

Tres Duces

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We used to call them the Tres Duces. The three leaders who, in a time of war, famine, and poverty, gave hope to the people of Divine America. Now we call them the Tres Corrupta.

Amos

“WILLIAM! GIVE ME THE COUGHER!”

My roar reverberates off the walls of Central Hall, the only standing building in Occident after the War. Orient and the Tres Corrupta started the War; it's our time to retaliate.

The door suddenly swings open and William busts in carrying a bulky device resembling a sniper rifle. “Comin’, sir,” he grunts. His bony arms and thin physique make it hard for him to lug the Cougher, but he does it for me every single day. Since the War took his parents, he works as my assistant in return for my hospitality.

“Is the virus ready?”

“Boss, this virus took two years to program and perfect. Are *you* ready?”

“I’m fine, William.”

“Good luck, boss.” William scurries out of the room, leaving me and the Cougher.

A wonderful work of refined craftsmanship and ingenuity, it is loaded with the solution containing the virus. It took two long, painstaking years of sweat, tears, and the Virofactor machine to make. The manmade virus attacks a specific part of the victim’s brain, making him stronger or weaker. When shot by the virus, the victim will immediately show signs of the programmed symptoms.

The intercom crackles to life. “Boss, make sure to do a final check on the Cougher an’ the virus.” The buzz dies down.

Flipping switches along the way, I turn on all the safety gears. Like Iron Man, I’m suited with a thick lab coat and heavy goggles. The three sections of the tube are labeled with the names and order of the targets. Sweat trickles down my forehead as I prop the weapon up on the stand. From the highest point in Occident, both sides look like dollhouses. But when I scope in with the sniper rifle, the world resolves and I am able to see my targets clearly.

The Tres Corrupta are seated in the highest room of the Citadel. Surrounding them are high palace walls where the citizens reside. Loga, the intelligence officer, is on the left, reading a report. Demo, the chief executive, lounges on the right, on the phone with the CEO of the leading artillery factory in Orient. Sitting in the middle is General Duran, staring blankly from a steel-hard face. As I aim and slowly press the trigger, I think, “That’s gonna change soon.”

His face slackens at once, but the others are too busy to notice. An empty cylinder labeled “Duran” slides out of the Cougher.

Next is Loga. Her eyebrows furrow as she stares into the report like she’s trying to burn holes in it. No sooner than I fire do her brows unknit. Her tense face relaxes and her eyes stop moving across the paper. Another cylinder clatters to the ground.

I switch to my last target. Before I can fire, the other two realize what is happening. They tell Demo to run, but their efforts are useless. I shoot, and I know I've hit when he abruptly stops running and looks around, puzzled. The last cylinder falls next to the others.

The container is empty.

Loga

My head boils with confusion. A second ago, I was reading the new report on Occident. Now I have no idea what in the world it is saying. I check on the others to see if they sense perplexity, but they look fine. I start to say something when Duran, who sounds oddly strange compared with the harsh, grating voice I heard a moment ago, screams out at Demo, "RUN!"

Evidently, he is having problems other than mine. Demo, shocked both by Duran's sudden outburst and rather queer voice, hesitates for a second, then begins to run. But it was too late. Demo screeches to a halt and scans around the room like a newborn having the first look at his home.

I flick on the Proculus, a device I created when I first took this position. It feeds live imaging to the 120" television in the meeting hall. From here, I order it to capture a 360° view of the Great Hall. The whole way up, I see nothing. The floors are empty and caked with dust. But on the highest point of the Hall, I see Amos. A mob of people surround him and carry him all the way down to the streets, their faces filled with joy and relief. For weeks I have been receiving reports of his brewing war effort. The people of Occident revere him like a god. As I expected, whatever has happened to us, he is behind it.

There is a loud slam on the wall I am leaning against. "AMOS!" Duran squeaks, pounding his fist into the wall of the Citadel. His words sound like a mouse trying to yell, but they send chills down my spine.

One by one, we dismiss ourselves from the meeting room, in fear of what might come next. On the way back to my office, I run into one of my spies.

"Oh, Miss Loga!" she exclaims. "I have a new report for you. There's been a lot of chaos coming from the other side. You might want to read it right now."

"I'll read it as soon as I get back to my office. Thank you, Herma."

"But Miss! Your office is being cleaned. Didn't you get the memo?"

"Yes, yes, of course I did. I simply forgot." I sigh. "Well then, let's see what it says."

I slowly tear open the large brown envelope like I have for the past 14 years. But this time, it doesn't feel the same. I glance at the report and see Herma's signature next to the date, December 15, 2873, but her signature doesn't look like it did last week. It looks... distorted. I move my eyes across the page and see the words jumble up together. Like ingredients in a boiling pot of stew, the words mix with each other and clump up. Sweat runs down my forehead, but I don't want Herma to see my anxiety. After a moment's blank stare at the unrecognizable page, I say, "I see. There is much work to be done. Thank you, Herma."

I dismiss her and return to the meeting room. On my seat is the memo from the Sanitatra. From what Herma told me, it says that my room was going to be cleaned, but to me, it looks like the letters are on vacation. The only things I can decipher are the numbers 2:30 and 4:00. I look at the massive grandfather clock standing erect next to the television. It reads 4:06.

Without another thought in my mind, I sprint back to my clean office and open all the shelves and drawers in the cabinets preceding my desk. Files spill out like a waterfall, and one by

one, I attempt to read them as I did before. Letters scatter over the page, and I once again, all I can understand is the date. I feel lightheaded and my knees weaken. I don't know it, but I collapse to the floor. As my eyes shut, I feel the weight of Orient's entire spy operation crashing down with me.

Duran

A lump forms in my throat. "RUN!" I manage to say to Demo. However, my voice sounds awfully strange. I feel tears well up in my eyes but force them back down.

Loga's Proculus projects a view of Occident's Great Hall on the television. A familiar figure stands there holding a foreign rifle in his hands. "AMOS!" I yell at the top of my lungs—but all that comes out is a feeble squeak. In all the years I have fought for Orient, never have I seen one of those rifles brandished. Though there have been no signs of a war effort coming from Occident, Loga has been informing Orient about a potential threat in a man named Amos. Perhaps he is the one who stirred the unfamiliar feeling inside me, but there was no sound when he shot the rifle. Dodging the eyes of the other Duces, I skulk back to my office.

I am greeted with an array of weapons and various sidearms. For 14 years, I have worked, slept, and struggled in the presence of these unique items hanging from my office walls. They have been there ever since the Tres Duces sided with Orient, leaving Occident to fight a war it would never be able to win. There hung the legendary Oblivio, the weapon used to destroy the entire Occident. Next to it is the infamous Referio. The super-charged laser destroyed half of the Citadel, leaving the factories and homes in rubble. These weapons marked the beginning of Orient's reign. Never did I think it was coming to an end.

As soon as I set foot in the office, the strange feeling I had in the meeting room boils up again. But this time, instead of anxiety, it is a mix of anger and fear. With a cry of distress, I run down the hall and straight into the War Room. Here, I am welcomed with a reassuring sense of peace and joy. This is where all of our military operations are planned and controlled. This is where I rule.

Grabbing a quick snack from the vending machine, I head out to the field where all the soldiers await my arrival. Currently, I feel completely fine. No strange feeling brews in my heart; I don't feel nervous or afraid. As I walk out, they snap to attention. I manage to crack a slight smile at the well-trained soldiers and begin buffeting them with drills. Having done this for years and years, they carry out the orders with ease. To them, it is as simple as reciting the alphabet. Now comes the hard part.

"All right, soldiers!" I bark. "Today is Friday, and y'all know what that means! It's war time!"

They all groan in unison. Every Friday, the soldiers split into two platoons and face each other in a mock war with airsoft guns in place of real weapons. Even after long years of training, they dread this day. Personally, I happen to quite enjoy their expressions while they suffer.

"Platoon One! Get to your positions!"

Suddenly, a wave of worry strikes me like a hurricane.

"Be careful out there!" I wail. "If I lost any of you, I just don't know what I would do!" I bite my nails to nothingness.

They all stop in their tracks and look at me, puzzled. For all these years, they have never heard those words come out of me, and I have never spoken them.

In a vain attempt to steer the strange feeling out of me, I clear my throat and say, “We all have no chance of winning this war! We are weak and no one is scared of us!”

I was meaning to yell something else along the lines of “WHAT ARE YOU DOING! GET BACK TO YOUR POSITIONS!” but a flush of pessimism incites me to sob out the words. It is like a foreign entity is toying with my emotions.

My heart feels like it is bursting into a million pieces. Flashes of depression, anxiety, joy, and anger assail me as I stumble around the field. I can do nothing but watch the once well-trained army disperse.

Demo

In the corner of my eye, while I am on a call with one of the executive artillery manufacturers, I notice Duran’s steel face relax. I think nothing of it; it has been a long day for us all and he is probably tired and stressed. Then, next to Duran, I see Loga’s eyes wander off her report. She seems quite confused.

“Hello? Mr. Demo?” I hear through the phone,

“Oh, excuse me, Mark. I think I’ll have to call you later.”

“But Mr. De—” He gets cut off.

“Hey, anything wro—”

Loga and Duran are staring holes into my head. I hang up. Before I can say another word, Duran roars, bizarrely, “RUN!”

Surprised by the sudden uproar and Duran’s mouse-like voice, I hesitate for a split second, then begin to run for my life. I don’t get far; a tugging sensation makes my head feel like it’s splitting in two. The meeting room warps around me as I suddenly halt and see the infamous Amos projected up on the big screen by Loga’s Proculus. For weeks, Orient has been receiving news about him. All of the factories and civilians fear he is going to destroy our population. But as the legislative ruler of Orient, the Power of the People, I won’t let that happen to us.

The pain keeps pulling at my head, and I can’t think straight. I manage to stagger to my office like a drunkard. I yank open the door and immediately collapse onto my bed. After a long day, I instantly fall asleep.

I wake up with my blanket and pillow pooled with sweat. My head has stopped hurting, and I feel less dizzy, but the tugging sensation plagues me still. Without thinking too much of it, I seat myself in front of a colossal stack of messy papers on my desk. Groaning, I begin organizing all of them into neat piles. I don’t notice it initially, but as I start signing some of the papers, I realize that the tugging sensation is gone.

Without a minute’s respite, it yanks me again as soon as Mark walks in the door.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Demo.”

Suppressing a groan, I grunt, “Good afternoon to you too, Mark.”

Noticing my discomfort, he begins, “Mr. Demo, are yo—”

An unfamiliar voice lifts from my throat. “Mark, can you please straighten your tie?”

I had not recognized his crooked tie until this compelled voice said it. At the moment Mark’s tie becomes straight, a wave of relief washes the tugging sensation away from my head.

“Mr. Demo! If you are going to critique my outfit incessantly, I can no longer do business with you, sir!” At that, Mark storms out of my office, slamming the door behind him.

My eyebrows knit from the unusual pressure. Sighing some papers off the desk, I pick them up from the floor and leave. From my breast pocket, I pull out a folded-up sheet of paper. It is the speech I have prepared for my presentation today. Glancing at my watch, I pick up the pace: in five minutes, I am supposed to be in front of all of Orient.

After speaking to massive crowds for 14 years, I am ready to state my point and leave. The curtains slide open and I stand in front of a huge mob of people. Instantly, the tug hits me like a magnitude-8 earthquake. I can't help but notice how messy the people before me look. Even with my throbbing head, I am able to discern citizens who have unkempt hair, crooked ties, ruffled collars, and stained sweaters. My knees violently wobble and I collapse onto the cold hard concrete. A few final blinks show the citizens slowly walking away from me, from the legislative ruler, from Orient.

Amos

Over the course of a week, we see Orient crashing down. The artillery industries are shuttered, the spyware and intelligence organization are not able to gather information, and the soldiers are playing poker all day. There is no one to prevent the people from rampaging down the streets and wreaking havoc. The Tres Corrupta are now powerless; they have failed their country. And all of this started from my head.

Watching the country destroy itself has made me wonder if this was all worth it. I created the Virofactor, the device that created the virus. I shot the Cougher, the weapon that corrupted the Corrupta. Occident, safe from all the troubles they have been giving us, can now rebuild. But in the streets, I don't see our people working. Rather, I see them having quite a bit of fun. They drink, eat, and prance around, jumping with joy. Was liberating them really the right thing to do?

For the next year, I think about this. I watch the people of Occident slowly destroy themselves, and I can do nothing about it. During that slow, painful year, I have not been celebrating like the others: I have been working on another virus. This one is not meant for anyone in Orient.

Last time I shot the Cougher, I was sweating like a madman. When I load it for the final time, I weep like a bereaved husband. But I can't shoot the thing on my own.

"WILLIAM!" I cry.

Just like that day one year ago, he comes running through the door, without a worry in the world. He has no idea.

"William," I sob, "take the Cougher."

"But Boss, there's no one in Orient to shoot at."

"No, there isn't."

After a few tense seconds, it dawns on him what I plan to do.

Tears streaking his face, William points the Cougher directly at me. His arms grow weak and it looks like the rifle is actually coughing as it bobs up and down. Without another word, he closes his eyes and dutifully shoots the virus at me.

On the canvas in my head, I have painted innumerable memories. From the day I was born to today, each one is a stroke of my brush. Now, I brush at the canvas furiously. Every stroke erases a patch of color. The thick layers of paint slowly wear down, and I am left to face a blank board.

People used to call them the Tres Duces. At some point, they became the Tres Corrupta.
But Tres, unbeknownst to anyone, became Quattro.
Now there is Nihil.