



It was easy as voiding your bowels, urgent as vomiting. The three women stood in a circle before the makeshift altar, hands clasping each other's. The plaster figure swathed in red remained erect, waiting.

Vasquez was the first to speak.

“Lo mató a mi árbol...” she muttered. A bella blue oak, it gave shade and assurance. “She said it devalued the property and she wanted to sell. She wanted the money.”

“Money and respect,” added Chen.

“Respect that comes with money,” said Hansen. “The title ‘Doctor’ before her name. The initials ‘MD’ after her name. Every address. Every signature.”

“She killed my brother’s mind,” said Chen firmly after a pause, remembering the unforgiving iron bars of his prison cell. “Then his spirit. Then his body.”

“She perverted the calling of my ancestors,” said Hansen. “She stole their words. Now we take them back.”

The curtain closed, they spoke the secret words in turn, twice around, Chen first.

“Buprenorphine!”

“Sodium thiopental!”

“Potassium chloride!”

“Mifepristone!”

“Hydrogen cyanide!”

Hansen, who knew death best, was the last to pronounce —

“Lebensunwertes leben!”

Then to complete the third round of threes and achieve the sacred number nine, they steeled themselves and chanted in turn the invocation:

“Lisa Gail Netherland!”

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“Lisa Gail Netherland!”

All at once a stench rose in the room, a smell so thick and foul Chen was almost knocked over. Vasquez and Hansen pulled her back on her feet.

“Breathe it!” said Hansen. “Breathe and expel!”

The glowing badges at their throats burned brightly, caught fire, then extinguished. The pain was momentary, disgust remained longer.

It was Chen who spoke first, haltingly, wonderingly, as if groping for a vision.

“A...moral...man...with...a...Fitz.”

The others’ faces framed in puzzlement, and Chen spoke the words again in a firmer voice. “A moral man with a Fitz. What does that mean?”

“We don’t have to understand,” said Vasquez. “We just have to be.”

Hansen shook her head gently to clear it and waved away the remaining smoke stench, calling the chant of dismissal, “Stumph! Stumph! Stumph!” The room was dark and quiet.

“So, it’s accomplished,” said Chen.

“Yes,” agreed Vasquez and Hansen.

All together they pulled away the curtain. Through the window, in the bright sunlight, they saw their marked creature, laughing with her workmates, as they strolled out of the abortion clinic.