

His Weight In Gold (The Katzenberg Cuts)

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His Weight In Gold (The Katzenberg Cuts)

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Summary

In the year 2000, a love story was edited down to reach a wider market. 20 years later, new generations bring new perspective, and the world is ready for the missing pieces.

[Continuation of The Road To El Dorado, property of Dreamworks.]

The Gods Will Approve Of Us Still

I know my legacy is to fulfill my promise to all my people who have trusted me, the gods will approve of us still.

Wood creaked as gravity shifted. A grid of light cut through the dank air and teased the men upon the wall, illuminating the crude and discouraging tallies scratched into the lumber. 5 days. 10 days. 15 days. 20 days... Voices could be heard above. The brutish crew of Hernan Cortez. They didn't know it but they, too, were prisoners.

A dirty and fatigued Tulio sat propped against one of the brig's tattered beams, with an arm draped onto one knee and his eyes half-lidded and lifeless. His stomach growled and his head throbbed. The man's slim build was a disadvantage against the firm floor, and his lower back began to ache.

He felt the familiar anguish of defeat, obsessively replaying events in his mind and wondering when it all became so difficult. When did his decisions steer away from lucrative and make a sharp b-line towards dangerous? He regarded a younger Tulio, who dreamt of a life of affluence, and wondered what he would think of the result of his habits. Feeding his partner and himself through cheap street schemes. Now jobless, landless, penniless, family less, and now much worse, captured... He was too smart for this. Not that the man believed in luck, but all things considered, he was lucky to be alive. He was lucky to have his best friend by his side. But Tulio was tired.

His blonde counterpart lied adjacent in a pile of hay, feeling the motion of the water and staring up at the blue sky beyond the bars.

"Do you think Cuba has cheese fritters?" he asked.

"We're not going to Cuba," Tulio responded flatly. Exhausted of escape tactics but still determined.

"Or maybe... maybe those turnips with bacon around them," Miguel continued, lethargically thinking out loud. Clearly hungry.

"Miguel," Tulio rolled his eyes, his own hunger titillated, "home will have all the bacon we could want. We need to get off this ship." Miguel's green eyes fell to look at nothing. His brow furrowed, bitterly pondering what life awaited them in Spain. Same old cons. Same old people. Stagnancy. Hostility.

"What if we didn't... go home," Miguel challenged quietly, knowing the answer but daring him anyway.

"We have to," Tulio quickly shot back.

"For what purpose?"

"Miguel."

"No really Tulio, I mean what opportunities could we possibly have there," the man began gesturing with his hands, more speaking to the heavens than arguing with his friend. "Nobody wants us there. Without money we're nothing. Sometimes I feel like we could be seeing so much more. We could be really living. But instead, we're choosing to be these-... street rats!"

Amidst his annoyance, a faint feeling of guilt welled up in Tulio's chest. Miguel and his wanderlust. Miguel and his free spirit. Miguel and his innocence. He was the world's only entity that Tulio cared for, and the only one that cared for him back. But it was only Tulio that understood just how deeply that care was rooted. He suddenly found himself thinking back to when the two men first found each other. How frightened and pitiful Miguel was when he was adopted into a life of crime. And though the shorter man's confidence has since flourished, and the two were equals with many stories to tell, Tulio would always feel responsible for the other. Either by obligation or by selfishly keeping him around for his own reasons. He knew that it was both. But he did want to see Miguel happy. He allowed his friend's words to sink in, agreeing more than Miguel may have expected. He couldn't, however, ignore the humor of the two's dramatically skewed priorities. Even being shipped off into slavery, Miguel was dreaming of a life at large.

"...Okay."

"Okay?" Miguel echoed, surprised by the rare absence of cynicism.

"Okay. I promise," Tulio proclaimed at length, "that if we survive this, we'll... have some grand adventure or-... something. Whatever. Something will change."

Miguel smiled. Tulio the pushover. Tulio the provider. Tulio the closeted sweetheart. Despite wanting more, Miguel knew at the end of the day that any day with Tulio was an adventure.

"Well then you really better get me off this ship."

Tulio smirked before his eyes widened, dropping the same smile, remembering the predicament at hand.

"Alright alright," Tulio sighed, bringing a slender hand to his forehead. "Let meee uh let me think..."

Miguel gave his friend the silence he needed. It would be a while.

All Will Be Revealed

All will be revealed on the trail we blaze.

Altivo let out a dramatic blow of a sigh, watching a bright-eyed Miguel lead his band of misfits through the grueling Meso American jungle. Tulio sat perched atop his new steed companion. They had been trudging through the feral plantation for what felt like days. They'd encountered hungry insects, hungrier animals, rain storms, and that was just the in the span of a day. Tulio found himself to be uncomfortable much of the journey, but Miguel remained positive. Giddy even. He was thrilled that Tulio was the pushover that he was. Otherwise, he could potentially be sailing across the Atlantic Ocean in a beat up dingy. A sure death sentence but also quite boring. After all, Tulio did promise him an adventure. Miguel grasped firmly onto his oxidized sword, swiping at shrubbery and playing up the swashbuckling in his mind. There were times when Tulio found it cute. But not many. Nothing was cute in this muggy wilderness, where they could be mauled by jaguars and no one would know they were ever gone.

"Miguel," Tulio spat in monotone, hardly able to see through the exhaustion clouding his head.

"What is it, Tulio!" Miguel sang back, still facing forward and swinging his blade, as if marching a parade into the great unknown.

"I think it's time to find camp."

It was beginning to get dark. Neither of the men were expert survivalists, but they were swiftly learning the importance of a warm fire and a good night's rest. They ventured forth until they found an open spot with soft, untouched grass. Exotic bugs chirped all around them. Tulio got to work building a fire while Miguel removed his shoes and rubbed his feet. Altivo flopped over into the grass and rolled around, brushing his neck across the long, cool blades. They had found their camp for the night, right under the deep sapphire, star encrusted sky.

Once they had caught their breath, they sat to feast on a bunch of bananas found previously in the day. Miguel studied the map as he ate. And when they were ready, they stretched their thin bodies along the crisp ground. Miguel folded his hands behind his head, a smile cemented across his whiskered face. His pupils dilated as he gazed up at the endless dusting of stars. They were brighter than any night sky in Spain. There was something humbling about being alone with the abstraction of the universe beyond one's own world. One man could see the sky as absolute proof of God. Another confronted with a sense of insignificance, as every being is simply an organism on a rock with no real purpose and no real protection. Some could take comfort in the presence a higher being, others see judgement, guilt, and consequence. As for Miguel, he never knew quite where he stood. He understood that he was only a man, and would never know the truth until his time came. But

it didn't stop him from struggling with morality. Being called a sinner enough times can make a person wonder the impact of his or her actions. Or thoughts. At what point do you draw the line between hedonism and virtue? And would any of it really matter in the end? Despite his life as a convict, it was never his intention to hurt anyone. But he often asked himself if it was enough.

"You know what I'm gonna do with my share of the gold?" Miguel asked thoughtfully, still star gazing.

"Hmm," Tulio replied, mostly listening.

"First..." he began at length, "I'm gonna live like a king. I'm gonna wear gaudy rings and velvet coats and see the whole world. Everyone will know who I am when I arrive. Then, I'm gonna buy villas for everyone in my family, and see to it that they all have servants and will never have to work again... And then..." He thought for a moment. "I'm gonna return every peseta that I've ever stolen."

Tulio smiled to himself. Somehow, he wasn't surprised by anything he'd heard.

"You're a good guy, Miguel," Tulio admitted. Although Miguel was the reason that he was galivanting through treacherous territory looking for a fantasyland, in that moment he wasn't angry. Tulio, too, looked above to the stars. Miguel the optimist. Miguel the people pleaser. Miguel the dough-eyed dreamer. The polar opposite of himself fascinated Tulio, making him precious like the very treasure they sought after. A pressure appeared in the man's throat as an overdue conversation sat idle on his tongue. A night like tonight, secluded in nature, could almost be the right opportunity; if only Tulio had the slightest idea of how to start. If only he didn't think that a topic of this magnitude could throw their chemistry and ruin the mission at hand. If only he had fully understood the confession himself. But he hardly did. It was a foreign emotion. He had loved women his whole life, but there was something about his partner. They worked well together, possessing an almost tangible connection. Miguel made Tulio feel vivacious, young, unmarred by the traumas of his past. Even sanguine at times. Like there's more to life than status. They had a closeness that was never achieved with any woman or friend before him, free of the conventional boundaries of masculinity. He often was content with calling their relationship platonic, but recently his desires had changed. Magnified. With every job, every scam, every night spent hiding and laughing over shared experiences, Tulio wanted more. He wanted everything.

Miguel snapped out of his fantasy and glanced over to his dark-haired familiar.

"What about you Tulio, what are you gonna do with all that gold?"

The taller man arched an eyebrow, not really prepared with an answer. What would he do with dust, nuggets, bricks of gold? As part of him remained skeptical that El Dorado even existed, he'd never thought that far ahead. His eyes rested as he pondered finally acquiring the wealth that he had been pursuing for most of his life. He had an idea or two. Mostly live like a king as well. Flaunt about and show all who doubted him what fools they were. Keep ruffians like Cortez and the police at bay, turning them into sniveling peasants by comparison. Bask in success. Rule Spain.

"Prostitutes."

Miguel giggled, amused by his own childishness. Altivo rolled his eyes. Miguel should have known his friend better than to expect a serious answer. But he did know his friend quite well. Yet one follow-up question escaped from Miguel in the moment of feeling vulnerable.

"Will we still be partners when we're filthy rich?" Miguel questioned, only partly kidding.

"Miguel," Tulio started calmly, "you're someone that money can't buy." He knew that his response would delight the other man. It did. Miguel smirked and let out a gentle snort. On this night however, he would not comprehend just how much Tulio meant it.

A Normal Man's Exactly What I Am

Any normal man would bridle if he's forced to be an idol, and a normal man's exactly what I am.

Chief Tannabok had thrown a grand celebration the evening of the two men's arrival. Bold colors danced across metallic structures and festive props. Between the toots of pan flutes, beautiful women served pulque as civilians of the golden city gawked in awe at their divine company. Although the circumstances were much too farfetched to process in full, Tulio and Miguel had accepted their new found roles. To Miguel there was never any question. He was quickly falling in love with the city. Tulio however, always considering the doom of being outed as man, saw no choice in the matter. Eye on the prize. But also, eye on not dying.

Constant pressure aside, a type A Tulio was able to enjoy his night. So well in fact that he was delivered back to the temple with Miguel and Chel under each of his arms to support him.

"*Be a symbooooool of perfectioooooon*," the Spaniard sang as he entered the room and plopped down into the canopied bed. The others snickered; a bit unstable themselves. Miguel reclined onto a stone seat, smiling and stretching his arms behind his head.

"They don't throw parties like that where I come from."

Chel sat and crossed her legs, shaking out her long, raven hair.

"And where is this *heavenly* place that you come from?" She wiggled her fingers on 'heavenly', implying sarcasm. Miguel mirrored the gag and held his palms up in front of him.

"The land," he answered dramatically, "of *Spain*."

Tulio continued to sing into his pillow.

"Spain," Chel repeated, resting her chin onto her knuckles. "What's Spain like?"

"Oh y'know, the fathers farm, the mothers raise the kids, the tyrants in charge make everyone's life Hell and everyone else plays backgammon." Chel smirked and raised an eyebrow. "But it's not all bad. There're the most beautiful beaches. The water's like a blanket of diamonds. The only thing more beautiful are the girls."

"Mm I bet they can't keep their hands off you," Chel teased. She bit her lip and glanced over to Tulio, who now appeared to be sleeping soundly. "And how did a sweet guy like you end up with lightweight over there?"

A warm smile crept up the side of Miguel's face. He looked to his slumbering friend, recalling their meeting for the first time since arriving to El Dorado. Which surprised him.

The memory was never far off hand.

"He saved my life," said Miguel. Chel's eyebrows disappeared into her bangs. The man sighed before proceeding. "Back in Spain, if you're accused of a crime against the church..." He dragged a finger across his throat with a quiet '*kccch*'. "They got him for fraud. We were complete strangers, shackled together in the streets, waiting for our turns. I thought I was a goner, but then he whispered for my attention and pointed out that our chains weren't linked to the others. So, we counted to three and we ran."

Chel blinked and pressed a dainty hand to her chest.

"That's like some miracle or something," she said.

Miguel nodded. A beat passed before he felt a pang of sadness. He knew that it wasn't a miracle. He got lucky. Luckier than he could ever fathom. Since that day, they called each other partners, but Miguel could sense that Tulio was protective of him. He sometimes wondered if he deserved companionship as great as Tulio provided. Others weren't so lucky. Tulio the hero. Tulio the lady's man. Tulio the imperfectly perfect. The poison word of 'Heresy' lingered in the back of his mind. Since then, he had been at war with himself. He was tried, but was he guilty? And if he was, was he spared? Since then, all conflicts seem to point back to Tulio. A man who protected him, and at the same time struck fear into his heart. The young man frowned, resting his head against his fingertips. A subconscious attempt to hide the shame that burned in his cheeks.

"I just hope that... if there is really a god, that he's more compassionate than that."

Chel's eyes darkened and drifted down to the cool cobblestone floor. She, too, knew what it was like to fear death in the name of religion. She nodded, standing from her seat and slowly walking toward the curtain that covered the door. With a fist full of thickly woven fabric, she turned to speak over her shoulder.

"Maybe you can be that god." With that, she exited.

Miguel was left alone to his thoughts and his carcass of a partner. He brought his hands to his face, rubbing and swiping his hair back before choosing to refocus his attention on the temple walls. Even draped in darkness, the architecture was stunning. Artistic scenes were depicted upon the walls in vibrant tile. Exotic vines twisted carelessly along the room's perimeter and hung down in long strands of giant green leaves. The reflective pool that lied in the center of it all threw active bends of blue light onto the ceiling, resembling a miniature aurora borealis, putting on a private show just for him.

It had been an amazing day. A day of discovery and reward. A day where for once he connected with citizens, and was celebrated over demonized. A clean slate. Miguel finally stood to his feet and shuffled over to join Tulio in the suite's only bed. He settled in carefully as to not disturb his bunk mate, who lied in bed fully clothed and care free. The shorter man lied on his side and closed his eyes, but when he was unable to fall asleep right away, his mind began to run once more. He thought about what it meant being in the new world. What he was meant to learn and what major life changes were sure to follow. Here, there were no rules. He made the rules. Standing at the threshold of a significant chapter, he felt hopeful.

Now was not the time to be cautious. Now was the time to be brave. To trust himself and do what felt right.

"Tulio?" he whispered. "*Tulio...*"

"Hmm."

The patterns on the canopy appeared to shift, reminding Miguel that he was still inebriated. Less so than Tulio, who smelled heavily of tequila and agave. He suddenly was reminded of his fears. Of the person he was, the soul that he carried and the transgression that marked it. It would follow him all over the globe.

"Do you think that I'm going to Hell?" Miguel asked somewhat casually. Not that the man was expecting a profound answer from the drunk atheist. He just wanted to hear Tulio's voice. He was not, however, expecting what came next. Tulio adjusted behind him, only to snake a skinny, pale arm around Miguel's waist, pulling him flush against the other man.

"You're not going anywhere."

Miguel blushed, barely remembering to release the breath that had hitched in his throat. From then he struggled to keep his breathing even as his heart picked up in tempo. Tulio squeaked out a single hiccup before passing back out, his grip not letting up. Miguel's worries scrambled into a white, hot haze. Of the thousand things Miguel could have been thinking, stressing about, over-analyzing, he found himself unable to. Was he ridiculous to be feeling so worked up over such meaningless contact? By morning, Tulio wouldn't even be able to recall the gesture. It was innocent. Miguel reasoned with himself enough to put his demons to rest the best that he could, allowing himself to close his eyes and relax into the warmth of his friend. He felt every gentle breath behind him, both through their clothes and on the back of his neck. Dare he try and enjoy it? None of it felt like sin to him. None of it even felt awkward. In fact, it felt absolutely wonderful. They fit together like puzzle pieces. He realized that there, atop a secret town, oceans away from the country that wanted him dead, and instead tucked into his hero's arms... he was indeed safe.

Only This Is True, I Love You

Showing me by just existing, only this is true, I love you.

The days following the ball game, Miguel was bordering on euphoric. He had saved 16 lives since first arriving to El Dorado. There wasn't enough gold in all of the Americas to compare to his glowing sense of reward. It felt phenomenal being in a position of power, where he could make a real difference, eradicate the violent traditions, make the world a better place, and like Chel said, be a god of compassion. For him, however, the best part was being a good person for no other reason than he wanted to. As he strolled happily along the glimmering streets, passing smile after smile of warm and welcoming faces, he realized what it meant to feel peace. Peace away from delinquency, away from the Inquisition, and mostly away from the guilt of his own unvirtuous intentions, past and present. Here, there was no burden of reputation, no persecution, no judgement. Europe began to loom as a darkened world, that even with new fortune promised oppression and hatred. But here, he was free to be whoever he wanted to be, even himself.

As Miguel sat to rest on an artistically crafted bench that faced the canal, he watched two golden butterflies flutter and play along the gentle ripples of the water. They seemed to exist so carelessly, only engaged in each other and nothing else. What would it be like to have that kind of freedom and merriment every day? The man's heart skipped beats as he imagined himself and his partner. Two vagabonds, overcoming misfortune and building their lives anew. Settling in a land that men only dream of. Living a life of love. Love for their people. Love for each other...

Miguel shook his head. He suddenly felt very silly. How could he ever entertain the idea that the two men shared feelings for one another, let alone were destined for a romantic union with a storybook ending? They were best friends, forever entwined into each other's lives through a deep connection and shared adventures, but that was it. Sure, it was clear that Tulio cared for him. He rescued him, stuck by his side, and kept him grounded. And yes, Tulio had always been a physical person towards Miguel. Providing affirmation via a friendly touch to the shoulder, arm or waist. And there had even been times when the two men shared uncharacteristic tenderness in the face of danger... At least Miguel thought it was uncharacteristic. Maybe it happened more than he had noticed. Maybe there was a lot he hadn't been noticing. His stomach twisted as he pondered. Was it possible? Or was it wishful thinking? There was no doubt that the pair were close, but none of it was evidence enough that Tulio was willing to change teams and elope. That is until he thought back to the contact made in their bed nights prior, and how every inch of his body was set on fire by the simple embrace. *'You're not going anywhere'*. Perhaps neither of them had to...

A shadow slid forward along the ground, rousing Miguel from his discord.

"Lord Miguel, are you alright?" Chief Tannabok's voice boomed. Miguel quickly hoisted himself from his seat, nervously dusting off his clothes.

"Yes, of course, yes, I was just um... thinking about fish," said Miguel, collecting his persona.

"Fish..."

"Yes. I need to make more of them..."

"Well, if you're not too occupied," the Chief said through a pleasant smile, pointing over his shoulder, "would you like to see your boat?"

Miguel accepted, immediately feeling a sadness. A finished boat meant that his time in the city of gold was up. Three days go by fast when you spend them getting to know yourself in a new society. It all meant one thing. If he wanted to throw in all of his cards and propose a drastically new plan, then he'd better do it soon. Today. He followed Chief Tanny, who led as he lit up a cigar in celebration of his men's impressive turnaround. Miguel followed, watching the smoke curl upwards before dispersing into the atmosphere, up to the very Heavens that the two comen were preparing to return to. For a moment, Miguel tried to imagine what a real place called Heaven was like. If it was real, was it better than here? Better than a life spent not only rich but worshipped? And with Tulio. With enough cultural influence to set the norm himself and live out his life in his partner's arms, was anything better? He swallowed down the pressure, ultimately deciding that the risk was worth it. Choosing El Dorado meant never returning to the Heavens. Or ever getting there in the first place. But he was worth it.

Confusion About What I'll Lose

Though the mist in my eyes might suggest just a little confusion about what I'll lose.

The evening hung heavy over everyone's heads as they tried to process the battle that had taken place between Tzekel-Kan's sorcerous stone jaguar and the two now mortal men. Thanks to her new friends' agility and cunning, Chel was safe. The town witnessed in horror the attack from their disgraced high-priest upon their gods, before carrying away their favorite to shower him in praise and welcome; leaving a less charismatic god and temple thief to return to their dwelling. There, they solidified their plan. They were to leave El Dorado in the morning, with nothing but their boat, their gold, and each other. Not the plan that Tulio had wanted, despite previous statements. He sat with stubborn pride on his face and a guilty lump in his throat. Chel sat with him in the dark, holding his hand in attempts to comfort the now friendless conman. The near run in with death phased him very little, compared to the news of his partner's decision to remain in Paradise. Chel was made aware that Miguel had discovered their secret. Not that she cared, really... but it wasn't her intention to tear the Spaniards asunder. Falling for Tulio was never a part of her own plan, but as they've all come to learn, plans change.

It wasn't much later when a vague silhouette of Miguel pushed the curtain aside and appeared in the doorway. The two looked up from their seats, not saying a word. Tulio's eyes locked with the other man's briefly until he spoke.

"Don't mind me, I'll be sleeping in the other room."

Chel squeezed Tulio's hand as she stood, hugging her arms and glancing sadly at Miguel before brushing past him out of the temple. The blonde felt shame as she passed, realizing that his only disdain with the girl was pure envy. Another sin to add to his record. Who could blame her?

"Miguel please," Tulio forced as he rose to Miguel's eye level. "I honestly don't know what you heard, but you're bei-"

"How long has it been going on, anyway?" Miguel interrupted, voice calm, eyes narrow.

"What?"

"I was just wondering, was it the whole time? Because I thought we had a deal."

"For Christ's sake, is that what this is about?" Miguel began walking towards his assumed half of the house. Tulio followed him. "I'm sorry, okay?! I don't know what happened, I never meant for her to be with me over you!" He wasn't really sure what he had meant to do. It was another poor decision made out of selfishness. He was a man in the habit of taking desirable things in life, including women. Chel was a different breed of girl. Chel the accomplice. Chel the deviant. Chel the complete knockout. But Chel was no Miguel...

"It's not that," Miguel said, trying to roll the tears out his eyes.

"Then what, what should I be apologizing for, *oh mighty one*?"

The shorter man whipped around, quickly losing control of his emotions.

"You don't have to say anything, Tulio, it's quite evident that you only care about yourself." Miguel's counterpart pressed a hand over his eyes.

"Miguel, my god, what are you talking about..."

"All this time you've only cared about your money!" Miguel cried, "it was never about El Dorado, it was never even about Spain, you just wanted to take what you could from these people and go live out your life with your precious gold, it was always all for you!"

"Not for me, Miguel, for *us*!" Tulio barked with desperation. Miguel was silent, his expression softening as the other man firmly took hold of his shoulders. "Don't you get it?!"

With that, Tulio only allowed himself a few seconds to plan his next move before leaning forward and pressing his lips to Miguel's. A move he had meant to make many times in the past but never could. Whether it be Spanish rule, the eye of God, the blurred reciprocation, or just plain nerves. But much like many of Tulio's plans, they were hardly plans. Just playing things by the skin of his teeth. Nothing ever scared him like this did.

Tulio pulled away to reveal a stunned Miguel. All anger had drained from his face. Tulio's hands slowly slipped off of his partner's shoulders.

"Yes, I want money," Tulio courageously continued to the dead air, "of course that's what I want. With my share I'd-... retire, I'd give up conning, I could finally stop *running*! Stop worrying what fresh Hell tomorrow will bring! Instead, I could... settle down, have a real life. We both could." Tulio's blue eyes burned into Miguel's. With little thought, he brought one hand back up to gently cup Miguel's face, feeling the coarse whiskers against the base of his palm. It took all of his fortitude to mutter his next confession. "I want you to have the life you deserve... I just wanted to be the one to give it to you."

Suddenly Tulio's protective nature made more sense. A multi-year partnership peppered with impure thoughts, and Miguel had never once considered the possibility of Tulio loving him the whole time. And though nothing could stop Miguel's insatiable adventurous streak, settling down suddenly didn't sound so bad. Tulio took his hand away, using it to run his thumb and fingers down his cheeks as he stepped away. He let out a tiny huff of a laugh, unable to believe what he was finally saying out loud. He felt a pang of embarrassment, his emotions shifting from vulnerable to defensive. He turned back to Miguel.

"But if you wanna throw it all away, then stay. Be my guest," he said bitterly. Miguel was at a loss for words. He kept a strong composure, still combatting the radiating sickness of jealousy as it was introduced to shock, guilt, and pride. He would not allow Tulio to manipulate him. He would not collapse into the other man's arms and sob. No matter how much he may have wanted to. Instead, he would respond with dignity and poise. He would meet Tulio's disclosure with feelings of his own. Reasonability. But before he could push the words from his mouth, Tulio started for the door.

"The place is all yours," Tulio spat begrudgingly. A statement only Miguel could sense was laced with sorrow. "I'll be back in the morning for my share." With that he left. Several daunting moments of silence passed before Miguel stepped back into the wall and slid down to the floor. He felt like a coward. Like he had just let the greatest thing he'd ever had slip through his fingers. The greatest thing he could have had. All due to petty jealousy. He himself would have gladly pursued Chel and it wouldn't have meant anything close to what the two men had. He dressed his wrist in red sleeve before using it to wipe away tears. He began to feel the emptiness of his decision. His fate could be forever sealed, perhaps in life and after. And all for what? Would any of it be the same on his own? Miguel regretted not telling Tulio earlier. Regretted his naivety and useless denial. Now, he was left to the future of his lonely divinity, along with the romantic and haunting conceptions of what could have been. There lied the eternal punishment, not from the God above but from the one within the walls of his own flesh.

Someday We Will Start Again

Someday we can start again, someday soon.

"Where are we going?" Tulio asked. He couldn't shake the Deja vu of being led through the jungle by an individual more adventurous than himself.

"You'll see," Chel cooed back from atop Altivo. The two men lagged behind, kicking up dust from a trail rarely traveled. Birds could be heard in every direction. Tulio was careful to favor every breath. Over and over, he reevaluated the outcome of his stunt to rescue the hospitable El Dorado. As a result, he was robbed of his fortune. Going from richest man in Europe back to transient in the mere time length of a boat crash. A difficult pill to swallow. But even he couldn't take for granted what he had come away with. A fresh face with soft features to travel alongside him. Someone proving more useful and delightful every day. But most importantly, his treasured ally Miguel. Tulio didn't believe in luck, nor did he believe in fate, and often even questioned the existence of love... But as he roamed to see another day under the warm sunlight with his crew in proximity, he knew that those things were real.

Several paces behind the horse, Tulio saw an opportunity.

"Miguel..." he began softly to the man next to him, slowing his walk to an unrhythmic and timid shuffle, "I owe you an apology."

Surprised, Miguel rubbed his elbow, allowing the words to marinate. Assuming Tulio was referring to his obvious indiscretions with Chel. Or did he mean for his candid actions last night...? Miguel kept his response light in attempts to be sensitive and inviting.

"Please. No harm done," said Miguel with a polite smile. He was pleased to be on healthy terms with his partner once more. He couldn't, however, stop himself from continuing. "But, um..." The sound of walking went silent and he slowly came to a stop. Tulio halted as well and looked to his friend. Their eyes met as Miguel coyly forced himself to finish his thought. "Did you mean it?"

Tulio blinked, his lips slightly agape as he processed the question. It came to him, with flashbacks of mouths colliding as they fought, spilling the truth that they both needed to hear. He could have complicated the discussion with his usual pretty words to help dilute the intensity of what was being asked. But instead, Tulio simply put forth all of his genuine and unguarded honesty.

"Absolutely."

Miguel could feel warmth run from his core to his limbs. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Their connection lingered strong until Chel could be seen dismounting her perch from a distance.

"Tulio!" she exclaimed. The men looked to her before returning their attention back to each other. Miguel flashed a side smile. A silent blessing.

"We'll have our time," he said, his voice velvety with patience and peace. "Someday soon."

Tulio sprouted a smile of his own, hitching a hand onto the back of his neck. His blue eyes were gleaming. He had left El Dorado with what he had wanted after all.

"I'd like that."

Chel wandered off of the trail into the long, green shrubbery. Miguel nodded in her direction and the two made their way to join her.

As they approached, they saw her standing by a steep, rock hill side, pushing all of her might into a boulder that rested against it.

"Help me out, will ya?" she requested through heavy breaths. The two men shrugged to each other before positioning themselves on either side of her, heaving their strength forth to help move the boulder. The large rock began to roll to the side. They pushed until it settled into a divot along the wall, and the three let out audible sighs and brushed the dirt from their hands. Chel smugly waited for the boys to notice what they had uncovered. When they did, their jaws practically fell from their heads and dropped to the ground. Before them was a tiny cavern, perhaps as tall as Chel, filled with shining, golden artifacts. Both men stared in amazement at the girl's secret stash of vast wealth. The objects caught light, turning it into small, yellow sparkles in their eyes.

"Chel... you... where..." Tulio attempted, his knees barely supporting his slender body. Chel giggled.

"You didn't really think I was running gold out here to find you two dopes," Chel teased proudly. She patted both of them on their backs. "We're gonna be okay, boys."

The two knew that she was right. The world was full of darkness, it didn't matter what side of the world you came from. You could try to run from your enemies, but the bigger Miguel and Tulio's world grew, the more they learned that real darkness stemmed from the things that you cannot run from. The band of crooks would find their vindication, but they would never stop adventuring. They would never stop pushing boundaries, defying the status quo, and discovering more of themselves. And they would do it together. Whatever the future held was nothing less of spectacular. As for Miguel, he would once worry that his destiny was defined by God. Turns out he was right. His tall, clever, neurotic, handsome God. He was alright with that.

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