

Daring to Play

“Gustavo,” Javier yelled, scanning the woods. “Where are you?”

His younger brother had insisted on playing hide and seek this time, and, of course, Gustavo’s coat was forest green. Perfect for hiding.

“Are you lost?” a brittle voice asked.

Javier spun, fists ready for a fight.

An old woman with a hooked nose stood behind him. “Can I help you?” Her voice rang with a hint of laughter.

“Can you make me an only child?” Javier laughed. He stopped when a shriek echoed through the woods and startled every bird into the air.

Not birds. Black geese. One clutched a green coat in its bill and his teenage brother flapped wingless below it.

Javier glanced at the old woman. No, the witch. Baba Yaga.

“Wish granted.” Her haunting laugh floated through the woods as she disappeared.

Javier cursed and sprinted toward the geese. He tried to watch the uneven ground and the geese simultaneously, but he tripped. Javier caught himself before his face met dirt, the scent of damp earth filling his nostrils. He growled and stood. His breath caught when he saw six trees with large white letters spelling one word.

BEWARE.

Javier glanced up in time to see the last black goose heading behind the warning. He steadied his nerves, mentally damning his smart mouth. Gustavo always said it would cause him trouble, but Javier bet his brother never thought it would involve a goose.

Javier plodded into Baba Yaga’s territory, and all sounds of wildlife vanished. Soon he approached a small, round house on four chicken legs as tall as the trees. The area smelled of boiled chicken, and Javier wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“Can I help you?” Baba Yaga chuckled.

“Yes,” Javier said. “Return my brother.”

“I take but do not give for free. What will you trade for him?”

Javier smiled, a new game coming to mind. “How about a deal? Recite me a riddle, and, if I solve it, you give my brother back.”

Baba Yaga’s eyes lit with intrigue. “And if you don’t?”

“You can have us both.”

Baba Yaga laughed. “Deal.” She pursed her cracked lips as she thought. “What is heavy but easily broken, falls yet never rises, and can be deafening?”

“Easy,” Javier said. “It’s— “

A blur of green tackled Baba Yaga. She screamed, but the sound cut off.

Gustavo stood and whipped his black curls from his face. “Seriously, brother.” He pulled his silver dagger from her throat, both dripping red. “We were hunting Baba Yaga, and the first thing you say when you meet an old woman in the forest is that you want to be an only child?!”

Javier shrugged. “You know I can’t control my tongue. That’s why I’m usually the assassin, not the distraction.”

Gustavo cleaned his dagger on his black pants. “Well, I’m sick of being the distraction and taken as hostage.”

Javier laughed. “Because that obviously didn’t happen this time.”

“Shut it.” Gustavo glanced at the woman’s corpse. “You think they’ll make this a fairytale?”

“No.” Javier started back toward town, his brother following. “Maybe if you had let me answer the riddle and free you. People want ingenuity, not brute force.”

“You would’ve answered wrong,” Gustavo said.

“Not true. It’s a waterfall.”

Gustavo’s eyebrows rose. “You can easily break a waterfall?”

“It’s just water. Even a stick can poke through it.”

Gustavo shook his head. “The answer’s silence.”

Javier glared at his brother. “If you hadn’t killed her before my answer, we would know.”

“You may be a year older,” Gustavo sighed, “but you aren’t wiser.”

Javier growled but let the argument drop. “Who’s next?”

“How about that baker witch?”

“Can’t. Hansel and Gretel already took care of her. They outsmarted the hag and pushed her into an oven. A good tale.”

“Excuse me,” Gustavo said. “But I was just abducted by a goose, killed it, fell and dislocated my shoulder, and then ambushed Baba Yaga. *That’s* a good tale.”

Javier shook his head. “I don’t get it either. No one has even mentioned the Shadow Mage we took out last month. Maybe we’re too old to make a good fairytale. Nobody wants teenagers.”

“Forget them,” Gustavo said. “I say we keep going until people tell our tale.”

Javier smiled. “There’s a sorceress up north.”

“That ice queen?”

“Snow queen,” Javier said. “They’ll give us our own fairytale if we best royalty.”

Gustavo grinned. “What game should we attack with?”

“I’m thinking freeze tag.”