

Timeless

Juaría had spent thirteen years of her life weaving away at the textile mill, and considering she'd only been alive for eighteen years, that was a very long time indeed.

Her fingers ripped through the threads, twining and cording and tangling and tearing. Of all the women, men and children who weaved together, she was the fastest. She slapped her loom over the dyed threads, snapping them in place, then threaded her fingertips into the next row of string. The light fabric barely tickled her hardened skin. Soon she would have to skin the top pads of her fingers off again. When they got too rough, Juaría couldn't feel the threads at all. If she couldn't feel the threads, she couldn't weave as fast. Juaría bit her lip and tugged even tighter on the current row. *God forbid that.*

"Juaría!" one of the other weavers--a short, older woman--called.

Juaría couldn't be bothered to draw her eyes away from her threads. She couldn't weave while she wasn't looking at them, and each second she couldn't weave was one second she'd have to be weaving later when she could have been finished.

"It's lunchtime, Juaría," the old woman said. "Come eat with us. Under the maple tree outside. The breeze today is heavenly."

Juaría raked the loom over her threads again. "No thank you. *You* can go, but *I* will stay here."

The woman lingered for a moment, and though Juaría couldn't *see* her disappointment, she could feel her sulking eyes on her. "An hour's break won't hurt anything. The threads will still be here when you get back."

Oh, the threads. The threads would always be here, wouldn't they?

“Maybe so,” Juaria said. “But *I* however don’t want to be here forever. Every textile I finish is one silver piece in my pocket. I could finish two textiles while you’re gone. That’s two extra pieces--fourteen in a week. Eventually, I’ll have enough to buy a house and seeds for a garden. Then I won’t have to work at all.”

The woman sighed. “But Juaria, what about before that? When will you relax?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll have all the time in the world to relax when I’m done working.”

The day, as it always did, was over before it truly began for Juaria. She took no note of the sunset, just like she’d taken no note of the sunrise, for her eyes were so fixated on the threads entangling her fingers. Just as she’d been the first one to arrive at the little mill, she was the last one to leave, only doing so when the owner told her it was time to go and paid her for her work.

“You never cease to amaze me, Juaria,” the owner said as he took the several textiles from Juaria’s arms. “You do more work than workers who have been here for thirty years, especially for a girl of only twenty.”

Juaria pushed a fray strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m actually only eighteen...” she said.

“Oh.” The owner frowned. “You look older.”

Juaria pondered the owner’s comment for a bit too much time as she hurried across the dirt trail, through the tall grass, and along the river towards her small home. Hastily, as normal. The sooner she got home, the sooner she could get to sleep. And when she went to sleep early, she rose early. That meant more time at the mill, more textiles made, and more pieces to come home with. So distracted was she with getting home as fast as possible that she didn’t even see the old woman crossing the trail in front of her until it was too late. Both of them crashed into the dirt, tangling their skirts and kicking a small cloud of dust into the air.

Juaria helped herself up first, then pulled up the old woman. What was she doing, crossing through the path instead of along it? And so slowly?

The woman slapped the dirt off her dress, which was much more patched rags than cloth, and patted her hair, which was in a silvery braid. “You walk so fast,” the old woman said. Her voice was slow and thick like honey, not speeding up for anything.

“Perhaps you just walk slow,” Juaria said tightly. “Good night, now.”

She turned to leave, but a hand wrapped around her wrist. “Look at you...” The old woman’s eyes ran over Juaria, from the top of her silky black hair to the hem of her colorful skirt. A glossy grey tint covered the woman’s irises, giving them a strange milky hue. Juaria had to avert her own eyes from them. “You’re so beautiful,” the woman said. “So young. You won’t be like this forever you know. And the faster you walk, the sooner you will get there.”

Yes that was how walking worked, wasn’t it?

“I must get home,” Juaria said, swiping her wrist out of the woman’s grasp. She started forward again, but the woman called back to her.

“Yes, get home to your family. But should anything happen to them and you find yourself in need, come to me. I will be here, taking in the view of the river for as long as I like.”

Juaria didn’t look back to the woman. She’d already lost so much time, and she only wanted to get home.

Everyone had already finished eating when Juaria finally arrived. They knew by now not to wait up for her. In fact, nearly everyone was asleep as she ate her cold dinner alone at their splintering kitchen table. Mama and Papa left their jobs far too early. For all the complaining they did about rent and food and money, they spent an awful lot of time--that could be used to make money and make life easier for them--dancing and reading stories and cooking meals

together. They didn't even work on Sundays! Their laziness had been their downfall, all of their downfall. If Mama or Papa worked like Juaria did, they might own their own house by now. Or would at least be close to it. But now, after so many years, neither of them had a penny to their name after each month's expenses were paid. All because they wasted so much time.

As Juaria crawled into her bed alongside her little brother, he shifted beside her.

"Juaria..." He rubbed his eyes. "When are you going to come home and eat with us?"

"Silly little boy." She ran a hand through her brother's hair. "I have to work for us. Mama and Papa waste too much time eating early and reading stories and such. One day, when I have enough money to buy us a house of our own, we'll have a garden and a pen of pigs and chickens. Then we can eat together every night. We'll have all the time in the world to do that later."

Her brother rolled over in the sheets. "If you say so."

Juaria awoke even earlier than normal the next morning. But it wasn't the rooster that woke her, but the coughs of her brother beside her. The coughs tore through his body with such ferocity that the entire bed under him shook. Mama and Papa were at his side in minutes, and a medicine man was called within an hour. Juaria couldn't take her eyes off her little brother as they waited. They were as frozen on him as they were on her loom each day, and her fingers threaded in his just as intently.

It took only a minute for the medicine man to determine her brother's ailment. A coughing sickness. "A simple ailment with a simple remedy," the man said. He could acquire a cure for only fifty silver pieces.

Fifty pieces. Mama and Papa had nothing to offer. And even the extra coins Juaria had saved totaled only thirty pieces. The family scrambled to borrow, beg and sell whatever they

could into order to acquire the remaining twenty, but even with the goodwill of their friends and neighbors, they could only come up with ten more pieces. They were ten short.

Night fell over Juaria's household, and her brother slipped into a deep sleep. She found herself wishing he would cough again, if only so she could see him move. The family faced the darkest of truths: their youngest was going to die.

But as all light disappeared from the house, a flicker of remembrance sparked in Juaria's mind. The woman by the river. She said Juaria could come to her should anything happen to her family. How she knew and what she meant, Juaria didn't know. But she had to go to her. There were no other options.

Juaria ran back across the dirt trail and along the river. The moonlight was her only light, and memory alone guided her steps. When she reached the path alongside the river where she was sure she'd seen the woman before, she saw only darkness. But with one turn of perspective, she caught sight of the woman once again. She sat at the base of one of the tall maple trees, overlooking the calm, moonlit river.

"You still move so very fast," the woman said as Juaria reached her. Her eyes didn't leave the peace of the water.

"Can you help me?" Juaria dropped to her knees at the woman's feet. She finally looked at her. "My brother is sick. Ten silver pieces can save his life. Will you give them to me?"

"Ten silver pieces? What a swollen sum of money! But what is silver weighed against time with the ones you love?"

"Please," Juaria pleaded. "I would give anything for those pieces. For more time with him."

"Anything at all?"

“Anything.”

“Hm...” The old woman tapped her chin. “Ten silver pieces. In exchange for ten silver pieces...give me ten years of your life.”

Juaria’s heart froze, but the woman continued. She dragged her boney finger across Juaria’s face. “Tens years gone and you will still be young. Younger than most. You will have so much time left, so long as you don’t waste it. Ten years and your brother will live.”

Juaria bit her lip and nodded. She was right. What was ten years after all? The woman smiled, pulled a small bag from her side, and handed it to Juaria. It sung the unmistakable song of silver. More than relieved, Juaria rose. Something changed. The ground was farther than before. She’d grown at least an inch taller. Her hands, she could see the veins inside them just a bit clearer. She risked a glance into the calm river only a step away from her. Her reflection--it was her, but she was...older. More mature looking. Ten years older.

There was no time to dwell on it. She sprinted back home, across the soft dirt, along the riverbed and through the grasses. She arrived with the pieces just in time. The medicine man arrived with the remedy for her brother’s ailment at the final hour. Within a day, he was well again. All was well again.

When everything was calm and she could finally breathe, Juaria took a moment to truly look at herself in her family’s kitchen mirror. She was twenty-eight now. She looked twenty eight. And no one seemed to notice.

“Mama?” she asked as she sat at the kitchen table. “Don’t I look different to you?”

But Mama only tilted her head to the side and knitted her brow. “No love, you look just as you did yesterday, and the day before that.”

Juaría tried to ignore the change. It should have been easy enough, she felt no different. But she couldn't keep from thinking back to that old woman by the water. As she went back to work, weaving and threading and raking her loom just as quickly as she always had, a dozen shredding thoughts ran through her. Her savings were all gone now. Of course, she didn't regret it. She did what she'd had to do to save her brother. But what if something happened to Mama or Papa...or herself? She would have nothing. Or what if something happened to them in five years or ten? She could save up every day for a decade only for it to be wiped away in a day. Time was money, and she was going to have to wait so much time just for the money that she might not even have when she needed.

But what if she didn't have to wait?

What was ten years anyway? She's lost ten already. Ten more would be nothing. If her family really needed the money, if the worst of circumstances befell them, they'd have to go to the city and take out a loan. A loan that would likely take a decade of work to pay off anyway. They'd be trading their time for money then anyway. So what if she could have it now?

For the first day in so many days of working at the mill, Juaría left early, along with the rest of her companions. But she lingered behind them. They weren't leaving with a purpose like she was, they were only going off to waste more time, she was going to make use of hers.

Juaría crept up to the large maple tree at the side of the riverbed. The old woman was right as she had left her, still taking in the sight of the calm river, looking content as ever. How much time had this old woman wasted lounging at the same sight? The river would still be here to look at tomorrow.

The old woman didn't look quite so old anymore. Yes, her skin still sagged into crumpling lines, but the lines were less defined. Her braid was still silver and graying, but the

grey didn't coat every strand. Lines of lively black mixed with them. And her eyes? Well, they weren't half as milky now. They were more brown than anything.

"You've come back," she said, smiling at the river. "Have you stopped running?"

"How much would you give me for ten more years?" Juaria asked, skipping over all other questions.

"Give you? Why on earth would you need more pieces? Is your family not well?"

"My family is fine," Juaria said, dropping to her knees as she had done days before. "But what if they are not fine in the future? We'll have nothing to fall back on. What good are my years if they must be spent worried about if something happens to them?"

The woman rubbed her chin. "No amount of money will ensure your family's well being. But what if I did? Give me fifteen years this time. And I promise your family will never fall ill or find themselves evicted from their home. They will be just as healthy and secure as they are now."

Fifteen years. Juaria would never need worry about her family's well-being. Fifteen years was a bit more than ten, but she had offered more than Juaria wanted too. The trade was more than fair.

Juaria nodded. A shudder ran through her. She scrambled back to the river. Her reflection was much changed this time. A dark hue circled under her eyes. The veins in her hands ran like rivers through her skin. She pressed her hand to her cheek. The skin was soft and tender under her touch. She looked like Mama.

Juaria jumped up and without even looking back to the woman, contentedly made her way back home. The breeze nipped at her hair and tickled her nose, wrapping her in an embrace of safety. Nothing bad was ever going to happen to Mama or Papa or her little brother. They

were completely and utterly safe, and she could work hard for them without worrying about her labors being for naught.

Juaría enjoyed this feeling as she arrived home. Like before, no one took note of the change in her. Not Mama or Papa, or even her little brother as he sat squeezed her when she came home. To them, it was as if she had always been this age.

Just like they had always lived in this house. Just like they would *always* live in this house.

Something tugged at Juaría. It pulled at her as she retreated to bed early. As she woke even earlier the next day and made her way to the mill. And most heavily as she snapped her loom again and again, and wound her fingers through the threads. The old woman had only promised her security. Only more of the same. But she wanted better for her family. They couldn't work like this forever. Juaría wanted them to be happy. To eat meals together and live in a place where they didn't even have to think about money. They deserved to relax, to be together, didn't they? How long would it take to earn enough to give them what they needed? Twenty, twenty-five years? What if she could have it now?

What was twenty or so years anyway if she had to spend them weaving away in the mill? She would be trading those years for time with her family anyway. Why not do it now?

Juaría jumped up from her loom and ran out from the mill. She took off down the dirt trail, through the grasses and across the river until she finally arrived at the maple tree. The woman, who was now looking to be about Juaría's age, was finally about to set off. She gathered her clothes around her and was tying her hair--now almost entirely black--into a new braid behind her.

She shook her head upon seeing Juaria. “You still haven’t stopped running. It’s perfectly alright to walk sometimes, you know.”

“I have one last request of you,” Juaria said, heaving heavier than she was used to.

The woman’s face fell, and she looked almost sad to hear it. “You have your family. You have their well being. You have so many years left. What else can I give you?”

“What point is any of that if I have so many years to wait until I can enjoy them?” she insisted. “I want us to be happy. In the little house with the garden and no rent or money to worry about. I want to spend time with them. Give us our little house and our peace. How much for that?”

“For that?” the now not-so-old woman looked at Juaria. “For that, it would take you thirty-five years to accomplish as you are now. But from you, I’ll ask for only thirty.”

Juaria beamed and nodded, but the woman hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“Completely,” Juaria said. A ripple rushed through her, followed by a drilling pain. Her knees trembled, and her chest quivered. Her back hunched and her bones ached. She looked down at her shaking hands. They were pale and boney, but also fuzzy at the edges. She blinked a couple times. Her eyes. They were tinted with age. She stepped up to the water, each footfall radiating through her bones. The woman in the water couldn’t be her, could it? Every strand of her hair, the thinning strands that remained, glinted silver in the sunlight. Countless lines scrawled across her skin, from her forehead down to her neck. Her eyes drooped into darkness, and her lips thinned into colorless lines. *Juaria*. This was her now.

She pulled herself up, her back cracking as she did. She winced, but took a deep breath. What were a few little aches now that she had everything she’d ever worked for? Her blurring eyes crept up to the woman, though now she was by no means old. Her smooth skin glowed in

the sunlight. The breeze fanned through her glossy hair. Even her dress looked brand new, tailored perfectly to her slender, toned body. She didn't look a day over eighteen.

Her eyes, her vivid brown eyes, sparkled as she smiled sadly down at Juaria. "Go home," she said. "Wouldn't want to waste any time."

Juaria nodded, and hurried as fast as she could out from the shade of the maple tree. The sun burned her skin, and her feet felt as if they were slapping the dirt as she scurried down the trail. Her hips moaned as she moved. Her breath thinned. She didn't think age would be this...aging. But it was fine, she could sit down once she got home. She could finally sit down and have dinner with her family, now that she had all the time in the world to do so. Now that there was no more work to be done.

She saw her house, her new, beautifully painted house beside the river, come into view. A lovely, fruitful garden bloomed alongside it, sprouting every fruit and vegetable imaginable. And even further back, a small pin, where a dozen tiny chickens and a lamb and a pig basked in the daylight. Mama and Papa were outside, relaxing in wicker chairs, and her little brother too. He spotted Juaria, and even from the distance and with her blurred eyes, she could see his face light up.

He waved to his big sister. She smiled. She was finally going home. Only a few steps away.

Something stabbed Juaria's chest. Her heart squeezed and squeezed and squeezed, like someone had wrapped their fist around it. She stopped, gasping for any air as she clawed at her chest. But it was no use. Her heart continued to tighten, her throat burned and throbbed, and the whole world faded into darkness. Juaria got only one last glance at the house and the garden and her family. The one she'd given so many years of her life for.

She collapsed to the ground, and only with her final breath did she realize: she'd run out of time.