

LBRIS

We know
books

Also by Isabel Cañas

The Hacienda
Vampires of El Norte

The
Possession
of
Alba
Díaz

ISABEL CAÑAS



SOLARIS



I

I'D WAGER YOU haven't heard the legend of the Monterrubio mine. Most haven't, especially if they're not from around Mina San Gabriel. It's a rumor, really, whispered from ear to ear, passed from palm to palm like so much silver.

It was an ancient terror, I've heard people say. Or a pagan devil, rising from the dark maw of the mine to devour all in its path. Some say it was a haunting. If you ask me, that's too straightforward. Can you imagine if this were nothing but a ghost story, full of cold drafts and shadows where they oughtn't be, clammy palms and sweaty napes? That's too clean a tale. Too simple.

And this one gets messy.

For they say that Alba Díaz de Bolaños barely survived. They say that when she stumbled down the cathedral steps, she was alive, yes—she was screaming, and all of Zacatecas heard it, their breasts chilled by how shredded and raw her voice was—but her wedding gown and all its silver was slick with blood. Gleaming with it, profane and red as cinnabar, wet as afterbirth.

Some say no one has seen her since.

I have.

And, unlike the storytellers who have mangled these events over the years, I know what happened.

The truth is worse than the stories would have you believe.

I once heard it said that the words themselves are cursed. That the tale, once told, will evaporate like mercury.

I can't know that for certain. Perhaps it will.

So lean in. Listen closely. I won't be repeating myself.



II

ELÍAS

NOT LONG AGO, in a land far from here, Elías Monterrubio found a book of spells. Or perhaps it found him.

In a shadowed corner of a book bazaar, before a stall stacked with manuscripts, he paused. The air around him swam with foreign tongues and the cries of Bosphorus gulls and the harsh slant of noon and the smells of men who had traveled far under summer's sun, but at once, all went still. Softness fell around him. Leather-bound and unassuming, as these texts always are, *El Libro de San Cipriano* seemed to reach for him more than he reached for it.

Now, Elías's studies of alchemy had taken him from the familiar spires of Sevilla and the chop of Gibraltar to this far side of the Mediterranean. He was a learned man; he had come across the name before.

Before he foreswore his black craft and turned to God, San Cipriano was a sorcerer omnipotent, the greatest enchanter to ever light a candle and pray. His was not a showy craft, leveling mountains or levitating to impress princes for jewels and coin, but one of quiet incantations. Love was all he wanted, and so love was what he spun spells for. Love was what San Cipriano's followers chanted invocations for, even after the sorcerer left the lies of the occult behind and fixed his attention on the promise of life everlasting.

An alchemist's mind is weights and scales. The romance of transmutation is stripped bare to equations. Charcoal figures scribbled on blank paper. A lingering cough from chemical fumes. Love and its spells, as far as Elías was concerned, were as much a myth as San Cipriano.

But still he paused. Perhaps it was because the title on the first page was written in aljamía, Spanish words in Arabic ligatures, an ancient marriage of his twin mother tongues. That alone was rare. A curiosity. A souvenir from a time long dead.

He bought it. Slipped it into his bag.

And then he forgot about it.

For late that evening, as the call to prayer rippled midsummer's humidity like the gentle strum of an oud, a letter arrived at his workshop.

Your father has returned, it read. Come.

MANY WEEKS LATER, Elías cursed himself for taking the bait.

Of course he told himself that he meant to return to Spain anyway. That he had to, on behalf of his circle of scholars. Hadn't they all agreed that it would be easier for Elías to obtain their mercury from Sevilla than for any of them? It was logic, cold as metal. Elías knew Almadén and the black markets of Sevilla intimately. The arrival of his grandfather's letter merely hastened the planning.

And the idea of speaking to his father for the first time in over twenty years? He hated that it drew at him. He hated how much he wanted it. He hated how questions and accusations spiraled themselves deep into his uneasy sleep on the ship that departed the Sea of Marmara's calm waters for the docks of Barcelona.

Why did you stop writing? Why did you never return?

He was cagey and jumpy on the road; he carried his friends' fortune sewn into his clothes. He barely slept. He spoke to no one. All he needed was to make it to Sevilla. Visit the mercury dealers from Almadén and pay his respects to his family. Face his father.

Then he could turn his back on the man like he deserved and return to sea. Before Elías knew it, he would be bound east, praying that no corsairs sank or captured him and the mercury en route to Constantinople. Then life would resume as before. He could bury his father in his mind and never sleep fitfully again.

He knew from years of travel that no trip was ever simple. He did not expect simplicity. Especially not when the sun set over Sevilla's winding streets and he entered the dark, dust-filled house of the Monterrubio patriarch, Juan Arcadio.

Still, when he sat in the drawing room and asked after his father, he did not expect what his grandfather said.

"Victoriano died in the Indies six months ago," Abuelo Arcadio replied flatly.

The drop was dark and sudden. The slam of a door and the profound silence in its wake.

Elías opened his mouth to speak; nothing came out.

He leaned forward to put his head in his hands; no, no, his father couldn't be dead, he had come *all this way*. He stood abruptly, strode three paces to the door, then whirled on his grandfather. He pointed a finger at the old man, a silent accusation before he could find speech.

"You wrote—"

"Don't look at me like that, boy." Abuelo Arcadio waved a liver-spotted hand dismissively and accepted a glass of sherry from a servant. "There was no dragging you back

from your Eastern debauchery without a lie and you know it.”

Elías dropped his hand. “*Fuck you.*”

His grandfather laughed, broad and unabashed as a sailor. Too throaty and rude for dark-draped drawing rooms. His shoulders shook; sherry swished in the crystal glass, winking cheekily in the candlelight. Abuelo Arcadio laughed with his whole body. That was the way Elías’s father laughed.

Used to laugh.

The drop beneath him reopened, and with a sweep of vertigo, he was falling again.

Every accusation, every question spun into brilliant, imaginary arguments as he rolled over on cold, rocky ground beneath the stars; all the weeks of wondering how twenty years had changed his father’s face . . . it was all for nothing.

Six months.

The man was buried and gone. Even if Elías sailed to the Indies tomorrow with nothing but a pickaxe, desperate to exhume the corpse, there would be nothing to find by the time he reached the grave. There was already nothing to find.

“Now that the formalities are out of the way, we can actually talk. Sit.” Abuelo Arcadio gestured to the chair Elías had vacated.

He could have walked out the door. Taken the bags of mercury he had purchased on behalf of his friends. Returned to the sea. He had a plan. All he had to do was leave.

All he had ever had to do was leave.

But he hesitated.

That was his inheritance, wasn’t it? A bone-deep lust for

more, more, *more*. This was what Victoriano Monterrubio had left him in death: no answers, no apologies, only a moment of hesitation. A fatal ripple of curiosity about what *more* lay twinkling beneath the surface of this meeting.

Abuelo Arcadio would not call for him—*lie* to him—without good reason. And the only good reasons that existed in this family were reasons that could be molten, forged, and sold.

“What do you want from me?” he asked.

“For you to sit,” Abuelo Arcadio said.

He did. Sherry was brought to his side; he refused it wordlessly. Watched his grandfather sip his drink. Waited.

“Victoriano swore to Heraclio that if we bought that mine, all we had to do was drain the flooding,” Abuelo Arcadio said. “That there was good ore beneath the waterline. The owner defaulted on his loans and his heir was dead, so we could get it for cheap.”

“That is why Tío Heraclio and Carlos left for the Indies.” Names attached to faces he had not seen in twenty years or so. Names he had not thought of in just as long.

Abuelo Arcadio tapped the rim of the now-empty glass; it was refilled. “They bought it, they drained it, and they began to dig. Your father was right, for once—the ore is good, but even that is not enough. Ah, Victoriano.” A delicate scowl crossed Abuelo Arcadio’s face. “He never made a business decision that did not mire this family in debt.”

“To whom this time?”

“Criollo merchants. And the Crown.” Abuelo Arcadio’s voice lowered to a growl over the word. “Taxes! All they want is taxes. The tax on buying mercury for amalgamation is choking us. But Victoriano had a solution for this too.”

“Did he now,” Elías said. It came out flat. Perhaps he should have accepted the sherry earlier. Unease glimmered in his chest—it was a sense that the ground was shifting under him, like the deck of a ship when the waves grew steep and thick.

Abuelo Arcadio’s grin was yellow, stained by years of tobacco. It brought to mind *jackal*. It was not at all kind. “He had whelped a little magician, hadn’t he?”

A flush of heat shot through Elías’s cheeks. Alchemy was weights and calculations. Alchemy was science. But not to all. To his father’s family, he had never been anything more than a charlatan playing with smoke and useless measures. Nothing more than a waste of family money.

“Summon Elías,’ he said,” Abuelo Arcadio continued. “‘Elías knows mercury.’” He sat back in his chair, gesturing at Elías expansively. “That was the last thing he ever wrote to me. And look what it brought me: a prodigal grandson on my doorstep, laden with bags of mercury. *Tax-free* mercury.”

Smugness becomes few people. Somehow, it suited Abuelo Arcadio, settling over him like the soft, flattering light of sunset.

“Do you know how much silver that mercury can refine?” he asked.

Elías did not reply. He didn’t need to. Abuelo Arcadio was already dreaming aloud, the divine power of metal lifting him to his feet and carrying him across the room, where he paced as if he itched with possibility.

“Enough silver to make the mine profitable.” It was prayerlike in its reverence. “To save this family from ruin. And then some.”

He turned to Elías. His final question was unspoken, but it hung in the air with the presence of a ghost.

“No,” Elías said.

“Mulish as ever,” Abuelo Arcadio said, with a measure of what some might call grandfatherly affection. It felt a touch closer to condescension. “Heraclio predicted this. You take after your mother, after all.”

“She stays out of this.” He was on his feet, stung by the lick of a whip.

Eagerness glinted in Abuelo Arcadio’s eyes. He had loved baiting Elías when he was a child, for Elías always snapped faster than any of his cousins. Still did, apparently. He did not know which he hated more: Abuelo Arcadio’s power over him, or how he let him have that power.

“Victoriano died with an enormous amount of debt in his name. As his only son, it is now yours,” Abuelo Arcadio said. “Bring your mercury to Nueva España. Become azoguero in Victoriano’s place and refine enough silver to repay the debt. Any silver refined from the mercury that remains will be fifty percent yours.”

“That mercury is not mine,” Elías said.

“It is in your bags,” Abuelo Arcadio said. Again, that jackal smile played across his face. “Is it not?”

The trust on his friends’ faces flitted through his mind. How easily they had counted coins into his palms. The way they waved to him from the docks as the ship pulled away. Casually, then returning to their coffee as clouds of gulls rose around them, obscuring them from sight. As if Elías were merely crossing the city and not the Mediterranean. For they knew he would return.

Wouldn’t he?

Or was it not possible that he could have perished in a storm, sinking to the bottom of the sea, weighed down by all the coins sewn into his jacket? Was it not possible that he could be captured by corsairs and sold? Or, once he reached

Spain, could he not be caught in the act of purchasing mercury on the black market and again condemned to Almadén?

Months would pass. His friends would mourn him as dead. Perhaps even forgive him, one day.

Greed was less a deadly sin than family creed, as inescapable as the name he bore or the way he recognized his father's gestures in his own hands. He swore he was different from his cousins, his uncles, his grandfather. His greed was different. It buried him in tomes and equations and experiments, for it was a lust for knowledge that drove him to seek more. It was a *noble* greed.

But that much silver . . .

He could sail to China, or Persia, and live as a scholar prince for the rest of his days. He could turn his back on the Monterrubios, for he would never need them. He could put every sin he had ever committed to his back and become someone new. Unburdened. Free.

"Seventy-five percent," he countered.

"Seventy," said Abuelo Arcadio, extending his right hand to shake.

Elías took it in his. Shook it once and firmly, before he could change his mind. "Done."

AT THE PORT of Cádiz, Elías boarded a galleon in the fleet bound for the setting sun.

After six days at sea, just before they passed las Islas Canarias, a storm struck. For hours, the fleet was tossed across waves higher than a cathedral's spires like pearls cast from a fist. In the hold, crushed against other immigrants as they retched and cried out between repetitions of the rosary, he pulled a small bag of mercury

to his chest and shut his eyes, for the darkness he could control was better than the gloom of the hold. He bit his tongue as he and the bodies around him rose with the next wave; breath cracked from his lungs as they were slammed back down against the walls of the hold and mercury struck his chest.

The squall quieted. In the end, it was a miracle only one man died, the sailors agreed as they tied an earthenware jug to the corpse's feet. And of fright, to boot. That was his heart's fault, not the captain's. It was an auspicious start to the crossing, was it not?

Each funeral shot of the cannon over the glassy sea rang in Elías's bones. One, two, three.

They sailed on.

Bile and thirst ravaged his throat. Hunger drew flesh tight as provisions staled and went to rot. The sun rose and beat on his back, on his skull, blistering his nape and the backs of his hands as he tried to read. *El Libro de San Cipriano* had stowed away among his belongings, still forgotten as he pored over Juan de Cárdenas's *Problemas y secretos maravillosos de las Indias* and studied amalgamation diagrams from José de Acosta's *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*.

His mind bent and folded with each blistering day. He swore he saw his mother in the faces of other passengers. He swore he heard the voices of the dead as he leaned against the side of the ship, enduring the exaggerated rise and fall of the swell—was it not better than being trapped in the airless hold below, among the sweat and chanted prayers and the stench of vomit?—and the punishing blaze of a cloudless sky. Salt spray stung his eyes and lips. Waves beat against the bow. Ghostly fingertips grasped at his shoulders, desperate, as if trying to pull him back from a precipice.