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The Sun Goes Down in Juárez

A rugged man with leather-brown skin sat tall at the barstool, separating the brothers who sat on either side of him. Rodolfo Vargas found himself desperately trying to avoid staring at the mean scar that crossed the man's cheek. From the corner of his eye, he could see other patrons doing the same thing, and whispering to each other behind their liquor-filled glasses. Women giggled and combed their fingers through their hair in pathetic attempts to grab the man's attention. Men sat up straighter, blowing out more smoke from their cigarettes to show they weren't threatened by the stranger. The scarred man adjusted the bandolier over his shoulders, and the golden bullets shone so brightly that it rivaled the gleaming silver pistol on his hip—he was a *rebel*. Rodolfo had seen rebels before galloping away through the pueblo, but *never* had he been in the same room as one, let alone be close enough to one to see how deep the jagged scar cut the man's face.

Rodolfo wondered how the rebel got the scar. Was it in a battle with President Díaz's army? Did the rebel kill whoever did that to him? More importantly, what was the rebel doing *here*? Sure, the revolution had heated up a lot more recently, but not in the little pueblo where Rodolfo lived.

“So,” he began, picking at the skin on his fingers, trying to formulate the words in the best way possible. It had been on his mind since he saw the rebel, but one wrong word and he wouldn't make it out of the cantina alive. He pointed to his cheek, “How did you get the scar?”

Raising his eyebrows in surprise at Rodolfo's straightforwardness, the rebel tossed back another drink of liquor like it was water. “I crossed someone who I shouldn't have crossed,” the rebel responded with a voice as rough and coarse as his appearance.

The answer was cryptic and vague, and not at all the adventurous and daring story Rodolfo was expecting, so he changed the subject, “Is the revolution coming here? I’ve heard rumors that—”

“*Tú cállate*,” his brother Jaime cut him off, widening his eyes as a silent warning, “I apologize for him, señor, Rudy here gets a little excited over things he knows nothing about.”

The rebel chuckled, lighting a cigar and releasing a cloud of smoke. “The revolution is everywhere, but don’t worry we’re only camped on the outskirts for the evening before we head north.”

Rudy raised an eyebrow, his curiosity growing. “What’s in the north?”

“Ciudad Juárez,” he said matter-of-factly.

Jaime smacked the back of Rudy’s head, but he ignored it. The younger Vargas brother continued his conversation with the rebel like they were two friends catching up. With every word that left the rebel’s mouth, the more Rudy became entranced with the revolution—if that were even possible.

“We could use you both, but I would decide quickly because we leave tonight,” the rebel stood from his seat, tipping his sombrero to a woman who had suddenly made her way to the other side of him. “If you’re interested, we’re gathered outside in the plaza. Just ask for El Valiente.”

Rudy watched him walk out of the cantina with a confidence that demanded attention and a fire ignited within him. One day, that would be *him* with the eyes of every patron glued to his back wherever he went.

“Don’t even *think* about it, Rodolfo.” Jaime’s voice was terse, “Life is hard enough without you looking for trouble everywhere you go.”

Rudy drank from his glass, throwing an arm around his brother's shoulder. "Oh, come on, just *imagine* it: two brothers fighting side by side in the war against Díaz's oppressive regime," He fantasized about the newspaper headline: "*General Vargas Leads Army to Victory*", and the photographs of him next to Pancho Villa would immortalize his image forever.

"Where El Valiente goes, death follows," Jaime spat, shaking Rudy's arms off of him, and pushing him away. "You're not following him just so you can get your name and photo in the paper. Get the idea out of your head. *Now.*"

"El Valiente is an *icon*," Rudy argued, "If you would just listen, I—"

"*No seas pendejo*, Rodolfo." Jaime slammed his glass down on the counter, the gruffness of his voice becoming more prominent as his volume grew. "Ever since Pancho Villa and Zapata became household names, you've become so *obsessed* with being like them," he stared at his brother with a tense jaw before leaving him at the counter by himself.

Later, Rudy walked out into the plaza as the sun began to sink behind the horizon. Vendors in the nearby market packed up their nearly fully stocked stands of various produce like *maize* and *nopales*. Others offered services like shoe polishing and clothes-tailoring, but they too, had difficulty attracting customers. A young married couple passed by Rudy, their two children helped carry baskets, easing the load on their pregnant mother.

"I think we should follow my sister to El Paso," the wife suggested. "Try our luck in the land of the free."

The husband swatted his hand like the idea was a pesky fly in the air. "Forget about it, we'll make it work. We always do." Though his voice suggested he was trying to convince himself of that too.

Ahead lay a group of raucous men and their horses as they laughed boisterously, and stowed away their rifles, restocked their belts with more bullets, and slid their arms back into their coats. One of the men walked toward the stone statue of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, removing his sombrero and running his right hand through his dark obsidian colored hair before making a sign of the cross. With a squinting gaze, Rudy caught sight of a familiar scarred cheek on the man, and his pulse picked up. Before he could have a second thought, Rudy ran toward the noise, speeding across the plaza and through the market, jumping over baskets of cornhusks faster than when he was a kid and Jaime had told him that *la llorona* was chasing after him. The men mounted their horses, a couple of them racing ahead while others followed behind at a trotting pace.

“Wait!” Rudy shouted, waving his hand in the air as he ran harder. The scarred rebel stopped, standing by him. “El Valiente... I-I want to... I want to join your army.” Rudy heaved as he doubled over, out of breath, and grabbed his knees to support himself.

The rebels fell silent and stared like Rudy had just asked to join forces with the *cucuy*, then erupted into a laughter so loud it echoed against the cracked stone walls of the pueblo.

One of the rebels rode by, slapping the scarred man on the back and chuckled, “This *pendejo* couldn’t be El Valiente even if he died and came back as her.”

“Her?” Rudy whispered to himself.

The army parted, lining up on either side of the trail, while a single rebel ahead sat atop his horse. Remnants of a peeking sun from behind the mountains blinded his eyes, and Rudy couldn’t make out the rebel’s face while the horse sauntered toward him. Each individual rebel nodded their heads in respect as the leader passed them, getting closer and closer to Rudy before stopping so close to him that he almost kissed the horse.

The rebel straightened the sombrero, revealing a feminine face with features sharp enough to cut, her eyes so dark they resembled two coal pieces staring directly into his soul.

Rudy scoffed in disbelief, “But... you’re a *woman*.”

She smirked, bringing her long, thick braid over her shoulder. Her gaze darkened, eyes narrowing, “You say that like it’s a bad thing, but if you ever say anything like that again, you’ll end up like the last man who crossed me,” she turned her attention toward her army, “Isn’t that right, Alejandro?”

Alejandro came forward, revealing himself as the same scarred rebel from the cantina, and only nodded his head in response.

“My apologies, but the—the papers,” Rudy stuttered, “And the rumors, they all speak of *El Valiente*.”

“And look at the fear on your face once you realized the boogeyman of your stories was a *woman*.” El Valiente chuckled, circling around him and sizing him up. “Do you even have a horse? I mean, what are you going to do, run all the way to Juárez the way you ran through the market?”

The rebels erupted into rowdy laughter, hands over their chest and pointing mockingly at Rudy. His face burned with embarrassment as he stumbled over his words. How could he be so stupid? The one time he has a chance to prove himself, he looks like a fool in front of one of the most infamous leaders on this side of Mexico.

“We have horses!” A rough voice shouted, and Rudy snapped his head back around to find Jaime approaching on horseback, leading another one their way. He handed the lead to Rudy, who flashed him both an appreciative smile and a look of guilt. He’d gone against

everything Jaime told him not to do, yet he was indebted to him for being the reason he could join the revolutionary cause.

Rudy turned to his brother, “How did you know?”

“When have you ever listened to me?” Jaime questioned sarcastically. “You would have found a way to Juárez regardless, and it’s my job to make sure you come back.”

As El Valiente took her position ahead of the rebel army, the others fell into place with Rudy and Jaime side by side, following behind her and riding through the night. The moon illuminated their path, as the horses left clouds of kicked up desert sand in their wake. Nearby, a pack of coyotes howled as they chased a group of cotton-tail rabbits through the desert. The rebels' booming voices roared and they laughed, the camaraderie as high as the stars in the sky above. At one point during the night, one of them had passed around a bottle of tequila as they fell into an off-key version of *Cielito Lindo* and to call it “singing” would have been too generous. At the peak of the song, a wave of silence wrapped itself around the army, as if they hadn’t been as loud as a cantina on poker night mere seconds ago. Before Jaime could protest, Rudy made his way to the front of the army, where they were face to face with a group of three men. Wearing a distinct, clean khaki colored long-sleeved tunic with trousers and black boots, the men sat tall on their horses. Their scowls rivaled that of Padre Delgado from Sunday mass when Rudy mumbled the *Padre Nuestro* prayer. If Rudy had been alone, he would have been intimidated by them, but not with El Valiente to his left and Alejandro to his right. The tension between both sides ran thick, like any small movement from either side threatened to cut it.

One of the men removed his black helmet, running a hand over his thick, bushy mustache, “Where are you all headed?”

“That isn’t of your concern...” El Valiente raised her head as she spoke, trying to extinguish the animosity. Rudy tuned her out, watching Alejandro as he subtly brushed his coat open, pointing to the hidden silver pistol. Without bringing attention to himself, he followed Alejandro’s lead and let his hand rest only centimeters away from his own weapon.

The uniformed men only threw their heads back in laughter.

“Who does this woman think she is?”

“Real piece of work, she is.”

“Talking to a Federale, to a *man* like the only things she’s good for aren’t cooking, cleaning, and—”

A flock of birds flew out of a nearby tree, squawking as the gunshots echoed through the mountains. Ringing rattled in Rudy’s ears, but he moved with such a swiftness that even he didn’t recognize. He raised his arm, pointed the pistol ahead of him, and pulled the trigger without blinking. The Federale fell off his horse with a crack, and Rudy winced. Though the Federale lay motionless and appeared to be dead alongside the other two soldiers, the slight twitching in his limbs told Rudy otherwise. Rudy approached him, turning him on his back.

“P-please... please...” The soldier choked through a mouth full of blood, reaching a hand out as if to beg for mercy. Rudy ignored his pleas, shooting him square in the head before seeing the expressionless faces of the army, and the horrified look on Jaime. They looted the bodies of the dead Federales, finding nothing more than a few cigarettes, pesos, and photographs of loved ones.

By daybreak, the army had already begun to make shelter in a barely occupied space of desert. It was too small to be considered a pueblo, but too big to go unnoticed. Various smells from the village infiltrated Rudy’s nose as they approached—from freshly ground corn-turned-

masa and hot tortillas straight off the *comal*, to the stifling odor of stray animals. In a nearby corner, a women's camp bustled with energy and movement as they prepared food and hung wet laundry on the clothesline to dry. Some of the women approached, offering clean clothes and hot meals of *frijoles* and *huevos* with fresh tortillas.

One of them handed Rudy a plate, "It's not much, but it's all we can offer. The Federales have taken everything." Her soft voice and light complexion reminded him a lot of his sister Ana Lucía. This young girl couldn't have been older than her the last time he saw her, and he wondered when all was said and done, if his dear sister would read about his soon-to-be victory in the paper.

"They're no fighters," Alejandro whispered to him. "But they're just as important."

While Jaime and most of the other rebels opted to rest against nearby tall yucca palm, Rudy sat around a fire with the rest who guarded their camp. The smell of burned wood and smoke absorbed itself in his clothes, and the rowdy noise from their travel had been replaced with the crisp crackling of wood and dancing blazes.

"You better have prepared yourself for this," El Valiente stared into the fire as she broke the deafening silence between them. "In war, there are no winners. There are only those who have lost and those who have lost more."

Rudy let out a breathy laugh. "Of course there are winners, how else are we supposed to defeat the Federal army?"

"By losing less."

"We *won't* lose," he insisted.

She shook her head, amused by Rudy's youth and enthusiasm. "We all will have lost something by the time this is over. It's not a matter of *if* or *when*, it's a matter of *how much*."

There was a hollowness behind El Valiente's eyes that Rudy hadn't seen in her before, like she was nothing but a vessel, an empty shell, and this wasn't the woman, the infamous figure who threatened his life only a day prior.

Rudy forced his eyes open, trying to mask his yawns behind his hand as the rebels continued their journey north early the next morning. The bright greens of the cacti and the vibrant magentas of their prickly pears contrasted deeply with the tan shrubs littered across the desert, standing out like beacons of hope amidst the realities of war. Three crows flew above, cawing as they encircled around the carcass of a mule whose insides were torn out. Rudy could see mighty adobe houses grow larger and larger the closer they approached civilization. Averaging the same size as the ones from his pueblo, they sat scattered around the earth in clusters, complete with wooden door frames and stone foundations. Unlike his pueblo, an eerie silence blew through the town, and the only noise for miles around was the click-clack of the horses as they rode through.

"I didn't think many people actually fled," Alejandro observed. He rode in between the Vargas brothers as they scavenged for anything that might have been useful. "This whole pueblo's gone."

"It's unpatriotic, if you ask me." Rudy said, shaking his head in disapproval. "I couldn't live with myself if I just stood by or ran away."

Jaime smacked the back of Rudy's head, speaking to him for the first time since he'd killed the Federale, "*No empieces con tus pendejadas*. Ana Lucía was pregnant, and Alfaro did us a favor. It won't be long before our pueblo looks just like this one."

"Who's that?" Alejandro asked.

“Our sister. Her husband Alfaro decided early on that it was best to move his growing family to the United States, and he relocated the rest of our siblings there too. They all live on a *rancho* somewhere in Texas. Jaime thinks it was a good idea, but I say it did nothing more than separate our family.” Rudy explained, noticing Jaime’s annoyance as he clenched his jaw.

“Look! Over by the church!” A rebel shouted, pointing ahead to a running man in a khaki uniform.

“*Maldita sea*, I thought this pueblo was empty!” Alejandro growled, joining the rest of the rebels who sped toward the church, encircling the man until he couldn’t see anything past the cloud of dust they created around him. El Valiente pointed her rifle at his back and pulled the trigger like it was second nature. He landed on the ground in front of the church with a thud, a thick crimson pool of blood forming right under him, and Rudy could swear that the soldier’s lifeless eyes were staring right at him. An old woman flung open the door of a nearby adobe house, dropping to her knees as soon as she laid her eyes on the grisly sight before her. Her shrill screams and cries made the hair on Rudy’s neck stand up, and his heart dropped when he looked back to see the woman holding the Federale’s dead body in her arms, staining her skin with blood, and rocking him like he was a child.

“*Dios mio*,” Jaime said, breaking the silence between him and his brother once the empty pueblo was nothing but a speck in the distance. His voice was barely above a whisper. “She just... *killed* him.”

“He was a Federale, Jaime,” Rudy shrugged indifferently, “What did you expect?”

Jaime scoffed, “How could you say that? He was unarmed and *running away*, that’s hardly a fair fight. I can still hear that poor woman’s cries.”

“There’s no point in talking about it.” Venom dripped from every word that left Rudy’s mouth, “What’s done is done. He isn’t the first, and he definitely won’t be the last.”

Jaime stopped in his tracks, “What is *with* you, Rodolfo? I don’t even know who you are anymore, you’re so consumed by the idea of becoming a hero that you don’t even see all you’re doing is becoming a *villain*.”

“He was hardly helpless, Jaime.” Rudy’s nostrils flared. “But if you’re not with the cause, you’re better off staying behind.”

Rudy didn’t wait for his brother to respond before he sped up, catching up to the front of the group and leaving Jaime alone. The Vargas brothers travelled in silence the rest of the way to Ciudad Juárez. An explosion reverberated through the city, followed by a shower of bullets and piercing screams. Civilians ran hysterically throughout the city center, narrowly dodging the crossfire between the rebels and the Federales. Buildings cracked and crumbled like clay, turning into piles of dust.

“He’s here! Get to the stronghold! NOW!” El Valiente shouted, her voice thick with determination and confidence amid the chaos.

“Who?!” Rudy asked.

Alejandro looked at him as if Rudy had just questioned God himself, “Pancho Villa, *pendejo*, who else?!”

The rebels followed without missing a beat, their sights set, and weapons aimed at anyone in a khaki uniform and black helmet. Dozens of Federales swarmed helplessly around the city, like a pack of animals with no leader. With every Federale life that he took, Rudy was one step closer to his dream, and it was all the motivation he needed to keep going. More explosions blew one right after the other like the church bells that indicated the hour, and it was a wonder

how any bit of Juárez still stood. Fires burned around the city, emitting dark clouds of smoke in the sun-setting sky. As the rebels scoured the city, blowing every bit of the stronghold with dynamite, all Federales either lay dead on the ground or retreated back to God knows where. El Valiente's rebels, combined with Villa's army, and other ragtag groups congregated in what used to be the city center, and Rudy's heart pounded with anticipation as they awaited the official victory announcement from Pancho Villa himself.

Anticipation quickly turned to dread when he caught sight of Jaime, horseless, and clutching his side. Jaime dropped to his knees, blood spilling out of his mouth.

"No, no, no..." Rudy muttered to himself, galloping toward his brother as fast as he could maneuver around the giant assembly, but still not fast enough. He tripped over his own feet as he dismounted and ran to Jaime. As he placed his hand over his brother's wounds, more blood gushed out of his body like a spout. He pulled on Jaime in a poor attempt to bring him to his feet, but Jaime slid right back down into the dirt, leaning his back against a rock. "C'mon, Jaime, get *up!*"

A man's voice echoed throughout the ruins of the city, highlighting the strengths and victory over the Federales. Rudy didn't have to look to know that it was Pancho Villa who spoke. The buzzing energy that surrounded him should have filled him with pride, but he shook with fear as he lifted his brother again and failed.

Rudy jumped at the sudden contact of a hand on his shoulder, but remained focused. "Ale, help me out here, will you?" He brought Jaime's arm over his shoulder, waiting for Alejandro to grab his other arm. "Ale, *que chingados estás haciendo?* C'mon, I need your help, grab his arm."

Alejandro stood immobile and brought his sombrero to his chest. “R-Rudy... Jaime’s dead.”

As he collapsed to the ground, Rudy squeezed his eyes shut after catching a glimpse of Jaime’s lifeless corpse. Only minutes ago, Jaime had been walking through the city, grasping his injury, how could so much have changed since then?

“I’m sorry, *compa.*” Alejandro made a sign of the cross before placing his sombrero on his head and walking away. “He was a good man. The best of us.”

Kneeling over his brother, the tears stung his eyes as they fell from Rudy’s face and dampened Jaime’s clothes. Celebratory gunshots and hollers of joy rang in the distance as the rebels and other armies gathered together in front of the destruction of the city for a photograph. It should have been a moment of commemoration as the sun crept underneath the horizon, but Rudy couldn’t have felt any more defeated.

There are only those who have lost, and those who have lost more.

And Rodolfo Vargas lost everything.

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