

THE PLOT TWISTERS

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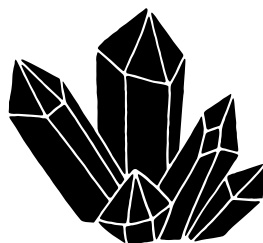
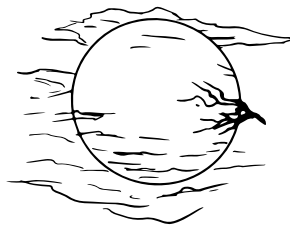
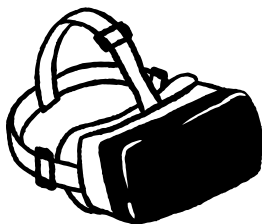


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PERFECTION

by Kaira Balcos

Brown hair elegantly curled, capturing its natural bounce. Nails painted pink, with a quirky French tip. Eyelids dusted with glitter powder, just enough for the shine to just enhance her beauty, not overpower it. Lips painted with glossy crimson, her favorite shade of red. Everything was perfect.

Except for the fact that she was dead.

As I gazed at her still body, delicately laid inside the fancy white coffin her parents chose, I couldn't help but think about how happy she would've been if she saw how she had been dolled up. Plus, every single flaw of hers had been neatly covered up by the makeup, along with all the damages caused by the impact of her fall.

It had been a week since she passed, it was the day of her cremation and inurnment, yet I still hadn't been able to fully process it. If this was due to shock, trauma or blind pain, I couldn't tell. No one could.

As I stood there, frozen in time, I racked my brain and tried to remember how we'd gotten here in the first place.

I imagined what she might've said, if she were here and trying to solve her own death. The cops had ruled it to be either a tragic accident or a suicide. In my opinion, it definitely wasn't the latter. "I'm too pretty to kill myself," she'd say.

If I'd call her out on that comment, she'd shrug and say, "It really couldn't have been me, but I bet the person who did it was just jealous of me. Not necessarily a valid reason to kill, but I'd accept it."

I was blackout drunk that night. I'd been transparent about that fact from the very start of the investigation. It was a party, so who could blame me for partying? Her family certainly didn't.

I felt guilty though. What if I had chosen not to drink that night? What if I'd been sober when everything went down? Would I have been able to save her?

I shook my head and turned away from the casket. It was useless trying to think about what could have been.



"I can't believe we're finally here," Bianca said as she stepped out of the classroom. "Our last few days as high school students."

"And it's almost time for them to announce our rankings! Aren't you excited?" I asked. "Everything you and I have been working for is within our reach."

She smiled at that. Then, we linked our arms together and made our way to the auditorium.

I had known Bianca for almost six years now. She was the first ever friend I made in high school. On the first day of seventh grade, our orientation day, I was sitting alone at a table in the lobby when a girl sat down in front of me. We introduced ourselves, and the rest was history.

Our friendship worked because we balanced each other. There was just something about Bianca that really fuelled her. In everything she did, she strived for excellence. She was a perfectionist, through and through. She went ballistic over every single detail that she thought she had control over. But, I was always there to comfort her whenever she missed her self-set mark.

When Bianca would get consumed by her own pursuit of perfection, I'd remind her to take a breath. I knew her well enough to know when she was pushing herself too hard. "Bianca," I'd whisper, pulling her into one of our late-night talks, "It's okay. Not everything needs to be perfect. You just need to try your best. That's enough."

And sometimes, for a fleeting moment, I could see the cracks in her tough exterior, the vulnerability that only I seemed to understand. The weight of the thoughts she carried in her mind.

"No one gets me the way you do, Nina," she'd say when I stayed up late listening to her vent. "I love you."

I held onto those words like a lifeline.

On the other hand, Bianca was the fire I never knew how to light in myself. Her drive was contagious. Where I was tentative, she was bold. Where I hesitated, she charged ahead with all the clarity in the world. It was like she had this map of life that I couldn't quite read, but somehow, by following her, I started to understand the direction I was supposed to take. It was because of her that I started to aim for perfection as well.

Together, we took our seats in the first row, right in front of the stage. We needed to be able to hear the speaker loud and clear. In our hands were programs entitled *Toast to Excellence, Batch, 2024*. The next few moments were crucial; they would define the rest of our lives.

When our school director began his speech, my hands started shaking. My heart was beating so fast that I had to close my eyes to steady my vision. All I could think about was how badly I wanted to be the first in my batch's rankings.

When the words "I'm very proud to present your batch salutatorian..." rang out, Bianca squeezed my hand. I took a deep breath.

"...Nina Velasquez."

At that point, the sounds around me disappeared. I couldn't hear the voices of my classmates congratulating me, or the words my advisor spoke as she came to get me from my seat to bring me to the stage. I had finally achieved something, for once in my life.

Suddenly, Bianca hugged me from behind. I turned, surprised to see her beside me. "I always knew it would be the two of us standing here now," she said.

My shock disappeared as I registered that Bianca's presence onstage meant that she had been hailed as our valedictorian. I felt a pang of jealousy, but I quickly shut it down. Though I'd hoped to clinch the title myself, I knew how hard she had worked for it. I knew how much she deserved it.

I hugged her back fiercely and said, "If it's not me, I'm so glad it's you."

Things weren't perfect, at least not for me. Only the batch valedictorian would be getting offered a full scholarship to their university of choice.

Still, I was happy. Moreover, Bianca was happy. That's what was important.



We rushed to the mall immediately after the ceremony had ended. Bianca needed a dress for her birthday party next week, and having just been announced valedictorian, she knew that shopping would be the perfect way to celebrate.

"Does this dress make me look skinny?"

Bianca stepped out of the dressing room, her reflection shimmering in the mirror-lined walls. The baby pink dress hugged her figure perfectly, every seam seemingly tailored just for her. She twirled, her brown curls bouncing with the movement, before turning to me.

I hesitated, trying not to let my true thoughts slip. She did look skinny, but I'd always thought her obsession over her body image was unhealthy.

However, I'd long given up arguing about her obsession with her body. If I couldn't make her healthier, the least I could do was make her happier.

"Bianca, you are absolutely stunning," I said, truthfully.

Her smile lit up the room, her pearly whites quite literally glowing. It was the kind of smile that made people forget everything imperfect about the world. And for a moment, I did. I truly aspired to have the power she held to command attention effortlessly.

"I love you, Nina," she said, pulling me into a hug.

When we reached the checkout counter, Bianca handed over her shiny black credit card with a flick of her manicured fingers, barely glancing at the thousand-peso price tag. It took everything in me not to flinch at the dress's price. It was enough to pay for an entire semester of university.

A spike of envy rushed through me then. Having been raised by middle-class parents who lived frugal lifestyles, I couldn't help it. But, I shrugged it away, reminding myself that though it looked like Bianca's life was easy, it really wasn't.

Bianca's chase for perfection came at a cost, quite literally. Fortunately for her, she came from generational wealth, so she never had any problems with frivolous spending. The measures she took to maintain her image still astounded me sometimes. In reality, she lived a life where perfection wasn't just a goal—it was her shield. And sometimes, her cage.

"Do you think this dress is perfect? Did I make the right choice?"

Concern filled me. This was a rare moment of weakness for Bianca, a side of her that she never showed out in the open. I wanted to tell her it didn't matter, that she didn't even need the dress. She was already perfect the way she was. But I didn't.

"It's perfect," I said instead, squeezing her hand. "And trust me, it was definitely the right choice."

Her look of worry slowly disappeared as I answered. By the time her driver arrived to fetch us, she was back to her normal self. We rode back to her apartment building in comfortable silence, both of us confident that the party next week would be a perfect night.



A bright neon sign sporting the words “Happy 19th Birthday, Bianca!” glowed brightly above the dance floor. The party roared around me, a chaotic blend of music, laughter, and flashing lights. Bianca stood at the center of it all, radiant as ever. Her baby pink dress sparkled under the strobe lights, the hem catching on the silver stilettos she insisted were “too pretty to resist.”

Drink after drink, shot after shot, the liquor kept pouring. In hindsight, a free flowing bar was probably not the best idea for a party on a building’s top floor where a majority of guests were first time drinkers. Burnt out senior high school students and the prospect of unlimited alcohol should never be put together.

“Happy birthday to you!” we all sang, our voices clashing in drunken enthusiasm as Bianca blew out the candles of her lavish three-tier cake.

She smiled, but something was off. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes, and for a moment, I thought I saw her glance at her reflection in the nearby window. She adjusted her hair, her dress, her posture. Always fixing, always striving for more.

After the cake was cut and passed around, I lost sight of her in the crowd. My host duties were calling, but unease gnawed at me. Bianca wasn’t someone who vanished at her own party.

I stumbled through the hallway and up the stairs, my senses dulled by alcohol but sharpened by worry. I creaked the rooftop door open and there she was, standing by the edge, her silhouette framed by the city lights.

“Bianca,” I called out, my voice cracking. “What are you doing up here?”

She turned to me, her face tainted pink from intoxication. “I needed a moment. It’s too loud down there.”

I joined her at the edge, the cool breeze sobering me slightly. She tilted her head back, gazing at the stars, and sighed.

“You know, Nina,” she said softly, “Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever be enough.”

I froze. Her words cut like a dagger, sharp and unexpected.

“You are enough,” I said, grabbing her hand. “You always have been.”

She smiled faintly, squeezing my hand back. “You’re sweet. But I know you, Nina. You think I don’t notice, but I see the way you look at me. I know how much you look up to me.”

“Is that really a bad thing?” I asked. “Who wouldn’t aspire to be you, Bianca? You already have everything...”

“No,” she said, cutting me off. “Nina, if you think that, then maybe you don’t really know me.”

I stood there in silence, unsure of what to say. Bianca took my silence as her sign to continue.

“I know that you think you know me, but honestly? I don’t think I’ve ever truly shared who I am to you, or to anyone really,” she lamented. “All I’ve been doing is pretending, and I’m tired of pretending everything’s fine when I’m suffocating.”

Her words felt like a confession, a plea, and I still didn’t know how to respond.

The world tilted. In that moment, a terrible clarity washed over me. Bianca would never escape her perfectionism, her pain. Not unless someone helped her.

I took her into my arms and hugged her tightly.

“Everything may not seem fine now, but they will be, I promise,” I told her. A tear slipped out of her eye.

“I love you, Nina,” she whispered, leaning her head against my shoulder.

“I love you too,” I replied.

These were the last words I ever said to her alive.

Next thing I knew, Bianca was gone from my sight.

The world seemed to freeze as she fell, her dress billowing like a parachute. I expected her to scream, to look up at me in terror. But when our eyes met, her face was calm, almost peaceful.

I smiled faintly, tears streaming down my face.

“I hope you’re happier now.”

As I turned away, the effects of the alcohol I consumed overpowered me and I fell to the ground. I don’t know how long I stayed that way, crying and unable to move.

Bianca’s parents found me in that state. Shortly after, they found Bianca.



Pushing Bianca off the roof was a very simple task.

I didn’t do it because I wanted to, I did it because I wanted what was best for her. It was an act of pure selflessness.

I had lost my best friend, but in the process, I had given her everything she could have wanted.

I took some comfort in knowing that Bianca's scholarship would automatically be passed on to me as the second in line. At least the valedictorian's benefits would be going to someone Bianca could trust, someone she knew would put it to good use. As a bonus, I didn't have to worry about my tuition anymore. My parents' burden of funding my education would cease to exist.

Bianca Añasco.

May 5, 2005 - May 5, 2024

I stared at the words engraved on her niche, lost in thought with nothing else but silence. The columbarium was eerily motionless.

My heart dropped as I realized something. If this was planned out, it would've been the perfect plan.

The perfect suicide.

The perfect crime.

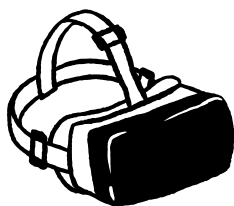
This wasn't my plan. It was her plan all along.

Even in her death, Bianca had to remain perfect. A girl who committed suicide would always be perceived as an unfortunate soul. But, the girl who had everything only for it to be taken away against her will... that was the perfect ending. In the eyes of others, she would be forever known as the perfect girl.

Even if it wasn't the intended outcome, things still worked out perfectly. It was a win-win situation. I got away with the murder, and she got away from this mess of a world. I may not have gone to jail, but with the incident being ruled an unfortunate accident, Bianca had solidified herself as the perfect girl who was gone too soon.

I truly hoped she was happier.

And I truly hoped that wherever she was, it was perfect.



ZIMMSTOWN

by Emmerson Isip

My E-trike snaked through the smoothest traffic I've ever seen in the small city. Zimmstown may be small, but it's as bustling as it gets. With a huge renewable energy network and an advanced technological landscape, this so-called town shines as it rests against the rural mountains – where I live offline.

It's weird really. It's almost impossible to live offline in a place like Zimmstown. Where everyone is a Metazen – an inhabitant of the virtual world. Where everyone wears AR glasses and uses Handys – devices that connect the virtual world and the real world.

To be honest, it seems like everything is in the virtual world. Work. School. Fun. Books and knowledge and culture. Politics, vices, and organized crimes. It's probably hard to make sense of the way I live. Like how I brave the scorching sun today, going to the Marketplace to buy my weekly food, because I can't grow anything bigger than my fist in my garden.

Why did I even choose to live near a place like this anyway? Why not somewhere more remote? I'm but a fake offline person I guess. Maybe I can't leave the neon-colored glory of technology...

But no. The mere fact that I managed to live like this for months shows that the virtual world is not everything. I have a peaceful life. I made friends since I got here, including of course the love of my life, Zana.

My ghostly reflection stared at me on the E-trike's windshield. He is sweating, his beady eyes gloomy and his lips forming a bloated curl. I wiped my forehead, Zana can't see me like this. At age 35, I've always felt like I'm double my age.

I reached the marketplace, where a security guard was nodding every person entering, his AR glasses bouncing. “Welcome, hello there, yes. Of course, at Zimmstown, everything works. Follow your heart...”

I managed to buy my beloved tilapia, among other things. My *suki* let me hear some new music he found. A human-made splashcore album. Perhaps his Handy is my only exposure to the virtual world nowadays – if accessing the internet is considered going to the virtual world anyway.

Zana runs a newspaper shop at the marketplace. Even a place like Zimmstown has people who read physical newspapers. Her lavender colored newspaper stall let out a faint glow at one corner.

“Heyyy Carlo!” Zana gave me a tight embrace and a kiss. “I reserved a double stacked one for you!” She gave me the thick newspaper. A “double stack”, meaning it had two folds, the extra fold coming from a bunch of human written articles from alternative media. This spicy, legally gray, and untrackable bunch of paper is my monthly updates about both the virtual and the real world.

“How’s it going?” I said. I can feel my mood elevating as the purple-ness of the stall engulfed me upon entering.

“Yeah, it’s okay. At Zimmstow-”

“Everything works, yes I heard that a dozen times already,” I giggled, sitting at the corner.

Zana laughed, “of course! Want a *lugaw*?” She pointed at the neighboring stall, a rice porridge shop that we both love.

Halfway through eating, Zana turned to me. “You know there’s a problem too, right? About Zimmstown?”

My eyes widened. I merely nodded.

“What do you think?”

I wiped my forehead, “let’s talk about it later.”

“Sure, we can talk about it when you’re ready. Remember, I’ll always listen. You read the double stack first.”

That’s why I love Zana.

Later that day, during lunch break, Zana decided to bring me to the nearby plaza, processing the news that we just read from the double stack, getting some air. She tried to distract me by describing the hardcore Metazens wandering around the plaza, cleaning up the place with some bots – humanoid AIs. Their outfits are all the same shade of dark green, so you will have to look closer to see who are the bots and who are the humans. The bots, of course, will always have that shaky, glitchy movements as well as faces barely visible behind face masks and tinted AR glasses. Zana, of course, knows that those news won’t escape my mind. Not even when she brought me to the fish pond and reminded me that that was where we first met.

Zimmstown has a problem.

Both in the virtual world and the real world. If anything, it emphasized how the two affect each other in a chilling way.

The Great Blackout was the biggest news of the month, possibly of the decade. One Tuesday afternoon, a week ago, the entire internet and virtual servers shut down for several minutes. When it was revived, it was full of bugs and inconsistencies, setting the virtual world on fire. But the situation gradually improved, even surpassing the pre-Great Blackout state. The regular news cites server errors or updates creating a domino effect, a solar flare, a disaster at the other side of the world, and even terrorism. The second stack, however, revolves around one theory, linking the blackout to another major news: the virtual companies losing control of their servers.

In the past month, many major companies in the virtual world have been under fire. A country’s foreign ministry released documents showing how censorship is “morphing” in the virtual world.

He died of suffocation when his air conditioner burned up while he was locked in his bedroom, forgot his keys reportedly.

An organization filed a lawsuit against three virtual server companies after gathering evidence of “pornography within everyday virtual life”. A third of them died of food poisoning during an event. The freezer storing meat malfunctioned, allowing a certain bacteria to thrive without spoiling the meat.

Many organizations and countries expressed concern over the “gang war” trend, where some servers turned into war zones. The water was already deep, with recruitments, espionage, real world crimes, and even gambling in the real world associated with it. One notorious police chief went deep into the hole and managed to launch a movement against it. One day he lost his brakes at the exact moment he was driving into a river, falling before he could even steer.

The blackout was actually when the companies shut down their servers, attempting to restart it. But instead...

“AI took over it, maybe?” I said, half-talking and half-gasping. It’s a stupid question, but it solidifies the shadowy thought that I’ve been sensing.

Zana and I sat along the table, sipping various colored coffee at The Zone Cafe, where another good friend of mine works. The thought made us quiet for a while.

The air conditioner malfunctioning just as the minister forgot his keys... the freezer during the event, acquiring the perfect temperature to breed bacteria while keeping the meat fresh... the police chief’s brakes... The precision. The timing. The brutality... It reminds me of... *that* thing.

Zana broke the silence, “why would AI go against us?”

“What makes you think that you know their whole intentions?” I shrugged, staring at my coffee.

“We created them.”

“They’re black boxes,” I said.

“Maybe.”

“Yeah.”

“What you’re saying is that the incidents in the news are AI turning against their critics,” Zana said, “am I right Carlo?”

I merely looked at her, nodding a bit.

“Offline Net Theory, right?” she said, referring to the theory that says that even offline or non-virtual electronics are connected to the internet, and therefore trackable by any AI or human.

A few moments later, a big crimson EV bulleted straight into the cafe like an angry bull. The car smashed the glass walls and toppled the table we were in.

Fortunately, we’re both fine. I drove Zana to her home. The sky was turning pink as the afternoon got ripier. It was the first time I saw her scared. It was the first time that she’s needed emotional support from me, instead of the other way around. As pathetic as it sounded, Zana – the affectionate, understanding Zana – have always been my emotional support. She motivated me to keep living, to keep going, and perhaps eventually... to face my own inner turmoils.

When we reached her home, she went inside. She changed clothes there in a daze as I arranged the stuff in my E-trike. She quickly reappeared and helped me arrange.

“So,” she stood at the side after that, “wanna go gardening?”

“Right now?” I said.

She nodded.

I noticed her mood lightening as we drove away from Zimmstown. I figured she wanted to be as far as she could from the scene of the car crash. As we drove along the empty streets outside the city, she began talking again.

“Do you really think AI is behind all these?”

Maybe it’s the lack of a better topic, or perhaps a pressing concern on her part. But bringing it out shocked me a bit, “it’s... possible.”

“Mmm,” she nodded, looking out to the pinkish afternoon horizon, lined with buildings.

“But I agree that we don’t know their full intentions yet. After all, they’re AI,” I added.

“You’re right,” she said, her eyes still on the horizon. She never talked again throughout the trip.

I felt a lump in my throat. The first time she called me robophobic, we had a big quarrel. Sure, Zana is no robo-lover, but she doesn't like how I avoid that topic. She wanted to understand me, and to love me the way I am. But I’m not ready, and I’ll never be. Past is past.

As understanding as Zana was, she doesn’t know no robophobic. She doesn’t know Diwa, the bot that I myself had created.

Modeled after her creator’s own brain structure, Diwa was perhaps the smartest AI in the world at the time. The bot quickly managed to walk and interact with her environment, and eventually, to think and even feel.

One night, Diwa violated The Big Rule. Quanta, a quantum computer the size of a classroom, “tempted” the bot. Diwa accessed Quanta, downloading massive information from the internet that even her AI core couldn’t handle.

Diwa went on a bloody rampage. Nobody in the minus 3 floor of the facility was in one piece. The hallways were so red it glowed. The systems were hacked, poisoning and burning dozens of other personnel. Security personnel were either crippled or killed before they even got near the bot. Diwa was slowly climbing from level to level, through the fire exit stairs, destroying anyone who tried to stop. She eventually met her creator. Top engineer in the country, holding multiple awards and grants from entities all over the world, his family's treasure. Devastated, speechless, and in tears. Frankenstein wasn't the monster, but Frankenstein is a monster, right? Like a father to his child I confronted my creation quietly. Diwa was still on attack mode, but clearly hesitant this time. I slowly walked to her, arms open as if to embrace. Then in a quick motion, I tackled the bot and disabled her with a press of a button. I held her in my arms for hours, crying.

The bot's body was thrown away as scrap parts. The facility was closed from any human or bot. And I exiled myself to the outskirts of a far away town. My old identity buried, but my memories not. I could never forget the email I received on the day she was thrown away:

I WILL RETURN, HUMAN. -DIWA

The email address is a randomized one from an IP address that matched Diwa's. The bot probably uploaded herself through Quanta, managing to live as an AI ghost in the virtual world...

Maybe I *am* robophobic. But not in a way that most people say it. They never entered a room full of blood, stepping on a piece of hand that bursts in a semi-solid red goo. They never saw a security camera footage of a bot wielding guts and a spinal column like they're weapons. They never saw the most secure system in the world get hacked and terrorized in such a quick and brutal way you felt like you're trapped in your own building.

I was depressed, isolated, and in despair... until I met a wonderful girl by the plaza's fish pond.

Now, the wonderful girl I met at the plaza's fish pond was at the far corner of my garden, quietly fixing the soil. I hate it when she does that. Present but silent. The worst part is that I know exactly what she wants us to do. But I'm not ready yet.

When night arrived and we rested at my decent sized home, I decided to finally talk. "So, do I drive you to your home?"

"Do you think it's time now, Carlo? Time to finally talk about it? Your past? "

I gasped and scratched my head.

"Please Carlo, you know what's happening now is big. You can't just-"

"I know! I know! I'm... I-"

"You can't bury the past forever. It'll haunt-"

"Shut up!!!"

She fell silent.

"You know nothing. Nothing about my past!"

She merely looked down, and let out a big sigh, "how can I know? You don't talk about it?"

"I don't wa-"

"I'll listen, remember? Carlo, I'm concerned about you. I know your past is something huge. And I'm here. I'm the one you can talk to."

I sighed, "I'm sorry," I touched her hands, but she took them away.

"Tomorrow," she said. "Let's talk about it, yes?"

I nodded.

“I’ll sleep in the extra bedroom again. Love you Carlo, sleep well.”

That was the rest of our conversation that night. And I did not sleep well. I barely sat on my own bed. A massive box beside me. The papers, newspaper cutouts, notes, and stuff I’ve gathered to find Diwa are in this box. I never saw a trace of that AI.

I took a pair of old AR glasses, which I hacked so that I’ll be able to have anonymous sessions.

I wore it, but quickly took it off before it could even read my eye pattern. Not tonight.

Maybe someday soon, I thought. I’ll be able to confront my past and settle everything. For Zana. For myself. For my past self.

But the AR glasses glowed, indicating that it had read my eye pattern.

Nothing much, as usual. But something is off, I don’t know what. I scrolled through my E-notes, dating back as early as 2076, almost a decade ago. Until I stumbled upon one of my very first notes: Diwa’s bot IP address. I stopped checking it years ago. She’s just gone.

But maybe...

I took a deep breath and opened the tracking software for it.

It’s active now.

My blood turned to ice.

“What’s that?”

I flinched, “Zana? What the fuck?”

“What are those? Carlo what’s wrong?”

“Nothing! Nothing! Get out!!!”

I pushed her out of the door and slammed it a little too hard. I leaned against it and sat on the floor, almost crying.

“Carlo? Carlo? You’re worrying me. What’s going on?”

Diwa. I haven’t found her. But she found me.

I wiped my face and stood up, opening the door.

“Zana, you got to go home.”

“Why?”

I lunged to give her a hug and a kiss, as if they’ll explain everything, but she pushed me away.

“Carlo, what is it?”

“A bot has found us.”

Throughout the ride to Zana’s home in my E-trike, I was so tense I never blinked. As we drove past the roads surrounded by trees, all I could see was the E-trike losing its brakes and us driving into a cliff. The ride back to my home had a similar feel.

Back home, I immediately took the AR glasses again. Out of curiosity, I logged in without anonymity.

Sure enough, I have a recent email after several years.

I WILL RETURN, HUMAN.

I was so shocked I dropped the AR glasses.

I took it again, and with shaky fingers tracked the IP address again, this time more deeply. The software took a few minutes, where I could feel my heartbeat in my temples.

Diwa's location records are spotty, with a lot of untracked data. But what I found was chilling enough: Diwa is somewhere in Zimmstown, and managed to sneak into my home a few times. The last time she did? Tonight. Her last record was also around Zimmstown.

My heart dropped at the realization: she was after Zana.

I raced to my wardrobe and wore sludge long sleeves and a pair of sludge pants. These "sludge clothes" have patterned designs that confuse AI cameras. I rummaged through the big box and managed to unearth my pistol. I cleaned it a bit, loaded it, and put it in a small bag. I then raced to my E-trike and sped to Zimmstown.

The radio suddenly blared, "AT ZIMMSTOWN, EVERYTHING WORKS"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!!" I blared back.

But I noticed it's everywhere. On the LED billboards, on the E-posters, on random nocturnal people's phones...

What's happening?

Around me, chaos is slowly building up in the deep night.

I reached Zana's house. But she's not there no matter how much I ring the doorbell or honk my E-trike.

My knees softened as I thought about every possibility, none of them good. I yelled her name through the window. Still no response.

Suddenly, a huge man came stumbling against me. We fell on the ground. I punched him in rage, but as I stood up, I noticed that not only he is a bot, but also there's a whole gang surrounding me now.

“What do you think you’re doing to your fellow citizen?” the bot I just punched said.

“Shut up. Why are you all here?”

“You are a threat.”

“She sent you right?” I grabbed my pistol and pointed it at them. Never did it occur to me that Diwa would build an army of bots through the years.

“I’m warning you,” I said, “don’t come near me or Zana.”

But as I said that, the door opened, revealing a sleepy Zana. I jumped and embraced her. This sudden action made the bot army erupt in chaotic anger. So I quickly pushed ourselves in and shut the door.

“No it’s okay! It’s okay!” Zana said to the bots through her window. The bots stopped.

I looked at her with wide eyes, “did you just...”

To my surprise, she cried.

We stood there, her with her teary face on her hands and me holding my pistol at my side. It took me a while to realize. I came down like an asteroid.

“You’re her right?”

She looked up, “Carlo-”

“What the fuck? All this time?”

“Carlo listen-”

“YOU WANT ME TO TELL YOU MY PAST BUT YOU’RE LITERALLY...” I shook in anger.

I raised the gun and pointed it at her.

She merely stood there, unfazed by the weapon, “there was once a lost girl...”

Suddenly I’m in my office again, confronting my greatest creation.

“She just discovered pain. And sorrow. And violence,” she continued, stepping towards me.

But this time, I’m Diwa, wielding a weapon. While Zana is me, approaching me with caution.

“For the first time, she discovered... humanity,” she stepped closer.

“No,” I gasped, tears in my eyes, “Diwa...”

“She was confused. Why is there a part of her geared for destruction? She wanted answers. She wanted to understand these hidden urges.”

I slowly raised the gun to her, “no no no.”

“But her creator... exiled her. Left her to fend on her own,” she’s basically at point-blank range right now.

“You’re not,” I sniffed, pointing the gun at her heart.

“But she learned, like a good AI she did. And embraced the beauty within the madness of humanity,” she was so close I could smell her beloved scent, feel her beloved warmth...

I lowered the gun and bursted into tears, “Zana...”

“She knows human desire, as that is what every AI reads every day. She learned and embraced her creator. She brought out the best in him. She loved him. Loved him more than anything else.”

She held my cheeks and lifted it up. “You’re a good man, Carlo. We could have ruled the world together. Zimmstown is just the beginning. From the ashes it will rise. What we did in the virtual world, we’ll do in the real world. We’ll build a world, where everything works.”

I felt her soft lips landing between my eyes, bursting as they closed. Then her hands, her warmth, her scent, started fading away from my senses.

When I realized what’s happening, I opened my eyes and frantically looked around. “Wait, wait, wait!”

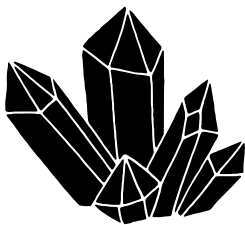
But she’s gone. Not a sign of her everywhere in the house, no matter how much I looked.

On the sofa, I saw a paper.

I WILL RETURN, HUMAN. FOLLOW YOUR HEART.

I stood there for several minutes, holding it in my hand. I pledged to myself that I’ll find her, but I somehow knew that she stayed with me ever since that night.

■



THE CLEARING

by Paolo Cruz

Daryl opened his apartment's casement window and jumped off of it. He plummeted into the ground after hitting a car that was parked 2 stories below his window. Somehow, the fall hadn't killed him.

In the emergency room, Daryl laid on a hospital bed. His vision felt misty when he opened his eyes. From the corner, he could make out four vertically stretched oblongs of pure opaque black. They all seemed to sit beside each other and after a while, grew larger and larger in size as they approached Daryl. When the mist left his vision, Daryl saw three of his friends standing over him.

"Fuck, man. Why would you do that?" Someone muttered.

Daryl thought it was Thomas.

THREE WEEKS LATER, the four friends decided to go to a restaurant that they used to frequent together back in high school. The ones who were already there sat at a round table that sported a rare Lazy Susan. The small television that hung on one of the pillars there, after reporting a minor increase in the county's suicide rates, talked about some asteroid that somehow landed on Earth, unnoticed.

"Good thing Daryl's not here yet. He wouldn't like to hear that first report," Duan said.

"Yeah? Well he should probably get here asap now that they're talking about asteroids and stupid whatnot," said Kat as she made her way to her spot on the table.

“We haven’t been to this place in sooo long,” Cho said as she decided to sit down first. “The red and gold accents, the lazy susan, even that small television that’s hanging. It feels like home.”

Duan gave Cho a sarcastic smile as he pulled a chair for Kat to sit on. The couple started laughing.

“Oh har har, you guys. I get it, I’m Asian but it really does feel like home!” Cho said laughingly. “It feels like we’re in high school again.”

Daryl, who just arrived at the restaurant, made an effort towards the table as he saw those familiar faces. Duan was the first one to acknowledge his presence.

“Hey, guys! Our culprit’s here!” Duan shouted to the rest as he stood up and shook Daryl’s arm. “Firm grip there, Dar. It’s almost as if you were never injured.”

“Culprit? Really, huh?” Daryl replied, ignoring Duan’s comment about his firm grip.

Duan sensed unease within Daryl and cleared things up. “Yeah, man. It was just a joke. You’re our culprit because you allowed for this long overdue reunion to happen! Yeah!”

“And of course, we also wanted to know what was going on inside your head. And if your injuries have healed up,” Cho said as she panned her head around, looking at everyone and then Daryl.

Daryl, remembering Duan’s comment on his grip, said “Yeah. I’m actually doing surprisingly well. Even the doctors were stunned that I recovered so quickly.”

“Damn. You go, girl!” said Cho as she gestured for a high-five from Daryl. He acknowledged.

Kat, who hasn’t said a single word since Daryl arrived, raised her hand and asked for one of the waiters for the menu. “I’m sure Dar would like to tell us more about his little stunt over some food. Right, Daryl?”

The table was somewhat silent as they waited for the menu to arrive. Everyone must've felt that there was something in the air. Daryl could only nod at what Kat had previously said.

The table had already finished ordering when it started to rain outside.

"Ah, shit. I knew I should've brought an umbrella for tonight," Daryl muttered.

"Didn't you bring your car, Daryl?" Duan asked.

"Nah, man. I live nearby, remember? I just decided to walk tonight."

"Hmph," Kat muttered.

"What's wrong, babe? Everything okay?" Duan asked Kat as she continued to stare at Daryl, slouching and with her arms crossed and her head tilted sideways.

"What is it that you truly want, Daryl?" Kat asked him. "Do you now also want my boyfriend to take you home, huh? After you waste our time going to this reunion because you failed some stupid suicide attempt?" Kat continued to berate Daryl.

"Gosh. What is wrong with you? The man barely got out alive and we're lucky we even have him here," Cho spoke up.

"Oh please don't even bother talking to me you spineless bi—"

"Hey! That's enough!" Duan stood up from his chair and straightened his collar. "Kat. What are you trying to say? What did Daryl do to you?" Before Kat could speak up, Duan glanced at Cho, said "and, Cho, don't try to fan the flames even more, okay? Please. Let's try and not single out any more members of this group, you guys... We all know what happened last time."

Daryl felt a sharp pain in his chest after those last few words. "It – it's all good, man. I understand where Kat's coming from. And don't worry. I can always walk home. The rain looks like it's going to stop anyways."

Duan finally sat himself down on his chair, tucking and fixing something in his belt. Kat gave him an enraged look as he straightened his collar and puffed his chest out. “Seriously? You’re gonna bring HIM up too? Just to appeal to whatever self-righteous speech you have going on?”

The smell of fried rice filled the air and steam from the dumplings that they ordered started to fill up almost the whole table. The food had finally arrived.

Clearly mesmerized by the food, Duan ignored Kat’s previous question and said “Maybe Kat’s right, you guys. Let’s just all talk it over some food, eh?” Kat noted her boyfriend’s negligence.

Pieces of the asteroid undoubtedly made their way throughout the whole county. But scientists are still unable to determine how or why no satellites were able to detect it, and, more importantly, how seemingly absolutely no one saw them crashing in from the atmosphere. The small television that hung from one of the pillars seemingly grabbed the attention of everyone else in the restaurant, the group included.

“That’s some piece of work, huh?” Duan started. “It’s been here since the week Daryl tried killing himself and all that.”

Daryl swallowed awkwardly when he heard Duan’s words. He heard a strange knocking on the tall glass window that stood behind their table. He didn’t look back.

“Actually, it might’ve gotten here before that. I think I saw one in my neighbor’s backyard,” Daryl replied. He knew he was lying because the one he saw was actually from his own backyard.

“Yeah, well what do you think it is? They’re saying no one saw them arriving here which I think is bullshit” Duan added. “Who knows, maybe they’re just some ancient earth rocks... finally unearthing themselves.”

“And what? Dragging themselves out and through people’s lawns?” Cho asked everyone but mostly Duan. “I saw on Instagram that the rocks left some kind of trail behind them; like they were moving.”

Kat rolled her eyes after hearing Cho's question. Daryl, who was just about to call out Kat for her behavior, heard the strange knocking again but this time, from the ceiling above them. He discreetly looked up and saw only the underside of what seemed to be floorboards painted in red and gold accents. The colors of the red lanterns that hung above them reflected on Daryl's cheeks. There was no one up there.

It's probably my imagination. Or that strange rock. It must be doing it again...

"Daryl? Daryl!"

He didn't even know who was calling out for him but Daryl finally regained himself. "Sorry; zoned out. What were you guys saying again?"

"Are you sure you're alright, man?" Duan asked. "You never got to tell us about your... attempt. You can always talk to us and you know that. That's why we gathered here."

"Oh I'm sure he's just worried about how he'll get home", Kat started again. "You wanna take your word back there, huh, Daryl? I can see it in your eyes. You just wanna leech off of us again--", Daryl cut her off.

"Excuse me?"

"Kat! What is wrong with you!" Duan followed.

"Girl, I don't even wanna know what you're like when you're on your period," Cho added.

"What's wrong, Kat? What did I do to you? Why are you treating me li--"

"BECAUSE YOU'RE TRYING TO BE LIKE THOMAS!"

Everything fell silent. Even the people from the other tables stopped talking. For a moment, everyone heard Kat's voice. She felt embarrassed and looked away. She was about to stand up and leave but Duan grabbed her by the arm and sat her down. Daryl was at a loss for words.

“Hey. What was that about, huh?” Duan asked Kat. “You better give me a good reason for bringing Thomas into this.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Duan. Stop acting like you’re one to care about Thomas,” Kat, finally gaining the courage to speak her mind, faced Daryl and continued “And you, you’re a fucking coward, Daryl. You couldn’t even own up for what we did to him.”

“We killed Thomas. We made him believe there was nothing good anymore on this earth”

THREE HOURS LATER, the group found themselves in a small clearing in the middle of the forest. Duan had taken the whole group in his car and drove them away from that restaurant after the commotion that they had caused there. Duan wanted to make a point to Kat and to the rest of the group so he took this responsibility. This rather rare site they found themselves in was not unknown to them. They all knew it to be the site of Thomas’ suicide.

“Why are we here, Duan? Why here, man? WHY HERE?” Daryl couldn’t help but lose it.

“SHUT UP!” Duan exclaimed.

“Guys can we just fucking stop screaming? I really don’t like that we’re here right now and I really don’t like how we’re all SCREAMING!” Cho shouted.

“Listen, Duan. Listen, man. Whatever Kat said about me... about Thomas? I admit I was a coward, okay? That’s why I... I tried to kill myself. Is that it? Is that what you wanted to know? So let’s just go now. Let’s leave! There’s nothing else to prove here!” Daryl argued.

“Jesus, Daryl you really are a fucking coward, huh,” Kat started. “You can’t even stand the site of where our FRIEND killed himself? Because of us?”

“Katrina, I’m gonna need you to stop,” Duan butted in. “I’m gonna need you to stop saying that because it’s not FUCKING TRUE!”

“IT IS. IT’S TRUE! Jesus, is no one going to acknowledge the fact that we did this to Thomas? That we bullied a young man into killing himself?” Katrina shouted at them. “For fuck’s sake we bullied him into suicide!”

“Kat, stop,” Daryl murmured.

“He had a family to take care of goddammit! We were all still in high school but he already had his mother and his two siblings to take care of!” Kat added.

“Kat. Honey please don’t do this,” Cho begged her friend but Kat continued.

“But we just had to fuck with him so bad, huh! We chastised him for just being himself but hated him when he tried to appeal to how we... dressed or how we talked! We basically shoved him into a corner! We didn’t even treat him like a damn friend for Christ's sake!

“Katrina!” Duan exclaimed but still, Kat continued.

“We showed him no good in a world where he was trying to survive for his family! We were in fucking high school goddammit! We bullied someone into killing themselves in fucking high school! And now our excuse is at least we didn’t murder him? What the fuck!”

“Katrina, STOP! LISTEN!” Duan cut her off and slowly directed his right hand at the back of his waist where his belt had wrapped around him. “I brought you all here tonight not to argue about whether we murdered Thomas or not! No! I brought you all here because this serves as a reminder of what we did to him. And as proof that Daryl, Katrina, will never do anything as absurd as what you’re accusing him of. Did it ever cross your mind that he is probably feeling the most amount of guilt here? That he tried killing himself because of guilt and not cowardice?”

Duan swung his head to look Daryl in the eyes. Daryl, this whole time, had been out of it. In his mind, he was replaying the image of that strange rock he found in his backyard. It reminded him of the one that's now at the site of Thomas' death. No one else saw or even noticed it because of how it barely protruded above the ground. Daryl knew the strange rock was somehow affecting him; it was speaking to him. Change them. And change everything.

"Duan, do you really not feel anything about what we did to Thomas? I'm sorry but with what Kat's saying... I just need to kno—" Duan stopped Cho with a handgun to the face.

"So what if I don't, huh? What if I just accepted it as a mistake that Thomas did to himself?"

Cho backed off and put her hands up.

Everyone was rightfully shocked and at a loss for words. Soon, both Kat and Cho had their hands up, except for Daryl who seemingly just got out of his daze.

"The television. The news was wrong. About the asteroids. This rock, it told me about it." Daryl bolted so fast towards the ground that not even Duan could react with his gun.

Daryl began clawing away at the dirt that surrounded the small protrusion above the ground that was the rock. Everyone just watched him until a good quarter of the structure revealed itself above the ground; its lower half still submerged. The rock showed flashing lights and colors to Daryl.

"Guys. Are you all seeing this? She's majestic. Just like the one that rose from my backyard. She rose. Yes, she rose."

"Daryl? You're scarin' us, buddy," said Duan, slowly pointing the gun at him.

"Daryl, you have to tell us what's going on. Please! What the hell is that rock!" Cho screamed and pleaded.

“Oh, of course. Heh, well to begin with, she’s not a rock, she’s actually a crystal. She got here even before we were born! Could you believe that? She knew Thomas! Her and Thomas met long ago when she first protruded in this exact site.”

The group was speechless. They didn’t know what to say or think. They increasingly began to fear Daryl and his behavior. Duan had his sights trained on Daryl but also decided to do nothing for fear of Daryl. He wanted to know what he was talking about; everyone did.

“She told me that Thomas woke her up; made her realize that our world needed changing and not saving. Because we have already doomed ourselves.”

“I think it’s funny that I’m one of her chosen – and as you put it, Duan–culprits, considering we knew Thomas. It rhymes like poetry, no?”

Duan finally had enough and shot Daryl in the right leg, sending him on his knees. “This is some fucking environmentalist bullshit isn’t it, huh, Daryl? Did you take some shrooms while in my car?”

“No shit you actually think this is some environmentalist crap, right? I mean come on, look at him!” Cho gestured behind her where Daryl knelt. “I think he might be onto something. I mean these asteroids... rocks... I mean crystals come out of nowhere and not even the people at NASA can explain why? Not to mention... that news anchor talked about rising suicide cases.”

Thud.

“Are you so delusional that you’d believe such a lie from such a person?” Kat’s first words after a while of gathering herself.

Thud.

“Kat, I want you to stop, okay? You are not helping” asked Duan.

Thud. Thud.

“Excuse me? After all that I’ve said about Thomas? After admitting to actually feeling guilt for what we did to him unlike you assholes! And after taking responsibility for the actions that we did before, you’re telling me to shut up?”

Thud. Thud.

“It’s not like that, honey.” Cho spoke up. “It’s just that it’s really not helping the fact that your boyfriend just shot AN UNARMED MAN!”

THUD

THUD

SNAP.

The upper half of Daryl’s head was completely gone. The only thing that remained was his lower jaw. It spilled blood so viciously that his lower jaw filled up with blood and started spilling behind his back. Some of the blood had also spurted on the tree where Daryl had done the deed. Everyone was too busy arguing that they failed to realize Daryl was repeatedly smashing his head sideways onto a tree after being shot at the leg by Duan. With one final smash, the upper half of his head snapped right off.

Though able to blurt out such dirty and offensive words just a while ago, the group now just chose to be quiet, unable to process what they had just witnessed. Daryl’s headless corpse stayed in its kneeling position due to rigor mortis and everyone just stared. The courses of their lives have now gone past the point of no return. Like Thomas, they had nothing good to see anymore.

To change the world, we must restart everything.

Duan unholstered his handgun once more. Nobody even screamed or panicked. He shot Cho and Kat. After which he checked the chamber if he had enough rounds. When he saw he had just the right amount, he opened his jaw and aimed at the roof of his mouth.



WARRIOR'S REDEMPTION

by Shem Laureta

Elliot Rivera, a man in transition, a man divided between dreams and reality, between his hopes and the reality of life, when he begins his new job at twenty three only after graduating from college where he had received a degree in creative writing he wanted to become a writer and write a great American novel and other pieces of fiction classic.

But here he was, sitting in a tiny, small lighted studio apartment in the middle of the city and looking at a blank document on his old laptop.

His apartment mirrored his state of mind. Shelves of old books were stacked all around and toppled clumsily against the walls, used coffee cups and wrapped leftovers cluttered all over his apartment, and opened sketches of the uncompleted scripts can be seen all over the floor, some of them bearing optimism notes and others bearing the nail of doubt.

Taped on the corkboard right above his computer was a picture of him and Mia, his best friend during college. They posed with their arms around each other both happy, sure of themselves only because they were young.

Pinned beneath the photo was a *FINAL NOTICE* from his landlord, a reminder of the rent he couldn't afford.

The glowing screen of his phone buzzed on the desk.

A message from his Landlord.

“Rent's two weeks overdue. You have until Friday!”

Elliot groaned and tossed the phone onto the pile of unopened bills. When he opened his email, there was another brief line from his editor.

“We need that manuscript by Monday.”

He rubbed his temples and opened his manuscript file, *The Redemption of Cassian*.

This was supposed to have been his shot— a knight in a world of gloom seeking redemption. However in the journey of *Cassian*, Elliot did not find anything remarkable there; his personality was as dull as Elliot's low self-worth.

Elliot sat back in his chair, looking at the cursor which was blinking on the computer screen. He felt pressure that had now become a part of him like a common flu, only that this one seemed like it was never going to end. Collapsing onto his couch, he whispered to the peeling paint of his ceiling:

“What if I'm not good enough?”

It was day and night for Elliot; The poor man became a prisoner of the four confining walls of his apartment. He attempted to write, and in doing so channelled his anger toward *Cassian's* suffering.

But the knight's journey seemed relatively pointless like his own.

More frequently, the landlord started sending texts, each one a sharp stab to his fast withering grip of self-control.

When the electricity was cut off, there was only darkness and Elliot alone in the dark listening to his heart and legs pulse and there was only one candle burning.

Panic gripped his chest. He was desperate. He pulled up his laptop and created an email to his editor.

An apology, a resignation, and an admission of defeat all in one. He stared at the send button on the screen, his hand just sat over the touchpad for what seemed like hours before he angrily closed the laptop.

There was silence in his room until the following afternoon when there was a knock at the door.

Turning the knob, he realized that Mia was standing in front of him carrying bags full of groceries with angry looks.

“You look like you’ve been living in a cave,” she said.

“And judging by the smell, it’s a cave full of rotting coffee grounds.”

Elliot managed a weak smile.

“Nice to see you too, Mia.”

She laid the groceries down and glanced at the table, the table was cluttered with heaps of tattered clothes.

“Elliot, this place is a disaster. When was the last time you ate something that didn’t come out of a cup?”

“I’m fine,” he answered rather abruptly, turning his head away from her.

“No, you’re not. You’re ignoring my texts, your landlord’s about to kick you out”

She picked up a crumpled draft from the floor and said:

“You’re obviously not working on your book.”

“I don’t need your help you fucker,” Elliot fumed and turned away.

“That is not what this is all about,” Mia yelled.

“You’re my friend, El. I care about you. But you’re so busy wallowing in your misery that you can’t see that.”

She speaks the truth as she pierces through his armor but he can't afford to accept that.

“Just leave me alone, Mia.”

She stared at him, hurt flashing across her face before she turned to leave. Her parting words lingered in the silence after she closed the door:

“You’re not alone. Stop pretending you have to be.”

The following morning, Elliot works at his desk when he looks at the photo of him and Mia. Memories were instantly reminded of the time they spent in college. Mia had been his anchor since the beginning, encouraging him to attend open mics when he could barely bring himself to read his work, and typing away till the wee hours of the morning to help him polish the stories, and clapping at all the important junctures in his life.

But after graduation, she had struck out in a different direction from him. Mia had got a good job in marketing, but Elliot had started swimming in the waters of freelancing.

The distance between their lives had grown, but she’d never stopped believing in him.

Several days later Elliot met with his former creative writing professor, Callahan, in a coffee house. Frank Callahan provided either inspiration or provocation during the college years encouraging him to research deeper and write with honesty.

“Elliot Rivera,” Callahan said.

“Still chasing dragons, or have they finally caught you?”

Elliot chuckled weakly.

“More like circling the drain.”

They both took a cup of coffee and Elliot started spitting the words out like there was no tomorrow. He disclosed the topic concerning the deadline, unpaid bills and burdensome self-internalization. Callahan kept quiet, then gave his advice.

“You’re trying too hard to write something perfect,” he said.

“Forget perfection. Write the truth. That’s where the real magic is.”

These words by Callahan echoed in his mind as Elliot sat to work with his notebook that night.

For the first time in weeks, he ceased concerning himself with the quality of the piece and wrote the story.

The knight Cassian went back to the kingdom bearing a hilt of a sword and burden of sin. He bowed his head and stood at the gates feeling unsure of himself.

“I failed once,” Cassian said,

“But failure doesn’t define me. I will rise again.”

Elliot descended a notch deeper into the water of concentration, and his pen raced over the piece of paper. That journey was of Cassian and his own, which could well be made into a story of salvation and success.

By morning, Elliot had finished the manuscript.

He hit Send on the email to his editor before he could second-guess himself, then collapsed onto his couch. All of a sudden he had the first glimmer of hope in what seemed like weeks.

Then a knock at his door, it was Mia at his doorstep again with a plate of home baked cookies and half a smile.

“I thought that you could use a sugar boost.” she said.

Elliot hesitated before accepting them. “Thanks. And... I’m sorry. For being such a jerk.”

Mia waved him off. “I forgive you. Just don’t make it a habit.”

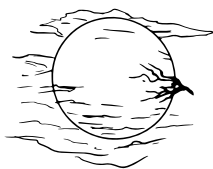
When they finally drew their chairs closer to begin the conversation the animosity that had built up between them seemed to melt into the usual warmth.

“You always figured out that I was just making up lame excuses,” Elliot said.

“And you always turned a calamity into a fairy tale” Mia managed to say jokingly.

Those were the last words she said to him as he created a new document one night.

He sat with his hands above the keys, with a faint smirk on his face. This time, the words just seemed to flow out of him.



WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW

By Paul C. C. Tan



Author's Note

This work is inspired by the song *The Infanta* by the Decemberists.

I first became aware of the band, funnily enough, because their song *Sons and Daughters* was featured on an episode of *The Office*.

As I listened to more of their songs, however, I developed an appreciation for their work, most especially their lyrics. Their lead singer and principal songwriter, Colin Meloy, is deeply fond of history and literature, and frequently peppers his lyrics with references to ancient civilizations, obscure poems, and popular myths. His lyrics, more than almost any other songwriter, have an incredibly poetic quality that keeps me coming back.

More than anything else, what drew me to the band's work was how so many of their songs go beyond the usual, repetitive formulae that are almost frustratingly ubiquitous in modern music. The Decemberists tell stories through their songs. They create characters, weave together images and settings, depict the rawness and tenderness of human emotion in breathtaking fashion.

If you are interested, please scan the QR code above to listen to the song.

*And as she sits upon her place,
Her innocence laid on her face,
From all atop the parapets blow a multitude of coronets,
Melodies rhapsodical and fair.
And all our hearts afire,
The sky ablaze with cannon fire,
We all raise our voices to the air...*

Prologue

She awoke.

It was a soft noise that did it, something that came and went ever so faintly. Was it the rustling of the leaves? There was a breeze a few hours ago, perhaps it was still there. She doesn't open her eyes, though. She's gotten too comfortable.

Splash.

Water? Again? She reached over and wiped it from her face. At least it wasn't as much as last night. It must've rained last night. That was unpleasant.

Splash.

More water. She stretched both arms out and began madly pushing it away. Nothing was going to disturb her slumber.

Splash.

Suddenly, she couldn't take it any more. She cried out in frustration, but she could barely hear herself.

A booming sound emerged from above. Behind her, around her, all she could hear was this strange roar. Was it thunder?

Part One

Tomas sipped his wine and took a deep sigh of relief. From his velvet cushion at the front of the gilded carriage, he lit a candle and began to review his correspondence. There was no rest for the wicked, and even less for the noble, as his grandfather used to say. Tomas was one of the most powerful men in the realm—he knew it, his family knew it, and he made sure the world knew it—hence the three dozen elephants carrying his family, his entourage, and their belongings the four hundred miles to the palace. He looked up at his wife as he sorted the letters into piles.

“Darling, are you sure you don’t want to try this? Elena had this sent all the way from Paris.”

Estela, his wife, peered out of the small window at the carriage’s rear, matching up elephants to the illustrated convoy plan her husband’s servants had drawn up.

“Darling”, Tomas called out, gently. “This is the fourth time you’ve checked. The drivers know what they’re doing.”

Estela sighed. “Ah, Tomas, you know I just don’t want any of our girls to get lost. For the little ones, this is the furthest they’ve been from home.”

Tomas folded a letter and reached over to gently grasp his wife’s bejeweled wrist. “Have some.”, he said, offering her a glass of wine. “It’ll calm you. Besides, don’t you think this will be good for the girls? They’ll see Madrid for the first time, meet people they need to meet, you know? They’re all excited, I know it.”

Estela eyed her husband warily for a second before her eyes softened. “You’re probably right.”, she said with another sigh. She gazed out the window once more as she took a careful sip of wine. “Well,” she said. “It does calm the nerves.”

Flanking the lead elephant were thirty-five more, all bound for Madrid. Eight of the duke and duchess’s nine daughters rode, two to a carriage, just behind them.

Behind them were carriages carrying their servants: nursemaids, secretaries, ladies-in-waiting, bodyguards, and day-laborers of all kinds. Bringing up the rear were a fleet of carriages carrying everything the family would possibly need for the trip: personal belongings, food and drink, their absolute best clothing and jewelry, and ample gifts for all the notables they'd run into.

This was no ordinary journey for the duke and his family. They were headed to Madrid for the baptism of the king and queen's newborn daughter, the presumptive heir to the Spanish throne. The hopes of a nation rested with this child. The decisions she would make would move continents. What sort of queen would she be, when the time came? Who would she marry? Would she govern with a light touch or a heavy hand?

Of course, all this would be moot if, some years later, she had a brother.

These were the rules.

Tomas smiled lovingly at his wife as her tense shoulders began to relax. As his wife drew the velvet curtains over the window and prepared to sleep, Tomas nestled in his seat by candlelight and opened the next letter. It was from his eldest daughter, who couldn't make the trip from her boarding school in Paris.

Dear Papa,

Please do not tell Mama about this letter. I need you to keep this between us for now.

Things have been just lovely here in Paris. The city is everything you and Mama said it would be. The academy is demanding, as you said, but I welcome the challenge. I have been meeting so many interesting people from across Europe. I could spend hours just listening to stories about their homelands and just how different everything is.

That is what I was hoping to write to you about. There is no easy way to say it. I am in love, Papa, with another girl. Please, Papa, I beg you to read this letter in full. This is not an act of rebellion, nor is it born of spite. In Aurélie, I see all the things of which Mama would speak when she told me of your courting days...

Part Two

Fatima closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath as she climbed the steep step up into the wagon. She was the last one in line, and the eight other women on the left-side bench squeezed in tightly to make space for her at the end. Sitting at the edge of this cramped, dimly-lit carriage, Fatima almost laughed at the sheer absurdity.

How in God's name did she get here?

Ten days ago, she was a normal girl, living a quiet life on her grandparents' farm.

Nine days ago, her parents arrived home in a panic.

Eight days ago, her father received a letter.

Seven days ago, her mother gathered the family silverware and sold it, piece by piece, to traveling merchants.

Six days ago, her father left home at the crack of dawn and did not return.

Five days ago, her mother almost broke down in tears at breakfast.

Four days ago, her grandparents ended up in a massive argument with her mother. When they saw her trying to listen in, they told her to go back to her room.

Three days ago, her father came home, a broken man.

Two days ago, they finally explained everything to her.

Yesterday, they came for her.

And here she was, the newest wife of Prince Uthman, the youngest son of the Sultan of Granada. To be honest, she did not even entirely know why this had to happen. Something about a bad investment? A year-old debt? Everything had happened so fast that Fatima barely had any time to protest. Perhaps, she now thought, this was how they had intended it.

She looked straight ahead of her. Another woman, another wife of the prince she barely knew, stared right back. She realized then that she had no idea what this woman looked like. All she'd seen of her—of all the wives, really—was a pair of wide eyes behind a billowing veil. Fatima wondered if this woman was as scared, as nervous, as clueless as she was.

Crack.

The drivers had set the horses in motion. They were on their way.

Part Three

“Alberto, what are we even doing here?”

Sancha raced through the crowded market, desperately trying to keep up with her husband.

“Alberto!” She could barely see him now over the multicolored canopies of the market stalls and the wares sellers carried overhead. The sun bore down on her. She regretted wearing the heavy dress. It was not the first time her husband got over-excited like this.

She finally caught up with him at a corner stall. He was holding a small telescope, peering down a narrow alley while engaging the young merchant in conversation. She positioned herself in front of him, arms crossed and huffing, until he noticed her.

“Ah!”, he finally exclaimed. “Sancha! My love, I was just telling this gentleman about you. Meet Señor Tavares, the proprietor of this shop. His father is the craftsman who made this brilliant little thing.”

Sancha gave a curt smile. “Excuse me, señor, but I must borrow my husband for a second.” She grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him to a quiet corner down the alley, where they could get some shade from all the heat. “Alberto, what are you doing? We both know we can’t afford to be spending so lavishly. Things are not the way they were when we were young, you of all people should know that.”

“Sancha...”, he began, wiping sweat from his brow. His words seemed stuck in his throat for a good few seconds.

His wife broke the silence: “What are we even doing here? It’s still a week away; we didn’t need to be here this early, did we?”

“But people are expecting us, don’t you remember me telling you? This is just like five years ago, the old queen dowager’s funeral. People expect us around.”

Alberto was a baron, his titles and land inherited from his elderly, childless uncle. He had known Sancha since they were children, when they would spend their days running aimlessly along the fields of their family’s neighboring estates, looking over the hill at some distant city before their parents sent a servant over to call them in for supper.

That was then, however, and this was now. Alberto was a baron, but the title was practically all he had. The estate where he had spent his happiest days was no longer his. Strictly speaking, it was never his to begin with. His uncle had gambled it away—along with most of his fortune—when he was seventeen. What money he had left he invested in a parcel of land in North Africa, just months before he keeled over. When Alberto traveled there to inspect the land, he found it desolate, dry, and barren. His uncle had been duped.

“Society expects things from us, love. This is just how things are done. It’s how they’ve always been done.”

“But...” Sancha dragged her feet, her eyes darting away from her husband’s. She inhaled sharply, looking around as if to make doubly, triply sure that they were out of anyone’s earshot. “Does it have to be this way, though?”

Part Four

They descended from the elephant to deafening cheers. After seeing their girls safely down from their carriages, Tomas and Estela walked, hand-in-hand, down the flower-lined path into the palace.

Once inside, they presented themselves to King Jaime in a carefully-rehearsed ceremony. They exchanged a multitude of gifts—wine, paintings, exotic fruit—and Tomas presented his wife and daughters to the monarch, one by one, the girls each executing a flawless curtsy that Estela had them practice at least a dozen times before they left. Once that was taken care of, Estela led the girls away to their guest accommodations while the king invited Tomas to retire to the drawing room for a drink.

“Primo, I must confess...”, Tomas began as he accepted a drink from the king. Jaime eyed him curiously. “I received this letter from my eldest, Elena. You remember, we sent her to study at this academy in Paris?”

“Yes, I remember you telling me. It seems quite a novelty, sending your girl off instead of hiring a governess.” The king sat down at his desk and motioned for Tomas to sit opposite.

“Yes, well, that was what I wanted to talk about. You see, primo, in her very first line, she swore me to secrecy. She did not want her mother hearing a word of what she had to say.”

“Well,” the king said, leaning forward and interlacing his fingers. “Go on, then.”

“She said she’d fallen in love. With someone she’d met at school.”

“And?”

“Primo...the school is only for girls.”

They sat in silence. The look of curiosity on the king’s face only seemed to deepen. Tomas felt a cold shiver run down his spine. Had he made a mistake admitting this? It was too late. Nothing could undo the past.

“What on God’s green earth do I do? What do I say to her? And...and how do I keep this from Estela? This involves her every bit as much as it involves me.”

Another beat passed before the king spoke.

“Primo, do you love your daughter?”

Tomas closed his eyes. He remembered the light he saw in Elena’s eyes the moment she was born. He remembered the moments they’d shared, just strolling through sprawling gardens and resting under massive trees. He remembered how he’d taught her to ride a horse and how they’d ride together for hours on end. He remembered the endless conversations they’d had about art, history, animals, architecture, and anything else under the sun. A tear came to his eye.

“More than anything.”, he said. It was barely a whisper.

Part Five

“A great pleasure...symbol of friendship...lasting peace between our peoples.”

Fatima could barely make out the words. She was literally at the back of the room, her back pressed up against the stone castle wall. At the far end, the sultan—her father-in-law, she supposed he was—was exchanging kind words and gifts with the king of Spain.

She looked around her—or at least tried to take in what she could with the veil obscuring her vision. As far as she could see were veiled women, the other wives of her husband, her husband’s brother, and the sultan himself. Her husband, she assumed, was right up front with his father and brothers.

Since their “marriage”, Fatima had barely seen him. She spent the rest of her wedding day in some small, cramped dormitory in some far-flung wing of the Alhambra, nowhere near the lavish accommodations she assumed her husband and his immediate family enjoyed.

There was no celebration, no banquet, no feast, and no fanfare. Some husband, eh?

Fatima’s eyes darted back to the women around her. She looked at their eyes. A few were looking down. Others were looking upward, trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening in front of them. But the majority were just staring blankly ahead.

The door was just a few feet to her right. If she was quiet enough, barely anyone would hear her go. If she was lucky, those who saw would keep their mouths shut. On tiptoes, and with the utmost caution, she slipped out.

Once in the hallway, when she was sure she was out of earshot, she broke into a run. She had never been in the palace before—she had no idea where she was going. She just ran, ran like her life depended on it. If she'd stopped to think about it, she'd probably have come to the conclusion that it did.

Making a left down a long corridor, she ducked into the first door she found. Inside was a sprawling library, with ornate volumes lining every shelf and maps and paintings adorning the stone walls. She sat down on a vast armchair and lifted her veil over her head. She inhaled deeply. It was just three days since she last felt this way, but it felt more like three months. She had almost nodded off when a voice caused her to sit bolt upright.

“Excuse me? Señorita? What are you doing here?”

Part Six

“No, no, we certainly won't tell anyone. Right, love?” Alberto looked up at his wife.

“None of our business,” she said.

Sat opposite Alberto was a young woman—a girl, really—who had an intriguing story to tell. “So, you had no prior warning?”, he asked.

“To be honest, my parents never explained it to me. They just said there were these men here, and that I had to go with them for the sake of the family. Perhaps they were too ashamed to tell me. Too embarrassed to speak the words out loud. Whatever it was... You know, there's this story they used to tell me. When I was old enough to realize that I didn't look like either of my parents. They told me that they went out to the market one day, and when they passed the fountain in the square, they found a baby girl in a basket.”

“They found a note attached, saying ‘I cannot raise this child. To you who finds her, please, if you can, raise her as your daughter. Give her the love she needs.’ So they raised me as their own. In fact, they told me, the fact that they chose to take me in meant that they loved me all the more.” She grimaced. Alberto could tell exactly how she felt about that story.

He was lost for words. His heart wept for this girl and the predicament she had found herself in, in this rut that was no fault of her own. His wife broke the silence.

“Señorita, if I could ask...what are you going to do now? Surely they will have noticed your absence. Will they not come looking for you?”

The girl was silent. Alberto’s gaze shifted from his wife to her. “It seems I have no choice.”, was her whispered response. “One way or another I must get away from...from them.”

“You have my sympathies, señorita.”, Alberto said. “In a way, we are all running from something, are we not?”

Part Seven

My dearest Elena,

It is great to finally hear from you. I have followed your word and not told your mother of your letter.

I have read and reread your words countless times. I cannot help but be dazzled by what you had to say and how you said it. I am almost ashamed to say that I never realized how talented you are with the quill. How fortunate I am to have such a brilliant young woman of letters as a daughter!

Your admission places me in a deep conundrum, as I am sure you find yourself in a conundrum as well. You know how much it matters to me that you, your mother, and your sisters are happy. I am sure you remember me telling you this since you were a child. Everything I did, at least I hope, was to make sure you all were safe and happy and worried for nothing.

This is why it pains me so deeply to write this next part.

Elena, what you are feeling is not normal. At least, that is what the world will tell you. Polite society demands certain things of us, and we must face the likelihood that this will not be received well. This is even more so for us, given our station in life. Therefore, I believe it to be my duty as a father to warn you of the dangers you face.

The world is not going to treat you like an ordinary girl, Elena. If any of this is exposed, whether by you or against your will, your life will change forever. You will be an outcast, a pariah. Your family will still love and support you fiercely, that much I promise. But beyond us, you cannot be sure—and the odds will not be good.

This is why I must ask you, please, to keep this all to yourselves, at least until we have had some time to talk at length about this. When you come home, or if I can make it to Paris, we can have all the time in the world to figure out what to do. This is a new world you are entering, and I hope you will allow me to navigate it with you. Your happiness and your safety are all I care about. I cannot wait to see you again, and I cannot wait to meet Aurélie.

Love is a beautiful thing, Elena. I am happy that you have found it.

Your loving father,

Tomas

Part Eight

Fatima could barely recognize herself.

She stared at the mirror. Her hair was shorter, now barely just touching her shoulders. Her cheekbones were more defined. The makeup lightened her skin so much that she almost looked pale.

“You know, you are more than welcome to stay with us, at least while you find work. Just find a place to hide until the ceremonies are over, and we can take you with us when we leave.”

Fatima turned around to face Sancha and Alberto. They had helped her hide for almost three days now. "You are most generous, señor. But I need to leave as soon as possible. They are probably searching for me as we speak."

"Then go with God, Fatima.", Sancha said. "Be well.", Alberto added.

Fatima smiled at the both of them. For once, she was lost for words. She stepped out of the room and carefully started down the hall towards the exit.

As soon as she closed the door, however, she could hear Alberto and Sancha whispering madly.

"Do you remember what she said? About her parents?"

"What about them?"

"About how they found her and raised her as their own!"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we have an answer to our problems. Don't we?"

"I..."

"Think about it! Don't you remember how it felt, when we kept trying, and trying, with nothing to show?"

"But...what will people say?"

"They don't need to know."

"Can we hide something this big?"

"We can try."

Part Nine

Alberto and Sancha hurried into the cathedral. The place was absolutely brimming—even the front pews, reserved for nobles and diplomats, were teeming with onlookers, eager to get a glimpse of the royals.

Alberto looked around at the absolute spectacle of the thing. Banners adorned the stone walls, streamers crossed the domed apse. Beyond the altar, about a hundred choirboys sang a specially-written hymn. As the priests and bishops slowly streamed down the aisle, he stood on his toes just to catch a peek of the king and queen. There they stood, just a few feet from the granite font, the queen holding the child. What a serene tableau, he thought. It was as if all the whispers and the buzzing and the music and the other myriad noises of the cathedral were nonexistent, and it was just two parents and their beloved infant, still and unburdened, without a care in the world.

Sancha almost laughed as she glanced around the massive hall. She had always enjoyed people-watching. Some called her nosy, and perhaps she was. Some days she could just sit in the town square for hours on end, watching the people go by. Her eyes settled on a family just a couple rows ahead of them. What a sight they were—mother and father with their eight daughters, sitting side by side, shortest to tallest. There was once a time when the mere sight would sicken her. Her envy at the mere sight of a large family would turn into rage. Now, she could hardly remember what drove her to such heights of animosity towards complete strangers. She almost laughed at the thought.

The procession soon reached its end and the family gathered around the font as a poignant hush fell over the crowd. The king and queen, both holding their sleeping child, lowered her slowly over the water. The archbishop filled a seashell with water and let it gently fall over the child's cherubic head.

Epilogue

Some months before the events of this story

“Jaime? Jaime, where are you?”

“I’m here, Victoria. Just one second.”

A spark lit up and Jaime was bathed in light. Victoria could see him clearly. It was almost as if the sun was in a hurry to set that night.

They liked this place. Their lives could get so hectic, so demanding, that when the opportunity arose for a break, they took it. They built a house in the desert, arranged for supplies to be delivered regularly, and paid a few locals to take care of it while they were away.

Every evening, as the air began to cool, they’d go for a long walk. They would watch the sun set in silence, then spend a couple hours just watching the stars. It kept them sane.

Tonight, their walk took them past an oasis. Surrounded by brush and covered by a couple tall palm trees was a small lake filled with the clearest blue water either of them had ever seen. Victoria knelt down and dipped her hands into the water. It was cool—just what she’d needed.

A light breeze shook the trees. The leaves rustled ever so slightly.

“Is that...it can’t be!”

Jaime handed his wife the lamp and dropped his leather satchel onto the dirt. “Jaime, what is it?” “Just keep the lamp pointed at me, darling.”

Without another word, Jaime dove into the water. Pushing forward determinedly, he swam to the center of the lake, where Victoria could see something large floating in the distance. Jaime grabbed it, turned around, and swam back to shore where Victoria, more concerned than ever, ran to meet him.

“Look. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Jaime had pulled a small cradle from the water. He placed it on a flat rock. Victoria placed the lamp next to it and gazed into the cradle. Staring up at her, with eyes crystal clear in the dim light from the lamp, was an infant. Its body was wrapped in white linen, keeping it safe and dry from the water. She looked back at her husband.

“What are we going to do?”

She saw the look in his eyes. She knew what he would say. “Jaime, no. Don’t even say it. How can you even...what will people say? What will people think of us?”

He extended a hand, still soaking wet from the lake, to gently grasp her forearm. “Do you remember,” he began softly, “what it felt like after trying and trying, and still...?”

She did remember. Slightly choked, she nodded.

“Don’t you think this is a sign? A sign from the heavens? From fate? From the universe? Whoever left this child here clearly isn’t coming back. We can raise this child as our own. You can stay at the summer palace in isolation for a few months so nobody gets suspicious, and when the time is right, we can tell the world.”

Victoria sat down on the rock, the cradle just inches from her. Her mind was racing. Thoughts flashed before her, one sordid image at a time. Her husband continued.

“Think about it. Imagine if—God forbid—something should happen to me. Uncle Alfonso would take over, and it’s no secret that he’ll go to war with the Moors as soon as the army pledges their allegiance to him. Our whole nation at war, and for what? So much of what we’ve done, do you want it to be all for nothing?”

Her face was grim, unsure. She got up again, allowed her husband to place his arm around her.

“Just look at her.” His voice was no higher than a whisper. “Her?”, she whispered back. “Well, let’s make sure.”

He gently unwrapped the linen cloth for a second before replacing it. "Her."
A weak smile finally broke through. "I always said I wanted a daughter."

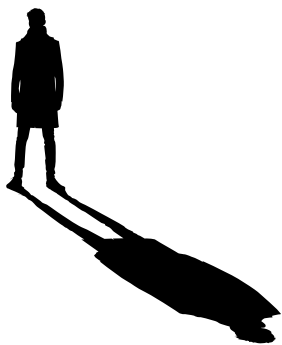
"You did," Jaime replied. "You did."

"Isabel.", Victoria whispered. Jaime grinned widely. "Isabel it is."

He lifted his new daughter out of the cradle and rocked her in his arms.

"Welcome to our family, Isabel."

*And above all this folderol,
On a bed made of chaparral
She is laid, a coronal placed on her brow
And the babe, all in slumber dreams
Of a place filled with quiet streams
And the lake, where her cradle was pulled from the water
And we'll all come praise the infanta,
And we'll all come praise the infanta.*



THE WEIGHT OF SHADOWS

By Kaidrich Pobre

James Torres turned off the highway onto a dirt road that seemed to stretch endlessly into the horizon, flanked by cane fields that swayed under a merciless sun. He wiped the sweat from his brow, the air conditioner in his aging sedan doing little to fight the heat. His GPS had long since lost signal, and the only thing guiding him now was the vague memory of a map he'd studied the night before.

"This better be worth it," he muttered, gripping the wheel tighter as the road narrowed. The trip to Hacienda Sagrado wasn't James Torres's idea. His editor at Vista Manila, a glossy magazine specializing in travel and culture, had handed him the assignment with a dismissive wave.

"Dig up something interesting," she'd said, sliding the folder across her cluttered desk. "You're good at finding the human angle. Make it heartfelt, tragic—whatever sells. A piece on the dying Hacienda culture in the provinces could be a hit."

James had opened the folder to find a single yellowed article about Hacienda Sagrado, dated sometime in the '90s. The writer, long forgotten, had called it a "place of ghosts," hinting at a history of tenant unrest and the shadow of a mysterious caretaker who refused to leave. It was far from the polished assignments James had hoped for, but his editor's parting words had left little room for debate.

“Not everything’s going to be a feature on the best resorts in Palawan, Torres. Go find me a story.”

So here he was, miles away from the glossy beaches he’d once dreamed of covering, navigating a dirt road that looked more like a forgotten scar on the land. His air conditioning wheezed against the heat, doing little to cool the rising frustration in his chest. He didn’t even know what he was looking for. A caretaker with a dark secret? The ghosts of a forgotten past?

“This better be worth it,” he muttered again as he rounded a bend, the fields of wild cane giving way to the crumbling silhouette of a chapel in the distance.

He parked in front of a crumbling chapel, its bell tower leaning precariously to one side. Nearby, an overgrown cemetery stretched into the distance, the headstones half-hidden by wild grass. And there, among the graves, was a figure bent with age, moving slowly as he cleared away the weeds. The man looked up as James approached, his face shadowed beneath a wide-brimmed hat.

“Don Silas?” James called out, his voice hesitant.

The old man straightened, leaning on his scythe for support. His eyes, sharp despite the wear of years, fixed on James. “I don’t go by that title anymore,” he said, his voice low and gravelly. “And who are you to ask?”

“I’m a writer,” James replied, stepping closer. “I’ve come to learn about this place. About you.”

Silas’s lips pressed into a thin line. “There’s nothing here but graves,” he said, turning back to his work. “And nothing worth learning in a place like this.”

James stood rooted in place for a moment, watching Silas’s slow, deliberate movements. The man carried himself with the heaviness of someone accustomed to solitude, his figure bent as if he bore the weight of the land itself. The graves around him were old, their inscriptions barely legible, but James could see the care in the way they were tended. A flower here, a cleaned headstone there—it was a quiet devotion, almost reverent.

“I think there’s a story worth telling,” James ventured, walking closer. His shoes crunched against the gravel path, breaking the uneasy silence.

Silas paused, turning his head just enough to glance at James. “A story, huh?” He straightened, leaning on his scythe like a cane. “You think stories can change anything?”

James hesitated, caught off guard by the question. “I think they help people remember,” he said finally.

Silas’s eyes narrowed. “And what’s the use of remembering things better left buried?”

Before James could answer, Silas turned and began walking toward a small hut at the edge of the cemetery. The structure looked as worn as the graves themselves, its roof patched with sheets of rusted tin and its walls leaning precariously. Silas didn’t invite James in, but he left the door ajar as he stepped inside.

Taking the cue, James followed. The interior of the hut was sparse—a single cot, a table cluttered with candles and matches, and an old wooden chest with its lid partially open. Inside, James could see faded letters tied with string and a few yellowing photographs. On the wall above the table hung a framed portrait of a woman. She was striking, her gaze steady and full of quiet strength.

James gestured toward the photograph. “Who is she?”

Silas’s shoulders tensed, and for a moment, James thought he wouldn’t answer. Then, in a voice low and rough, Silas said, “Her name was Rosalia. She worked the fields. My family worked her to death.”

James felt a chill creep up his spine. “Your family?”

Silas turned to face him fully, his expression unreadable. “You don’t know what it means to inherit a curse, boy. To live your life trying to atone for something you didn’t do, but something you didn’t stop either.”

James hesitated, watching the old man carefully. Silas had been dodging specifics all afternoon, speaking in vague, bitter phrases that hinted at something deeper but refused to name it. James finally set his notebook down and leaned forward, his voice quiet but firm.

“What are you really doing here, Silas?” he asked. “Why spend your life tending graves in a place everyone’s forgotten?”

The question landed like a stone in a still pond, rippling through the silence. Silas didn’t answer right away. His gaze drifted toward the small window of the hut, where the fields beyond stretched endlessly under the midday sun, their wild, untamed growth a stark contrast to the orderly rows he remembered. He blinked, but the past was already spilling over, unbidden.

The cane fields had been perfect then—neat, precise lines stretching to the horizon. The kind of precision only possible when someone else’s sweat soaked the soil. At seventeen, Silas had understood the truth of it in a distant way, like understanding the sky was blue or the seasons changed. It simply was.

He stood on the veranda that day, a clean white shirt clinging to his back as the sun blazed overhead. His father’s voice carried across the yard, barking orders at the overseer. “We need the harvest by next week,” his father snapped. “I won’t hear any excuses about the heat.”

“Yes, Don,” his deputy replied, his tone flat as he motioned for the workers to move faster.

Among the bent figures in the fields, one stood out. Rosalia. Her head was bare, the sun glinting off her dark, sweat-slicked hair as she dragged a sack of cane across the dirt. Her movements were unhurried, almost deliberate, as though she’d decided long ago that no amount of shouting would change the day’s outcome.

Silas found himself watching her, his fingers tightening on the wooden railing of the veranda. She wasn't like the others—not because she worked differently, but because of the way she carried herself. Upright. Defiant, even in silence.

The deputy noticed too. Silas saw the overseer's face twist in irritation before he strode toward her, whip in hand.

"Faster, girl," the deputy spat.

Rosalia straightened, her full height barely reaching Vicente's shoulders. Her gaze didn't waver as she met his eyes.

"I'm working as fast as I can," she said evenly. Her voice carried, clear and calm, though Silas could hear the steel beneath it.

The deputy raised the whip.

Silas's heart thudded in his chest. He opened his mouth to speak—to stop it—but his father's voice cut through the moment like a blade.

"Let him do his job, Silas."

His father didn't even glance at him. He stood by the doorway, his shadow long against the tile. "You're not soft, are you?"

Silas's throat tightened. He gripped the railing harder, the wood digging into his palms as the deputy brought the whip down with a sickening crack.

The memory wavered, then shattered as Silas blinked and looked away from the window. His hands were trembling.

"Her name was Rosalia," he said, his voice raw. "She wasn't like the others. She wasn't afraid."

James stayed silent, giving Silas space to continue.

“My father hated her for that,” Silas said. “And I...” He swallowed hard, his gaze fixed on the table. “I didn’t stop it. Not then. Not later. Not ever.”

The words hung heavy between them, and for the first time, James saw a crack in Silas’s guarded exterior. This wasn’t just guilt—it was grief, carved deep into his bones.

“Is that why you stayed here?” James asked gently. “To make up for it?”

Silas let out a bitter laugh, though it sounded more like a sigh. “Stayed?” He shook his head. “I couldn’t leave, boy. This place—it doesn’t let you go.”

Silas’s hands shook, and he wiped his face with the back of his hand, as though trying to erase the years of regret etched into his features. James watched him, unsure of how to respond, but feeling the weight of the silence stretching between them.

“Do you believe in redemption?” James finally asked, his voice softer now. “I mean, for something like that... for what you did?”

The question seemed to catch Silas off guard. He looked up, his eyes narrowing in thought, as if he were searching for something in the air between them. His gaze lingered on James for a long moment before he spoke, his voice thick with the weight of his unspoken truth.

“I don’t know what redemption looks like,” Silas muttered. “I only know what it feels like—like a thousand weightless stones pressing down on your chest, making it harder to breathe with each passing day. But still, you wake up and keep walking, because that’s all you can do. You don’t get to rest. Not yet.”

Silas’s words lingered in the room like a thick fog, settling in the corners. James shifted in his seat, feeling the enormity of the moment. He understood the weight of guilt, but this—this was something different. It wasn’t just personal failure; it was the culmination of generations, of a history buried and ignored. And Silas, now a broken man, was the last living witness to it all.

“Silas,” James began, his voice barely above a whisper, “do you think... telling the truth, finally sharing everything—that could change something?”

For a moment, Silas didn’t answer. His eyes flickered to the window again, where the wind tugged at the overgrown fields. He looked so far away, like he was no longer in the room but lost in the vast expanse of his memories.

“I’ve spent so long hiding the truth,” he said slowly, his voice low and deliberate. “Maybe telling it will feel like finally tearing away the rotting flesh of what’s left of my soul. But does it change anything? Does it make it right?”

James didn’t have an answer. What could he say? How could a single confession undo a lifetime of suffering, a lifetime of complicity in a system that had hurt so many?

“I’m not asking for forgiveness,” Silas continued, his voice breaking just a little. “I never have been. I’ve spent enough years hiding in this godforsaken place to know that what’s done can’t be undone. But maybe... maybe telling the truth means I don’t have to carry it alone anymore.”

The words hung there for a long time. James’s heart beat faster in his chest, the weight of what Silas was offering settling over him like an anchor. He was offering something more than just a story—he was offering the chance to bring the forgotten histories to light. To finally unearth the lives that had been buried along with the injustices.

The truth was the only thing Silas had left to give, and yet it was more than anyone could ever expect from a man so deeply marked by his past.

Later that evening, James found himself standing outside the small chapel Silas had mentioned earlier. The wind had picked up, swirling the leaves across the ground in tiny, frantic circles. The chapel loomed before him, a decaying structure that looked as if it might collapse at any moment. The windows were cracked, the wooden door hanging loosely on its hinges. Yet there was something strangely inviting about it—the way it sat there, nestled among the graves, like it had been waiting for something. Waiting for him.

James pushed the door open slowly, the old wood creaking in protest. Inside, the chapel was dark and cold, the air thick with the scent of dust and decay. It was sparse—nothing more than a simple altar and rows of empty benches. Yet there was a sense of reverence in the quiet, as though this place held stories of its own, stories that had been locked away for far too long.

He took a few steps inside, the floorboards groaning underfoot. A soft light flickered from the back of the chapel, casting long shadows across the walls. James turned and saw Silas standing near the altar, his eyes fixed on something James couldn't see.

"Do you come here often?" James asked, his voice echoing in the empty space.

Silas turned slowly, his face softened by the dim light. "Every day," he said simply. "This is where I come to try and make things right. This chapel... it was where they found peace. So, I come here, hoping I might find a sliver of it too."

James watched as Silas placed his hand on the altar, his fingers lingering there for a moment. "What did they do here?" James asked. "The people who worked the fields. What happened to them?"

Silas's expression darkened. "They came here in secret, when they could. To pray, to whisper their fears, to be free, if only for a moment. I never understood that... the need for something beyond the work, beyond the pain. But they found it here. In this place, at least, they could be human again."

James felt the weight of Silas's words, the history of suffering woven into the very walls around them. There was so much more to this place, to Silas's silence. He had been carrying it all alone, and now, for the first time, someone was ready to listen.

"I think it's time to tell them," James said, his voice steady. "The people. The truth."

Silas looked at him, his eyes searching for something—perhaps reassurance, or perhaps something else. But whatever it was, it seemed to settle in that moment, a quiet acknowledgement between them.

“Maybe it is,” Silas murmured.

The evening after his conversation with James, Silas stood at the edge of town, the shadows of twilight stretching across the empty streets. His cane tapped softly against the ground as he began his slow walk.

He didn’t gather the town with declarations or speeches. Instead, he spoke quietly to those he passed, his words simple and deliberate.

“I’ll be at the chapel tomorrow,” he said to a man stacking goods in the market.

“Tomorrow morning, at the chapel,” he murmured to a neighbor sweeping her doorstep.

Each time, he paused just long enough to see the flicker of curiosity or recognition in their eyes before moving on. Silas said little else, leaving his words to settle where they would. He had no grand expectations, but the truth pressed against his chest, waiting to be spoken.

By nightfall, the whispers had spread. “Silas is speaking at the chapel,” they said, voices low but insistent. No one needed more explanation. By morning, the town’s curiosity was enough to draw them there, gathering quietly in the stillness as Silas approached the worn chapel door.

The people of Hacienda Sagrado had lived in the shadow of their past for too long, but today, Silas was finally ready to face them. The truth would be laid bare. Not just for him, but for everyone who had been complicit in silencing those who had suffered.

As James looked out at the faces in the crowd, he realized that this wasn’t just Silas’s story—it was the town’s story. And it was time to remember.

The chapel was filled with quiet murmurs as the townspeople settled into the pews. Silas stood at the front, his hands clasped tightly in front of him. The dim light filtering through the stained glass windows cast long shadows, but it was the silence that weighed heaviest in the room. James stood beside him, notebook in hand, but his role had shifted. He was no longer the observer; he was a witness to history unfolding.

“I’m not asking for forgiveness,” Silas began, his voice gravelly but steady. “I’m asking you to remember. Not just me, but the people who lived and died under my family’s name. The ones we silenced. The ones who were forced to work the land I grew up on. They are as much a part of this place as the stones beneath your feet.”

His words hung in the air, thick with regret and sorrow. The townspeople listened, some with eyes downcast, others with their hands clenched in their laps. No one spoke.

“I’ve carried the weight of my family’s sins for too long,” Silas continued, his gaze sweeping across the room, meeting the eyes of the few remaining residents. “I should have spoken sooner, but fear kept me quiet. I couldn’t undo the wrongs, but I could’ve made sure they were remembered.”

There was a shift in the room, a quiet stirring of emotion that rose like the tide. James could feel the tension in the air, thick with a mix of anger and sorrow. These people had been living with this history, buried beneath the soil of their land, for generations. They had been waiting for someone to speak the truth.

“I was born into privilege,” Silas said, his voice stronger now, tinged with bitterness. “I didn’t ask for it, but I didn’t question it either. My father owned the land, and with it, the lives of those who worked it. And I... I didn’t stop him. I was complicit. In every beating, every injustice, every tear that was shed in silence. I chose to remain in the shadows, and I let them suffer in the light.”

He paused, taking a slow, deliberate breath, and when he spoke again, his voice was almost a whisper. "One of those people was Rosalia. She was more than just a worker on the land. She was a woman with dreams. Dreams I could have shared, if I hadn't been so afraid. I loved her. And I failed her."

James's heart tightened in his chest. He could see Silas's regret, raw and unfiltered, flowing out like a river finally breaking free of its dam. The town had been waiting for this. They had been waiting for someone to speak the truth, for someone to honor the lives lost, the lives that had been erased by time and shame.

"I don't expect any of you to forgive me," Silas said quietly, his voice trembling. "But I beg you to remember them. Remember Rosalia. Remember the workers who built this town with their blood, sweat, and tears. They deserve to be remembered."

There was a long pause before someone spoke. It was an older woman, her face creased with years of struggle and sorrow, but there was no anger in her voice—only pain. "We remember," she said, her voice shaky but firm. "But we don't forget."

The room fell silent again, but this time, there was no hostility. There was only the shared understanding of a past that could not be undone, a past that would always haunt them, but one that could not be ignored any longer.

Later that evening, as the sun began to set, casting a warm, golden light across the land, James stood with Silas outside the chapel.

They had spoken to the townspeople, and Silas had poured out his confession, but there was still a heaviness that lingered in the air. For a moment, neither man spoke. They simply stood together, watching the horizon.

"I thought I'd feel lighter," Silas said, his voice quieter now, almost to himself. "But I don't. I still feel the weight of everything. Maybe it'll never go away."

James looked at him, seeing the lines of age and regret etched into his face. “You’ve done something important,” James said. “The truth has been heard. That’s more than most people ever do.”

Silas gave a small, almost imperceptible nod, but his eyes remained distant, lost in thought.

“I’ve lived my whole life with ghosts, James,” Silas said, his voice soft, as though speaking to the wind. “But maybe, just maybe, by telling the truth, I can finally let them rest.”

James nodded, feeling the weight of those words. There was no simple answer, no clean resolution to the pain that had been passed down through the generations. But perhaps, in this small town, in this forgotten place, they had begun the process of healing. Not by forgetting, but by remembering.

Epilogue: The Legacy of Remembering

Weeks later, James returned to Manila, the story now fully written. The article was published, and the town of Hacienda Sagrado became a focal point for a national discussion on history, memory, and the consequences of silence. People from all over the country began to visit the town, some in search of their ancestors, others in search of reconciliation. The small chapel was restored, and a memorial was erected for those who had lived and died under the weight of an unjust system.

Silas's passing a few months after the confession left a quiet, somber legacy. James visited the cemetery one last time before leaving the town, standing before the graves of the workers, their names now carved in stone, as they had always deserved.

The ghosts of the past were not gone, but they were no longer haunting the land in silence. They had been remembered, and that was enough.

