



THE DELA TORRE QUESTION

by: REINA RAOMCHELLE B. ARZOBAL

Compared to the majority of houses in the area, it could be said that the structure looked out of place. The ground it was set upon contributed to its foundation, as it sat the farthest away from the small community within the countryside, near a hill, and closest to the direction for those wishing to travel away from it. This was the usual scenario. *Few wished to approach the house.* Most of the people who lived there assumed the inhabitants were wealthy yet mediocre among their own kind. From the looming sight of it alone, a passerby might have thought it did not belong there—perhaps an edifice that should have been taken down years ago, or simply, that the household was tone-deaf to the customs of their neighbors.

Those who were reproachful narrowed their eyes at the mere thought.

“A strange family, those people. If anything, it is only the son who wishes to associate with us. Even he is embarrassed of their circumstances. No wonder he is usually seen fleeing to the city. He comes back, albeit weeks after.”

Some, more sympathetic, chose their words carefully.

“Are we not strangers all the same? It is only they who have remained that way. Opportunistic, that’s for certain. Yet those who seek opportunity, aren’t such recluses.”

Yet being ignorant was not the answer, nor was it a structure belonging to days of old.

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It had been merely seven years ago when a group of men from the city decided to cut down a large portion of trees near the hill with an intent to vacate the area for the house. Days later, another group followed with at least twenty carts of stone bricks and ten more carts carrying lumber that undoubtedly came from the thicket of trees felled a few days prior.

No one approached these workers, as they spoke languages foreign to the townspeople. The locals interacted only with the architect, who typically oversaw the construction until its conclusion.

It had been quite a spectacle for the small community, as they were not accustomed to such noise. Activities like that were more common in urban settings. One might find solace in isolation, especially in their later years. Those who chose to remain in the rural land had opted for a quieter daily routine.

Nevertheless, while some found themselves irritable and restless, many were fascinated by what was happening. Some families even took the time to watch the construction of the house, occasionally asking the architect about the house itself, the people who would soon occupy it, and why they had chosen to settle in such a secluded place.

During these periods, a child had wandered to a smaller cart and questioned the man in charge. In response, he allowed her to keep one of the items from the convey. When she returned to the townspeople, they noticed she was holding an oyster shell—translucent, yet not as clear as glass. This puzzled many, as there was no sea, or any body of water, within miles of the area.

“Capiz,” the architect replied when asked about the shells. “To be precise, Capiz shells.” He held one up for the attentive crowd to see. “These are more common in my

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homeland, and it cost a small fortune to transport them here. They will be used as window panes.”

“These are not exactly native objects then, Mr. Santiago?” asked an older man, who had stopped by to watch the construction. “It reflects a *distinct* culture, this entire procedure. I’m not suggesting that the structure is displeasing, quite the contrary.

The architect remained steadfast. “Indeed, sir. My clients were very particular about the details of the house. Much more will be brought once they are fully settled.” Musing to himself, he added with a light chuckle, “In all honesty, I was almost taken aback by the cost.”

“No doubt,” the old man replied, glancing at the house. “I assume these people hold quite a bit of prominence?”

Santiago nodded. “Quite so. It’s for an older gentleman who wishes to feel more at home. We’re old friends, and I was sympathetic to his situation.”

A younger, though rather blunt, man folded his arms. “Given the size, I’d surmise this house is intended as part of a retirement plan. Our soon-to-be neighbors remain unknown since you did not even bother to disclose their names.”

A murmur of agreement swept through the crowd, typical for such a community.

Santiago frowned. “I would have assumed that word would have gotten around. Perhaps I underestimated his prestige.”

“*Whom* exactly do you speak of?”

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"I thought there would have been no need to mention him!"

The young man pressed on. "We live far from the hustle and bustle. Surely you understand that news travels slowly here, and newspapers hardly capture the full scope of what happens in places beyond here?"

"Haven't many of you traveled to the city and seen his work?" the architect asked the crowd, incredulous. "Museums, and even the finest establishments showcase his creations prominently. Theaters in various countries hire him for their backdrops and posters. His name stands out whenever he is credited!"

"Do tell!" exclaimed another member of the crowd. "Your description leaves much to be desired. If this man you speak of has such a distinction, what exactly are his achievements?"

"The pride of many he is," said Santiago. "Myself included. He told me that I should not speak of who he is to the public eye. That, I cannot comprehend. Many had held a brush, and poured their souls into the canvas."

He removed his hat from his head, a solemn expression upon his face. "Yet, Andrés Dela Torre bled for his own portraits, until they embodied the life he knew."

Once the name of the figure who would soon occupy the house was spoken, the town naturally wanted to know more about this painter. Yet Mr. Santiago merely raised his hands, refusing to elaborate further. As per his wishes, he was to respect his friend's request: *speaking no more of who the painter was to the public, in order to preserve the image of a simpler man, who sought a life away from the prestige that once was entirely his own.* The architect

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insisted on respecting the man’s honor and dignity, maintaining the silence demanded by his renowned companion.

The discussion was left at that. Subsequent words were vague, and the townsfolk were left to ponder the appearance and the enigma of such a man, mentioned in just a casual conversation regarding one of his properties.

Andrés Dela Torre became more of a question than a person in the weeks that followed the people’s conversation with the architect. What was known was that he was a man of an extraordinary hand, whose paintings were each considered a magnum opus, each better than the last. Some began to share anecdotes of their visits to the city, attempting to discern who this man was and what connection they might find before his arrival.

Others were optimistic, excited to meet the famed painter.

“How joyous is it not? It is only sometimes that one could live near such a celebrity! They say he is not from the country, and has remained in his prime for twenty years. His works continue to rise in value. Yet then again, as of late, what surrounds his name is ‘*The Dela Torre Question*.’ Even those in the city want to know more.”

Skeptics remained pessimistic.

“Or so as they claim. One *cannot* think too highly of a man he is not familiar with. Artists tend to be the most misunderstood people, often deemed either lunatics or personas merely for show, and this man is no different. He has not been well. They say he’s beyond his means, discontent. The Dela Torre Question is neither good, and the answer shall prove to be either disappointing or simply nothing.”

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Rumors went around, and the townsfolk eagerly awaited the completion of the house to learn more. When finished, it was as simplistic as it was grand—out of place, yet undeniably new.

The ground floor was constructed from sturdy stone, while the upper part of the structure was built of wood, with overhanging eaves and a terracotta-tiled roof that stood upon it all. The windows were wide, revealing the oyster-shell as the panes that the architect had shown them weeks earlier. Approaching the door, one could admire the intricate detail on the wood, which had taken nearly weeks to carve, complementing the aesthetic of it all.

Mr. Santiago found himself pleased with the completion, and had planned to return to the city once his supervision was no longer needed. Yet a sudden obligation kept him from straying away. He felt compelled to help his old friend settle in completely. It was more than necessary. After all, he was significantly involved in constructing the lodgings that Dela Torre would live in. But on a personal level, it remained a must to do so. They were friends, after all—Santiago was the painter's oldest confidante. Despite his efforts, he had not met with de la Torre in person; his only communication had been through exchanged letters, speaking solely with the painter's son.

He recognized his friend's presence only through these letters, leaving him in a state of less resolve than he had hoped. The handwriting was familiar, the tone still jovial and cordial, but all communication was limited to the son.

Thus, it came to be. *Seven years* of written correspondence, and it was no longer the father who visited Santiago in his lodgings in the city but rather his child, who rarely mentions him. He frequently sought any news or signs of activity from the painter—perhaps a piece created for leisure—but the responses were never enough to satisfy his longing.

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It would not make any difference if he were to visit Dela Torre himself. How long had it been since Santiago took up the courage to refer to his friend outside of a professional context? They had worked together for years, on sets and commissions given by the higher echelon. He had always been the more practical of the two, while the painter, *Andrés*, had been more expressive.

His paintings, sometimes sculptures, or anything influenced by his hand, were mere extensions of his viewpoint—a testament to the fervor that lay beneath the surface of any artist. Words could not adequately describe his work; poets were often inspired by his paintings, and vice versa. Nor did it suffice to merely show his work, to let the quality of the paint speak for itself. What use was the eye without the mind or soul to accompany the heart of the piece?

That had been *Andrés*' philosophy, and he maintained it for years.

Did his words still hold true? This was a question the architect asked himself every day. Santiago, in his habits, was influenced by such a mindset. Whether it was out of remembrance for his old friend, he could never fully define the ineffable. It all stemmed from the time they left their homeland. Admittedly, he was not opposed to the idea, yet *Andrés* had surprisingly been less enthusiastic all those years ago. Opportunity came in the form of a livelihood—the prospect of earning from their talents. Their country of origin had provided little for them then. For the remainder of their adulthood, they stayed in the West.

It was inevitable, the decision to remain in the country, serving people who were not their countrymen. They were appreciated, far from any more conflict. It was not entirely their own, and what remained theirs was the talent and the practices and influences they carried with them. *Andrés*' house was a testament to that.

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For seven years, it had stood upon its ground, seemingly untouched by the conditions of the countryside. Despite its size, it housed only three inhabitants. The only noise it ever caused was during its creation, and once Santiago had ensured his old friend was content with the arrangements, that was the last time they saw or spoke to one another.

Both of them were busy men. Andrés kept himself occupied even in his retirement, while Santiago remained dedicated to his profession, with no plans to leave his work behind—perhaps another ten years, he thought. Then a mental picture formed within his mind, a saddening morbid one: To humans, their common clock was their age.

This realization slipped in whenever there was nothing else to think of, when one contemplated their current position. Santiago, however, had little time for such reflections.

Never did he allow himself to dwell on thoughts that might weigh him down, maintaining the appearance of a composed, focused architect. His profession demanded it, and the society around him expected no less.

It was never an option to escape to the countryside for a brief respite.

Until today.

He stood by the ornate door, contemplating whether or not he should knock, or even allow himself to be near the perimeter of the house. Santiago looked around, deciding to distract himself from what he intended to do.

It had been seven years, and not much had changed in the surroundings. The house was just as he had left it that day, and there was no one in sight. The occasional birds flew by, their chirping audible from a distance, and the slight gusts of wind shook the trees,

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creating an almost tranquil atmosphere. Yet, an unwelcoming feeling still hung in the air. He looked rather foolish, hat in hand, still donned in his coat, debating whether or not he should make himself known.

Swallowing his discomfort, Santiago raised his fist to knock on the door. His knuckles almost tapped the wood impatiently, but he withdrew his hand, listening for any signs of life within.

Footsteps approached, accompanied by a voice yelling at someone else. As the steps neared the door, Santiago recognized the voice as Andrés' son.

The door opened, revealing a disheveled young man who looked over his shoulder to address his fiancée. "Celia, do attend to my father! He seems to have forgotten to join us for lunch—" He paused mid-exclamation, a look of humility crossing his face. "My apologies, Mr. Santiago."

Santiago offered him a small smile in reassurance. "How are you, Lucas?"

"I have just returned from the city, sir," Lucas said, stepping aside to allow him to enter. "I did not expect to see you so soon! What brings you here to the countryside?"

"My conscience," Santiago replied. "Forgive me for being so sudden."

"Not at all, sir!" assured Lucas, closing the door behind him. "Please, have a seat. It must have been quite a journey to get here."

Allowing Lucas to lead him to the wooden staircase that ascended to the upper floor, Santiago surveyed his surroundings below once more. The bottom part of the house was

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made entirely of stone, with crates lined against the walls. As he moved up the steps, he glimpsed the living quarters above: a large open space with a high ceiling, light streaming through the expansive windows.

Once he reached the top of the staircase, the interior of the house revealed itself. Andrés had clearly taken great care to ensure that his family was surrounded by the life he had known before leaving his country. Santiago ought to have realized from the exterior of the house alone. Not only ornate in taste, but also an extension of what the artist idealized.

He recognized the subjects of the paintings adorning the walls, each identical to those Andrés had created back in their homeland.

The living area seemed almost secondary to the painting that dominantly decorated the room. It was an oil painting of a romanticized scene, something from childhood, before he and the painter had traveled to the West. It was Andrés' signature subject, one of his few muses: a pastoral scene of rural life. A typical Sunday morning, with a family setting out toward the fields, leaving their humble hut for the eyes of those who saw the painting.

Adjacent to it, another painting complemented the first perfectly. It depicted another perspective of the same minor subjects from that typical Sunday morning. This time, the canvas showed an afternoon meal, with a few farmers in a state of repose under a tree, while others continued to toil in the fields, harvesting what they would sell in the market in the coming days. Andrés had outdone himself with the scenery; the bright colors vividly brought to life the essence of the land, the afternoon sun in full view, with the thick trees being one of the few blessings that any man can settle himself upon on.

The countryside depicted in the paintings was tranquil and simplistic. It was the retirement his friend had sought after. The lower-class families, tending to their daily routines,

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made do with what they had, surrounded by their loved ones—not for the public eye to gawk at or interpret, but to keep close as a sense of home.

He stared at the masterpieces, his hand resting on the settee. It was only when Lucas called him to sit down that he was brought out of his reverie.

“Are you hungry, sir?” asked Lucas, ushering him to the space. “Forgive us, Celia and I just finished our lunch.”

Setting himself on the sillón, Santiago shook his head. “I am quite fine, Lucas. Water would suffice. It’s quite sultry nowadays.”

Almost as if on cue, a young woman crossed the threshold, a tray of fine wood in her hands. Upon it was a brass pitcher and two glasses. She smiled as she met Santiago's eyes, setting down the tray on the small wooden table in front of him.

“Thank you, Celia.”

She poured water into the glasses, then stood up once more. Celia turned to her fiancé, bending over to whisper in his ear. Lucas’ expression shifted from hospitable to slightly annoyed, then urgent, as he sent her away with hastened instruction.

As she left the room without a word, Lucas turned to his guest once more. “I assume you have come to see my father?”

Taken slightly aback, Santiago nodded. “How is Andrés?”

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Lucas's expression turned hesitant as he clasped his hands together. "Has he not written to you yet?"

"It's a monthly routine, dear boy," remarked the older man. "He was due to write."

He shook his head. "My father has neither picked up his quill, nor his brushes."

"This has never happened before? Such lapses are not uncommon among artists."

"This is no mere artistic lapse," sighed Lucas. "He has been unwell."

"How concerning," said Santiago. "For how long? He made no mention of any illness in his letters, Lucas."

"I am uncertain of what to tell you."

"May I see him, then?"

Such a question had the ability to unsettle the entire situation, as Lucas' composure seemed to slip. Santiago was beginning to question his own understanding, yet he hesitated to intrude upon Andrés' private matters. Only he and Celia were present to accompany the patriarch in their residence, and they knew more about his friend's condition than he did.

He could only look at the hesitant son, contemplating whether to allow Lucas to speak further or to prompt him to do so.

He chose the latter and spoke again.

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“What has happened to Andrés, Lucas?”

“Martin, if I were to describe his condition to you, I am unsure if you would still be inclined to stay, or even speak to him.”

Santiago’s expression turned grave. “Do you imply that I might hold him in shame afterward? What kind of friend would I be?”

“I, his son, cannot understand him either,” remarked Lucas. “He seems to be out of his former wit.”

“I find myself unable to believe you.”

“And so will many if I even attempt to tell them.”

Santiago raised his eyebrows. “Your father is merely fifty years old, Lucas.”

“Age is the clock of humanity,” replied Lucas. “and I see that point proven in him.”

“Do you imply that he shall die?”

“Bold of you to say it out loud when you clearly fear that it may happen.”

“So it is true!”

Fear had now crept into his senses, and no longer could he properly look at the young man who sat opposite him. With a hand on his heart, his countenance betraying the fleeting

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thoughts racing through his mind, Santiago was torn between disbelief and the raw, bitter truth just spat at him by what seemed to be a resentful son.

“I am resigned to whatever may happen,” said Lucas. “Three doctors, and they have reached the same conclusion. Repeatedly, I have gone back and forth to the city to sustain his treatments, but physically, he shall remain frail if his state of mind does not improve.”

In his frustration, he placed a hand on his head. “Did the countryside not ease him? This was to be his retirement, his time of ease, away from everything.”

Silence fell between them, and the architect remained stiff in his seat. The thought of death was a serious matter to be tended to, and if his son had been so certain, he dreaded to think what else might be implied.

“Celia shares your sentiments,” said Lucas. “She attempts to reassure me, but I can clearly see the cracks in his demeanor. You might have heard the rumors about my father in the city—that he *‘disappeared’* so suddenly, and the doctors who visited our house may not have kept their promises of discretion.

“My father is raving, and I have lost the will to even comprehend his words. He wishes to return home, *years* after asking me to build this house for him, away from everything!”

He spat the last sentence out irately, struggling to keep the bitterness from his voice as he continued. “But you are aware the troubles in the motherland. Our people can barely make ends meet, and we submit to another foreign hand. We still do, unfortunately. Once he sees it for himself, it will become clear that he will shatter entirely, digging himself an early grave.”

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Lucas paused once more, bowing his head. "He paints to comfort himself, creating scenes from our life in the provinces, and she just encourages him to remember those peaceful times. Alas, I am sure he knows the inevitable, even in his current state of mind.

"I do not hold him in shame, Martin, yet I cannot accept that he is no longer the man you, or the people, believe him to be."

"Do you not miss the country?"

Lucas closed his eyes, his hand resting on his forehead. "Who would miss a country that allow the soils of their farms to rot, and no crop prospers from it. The motherland has succumbed to her suffering, and the cause of it are those who continue to poison the seeds she embedded upon herself."

"Yet your father," Santiago said, standing up from the settee, "did not fail to recognize that his blood is still stained upon those lands. He can no longer experience the true feeling of liberty, what he depicts in his own work, and he does not intend to die in a foreign country that is not his own."

For all that had been exchanged during that conversation, Santiago had realized more than he could bear. Sentiments he had long avoided now confronted him. The truth of the country they missed, the idea of a simpler period, how little it seemed to matter to those who viewed it in a less idyllic light. What had kept them alive until now were the traditions they were not willing to let go of. These traditions had kept Andrés alive, sustaining his pride. In his mind, he still existed in those halcyon days, in the fields he romanticized, out of love for the nation he left for a livelihood he appreciated, and his heart remained there.

Andrés had maintained what he held dear, molding the house he retired to in a way that resembled what he knew, where he felt most at home. It had been an artificial escape,

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with little similarity to the people and lands he was loyal to—terra firma that could not remain in his hands, and the people of the same country who could do so little to simply live and seize the day. What was around them now, it held the same reality to some extent.

Whether they remained in the West or any country that was not their motherland, what kept them alive was the identity of the country, a name that continued to shape any proud man who had lived on her land.

And Andrés was an example of that.

“Where is your father?” Santiago asked.

Lucas seemed reluctant to answer, but the determination in the older man’s expression and words left him with little choice. Neither could they agree on what they spoke about. Turning to Celia, who had returned from her obligations, he pointed to her.

“Accompany him to the terrace.”

Silently, she acquiesced, and Santiago followed her quietly. For one last moment, he regarded the son, who did not turn to face him again, his posture and expression steeped in contemplation, his head resting upon his right hand. With one call from Celia, he continued to the azotea. He neither spoke a word to her, nor did she meet his eyes as they proceeded toward the closed door that led to the outside, offering a higher view of what lay below, and a better sight of what was above.

Reaching for the door handle, Santiago’s hand rested upon the brass.

To think more of it, or not to think at all. They were, or had been, familiar.

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Would it remain so if his friend was indeed as unrecognizable as Lucas described him?

What kind of man would he find? Would it still be the persona of the painter that he placed himself in the company of those close to him?

"He's waiting for you, sir," Celia mumbled. "Best not to keep him waiting."

"Must I be mindful of anything?" asked Santiago.

"Perhaps not."

Unsure, he was. Nor did Santiago allow himself to open his eyes as he twisted the doorknob, and pushed the door open. Closing it behind him, he felt the cool air hit his face, hearing the wind brush against the trees that caused them to rustle.

"It took you quite long enough, old friend."

The voice caused him to turn and take in his surroundings.

Upon the terrace stood a few easels, each holding a canvas splattered with paint, but no discernible picture. The primary colors—red, blue, and yellow—seemed deliberately discordant on the white surfaces. Some canvases bore mere sketches, awaiting the touch of paint, though he could not perceive the details from where he stood.

Clusters of potted plants adorned the terrace corners. Looking closer, he recognized some of the flora familiar from the courtyards of old churches. When in bloom, these plants brightened the spirits of those attending mass, children hastening towards the pots to pick

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flowers. Ferns scattered about added lush ornamentation, interspersed with Crotons and fan-shaped palm leaves. The flowers added to the picturesque scene: orchids resembling blossoms, some petals fallen to the ground, and large hibiscus flowers emerging from the greenery. White jasmines, aged but still unwilted, hung from pots, the same kind used as garlands.

Wooden furniture, evidently purposed for storage, stood by. Unlike the ornate cabinets and settees, these pieces were plain, some chipped and roughly polished, all showing signs of wear. Above one cabinet hung a crucifix.

There he was, seated on a chair, palette in hand, paintbrush in the other.

Andrés smiled, and Santiago could not reciprocate the gesture, in his disbelief, sorrow, and relief. His uncertainties and convictions came to the ground, leaving him bewildered by the sight of the man before him—seated in a chair older than he, his white shirt splattered with paint.

He had aged naturally. His hair was heavily streaked with gray, and the lines on his skin had deepened. His hands were calloused, yet held the paintbrush firmly. The smile on his lips did not fully reach his eyes, but he looked at Santiago as if his visit was neither unexpected nor an intrusion.

“Forgive me; I should have come to you myself.”

“It’s no concern at all. How are you?”

“Better than they make it out to be, Martin.”

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"Are you, Andrés?"

"Since when have you doubted the truth of my words?"

"You have not always been truthful with me, nor consistent."

"I cannot leave for the city, unfortunately. I wish I could."

"Start now, then, would you?"

Santiago approached the painter and noticed a small stool beside the chair. He drew it closer and seated himself upon it, resting his elbows on his knees as he looked up at Andrés, whose frown unsettled him.

The walls of the house were not that thick, one would be able to hear what the others say about him from the other room. Was Andrés unaware of how tense his companion was? Did he not realize what Santiago might have heard or knew?

"What would you like to know? Do you pry?"

"Certainly not. I ask out of concern. Tell me the truth."

"Must I?"

"You should. Given what I know and what I doubt."

"And why do you press me about such?"

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“To console both of us. I know you aren’t happy here.”

He must have been prying indeed. The architect’s gaze had probed him, as if seeking to uncover more. Perhaps he knew more than he should, recognizing what Andrés had avoided discussing. The painter had turned away, placing his materials on a small table beside him. Upon closer inspection, Andrés appeared a decade older. He had always been the younger of the two in every respect.

Yet now, before Santiago, sat an old man, a far cry from the expressionistic artist he once knew—the one who poured life into a canvas with color, passionate in his craft. Such a sight reminded Santiago that his friend had never been just an idol to those “beneath” nor a prize to the upper classes. He was, after all, a human soul through and through.

“Are you not, either?”

“Perhaps not, Andrés.”

“Then we are both guilty.”

“Why are you discontent?”

“Not unhappy, just discontent.”

“Did the countryside offer no remedy?”

“An escape, perhaps, but not a worthy one. I fear I am delusional.”

“Delusional people do not speak in such terms.”

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“Yet I, a fool, have gone to great lengths to reassure myself that I remain closer to home.”

To remain closer to home—such a sentiment alone was enough to bear the weight upon them both. Andrés no longer saw the point in keeping it from Santiago. The problem remained closer than ever.

Yet it was not a problem but a reality—one that had been riddled with complexities ever since. Personal sentiments rarely aligned with the stark truth that was already there.

One cannot simply close their eyes and wake up in a place where they wish to be.

Santiago sighed. “You endured this delusion for seven years?” He hung his head, letting the weight of the moment close in. “*Why?*”

“My happiness *does not* reside here; it remains elsewhere,” Andrés said with a resigned tone. “The sun still shines in our motherland, I know it. They just need to see the light it brings.”

“It’s night here whenever it is morning there.”

“Yet I can still feel the spark. *I want to go home, Martin.*”

“Why have you not?”

“I’m still a fool through and through.”

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“Why so?”

“I cannot face reality. The people, my muses, all trodden down in the fields where they work.”

“And if you were to go back?”

“I know I don’t have long. I would have to live faster once I’m there.”

The thought of death—now that Andrés was right before him—had solidified into an image Santiago never wanted to confront. To see his friend waste away, wither, and fade was unbearable. He wondered if Andrés’ legacy would endure or if it would merely be another unanswered Dela Torre Question. Such a question seemed futile now. The outcome was clear: the fate of many who had come before him awaited Andrés.

“You’re well aware that neither of us can live long enough to make new friends.”

“Will you not lash out at me for abandoning you for nearly a decade?”

“I have no intention of it.”

The implications of their exchange were clear—no further words were necessary. He had no intention of prolonging the rift. The distance had been palpable, and the weight of not seeing Andrés for seven years was heavy. Yet the painter appeared at ease, acknowledging that the trouble now held little significance. Often challenging was to forgive, but there had been no anger—indeed, it had never existed. In its place was worry, and with it came the realization that their relationship would endure for the remainder of what else was left for them.

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Neither of them spoke for what felt like minutes. Footsteps from within the house could be heard, and birds had gathered to rest by the edge of the azotea. Time seemed irrelevant, and the sun that hovered in the sky suggested that it was still the start of the afternoon—an ordinary day.

Andrés glanced at him again, picking up his paintbrush and palette. The somberness had lifted from his expression; his eyes, once downcast, were now thoughtful as he surveyed the painting still resting on the easel. "Do you ever intend to leave the West?"

With a hint of good humor, Santiago shrugged. "In ten years, perhaps."

"Why wait?"

"To waste away is a fear of mine. I am only human, Andrés."

"Does nothing await you?"

Santiago gestured toward the door. "You have a son, while I have only what I will leave behind in the end."

Andrés took Santiago's hand, lifting him from the stool and guiding him to the side of his chair. "Then let the country welcome us back with open arms," he said, pointing his paintbrush at the canvas. "I will end where we began."

Surprisingly, he had not yet taken in what was displayed on the easel. It now dawned on him that Andrés had finally completed his piece, despite the others that was scattered

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around the terrace. Best not to make assumptions, as the paintbrush was still in hand. "What are you painting?"

Their homeland had always been his muse, the greenery of pastures and fields rendered in a more romantic light. The scenes he painted were peaceful—prosperous harvests or people resting under the shade of trees that offered pause from the sun and toil. But now, the muse had taken on a more literal form.

Gone were the lush greens; the scene had shifted to the sea. On the canvas was a young gentleman standing on the deck of a ship, packing away his easel as he gazed at the approaching landscape. The port, full with large ships unloading merchants and goods onto smaller boats, seemed distant. Yet from the young man's expression, he would have seemed content with return.

It was almost as if home had drawn closer, nearer than it had ever been.

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