The Crossroads

When people come to visit, they call my city *an audacity*. I first heard the word three years ago on a street corner outside of a tourist agency. The second time, I was at the market watching a group of vultures squabble over a bag of chicken bones. After that, a month or two might go by, but I'd always hear the word again.

In my little English thesaurus, 'boldness,' 'impertinence, and 'defiance' are listed beside audacity. How strange, I have always thought, that so many of our visitors fix upon that same word, as though their minds are sieves, filtering through its synonyms before catching against it's hard acid sound – audacity.

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On the day that I met Chaupi, I had taken the canoe upriver from our house, zagging into the narrow channels of Iquitos district so that I could tie up at Qori's dock. I was heading to Belén Market to buy ají, oil, and uvachado, and though there were plenty of docks closer to the market, my father insisted I tie the canoe only where friendly eyes could keep it safe.

"Qori Sonqo," I yelled up the ladder to his house, too lazy to climb up, "Come with me to the market, and I'll buy you a chicha morada."

"Oye, Rumi," he said, sprinting out the door like a dog, "I've got news. New developments with Señorita Camila."

Señorita Camila was the girl that Qori had been in love with as far back as the wind blows. She helped her mother run a fruit stand about two kilometers north of Qori's house, and every Saturday morning, he walked all the way to her stand to buy plátanos and camu camu, even though there were six tiendas before hers that sold all

the same things for the same prices. Qori's 'developments' with the Señorita tended to fall into the category of 'she smiled at me,' or 'our hands touched when I handed her the money.'

"This one's big, I'm telling you," he said, slipping his shoes on and scurrying down the ladder.

"Sure it is," I chided, and we set out walking.

We took our normal route, north a couple of blocks and then west, so that we could cross through the Plaza de Armas. By the time we passed the Casa de Fierro, an anomalous two-story building designed by the French architect Gustave Eiffel – the same man who built the Eiffel tower – Qori had only just finished going over the details leading up to his 'big development,' somehow managing to stretch what must've been a thirty second interaction into a ten-minute discourse.

"And then she gave me a mango, Rumi! A mango – for free! And all she said was 'It should be ready by tonight. Don't eat the whole thing yourself.'"

Qori had gotten himself so worked up that the people on the balcony bowed their heads down to stare at us. He didn't seem to notice.

"A mango, Rumi! What do you think it means?"

"Probably that she's happy to have made so much money off of you over the years, and since she's not planning on putting out anytime soon, she figured she'd throw you a piece of fruit to keep you swimming at the end of her line."

"Oye, don't talk like that, Rumi," he said, "It's bad luck."

In the Plaza de Armas, the Igelsa Matriz, a neo-gothic Cathedral painted eggy yellow and trimmed in the rich dark-red of dried blood, stood like an apparition, strangely firm in its sense of being.

“What are the characteristics of a mango,” Qori was asking, as much to himself as to me.

“They’re native to South Asia,” I said, “so maybe she’s trying to tell you that you’re as foreign to her as the Chinese New Year.”

“A foreign fruit, right,” Qori echoed, mulling it over in his head, “But of course we’ve got tons of mango trees here as well. So maybe it’s that there’s something different about me, some kind of unknown essence. I’m mysterious, but not impenetrable,” he concluded, nodding to himself.

I had to stop and laugh at him for that one.

“The only thing that’s mysterious about you is that smell, Qori Sonqo. When was the last time you washed yourself?”

On the old clock below the bell-tower, the long-hand pointed to the four, which was written in old Roman Numerals, four single I’s instead of the more commonplace IV. It was nine twenty in the morning, and suddenly, I was struck by my first theory. It had been right there in front of me all along. La Iglesia Matriz, La Casa de Fierro, El Ex Hotel Palace, the whole thing was really very simple. What were Baroque and Rococo, let alone any metal fixture ever even touched by Gustave Eiffel, doing here, a thousand miles outside of the world, where hollow spaces filled with snakes and psychedelic cumbias collided, each night, with the wave of insects that precipitated out of the steaming air? What did that other world have anything to do with thatched-roof houses that were made of dried reeds and soft wood? What did it have

to do with the tannin that flowed into the water and gave it the same color that sun and history has given us, or with floating universes, where you could fall asleep in a canoe, looking up a meter into the cool underbelly of your stilted home, and wake up after the rain with your nose brushing against its sagging wood?

A child would know that history had made the collision of the two worlds, ours and the one outside, inevitable. Money might not grow on trees, but rubber grows inside of them. So was the audacity that of the outside world, of cuacheros who came to steal our resources, and brought us – a civilization bent on survival in the heart of the Amazon River Basin – the frivolities of whimsical architecture? Were *they* the audacity, for treating us to the same fate as all who have ever been colonized?

"Or perhaps I should be asking what sets a mango apart from other fruits," Qori dragged on, "They ripen to red, instead of brown, for example. Green to orange to red. Leaf to fire. That's it," he suddenly cried, "Sunset! She wants me to meet her at sunset."

But I don't think that's it, after all. Those who have never been colonized wouldn't use a word like audacity to describe an act of colonization. They'd use rounder and softer words – a pity, they might say, or a shame.

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By the time we finished our shopping, Qori was so convinced that the mango was an invitation to a sunset walk along the malecón that I was almost starting to believe him.

"What should I wear," he asked.

“If she shows, and that’s a big if,” I told him, “she won’t care what you’re wearing. Just be sure to wash and pull a comb through your hair.”

Qori walked me to the end of his dock.

“Well, I better start getting ready then,” he said. It was still hours before sunset, and usually we would have sat on the dock telling stories or gone out fishing together, but I could see how anxious he was.

“Alright, Qori Sonqo. Good luck. Try not to say anything too stupid.”

I was in the middle of untying my canoe when I heard a heavy sigh behind me.

“What is it now, Qori?” I asked, but when I turned to face him, there was nobody there. *Strange*, I thought, *the dancing heat must be playing tricks on me*. But then I looked down into the canoe.

“Oye, Qori!” I yelled, summoning my friend back, “Come look at this!”

Qori came thundering down the dock, and the sigher in my boat, startled by the commotion, jerked awake.

“Ha,” Qori laughed, “looks like you’ve got yourself a new girlfriend as well.”

She was a Peruvian Inca Orchid – a hairless dog. She had wrinkly gray skin and a single poof of orange fur between her ears that made her look like the dog of a punk musician.

“You know they’ll never let me keep her,” I said.

But she was determined. After a prolonged struggle, Qori and I succeeded in hauling her onto the dock. But as soon as I pushed off, she jumped into the water and started swimming after the canoe. I figured she’d tire herself out after a few minutes and

swim back, but by the time I was wading through the water foliage of Punchana district, where the piranhas often gather in swarms, she was still following me.

“Fine,” I said, slowing down to help pull her inside, “But they’re not going to let you stay either way.”

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I was right about that.

“You forget the eggs, and you come back with an overgrown rat,” my father yelled, “Ay carajo, Rumiñawi! We don’t need any more mouths to feed.”

I put her out on the dock and told her she had to go. But that night, when I went outside to piss off the dock, she was still there.

“I told you, you can’t stay here,” I hissed, waving my arm to shoo her away.

But there she was again the next morning. In the evening, I snuck out and brought her a few scraps of chicken. By the third day, there was nothing my father could do.

“Fine,” he said, “But if she shits on my floor even one time, she’s gone.”

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As persistent as she had been from the beginning, she was very self-conscious. She couldn’t shit, piss, or eat if anybody was watching her, and it took her five nights of sleeping on the floor before I was finally able to coax her onto the end of my mattress for a belly rub. When at last she rolled over, relaxing along the length of her sturdy spine with her legs flopped open like a frog, I noticed a strange mark at the base of her rib cage. At first I thought it was a birthmark. But when I touched it, I could feel that it was raised slightly above the wrinkle of her gray skin. It was a tattoo, I

suddenly realized. Some kind of symbol resembling a P turned on its side, whose hump, instead of forming a half moon against the hard line of its back, pulled out into a spiral.

I decided then to name her Chaupi, a Quechua word which means 'between,' because I figured I had met her at the crossroads between her life that had been and her life that would be.

The following weekend, she went with me to pick Qori up on the way to the market. While I tied the canoe to Qori's dock, she barked her way to the base of his house ladder.

"Oye, get lost," Qori shouted, stumbling out onto the platform. "No way," he laughed then, recognizing her at once by the poof of orange hair between her ears, "I can't believe they let you keep her."

"Didn't have much choice in the end –" I started, but he'd already dipped back inside. He emerged a moment later with a lucuma fruit cupped in his left palm.

"You're not the only one who got lucky," he grinned, "What's your best bet for the time and place of my next meeting with Señorita Camila based on this?"

He tossed the soft green fruit down to me.

"No way," I exclaimed, and Chaupi barked twice, imitating my surprise.

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That day was the first in what became our Saturday ritual. Qori would spend the first half of the morning filling me in on the details of their last date, and then we'd use the second half to try to guess the meaning of the newest gift. Chaupi joined in the conversations as well, barking whenever one of us exclaimed, and panting heavily

along when we broke into fits of laughter. In the weeks that we got it wrong, Señorita Camila would give nothing to Qori, and he'd have to wait until the following week to test a second hypothesis. Slowly, through the stories that Qori told, through the time that we spent trying to divine the meanings that she had threaded into the flesh of gifted symbols – one day a baggie full of aguaymanto, another a browning pear or a dusty avocado – I began to feel that I knew Señorita Camila just as well as Qori did, and maybe even better.

I was the one, after all, who figured out the solitary green grape, after he'd gone nearly a month without seeing her. I knew what the plátano meant right away, recalling the story she'd told Qori months ago about the time her little sister had bitten into one not a moment after a wasp had alighted on its peak, and how they'd taken her to the neighborhood shaman when her throat swelled closed, unable to pay what it would have cost to bring her to the city hospital.

Qori was often careless in the way that he listened to her. She'd give him a deep purple plum, and I would remind him that that was the color she'd worn to her brother's wedding, but when I pressed him for where her brother had been married, he wouldn't remember.

"Have you ever mentioned me to her?" I asked timidly as we wandered in the market one afternoon between rows of hand-rolled cigarettes and dead chickens, plucked and hung by the neck on iron hooks.

"Couple of times, yeah," he shrugged, "Who else have I got to tell her about? The naked mole rat?"

Chaupi looked up at him then, and when he reached down to scratch between her ears, he said her name. Chaupi. She barked, seeming pleased by the correction.

When I realized that Señorita Camila knew about me, something changed. For a long time, I'd been harboring a dark thought, something I'd been using Qori's newfound brightness to cover over. If Señorita Camila was half as insightful as she'd long compelled Qori and me to be, it would be obvious to her that Qori was no longer the one solving her riddles. She lived in symbols – in colors that carried the weight of her ancestors, in smells that told you the rain was coming and just how hard it would come. For her, the history of the world could be contained in a single piece of fruit. These were things that Qori did not understand, as much as he may have loved her. *He doesn't deserve her*, I suddenly thought, the sentence floating up from the darkness and alighting on the surface of my mind, as clear as if I had said it out loud. *He doesn't deserve her*, I repeated to myself. But maybe, just maybe, I did.

In May, Señorita Camila gave Qori a cherimoya – a soft green jungle fruit with a faceted surface that makes it look like a grenade. Cherimoya tastes like a cross between an apple and a pineapple, with some kind of flower crushed into it, and though it's stringy like a pineapple, it's white interior, punctuated by large black seeds, is as creamy as a papaya.

Qori went for the most obvious reference – the grenade. He took his canoe to the curve in the Naynay River where the Spanish Jesuits are said to have first arrived, more than two-hundred and fifty years ago. He waited for her in the fading light, captivated by the ability of trees and plants to grow over history, as if nobody had ever landed right there, bursting into the jungle and forcing religion upon its people, whom they called savages even as they raped the women and beat the children.

But Señorita Camila would never have treated such a mysterious fruit so literally. A fruit already steeped in resemblances, to other objects and other tastes, could not

allude to anything so uncontestable as the violence of the Spaniards. It had to be in reference to another kind of mystery or symbol. A myth or a piece of folklore, perhaps.

The young fisherman's daughter, I suddenly remembered. She had disappeared the year before and was rumored to have been eaten by Pirarucu, the son of an ancient Amazonian chief who was banished to the river for his cruelty and forced to live as a great red monster – a fish the weight of three grown men, with a flat head and thick bony scales that are sold in local markets to daring women who use them as nail files. For Camila, the facets of the cherimoya were nothing like the grooves of a hand grenade. Instead, they were the scales of a great fish.

She *was* waiting on the river bank, I realized. Just not the one where Qori had gone to look for her.

Without pausing to think, I began to make my way there, Chaupi trailing behind me. It wasn't until after I arrived that I remembered the cherimoya had not been given to *me*, and that if Señorita Camila did show up, she wouldn't know me from a stranger at the Saturday market.

"Oye, you brought Chaupi," I heard a voice exclaim from behind the thicket Chaupi had chased a frog into, "And she really does look like a punk rocker!"

I froze. She was there, and I hadn't done anything to prepare. I hadn't washed or put on deodorant or thought of anything to say.

"Qori," she asked the silence, "Where are you, Qori?"

She laughed and stumbled into the clearing where I was standing.

“Oh, sorry,” she said when she saw me, and she quickly averted her eyes toward Chaupi, who she reached down to scratch between the ears. After a few moments, she looked up again.

“This is Chaupi, though, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

She had two beautiful black braids, as thick as mooring ropes. Her eyes were shaped like almonds, but each was as wide as a yawn, and her nose curved so gracefully into her cheeks that I almost overlooked her black nostrils, which punctuated her face like commas, reminding one to pause at every interval, to stop and breathe. They were a necessary detail, for something about her thin, ripe skin, or perhaps it was the impossibility that such a tiny body could carry the weight of those braids – something made you want to take her in all at once, as though she were a hallucination, liable to disappear at any moment. But then, every time she moved her mouth or let a new expression take hold of her, it was obvious that you’d misunderstood entirely. She was not something that could be taken in at all.

“So then you must be Rumiñawi,” she concluded.

“How’d you know?” I stammered.

“Qori talks about you all the time,” she said nonchalantly, “I’m surprised he didn’t introduce us months ago.”

“Right,” I said, nervously digging my toe around in the dirt.

“Where is he, anyway?”

“Oh, um...actually I sort of had my own last minute guess on this one. Qori had already gone to look for you somewhere else and I just – I was just curious to see if

I'd figured it out. Besides," I added, "I'm not superstitious, but if there's any truth to those stories about the fisherman's daughter, you shouldn't be out here alone."

"Hmmm," she hummed pensively, scratching Chaupi between the ears again, "so do you want to take a look around?"

"Okay," I said with a voice as flat as tree bark. And then, trying to redeem myself, "Qori's told me a lot about you, too, by the way."

"I know he has," she said, her eyes meeting mine in a fiery flash, "You've been helping him unravel my symbols."

I smiled.

"Yes."

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That evening, I told Camila my first theory about why they call us *an audacity*.

"No," she laughed when I'd finished, "It's got nothing to do with the Spanish. It's us they're talking about. Not the architecture, and certainly not the Spaniards."

We'd gone walking into the shipping yard, and now she pointed up at a huge ocean vessel.

"Look at that ship, Rimiñawi," she said, "That ship will be filled with timber, oil, aguaje, camu camu, rum – all the riches of our world – and then it will travel three-thousand six hundred kilometers down the Amazon, until it falls out of our world and into the Atlantic Ocean."

She looked at me for a moment before continuing.

"This is the largest city on earth that can't be reached by car, did you know that?"

I shook my head and watched her wisp of a body as she climbed, lithely, up the side of the large ship, beckoning me behind her. I began to climb as she spoke, her words as spell-binding as the thick braids that hung down her back.

"They call us an audacity, Rumiñawi, because we are a world hidden within the world, something that most people have forgotten is possible. They think the world is modern and know-able. But we are none of those things. We are an audacity because not only do we exist, but here, where the plants grow taller than men and can swallow you whole, we flourish. They can't dismiss us as they do the small jungle tribes, which they presume live as they do only out of ignorance, only because they don't know anything else. Having known the outside world, we remain here, with no roads leading out and no desire to escape. And so, in the outside world, where the desire to escape is all that exists, they call *us* the audacity, for daring to live as we do."

I did not think of Qori when I leaned in to kiss her. If I had, the shame alone would have burnt through my cheeks. They would have been left swollen and red.

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The following Saturday, before I met Qori to go to the market, I found a bright yellow maracuyá fruit on the mat outside my door. The week after that, it was a guanábana. It took me three weeks to tell Qori what had happened, three weeks that he went looking for her when I had already found her. When at last he told me he was going to the riverbank where the fisherman's daughter had disappeared, I couldn't take it anymore.

"You won't find her there, Qori," I burst.

That was the moment I learned that love is as capable of destruction as it is of creation.

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For a long time afterwards, I tied my canoe to Qori's dock every Saturday morning on my way to the market, but when I called up to him, he was never home. Then, one day, Chaupi and I returned to find a note crumpled up inside of the canoe.

"If you leave your boat here again, I'll float it into the channel and wait on the docks for it to be stolen."

After that, I took a mototaxi to Belén on Saturday mornings.

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Six years passed in the city that they call an audacity. Camila and I got engaged, and I started teaching English at an elementary school in Belén. From time to time, I saw Qori walking through the Plaza de Armas, or I passed him in my canoe, fishing along the riverbank with his father, and we both nodded cordially, never saying a word. Chaupi continued to follow me everywhere, though with age, her front right leg grew stiff, and she developed a growth underneath the skin of her back, and one just behind her left ear.

On a Saturday in March, Chaupi and I took the canoe out fishing. She lay in the quiet sun while I waited, looking into the hazy tannin-infused water and thinking of ancient river myths. Soon we floated past a group of villagers hauling the carcass of a cow toward the river bank. It was an old practice. Throw a carcass in and a swarm of piranhas will flock to it, clearing the water upstream to swim or bathe in until they grow hungry again.

I decided to take the opportunity, guiding us downstream from the carcass, where all manner of fish would soon congregate, drawn by the scent of fresh blood. Within a

few minutes, I had caught two catfish, and Chaupi busied herself pawing at them while I waited expectantly for a third catch. I was trying to remember if we had any banana leaves left at home to wrap the fish in for grilling, when suddenly, Chaupi sat up with a jerk. She began to bark and strained out over the back of the boat, her reflection shifting in the water like a blooming ayahuasca vision.

"Quiet, Chaupi," I hissed, "You're scaring them all away."

But she wouldn't stop. She stretched so far over the canoe's edge that I imagined her falling in, her body transformed into a piece of fresh meat the moment it hit the water.

"Alright, alright," I conceded, rowing us in the direction that she was indicating.

A few meters downstream, I saw what she was fussing over. There was a struggle in the water. Something large was thrashing just below the surface.

With all manner of river-monster legends flickering through my mind, I pulled Chaupi firmly under my left arm and began paddling awkwardly with my right. But she wasn't having it. She bared her teeth and struggled against me, and then, in a single fluid movement, she broke free and leapt into the water in pursuit of the thrashing creature. I cried out after her and tried to pull her out of the water, but again and again, she defied capture, her hairless skin as slick and slippery as the scales of a fish. The boat rocked violently and threatened to swamp. And then I saw it. It broke the surface for a split second before disappearing again beneath the commotion. A hand.

Piranhas can strip the flesh off a cow in under ten minutes. That puts a seventy kilo adult at around five. There was no time to lose.

Chaupi, I understood then, had already made her decision, and I didn't have time anymore to try to get her back in the boat. I paddled as hard as I could into the thrashing water, my eye pinned to the place where I'd seen the hand emerge, strain upwards towards nothing, and slap back beneath the water. I thrust my arm beneath the surface in search of a body, but the moment I touched the water, a white hot pain shot up my arm as though I'd forced it through a tangle of barbed wire. I screamed and recoiled. I spent an illogical moment then trying to breach the water with my gaze, but it was opaque as mud, a whirlpool of tannin and kicked-up sediment. Just as I began to entertain the idea that the whole thing had been a trick of the light, that what I had seen was the flip of a fin rather than a desperate contortion of human fingers, I spotted Chaupi to the left of the canoe. She squealed in pain, but as I reached out to grab her, she dove beneath the surface.

"Chaupi!" I screamed. But just where she had gone under, two arms and a head suddenly bobbed above the surface. She was pushing the body up, I realized. I grabbed an arm and pulled, almost falling out the other side of the canoe as I leaned back against its weight. It was a young man, and the water was as red as a ripened mango.

As he lay in the belly of the canoe, I turned back to the river and thrust my arms in again. I caught Chaupi by the nape of her neck, the firmness of my grip hooking the teeth of a piranha deeper into her skin, so that as I hoisted her aboard, it stuck to her, flopping back and forth against her hairless back. I reached for my fishing knife and rolled Chaupi onto her side so that I could isolate the fish against the wood. I stabbed straight through it, waited for it to stop squirming, then pried its jaws open and flung it back into the water to be devoured by its own.

Only then did I return to the young man, who was unconscious and so covered in pulsing blood that I couldn't see his face. I rolled him onto his belly and hit his back until he let out a few weak coughs. Then I took off my shirt, tore it open, and wrapped it around his abdomen to stop the bleeding. At last I returned to Chaupi, but there was so much blood that I couldn't figure out where to apply pressure. I cut open the canvas bag I had brought our lunches in and pulled it tight around the length of her body, praying that it would be enough.

I paddled then until the lactic acid in my arms was so palpable that I imagined my sweat would burn through the hand of anybody who dared to touch me. I watched from a hazy distance as I dripped blood into the water and schools of fish bumped against the canoe in pursuit of fresh meat, trailing us until we were picked up by a motor boat.

There were three men on the boat – one tied my canoe to its side, and the other two hauled the young man and Chaupi inside before rushing us all to the docks below the malecón.

I didn't hear my own voice when they asked me what had happened, nor did I feel the tears begin to stream when I realized that Chaupi had stopped breathing. I didn't even have it left in me to be surprised when somebody wiped a wet cloth over the man's face and I saw, through the bruising and swelling, that it was Qori. I just jumped off the boat, Chaupi's wrapped body pressed close against my chest, and when we got up onto the malecón, I climbed with both of them into the ambulance that was waiting for us.

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A week later, my mother was serving ají de gallina when a knock came at the door. It was Qori. His arms and face were covered in newly formed scabs, and when I swung open the door, he was standing stiff and unsure, nervously poking his shoe into a small inconsistency in the wood.

“Qori,” I said softly, allowing my gaze to fall to the circular inconsistency as well, as though it, rather than my old friend, was the most interesting thing on my doorstep.

“I wanted to say thank you,” he whispered, still without looking up.

Just then, my mother burst through the door.

“Dios mio,” she exclaimed, “Qori Sonqo? I haven’t seen you in years! Come quick,” she yelled over her shoulder to my father, “Look who it is.”

Unmoved by Qori’s half-hearted protests, she insisted on pulling him inside to eat with us. At first it was uncomfortable, but soon I was grateful for her chattiness. She asked him all of the questions that would have felt forced coming out of my mouth, that would have only sharpened the distance between us, shining a light on everything we no longer knew about one another.

When she told him that I’d gotten a job as an English teacher, he laughed.

“Of course you did,” he said, “You’re the only person outside of the tourist industry who speaks a lick of it. The administration will never figure out what nonsense you’re stuffing in the kids’ heads.”

And when my mother worked it out of him that he was dating a graduate of the National Amazonic Peruvian University, a Limenean who’d come to Iquitos to study marine biology, I couldn’t help myself.

“She chose well, eh? A fish magnet to show her around the river.”

Soon enough, we didn't need my mother. Just as easily as the psychedelic cumbias and insect songs fill the nighttime air along the malecón, we'd begun to fill in the distance between us.

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Three weeks later, Qori and I went to the market to buy dragon's blood ointment. Afterwards, we sat down in the Plaza de Armas, and Qori took off his shirt so that he could apply the ointment to his scars. At the base of his ribcage, I noticed one scar in particular. It looked like a P turned on its side, and its hump, instead of forming a half moon against the hard line of its back, pulled out into a spiral.