed bets on who would be chosen to compete in the Sunbearer Trials. They peppered Teo with questions to get the inside scoop, as if he cared enough about the Golds to keep tabs.

The light changed and Teo crossed the street, dodging a man pushing his duritos cart and a woman carrying a stack of crates. A bodega sat on the corner, nestled between a bird supply store and a spice shop. It was a short, clementine orange building with windows plastered with flyers and advertisements. Above the front door, the words *El Pájaro* were written in black letters next to a delicately painted mural of a quetzal.

Out front, a man struggled to unload boxes from a small truck.

"Whoa, let me help!" Teo said, sprinting forward to easily take all four boxes in one hand. The ability to carry more boxes than the average middle-aged man was another mostly useless power he had as a Jade.

The man leaned back in surprise. "Careful—!"

When Teo shifted the stack out of his hand, the man's eyes took him in. A wide smile split his face immediately.

"Pajarito!" he greeted warmly, spreading his arms out at his sides.

"Aye, Chavo." Teo grinned. "Need a hand?"

Chavo chuckled. "My back ain't what it used to be," he confessed, slapping Teo on the shoulder. His shirt was cobalt blue and he wore a matching string of tiny blue feathers around his neck. "How's it goin', man?" Before Teo could answer, Chavo's face scrunched up in confusion. "Aren't you supposed to be on your way to Sol Temple?"

Teo shifted another stack of boxes into his other hand. "Just swinging by to pick up my order first."

"Come, come, I've already got it ready!" Chavo said, ushering him toward the bodega. "Huemac's not gonna be happy with you," he said with an amused look.

Teo snorted. "What else is new?" Late was late, and his approximate amount of lateness didn't matter. He'd be getting a lecture either way.

A bell chimed as Chavo pushed through the door.

*No cats!* an angry voice chirped.

“Hey, Macho,” Teo said as he set the boxes down. Macho, the tiny parrotlet, swooped down and landed on the counter.

*Oh, it’s just you, Son of Quetzal,* he said, distractedly dipping his head to look at the door.

“What’s got him all worked up?” Teo asked as Chavo went behind the counter.

“Oh, don’t mind Macho,” Chavo said. “That stray cat’s been around again.”

*Always sneaking in and trying to steal!* Macho shouted, blue feathers ruffling as he hopped angrily across the tobacco case. *NO CATS!*

Chavo pulled out a large paper bag that was so packed, it’d had to be stapled shut. “Here you go!”

“You remembered the Chupa Chups, right?”

“Of course!” Chavo said as he rang up the order on his ancient register. “I would never forget those!”

Teo grinned. “Perfect.”

“You weren’t kidding when you said you were stocking up.” Chavo grinned.

“I’m going to need it,” Teo told him, fishing out his wallet from his backpack. “Dios Maize doesn’t allow ‘refined sugar and processed garbage’ in Sol Temple.”

“Man, what I wouldn’t give to go to Sol Temple,” Chavo said, sighing wistfully as he stroked his goatee. “I’ve never seen a Gold diose in person.”

Teo couldn’t blame Chavo for being fascinated by the Golds. They were rare to come by, especially in Jade cities. They were even bigger celebrities than their semidiose children—famous and untouchable. All of the gods ruled from Sol Temple and only semidioses and priests could make the journey to the island in the center of Reino del Sol.

“I’d like to meet Dios Tormentoso and thank him and Lluvia,” Chavo said, glancing back over his shoulder.

Behind Chavo were two altar boxes. The larger nicho was painted in shades of turquoise and jade, with illustrations of birds in devotion to Teo’s mother. Bird feathers of every color had been laid inside. The smaller, newer nicho was painted in swirls of light blue and gray with white raindrops and yellow bolts of lightning. Taped inside was a newspaper clipping. Lluvia, the eldest daughter of the weather god, Dios Tormentoso, stood in the center of the black-and-white picture, hands on her hips and beaming.

Three years ago, a hurricane had hit the western coast of Reino del Sol. Even though hurricanes were common in September, this one tore through the western Jade cities, requiring the demigods of Tormentoso to be summoned. Lluvia arrived in Quetzlan and managed to tame the angry storm enough to save civilians from the flooded streets—including Chavo and his wife.

“I’ll put in a good word if I run into them,” Teo lied as he handed over his debit card.

“Are you nervous?” Chavo asked, eyebrows pinching.

Teo frowned, confused. “About what?”

“You know, getting selected for the trials.”

“Oh, that? No way.” Teo snorted as he took his card and receipt and shoved them into the pocket of his jeans. “I’m just there as a formality.”

Teo had only been seven years old during the last trials, so he didn’t remember much. What he did know was that Jade semidioses were almost never chosen to compete. The last Jade had been chosen 130 years ago, and they hadn’t made it out alive.

“All I’m gonna do is explore the Gold cities, eat as much food as I can, and blow all my money on souvenirs.” He grinned, the impending sights and travels sending his heart racing.

But when he looked up, Chavo still looked worried.

“Hey—only the most powerful and honorable semidioses get chosen, remember?” Teo said, bumping his fist against Chavo’s shoulder in an attempt to reassure him. “I’m just a Jade.”

That seemed to ease the tension in Chavo’s expression. He was back to his apple-cheeked smile. “Hey, it don’t matter if you’re a Gold or not. You’re still our Hero, patrón.”

Teo snatched the bag and shoved it into his already full backpack. “All right, okay, I’m outta here before I freaking barf.”

Chavo laughed as Teo slapped his palm one last time. “You should stop by the panadería!” Chavo called after him as Teo bolted for the exit. “Veronica made some green concha especially for Diosa Quetzal!”

“Oh man, you know I can’t pass those up,” Teo said with a grin.

“See you in a couple weeks!” Chavo called.

“I’ll literally be counting down the days!” Teo said as he slipped out the door. The bell rang behind him.

*NO CATS!* Macho’s voice followed.



Teo could smell his destination before he even made it around the block.

The street was crowded and filled with restaurants, food carts, and taco trucks. The sizzling scent of al pastor hung heavy in the air, tickling his nose along with the sweet smell of elote and the spicy zing of chamoy. Teo was so distracted by his growling stomach that he didn’t notice anything was wrong until movement rippled through the crowd—turned heads and raised voices.

The hairs on the back of Teo’s neck stood on end, and a moment later, a flock of birds tore down the street. Their screeches filled the air, making everyone stop and stare upward as their colorful feathers streaked



across the sky. Teo tried to make out what they were saying, but they were all shouting at once, panicked cries tumbling over one another.

A crowd of bodies surged into him, nearly knocking Teo over. That was when the sharp smell of smoke hit his nose.

Teo tried to get on his tiptoes for a better look. Down the street, thick, black plumes billowed from where the panadería sat. All at once, the birds' voices became clear.

*FIRE! FIRE!*

Human shouts crashed with the birds' cries. The crowd surged forward again, a wave of bodies trying to get to safety. Teo had to latch on to a light pole to keep himself from being swept away.

"Where's María?" a girl wailed.

Teo searched and found a little girl crying in the middle of the street. He pushed his way through the crowd and crouched down in front of her.

"Who's María?" Teo asked as calmly as possible with adrenaline slamming through his body. "Your sister?"

"My doll!"

For Sol's sake.

"I need you to do something very scary right now, okay?" he asked, squeezing her small shoulders to get her to focus on him. "You need to get somewhere safe, find someone you know, and I'll look for María, okay? Can you do that?"

The sound of cracking stone split the air. The large windows of the warehouse where the panadería was located exploded into shards.

Teo tugged the girl to his chest and crouched over her. Tiny bits of glass rained down around them.

After that, she didn't need more encouragement and took off.

Teo stared up at the building engulfed in flames. His heart thudded in his chest, his breaths sharp and shaky. Most of the food carts in the alley ran off propane. If the fire from the panadería got out of control, it'd be

a street full of bombs ready to go off. How fast could the whole block burn down? Had anyone summoned help?

An anguished scream cut through the air.

Through the curtain of smoke, Teo spotted a pair of arms desperately waving for help.

The frantic thoughts in Teo's brain cleared in a snap. Only one thought remained: Someone needed help.

While everyone else fled from the growing flames, Teo ran toward them.



## CHAPTER 2

Teo sprinted to the front of the panadería. Thick, black smoke billowed into the air, blotting out the sun, while flames licked the now-empty window frames of the third floor.

Something swooped down from above, knocking into Teo's head.

*She's still inside! She's still inside!* The masked tityra zoomed back and forth, frantically beating his wings. Streaks of soot darkened his silvery feathers.

"Who's inside?!" Teo asked, but the bird was inconsolable.

*I left her! I can't believe I left her!*

Out of impatience, Teo caught the bird between his hands. "Who?"

*My human! I left my human!* Teo could feel the poor thing's racing heart. *Veronica!*

Teo's stomach dropped. "Where is she?"

*The second floor!*

"Show me!"

Teo released the bird and he darted to a broken window on the second floor. *Here, she's here! Please help her, please!* the tityra begged.

Every fiber of Teo's being told him to go in. There was a fire escape that led right to the window, but he didn't know what he was doing. Teo didn't know jack shit about fires. It wasn't like fire science was an elective at Quetzlan High.

But this was *his* city, *his* panadería, the green concha waiting for *his*

mom. If any of his people were in danger, he sure as hell wasn't going to sit by and watch. If he didn't do something, Veronica could die.

Without a plan or a single coherent thought in his head, Teo ran for the fire escape.

*"Shit, shit, shit,"* he hissed to himself as he tore up the rickety steps.

Teo tumbled through the window and was immediately choked by thick, acrid smoke. Teo coughed, his eyes stinging as he dropped to a crouch, trying to stay below the smoke line.

He tried to call out for Veronica, but more burning smoke filled his lungs.

Teo looked frantically around the room. It was by sheer luck that he spotted the crown of someone's head peeking out from behind a counter. He ran over and found Veronica slumped on her side, unconscious but still alive.

A loud crack cut through the air and the floor beneath Teo's feet trembled moments before part of the ceiling caved in. Smoldering roof beams crashed down, sending sparks swirling in the air and blocking off the window he'd just used. Ropes of fire chewed at the wood and crept across the floor. The paint on the walls bubbled as the temperature in the room skyrocketed.

Teo knew you weren't supposed to move someone who was unconscious, but now seemed like a pretty good time to make an exception.

Teo scooped Veronica easily into his arms, but when he tried to squeeze past fallen rafters to the window, his arm scraped against the burning embers. He jerked back as jade-colored blood bloomed on his singed skin. It wasn't like he could put the fire out or just slam through a wall to make a new exit. The best he could do was find somewhere for them to get away from the fire, but the options were limited.

Thinking quickly, Teo pulled Veronica into the open walk-in freezer, seconds before a beam crashed through where she'd been lying. Inside

the cooler, the plastic containers started to melt, but it would at least buy them some time.

“It’s Marino!” someone shouted from outside.

If Marino was here, that meant the Golds had arrived. Relief and dread twisted in Teo’s stomach. That meant Aurelio and Auristela were here, too.

Another window shattered as water poured inside. Scalding steam billowed. Teo tried to call out, but his throat was so raw he could only cough, and even that sound was drowned out by the rush of Marino’s water spray.

He had to block himself and Veronica from the steam. Teo grabbed the stainless steel door and tugged it closed to act like a shield. He pulled Veronica as deep into the walk-in freezer as he could, but the fire was moving fast. He could hear the hissing steam and jets of water, but flames were already licking under the door, reaching for them.

“*Help!*” Teo finally managed to shout.

Suddenly, the flames under the door disappeared, like they’d been sucked away. Voices spoke from inside the warehouse, muffled by the steel door.

“*We’re in here!*” Teo shouted, his voice strained.

“Oh, shit!” he heard Marino, Son of Agua, say. “I think there’s people in there!”

Three sets of footsteps came pounding toward them. The door was ripped off its hinges. Teo collapsed into a heap. Through the steamy haze, three figures stepped forward.

“Dios, are you all right?” a boy with strong bone structure and a thick build asked, quickly stepping into the freezer. Marino’s cool umber skin hadn’t even broken a sweat.

Teo could only nod as his chest heaved against his binder and he desperately tried to gulp down fresh air.

A girl pushed past Marino. Her ember-colored eyes flicked to Veronica before landing on Teo, narrowing sharply. “Is she alive?” Auristela, Daughter of Lumbre, demanded, like he’d been purposely keeping the unconscious baker captive or something.

Teo nodded again.

She moved in, lifted Veronica into a fireman’s carry, and promptly made for the exit.

Veronica would be okay. The relief crashing through Teo made him shake. His eyes burned so badly from the smoke, he could barely see through his tears and singed lashes.

“You’re okay,” Marino said, kneeling down next to Teo. He cupped his hands and conjured two gentle spouts in his palms, like a makeshift eyewash. “That was either a very smart move or a very stupid move, Bird Boy.”

“I like to toe the line,” Teo replied, his voice barely more than a wheeze, before he bent over to rinse his eyes. The cool water both stung and soothed.

“Is he all right?” a third voice asked. One that made Teo’s chest clench painfully.

“He will be,” said Marino, thumping Teo on the back a little too hard.

He sat up and wiped the water from his face. A pair of strong hands pulled him to his feet. Teo blinked the droplets from his eyes to find a pair of copper-brown ones staring back at him. Aurelio, Son of Lumbre, frowned at him.

While Auristela’s features were softer, and Aurelio’s nose was broader, the two were unmistakably twins. They wore the same hairstyle—an undercut with their hair knotted at the back of their heads—and even their form-fitting crop top uniforms were similar, except for the gold bands Aurelio wore around his forearms and the flint-tipped gloves that covered his thumb and pointer finger.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Teo snapped, but he was wobbly at best, and his arms trembled in Aurelio’s warm iron grip. He tried to yank himself free, but Aurelio held firm.

Aurelio was the last person he wanted to see right now, especially when he was in such a sorry state. Teo hadn’t spoken to Aurelio in years and he wasn’t interested in starting now.

“You’re shaking,” Aurelio replied, his voice as cool and calculating as ever. “You might be in shock.”

Teo attempted a sarcastic laugh. “You’re being dramatic.”

“Can you walk?”

“Of course I can.” Teo took a step, but his knees immediately buckled.

Aurelio caught him easily. He slung Teo’s arm over his shoulder and hooked his arm around Teo’s waist. The sudden proximity sent a shock through Teo’s body; his breath hitched in his throat, only making him more annoyed.

“I don’t need your help,” Teo snapped, even as Aurelio led him out of the freezer.

“Yes, you do,” Aurelio said.

Teo would’ve preferred sarcasm, annoyance, or even anger instead of his infuriatingly placid response. It was bad enough that the Golds had to show up, but worse was knowing Aurelio was right: He needed their help.

As they walked around the smoldering debris, Teo’s foot landed on something soft. Under his shoe was a rag doll with ribboned hair, a hand-woven blouse, and a colorful skirt.

“Wait—” Teo planted his feet, pulling Aurelio to a stop.

His heavy brow furrowed. “What are you doing?”

Teo ignored him and bent down to scoop up the doll. It was a bit soggy and would need a good wash but was overall still intact.

Aurelio frowned at him disapprovingly.

Heat flushed Teo’s cheeks. “I told a little girl I’d get it for her.”

Aurelio shook his head, like he didn't understand. "It's a doll. It doesn't matter."

Maybe he was right, but Teo would never give him the satisfaction.

"To *you* it doesn't, but to her it does," he shot back.

"It's just a toy—"

Teo let out a sharp laugh. "I wouldn't expect *you* to understand."

Teo was ready to argue—wanted to, in fact—but Aurelio only stared at him for a moment before shaking his head and looking away. He practically carried Teo down the fire escape and back to the street, where fire trucks and camera crews had gathered.

Great. Now there was photographic evidence that he'd needed to be rescued by *Aurelio*. Teo wished he had been swallowed up by the flames.

Veronica was wheeled into an ambulance, her tityra companion pacing anxiously across her legs. Aurelio didn't release Teo until the paramedics hefted him away. Aurelio took his simmering body heat with him, leaving Teo shivering as the paramedics tended to him. Luckily, semidioses healed quickly thanks to their godly blood.

A group of concerned citizens crowded around Teo.

"Thank goodness you're all right, Teo," someone said.

"Your mother will be so worried!"

"That was dangerous, you should've waited for the Heroes!"

Teo didn't have the energy to respond. Instead, he watched discreetly as Aurelio rejoined Auristela and Marino. The other two smiled for the cameras and frenzied reporters who swarmed like bees, but Aurelio hung back, gingerly massaging his thumb into his palm.

An odd mix of anger, spite, and something more electric that he couldn't place buzzed through Teo's whole body. When Aurelio glanced in his direction, Teo quickly turned away, jaw clenching as the sensation danced across his skin.



Teo searched the crowd lining the street and spotted the little girl, her face all but buried in her mother's skirts as she tried to reassure her daughter. Teo walked over and dropped to a knee before her.

"Is this María?" Teo asked gently with a tired grin.

The girl looked up and tentatively took the doll from him. In a blink, a wide smile brightened her tearstained face.

"You saved her!" The girl crashed into Teo, throwing her arms around his neck.

A surprised laugh bucked in Teo's chest.

"Our hero!" the girl's mother said with a relieved sigh.

The bitter twist of his mouth was hidden by the girl's curls. Hero. Yeah, right.

After convincing the paramedics and everyone else that he was fine, Teo made to head home. At this point, he was doomed to a lecture to rival all lectures from Huemac.

Every temple in Reino del Sol was U-shaped with a large set of exterior steps that led to an observatory where the main altar stood. They looked different, depending on the god and the city, but each housed a Sun Stone—the piece of Sol that provided light and protection from the dangers locked away among the stars. At night, the beams from the Sun Stones could be seen from several miles away.

At the moment, it was a glaring reminder that the Sunbearer Trials began in a handful of hours, and Teo was *very* late.

The Quetzal Temple was in the middle of the city and could be seen from nearly anywhere. It was painted a bright, warm yellow, with many archways so birds could come and go as they pleased. He normally loved looking at the larger-than-life mosaics of tropical birds, painstakingly crafted with colorful tiles, but today they seemed to loom over him as he hurried toward the courtyard.

The fluttering of wings echoed and birdsong rang out, welcoming

Teo home as they flew between the canopy of trees overhead. In a matter of moments, he was swarmed. Gem-colored hummingbirds zipped past his ears while a pair of toucans bounced happily at his feet, singing their greetings.

“It’s good to see you, too.” Teo chuckled, trying not to wince and accidentally hurt the feelings of the peachy-pink parrot squawking joyfully from his shoulder. “Ouch!” he hissed, ducking as a rose-bellied bunting expressed his love by tugging out a small chunk of Teo’s dark hair.

“Shoo, shoo, leave him be!” Claudia’s voice rang out.

In a flash of feathers, his friends dispersed. “They act like I was gone for days. Thanks for saving me,” he said with an amused grin to the woman in the turquoise robes of Quetzlan priests.

“Don’t thank me,” Claudia huffed with a stern look, sharpened by a tight hair bun nestled on her head. “You look a mess, and Huemac has been looking for you! You’re *very* late—don’t keep your mother waiting!” Claudia gave his shoulder a smack.

“I’m going, I’m going!” Teo grinned, not even attempting a straight face as he danced out of her reach. He sprinted across the wet floor, his dirty sneakers leaving black footprints while a priest mopped the old stone.

“Ugh, Teo!” the priest lamented.

“Sorry!” he called with a guilty dip of his head, narrowly avoiding another priest carrying a large platter filled with fruit, seeds, and bugs. A quetzal waited patiently on the priest’s shoulder while a toucan made himself at home on a pile of passion fruit and hummingbirds fought noisily overhead.

Teo passed tiny waterfalls that spilled over volcanic rocks into crystal-clear pools filled with water lilies. Birds splashed around, droplets sparkling in the sunlight on their multicolored feathers.

He rounded a corner and found Huemac waiting for him with folded arms. He stood on the large stone steps that led to the observatory,

surrounded by a group of priests. His quetzal companion, Cielo, sat perched on his shoulder.

“Huemac!” Teo greeted, his arms held wide at his sides as he put on an even wider smile. “You haven’t welcomed me home from school since I was a little kid! Aren’t there more important things you should be doing?” he asked with as much innocence as he could muster.

“Yes, there are,” Huemac agreed with a withering look, his thin lips pressed into a line.

Huemac was tall and angular with sun-wrinkled skin and a perpetually exasperated expression that seemed to deepen whenever Teo entered the room. He wore emerald green robes that marked him as the head priest of Quetzlan. A jade rod was pierced through his septum, and one of Cielo’s tail feathers hung down to his shoulder from a jade plug in his left ear.

“Been catching up with the stars?” Teo guessed. He always found the head priest bent over his telescope.

“Planets,” Huemac corrected, adjusting the chunk of jade engraved with the Quetzal glyph that hung around his neck.

“And what do the planets have to say today?”

“That you’re late.”

“You need a telescope to tell you that? Most people use a watch.”

“And that you nearly got yourself killed,” he added, looking Teo up and down.

“The planets knew about the fire?” Teo asked, impressed.

“You’re also covered in soot,” Huemac added.

Teo clicked his tongue and pointed finger guns at the annoyed priest.

“You got me there!”

“This isn’t a joke, Teo,” Huemac said, his voice suddenly sharp.

Teo’s grin faded. “I know it’s not.”

A deep crease settled between the older man’s eyebrows. “You could’ve gotten yourself hurt, or worse, put others’ lives in danger.”

Teo scoffed. “What was I supposed to do, stand by and watch while—?”

Huemac cut him off. “You are *not* a Hero, Teo.”

Teo’s mouth snapped shut.

It was true, he wasn’t a Hero. But it wasn’t like anyone had given him a chance to be. He was destined for a dull life of serving his mother like a glorified priest. The very thought was enough to send his pulse thudding, trapped under his skin. He didn’t want to be cooped up in Quetzlan for the rest of his life—never getting the chance to see the rest of the world or find something he was actually good at.

Huemac closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose before taking a deep, long-suffering breath. “It is the responsibility of the Heroes to protect the people of Reino del Sol,” he explained. “And it is *my* responsibility to protect *you*, troublemaker.”

A responsibility that Huemac undoubtedly loathed.

“Go up and greet your mother, and don’t make her wait any longer than she’s already had to,” Huemac said in a tired voice. “We’ll meet you there with your regalia.” With that, he went back into the temple, leaving Teo feeling like a scolded child.

He took a deep breath before hitching his backpack higher on his shoulder and starting the long ascent to the observatory. Teo had tried to talk Huemac into installing an escalator but the head priest had just sniffed indignantly and cited tradition, the sanctity of the ancient temple, and blah blah blah.

When he finally reached the top and entered the gold-framed glass observatory, Teo could see all of Quetzlan far below. A gray smudge lingered in the air where the fire had broken out. The observatory housed Huemac’s beloved quetzals, the pride and joy of Quetzlan. The electric green-and-blue birds perched on ancient astronomy tools like tarnished armillary spheres and jade sundials. They cleaned their ruby

chest feathers from the tops of telescopes and ate from golden bowls with their short yellow beaks.

The main altar was set in the middle of the observatory. It was surrounded by candles of different shapes and sizes in tall gold holders. His mother's glyph stood in the very center. The ten-foot square slab of pristine jade was carved to resemble a quetzal midflight—its wings spread and long tail feathers curled in while its small pointed beak tipped skyward.

Hovering above the glyph was the Sun Stone, slowly spinning in midair. It was too bright to look at it directly, but before Teo burned his retinas, he could catch a glimpse of the smooth surface that seemed to undulate with light, giving off tiny flares. It beamed a radiant blaze of light up into the sky, disappearing somewhere beyond the clouds.

He passed a young boy with a blessing from Teo's mother—a scarlet macaw feather—gripped tightly in his hand. Jade gods were the only ones who gave out their blessings in person. The Gold gods were too busy and passed off dealing with mortals to their priests.

Teo awkwardly lingered off to the side, not wanting to interrupt as his mom gave an older woman a long shimmering green feather. Quetzal cupped the woman's cheek with her hand and spoke softly as the woman smiled up at her with watery eyes.

As a priestess escorted the woman out, Quetzal turned. Upon seeing her son, a bright smile broke across her luminous face. "There you are!" she said, relief in her singsong voice.

"Hey, Mom," he said, guilt settling on him like a weight.

Quetzal was a vision of beauty, as vibrant as the birds surrounding her. Instead of hair, long feathers framed her oval face. Shades of brilliant blue and green at the crown of her head faded to rich brown as the feathers trailed down her back. A choker made of gold-plated feathers spread from the base of her jaw to fan out across her clavicle. Earrings

made of tiny magenta, purple, and ruby red hummingbird feathers hung from her ears.

“You’re late!” she added, sweeping her son into an embrace and giving him a tight squeeze, towering over him. The gods all stood well over seven feet tall and his mother was no exception.

“Sorry,” Teo said, returning the hug, her feathers tickling his nose. “I got held up.”

The bodice of Quetzal’s dress was adorned with scarlet macaw feathers and the rest was made of bright green, cyan, and sapphire blue plumage. The plunging back put her huge wings on full display. While Teo’s were unwieldy and knocked into everything if they weren’t bound, his mother’s folded prettily against her back and never got in the way.

“They told me there was a fire,” the diosa said, stepping back to look him over. “Your arm!” she gasped, delicate fingers running over a burn on his elbow.

Teo tried to tug his sleeve down over it. “It’s not a big deal—it’s already starting to heal.”

Quetzal sighed but smiled. “Well, thank Sol for that.” Her skin was warm brown just like Teo’s, and he’d also inherited her large, dark eyes. “Huemac and I were *very* worried.”

Teo seriously doubted the former was true. “Sorry.”

Quetzal affectionately pushed Teo’s wild hair out of his face. “I’m just glad you’re safe,” she said, smiling. “Thank goodness Marino, Auristela, and your friend Aurelio got there in time.”

“He’s *not* my friend,” Teo said, harsher than he’d meant but unable to reel in his anger at the mere mention of Aurelio.

His mom gave him a disappointed look, but, luckily, Huemac and the other priests showed up at just the right time.

“Undress. Let’s get you changed,” Huemac said, and a flurry of

movement engulfed them. Quetzal stepped out of the way as a standing mirror was brought in along with a clothing rack.

“Right down to business, huh?” Teo muttered. A younger priest took the opportunity to take Teo’s backpack from his shoulders. “Careful, I’ve got important stuff in there!” Teo said.

Huemac raised an eyebrow.

Teo cleared his throat. “Y’know, homework. And stuff. I need it while we’re traveling— Can I at least take a shower?” he asked before Huemac could question him further.

In return, he was presented with a large silver bowl filled with water and a face cloth.

Teo scowled. “This is it?”

“If you had been on time, you could’ve taken a shower,” Huemac told him as he calmly clasped his hands and waited by Quetzal’s side.

Teo dipped the cloth into the basin and immediately hissed between his teeth. “The water is *freezing!*”

“If you had been on time—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. I can do this part on my own, thank you!” he added, flapping his hand as a priest tried to assist him. “Any chance I could get some privacy?” he asked the audience as he undid his belt.

On cue, a priestess brought forward a screen for him to change behind. He made quick work of scrubbing the soot from his cheeks and arms.

Usually, he could attend the various holidays and celebrations wearing a nice shirt with slacks. But, since the Sunbearer Trials was their most important ceremony and only happened once every decade, things were a bit more involved.

“I don’t see why I have to dress up,” Teo grumbled as he pulled on bright blue-green charro pants with gold feathers embroidered down the outer seams.

“Because you are a semidiós and there to represent Diosa Quetzal and all of Quetzlan,” came Huemac’s gruff voice.

Teo grunted.

“You’ll be able to hang out with Niya for a whole week and a half!” his mom called.

Aside from visiting cities, that *was* the only perk. But Niya was a Gold, and a powerful one at that, so there was a good chance she’d be chosen to compete in the trials, in which case he wouldn’t be able to spend any time with her at all. Being chosen to compete in the trials was a great honor, of course, but it was also incredibly dangerous.

And always deadly.

Teo did his best to ignore the twisting in his stomach at the thought of his best friend competing. He struggled out of his shirt and attempted to readjust his binder before stepping out from behind the screen.

While Quetzal did her best to keep smiling, Teo didn’t miss the softening of her expression or the way her eyes darted to his chest for a fraction of a second.

Teo tensed. Two years ago, when he was fifteen, Teo realized he was a boy. He’d started hormone replacement therapy and gotten top surgery, which helped him feel more at home in his own body. He even liked his top surgery scars—they looked badass. The binders he wore were for the set of wings he’d been born with. When he was little, he hadn’t thought much about them, but that changed when he’d started school. His classmates were always staring, and they laughed whenever he accidentally knocked into something. But the worst part was the *touching*.

The kids in his class could never keep their hands to themselves. Even his teachers were mesmerized, going as far as to touch his feathers and comment on how they felt. He hated the attention and the way it made him feel like the lone animal in a petting zoo.

As if that weren’t bad enough, his wings were also the source of Teo’s



first experiences with dysphoria. They weren't the brilliant blue and green of male quetzals, but grayish-brown with hints of green like the females' plumage. At nearly the same time Teo realized he was a boy, his wings started molting.

With help from some of the priests, Teo made binders for his wings so he could keep them hidden, tucked against his back with crisscrossed bands of black spandex. The more he tried to restrain them, the more they seemed to fight back. He only let them free when he slept or took a shower, doing his best not to look at the dull feathers and huge bald patches.

"Are you sure you don't want to take that off?" Quetzal asked gently.

"Mom," Teo said, his voice tight. He did not want to have this discussion again, especially in front of Huemac, who at least had the manners to busy himself with applying a salve to the burn on Teo's arm.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Quetzal asked, softly smoothing her fingers down a section of exposed feathers between their bindings.

"No," Teo lied, shifting out of her reach.

The truth was, it did hurt. It was like having a second set of arms handcuffed behind his back, but that was nothing compared to the cloying dysphoria that choked him whenever he saw his wings.

Huemac handed over a red, sleeveless tunic that a priest helped Teo pull down over his binder. Clearly having anticipated Teo's refusal to have his wings out, Huemac draped a cape made of the same blue-and-green feathers as his mother's dress over his shoulders.

The most substantial piece was the pectoral. The centerpiece of the collared necklace was Quetzal's glyph painted in gold onto a huge chunk of jade adorned with smaller bits of jade, turquoise, and gold beads. The weight of it made Teo sway as Huemac secured it in place.

Lastly, Huemac pulled out a circlet made of gleaming quetzal tail feathers.

“Oh, Huemac, it’s beautiful!” Quetzal beamed, hands collapsed to her chest.

Huemac was usually a very reserved man who prided himself on being humble, but Teo didn’t miss the way the corner of his lips twitched or the faint hint of red that tinged his cheeks at the compliment. “Thank you, Diosa,” he said, positioning the circlet on Teo’s head.

But as soon as Huemac stepped back, it slipped down Teo’s forehead.

“A little big, don’t you think?” Teo asked, trying to push it back out of his eyes.

Huemac’s pleased expression wiped clear.

“If you’d shown up on time, we could’ve altered it,” he replied.

“You look so *handsome*, Teo!” Quetzal sang as she fluttered around her son, making tiny adjustments.

Teo inspected himself in the mirror and tried to flatten down his curly dark brown hair. He didn’t look *bad*; it was just . . . so *much*. But he was a semidiós, and ceremonial finery came with the territory. He didn’t want to hurt his mom’s feelings and, as much as he enjoyed teasing Huemac, he knew how much this meant to both of them.

So Teo smiled and thumped the priest on the back of his shoulder. “It looks great.”

Huemac gave a slight bow of his head, which was the closest thing to a smile Teo ever got from him, so he took it as a win.

“It’s getting late,” Quetzal said, still fussing with the feathers of Teo’s cape. “I should get back to Sol Temple.”

“We’ll leave now and meet you there, Diosa,” Huemac reassured her.

Quetzal smiled. “Thank you, Huemac.” She caught Teo’s chin and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Ugh, Mom,” Teo groaned, wiping it off with the back of his hand.

“I will see you all soon!” she said. In a flash of light, she vanished.

“Wait—what about my stuff?” Teo asked as the priests carted out the rack and mirror.

“We already packed for you. The boat is ready,” Huemac replied curtly, following the other priests toward the stairs.

“Don’t forget my backpack!” Teo said.

Huemac picked up the beat-up bag from the floor, weighing it in his hand. “Homework?” he asked, side-eyeing Teo.

Teo nodded vigorously. The circlet slid down to his brow. “Lots of homework,” he agreed, pushing the feathers out of his eyes.

Huemac sighed deeply. “The trials are the single most important event you will ever attend. Don’t cause me trouble, boy.”

Teo blinked his large, dark eyes at Huemac. “Me?” His voice broke around the word. “I would never!”

With a disgruntled grumble, Huemac turned away.

“Is this because of what happened during Día de Muertos? Because that was an accident! I apologized to Dios Maize!” Teo called after him. When he didn’t stop, Teo chased Huemac down the steps. “Hair grows back!”