

They had passed through hell already; their bare soles had tread painfully upon the embers from the scorched *nipa* roofs and the splintered carriage wheels, they had inhaled the fumes from the burnt plantains mingling with the tortured sweetness of rotting flesh, they had slept fitfully by the burnt stumps of the sugarcane husks through the gunshots and the anguished horse cries; they had seen what happened when the Americans waged war.

Pedro Alpas wandered hell, and he found that it disappeared within him. His skin had become coated with the same dark soot that clouded the mountains and the sky, his calluses had become senseless to the dryness of the earth, and his nose had stopped wrinkling at the persistent stench of death that tinged his sweat and stuck to his clothes. He rubbed his stomach for the first time in days and noted how concave, how hard as a rock it had become. The stench until now had stifled what little was left of his appetite.

As he thought about his own stomach, he turned to look at his wife's. She was with child but only for a few months now, and she could still walk for many hours while carrying a heavy sack of rice and dried fish. Pedro saw her feet and saw that they were beginning to be full of sores and lumps, but she did not complain. He was pleased that she did not complain. They both knew that there were far more important things to care about than the sores on some peasant woman's feet.

*Luna.* She had been born on a full moon, and Pedro thought she looked like one too: her face was round and plain and not much to look at, but radiant all the same.

He turned forward again and continued off the dirt path into the sugarcane fields, where they would not be as easily seen.

The American lay half-submerged in the shallow field water. His intestines spilled out of his stomach and his frayed navy coat, bloated and frothing with maggots in the afternoon heat. His blonde sideburns were torn from the pits of his sallow cheeks, maggots pouring into the wells in his pale skin. The greying man stared upwards into a sunless sky.

Pedro turned back to look at Luna, who was covering her mouth with her hands, about to gag at the smell and back away. But Pedro urged her on with that wordless look that bound a man and his wife, the furtive glint in his eyes that bound them with one blood and one heart.

*No, woman, look!*

The American still had a holster, buried in the mud, and Pedro saw a handle protruding from it. Covering his own mouth, he stumbled through the brown water and yanked the revolver from underneath the corpse, causing a wave of maggots to suddenly burst forth. He stumbled and fell back into the mud.

The revolver was rusty and long-barrelled, and Pedro doubted that it would work—until he pulled the trigger, spewing damp gunpowder and powdered rust. He remembered how he had

seen the old guardsman clean his, and faintly mirroring his own distant memories, softly nudged the cylinder open.

*Three bullets.*

A galloping came from behind.

Luna had never seen a revolutionary scout before, but she knew what they looked like from a patchwork of legends: waves of colorful bandits thundering through villages with bolos and looted rifles, heroes in their purest form. This one just looked like a man with a red-tipped collar and a sabre too long for his height, but Luna did not think that made him any less of a distant hero.

He had his horse slow to a trot, and raised one gloved hand to the wayside.

“Ho there! What is that by your side?”

Pedro and his wife moved aside to show the officer’s stinking remains. “An American, señor,” he weakly noted.

“And what is that in your hand?”

Pedro slowly held up the revolver, the rusted iron gleaming in the grey fog.

The scout leaned closer from his saddle, his eyes betraying some form of scrutiny that Pedro could not understand. “Where are you headed to?”

“East, towards the sea.”

“And what do you hope to find by the sea?”

“Our son, señor.”

At this the scout fell silent, and he finally understood why two peasants were travelling alone through no-man’s land, drowning in mud and trigger-happy Yanquis.

“Have you seen him?” the woman suddenly asked.

The scout was taken aback. The woman’s grey eyes had lit up, albeit with a tired, time-tested sort of hope.

“He has a birthmark on his cheek. It looks like a river.”

The scout stayed quiet for a long time, long enough for the couple to realize that he did not know, and it was best for them not to know either.

“You will take care now.” The scout rummaged inside his satchel and tossed a small gleaming trinket towards Pedro, who upon inspection found it was a coin of value. “They are shooting every brown-skinned fellow they can find.”

Before Pedro could respond, the scout had already spurred his horse and galloped off in the direction from whence they had come.

He looked forward again towards the plains in the distance, awash in the orange glow of the setting sun.

Night fell, and the moon blazed in a sky studded with dying stars.

Pedro laid back on the sack of rice he had been carrying earlier, eyes focused upwards. He remembered how his grandmother had once said each star was the light of a vigilant ancestor, all arranging themselves into patterns to guide the future travels of their descendants. He felt Luna’s hair graze his neck, her scent mingling with the bitter breeze. They both wondered which star was guiding their own descendant within the burning wilderness around them.

Luna suddenly sat up. “Pedro.”

“Hmm?”

“The gun.”

“What about it?”

Then he sat up to look in the same direction, and understood.

The three navy-blue uniforms wading in the paddy water in the distance did as well.

The revolver trembled in Pedro’s grip. The cries in the distance became louder, and Luna recognized the commands for them to halt in English.

*Three bullets, three Americans.*

He could have done something. But they were closing in enough for them to recognize a weapon, and if he fired once, he would have needed to have killed all of them. He was no sharpshooter.

And so, as Luna looked on with a dejected sort of horror, Pedro threw the revolver into a nearby thicket of burnt cane. Then they both waited, hands meekly raised in surrender, for the Americans to fall upon them.

They smelled like pigs, Pedro thought, and acted the part. They were punched, kicked, shoved, slammed with rifle butts, spat on, pinched, all accompanied by a guttural and harsh language not unlike the whinnying of incensed horses. Pedro could only understand one thing emanating from the slew of curses: *nigger*. As far as he could tell, they used it as a noun, adjective, verb, and conjunction all at once. Then he realized they were now repeating a certain phrase in between the pummeling of fists and gunstocks, which he recognized as a poor form of Spanish: a language he could barely understand any more than they did.

*"No comprende, no comprende..."*

*"No compren-dey?"* one of them guffawed, spewing garlic breath followed by another riflebutt to his stomach. The question was repeated. One of them pointed at the distant fields where they had come from: the same place where they had found the American's body.

*tu—matar—blanco—hombre?*

The Americans were jovial, but they were tired, and soon Pedro anticipated they would also grow tired of terrorizing two peasants in the middle of a dark field. After many repetitions of the same question, complete with charades of slit throats and stomachs, they made as if to finally leave them and continue on their way.

But one of them had the foresight to walk around the area, digging up the occasional stone and clump of soil, eventually pulling the revolver out of a mass of dried cane husks. An angry question was issued, and Pedro did not know how to answer. The Americans fell on them again, but this time there was real rage and venom in their threats, more force behind their punches and pinches and kicks. Someone pulled hoods over both their heads, and Pedro could not help but vomit up a little bit of blood against the black canvas.

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He had technically woken up some time ago, but he did not fully come to his consciousness until the first of the sun's rays had alighted on the tree he was tied to. He looked around to see Luna bound to an adjacent tree, like him: awake but only half-aware of her surroundings. His throat was beginning to feel shriveled like sandpaper on account of the rag stuffed in his mouth.

They were in the middle of a great clearing, with a large, old wooden barn to their side. Surrounding them were dozens of tents: some big, most small, all full of American soldiers that began to emerge as the sun rose. The sun turned their skin piggish pink and awakened terrible odors from the recesses of their bodies, and it occurred to Pedro that most of these men were once, an ocean away, sons of the land like him. It was to her surprise that Luna learnt they did

not all look the same. There were some fat Americans, some skinny ones, some yellow-haired ones, some black-haired ones, some younger ones, some older ones, but all of them were glaring at the two peasants tied to the tree with poisonous contempt.

The first one to pass by Pedro's tree took his rifle and slammed its buttstock into his shin, eliciting a muted yelp. His companion laughed, but he did not. As they walked away, Pedro heard them conversing in their strange language. It seemed to be weightier and less cultured than the delicate Castilian he was used to.

*"Where'd you get the gugus?"*

*"Down west in the cane fields, where they found poor old Scranton with his stomach half open."*

*"Goddamn animals. Gutting folk comes second nature to 'em, don't it?"*

Luna suddenly started to shift more in her restraints, and Pedro soon smelt why: breakfast was being served. It was a beef stew, and soon the entire camp stank of it, emanating from bowls found all across the camp. Pedro started breathing rapidly, hoping to blot out the fragrant steam from wafting into his nostrils. He heard loud howls and hollering from the other side, and turned to see Luna squirming in her restraints, her gagged mouth desperately trying to lap up the bits of stew one of the soldiers had thrown at her face.

*"That's enough. Take them to the brig for questioning."*

*"But sir—"*

*"I said that's enough!"*

The smell of the stew grew stronger as they were cut down, and Pedro struggled to keep from passing out again.

There were only two soldiers inside the big barn: a darker-skinned American who spoke fluent Spanish, and a native soldier who served as a translator. They both stood as Pedro and Luna sat cross-legged on the straw floor, hands still tied behind their backs.

The dark American was taut, almost bored in his interrogation, something his native translator reflected. The old man's eyes were grey and tired, glossing over both the captives' faces as if they were just a couple in the many he had seen once and never seen again. His voice was low and muted.

*"Where are the insurgents encamped?"*

*"W-what?"* Pedro whimpered.

The sordid glare of the interrogator made it clear to Pedro that that was not an acceptable response.

“W-we aren’t insurgents...”

“Do not play games with us,” the interpreter said drily. “You were found wandering the same area an American officer was executed in, you were in unlawful possession of his sidearm, and according to your captors you resisted arrest. What kind of person does that who is not an insurgent?”

“W-we only wanted to find our son.”

“Your son?” The interpreter relayed this to the dark American. “What is he doing away from you two?”

At this Pedro was about to give an answer, but swallowed it back down when Luna kicked his shin. Blood flowed to his cheeks, and he suddenly realized what a foolish mistake he’d made.

The interpreter was still looking at them expectantly. “You do not want to answer?”

For a moment, it seemed as if the other was on the verge of responding with some life-saving excuse, but after a while they both exhaled in quiet dread.

“This is very serious,” intoned the interpreter, parroting the drab timbre of the American. “It seems as if you do not want to cooperate.”

Pedro opened his mouth to protest but again found no alibi to cloud his own panic.

Four men tied the both of them down to a wooden bench, two Americans and two natives. The natives worked quickly, their movements soft and invisible. The Americans were also quiet, but they strung and pulled the ropes with more vigor, the grins on their faces silent yet expectant. A large tank was wheeled into the barn, and jars were passed out. Finally, their jaws were forcefully held open as an American unceremoniously jammed a long bamboo funnel into each of their mouths, their shrieks and pleas for mercy becoming no more than muffled cries.

And then the water came.

It was easy to bear at first—all you had to do was drink. But the water came down faster than you can drink it, and there came a point where the stomach had been filled up so much that the surface of the water could not help but retreat up to the throat, and when even that had been filled the water pushed and tore and beat itself against the walls of your stomach, your bladder, your lungs, your nose, behind your eyes, so much water there was not even enough space to cry for help when you looked down at your stomach and saw it inflating like a balloon...

The funnels were removed and both of them were pushed onto their stomachs.

They vomited and shat and pissed so much water, for a moment it looked to them as if they were to drown again on the floor in their own filth. An American pressed hard on Pedro's stomach and a jet of water flew out his mouth, much to the loud amusement of everyone present.

"The next one will kill you," one native soldier whispered in Luna's ear.

"Where's the boy?" another called to the men outside.

As if on command, a young native soldier with a river birthmark on his cheek entered the barn.

The recognition was not instant. The boy did not like to look at the faces of the people he was killing. But as he was pouring the pails he was holding into the tank and refilling the jars, he thought he recognized the voices begging for mercy from under the bamboo funnels.

As he looked longer, a pail dropped to the floor.

"No..."

He had stopped refilling the jars, and everyone turned to look at him. The words slowly came out from his mouth in halting, half-heard Spanish.

*"Estos...estos son mis padres."*

*"¿Tus padres?"* The Mexican interrogator scratched his head. *"¿Qué hacen tus padres aquí?"*

*"Por favor."* The boy shakily clasped his hands in supplication. The Mexican, confused and slightly overwhelmed, ordered the funnels to be taken out of their mouths. All four of the soldiers stepped away from the benches as Elio reached a tentative hand out to his bound mother.

"Mama...Papa..."

One of the natives whispered something to the Mexican, and after some hesitation, he ordered all of the soldiers out of the barn save one who discreetly remained in the corner.

"Elio..." Luna struggled to speak through her watery lungs.

"...I told you not to look for me, Mama, didn't I?" Elio whispered softly as he knelt to caress his mother's emaciated cheeks.

"The farm, there's..." Luna coughed out even more water. "...There's nothing left..."

"Do they... do they treat you well, my son?" wheezed Pedro from the other side, retching a stream of water and bile that ran down his chest.

"Yes, they—"

"You are not... a prisoner here?" Luna asked.

The question took Elio by surprise, but then he stopped to remember the rifle slung over his back and the bayonet fastened to his belt.

"You told us..." Pedro descended yet again into another round of wheezing and coughing. "That you would... join those that fight... for our land..."

The soldier in the back tensed and whispered to someone outside, while Elio shook his head and turned to his father. "They give me a good wage, Papa, way more than the *revolucionarios*. I have saved up enough. We can buy our land b—"

"You *fool!*" Pedro suddenly raised his voice, which proved to be a mistake as a tortured noise emanated from his throat and more blood poured from his mouth. "We... may not have...our land...but we have... our dignity..."

"*Soldado!*"

Elio stood and snapped to attention as the barn doors opened once again. The Mexican and the interpreter stood in the open doorway.

"*Tus armas.*"

Elio reluctantly unslung his rifle and removed his bayonet from his belt. As the Mexican received them, he passed them to an unseen waiting soldier outside.

"Do you still want to cooperate?" the interpreter asked Pedro.

"...Did you not see our son?!" Luna spat back with an unusual ferocity.

"You still expected your son to be an insurgent, and killed an American officer in your search." The interpreter struggled to get the words out, knowing they would be his last to them. "You have still not confessed."

With that, he silently slipped out the doorway. More of his countrymen, gone for the day.

The Mexican tossed something to Elio, who found it was another jar. He suddenly heard his mother scream his name, and looked up to see the Mexican already by her bench and ramming the funnel once more down Luna's throat.

Before Elio could react, the Mexican drew and aimed his revolver with his free hand.

“*Vertir.*” He gestured to the jar.

Elio stood motionless at the order given to him, the jar frozen in his grip.

“*¡Vertir!*” The Mexican cocked the chamber, eyes like daggers.

As if every step led closer to his death, Elio gingerly stepped over to the tank and dipped the jar in. He could still hesitate, if he took this easy. He could still have time—

Luna screamed as the Mexican pointed the revolver at her temple. Pedro, still weak, started to struggle against his bindings on the other end.

With a quiet whimper on the verge of tears, Elio stepped over and began to pour.

Luna’s muffled screams went up once more as she began to feel the water pushing at the walls of her lungs, tearing holes so big in her stomach she would never be able to eat again...

She closed her eyes and waited for the familiar drowning, dying sensation to resume, but when she opened her eyes again she found that the water flow down her throat had slowed down to a trickle. She looked up to see Elio roughly grappling with the dark American, trying to force down the revolver that the latter held in his hand.

“No! No, you can’t...”

“*¿Qué estás haciendo?!*” The Mexican struggled, the barrel of the black Smith & Wesson gleaming in the light of the single lamp in the barn.

“*Sargento, por favor...*” A voice, native, suddenly intruded from outside.

“*¡Ayúdame aquí, idiota!*” The Mexican began to panic as the muzzle of the revolver started ever so slowly turning towards his general direction.

The voice spoke up again, shivering panic more evident in its tone. “*Sargento, hay insurrectos afuera—*” before it was cut down by a bullet through its throat and the whinnying of a dozen war horses in the distance.

In momentary shock, the Mexican’s muscles stopped tensing up for a brief moment—allowing Elio to lower down the revolver’s barrel enough to pull the trigger in between his eyes. Elio stumbled and fell backwards as the Mexican’s body thumped to the ground, just as the screams of war and chaos erupted outside the barn.

Elio lay on the dirt floor in shock, his eyes unable to break away from the blood on his hands and splattered on his face. Then he turned and saw that his parents were still bound in their restraints, just as wide-eyed at the candidness of death as he was.

He rushed to their side and took out a knife, feeling with every sundering of their restraints the galloping of horses thundering about the earth. Suddenly, he threw himself to the ground as a volley of flying bullets splintered the wooden walls, one of them making an uncanny *tink*. When Elio looked up, he saw the light and flames of a hanging lamp spilled all over the floor, hungry for fuel. The barn was ablaze.

He finished severing the last of Pedro's bindings and helped the both of them to their feet. Luna stumbled to her knees not long after, retching drops of bile onto the dirt. Pedro realized it as the childbearing sickness appearing again. He looked up again to the doors to see Elio about to cautiously nudge them open, stolen revolver in hand.

"Elio, your uniform—" Pedro weakly pointed again to his son's white shirt and blue slacks.

Elio looked down and thought nothing more of it. "We must go—" he called back to them from the open doors before promptly crumpling to the ground, a bullet hitting the back of the barn not long after.

Despite the flames picking up behind them, neither Pedro nor Luna could move a muscle. The whites of their son's eyes emptily stared back at them, as still and as unmoving as the Mexican by his side.

"Check that barn, corporal!" someone yelled from outside.

They could hear the sound of a horse slowing to a stop and someone dismounting from it. Suddenly, a revolutionary scout burst through the doors, revolver in hand. He stepped over the bodies and pointed it at the couple, then slowly lowered it as the spark of recognition from that faraway field glimmered in both their eyes.

"It's you!" he cried at last.

"My son—" Luna's words choked halfway in her throat.

"Your son? He's here?" The scout stepped over the bodies and looked around. "Do you know where he's being held? Is he—"

"*My son!*" The wail escaped her fitfully like that of a bloody, mauled animal, as she ran to Elio's body at the doorway. Pedro stayed where he was, too shocked to move, eyes glazing over as the roaring flames grew ever more ravenous behind him.

The scout looked at Luna grieving over Elio, the Mexican's body, Pedro, and then back to Elio. He quietly pushed away the realization of what he had done when he had shot that shadow emerging from the doors seconds earlier. Death came quickly in his line of work, and he had learned not to fear it.

"We must go."

"You killed him." Luna suddenly looked up, a smoldering rage as hot as the fires around her starting to fester in her eyes.

"No, it must have been someone else." The scout looked around again as the flames began to spread to the ceiling. "You two, we need to go now—"

"*You killed him!*" Luna screamed as the scout grabbed her and began to drag her through the barn doors. "You killed my son, you *animals!* Let me go! You killed him! You killed my boy! You killed my baby boy!"

At the cries of his wife, Pedro's muscles started to work again, compelling him to stumble outside the doors as the half-eaten ceiling above began to collapse. As he reached the door, he grabbed onto Elio's cold hands and dragged his limp, bleeding corpse outside with him, leaving a thick trail of blood staining the dust in their wake.

When he got outside, he found a half-delirious Luna being held down by several other scouts, the wildness of her rage eventually cooling and collapsing upon itself into a sick, unintelligible wailing:

"You killed him—you killed my boy—you killed my baby boy—he did nothing to you—he did nothing to anyone—you have no shame—none among you have shame—none of you have shame for killing a boy—he was just a boy—he was just my baby boy..."

In the distance, the sounds of gunshots and the galloping of horses grew fainter as the ambush on the camp turned into a chase through the forest. In the clearing, tents lay as trampled and torn as the corpses of their former inhabitants, white and brown alike.

Pedro looked back again at his son's lifeless body, remembering the days when he was small enough for Luna to hold him in her arms. The river on his cheek was paler and greyer now, the last of his blood still pouring from the hole in his skull. His eyes still lay wide open in postmortem shock, coldly gazing up at his ancestors in the sky.