Kalakalan Cave:

The last few months had been hard for Trey, but moments like these made it all worth it; the breeze gently washing over his body through his loose fitting clothes, the fresh smell of the water wafting in the air, and the thin threads of sunshine that seeped past the curtain of leaves, casting a mesmerizing gleam on the rocky walls of the cave.

And of course Victoria.

She had moved him thousands of miles across the world and introduced him to a life he never knew he needed—one of peace. Now, as he squeezed her in his arms and felt the soft touch of her hair on his neck, he became even more determined to help her when she needed it the most. But not here. Not in Kalakalan cave. Here, there were no problems. How could there be in such a beautifully secluded oyster of life?

And as they gazed at each other as they gazed at the sun, their faces lit up with the warmth of their presence; and the multitude of anxious thoughts that were mutually exchanged, were mutually discarded—without the utterance of a word, but with the companionship of love.

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The ward was really just a house whose owner had passed away quite a few years ago. Since then it had been modified of course; extensions, repairs, the works, but it never seemed up to par for Trey. Back in his home country hospitals had been massive beacons of sanctuary that could accommodate more than enough of its citizens; here it was more like a slapped together B&B with a first aid station just in case.

Again, most of the villagers preferred local treatment of herbs and whatnot and would usually just go to a neighbor for help.

And so the days went pretty slow for Trey up until that night. He had been going through his usual schedule up until then; studying the doctors whenever a patient stubbled in (most of which had merely just got the wrong building), experimenting with what little tools he had, and dreaming about what he would have for dinner. But when that first victim came in, everything changed.

It was a woman, he remembered. Not too young, not too old. It wasn’t very important in these cases. What was important was treating the gaping wound at the bottom of her knee. And what would prove to be more important over the next couple of weeks was to find who had taken her leg off.

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“We’re running out of things to sell. And the medicine isn’t gettinging any cheaper.”

Victoria looked down. “And how’s she doing?”

“She’s getting worse. Much worse.” Her father stared at her with his dark eyes.

“Maybe I can see her?” She looked down at the floor. “You know, if she’s alright with it?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

The back room that harbored Victoria’s mother hadn’t seen light in almost a month. The blinds were always closed, as if hiding some hideous thing from the eyes of the villagers. A thing coarse with rough bumps, withering skin that peeled off like dust, and limbs that knotted like roots upon a much too old oak tree. Symptoms had started months ago, but ever since her skin started tearing off in chunks, they had put her in the back room and hid her disease from the open roads. Victoria still loved her mother deeply, but when she eyed this withered form lying in the dark, she couldn’t help but think that it couldn’t possibly *be* her mother, but an evil mimic who had consumed her.

And so she shut the door to the gloomy back room and burst out of the one to the sunny streets of life; where she could never be stuffed into some stifling coffin to spend her last days alive.

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A little bourbon here, a little bandage there. Nothing he couldn’t handle. The doctors had done the sawing, Trey could do the rest. There were more patients coming in everyday, each with his own heavy mark of corporal thievery. And Trey didn’t see any sign of stopping, especially since there was no regulated police force in the village and it had dissolved into some sort of anarchy in the main streets.

He carefully rewrapped his last bandage and stepped out for a break. There was a psycho on the loose, but Trey wouldn’t leave. He had come here and made this place his home. He had escaped from much worse things in his home country and wouldn’t lose faith in this new one.

Sauntering through the not so bustling market, he slowly magnetized towards the coast. He journeyed past the small forest of trees and floor of palms, past the dark passage of tumbled rocks and hazy air, and down the natural rocky staircase that led him out into the open breeze of the water. He could immediately feel the cool air hit his face and heard the rush of the waves out at sea as he made his way down the steep path. Around the bend, over the boulder, and through the curtain of leaves into Kalakalan Cave.

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“‘Kalakalan’, Victoria had explained to him, means ‘trade’ here, but it usually refers to commerce, like at the market. However, our ancestors believed in a market of the mind. In this cave, you trade your time for peace. You give up a part of your busy day to it, and it gives you calmness, solitude.”

Trey had been hooked and from then on he and Victoria went down there regularly. Today was no different.

As he brushed away the curtain he saw her sitting with her feet dipped in the subterranean lake. They had been down there a fair amount of times. It was deep and led to a series of small passageways and smaller caves with air pockets, but they preferred to stay up here most of the time. It was safer.

He took a seat next to her, peeled off his shoes, and dipped his feet in the water.

“I’m worried about my mom,” she finally said. “I don’t think she has too much longer.” She fixed her eyes on the murky pond below.

“We’re only an hour’s drive outside of Palawan. She can get good help there.” He grasped her shoulder and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Why won’t you just do it?”

“She won’t make the ride. Have you seen how the light breaks her down? I can only imagine what the road would do.” She paused and looked up at him. “How are you doing, though?”

Now it was Trey’s turn to look down. “I’m just…confused more than anything. I mean, why? In a place like this?”

And so they sat there circling their feet in the cool water and listening to the birds’ echoes reverberate around the cave walls; enshrined in the most beautiful sanctuary on Earth, yet tainted with the fear of leaving it.

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The cover of the night. He should strike soon. He just needed to figure out *where.* Locations had to be chosen strategically. Patterns can and will be found—always.

It was imperative that he complete his task successfully. He needed this job. His life depended on it.

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“Everybody out of the way!” The screaming voice of a nurse barely pierced through all the noise of the makeshift hospital. “C’mon, let’s go! Open up another table!”

*Not another one. How many could there be?* The last couple of days had yielded dozens of amputations and it showed no sign of stopping. But as this new gurney wheeled its way into the main room it was followed by a ghastly Victoria in close pursuit. And for Trey, it took very little time to figure out why.

“Holy shit it’s your dad!” But her glazed eyes continued to stare back at the victim.

Trey never remembered much about that operation; he could only ever envision those glazed eyes.

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Trey hadn’t talked to Victoria in weeks, now. The cuttings had slowed down, now only about one per week, but they still came. He knew she would be in the cave, but he didn’t want to intrude on her peace. Instead he would just watch her from a distance, on the shore but just outside the leafy curtain.

Likewise, Victoria knew he was nearby. But she wasn’t ready to talk, not yet. She had been helping her dad with water therapy ever since he was attacked. He would tread water in the deep pool of the cave and even go for some underwater dives. It was healing, this way, because there was less stress on the leg, but he could still fit in physical activity.

And so the days passed on grudgingly like this. Waiting and watching. Waiting and watching.

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“Your leg’s doing well, sir. It won’t be out of use much longer, don’t worry.” A doctor was doing a checkup on one of the patients. And Trey couldn’t help but overhear because that patient was Victoria’s dad. “And I’ve heard that you are remaining physically active?”

“I do my best to fit in regular swims and dives.” The doctor hesitantly eyed him. “I’ve been exploring underwater caves since forever. I can’t stop now. It’s the one thing that feels…normal.”

“I get that. I hope you bring equipment, though? With an injury like this, you never know how that could affect your respiration.”

The dad waved his hands. “Yes, yes, of course. I bring oxygen tanks and suits, the whole deal. Don’t worry about me, worry about that damn killer we still haven’t caught.”

For the first time in a while the ever present fear that had buried itself sprung out of its hole and attacked the mind of Trey.

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Trey had been watching Victoria’s dad swim and dive for quite a while now. Sure enough, he did have all the equipment he had talked about. It was just that…something didn’t seem right. It was something Victoria had mentioned a while back. Something about her family having to sell their possessions to buy medicine for her mother. *So why does he keep a whole damn suit and oxygen tank?*

This question had burned so strongly in his mind that he had had no other choice but to explore the grounds on which there may be a discrepancy—the cave. And so he took a large gulp of air before diving down just as Victoria’s dad had done.

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Time was running out. He could sense it. Sooner or later he would be caught; and he had certainly known this, but it was worth it. But if he could get just one last victim, maybe, maybe it would work.

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The water felt cool and relaxing but his heart sent sporadic piercing shocks everywhere. He had to move quickly. The cave system was small and, as Trey quickly realized, much too small to maneuver with an oxygen tank. His mission was to swim through what little area there was and see if he found anything unusual; and it only took about two minutes to find something.

There was a much smaller underwater cave about a quarter of the way through the system which served as a great stop to catch a new breath of air. However, Trey and Victoria usually hung out in the main cave because the air was too stuffy in the other one. And when Trey surfaced it was a whole lot stuffier than he remembered.

The smell instantaneously wrecked his consciousness and somersaulted his senses. It was a ghastly concoction of foul bile and distasteful death. And if the smell wasn’t enough to knock him down, the sight certainly was. Deep in the back corner lay a shadowy pile of dozens of hacked and bloodied limbs. A ten foot mountain of moral doom which boasted the spoils of many tortured vivisections.

Trey only took a few seconds to compile the evidence as he swayed side to side from the fumes. *He’s been harvesting limbs from his neighbors—hell, even himself!—and shoveling them down here through a damn oxygen tank! This man’s a psycho!* He tried to get back in the water, but only managed to get his legs in before the deadly fumes knocked him out on the rocky surface.

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Yes, just one more victim. And this one would certainly work. He eyed Trey’s body curiously, trivially weighing his options as if he hadn’t already made up his mind. This cave was sacred, known for its trades. If he had given it life, it would certainly offer up life to him, and his wife.

He hadn’t intended to go this far, but he was too invested. He needed to see it through. It would hurt Victoria, no doubt, but he had to.

So with a heavy heart, he cut away the bandages from his own leg and allowed what little life source he had left to drain away into the water of the cave.