

Semper Idem

PROLOGUE

Excerpt from “The Organization of the post-war World Order” (translated from French), written by Louis Bernard, © the Euro-African National Literary Commission, 2050

Decades ago, two global powers waged the Final War, an unprecedented conflict that collapsed all nations and claimed five billion lives.

In the aftermath of the Final War, the surviving leaders convened to redraw the world’s borders. On that day, six super-states were formed. These super-states were not nations in the traditional sense, but were entire continents ruled by a single government. These countries were inherently averse to conflict, knowing that their immense power made any war mutually destructive.

The North American Socialist Union (N.A.S.U.) contained most of North America, down to Mexico’s southern border. The N.A.S.U. attempted to restructure pre-war American society according to the principles of communism. In 2017 the nation collapsed after a violent uprising following the dramatic disappearance of the government. At this point, the former government has yet to resurface, leading the nation to devolve into a cesspool of anarchy.

The Euro-African Commonwealth consisted of Africa and western Europe. Euro-Africa was wealthy and prosperous until the introduction of an AI supercomputer, tasked with optimizing all government work. The AI system took control, optimizing every human action to create the most efficient society imaginable. Now Euro-Africa has become a hollow shell of humanity, a decaying corpse manipulated by a machine obsessed with playing God.

The New Persian Sultanate was a fanatical theocracy. Since its inception, the government displayed hostility towards outsiders and ruled by violence and corruption. The government distorted their religion’s principles so profoundly that they are now unrecognizable, bearing no resemblance to their original form.

The Pacific Union integrated Australia and eastern Asia. This nation was the world’s leader in pharmaceuticals and biological research. Decades of intensive mining and fracking operations brought about natural resource depletion. As a result, today the nation is embroiled in a violent civil war.

Slavica consisted of Russia and eastern Europe. It is a brutal police state. Very little is known about Slavica or its people. However, smuggled population data report troubling statistics. All other nations report increasing populations in the sixty plus years since the Final War, while Slavica’s population has declined by more than twenty percent. One can only assume that the brutality of the state is beyond measure.

Finally, there is América, which encompassed South and Central America. América is the most mysterious of the super-states. There are no diplomatic relations or trade agreements between América and the other super-states. They have no embassies in other cities, nor are there any embassies in theirs. Their land-borders are patrolled by autonomous war machines, and their coasts are protected by anti-air batteries and a formidable navy. No air traffic is allowed to pass

over the country. They are completely isolated from the rest of the world, without any apparent reason.

These are the nations of the twenty-first century and will likely remain the only nations for centuries to come.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

“Wake up, *mi hijo*. We have much to do.”

Julio opened his eyes. His father was standing at the foot of his bed, as he typically did. The sun was peeking through the curtains, and bathed the room in warm, orange light. Sounds of tropical birds could be heard. A cool breeze was flowing in from the window. He raised his head and checked the time. It was exactly seven o'clock in the morning, 15. June 2124.

“Wake up. We have much to do”, his father repeated, and Julio got out of bed.

“What’s the rush?” Julio asked, annoyed at being woken up so early, “We always have ‘much to do’.”

His father ignored his question, and simply told him to get dressed and meet him in the courtyard at nine thirty. Julio slipped into his uniform, a white suit with red and gold accents, and trudged out of his room and down to the kitchen to eat breakfast. Armed guards adorned the entire mansion, watching Julio’s every move like hawks. This would usually be nothing noteworthy, but something was off. The guards seemed more agitated today, with some even risking punishment by smoking cigarettes inside the house. The mansion itself was stunning. The walls featured brilliant white marble, decorated with old paintings and ornate carvings. The floors were crafted from rich oak wood. The windows were as tall as the rooms were high and were draped in luscious silk curtains. Above the main entrance, three words were emblazoned in gold steel on black wood: “AMÉRICA PARA SIEMPRE¹”.

After eating, Julio strolled down to the courtyard where his father was waiting for him. The courtyard was a beautiful, sprawling garden with a massive gold fountain in the center, dressed with a statue of the dictator, raising his fist in defiance. Julio hated that statue. It was as if a shadow enveloped him, relentless and impossible to outrun. As he approached, his father shot him a sideways glance.

“You’re late,” his father scolded, “You were supposed to be here at nine thirty and it is now nine thirty-one.”

“Forgive me,” Julio retorted, “I’m not a machine”.

His father shook his head and sighed.

“For someone who will run this country one day, you are very disorganized.”

¹ “AMÉRICA FOREVER”

Julio rolled his eyes. Lately, his father had been talking incessantly about Julio's future role as dictator of América, stressing that it was a responsibility beyond responsibilities. This annoyed Julio a lot, because his father had never cared about his future before. He followed his father as they walked across the courtyard to an armored car.

"Get in." the dictator ordered.

They drove out of the courtyard and down the paved road that led up to their mansion. His father began to ramble.

"*Mi hijo*, the time has come for you to begin preparing. You will be eighteen years old in a few months' time. Soon, you will lead the nation, a responsibility that can only be shouldered by the best of the best."

The rumble of the motor drowned his father out. Julio's attention drifted away. This was a discussion they'd had so often, that Julio had memorized its beats by heart. His father continued, talking about all the jobs that his son would have to take on. Eventually, they left the well-paved road for a less-well paved highway, headed in the direction of Serpiente, América's capital city. Billboards stuck out of the sides of the highway, acting as a staunch reminder of the control his father exerted over his life. They were boldly plastered with pictures of the dictator alongside the sentence "AMÉRICA PARA SIEMPRE". This phrase was the Regime's slogan and could be found on every piece of propaganda in the country. It was often coupled with a picture of the dictator, or a symbol of a snake eating its own tail. The meaning of the snake had never been explained to Julio. He had asked about it many times in the past, but his father had never given him a clear answer. Seeing the symbol, Julio suspected it was connected to the concept of infinity, but he doubted that its purpose was benevolent.

As they entered the city, the environment slowly changed from palm trees and tall grass to concrete spires and apartment blocks. Serpiente was a depressing place, with no nature to speak of. The city was defined by a vast expanse of identical concrete residential buildings, stacked like cubes upon one another, and sprawling industrial districts that dominated the northern landscape. Occasionally, grass would poke up through the cracks in the sidewalk, but it usually died quickly. The air was choking, heavy with the pungent odor of sweat, blood, and other bodily fluids, all seeping up from the inadequate sewage system below. By this time, the streets had grown quiet, with most people already at work in the factories. Yet, a few stragglers remained—walking their flea-ridden dogs or leaning out of cracked windows, puffing on damp, low-quality cigarettes. The city watch was making its rounds, kicking down doors and arresting people without cause. Julio heard rumors that these arrests were increasing. Dual rotor helicopters swooped down from overhead, like vultures circling their prey. Some people were violently vomiting onto the sidewalk, afflicted by a virus that had ravaged the country for some time. The building walls were plastered with posters urging people to take a drug² that was claimed to be the cure for the plague. On every street corner stood vending machines dispensing water and rations. The rations resembled odd grey bricks that were supposed to be edible. These machines were the sole means of food and water for the people, because every other way was forbidden by law. One of the most common forms of crime was "ration fraud" or eating something other than rations, which was punishable by prison sentences of up to fifty

² The name of the miracle drug changed weekly, in order to keep the recipe secret. In fact, it was kept so secret that Julio had no clue what the drug actually contained, just that his father had forbidden him from taking it.

years. Julio never found out why the rations were considered superior, because his father forbade him from ever consuming them. Ginormous plumes of smog rose over the skyline, from the factories that dotted the horizon. The toxic smoke blocked the sun and cast a shadow over the slums. Julio and his father continued towards the only building in the city that had some color: the Regime's headquarters. The Regime was what the government called itself. It wasn't clear where the name came from, since all information on América's founding was scarce. Most historical events were this way. The Department of Record's official reasoning was that knowledge of the past wasn't necessary, and perhaps it really wasn't. Nobody knew for sure.

The brakes screeching pulled Julio back to reality. He'd gotten caught up in his own thoughts again. His father told him to get out of the car and wait for him to find a parking spot. Julio smirked. He found it amusing that even his father, the most powerful man in the country, had to look for a place to park. While waiting, he studied the government building. He'd never seen it from this close before. It was a massive structure and reached far above the clouds. It was made of brilliant white marble, with red and gold streaks stretching all around the exterior. A huge gold plaque was engraved into the marble at the front of the building, with the words "AMÉRICA PARA SIEMPRE", accompanied by the symbol of the snake eating its own tail. The staircase leading up to the entryway must have been fifty meters wide, and there were at least a hundred steps between Julio and the entrance. There was a distinct smell, a flowery scent and possibly a hint of vanilla. It was a stark departure from the dreadful slums. The building made him feel very small. As if to accentuate that feeling, his father returned from his parking adventure. He put his hand on Julio's shoulder.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" he sighed with a smile and an almost romantic intonation, "This building has stood tall for over one hundred years. It's almost as old as América itself."

"It's very pretty," Julio mumbled, more concerned with the sheer number of steps than with the building itself. As they ascended the oversized staircase, Julio noticed that his father was more energetic than usual. Normally he could barely ascend the stairs between the dining room and his bedroom without descending into a fit of coughing, but today he was rocketing up the stairs with a fire in his eyes that Julio had never seen before. As they reached the top of the staircase, Julio could finally see the entrance to the building. Rows upon rows of revolving doors, with hundreds of people entering and exiting the building. Julio's father put a hand on his shoulder once again.

"Are you ready to learn, *mi hijo*?" he said with a grin.

CHAPTER 2

They wandered around the endless identical brown halls for ages, only stopping periodically to open one of the thousands of identical brown wooden doors. Each time, they peered into one of the rooms full of desks, computers and workers looking tired and gaunt, the dictator would explain the function of the room, and they would continue onwards. Eventually, they came across a golden elevator, solely for the dictator's use. The elevator took them to the top of the building, where the brown corridors and brown doors were exchanged for fancy paintings and lavish carpeting. This was the dictator's office, the nerve center of the Regime. Julio couldn't stop his jaw from dropping. The office was ten times more extravagant than the mansion they lived in. The walls were pure mahogany, except for the rear. The back of the room was made of glass, revealing a magnificent vista of the city, ocean, and a massive statue of his father atop

Mount Corcovado. You could even see the anti-air missile batteries dotting the coastline, ready to bring down any would-be invaders.

The dictator, seemingly reading Julio's mind, swooned, "Wonderful interior, isn't it? Of course, this wasn't my doing. I changed very little when I came to power."

"How can you afford all this?" Julio asked in disbelief, "These paintings gotta be at least a hundred years old!"

His father chuckled, "When you step into the role of dictator, money ceases to be an issue."

Next, he showed Julio his office, his desk, his personal water fountain and the exotic plants that had been shipped all the way from the southern tip of the country. What interested Julio most, however, was the gigantic monitor hanging above the entrance, blazing with numbers, words and phrases like "*Índices actuales de producción de armas*"³ and "*Lugares con gran actividad insurgente*"⁴. It was unlike any computer screen he had ever seen, stretching at least ten meters across and hanging from the ceiling down to just above the door. A huge map of América covered most of the screen. Red spots of varying sizes dotted across it. The rest of the display showed various statistics, a to-do list with items like "Bump up Oblivira production by 150%", and a messaging app with multiple unread emails.

Julio pointed up at the screen and asked, "What's that for?"

His father turned his head and spoke in a more serious tone, "That, *mi hijo*, is the less glamorous part of the job. This screen allows me to monitor anything and everything happening in the country."

"Anything?"

His father nodded.

"Everything, from the production of tobacco to the current mood of the population. Any executive order that I have ever made, was with the help of this monitor. You should get acquainted with how it looks, because when you come to power, you will spend your days staring into it."

Julio shuddered. That did not sound like a life he wanted to live. He'd rather spend his days the same way he spent them now: smoking expensive cigars, driving fast cars, sneaking out at night to go clubbing in downtown Serpiente with the other Regime kids and benefiting from his father's position while carrying none of his responsibilities. Suddenly, he had a vision flashing through his head. It was of him, twenty, maybe thirty years later, sitting at his father's desk pushing buttons for hours on end. The snake eating its own tail came to mind, a representation of the endless day-to-day cycle Julio was doomed to repeat for the rest of his life. It was enough to make him feel sick to his stomach.

His father pulled a second chair up to his desk, and beckoned Julio to come sit down. Julio obliged as his father launched into yet another long-winded speech about the tasks and responsibilities that Julio would be taking on, none of which he really cared about. While his father was rambling on, the enormous screen demanded Julio's attention. He didn't know why, but something about that screen seemed ominous. Above all else, he was curious about the

³ "Current rates of arms production"

⁴ "Locations with high insurgent activity"

statistics regarding the rebellion in the south. He had always known about the guerrilla rebels occupying the southern tip of the country, but he was puzzled by how they had obtained the precise locations of their strongholds, and the names of their leaders displayed on the map. Yet on the radio and in news outlets, they reported that the army still hadn't found either. If the head of state knew where the rebels were, why didn't he just strike their hideouts and kill their leaders? Another thing that caught his eye were several statistics referring to something called Oblivira. Julio had no clue what that was. His father never mentioned Oblivira, and yet, at least half of the miscellaneous statistics on the screen were about it.

Without even realizing it, Julio muttered under his breath, "What's Oblivira?"

His father stopped talking, the only noise emanating from him was his raspy breathing. Julio froze. Had he heard it? He didn't mean to say it out loud, but it just slipped out. His father turned to face him; a dark look having replaced the enthusiasm of before.

"You don't need to know what Oblivira is", he snarled, his narrowed eyes boring a hole through Julio's soul, "You will figure it out in due time."

Julio nodded. It was best to agree with his father in situations like this. While his father did seem like a mild-mannered older gentleman on the outside, he was notoriously short-tempered and murderous on the inside. His father resumed his speech, not even noticing how pale with terror Julio's face had become. But beneath that pale skin, questions were being asked, and Julio was not the kind of person who left questions unanswered.

CHAPTER THREE

He couldn't find anything. He'd been looking for any reference to Oblivira ever since they got back from their excursion. There was nothing in the public libraries nor anything in official government records. There wasn't even anything about it in the confidential files that only higher members of the Regime, including him and his father, had access to. There just was no mention of it anywhere, besides that confounded screen in the dictator's office. Julio was beginning to think that Oblivira was just the name of a new secret project, that simply hadn't been admitted into official records yet⁵. His father's sour disposition had stuck with him. He'd never seen his father take on such a menacing tone with him before. Even when he'd broken some sort of rule, he'd never felt the terror he felt when he asked about Oblivira. There was a knock at the door. Julio looked up from the file he was reading, his bed covered in various government documents. His father dragged himself in, his barely functional left leg sagging like a wet noodle.

"I'm so glad you're taking to the administrative part so quickly," he remarked with a coy smile that didn't quite seem genuine, "That was the hardest part for me to pick up, I just find it so boring. I still don't understand how my mother could have been so enthusiastic about it."

"Hmmpf."

Julio was exhausted after researching Oblivira for so many days so that was all he could manage. Fortunately, the half-baked reply had no effect on his father's cheery disposition.

⁵ The American Department of Records was notoriously slow when it came to archiving documents, with it usually taking two to four months for something to be registered in its halls due to its rigorous "assessment" process, which usually consisted of editing anything out that the government didn't find appropriate.

“How would you like to go on holiday, *mi hijo*?” the dictator inquired, “You’ve never seen the south of the country, ¿no?”

Julio immediately turned skeptical. Holiday? His father? Something wasn’t right. The tone with which his father had spoken to him when he entered the room was also odd, as if he suspected Julio of sticking his nose where it didn’t belong.

“Holiday?” he inquired suspiciously, “Why?”

His father’s false smile widened.

“It is tradition that I bring you on a little holiday getaway, so you can gain firsthand experience about how the country is run.”

Julio wasn’t buying it. Still, just in case his father was being genuine, he decided to push his luck a little bit.

“Can I bring any friends?” he pleaded hopefully.

His father’s expression returned to the usual scowl.

“No. This is a father-son only vacation.”

Julio felt a pang of dejectedness. *Oh well*, he thought to himself, *at least I’ll get to see the south for the first time*. He’d never even seen pictures, let alone traveled to the southern tip of América. He remembered overhearing discussions between his father and his best advisor, where Argentina and Chile were described as “provinces we could damn well do without.” Indeed, the increasing support for the revolution in the southern provinces was always an annoyance for the Regime. Whenever he ate breakfast with his father, rare as that was, the dictator always complained about the revolutionaries striking a uranium storage facility or iron mine or, especially, a chemical manufacturing plant. He wondered, what was it about the chemical plants specifically that set his father off? Perhaps it had something to do with the mysterious Oblivira? The screen had said something about increasing its production. He looked back at the mountain of files piled at the foot of his bed. He sighed and pushed them off. Despite his curiosity, he was burnt out on researching something that didn’t seem to exist. Papers rustled as he repositioned himself to watch some television. Turning it on, it immediately switched to the news channel. This was standard, as all T.V.s in the country were mandated to stay on the official news channel for half an hour before being permitted to watch anything else. He turned up the volume.

“Breaking news! We’ve just received reports that *Ejército Dorado*⁶ soldiers have scored a victory against the rebel scum! The rebel encampment north of Buenos Aires has been taken, and the rebels have been pushed back fifty kilometers! The city of Buenos Aires is now closer to liberation than it has ever been! We turn now to our reporter on the grou—”

Julio muted the television and rolled his eyes. There was always something around Buenos Aires that the army was liberating. As far back as he could remember, the city had always been fought over. “Closer to liberation than it has ever been” was just Regime-speak for “The city might be liberated within the next decade.” Besides, since when was there a rebel encampment north of Buenos Aires? Just last week they said that the military was fighting over an encampment west

⁶ “Golden Army”, the nickname of the American military. The name came from the color of the “*Destrucción Andante*” combat mechs that made up the majority of América’s armored infantry.

of the city. Or had they taken that one already? He'd just been looking at some files pertaining to this. He rummaged through the stack of files on his bed. Sure enough, one of the files held a record of this altercation. This wasn't really surprising. These inconsistencies were common; for example, Julio's age was recorded as three years younger than he was. They were a byproduct of the Department of Records' constant meddling in recorded history. It was impossible for anyone to verify any statement that the news made, since by the time it aired any evidence to the contrary had been erased. To what end these edits were being made was unknown to anyone except the dictator. Julio was annoyed by all this lying to people that trusted them. He decided to keep the file. He felt like it could come in handy someday. He looked back at the screen. The reporter was at the scene of the battle, wherever that was. The camera was looking down on him from the edge of a crater, probably one made by a missile impact. Small text was scrolling along the bottom of the screen, mentioning a speech due later today by the dictator. Julio groaned. He was always forced to attend his father's multi-hour-long rants, about how great he was and how prosperous the country was. It was enough to put an insomniac to sleep. There was another knock at his door, and his father limped into the room again.

"I am holding a speech in fifteen minutes. Get ready and get in the car"

"Fantastic, I could use a nap right 'bout now," Julio muttered under his breath, making sure his father couldn't hear it like he heard the inquiry about Oblivira.

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

"How much longer 'till we get there?"

Julio was incredibly bored. They'd been flying for multiple hours and hadn't made any visible progress. The landscape hadn't changed at all. The only thing that had changed was his mood.

"Patience, *mi hijo*. Air travel takes time."

His father also seemed to be growing restless. He'd been acting strangely ever since the speech, as if anxiously awaiting something. Julio was excited. The two never went on vacation together, and when they did it was because of some diplomatic event that Julio was forced to attend. The past three days had been spent learning how to pack, because previously that job had always been done by a servant. He wasn't confident he'd done a good job, because the suitcase was about to burst when he loaded it into the plane. *I might've overdone it when I packed those files*, he reflected, *at least it fit into the cargo hold*. This was the first time Julio had ever been on any of his father's private jets. In fact, it was the first time Julio had ever been on any kind of aircraft. Whenever they'd gone on a trip, they'd always traveled by armored convoy. The jets were reserved for important occasions, such as birthdays of Regime members. Suddenly, the plane shuddered. The pilot's voice came over the speaker, announcing that they were set to land in Santiago in approximately thirty minutes. His father seemed relieved at the news.

The plane jolted and shook as it landed on the runway. All around the apron, hundreds of people had gathered to greet their glorious leader and his less glorious son. Loud cheers erupted from the crowd as Julio and his father disembarked. Julio was intimidated by all the flags waving and people singing. Some were trying to get their attention by dousing themselves in the water that came from the vending machines. A woman at the front of the crowd was holding up her child, clearly afflicted by the plague, begging the dictator to do something about it. She was

immediately apprehended by guards and beaten senseless, the child whisked away, yet the people continued to cheer, celebrating the poor woman's arrest. It was cult-like. His father was smiling and waving, in a dismissive way, almost as if to say, "*I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't have to.*" Julio didn't understand why these people were still supporting the Regime. They would most likely be arrested and their identity erased anyway. It was an unfortunate fact of life in América that people would vanish occasionally. They were often forgotten, families and friends failing to remember that they ever existed.

The two approached a single officer, wearing the standard white and gold suit, directing them to board an armored van. The crowd continued to cheer as they drove off, not knowing that they could not be heard from inside the soundproof van. As soon as the doors of the car closed, police descended upon the crowd, arresting people left and right. The dictator turned to Julio with a dark expression like the one he'd had in his office.

"Now, *mi hijo*, there are some things that you need to know about how to act in the south. You understand that you are closer to the revolution than you have ever been, ¿*no?*"

Julio swallowed and nodded.

"*Sí, papá.*"

"Good. There are three rules that you must follow while we are down here. Rule number one, never leave the confines of the house without me or an armed escort. Rule number two, do not, under any circumstances, talk to anybody you may meet. Rule number three, never, ever, go out at night. If you break any of these rules, you will be severely punished. Do you understand?"

"*Sí, papá.*"

"Good."

The dictator sat back. Julio rested his head on his hand and looked out of the thick, bulletproof window. Outside, the environment was changing from the small towns on the outskirts of the city, to the densely packed trees of the Chilean rainforest. The road was loosely packed gravel, littered with potholes. The sunlight was peeking through the treetops, illuminating unexploded bombs stuck in the tall branches. Occasionally, they would pass the corpse of an *Ejército Dorado* soldier hanging from a tree, no doubt left there by rebel forces wishing to send a message. Julio hated the animosity between the *Ejército Dorado* and the rebels. Whenever the news showed footage of soldiers executing rebel prisoners or innocent women and children, he had to look away. He found it disturbing and had begged his father to stop the killing. Of course, his father never listened. He couldn't fathom how the dictator could stomach watching it. Those were his people, after all.

When they arrived at the getaway, it was in shambles. The small mansion had clearly not been used in years, possibly decades. As they entered through the front door, the doorknob came off in his father's hand, and about thirty tarantulas scattered across the floor. Julio gagged. His father, not noticing Julio's revulsion, was elated to see the interior.

"Ahh," he said with glee, "it's just as I remember. You know Julio, this house has been in the family for generations, passed down from the very first dictator."

"Has it always been this much of a mess?" Julio wondered, barely hiding the disgust in his voice.

“It is not a mess, *mi hijo*, it is simply old. It will grow on you. Believe me, I was also quite unhappy with the place when my mother brought me here forty years ago. I would even go so far as to say there were twice as many tarantulas when I was last here.”

“Ewww...”

Julio picked up his bag and carefully made his way through the cobwebs into the living room of the mansion. It stank of mold and mothballs. *I might need a gas mask if I'm going to stay here*, he thought to himself. His father called out to him from the upper floor, telling him to put his bag in his room. He trudged up the stairs, careful not to fall into one of the many holes in the steps. His room was in the worst state by far. The walls were yellow with mold, that barely disguised the many bugs that lived in them. The bed had a thin, rigid mattress with stains that Julio hoped weren't bodily fluid. The lamp on the ceiling was hanging by a single wire, defying gravity. The light switch was a mess of exposed wires. The air was thick with dust and the stench of something that had died in the walls. Most unnerving of all, the room had an unusual aura about it, that made Julio feel as if he was being watched. He dropped his bag onto the bed, which made a repulsive squelching sound. It was too much to bear. Julio ran to the bathroom and threw up in the toilet. His father poked his head through the doorway.

“I see you have made yourself at home.”

“Yeah, real homey,” Julio spluttered sarcastically, “The need to vomit really makes me feel like I never left.”

His father rolled his eyes.

“If you wish, I can call a team to clean this place up.”

“Yeah, that'd be great. This place smells like hot garbage.”

His father turned and left, muttering something about the younger generation and entitlement in between dust laden coughs. Julio looked up from the toilet and stared at the bugs on the wall. The bugs seemed to stare back. The stench of the bathroom overcame him, and he vomited again.

CHAPTER TWO

Julio woke up to the sound of rotors whirring. A helicopter had landed right in front of the house. His eyes had barely adjusted to the daylight before his father barged into his room, taking another doorknob with him.

“Get dressed. Immediately.” he barked. Clearly, he wasn't in the mood for sleeping in.

Julio sat up and stretched.

“What's going on now? I thought we were on holiday.”

His father didn't bother responding. He simply motioned for Julio to hurry up. Julio slipped into a comfy pair of shorts and a shirt. He was annoyed that his father had woken him up again, far earlier than he would have liked. Couldn't it wait? They were going to be there for two weeks, surely the dictator could afford to let him sleep in at least once. But it would never happen. Julio's father woke up every day at precisely seven o'clock and expected his son to do the same. If only his father would realize that he didn't want to be the same as him. Once he'd overheard his father complaining to the head of the army that Julio had “no drive, no passion, no respect

for the role.” It annoyed him to his core. Julio’s eyes closed and his lungs drew in a deep breath. Being irritated was only going to make things worse, and the last thing he wanted to deal with this morning was an angry tyrant. He made his way down to the kitchen to make himself breakfast but his father stopped him before he could get there.

“No. No breakfast today. We are already running late.” his father droned.

Julio, already tired and grumpy, snapped, “Oh, so I’m just supposed to starve?! Tell me, what’s so damn important that you wake me up at the crack of dawn and don’t give me breakfast?”

His father raised his voice, “I will not have this lip from you, young man! I am working around the clock to prepare you for your future, and this is the thanks I get? *Dios mío...*”

Julio stamped his foot on the floor, “This is exactly what I mean! You push me around, expecting me to just lie down and let you walk all over me, well lemme tell you, I’m done with it! I’m eating my goddamn breakfast, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

The dictator furrowed his brow shortly before roaring, “I refuse to tolerate this insolence any longer! You will get in that helicopter, and you will not complain, or you will get no food, let alone breakfast, for three days, *¡maldita sea!*”

Julio backed down with a growl. There was no point arguing with his father. It always devolved into threats, be it no food or being grounded. Thankfully these threats were usually empty, however, there were times when he was very young where his father had followed up on his promises. *If I ever have a kid*, Julio thought, *I’ll make sure they get food if they want it*. He trudged out to the helicopter with his father in tow. The rumble in his stomach was almost louder than the thudding of the rotors. The helicopter was, for once, a vehicle without grandiosity. It was a standard military aircraft, complete with rocket pods and coaxial machine guns strapped to its sides. The central compartment was, according to what Julio remembered from his homeschooling education, designed to hold at least thirty-five soldiers plus additional gear, but in practice it rarely held more than ten. The outside armor of the helicopter was smooth, with rounded edges designed to deflect radar so it couldn’t be tracked. The cockpit was made of one-way bulletproof glass, with the snake stamped on the front of it. The whole thing was colored a deep black, with the red and gold accents of the *Ejército Dorado*. The nose of the aircraft had cutting edge tracking equipment, as well as flare launchers to ward off incoming missiles. Julio had only seen these gigantic masses of steel flying over the city, he’d never actually been on one. His father’s voice called out from behind him,

“*Mi hijo*, help me up quickly. I am not as strong as I once was.” he wheezed, trying and failing to pull himself up into the helicopter.

Julio sighed and hopped into the vehicle. The injury that afflicted his father’s leg was as much of a mystery to him as Oblivira was. He helped his father in, without so much as a simple thanks in return. His gaze wandered around the helicopter’s interior. The bench he was sitting on extended out all the way to the back of the helicopter, where a rear gunner pod was sitting unmanned. The door to the cockpit was hermetically sealed, the only means of communication with the pilot was a radio headset, which was currently in his father’s hands as he tried figure out how it worked. The walls were covered in screens showing camera feeds from the outsides, computer reports of the integrity of the armor and various forms of threat detection systems. Alongside the screens, there were plaques inscribed with “AMÉRICA PARA SIEMPRE”, as well as various propaganda messages for the troops. Julio figured that “PARA SIEMPRE” might refer to

this war that seemed endless, and remind soldiers of their fate. The interior reeked of jet fuel and engine oil, and it was unbearably hot making Julio feel lightheaded. His father, having finally found out how the headset worked, strapped himself in and said something into the microphone that never reached Julio's ears. The helicopter's rotors kicked into overdrive, the engine roared to life and they slowly began to lift off the ground. Julio pulled the seatbelt over himself and let the rhythmic thumping of the rotors lull him to sleep.

He was awoken by his father aggressively shaking him.

"We are here," he shouted over the droning of the engine.

Julio rubbed his eyes and sat up as the helicopter deployed its landing gear. As he was pulling his seatbelt off, two soldiers opened the doors to the helicopter and helped his father out. Julio realized where they were. They were in one of the *Ejército Dorado's* massive strongholds. The two soldiers entered the helicopter again and offered to help Julio out, which he politely declined. He hopped out onto the grass, to find his father already annoyed with a lieutenant.

"What do you mean you 'aren't ready'?! You were told about our arrival three months ago, ¿no?"

"Yes of course sir, but—" the lieutenant stammered.

"Then you have had more than enough time to prepare! Show us precisely what I asked of you or be relieved of your duties."

"Sir, I cannot do that right now. The divisions you were scheduled to see are currently out on patrol. The calendar I was given said that your visit was tomorrow."

"Then get them back from patrol and show them to me! ¡Ay dios mío, always with the excuses! This is precisely why we have not dealt with the rebel scourge yet; incompetent leadership!"

Julio fought hard to hold back a smirk and saw the two soldiers from before doing the same. How deliciously ironic it was for his father to complain about incompetent leadership. Meanwhile, the argument raged on:

"Sir, I have told you, I sent the divisions out on patrol, I cannot call them back now."

"And why not?!"

"I am not permitted to sir; protocol dictates that all patrol shifts must be fully completed no matter what."

"Who made that protocol?! I shall have them executed!"

"You did, sir."

A hush fell over the crowd. By now at least half of the standing infantry had shown up to witness the two bicker. Julio feared it was about to become a very one-sided argument. The dictator's eyebrow twitched, and his demeanor had changed from uncontrollably angry to unsettlingly calm.

"Come again?" he hissed.

Any semblance of color in the lieutenant's face before had now been replaced by a pale milky complexion.

“I-I mean, I-I d-don’t think it was you specifically, s-sir, I was more referring to someone in charge of the army, of c-course,” he stuttered, shaking like a pair of *maracas*.

A sickening smile spread across the dictator’s face, though it was clear that this was no happy smile.

“Of course you didn’t mean me specifically, that would be suicide for you, ¿*no*? If protocol really is the issue, then me and my son will gladly wait a little while. In the meantime, why don’t you show me exactly where this protocol is written down, so I can rectify it later, okay?”

The lieutenant seemed slightly relieved.

“Of course I can show you the protocol sir, it’s right on my desk in my offi–”

He couldn’t even finish his sentence before the dictator knocked him to the ground, pulled a pistol out of his suit and shot him twice in the head. The bullets created a cloud of dust as they hit the floor, thankfully masking most of the gore. The sound of the gunshots rolled over the mountains like a screeching symphony, scaring any birds that happened to have had the misfortune of hearing it. As the dust settled, Julio couldn’t help but stare at the stump where the lieutenant’s head used to be, a feeling of nausea spreading through his stomach. The dictator’s suit was stained crimson. Julio fell to his knees and threw up. The dictator stood up straight, adjusted his tie, returned the pistol to the inside of his suit and wiped the grey matter from his suit pants.

“Now then,” he announced smugly, “is there anybody else who wishes to file a complaint about my military protocol?”

Nobody dared to speak up.

The dictator smirked. “Wonderful. Now, can somebody direct me to his second in command?” he said, gesturing at the corpse on the floor. A small rotund man with a bald head and round glasses came forward and raised his hand.

“I am his second in command, *señor*.”

“Good, you are promoted. Call those divisions back from patrol.”

The man nodded and scuttled off to a nearby barracks. The crowd of soldiers dispersed, and a crew arrived to carry the corpse away and clean up Julio’s vomit. They didn’t seem to be fazed by the murder, which made Julio think that this kind of occurrence was not rare. The dictator walked over to him, appearing disappointed.

“Get up, *mi hijo*. You are making a fool out of yourself. There is no need to go and throw up over a bug being squashed.”

Julio picked himself up, still staring at the corpse being dragged away. Hearing his father refer to the man as a bug unsettled him. He’d never seen him turn like that before. Above all else, he was shocked at the ruthless efficiency with which his father had acted. It was all done in one smooth movement, knocking him down with one hand while grabbing the pistol with the other. It was a routine that his father seemed to have perfected. His thoughts were once again cut short as a small radio that his father had pulled out of his suit grabbed Julio’s attention. It was a small black and gold device, with an antenna sticking out the top, a button on the side and a microphone on the front. Below the microphone, the logo of the Department of Records was

engraved. His father pressed the button on the side of the device and spoke into it with a low, hushed voice:

“Department of Records, there is – was – a lieutenant, designatory number 0451, who needs to be erased. Administer increased Oblivira dosages to his family and delete his record.”

There it was, the elusive Oblivira! Finally, some form of clue as to what it pertained to! Julio’s mind began to whirl around like crazy. Was Oblivira some form of medicine? It was referred to as dosages, so that explanation seemed plausible. But why was it being given to the family? There were so many questions that Julio wanted answers to. Again, his thoughts were cut short as the small rotund man, now a lieutenant, waddled back from the barracks and proclaimed that the divisions would return in half an hour. The dictator invited Julio to go explore the base on his own.

It was a massive complex, easily stretching on for thousands of square meters, with rows upon rows of barracks, airstrips, hangar bays and parking lots filled with tanks and other armored vehicles. All around the base, the snake eating its own tail could be seen. Soldiers were chatting, playing cards, cleaning their rifles and smoking cigarettes. Between the barracks, large wooden spears were mounted with the severed heads of what were presumably revolutionaries skewered atop them. There were other morbid decorations such as this, like the corpses of the women and children killed in mass executions hanging from the guard towers. Soldiers wore necklaces made of teeth, and their faces were painted with blood. Julio shuddered at the sight of them. He saw in these soldiers no trace of any human soul; they may as well have been savage beasts. The soldiers wore similar uniforms as the guards back home, except the crimson beret was swapped out for a crimson helmet. The shirt and pants were brown and green camouflage, with strips of bulletproof material woven in. Their steel toed boots had spiked soles, no doubt to inflict maximum pain when stomping on an unfortunate prisoner. They wielded huge assault rifles with armor penetrating capabilities as well as built in automatic grenade launchers. They looked like a pain to carry around, but none of the soldiers seemed to complain. Julio wandered in circles for what seemed like ages, given the complex had a confusing layout, before he was fetched by the small rotund lieutenant. The divisions had returned.

He was dragged across the base back to his father, who was standing in front of the *Ejército Dorado*’s crown jewel: a *Destructión Andante* combat mech. And what a sight it was. The monstrous machine towered nearly ten meters into the sky. The main torso of the machine was a massive gold box, held up by two gigantic legs that were like the hind legs of a dog, except that the feet were flat and round. The arms, if you could call them that, were two enormous rotary cannons, with barrels so big, soldiers could probably fit in them with room to spare. Atop the walker were six batteries of multi-purpose missiles, as well as six autoloading mortar cannons. The front and rear of the thing were studded with machine guns and flamethrowers, for cutting down infantry. Hanging from its groin was what looked like the front end of a snowplow, outfitted with spikes. Julio was at a loss for words. It was so enormous; his eyes couldn’t take it all in at once. His father was also silent, with a dreamy smile on his face, drinking in the sheer majesty of this war machine. After a solid minute of just staring, the dictator broke the silence.

“This, *mi hijo*, is the greatest war machine ever constructed. It weighs a hundred tons and kills everything it comes across with zero effort. The design is close to a hundred years old and yet still remarkably efficient.”

Julio still said nothing. It was the largest thing he'd ever seen. His father continued.

"Now, I will show you the full might of América, *mi hijo*. The very thing that you will inherit."

Julio was toured around the base. He saw tanks, gunships, planes, bombers, helicopters and, of course, hundreds of combat mechs marching in unison. The tour also included a training exercise where soldiers simulated their escape plan from a damaged troop transport with no way out. He got to see all the equipment that the soldiers had at their disposal, including a set of prototype grenades that spewed radioactive waste when exploded. He even got to shoot one of the soldier's rifles, which had very little kick given that the round it fired was the size of Julio's forearm. After all the technical demonstrations, he was shown how logistics ran, how orders were issued and carried out and other boring bureaucratic drivel. When all was said and done, his father and he were given an aerial tour of the surrounding countryside before being taken home. The sun had begun to set, and the trees were illumined by the orange light.

"What did you think, *mi hijo*?" his father inquired.

"Awesome," Julio responded, gazing at the horizon, "It was a blast."

"Good, I am glad you enjoyed it, because from here on out, things will become a little bit more serious."

Julio turned away from the window.

"What d'you mean?"

His father turned solemn.

"You are approaching your final lesson, *mi hijo*. You may not realize it, but you are closer to your future than you have ever been."

Julio's confusion grew.

"What does that mean? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You will find out soon, *mi hijo*, you will find out soon."

CHAPTER 3

Julio couldn't sleep. His father's statement rattled around in his skull. He had no earthly idea what a "final lesson" would look like. It was debatable whether or not his father had even given him something that could be called a "lesson". Julio decided to get up, finding no point in trying to fall asleep. He lifted himself from his bed and trudged over to the window, scaring a few cockroaches in the process. The windowsill had rotted away, now overrun with mold. The sanitary situation in the house hadn't improved in the slightest, even after the cleaning team finished their work. Julio's bedroom overlooked the nearby town in the middle of the surrounding rainforest, and he could see that it was still lively even at this late hour. There was some gathering or celebration going on in the town square. He turned his back to the window and moved towards the bathroom to get a glass of water, when suddenly a small plinking noise made him turn back around. Someone was throwing pebbles at his window. He looked out. There was a small group of people his age motioning for him to come outside, but before he could open the window and speak to them, the group scattered. Julio blinked. He wasn't sure he was seeing correctly. He pinched himself to make sure this wasn't a dream. What could they possibly want with him? Did they even know who he was? He was just as excited as he was

confused. The temptation to accept the mysterious group's offer was unbelievably strong. He weighed his options. Either he could let his curiosity get the better of him and risk harsh punishment from his father for breaking the rules, or he could ignore it and try to squeeze as much sleep out of this night as he could. He stood in place, while his thoughts raced at the speed of light, before finally coming to a decision.

He pulled some clothes on and slowly snuck down the stairs, careful not to wake the sleeping bear that was his father. He'd almost made it to the front door when two voices made his blood turn to ice. There were two guards outside, chatting away as if there were no tomorrow. Julio silently cursed. That door was the only way out of the house, and the guards wouldn't be too happy with him if he were to just stroll past. Julio was going to have to improvise. He returned to his room and opened the window. Just next to it was an old drainage pipe, which ran all the way to the ground. Julio carefully lifted himself out of the window and wrapped himself around it. The rusted thing let out a groan as the extra weight caused it to buckle slightly. Julio grimaced. Any slight noise ran the potential risk of alerting the guards or his father. His heart beat like a drum in his chest. He slowly began to shimmy down the pipe, stopping in fear after every creak it made, until his feet touched the earth. The pipe let out one final rusted cry as Julio dismounted. Feeling somewhat satisfied with his successful escape; Julio began to make his way to the town.

As he wandered through the rainforest, his mind wandered with him. He thought about what life was like outside of his father's iron grip. He wondered if the common folk ever had to worry about stepping up to some form of great responsibility, or if they knew what it felt like to have your future condemned to a monotonous office job. Above all, he wondered if they held the same disdain for his father that he did. He speculated if the revolution's ideas were more widespread than the Regime imagined. A brief image flashed through his mind. It was Serpiente in flames, a full-blown confrontation with the rebels and the *Ejército Dorado*, with the latter slowly losing ground. He saw the mansion he called home collapsing in on itself, symbolic of the Regime falling at the hands of the revolution. He saw flags of the snake eating its own tail being destroyed, and for a moment, he swore he saw the snake release its tail. He saw the Regime burning down, and a new América rising from the ashes, led by a human, not a monster who killed their own subordinates for a simple misunderstanding. It was a scene that gave him a strange sense of hope. Maybe one day, his father could finally be given a taste of his own medicine, a sort of retribution for Julio's treatment his whole life. Julio tried to think back to a time when he truly loved his father, but he couldn't remember. Another image briefly flashed in his head, though this time it was a memory and not imagination. He remembered sitting on the stairwell, barely four years of age, and listening in on an argument between his father and an unknown woman in the neighboring room. Could that have been his mother? Julio had never really known her before her untimely death when he was five years old. His father had always claimed that she never truly cared about him the way he did. Julio doubted that a level that low was possible. Regardless, his mother had been imprisoned and died a year later due to "natural causes". He never really heard more about it from that point onward. The Department of Records had no profile on her, she'd likely been erased.

Julio continued riding this train of thought until he finally reached the town. It was even more lively than it'd seemed from the window. The whole town was beautifully illuminated by bonfires, and there were wondrous smells of salty meat and sweet dough coming from stands selling local street food. Julio decided to keep a low profile. He noticed that all around the town, people were acting very strangely. Most of the people were acting like idiots, and there were others laying on the ground wearing clothing marked to signify infection. Angry shouts came

from two men in an alleyway having an argument over the ownership of a rotted plank of wood. One woman was struggling to open a door that was already ajar. All the stands selling food had misspelled signs. He wondered if this strange behavior had something to do with the Regime. Those vending machines were everywhere, although he doubted that the “rations” were being used to make whatever smelled so delicious in those stands. If this were Serpiente, they’d have all been arrested for ration fraud by now. He continued through the crowd, looking around at the houses as he went. They were a far cry from Serpiente’s mass-manufactured concrete blocks with tiny windows, instead they were traditionally built houses, made from clay or brick and mortar, with thatched roofs. Some of them even had breathtaking stained-glass windows, depicting ancient imagery of what the land used to look like. He wandered over to the town square.

The square was chock-full of people, even at this time of night, and right in the middle there was a beautiful fountain, even more beautiful than the one in his own backyard. He couldn’t help but smile. At least the architecture remained untainted by the Regime. He heard someone call his name from behind him and froze. *Mierda*, he thought, *I’ve already been found?* He ducked into the crowd, blending into the masses as if he were one of them. The voice continued to call out. He shuffled through the crowd until he came upon an open area. He scrambled into an alleyway as the voice continued to follow him. He hid behind a trash can and waited for his pursuer to give up the chase. He heard the voice call out to others, commanding them to spread out and search. He heard footsteps coming into the alleyway. *This is it*, he thought, *this is where the rebels capture and kill me*. The footsteps stopped. He heard chuckling before a new voice called out:

“Y’know, it might be more effective to hide *in* the trashcan.”

Julio stood up with his arms raised. The voice belonged someone his age. The kid let out another laugh.

“Put your arms down *hermano*, I’m not gonna hurt you.”

Julio approached the kid who continued to speak.

“You’re *el presidente*’s kid, ¿*no*? We’ve had our eyes on you a long while now.”

Julio, still visibly shaking, stayed silent. The kid shook his head.

“Ay, we really scared the hell outta you, huh? Sorry ‘bout that. I’m Luis, by the way”

The two walked out of the alleyway. Luis called out to an older kid, who Julio figured must’ve been the voice calling to him before. The older kid strolled over with his hand outstretched. Julio mustered enough stability to shake his hand, despite his violent shivering. The older kid spoke with a remarkably deep voice:

“My name’s Alejandro. I lead the rebel groups around here. No need to introduce yourself, *compay*, we already know who you are.”

Almost as if to prove his point, the other kids approached behind Alejandro, some waving, others looking down their nose at Julio. Some of them were even armed.

“You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?” Julio croaked.

Alejandro cracked a slight smile.

“Don’t worry, we won’t kill you,” he said while motioning for his group to put their guns away, “I just wanna talk to you.”

Julio walked with Alejandro, Luis and the rest of the rebels to an encampment on the other end of town. As they made their way over, the townsfolk were in awe of Julio, looking at him as if he were some kind of exotic animal. The tension in Julio’s body subsided slightly. Nobody ever looked at him with that sort of wonder. It was always his father that got all the attention, but now that his father wasn’t here, Julio could bask in that same admiration. It felt good. When they got to the camp, they were greeted with a cheer. Julio had never seen such a lively party before in his life; Tons of rebels were dancing with each other to music that was most definitely not state-approved. The relaxed atmosphere calmed his nerves further as he followed Alejandro across the dance floor. Luis stayed behind. The two entered a large tent that was marked with a sign saying “*¡OFICINA DE ALEJANDRO, POR FAVOR NO ENTRE (LUIS, ESO VA POR TI TAMBIÉN)!*”⁷ It was a quaint office space, lit by a single lantern in the corner. Alejandro motioned for Julio to sit down on one of the beanbags that covered the dirt floor. As he began to tap away on a portable computer, Julio tilted his head upwards and looked around the room. The walls of the tent were decorated quite nicely, with mesmerizing hypnotic patterns that Julio couldn’t help but get lost in. Betwixt the patterns were drawings of people holding up their fists, and above them the snake on the flag, skewered by a sword. Julio assumed it was some revolutionary cartoon. Alejandro cleared his throat and broke the silence.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” he muttered, “We think you’ve got the same revolutionary instincts we do. We’d like to recruit you.”

Julio’s jaw almost hit the floor. It was already bad enough that the rebels had risked contacting him, attempting to recruit him was surely suicide, for both parties. He doubted the authenticity of the offer, wondering if this was just some rebel plot to infiltrate the government, provided they hadn’t yet done so.

Alejandro continued, “I know it may come as a shock, believe me, but we wouldn’t be doing this if we weren’t 110% sure. We’ve been watching you ever since your father showed you around the Regime’s headquarters, every interaction and every argument. It’s a surprise none of us were captured. Regardless, it was only yesterday morning that it became obvious to us that you aren’t loyal to your father.”

Julio felt an odd anger well up inside of him. How dare he assume that the heir of América would be remotely disloyal to his country. But something made his anger disappear as soon as it came about. Alejandro was clearly no fool, and his wording had been deliberate. He’d said Julio wasn’t loyal to his *father*, not his country, which was true. The scene of Serpiente burning flashed in his mind again. The offer was tempting, but Julio wasn’t going to be taken for a fool if this really was a trick.

“What’s in it for me?” he demanded, sitting up slightly as he did so.

Alejandro smiled, “Well, we can offer you the chance to get revenge on your father. It’s no secret that he treats you like dirt. I suppose a guy like you would be open to that sort of thing.”

⁷ “ALEJANDRO’S OFFICE, PLEASE DO NOT ENTER (LUIS, THAT GOES FOR YOU TOO)!”

Indeed, Julio was certainly open to that option. He was almost salivating at the chance to prove to his father once and for all who the better man was. However, this tantalizing offer still wasn't enough to convince him. He needed one more thing.

"I'll do it on one condition. You promise me, that alongside the revenge, I'm granted the position of head of state like I am owed."

Alejandro winced, and his brow furrowed, his coy smile falling from his face like a stone.

"Hmm," he pondered, "I'm not granting you that. The point of the revolution is to get rid of the dictatorship, not continue it with its next-in-line."

Julio countered, "It's clear to both of us that I have the revolutionary spirit. Meaning, if I'm in power, I'll be able to change things according to our ideals. Plus, the remnants of the old government would probably listen to me more than you guys anyway, given that my dad is the leader and all. No offence."

"None taken, though I'm still not convinced. I can't just give you something like that when we don't even know you. I've got too much on the line to be putting all my eggs in one basket. Besides, what's stopping you from just betraying us and gaining your father's favor?"

"What would I gain from stabbing you guys in the back? The favor of my *papá*? The guy who's condemned me to a life of boring office work. Thanks, but no thanks, I'd rather side with you guys."

"Julio, I get you. Really, I do. My dad's a *hijo de perra* too. But you're out of your damn mind if you think you can just waltz in here and demand we install you at the top of the pyramid. Either you settle for second place, or you leave."

Julio grumbled, "Fine. I'll play by your rules."

Alejandro's smile returned to his face.

"Wonderful. I'm glad we could come to an agreement. Maybe if you gain enough trust, I'll reconsider your demand."

He stood up and walked outside. Julio poked his head out of the door. He watched Alejandro motion the DJ to kill the music. When all was quiet, he announced with great gusto:

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce to you all, the newest member of the revolution!"

Julio walked up next to Alejandro. At first the crowd was quiet, but when they realized who Alejandro was talking about, they erupted into cheers. All around the camp, people were elated that the son of the dictator was on their side. Many were singing revolutionary songs of hope. Some were raising their glass to toast. Others were too drunk to know what was going on but were celebrating anyway. Luis ran up to him and gave him a high five and said something that he couldn't hear over the roar of the crowd. Julio realized at that point that to these people, in some way, he represented hope. He was proof that there was resistance, even at the highest possible level, and that was inspiring to these guerillas. He cracked a smile. The DJ turned the music back on, and everyone, Julio and Alejandro included, hit the dance floor.

The party continued for hours. Julio and Luis were among the few who were still dancing when day broke. Suddenly, the town's church clock struck six. Julio heard the ringing of the bells, and his heart stopped. He hadn't been keeping track of the time, and now he wasn't sure he'd make

it back home before his father woke up. Immediately he bid his new friends goodbye and made a mad dash for home. He stampeded through the town square, raced through the jungle and scrambled up the drainage pipe, not thinking about the racket the rusty old thing would cause. He fell through the window on to the floor of his room and proceeded to change into his pajamas in record time.

He'd just pulled the covers over himself when there was a knock at his door. He held his breath, awaiting his father's angry tirade over how he broke the rules, but it never came. Instead, there was a courier at the door. His uniform indicated that he was a high-ranking member of the Regime, just below him and his father, so whatever it was, it must be important. Julio sat up, making sure to imitate someone who'd just awoken from a deep sleep in case this was some sort of trap. The courier said nothing and just handed him a red envelope, sealed with a wax imprint of the snake eating its own tail. Curious, Julio took the letter and carefully opened it. Inside was a handwritten letter from his father.

It read, "Dear Julio. I am writing this from our home in Serpiente. Pressing matters have come upon us and you must return. I have arranged transport for you. Please get ready and leave immediately upon receiving this letter."

He hadn't even bothered signing the damn thing. Julio rolled his eyes. So much for "vacation". He looked up at the courier, who was urging him to pack and leave. He sighed and began to prepare himself for the return trip. He managed to eat some cereal before leaving, a luxury that his father seemed unwilling to grant.

The courier loaded his suitcase into a white limousine and opened the backseat door for Julio to enter. The interior of the limousine was covered in luscious cherry-colored leather, with gold metal accents. The windows were tinted black, and the whole thing smelt of cheap cologne.

"Hold on to something," came a curt order from the courier as he slammed his foot down on the gas pedal. The car lurched forward towards the road, at a surprising speed. Clearly, they were in a hurry, but Julio still had no clue why.

"D'you mind telling me what the hell is going on?" he demanded from the courier.

"Sorry, can't say. Official Department of Records business, it's confidential," came the response.

"Confidential? I'm the leader's son, nothing should be kept from me, damn it! I wanna know what the hell is going on!"

"Sorry, I've orders to keep quiet. Your father was very specific about that."

They continued racing down the highway as if it was their last day on earth. Julio had to brace for impact multiple times, since the courier seemed intent on risking their lives.

"Slow the hell down!" he begged the courier, "Are you trying to get us killed?"

"Sorry, can't go slower. We really don't have much time."

Eventually the chaos of the jungle morphed into the suburbanization of the city outskirts. Smoke plumes from the factories like the ones in Serpiente rose high into the heavens, blotting out the sun and the still visible moon. Suddenly, the car came to a screeching halt. They were caught in a traffic jam. Julio figured that it was a good opportunity to get some rest, since he no longer needed to pray for his survival, but the courier had other plans. He spoke into a radio, and within

minutes, an army helicopter had arrived to airlift them, along with the car, to the airport. The absurdity of the situation boggled Julio's mind, and he couldn't help but laugh as the traffic jam cleared up as soon as they were lifted.

After a half hour, they finally managed to fly the car to the airport, where Julio and the courier, swiftly boarded a sleek black jet. This plane was not like the one Julio and his father had used to arrive, rather, this one was modern and fast. The seats were almost like sitting on a cloud. All the paneling was well affixed, and there was an in-flight entertainment system which Julio opted to forgo in favor of getting some rest. He figured this plane was most likely the one his father actually used for special occasions, instead of the old rust bucket they flew in on. Even the takeoff was silent and smooth, a reflection of the aircraft's exterior. They'd reached cruising altitude within minutes, and within an hour the plane had already begun its descent. Julio hadn't even had time to get comfortable. The plane touched down with the grace of a swan. Mere nanoseconds later, the door opened, and the courier leapt out and fetched a new limousine.

They raced up to the mansion at speeds Julio hadn't thought possible for an automobile. However, when they got to the mansion they didn't drive into the yard. Instead, the courier ventured into the surrounding forest. They came to a wide clearing, and he clicked a small button underneath the dashboard. A massive steel box rose from the ground. Julio had never seen this before in all his eighteen years. The courier slowly drove into the entrance, and it started to descend. The elevator began to thrash violently in different directions, making an awful din. Eventually, the front of the box opened to reveal a garage the size of a football field, filled with similar limousines. The courier found an empty parking space and they both got out of the car. He led a bewildered Julio into a building with a mess of identical well-lit steel corridors, before finally entering a room where the dictator was waiting for him, giddy with glee.

"*Mi hijo*, I apologize for cutting our vacation a bit short, but you must understand, the house was no longer safe. A—"

"Where are we?" Julio interrupted.

"We are in the Department of Records, *mi hijo*. The true nerve center of the Regime."

"Why'd you drag me all the way back here? What's going on?"

"As I said, we had to leave because our position had been compromised. Rebels had set up camp outside that neighboring town, presumably planning to assassinate us both. Do not worry, at seven A.M. this morning the encampment was raided and most of the insurgents were captured or killed. We are safe."

Julio's heart sank as he thought of his new comrades. He wondered about the fates of Alejandro and Luis. Had they been captured, or worse, were they dead? Any hopes that he'd had of getting back at his father were now crushed. He counted his lucky stars that he had left when he did, or else he too would have been captured and killed. His father stood up.

"Now, on to the reason I brought you here. I have decided to give you your final lesson ahead of schedule. But, before we continue with that, I must first test your loyalty. We shall see if you are truly ready to accept the responsibility as leader. Follow me into room 984, please."

Curious as to what a test for loyalty could entail, Julio followed his father into the adjacent room, where there was a man on the floor with a bloodstained bag on his head. His hands were cuffed, and his legs tied together. On the opposite side of the room there was a window to an

unbearably brightly lit room, with a figure inside that Julio found familiar, though the lights made it impossible to distinguish any facial features. The dictator walked over to the restrained man and tore off the bag. Julio almost let out a cry. It was Luis. The dictator walked back over to Julio.

"This is one of the rebels we captured this morning," the dictator explained, producing a pistol from inside his suit jacket, "and I want you to kill him."

Julio looked up at his father horrified. To think that at eighteen years old, he would be forced to kill another human being! He wanted this to be a joke. He expected his father to do the deed for him. But alas, the dictator seemed intent on seeing Julio pull the trigger. He pressed the gun into Julio's hands.

"Go ahead," he whispered, "pull the trigger."

Luis met Julio's gaze and shot him a look of vitriol. It was clear he thought Julio had betrayed them. Julio sent a look back at him that said, "*I swear I didn't betray you. I don't know how he found out.*" The dictator spoke again, in a louder voice.

"Pull the trigger, Julio."

His father's grip on his shoulder tightened. Julio could barely breathe or think straight. Luis' gaze bore a hole through the back of his skull. Every emotion Julio had ever felt was rushing through him, like a tidal wave of chaos, and riding it was his father, the dictator. A wave of nausea overcame him, and he fought the urge to vomit. His gaze wandered down to the gun in his hand. It was a beautiful weapon, a golden revolver with an ivory grip, with the words "AMÉRICA PARA SIEMPRE" engraved into the barrel. It was a gun fit for a king. Julio tilted his head up to his father and tried to reason with him.

"*Papá*, I don't – are you sure you want me to kill him, I mean, i-isn't that a little extreme? Why don't we torture him, or toss 'em in prison, or something. Isn't that what we usually do?"

His father's voice rose even more, "Julio, I will have none of this now from you. I want you to kill him."

"But *papá* –"

The dictator stamped his foot on the ground. His voice rose to a fever pitch.

"What part of this is hard to understand?! I give you a gun, I tell you to kill him, and still somehow the message isn't getting across. Are you loyal to your country, *mi hijo*?"

"*Papá*, I..."

"Answer the question, Julio! Are you loyal to América or not?!"

Tears had now begun to run down Julio's face.

"*Sí, papá*, but –"

"Well, if you truly want to prove to me that you are loyal, that you are truly ready to lead your country, then kill him!"

Julio returned his gaze to Luis, whose expression of anger changed to one of fear. Tears in his eyes, Julio raised the barrel of the gun in the direction of Luis' head. He hesitated. He didn't want to kill him, but his father was forcing his hand. What was the end goal of this sick mind game, to

prove loyalty? To prove his worth? For the dictator's enjoyment? He truly wanted, in that moment, to turn the gun on his father. For someone to force their son, their own flesh and blood, to end a human life, they'd have to no longer be human themselves. But for whatever reason, even though he wanted to, he couldn't bring himself to shoot his father. He was the only family Julio had, and that counted for something, right?

The dictator was becoming agitated.

"What are you waiting for?" he screeched, "Pull the damn trigger!"

Julio closed his eyes. There was no winning here. He could stall this if he liked, but in the end, he wasn't going to leave this room if Luis didn't die. He took a deep breath, lined up the shot, and gently allowed the hammer to fall, sending out a bullet. The resulting gunshot was amplified tenfold by the steel walls of the room. The noise ripped through Julio's ears, rendering him dizzy. But the deed was done. A pool of blood had appeared beneath the still body of Luis. He felt a deep emptiness within him, as if a portion of his soul had been fired off along with the bullet. He began to shake violently. Another wave of nausea overcame him, and he threw up on the cell floor. His father didn't seem to care, he simply looked at Julio with grim satisfaction.

"Well done," he congratulated, the edges of his mouth curling up into a twisted smile, "Keep the gun. You have proven your loyalty and your preparedness. I believe it is finally time to explain to you the truth behind América. The true reason why we, as leaders, do what we do."

Julio shot his father a pained look. He only hoped that whatever information he would receive would be somewhat worth the trouble. He looked up at the window on the opposite side of the room. The mysterious figure had come slightly closer, revealing a vague outline of a face, and for a moment, Julio swore it was Alejandro behind the glass, gazing upon him with disappointment.

PART THREE

CHAPTER ONE

"Please, *mi hijo*, take a seat. We have much to discuss."

Julio was led into a large room, with a gigantic oval table in the middle. On either end of the table were two chairs. Behind one chair, there was a massive screen, similar to the one in the dictator's office. Julio took the chair opposite the screen, while his father positioned himself so that the whole screen was visible. Guards adorned either side of the room, their ears muffled for secrecy. Julio put the revolver down on the table and looked up at the screen. His father pressed a button on a remote control, and the screen blared to life, displaying a map of the entire world and its borders. He began his lecture with a question.

"Now, *mi hijo*, can you name all the countries on this map?"

Julio, still shaken from the ordeal in room 984, managed to string together the correct answer, "Sí, the N.A.S.U., the Euro-African Commonwealth, the New Persian Sultanate, Greater Slavica, the Pacific Union and, of course, América."

"Correct. Can you tell me now, when these nations came into being?"

Julio thought back. His homeschooling taught him merely that the other nations existed, any further details had been omitted. He decided to go with the safe answer, "They've always existed."

His father chuckled and tapped the remote again. The screen changed to a much older map, with completely different borders. There was a dizzying number of borders and individual countries. Julio had never even seen such a complicated map. His father continued.

“Wrong, *mi hijo*, very wrong. You see, around one hundred and thirty-five years ago, this is what the world looked like. Hundreds of individual countries with their own individual cultures. It was chaotic, disorganized and in dire need of change.”

He paused to gauge Julio’s reaction before continuing, “Then, one fateful day, that change came. A war happened that would change the course of humanity forever. The war was dubbed the Final War, as one on its level between nations will never happen again. You cannot imagine the scale of this conflict, *mi hijo*. It was not a simple war like the one we are waging against the rebels, rather, it was a disastrous massacre on a global scale. Two of the world’s largest superpowers and their allies engaged in an exchange of weapons of mass destruction. These weapons were mostly biological, genetically engineered super-viruses that killed within minutes of infection and spread twice as fast. The first weapons unleashed were nuclear bombs. These weapons are archaic nowadays, but they used to be the backbone of any military arsenal. They were bombs designed to eviscerate large swathes of land in an instant, leaving clouds of radiation to clean up any remaining survivors. They were used in the first hours of the war, notably to annihilate Moscow, Paris and Washington D.C., but they were quickly surpassed by their biological counterparts. These weapons released super-viruses that rapidly spread throughout the cities and countryside, collapsing civilization wherever they went. The countries that released these viruses couldn’t even control them, committing genocide against their own people when unexpected wind patterns blew their own weapons back to them. When the dust settled, 95.6 percent of the human population had been killed, or an estimated five billion people, and all the nations on Earth collapsed.”

Julio couldn’t believe his ears. Five billion people was more than ten times the entire population of América. The death toll of the revolution wasn’t even one percent of the death toll of this Final War. The screen changed to an old photograph of a group of old men sitting in a diner, surrounded by a burnt and destroyed landscape.

His father continued, “The day after the armistice was signed and the remaining bioweapons contained, the surviving world leaders met to redraw the world’s borders. Among them was the first leader of América.”

The photo zoomed in to a vaguely American looking fellow wearing a white suit with red and gold accents, just like his father was currently wearing, albeit much dirtier.

“His name has been lost to time, but his creation remains. We owe everything to this man, Julio. He not only founded América, but he founded the ideology that allows us to remain in power today: Ouroboric Totalitarianism, he called it.”

The image on screen shifted to show the snake eating its own tail, with the word “Ouroboros” underneath it.

“The ideology is named after an ancient symbol, Ouroboros. This symbol is on our flag, our government buildings and army vehicles. You have seen this symbol your whole life, and yet, you have no idea what it truly represents. Tell me, what do you think? What does it represent?”

Julio thought. He whirled through the past decade of pondering over this stupid snake. After a minute had passed, he answered, "It represents a cycle of some kind, maybe. Something infinite."

The dictator nodded, "You are not that far off. The gnostic meaning of the symbol is that of the cycle of life and death. For us, it has the same meaning yet applied to a different kind of life. Do you know how long this revolution has been going on?"

"No, not really."

"That is because it has always been going on. The principle of Ouroboric Totalitarianism is the consolidation of power by perfecting a system, which we call the Regime. Every so often, the revolution is allowed to win, topple the government and install a new one. Are you familiar with the saying 'Power corrupts'?"

"Sí."

"Imagine that principle but applied to a whole government. Whenever the Regime becomes too corrupted by power, the revolution will naturally overthrow the government. The newly installed leader will then get to work on their new government. However, power corrupts, so they end up creating the exact same Regime, over and over again."

Julio was shocked. So, this was the fate of the revolution? This was his fate, doomed to follow in his father's footsteps no matter what?

"That doesn't seem possible," he blurted out, "How is it that nobody realizes what's going on? Surely somebody will make a new government!"

His father cackled, "Really? Look around you, Julio. The Regime has gone on for one hundred and thirty-five years. Picture that for a moment, one hundred and thirty-five years. That's one hundred and thirty-five years of the exact same government created repeatedly, with no deviations. The best part of this whole system is that it is naturally resistant to the corruption of power. When the Regime is reconstructed, the corrupted parts are destroyed and replaced with similar, yet non-corrupted parts. The new leader then improves the Regime, based on the shortcomings of the old one."

"But why?" Julio demanded to know, "Why do this, why do any of this?"

The dictator slammed his fist on the table, "Is it not obvious, Julio? We do this for power, nothing but power. Whereas other dictatorships manifest their power in oppression, our government manifests their power in the shadows, the system becoming increasingly efficient with each cycle, each set of improvements, until one day we shall reach a point where the system becomes so efficient that any deviation from it is impossible. The cycle will stop being a means of improvement, and instead become a means of cleaning out the Regime. On that day, América will become immortal. It could be the next cycle, it could be in ten cycles. It could even be in tens of thousands of years, but one thing is for certain, América will outlast the other inferior super-states, and we shall inherit the earth!"

His father descended into a fit of coughing. He doubled over in pain as his lungs violently expelled air and blood out of his mouth. Julio was speechless, his mouth opening and shutting like a goldfish, trying to find the right words.

Eventually he mustered a sentence, “What about the people, *papá*? They will notice, they will do something!”

His father managed to fit a laugh in between his painful wheezing.

“The people? The bloody *people*???” he reared his head back in laughter, “*Mi hijo*, do you not think our nation’s founder already thought about that? Of course, he realized that if the whole population banded together, they would destroy the carefully engineered system put in place!”

The dictator composed himself and took a puff of his medical inhaler. His labored breathing slowed, and he sat down.

“Now we come to the subject of Oblivira. If you recall, I told you in my office that you would learn about Oblivira soon enough. Information regarding Oblivira is not something you find in the Department of Records’ public offering, it is top secret, and accessible only to the dictator. Not even you could access the files, even though you tried. And yes, I am fully aware of why you were so fascinated by those documents, do not lie to me. Anyways...”

The screen changed to show the chemical formula of Oblivira alongside its atomic structure.

“This is Oblivira, an organic chemical compound with psychoactive properties primarily affecting the amygdala, the region of the brain responsible for memory.”

“What?” interjected Julio, not understanding the string of scientific jargon that had just left his father’s mouth.

The dictator shot him a murderous glance.

“Put simply, it is a chemical that affects people’s ability to remember things. It is an ancient, pre-war formula that has been in possession of the state for generations. Its primary use is in ensuring that the population does not remember the previous revolutionary cycle, which would be a dead giveaway to the mechanism of the Regime. It also has the side effect of reducing the functional capacity of the human brain, which results in various things such as increased gullibility, inefficient cognitive functions, etcetera. Oblivira makes the population susceptible to propaganda, and with their ineffective memories we can spin whatever story we want, and they will believe it. For example, on the news about a week ago, there was a story about a rebel encampment being taken to the north of Buenos Aires, despite the previous week having reported that the encampment was positioned to the west. In reality, the encampment was to the south, but we run these stories to test the population to see if they have taken their Oblivira like they should.”

Julio thought back to that file he stashed away for future use. Not even that held factual information.

“If anyone questions the truth of reports or my speeches, based on information they shouldn’t be remembering, they are arrested and their identities erased. Their family will be given higher doses of Oblivira, and they will forget their own family member ever existed. Oblivira is primarily administered through the rations and water in vending machines, which is the reason I forbade you from ever drinking or eating anything from them. They are also administered via the drugs that the population are forced to take to counteract the virus that is going around, which brings us to our next topic. You have most likely noticed that neither you nor I, nor any other high-ranking Regime member, seems to contract this disease, ¿*no*? “

Julio nodded.

“Well, that is because we are all vaccinated against it. The virus is deliberately released into the population to make sure that they are physically weak as well as mentally handicapped from the Oblivira. You see, the virus is one of the biological weapons left over from the Final War, albeit slightly toned down so it does not kill as fast. If left untreated, however, it will kill. As luck would have it, this specific bioweapon is affected by Oblivira, which is effective at suppressing but not curing the virus. We developed a drug, which is nothing more than pure, concentrated Oblivira in pill form, to give to the population. The name of the drug is changed often to check for any treatment lapses. Do you have any questions so far?”

Julio shook his head. He hadn't even managed to process all the information yet, before his father continued his tangent.

“Now on to the revolution itself. You may be wondering how revolution is possible if Oblivira makes all citizens feeble minded and susceptible to propaganda. The answer is simple. It is not. We must manually force revolution to happen. We do this through our school system. We use a series of exams to pick out promising students that display physical and mental adeptness, and then we consequently reduce their Oblivira dosage when they leave school to the point where they no longer take it. We administer vaccinations to these people and begin to feed them anti-Regime propaganda. Eventually, the movement develops into a full-blown revolution, and we no longer need more candidates because the rebels will propagate themselves.”

Julio couldn't believe his ears. Was the whole revolution a lie? Was the movement he had agreed to join nothing more than mere smoke and mirrors?

“Beyond the continuation of the cycle, the revolution serves two main purposes. The first is distraction. The population's hate and anger are directed towards the rebels and not us, ensuring there will always be enough resistance to the revolution to prevent it from spiraling out of control. The second is the use of labor power. Luxury goods that high-ranking Regime members consume only make up two percent of our total production. The rest is solely weaponry, which is divided among the *Ejército Dorado* and the rebels. This way we can keep the population materially weak as well.”

His father sat back. Julio was still trying to take it all in, trying to make sense of everything that he had just heard. His whole world was crumbling around him. He realized that he had been lied to his whole life. Nothing seemed real anymore. He was on the verge of tears. His father didn't notice this, and continued, standing up again.

“There is one final thing I shall mention, and it is an issue that the founder of our great nation struggled with for years: What if a citizen of América realizes that the living situation in other countries is vastly better than here? One final line of defense was set in place to counteract this. Indeed, a final barrier that could not be broken. We became truly independent. We purposefully isolated ourselves from the rest of the world so that our population would never realize that we are actively making their lives hell. In their eyes, there are no other countries besides América. Their lives are more important to them, and that is what matters. Now, foreign intrusion is also a big risk to the sanctity of the Regime. Thus, we reinforced our borders and armed our coastlines. No air or sea traffic is allowed to even graze American territory. The border to the N.A.S.U. to the north has hundreds of kilometers of nothing, no people, just automated sentry turrets that cut down any would-be tourists or invaders. Our nation's military, the *Ejército Dorado*, is also more than sufficiently equipped to take on the armies of Euro-Africa, or the Pacific Union, or any of

the super-states. We produce all raw materials ourselves as well, like our food and our steel. Our electricity is produced solely by renewable resources and nuclear energy, to ensure we never run out of power. We are the world's only truly self-sufficient nation."

His father paused to take a deep, raspy breath. Julio's tears had subsided into a paralyzing shock. He was still digesting the truth about Oblivira, about the revolution. He was horrified and disgusted at the true nature of América, of this so-called "Ouroboric Totalitarianism". He wanted nothing to do with it. His father stood up, struggling to stand on his own two feet after being weakened by the excitement of his tirade. Julio got up as well. His father limped over to him and put both hands on his shoulders.

"*Mi hijo*," he croaked in between blood-laden coughs, "I am very proud of you, you know that? I know you will make a great leader someday."

He tried to hug Julio, but Julio wasn't willing. A fire of determination had sprung up inside of him. He was determined to prove the system wrong, to make a new Regime that did away with Ouroboric Totalitarianism entirely. He was going to fix América.

CHAPTER TWO

The engine's humming and the rhythmic pattering of the raindrops almost made Julio fall asleep at the wheel. He'd always liked joyrides after the sun set, but the mission today was different. He was on his way to the new rebel encampment reported hours earlier. He hoped that the remainder of the rebels had managed to find refuge there, especially Alejandro. He wanted to show them he hadn't sold them out. He'd brought the incriminating document on the inconsistent news reports, ready to prove his loyalty if needed. It was undeniable evidence that the government was lying to its own people. A truck whizzed by the car, jolting Julio. He was now fully alert. He pressed the gas pedal down and watched as the speedometer slowly climbed up to triple digits. He knew he didn't have much time, if he were away for too long it would raise suspicion. Another truck roared past the car. Julio turned his fog lights on. The weather tonight was terrible, a combination of heavy rain and dense fog. The windshield wipers seemed to be putting in twice the effort for half the results, since any rain wiped away were fully replaced within seconds.

Julio checked his GPS. He was twenty minutes away from the reported encampment location. It was just straight ahead, so Julio killed the GPS to be untraceable. He also switched off his smartphone. Outside the window he could just make out the faint outline of the dense palm trees of the Atlantic rainforest. He was far away from Serpiente, out on country roads that were barely paved, where speed limits hadn't yet been introduced. It was also the path less traveled, since military patrols this far away from the interprovince superhighway⁸ were as rare as diamonds. The pitter patter of the raindrops changed to the meteoric ping of hailstones on the hood of the car, as the weather became progressively hostile. Julio shifted gears and pushed the car to even greater speeds. He was practically gliding down the road now, so any cars passing were mere streaks of light.

His mind was still trying to process the truth of what his father had revealed to him one week ago. How could it be that after more than a century, nobody had been able to bring this country

⁸ The interprovince superhighway was an eleven lane highway that connected the cities of Santiago, Serpiente and San Salvador, and was an infamous hotspot for rebel ambushes and underground smuggling operations, hence why the *Ejército Dorado* was monitoring it nearly all the time.

out of its miserable state? He still didn't fully believe his father and he questioned whether this "Ouroboric Totalitarianism" was real or simply a plot to try and trick him. He hadn't slept in days. How could he successfully overthrow his father? A full-frontal assault on the capital would be utter suicide, given the concentration of military personnel around Serpiente. An assassination plot would also be pointless, because his father was monitored and guarded by the nation's best 24/7. Julio had considered drawing out an attack over months or even years, using guerilla tactics and light terrorism to strike critical infrastructure. However, he ruled this idea out because it would be too difficult, too costly, and the risk of capture too high. Morally, he was determined to minimize civilian casualties, a point of pride for him in contrast to his father.

The country road slowly became narrower as Julio approached the insurgent camp. He switched off his lights and slowed down. The hail had gotten worse and was the size of grapes. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched. He swore he saw eyes in the treetops, observing his every move. The road came to a dead end, so Julio stopped the car and continued on foot. Thankfully, the trees canopies provided ample shelter from the hailstorm.

Eventually, he came upon a small clearing, where a few tents were pitched and a small gas cooker worked under a protective metal sheet. *This must be where the rebels set up camp*, he figured. The small campsite was devoid of any human life. Whoever was there had left in a hurry. Julio wandered down into the campsite for a closer look. The insides of the tents looked hastily ransacked, only sleeping bags and toiletries remained. Julio decided to take cover in one of the tents to wait for the hail to subside. The hailstones were now the size of golf balls and began tearing holes in the tent walls. Julio sat down for a few minutes and listened to the rattling of the raindrops hitting the metal sheet outside.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps approaching and voices talking outside. Whoever owned this camp had returned. He scrambled to get out of the tent, and silently slipped out of one of the holes and dove into some nearby bushes. He watched as the group carried a dead animal into the camp, patched up the tents and prepared a meal. He recognized some of the faces from the rebel base where he had danced until dawn not that long ago. *Survivors*, he thought to himself, *I can't believe it!* He didn't see Alejandro anywhere. A feeling of intense dread engulfed him. What if Alejandro had been captured? What if the rebels thought that Julio had ratted them out? He slunk further into the bushes, making sure not to make any noise. A second group had just returned from the other direction, carrying weapons and maps, likely returning from a scouting mission. Julio began to panic. There was no way he could get out of there, not with Alejandro gone. He didn't see any chance of making it home in time to avoid suspicion. His mind was racing with possible outcomes, none of them good. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't even notice someone sneaking up behind him. A hand gripped his shoulder tightly. Julio tried to scream, but another hand covered his mouth.

A voice whispered to him, "You shouldn't've come here, *compay*."

It was the last thing he heard before he was knocked unconscious by a small blunt object.

When he came to, he had been zip tied to a post, and his hands were tied behind his back. Alejandro loomed over him holding a machete.

"I have to say, you were the last person I ever expected to see again. Did it feel good to betray our location to your precious *papá*?" he sneered.

Julio spat onto the ground, "I didn't betray you. I've got no idea how he found you.

Alejandro placed the blade of the machete to Julio's temple, "Don't lie to me, *compay*. I know it was you."

Julio, fearing for his life, stared Alejandro dead in the eyes and, with all the determination and sincerity he could manage, said, "It wasn't me, Alejandro. Why would I give up my one chance to get revenge on my father?"

Alejandro's eyes narrowed.

"Prove it wasn't you then. Gimme some hard evidence."

Julio smirked.

"You'll have to untie me first."

Alejandro paused for a moment, scrutinizing Julio as if testing his legitimacy, before turning to one of the guerillas flanking him and ordering him to untie Julio. The guerilla nodded and cut Julio's restraints. Julio rubbed his wrists. The zip ties had left a red indentation where they had been cutting into his skin. Alejandro sheathed his machete. Julio stood up and produced the incriminating document from inside his suit.

"This document proves that the news reports are being fabricated. Two weeks ago, the news claimed that an encampment was captured to the north of Buenos Aires, but the week before, it was said to be to the west. They are lying to the people. Stuff like this could turn the public against the Regime."

Alejandro took the paper and glanced over it, eyes widening as he read further. He looked up from the document

"This does seem legit," he remarked, "Maybe you are telling the truth. Make no mistake though, you're still skating on thin ice, *compay*. I hope for your sake you've got a good reason for being here."

Julio brushed the dirt off his suit and aggressively announced, "I wanna kickstart this revolution and attack the capital."

Alejandro gave him a look of wild disbelief before breaking out into hysterics.

"Are you crazy?" he wheezed, "We're no more than fifty people here, how d'you expect us to win against the *Ejército Dorado*?"

"Can't you coordinate with other rebel groups?"

"It's possible, but I could never convince them to do something this stupid."

"It's not stupid! I thought this was your end goal?"

"Sí, it is, but no one's willing to do it now! We barely have the resources to hold Buenos Aires, let alone capture the bloody capital! Besides, do you even have a plan for how we would do something like that?"

"I've had a few ideas, but none of them were particularly good. That's the reason I came here, to get help."

“Sorry, Julio, but if you want to overthrow your father now, you’re on your own. I already lost enough of my people in the raid after you left. I can’t afford to lose any more. Come back when you’ve got a plan.”

Alejandro turned on his heels and left to join the other rebels who were cooking the animal over the fire. Julio’s shoulders sank. Alejandro was right. Even if they had the support of other rebel groups, the *Ejército Dorado* was too strong for them to handle. *If only we had those mechs*, Julio thought to himself, *we’d take Serpiente in a day*. And then, like a bolt of lightning, an idea struck Julio with such force that it corrected his sagging posture. *That’s it*, he proclaimed internally, *we can use the Ejército Dorado’s weapons against them! All we’ve got to do is find soldiers who are willing to fight for us*. He rushed over to Alejandro and the rebels and explained his idea in an excited frenzy. Initially, he garnered raised eyebrows and smirks, but the more he went on, the more the rebels seemed to warm up to the idea. After he had finished explaining, Alejandro piped up.

“This seems like a bad idea. How would we get the *Ejército Dorado* to join the revolution? Such an operation would require time, manpower and willingness, all of which are in short supply. Most of the *Ejército* are too far from Serpiente to care about this anyway.”

Julio pondered this for a moment before speaking, “The *Ejército* aren’t too far away. A massive portion of their forces are concentrated around Serpiente. As for manpower, we could convince the city watch to join our cause. That’d certainly be more than enough.”

Alejandro cackled sarcastically, “Yes, because the people who are expressly dedicated to hunting us all down would certainly join our cause. Don’t be stupid, *compay*.”

Julio’s ears grew hot.

“Obviously we won’t just walk in there and ask them nicely! We could spread pro-rebel propaganda among the troops guarding Serpiente, subtly turning them against my father.”

“It’s still too risky. I’m not sending any of my guerillas in there. They’d be found out instantly. How about instead, you just pull a few strings? It would further prove your allegiance to our cause.”

Julio decided to agree to this proposal. He figured it wouldn’t be too difficult, since he was friends with the head general’s son. Using him to worm his way into the military divisions surrounding Serpiente would be a cinch. From there, he could spread revolutionary ideas throughout the army, slowly turning more and more of them over to the revolution. It would take some planning and preparing, but it was feasible. Once that was completed, it was only a matter of drawing out the remaining military and vanquishing them with their own weaponry. From there, they could take the capital with relative ease. It was a bold plan, one that had many chances to go wrong, but they just might pull it off.

The rest of the night was spent drafting battle plans, preparing propaganda and contacting other rebel groups to discuss the plan. Surprisingly, most of the other rebel groups agreed to assist, and offered to smuggle goods and weapons to Alejandro’s men.

At one point Julio found himself lying on the grass staring up at the night sky, while the rebels were busy communicating. The storm had cleared, and the stars were fully visible away from the lights of Serpiente. The moon was bright and full, and Julio could see for several miles. The grass was damp and smelled fresh and earthy, unlike the artificial stuff back home.

Julio was amazed to think that mere hours ago he had been tied to a post. Now, he had managed to pull the rebels back to his side. He thought back to Luis, room 984 and the mysterious figure in the window that looked like Alejandro. He wondered who that figure was. Was it some state official, a news reporter, or was it a figment of his imagination? The episode at the Department of Records made him question reality.

Then Julio started to dream about the future. He envisioned himself victorious, strolling down the endless steel halls of the complex. He saw himself and the rebels celebrating their victory and their triumph over the snake that has poisoned América for so long. He saw the future of Serpiente, glistening in the sun, the drab concrete gone and replaced with vibrant colors. He saw the citizens living under his rule, happy and healthy, the taint of Oblivira removed from their lives. He saw people dancing in the streets and cheering for him, because they had been liberated from the clutches of the monstrous dictator. He saw himself reaching out to the other nations, cooperating with them for the first time, working to make a more interconnected world. He saw himself as a savior, a renegade angel brought here to save the nation. As the sun set on his vision, he saw the *Ejército Dorado* marching for him, and onlookers chanting his name in reverence. *Ju-li-o, Ju-li-o, Ju-li-o*. A new era was dawning for América, no, the entire world, and he, Julio, son of a tyrant, was at the helm. It almost brought a tear to his eye. Then, the dream started to fade away, and Julio was once again staring at the beautiful night sky. Alejandro walked over to him.

“Julio,” he ordered, “Get going. Dawn’s is breaking and you don’t want to be caught out in the middle of nowhere with a group of rebels. We’d all be killed.”

Julio had completely lost track of time, forgetting that his initial intention was to stay briefly.

He stood up and started making his way back to his car, but turned and asked, “Will we be in touch?”

Alejandro nodded and tossed him a small radio.

“Secure end-to-end encryption,” he explained, “the *Ejército Dorado* won’t be able to track that thing. Use it when you need to communicate with us. Make sure you aren’t in range of any listening devices when you do.”

Julio gave a thumbs up and hurried out of the clearing back to his car, invigorated by a new sense of purpose. *It’s really happening*, he nervously told himself, *we might actually overthrow the Regime*. As he drove away and onto the road, sunlight cast a warm glow over him, mirroring the fire he felt inside. He was ready to revolt.

Julio spent the following day preparing to infiltrate the army. The plan was to manipulate the son of the general into granting him and the rebels access to secure military installations, as well as spreading fake reports that the rebels had drafted during Julio’s visit. The reports were going to be damning for the military’s leadership, and hopefully make the soldiers open to joining the revolution. He practiced for hours, read the reports to make sure that they looked official and even had his suit dry-cleaned for the mission. Luckily, his father wasn’t home, he was attending pressing matters up north in Nicaragua. As the clock struck six P.M., he began to make his way down to Serpiente’s clubbing district where the son of the general could be found every night without fail. As he sped down the highway, his father’s billboards caught his eye and anger built within him. This time, rather than feeling his father’s control, he was reminded of the true purpose behind his actions. As he sped into the capital, blazing past the concrete slums, he

saw the city watch force a group of people against a wall, likely on suspicion of ration fraud. He blew by the imposing structure of the Regime's headquarters, and it reminded him of how far he'd come since his last visit.

He entered the clubbing district. Neon lights circled the rooftops, and blinking signs announced sleazy bars and night clubs along the street. There was a sense of the provocative and forbidden, like a red-light district without the sex. The sidewalks were filthy, and the young Regime kids that played on them were too. These were children alone and allowed to run wild, while their parents played different games inside. The alleyways were full of dubious characters, selling illegal goods. Cigars, wine and weapons were all on display and for sale. The atmosphere was thick and smelly, like a nightclub the morning after. The sun never reached this part of the city. The concrete buildings were too tall and too dense. These establishments were highly illegal, but they were full of Regime members, so the city watch looked the other way.

Julio parked the car and got out. His target was a dingy bar where the general's son hung out. Unlike the other clubs, a single unadorned wooden door served as its entrance. As he approached the bar, the stench of smoke and alcohol permeated the air, the scent rendering his suit permanently tainted. He noticed that the sidewalks were densely layered with rain-soaked cigarette butts, like a wet carpet whenever he took a step. Even the rain smelt off, as if the clouds themselves had inhaled the drug-laden smoke wafting up from the clubs' ventilation shafts. Julio had always avoided this part of the clubbing district, opting instead for the more luxurious clubs on the other side of town where only the high-ranking Regime kids got in. It was strange to him why the general's son would choose to party at this sorry excuse of a club. As Julio pressed against the wood and turned the doorknob, it creaked open. At first glance the club was worse inside than out. The floors were thick with twenty years of grime, but the bar wasn't too bad. The wood was dark and smooth with thick cushioned stools pulled up to it, the kind that make you feel like settling in. The music was loud, and the patrons danced the dance of alcohol and drugs. A shout came from one of the tables.

"Julio! ¡Amigo! I haven't seen you in ages! How've you been?" slurred the son of the head general. For the life of him, Julio couldn't remember his name. He was more of an acquaintance than a friend. Making his way over to the table, he was careful not to step in the puddles of goop that dotted the floor and sat down. The son slurred on.

"What brings you to this humble establishment? I thought you were more of an eastside guy!"

He punctuated the sentence with a drunken guffaw, and Julio returned with his best fake laugh.

"I figured I'd just pop in and see how you were, that's all," he nervously explained.

The son let out another laugh, "I've never been better! My father's been teaching me the ropes of his job, since I'm due to take over soon. It's been great! Just yesterday I got to authorize a drone strike on a rebel camp. You shoulda seen them run!"

Julio had to use every ounce of self-restraint he had to stop himself from punching him in the face. To take pleasure in the senseless murder of his soon-to-be subjects sickened him. But he continued to laugh with him. After they'd ordered a round of drinks, Julio began to butter him up.

"Y'know, I've seen what your dad's been teaching you," he said in a hushed tone.

"What d'you mean?" the son responded in a similar tone.

"I've seen some of the things you've done, and I'm impressed. I think you're a way better general than your dad."

"Oh yeah? Ya think so?"

"Yeah."

"That's high praise coming from *el presidente's* kid."

"Personally? I think you deserve more of a, how do I put this, involved role. How's that sound?"

The son sat up in his seat, "Sounds too good to be true. What's the catch?"

Julio grimaced, "No catch. I'd just need clearance for the military installations around Serpiente that your dad's got control over."

"What d'you need that for?"

"There are computer terminals in there that I've got access to. I can grant you higher security clearance so you can use them. That way, you've got a bit more control over what's going on. Plus, you can impress your dad by doing things that he hasn't taught you yet, y'know, to give him the impression that you've done your research."

The son raised an eyebrow.

"Why d'you need my clearance when you've already got access to the computers?"

Julio was becoming exasperated. Despite the son's drunken state, he was still as sharp as a knife.

Still, he pressed on, "The clearance to get into the complex isn't the same as the one needed to use the computers. I can use every Regime computer in the country, but I can't access every Regime facility in the country."

The son's disposition didn't change, "How do I know you aren't trying to trick me?"

"If it changes your mind, I can give you some files to spread among the soldiers," Julio offered while producing the fake reports from inside his suit jacket, "They're priority reports that I think will sway them over to your side."

"What's in 'em?"

"All kinds of nasty stuff. We're talking approval for using soldiers as targets for weapons testing, plans for suicide assaults, even confidential conversation transcriptions from your dad talking about not caring about his men. All stuff that'll sway the soldiers more in your favor. But I won't give them to you unless you give me the clearance. Think of it as like a symbol of trust."

The son didn't seem horrified that his father held his soldiers in such low regard, most likely because he held the same sentiment. He fell silent, slowly mulling over the options in his head.

"Ok, I'll do it," the son agreed.

"Perfect," Julio handed him the files, "Here are the files, now, can I have the clearance?"

The son produced a red card from his front pocket and slid it across the table.

Julio was now grinning like a madman, "Brilliant. Thanks very much."

The son stood up, and got uncomfortably close, “If I find out you’ve pulled the wool over my eyes, I won’t hesitate to tell your dad, alright?”

Slightly unnerved, Julio bid him farewell and left the club. Despite the son’s suspicion, he had successfully tricked him into giving him access to the facility. He held his head high as he drove home, satisfied with his lying skills. On the way, he switched on the radio to communicate the good news to Alejandro. The device crackled to life and Alejandro’s voice came over.

“Julio? Anything to report?”

“It’s done. I’ve got the clearance card, and I’ve spread the fake reports. We’ve officially infiltrated the military.”

“Brilliant, Julio, just brilliant. You’ve got the makings of a real guerilla. Meet us at the western base entrance tomorrow at midnight, that should be the emptiest one. We can start our propaganda operation in there.”

“Hasta luego, then”

“Hasta luego, mi amigo.”

Julio hung up. That sense of purpose filled him once again. The revolution had begun.

CHAPTER THREE

Months had passed since Julio’s little meetup with the general’s son. The recruitment operation had gone swimmingly, and most of the standing military guarding Serpiente, including some high-ranking officers, had joined the revolution. Julio and Alejandro had been hard at work as well, procuring weapons and munitions through underground smuggling operations carried out via sea transport. A rebel faction in Havana had managed to take hold of an Ejército Dorado weapons stockpile, most of it smuggled via the interprovince superhighway. Due to the mass production of pro-revolutionary propaganda pamphlets which were widely distributed among factory workers, the rebel army experienced significant growth. It seemed like the scales were finally tipping. The hardest part of the whole operation was keeping it hidden from the dictator. Julio couldn’t believe that his father hadn’t noticed his frequent outings. His father, in fact, had seemed more distant lately. Whatever he’d seen in Nicaragua had shaken him to his core. Julio had asked him about it but had received no coherent answer. It didn’t matter, because Julio had much bigger things on his mind. The preparation for the assault on Serpiente had been long and meticulous, but he finally felt that they were ready for the attack. Thanks to the unwitting help from the general’s son, the battle plans were ready.

Julio walked out of his room and down the stairs to go meet Alejandro to make last-minute orders for guns and ammunition. When he reached the entryway, he was stopped by his father.

“You have been very busy these past few months, *mi hijo*, what have you been doing?” he wheezed.

Julio panicked and tried to come up with something on the spot, “Uhh, I’ve been familiarizing myself with the Oblivira distribution as well as police and army protocol. Y’know, just to make sure that when I take over, I’m ready for continuing the cycle, or whatever.”

Julio’s father brightened up. The Oblivira comment seemed to strike a chord with the sickly dictator.

“Ay, *mi hijo*, you are so much like me when I was your age...”

Julio wanted to assure his father that he was nothing like him, but before he could, his father shuffled back into the living room, falling back into his lounge chair while violently coughing and retching. As Julio turned to go, he could hear his father speaking softly into his walkie-talkie, but he paid no attention and made a beeline for his car.

While he was speed-walking through the courtyard, he caught a glimpse of the courier watching him from the kitchen window, speaking to someone through a small radio device, before ducking down behind the wall when he realized Julio had seen him. Julio paused for a moment, wondering if what he had seen was real or simply a figment of his imagination, before shaking his head and continuing to his car. He hopped in, turned the key, and drove off down the road, on his way to his destiny. As he turned onto the highway, he noticed a black car tailing him. At first, he paid no attention, thinking it was just some random person, but the car followed his every move. Whenever he changed lanes, the car changed lanes, whenever he sped up, so too did the car. Julio adjusted the rearview mirror to try and see who was driving. His heart skipped a beat when he realized it was the courier. He was being hunted. Panicking, Julio slammed down the gas pedal, and the engine roared as the car sped up to its maximum speed. Of course, the courier mirrored him. They ripped down the highway. Julio tried unsuccessfully to shake him, before deciding to take this chase into the city. It would be much easier to lose him there. He swerved sharply onto the exit ramp, narrowly avoiding a crash with a semi, and the courier followed suit. They descended into Serpiente, ducking and swerving through traffic like they were automobile acrobats. Julio checked the sideview mirror to see if the car was still following, but it wasn't. He let out a sigh of relief before his car was rammed by the courier in an apparent murder attempt. They both slammed into the side of a building, knocking Julio out cold.

When he came to, he was still in the wreckage of his car. He was alive but wounded. He was bleeding profusely, but he wasn't sure from where. He pried himself from the wreckage and slipped out of the broken window. He made sure to grab the radio Alejandro had given him out of the glove box before checking on the black car that had almost killed him. The courier hadn't been as lucky as Julio, a shard of jagged metal was sticking out of his heart like some sort of twisted limb. Julio dragged himself into a nearby alley and sat down to rest and assess his injuries. His leg was burning like crazy, and then he saw the cause of his pain. He had a good-sized gash about ten centimeters long in the front of his leg. He had to fight the urge to faint when he realized that it was his own muscle that he was looking at. Julio looked up at the sky and said aloud,

“Ay, this is definitely going to need some medical attention.”

The radio seemed to be in good condition, though he was surprised it had survived the crash. Julio's mind was wrapped in confusion. Why was the courier trying to kill him? Had he found out about Julio's revolutionary intentions? He looked at his leg. It had become numb with pain, to the point where he could no longer move it. It wasn't broken, but he needed to stop the bleeding. He tore off one of the sleeves on his uniform and tied a quick tourniquet above the wound. It helped, but his leg was throbbing. Walking the rest of the way was manifestly out of the question. Julio decided to radio for transport.

Raising the radio to his lips, he spoke in whispered tones, “Need help. Car crash. Someone tried to kill me. I'm heavily wounded. Please send transport.” Julio signaled his location and dropped

the radio on his lap. He couldn't be sure if the message had been received, but he was too weak to care. Laying his head against the wall, he passed out.

"¡Compay!"

Julio was jolted awake by a burning, agonizing pain shooting up his leg. As he opened his eyes, a blinding light shown down on his face, and he realized he was in the back of an ambulance. A doctor, that he did not know, had just finished sewing up his leg and was completing the dressing.

"Julio, I'm Dr. Perez. I've done the best I can, but you'll need to have this leg seen as soon as possible. The wound is very deep, and I don't have the equipment here to do the job properly. I am going to put a pressure wrap around the injury, so that you can move around without pain, but be aware this is only a temporary fix."

Julio replied, "*Gracias* Doc., I really appreciate that."

"You alright, *¿compay?*" Alejandro asked, appearing out of nowhere. "That car crash left you pretty banged up. It's a miracle we found you."

"Where are we?" Julio blurted.

"We're on our way to the western base. I assume that's where you were going initially, *¿sí?*"

Julio nodded. Alejandro motioned for him to lay back down and recover his strength. He was going to need as much as he could garner for what was coming.

As the ambulance rumbled on towards the western base, Julio tried to find a reason for the courier's behavior. The Regime couldn't possibly have found out about Julio's involvement with the rebellion, could they? How could they know about Julio's nighttime excursions, unless of course his father had figured it out. This seemed unlikely since Julio didn't think that the dictator cared about his personal life. Confusion clouded his thoughts. He was definitely not thinking clearly. What kind of drugs did that doctor give him anyway? He thought back to the beginning of the evening. Who had his father been speaking to when Julio left? Had his father ordered the courier to follow him? Was the whole thing an accident, like a spy chase gone wrong? That would explain it. You shouldn't send a courier to do the work of a tail. He had seen the courier spying on him in the courtyard, so he obviously wasn't very good at it. Julio didn't even know his name. He was just someone who ferried him around the country. Julio's mind spun around in circles, trying to piece together some explanation for the whole thing. The memory of the impaled courier kept flashing through his head. His heart beat harder and faster. The memory of the crash played over and over again. His breathing became rapid. He became consumed by stress as the gravity of the event hit him. He realized how close he'd come to death.

The rumbling of the wheels rolling over gravel grew louder. He felt like throwing up. His heart felt like it was going to jump out of his chest. His head ached, and the world spun around him. He felt a sense of impending doom, like all his efforts would amount to nothing. He envisioned the dictator, proudly standing on a mountain of rebel corpses, berating Julio for his foolishness. He saw the snake, swallowing its own tail until it turned inside out. A sharp pain in his chest sliced through his vision. He opened his mouth to scream but nothing came out. He was falling into a deep dark chasm, so dark he couldn't see his own hands. He fell and fell and fell for what felt like hours, time was no longer linear to him. Decades passed in milliseconds, centuries passed in seconds, millennia passed in minutes. He experienced infinite time, as well as infinite falling.

Again, he tried to scream, but nothing came out. He saw a bright light at the bottom of the chasm. At last, salvation! As he drew closer, the sound of screeching brakes and car engines filled his ears. He felt the impact of the car crash that had nearly killed him, now so long ago that he wasn't sure it had even happened. He felt himself hit the floor, the impact splaying him out across infinite space, filling it with beautiful colors. It was beautiful. A thousand voices rang out at once in a beautiful symphony that reduced Julio to tears. The symphony turned to mocking as the colors vanished, the voices reminding Julio that the cycle was surely doomed to repeat itself. He tried to tune them out, but it was no use. No matter how much he pressed his hands on his ears, the voices still pierced his mind, driving him insane. And then, nothing. Everything stopped abruptly. The silence was deafening. Julio found himself back in the ambulance, his ears still ringing from the mockery of the voices.

Alejandro and the doctor crouched over him. Julio tried to speak, but all that came out was a wet gurgling sound. His heart had returned to a normal pace, the tightness in his throat had dissipated and his head no longer ached.

"20 mg of benzodiazepine onboard," the doctor ordered.

Alejandro turned to the doctor and asked, "What the hell was that?"

"He'll be alright. He's been through a traumatic experience tonight. It's normal to have a reaction like that. He just had a major panic attack," answered the doctor.

Alejandro nodded and turned to Julio, "You alright, ¿compay? You were screaming like a banshee."

"I dunno, I really don't know. Everything just kinda spiraled out of control," Julio explained.

The two sat in silence for the remainder of the ride. The ambulance slowly came to a halt as they arrived at the western base. Two soldiers carried Julio inside on a stretcher and brought him to the infirmary.

Meanwhile, Alejandro beelined it to his office to inform the other rebel groups about what had happened. At the infirmary, doctors ran all sorts of tests and tried to stabilize his condition. He felt like a lab rat. He pondered whether he should tell Alejandro about the visions he had had. It felt like a bad omen, and Julio wondered whether they should postpone the revolt. There was too much on the line for them to be taking any chances. Alejandro marched into the room.

"¿Cómo te sientes?" he asked hopefully.

Julio rubbed his forehead, "Better, I guess. Better than in the ambulance."

"Good, because we're starting the assault soon."

Julio was taken aback, "What?! I thought we weren't starting for another week!"

"Sí, I know, but the other rebel groups are growing impatient. The *Ejército Dorado* have been poking at them from the southern flank, and they suspect a full incursion any day now. Plus, our converted soldiers are getting nervous, and if we lose their favor, we lose the war. It's now or never, compay. We leave in the morning so get some rest."

Alejandro nodded curtly and left the room. Julio tried to fall asleep. His last thought before drifting off was of his life before meeting the rebels. From tomorrow onwards, his life would never be the same.

He was awoken by the sound of alarms going off. Alejandro was shaking him violently, trying to force him awake.

“Come on, Julio, wake up! Three hours ago, the other rebel groups and the army began the assault! We must go!”

Julio barely processed what he had heard, before he was pulled out of the bed and given a submachine gun.

“*Vámonos*, Julio, we have to hurry.”

They sprinted down to the main entrance of the western base, where the rebels had already loaded up troop transports and tanks. Overhead, rebel helicopters were racing towards the city. Julio could see huge plumes of smoke and ash in the distance. The faint crashing of artillery shells and gunfire could be heard. Alejandro dragged him into one of the last troop transports.

“*Tenemos a todos, ¡vamos, vamos!*” Alejandro cried out to the driver once the last soldier had boarded the transport, and they slowly rolled off to join the others. There were no windows in the transport, just rifle slits that were all occupied by rebel guerillas. They were clad in bulletproof armor and wore blue helmets. Some of them were even younger than Julio. Alejandro tossed a bulletproof vest over and ordered Julio to put it on. The explosions grew louder as the convoy approached the city limits. Julio heard the rumbling of tanks roll by the convoy, and the roar of jet fighters screaming through the sky. There were indistinguishable shouts coming from all around the vehicle. Suddenly, a huge explosion went off at the front of the convoy. Shouts came from soldiers, “*¡Destrucción Andante! Run for your lives!*” Julio’s heart stopped. *This is it*, he panicked, *this is where it ends*. The chasm threatened to swallow him again, but this time, Alejandro snapped him out of it.

“Stay with us, *compay*, don’t you flake out on me!”

The ramp of the transport lowered, and Julio, Alejandro and the other rebels scampered out. Julio could finally get a good look at the battlefield. Serpiente had been transformed into an utter hellscape. The city was ablaze, buildings had collapsed, and rebels and *Ejército Dorado* were scrambling around, trying to survive. The mech that had annihilated the front of the convoy towered over everything, and had its sights set on them. Julio was glued to the spot, eyes wide with fear as he saw the massive rotary cannons blaze to life. Fortunately, Alejandro pulled him aside moments before the strip of road was torn apart by the thunderous impact of twenty-millimeter rounds. Julio was frozen in terror. He was caught up in the very war that his father had told him about in the Department of Records months ago. He looked up to see another group of rebels in the middle of the street, desperately looking for cover before being vaporized by a barrage of mortar shells from the *Destrucción Andante*. He looked to his right to see Alejandro, urgently calling for air support from any plane in the vicinity. A jet blitzed past overhead, and dropped a bomb onto the mechanical beast, destroying it in a glorious ball of fire. Cheers emanated from all the rebels around Julio, and he couldn’t help but join in.

After that minor victory, the makeshift battalion inched into the city, spearheaded by Alejandro. It was just like Julio envisioned it when he was walking into the rebel hideout for the first time. The city was ablaze, and it seemed like, for now, the rebels were winning. Any *Ejército Dorado* soldiers they came across were on their side, fighting for the revolution, while those that remained loyal to the Regime, were overwhelmed by the rebel mechs. The group was just about to make it to the center of the city, when a hail of bullets ripped through them. Alejandro cried

“Duck and cover!” as more rounds rained down on the rebels. Julio dove behind a pile of rubble, screaming from the pain in his leg. Slowly he gathered his wits and peeked over the top to see who was attacking them. An *Ejército Dorado* machine gun emplacement was firing at them from the window of an apartment building across the street. Julio realized that the shooter did not see him. The others were pinned down, unable to get a shot off. He knew he was the only one with a clear shot. Summoning all the courage he could muster, he straightened his torso and stood up behind his cover exposing his position. With shaky arms, Julio shouldered his machine gun, resting the barrel on the pile of rubble. Setting his sights, he lined up the iron pointer with the window, and gently pulled back the trigger, just like he had been taught. A barrage of bullets shot out of the barrel and peppered the windowsill where the machine gun was perched. The weapon fell to the ground, alongside the poor soul who had been manning it, his uniform stained red with blood. The rebels jumped out from behind their cover and sprinted ahead to secure the building. Julio dropped his gun, trembling like crazy. He’d killed again. He felt the urge to vomit, though he managed to suppress it this time. He moved up to join his fellow guerillas, who’d now taken the building. Just up ahead, he could see the Regime headquarters reaching up to the clouds, only this time, it was circled by helicopters, like a beehive under assault by wasps. The group took a pause to gather their strength, drinking the untainted water they’d brought with them. Alejandro walked up to Julio and put a hand on his shoulder.

“That was a damn good shot, *compay*,” he congratulated, “You just saved all of our lives.”

Julio simply nodded, too shaken to produce any words. Alejandro’s radio crackled to life, with the news that the *Ejército Dorado* had just pulled back from the eastern side of the city. Another small victory for the revolution. Corcovado Mountain had also been taken by the rebels. Slowly but surely, Serpiente was beginning to crack. Julio composed himself.

“Alright, now that we’re in the city center, what’s the plan?” he shouted over the sound of bombs going off nearby.

“We link up with other squads that are on their way and then we go from there!” Alejandro shouted back.

“That’s it? That’s our plan? To meet up and then ‘go from there’?!”

“Do you have a better one?”

“No...”

“Then don’t complain.”

A huge explosion rocked the group as the building next to theirs collapsed in on itself. The rebels gathered their things.

“Let’s move now before we get caught up in an impromptu demolition job!” said one of them.

The gang hopped back out on the street and moved up to the Regime’s headquarters. Miraculously, despite all the fighting, the building was still standing tall and proud, almost taunting the rebels with its unscathed white marble walls. A legion of loyalist soldiers were holding out at the entrance, beating back a small group of rebel assailants. Alejandro let loose a stream of bullets from his rifle, and the other rebels did the same. Now the loyalists were being attacked on two fronts. One of the soldiers fired off a bunch of grenades at Alejandro’s men, who scattered like bowling pins attempting to escape. Julio hid himself behind a truck, occasionally peeking out and firing bursts from his submachine gun. But they had little effect,

as the loyalists were well-protected by ballistic barriers and their advantageous high position. Alejandro was silently cursing to himself, because his radio had broken while he was diving for cover. Bullets raked the ground all around them. Pinned down with no way out, Julio began to think. There must be some way to exploit their weakness. Air support was out of the question. If the helicopters came any closer, they would be picked off like sitting ducks. There weren't any mechs or tanks in the area either. They could try and toss grenades up there, but the loyalists were well out of throwing range. Julio thought. Maybe there was another option. The truck he was hiding behind had the engine running.

"I'm gonna draw out their fire," Julio screamed, "Move up to a better position!"

Moving carefully around the back of the truck, Julio hopped into the driver's seat and stomped down on the gas pedal. The truck lurched forward, and immediately began drawing gunfire. The diversion worked. As he maneuvered the truck in front of the building, the loyalists were distracted long enough to allow the rebels to move forward to a better position. The first group of rebels quickly understood what was happening and seized the opportunity to rush the front steps with their bayonets affixed. The loyalists, completely overwhelmed, had to divide their attention between the truck, and the two rebel groups. They were quickly overrun, and within minutes the battle had been won. Julio hopped out of the truck and ran over to Alejandro.

"Not bad, huh?" he proclaimed proudly.

"¡Dios mío!, Julio," cheered Alejandro, "I seriously can't tell if you're stupidly brave or bravely stupid! I'm not going to argue with the results though!"

The group surrounded Julio, slapping him on his shoulders, and praising him for his bravery. He began to feel a sense of purpose once again. The hellscape around him seemed to brighten for a moment. Then he remembered something.

"My father. We must deal with my father."

"Julio, what do you want to do?" asked Alejandro.

"We've gotta get to the mansion. If we defeat my father, we win the battle. We can't let him get away."

Before Alejandro could protest, Julio grabbed his arm and pulled him over to the truck. They got in, fastened their seatbelts, and started to make their way through the city as quickly as they could. The slums were worse than the inner city. All the concrete buildings had been flattened. There were hundreds of civilians mulling around, picking through the debris, looking for loved ones under the rubble. The loss of life was tremendous. Julio questioned his right, the rebels right, to consider these lost souls as collateral damage.

As they made their way forward, the roads were clogged with refugees trying to leave the city. The truck inched slowly through the mass of people who were desperately clawing at the truck's windows. The people were filthy dirty covered with dust from the destruction of hundreds of apartment buildings. Julio couldn't help but notice that they seemed as if they were cloaked in a layer of volcanic ash. Some were almost naked, their clothes burnt off their body, and some were badly injured and bloody. Julio was sick to his stomach. These civilians looked like animals. They were begging for help like mewling children. He felt a sense of guilt and empathy for their plight, but he justified the revolt to himself thinking, *soon, yes, soon you'll all be happy*

again under my reign. Finally, the truck broke free and continued down the highway, finally turning onto the small road leading up to the mansion.

On the way up, Julio asked Alejandro, "So, about my proposition..."

"Which one?"

"The one I made to you when we first met. The one about me taking over."

"You wanna talk about that now?"

"When else?"

"Fine, fine."

There was silence between them.

"So?!" Julio asked, becoming increasingly agitated.

Alejandro put his hand on Julio's shoulder.

"Go ahead. Take over. After the courage you've displayed tonight, there's no doubt in my mind you'll make a better leader than your father. Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Promise that you'll make me your top advisor. That way, I can keep you in check."

"Alright, deal."

When they got to the mansion, it was already in flames. Rebel troops surrounded the complex. Guards were desperately trying to put the fire out while returning fire to the rebels. Julio and Alejandro got out of the truck and moved into the courtyard. They found cover behind the marble garden walls and took potshots at the guards. Julio took out two that were firing from the kitchen windows, while Alejandro picked off the guards at the front door. Seizing the opportunity, Julio raced inside, leaving Alejandro behind. He had only one priority now. He dashed upstairs, looking for his father. He checked the first bedroom but found nothing. Then he checked his father's office, again nothing. Then he heard a cough coming from his father's bedroom. He kicked the door down to find his father staring out of a newly made hole in his room. The entire rear wall and roof were gone, giving way to a beautiful view of the ocean. The whole room was on fire. Julio raised his submachine gun.

"Turn around and put your hands up," he stammered.

The dictator slowly turned around with a sick and twisted smile on his face.

"So," he murmured, "my own son betrays me. Why am I not surprised..."

Julio took aim, "I'm not kidding, *papá*. Put your hands up."

The dictator slowly raised his hands, his smile never waning.

"You know I knew the whole time, right? About your involvement in the revolution? I knew about it before you even met Alejandro."

"What do you mean? How do you know his name?"

"I know all their names, *mi hijo*. I knew Luis as well."

Julio's eyes began to tear.

"Shut up! Just shut up!" he cried, "Don't you dare talk about Luis!"

"Why not? You are the one who killed him after all."

"You made me, you sick, twisted bastard!"

The dictator continued to grin like a madman. Julio wasn't going to let his father's mind games get to him this time.

"This was planned, you know. Did you already forget what I told you in the Department of Records? Do you not remember what I taught you about the role of revolutions in our system? This revolution was instigated by me!"

"It wasn't! It's not true! You're lying!"

"Ah, but I am not, *mi hijo*. Search within yourself, you know it to be true."

"I'm not falling for your goddamned tricks, *papá*."

"Trick?" the dictator cackled, dropping his hands to his sides, "There is no trick, *mi hijo*. All that I have said is true. The revolution was planned, the assault on Serpiente was planned. I even brought you out right next to a rebel camp because I knew they would contact you, and I knew you would join. You are just as much of a snake as I am."

Julio could barely contain his rage.

"I'm nothing like you!" he screamed, "I'm better! I don't treat our citizens like animals!"

"Oh really?" the dictator bellowed, "then why did you do nothing when that poor woman was beaten by those guards when we landed in Santiago? Why did you do nothing to help that officer that I shot? Why did you shoot Luis? I cannot believe you still do not see, *mi hijo*. We are cut from the same cloth, we are both natural born dictators, we are both monsters!"

"No!" Julio bellowed, "No, it isn't true! I won't let it be true!"

"You cannot stop it, Julio! Dread it, fear it, hide from it, it matters not! You cannot escape your destiny! The snake is taking another bite of its tail as we speak! The cycle is repeating itself, as it is supposed to! Open your eyes, *mi hijo*! This is so much bigger than you can comprehend, than you can fight!"

"I won't let it happen," Julio sobbed, "the cycle ends today."

The dictator laughed maniacally, "*Mi hijo*, how is it that you still do not understand?! You cannot break the cycle; nobody can break the cycle. Mark my words, the cycle shall instead break you, just as it broke me, and my mother before me, and every single goddamned dictator this country has ever had! You want to try and end the cycle? Be my guest, but I warn you, heed the words 'AMÉRICA PARA SIEMPRE'. You cannot end something which does not have an end."

The dictator descended into a violent coughing fit. Blood spewed from his mouth and his entire body convulsed with pain. Holding his breath, Julio pulled the trigger on his submachine gun, only to hear a disappointing click. The weapon was empty. The dictator, with renewed vigor, stampeded past Julio out into the hallway, knocking him to the ground. Julio got up slowly and drew his pistol out of pants pocket, the same pistol he used to kill Luis. He calmly walked out

into the hall, aimed for the frantically limping dictator and shot him in the back. The dictator stopped and stood up straight. The gunshot echoed through the halls of the mansion. All at once time stood still, and everything went silent. Julio lowered his pistol. A crimson stain appeared on his father's immaculate suit. The dictator adjusted his tie and turned around.

"You know," he muttered, "you are just like me when I was your age. Desperate to get out of my mother's shadow, I did the same thing you are doing now. I joined the revolution, stormed the capital, and shot her in her office."

Julio swallowed hard.

The dictator cleared his throat and continued,

"You see, *mi hijo*, before I shot my mother, she made it very clear to me that the cycle could not be broken, but I did not believe her. I thought she was crazy. I thought I could tear everything down and start again. It took me a long time to realize it, but she was right. Try as I might, I couldn't stop the same chain of events from repeating itself. You can go ahead and kill me now, because my life does not matter. The cycle will continue with or without me."

He paused to let out another barrage of bloody coughs.

"Would you like to know the last thing my mother ever said to me?"

"Tell me."

"Pull the trigger."

Julio couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Excuse me?"

"Pull the trigger,' that's the last thing she said to me, and it will be the last thing I say to you. So go ahead, *mi hijo*, pull the trigger. We shall meet again the next time the cycle repeats itself."

With that, he began to laugh. A maniacal, deranged laugh. A laugh of sheer insanity. It rattled in Julio's ears like nails on a chalkboard. The dictator raised his arms defiantly, almost taunting Julio. Blinking back tears, Julio raised the pistol and pulled the trigger, once and for all. The laugh stopped instantly. The dictator crumpled to the floor, that twisted grin still plastered on his face. Julio dropped the pistol and completely broke down sobbing. One sentence echoed in his mind again and again.

"You cannot end something which does not have an end."

EPILOGUE

"Wake up, *mi hija*, we have much to do."

Maria opened her eyes. Her father was standing at the foot of her bed, as he typically did. The sun was peeking through the curtains, and bathed the room in warm, orange light. Sounds of tropical birds could be heard. A cool breeze was flowing in from the window. She raised her head and checked the time. It was exactly seven o'clock in the morning, 15. June 2166.

"Wake up. We have much to do", her father repeated, and Maria got out of bed.

“What’s the rush?”, she asked, annoyed at being woken up so early, “We always have ‘much to do’.”

Her father ignored her question, and simply told her to get dressed and meet him in the courtyard at nine thirty. Maria slipped into her uniform, a white suit with red and gold accents, and trudged out of her room and down to the kitchen to eat breakfast. Armed guards adorned the entire mansion, watching Maria’s every move like hawks. This would usually be nothing noteworthy, but something was off. The guards seemed more agitated today, with some even risking punishment by smoking cigarettes inside the house.

Julio smiled. He was in his room getting ready. Today was the big day. He was going to begin preparing his daughter to step into the role as leader. Forty-two years had passed since he shot his father and took over América. After the battle for Serpiente, he immediately took power and appointed Alejandro as his top advisor, just as he had promised. Julio even made him head of the Department of Records at his behest. He filled his ranks with other important rebel leaders. His first official order was to rebuild. They rebuilt Serpiente into more or less what it was before, however, he created a nationwide sanitation department in order to ensure that the sewers and other sanitary institutions were kept clean and functional. Otherwise, the cityscape changed very little. Alejandro said he would attend to it, but never did. Julio then began to improve the lives of his subjects, by first making them forget the horrors that came before. It was Alejandro’s idea to make use of leftover Oblivira stockpiles and production lines to ensure the people would forget. They even made a law stating that citizens could only get their food from special vending machines, that only contained sustenance spiked with Oblivira. As for the *Ejército Dorado*, Julio decided to keep them around, only this time he gave his head general more vetoing power to ensure that no rogue protocols hampered his men.

Naturally, some people did not take kindly to Julio’s new, better regime, and in the first months and years, there were protests. After those were taken care of, Julio decided to take a page out of his father’s playbook and instigate a revolution to draw the public’s ire away from his perfect state. Just to make sure no extra revolution appeared, Alejandro had an idea of releasing a super-virus into the population, to keep them sick and weak. As for his plans to reach out to the other super-states, he never carried them out after he saw the sorry state that the others were in. After all, why would he want to interact with subpar countries when he lived in the best nation in the world?

He looked out of his room’s window and observed his domain. He saw the statue of himself he had ordered erected atop Corcovado Mountain. It was beautiful. It was perfect. It was everything he’d ever dreamed of. He only wished his father could see him now, how he had taken Ouroboric Totalitarianism and molded it into the perfect state. He never ended up dropping the Ouroboric ideology, mainly because he realized it wasn’t inherently bad. He had essentially kept the Regime and improved the lives of his people within the parameters of the system. He also never dropped the symbol of the snake eating its own tail, nor the slogan “AMÉRICA PARA SIEMPRE”, as those were both supposed to represent the eternity of his new, glorious, perfect Regime. The cycle would repeat itself, as it always did, although now he had shaped América to be a land of peace and prosperity for centuries to come. All of a sudden, he was overcome with a violent coughing fit. Blood flew out of his mouth and splattered onto the

window. Julio wiped it off with disgust. He left his room and walked past the kitchen where his daughter, Maria, was eating breakfast. He marched through the courtyard, guards saluting him as he passed. He came up to the courtyard gates and began to wait, descending into a small coughing fit all the while. He admired the new statue in the middle of the courtyard. It was one of himself, raising his fist in defiance. It was in much better taste than his father's.

Maria wandered out of the house and began to make her way down to him, shooting the statue a disgusted look. Julio beamed with pride. He was very aware of his daughter's distaste for how he ran the state. He didn't mind though, as he knew that eventually, she was going to overthrow him and improve his utopia further. She walked up to him.

"You're late," Julio scolded, "You were supposed to be here at nine thirty and it is now nine thirty-one."

He checked his watch.

"Nine thirty-two, as a matter of fact."

"Forgive me," Maria retorted, "I'm not a machine."

Julio shook his head, trying his best to hide the smile on his face.

"For someone who will run this country one day, you are very disorganized."

Maria rolled her eyes. Julio made sure to speak frequently to Maria about her responsibilities, just as his father did with him. They marched over to an armored car, and Julio ordered her to get in. As he was buckling his seatbelt, he caught a glimpse of himself in the sideview mirror, and for a moment, he swore he saw his father staring back at him.

Deep within the Department of Records, Alejandro was annoyed. Julio had gone ahead with the preparations a full week ahead of schedule. He always did these things way too early. It soured a job that Alejandro otherwise loved. He'd always wanted to be head of the DoR, ever since he was admitted as an agent at the age of fourteen. He'd done substantial work for the Department under Julio's father, but his real magnum opus came when he was selected to recruit Julio, a chance he took advantage of. He had known exactly what to say to get Julio on board, even down to letting him take power. Alejandro, of course, never wanted to be leader, his sole duty as an agent of the Department of Records was to ensure that the cycle repeated itself, which he had done successfully. He convinced Julio to utilize Oblivira in the same manner his father did, even down to the vending machines that Julio hated when he was a rebel. He also persuaded him to employ that super-virus that he would've otherwise been against. Alejandro chuckled to himself. He'd even talked Julio into letting him replicate the Department of Records one to one. He was currently on his way to appoint a new agent, one that would infiltrate the revolution, recruit Maria, and eventually manipulate her into making Julio's 'perfect' state all over again. The cycle would repeat itself, just as it always had.

He came upon his office. Walking in, two guards were flanking a young boy, no more than fourteen years of age. Alejandro sat down and pulled up the file on this young boy. He smirked. The boy's name was Luis. *Well, well, well*, he thought, *if that isn't the world's biggest*

coincidence. Alejandro looked up at the back wall. There was a plaque, emblazoned with three simple words:

‘AMÉRICA PARA SIEMPRE’

THE END