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## The Devil at the Gay Bar: Revitalizing and Queering Northern New Mexican Folktales

Ishmael Mondragón

In northern New Mexico, the youth of the past partook in the sharing of *cuentos*, oral narratives told by elders of the community to preserve certain beliefs and traditions special to Chicana/o/xs. However, with WWII and the spread of American culture, these folktales began to lose their value with the rise of technological advances. In the 21st century, distractions in the form of portable technology slowly individualized members of the community and replaced the voice of the *abuelos* with Apple and Android. Despite this, one character has helped *cuentos* survive, La Llorona, especially with Warner Bros. Pictures and New Line Cinema modernizing her tale in *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019). Even though the weeping woman takes center stage, my work shifts the spotlight from this infamous icon as a means of bringing to the forefront another legendary character of cultural significance, the Devil. While the tale of La Llorona represents the *mestizaje* of Chicana/o/xs, the Devil signifies the beliefs marked by the Spanish conquest that still survive with Catholicism. As a folklorist and creative writer, my work (re)introduces an adult audience to the *cuento* of "Devil at the Dance Hall" as a way of revitalizing this form of storytelling by removing the vague warning of this tale as an example of how to convey a moralistic message in the present day. My short story, "Good Friday," utilizes the Devil as a character who continues to enforce the codes of morality within a culture to understand what has survived and changed by transforming the voice of the elders into a modern queer narrator. Although *cuentos* are used to educate younger generations, I target adult readers, within and beyond the academic community, to illustrate how to communicate relevant beliefs in modern times to ultimately retell these stories in contemporary contexts while illustrating a facet of Nuevomexicana/o/x culture.

As a writer, I transform oral narratives into contemporary adult short stories to continue the transmission of Northern New Mexico folktales to give voice to a Chicana/o/x subculture found thriving in the American Southwest. The reason my writings focus on (re)educating adults on this form of storytelling is because the modern-day Nuevomexicana/o/x, Chicana/o/x, and everyday reader no longer have the time to come together to listen to *cuentos*. In 1998, it was found that “the younger generations, beginning to be influenced by modern ideas and notions, no longer seemed to be interested in this particular heritage... [which] has become increasingly evident since the great changes that have come about throughout the United States since World War II” (Espinosa and Hayes ix). Although some traditions are fading into the static of the digital era, folktales can be modernized to catch a glimpse of what that culture was like during a particular moment in time. According to Aurelio Espinoza, “the folktale... [is] a traditional, popular narrative that deals with human beings – ordinary human beings – but in which the heroes and heroines often receive supernatural help in order to realize the ideals of justice of the common people” (174). I utilize the *cuento* as a foundation for storytelling because it is the words and beliefs of *los viejos de antes*. Brunvand states, “folklore represents what people preserve in their culture through the generations by custom and word of mouth when few other means exist to preserve it” (23). Lucky for this generation, digitization has presented itself to modern readers to help create a digital imprint of what it means to be Nuevomexicana/o/x at the turn of the century. My work is designed for adults to show how a folktale can be modernized for a contemporary understanding of values associated with traditions and beliefs still practiced to this day.

Although I transform the voice of *los viejos de antes*, I create a contemporary adult Nuevomexican@ narrator who continues to serve the purpose of the use of folktales as an elder who “bear(s) principal responsibility for ensuring the vitality of... culture and the survival of its bearers” (Briggs 59). Since the adults of today will be the *viejitos de mañana*, I use folktales as the skeletal structure for my writings to capture the voice of the elders in the new age to show how to retell these stories to the future while continuing to warn people of what could happen when there is no balance between one world and the other. Sometimes people resist traditions because they no longer understand why they do things, but “even as tradition gestures to the past, it also carries us forward to our communal future” (Blank and Howard 18). My revitalized folktales show how the warnings of the past can be transformed into modern understandings for

an adult audience. According to Dundes, “Folklore provides socially sanctioned forms of behavior in which a person may do what can’t be done in ‘real life’” (59). Since folktales create this storyworld, my work uses this idea of folklore to create the duality found in a world where a person has to navigate through several spaces to exist. However, instead of keeping the vagueness of the outcomes of certain communal violations, my short stories provide a graphic adult interpretation which depicts the results of engaging with the taboo. While preserving the voice and warnings of *los viejos de antes*, I construct a storyworld that shows the presence of the Nuevomexicana/o/x in the twenty-first century, and I give voice to the queer Nuevomexicana/o/x to show their presence within a community.

To be a Nuevomexicana/o/x in the twenty-first century means that mestiza consciousness is utilized to navigate through the dominant space. The people of this region have changed because our people have dwelled in an area long before the Mayflower wrecked into Plymouth Rock. They created a culture in a place where the border fluctuated around them until the United States drew lines in 1912. The folklore from northern New Mexico reflects this multifaceted identity and my work shows how these people are *mestiza*, “a product of transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (Anzaldúa 100). In the twenty-first century, being Nuevomexicana/o/x reflects mestiza consciousness as Spanish, Mexican, Native American, and American identity converge to identity the culture of these people. Their history shows the awareness these people have of their multiple layers of identity because “Nuevomexicanos [possess] a readily understood racial identity, a documented historical lineage, and a claim to the land that dated to the very ‘conquest’ of New Mexico” (Nieto-Phillips 81). Although the origins of some of these people arose from the Republic of Mexico, the citizens of the region identified with Spain. Geography isolated the culture which helped increase the population and “interestingly enough, northern New Mexico, where Spanish settlers and Pueblo Indians had their earliest and most enduring contacts has maintained what might most accurately be called Spanish-American culture, rather than Mexican-American” (West 28). However, to survive these constant changes, the Nuevomexicana/o/x realized, “It is not enough to stand on the opposite bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions... [O]n our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank... so that we are on both shores at once... (Anzaldúa 100 – 101). In order to survive an ever-changing cultural world, Nuevomexicana/o/x embrace

their *mestiza consciousness* as a means of maneuvering through the world by maintaining an attachment to their community while blending with the dominant culture for future preservation. As *mestizas*, “we are chameleons. As we move from one world to the other we exchange colors, ideas, symbols and words in order to fit, to relate and to survive” (Burciaga 101). Instead of assimilating to an unattainable standard created in the image of the Anglo heterosexual-male, a cultural group survives by understanding who and what makes people different rather than what sets them apart. My work shows how the Nuevomexicana/o/x uses *mestiza consciousness* to see the world with communal eyes within a globalizing world for survival. We live in a time where voices are trying to be silenced, but my work gives voice to the Nuevomexicana/o/x in 2019 to show their presence and future transformations.

Besides emphasizing on transforming folktales into short stories for preservation and to portray the contemporary Nuevomexicana/o/x, my work brings the legendary characters of the ghost, *bruja*, and Doña Sebastiana to the forefront. However, since Lent is still practiced in Chicana/o/x communities, I introduce this audience to “Good Friday,” a revitalized version of “Devil at the Dance Hall” from *Hispanic Legends of New Mexico* (1980) of the R.D. Jameson Collection edited by Stanley Robe. Legends are types of *cuentos* which come from the mixture of the various cultures that make up a cultures identity. According to Herrera-Sobek, “Legends are defined as folk narratives whose actions take place in a historical time in a specific space on earth and with protagonists that may be human or supernatural” (28-29). The most infamous supernatural legend whose cries overshadow other legendary characters in Chican@ culture is *La Llorona*. This classic *cuento* has been told time and time again, with the most recent addition to the Nuevomexicana/o/x literary canon, *Bruja: The Legend of La Llorona* (2011) by Lucinda Ciddio Leyba and now for a general audience, *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019), a film adaptation by Warner Bros. Pictures and New Line Cinema. The tale tells the story of a young woman who is abandoned by the man she loves and left alone to raise their children. Either grief or revenge takes over the woman which leads her to drown her children in a body of water. In her afterlife, she is bound to roam the shores searching for her children. The tale itself is used to warn unruly children to obey their parents and stay away from forceful bodies of water. Besides the main storyline of the *cuento*, this legend embodies the meeting of the Old and New World, she represents the *mestizaje* of a people. According to Pérez:

The legend of La Llorona is as old as is it dynamic. From a pre-conquest portent, which consisted of a woman howling in the night month before Cortés' arrival, to the Houston mother from Mexico accused of murdering her children, who stated in an interview, 'Yo soy La Llorona,' the Weeping Woman has permeated the consciousness of her folk community. To those who participate in the transmission of the lore, either through storytelling or as interlocutors, La Llorona is alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, a person, legend, ghost, goddess, metaphor, story, and/or symbol. (2)

The *cuento* of La Llorona provides the inspiration for the revitalization of other classical supernatural legends by creating characters who embody the supernatural. The purpose of portraying these characters in modern times is to demonstrate what has transcended time in a changing nation-space. Since Lent is still celebrated, I construct the storyworld of what happens when a member violates a communal practice during this religious festival, even in a technological age.

In northern New Mexican culture, the Devil is a character that symbolizes something more than the concept of evil. In Catholic ideals, the Devil is Satan, however, the character of the Devil found in Nuevomexican@ culture is not Satan but rather a figure that embodies Spanish-American religious ideals. When he appears in northern New Mexican text, The Devil represents the survival of the Catholic faith, a mark of the Spanish conquest in modern times. His presence "enforces the codes of morality as it has long existed in northern New Mexico. He is not entirely evil and is to be feared mainly by violators of religious and moral taboos" (Robe 145). When he appears in the folktale, he is a depiction of "[a] moralistic attitude toward dancing, especially public ballroom dancing, is more prevalent in Spain and Spanish America than realized by North Americans who think all Puritans come from New England" (Paredes 201). For this northern New Mexican folktale, the Devil is associated with the night life and only appears when a character violates a norm of the community. Robe states:

He appears in a clear pattern which supports the regional system of traditional values, by insisting on the observance of religious feast days, by pressing the fulfillment of religious obligations, and

enforcing respect for one's parents. These values are characteristics of Hispanic Catholicism in New Mexico, a survival of the militant faith of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The devil is a personification of evil, yet he supports this religious and moral system. (145)

In all variations of this tale, the Devil is the result of the violation of religious practices. Using this supernatural character to instill fear in the younger generation of the community continues to show the persistence of Hispanic Catholic beliefs within the community.

For the short story "Good Friday," I took the basic plot elements of "Devil at the Dance Hall" and twisted the tale for an adaptation geared toward a broad adult audience. The original story starts with "a disobedient girl [who] goes to the dance without her parents' permission . . . while at the dance a handsome beautifully dressed man asks her to dance. They dance all night, until she suddenly notices with a shock that he isn't wearing shoes, and in fact doesn't even have feet" (Castro 17). It is at this point "some physical feature betrays him to those who are present, a long tail, feet like those of a chicken, or horns protruding from his forehead. Once his presence is known, he vanishes amid a cloud of sulphurous smoke" (Robe 145). Depending on the motive of the tale, the young girl often disappears with the handsome stranger or she is able to ward him off by making the sign of the cross. Originally, this tale was geared toward a female audience "to instill fear in young women . . . not [to] disregard parental authority. In some variants a young girl specifically transgresses religious beliefs by insisting on going to a dance on Good Friday. . . The appearance of the devil on this day is an especially ominous sign" (Castro 18). The reason this tale is revitalized is because the majority of modern-day Nuevomexicana/o/x are catholic and still practice Lent. Since this religious festival is celebrated, the warnings of the Devil should be clear during that time, but how does one meet this character in the new millennia? What does it mean to meet the Devil at the dance? What does it mean to disappear with the Devil? [See the excerpt from the short story, "Good Friday," at the end of the essay.]

For my version of this tale, I removed the vague outcome by switching the gender of the main character to create a new variation of this legend, creating a vivid answer to what happens when you meet the Devil at the dance. My short story has a closeted homosexual male as the lead role for this tale to show how a

Nuevomexicana/o/x can embrace *mestiza consciousness* to survive in modern day America and within their own community. As a *mestiza*, a gay male character, such as Alex, is able to replace the prototypical role designed for a young female because he learns to shift his sexual identity for personal gain and satisfaction. Anzaldúa states, “Men, even more than women, are fettered to gender roles . . . Only gay men have had the courage to expose themselves to the woman inside them and to challenge the current masculinity” (106). In Chican@ communities, men are associated with the image of the “macho,” a meaning which is the result of Anglo hierarchical male dominance, in concept and invention, that insinuates oppression, poverty, and low self-esteem (105). The short story of “Good Friday” illustrates the current struggle with the northern New Mexican male in an American nation-space. Alex lies to his mother and girlfriend to partake of carnal needs despite knowing his cultures beliefs in religious practices during Lent and feelings towards sexuality. His actions represent the violation that occurs so that the Devil manifests. When he appears, “[The Devil] is clearly portrayed and identified in those legends where he plays a major role that is repeated in a number of texts without significant variations” (Robe 146-147). The character of Luciano remains true to what his purpose is as the devil, but in the short story the supernatural element is absent. Instead, Luciano represent the Devil in the flesh as a way of teaching a moral or issuing a warning of communal violation whether the protagonist believes in the traditions or not. Alex meets the Devil in the flesh not based on his sexuality but on the fact he was not true to himself. He consciously decided to manipulate his family and girlfriend to go out to a gay bar on Good Friday. In the end, despite Alex not believing in the Devil, the character manifests himself to the protagonist to continue the translation of what it means to meet the “Devil at the Dance Hall.”

Overall, what I hope my work does for adult readers is reconnect them to their own folklore to eventually retell their own stories to their youth. Sometimes, I wonder if what I am doing is enough for the continued transmission of northern New Mexican folklore, but all I can do is rely on transformation and adaptation as ways to ensure these folktales survive for future generations. Although there are still a number of people who prefer reading over any other form of media, we are headed into a future where taking time to read a book, even on Kindle, is becoming obsolete. The idea of folklore is to preserve a culture with modern technical means available. Since my work has moved the oral narrative to digital print, this may lead to other forms of medium, perhaps audiobooks or even film as



a means of not only preserving and changing northern New Mexican folklore but also showing how the Nuevomexicana/o/x maneuvers through the new millennia and beyond.

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## THE VIOLATION

### *Excerpt from "Good Friday"*

Condensation gathered on the mirror above the black granite counter top while the chrome swan-neck faucet glistened in bathroom lighting. Alex wiped the mirror dry with a white wash cloth. He smiled at his reflection and winked as he adjusted the Bluetooth in his ear. Alex fingered it in until it felt snug. As he leaned toward the mirror, he tilted his head to check for stray nose hairs. A lone straggler waved at Alex as he exhaled. He pinched the end of the hair between his index finger and thumbnail. Alex tugged. It curled and retracted. He leaned in closer to the mirror to stare up his nostril. He found the end of the curly Q, slowly he extended it, and yanked. His eyes watered as he sneezed.

"*Salud, hijo,*" his mother said on the other end of the line.

Alex buttoned the last two buttons of his lavender dress shirt.

"*Ya te vas acostar?*" asked his mom.

“I’m already in PJs, ma,” He unbuttoned the sleek charcoal dress pants which hung loosely on his firm legs. Adjusting his bulge in baby blue bikini briefs, he tucked in his shirt, and buttoned up.

“It’s past my bedtime.”

“That’s good, *mijo*. Once I hear KRQE at 10, I’m ready for Mark Ronchetti to come out. *No se, hijo*. Your dad has no idea how those rosy cheeks of that weather boy help me put him to sleep. Once the news and your father are done, its time for a few levels of *Candy Crush y despues trampo oreja*.”

“Whoa. Mom, please. I’m trying to go to bed. Last thing I need is. . . visuals.”

“It’s natural, *Alexis*. I could see if it was Diane Anderson *calentandome*. Then there’d be a problem. Not for your father, but for my soul. Anyways, it’s good you are staying in. It’s Good Friday. You don’t want to meet up with...”

“*Aye mamita*, the devil is not loose on Good Friday. That stuff only happened in the old days.”

Alex tilted his head back and laughed.

“*No ries*,” his mom said. “You know he’s real. Because of movies nowadays, *y esos estupid*’ video games, *tú y tu* generation thinks everything is fake. You know your Tia Mona felt his presence once when she was young.”

“Oh, God. Not this again,” Alex said shaking his head.

“*Hijo*, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain . . . and listen to me, okay? So she snuck out of the house to a dance at the Civic Center or Night Owl, or whatever they call that bar *en Las Vegas* nowadays, *pero ese cerca de Harris Pond*. You know the one *que tiene los jotos de dueños*.”

“Mom . . .”

“Anyways, that Good Friday, she sneaks out and goes to the dance and at midnight two pigs with beady red eyes entered the dance hall and started dancing the Macarena.”

“Mom listen to yourself. Pigs? Really? Did she mean cops?”

“No. Listen. Pigs are symbols of filth and Jesus put demons in pigs because they are dirty. You remember *con ese . . . como se llamaba? Lee . . .? Leon?*”

“Legion?”

“*Si! El!* Anyways, the pigs started dancing and your *tia* freaked out. She’s all ‘Ahhhh!’ and made the sign of the cross and prayed to *Jesús, María y José*. *Izque* the pigs disappeared in a puff of smoke.”

“I don’t even know what to say.” Alex laughed. He smiled at his reflection and winked as if it could acknowledge him.

“*Piensalo, hijo*. Why do you think she doesn’t go out anymore? She doesn’t even use Listerine during lent because of how much alcohol is in it.”

Alex slipped the end of his belt into the first belt loop. He fed the leather strap through each loop until he reached the front.

“Pigs at a dance? You should have told me the other one. I like the one about the girl who meets the handsome stranger and disappears.”

“*Ya, ya, ya* . . . enough Devil talk. It’s like calling him out to play. And I don’t even wanna play jacks with him.”

“Jacks?”

“Jacks. Nintendo. Pinochle. *Lo que sea!* Let’s talk Jesus. What time will you be here Sunday?”

“Early Sunday morning. . . the latest nine. I have a lot of homework to do tomorrow, so I want to take care of that, so my focus will be on your *torta de huevo* and salmon patties.”

He scrunched up his face in disgust as he said the words “salmon patties.”

Alex tightened his belt. He smiled at his reflection.

“Have you talked to Gloriana?”

“Not since earlier. I haven’t been able to get a hold of her. I hate texting her. I’d rather hear her voice,” Alex replied. He reached for his black iPhone and pushed the home button. Two unread text messages from Gloriana.

“*Bueno, hijo*. I know you’ve had a long week and you’re already in bed, so call me when you can tomorrow. Mark Ronchetti is about to come out. Good night.”

His mom hung up.

Alex laughed as he pushed the end-button several times to make sure the call was over. He placed his earpiece on the counter just as the Pandora app popped up connecting to the Wi-Fi. When he placed the iPhone on the Bose sounddock, Today’s Dance Hits came on. Electronic beats bumped and filled the bathroom. Alex swayed his hips to the song. The golden cross necklace, which hung around his neck, glinted in the florescent bathroom light as Alex danced. He unclasped the chain and tossed it to the corner of the bathroom counter where bottles of body scrub, skin moisturizer, and hair product were neatly lined up. The chain wrapped around a grey bottle of Clinique skin moisturizer for men, knocking

the container on its side. Thick white liquid splattered across the black countertop. Alex grabbed the white wash cloth and dabbed the mess.

## THE MEETING

“Howl ‘cuz it’s midnight.”

The crowd howled.

“I just wanna thank all you heathens for being an awesome crowd tonight,” DJ Beezle continued. “Hope you’re enjoying your Easter weekend. On this Good Friday don’t forget to try our drink specials: The Bleeding Jesus for \$7 and Holy Hail Mary shots for three bucks.”

Alex wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

“I need another drink,” Alex said as he walked away.

“Wait,” Sammy said as he tugged on Alex’s arm. “He’s here.”

The lights flashed off. Sirens blared as red lights flickered. Thick fog filled the dance floor. The dubstep thumping of “Must Be the Feeling” by Nero pulsed from speaker boxes. The crowd howled.

“Sammy?”

Alex reached forward trying to find the purple-haired boy.

The lights flashed back on. Sammy vanished but, in his place, stood a tall olive-skinned broad-shouldered man with his arms crossed, stroking his nicely trimmed chin strap with one hand. His jade eyes glinted in the flashing lights. He uncrossed arms as he ran a hand through onyx hair. A tight scarlet western shirt with black trim embroidery outlined the man’s defined torso. The stranger gripped the silver bull skull bolo and adjusted it, bringing it closer to his thick muscular neck. Tight black jeans gripped his thick muscular legs and tight ass. He ran his hand down his shirt and stopped at his belt buckle, a golden eagle with silver-tipped wings perched above his packed crotch. On his feet, black pointy vaquero boots with the points trimmed in silver. Sammy stepped out from behind the handsome stranger, handing him two bottles of Dos Equis. The man offered one to Alex.

“I hear you’re thirsty,” said the man. His voice was deep and low. He smiled. His left canine, trimmed in gold, glinted in the strobe lights.

Alex took the beer from the man who firmly held on to it. His eyes locked on to the green eyes of the handsome stranger. The stranger took his bottle from

Sammy as smoke engulfed the dance floor. The purple-haired boy faded into the mist. Keeping his eyes on Alex, the man let go of the beer and smirked. Alex took a sip of his beer. The handsome man placed the tip of the beer bottle up against his bottom lip, tilted his head back, and in three chugs he swallowed his drink. Alex grinned and mimicked the stranger's action. His attempt was unsuccessful as he spit up a little after the third chug. Beer ran down the corner of his mouth. The handsome stranger leaned into Alex as he withdrew a black handkerchief from his back-left pocket. He wiped the corner of Alex's mouth and grinned.

"I'm Luciano," he said. His voice carried over the bass.

"I'm Al..."

"I know who you are," Luciano interrupted. His breathe smelled of Wrigley's Big Red and beer. "I've had my eye on you."

Sammy appeared out of the smoke and took the empty beer bottles. The handsome man patted the purple-haired boy on the butt before he vanished into the dancing crowd. The stranger tucked the hanky back into his butt pocket as he slipped his index finger through the belt of Alex's pants. As he pulled him close, he gyrated his pelvis into Alex.

"Dance with me?" Luciano asked but it sounded like a command.

Alex followed Luciano's hips. When the beat began to speed up, the handsome devil separated from Alex and danced on his own. He stomped his silver lined boots on the dance floor like horse hooves. Alex smiled. His eyes glistening in the manipulated light. Step by step, Alex followed the man's dance moves.

## THE (DIS)APPEARING

Alex took the drink.

"Run along and get the car ready. We're gonna finish dancing," Luciano said. He tugged at the O-ring around the boy's neck.

Sammy nodded and walked away.

Alex took a sip, "Damn, this is good. What is it?"

"Adios Motherfucker," Luciano said.

"What?" Alex asked as he stopped drinking his blue concoction.

"That's the name of your drink," Luciano said. "Drink up. One last dance is needed before we leave."

Alex removed the thin black straw and tossed it to the floor. He downed his drink. The mixture of tequila, gin and vodka overpowered the subtle citric flavor. Chills crawled throughout his body. He wrapped his arm around Luciano's thick bulging bicep. Alex staggered behind Luciano who walked through a door other than the one they exited from. As they crossed the threshold, Alex's hand stamp illuminated and itched. Alex scratched the stamp as he stumbled toward the center of the dance floor. Strobe lights flashed. The fog machine hissed as smoke billowed across the crowd. Luciano continued pushing through the crowd until he found an open spot to dance with Alex. The music thundered and the room started to spin for Alex. He shook his head trying to shake the feeling but the room spun faster. He clung to Luciano as the lights flashed and swirled around. Luciano's deep laughter drummed through Alex. He tried to catch his breath but the smoke gagged him. His body went limp. As he fell, the lights blurred and swirled. Luciano's handsome face distorted and then nothing.

The last thing Alex heard was, "I got you."

\*\*\*

Darkness.

Alex moaned. He opened his eyes to find his face covered by a burlap sack. A dull orange glow seeped through the tiny holes of the fabric. Alex tried moving his body but his arms and legs were restrained, spread apart like those of DaVinci's *Vitruvian Man*. He moaned again unable to tell whether he was lying down or upright. A cool breeze flushed over his naked body. His flesh stung.

"He's awake."

Alex recognized the purple-haired boy's voice. He tried to say "Sammy" but a ball gag muffled his cries. Alex coughed and groaned as he tried to move an arm. Nothing. He tried his other arm. Still nothing. He pushed himself up. Not a budge.

"There, there. Just relax, master isn't done with you," Sammy said. He pulled the burlap sack from Alex's head. Upon black and white checkerboard tile, in the center of a dark red room, trimmed with black paint, Alex lay on his back across a leather mat which covered an old round gray dried up oak table. Black fabric covered the windows. Two white candles burned on holders placed on the walls, separated by a bleached goat skull, while a mass of black, red, and white candles burned brightly on an altar beneath.

Alex struggled.

"Save your strength. You've been a good boy."

Sammy caressed the red welts puffed across Alex's torso. Alex twitched as the fingertips grazed his sore flesh. Above them, four chains hung from the beams on the ceiling. Sammy reached for a chain and linked it to an opening on the corner of the leather mat beneath Alex. He freed one of Alex's hands and secured it to the leather cuff attached to the chain. He did this to the other hand and both legs. Sammy walked to the corner of the room. He gripped the handle on a circular wrought iron wheel and cranked. The table beneath Alex squeaked as it lowered away from his body. As it retracted into the floor, the tabletop became a platform. Alex gripped the chains with both hands, trying to resist the force of gravity, but his body went limp. The chains jangled. Suspended in air, Alex thrashed about, attempting to break free. He released the chains and groaned. Alex moaned a rubber-ball muffled "help" as he dangled in the air.

"How do you like being the prey?" Sammy asked.

He walked over to Alex's dangling body. With one hand, Sammy wrapped his fingers around Alex's neck and clenched. He tightened his grip. Alex's face turned red.

"That is enough, Sammy."

Sammy released Alex and stepped back.

Luciano appeared at the doorway as he puffed up his smooth bare chest. He pulled a red and black lucha libre mask over his head. Black plastic horns protruded from the forehead. Luciano rubbed his hands down his chest to his abdomen and stopped above his well-groomed pubic hair. He spit in one hand and then rubbed himself.

"You may leave us. I will call you when I am done with him."