

The Glassman

MultiMind



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Perry, I wish you got to read the whole book before you passed –
but I am glad you liked the beginning.



Content Warning:

- Depression/Trauma
- Suicidal Ideation/Self-Harm



THE CLASSMAN

Part One: The Existence

In a future not far from our present day, things have changed. Summers are hotter. Days are hazier in the city of San Diego. In the home of Jacob “Mars” Juarez, the morning light rose away from his bedroom window as the sun further ascended, waking him no earlier than anyone else naturally would on his street.

He opened his brown eyes, the open windows stood before him as the waft of the waking city ebbed through the gathered lace of the copper curtains. The curtains swayed lazily at the gathers in the soft wind on that gentle humid day. His eyes then fell upon the curly, russet hair of his wife, Danielle Juarez. The white cover had drifted from her bare, dark gold shoulder in the night. The strap of her black tank top nestled against her neck as she slumbered. From the feel of the room and how tucked her head was in the pillow, he surmised she cried herself to sleep for another night that week.

Mars lifted the covers slightly to check for any abrasions or cuts he may have caused her or any possible evidence left

between them. Nothing but the shadow of space between them. A good sign.

Danielle stirred gently and opened her auburn eyes to the chattering birds sitting outside the window, just out of view. She felt the crisp dryness of her eyes. Flashes of last night came to her, muffled sobbing resounding in her ears. She willed the sorrowful memories away and settled herself better. She could feel her husband behind her, his back against hers. Danielle closed her eyes to wait for any prick or sting to greet her. Nothing but the heat of her husband and his gaze as he turned over to her. She loved him dearly, but now she feared the morning she would wake at the pearly gates.

Mars felt a light ebb of joy deep within. For yet another night, his wife still slept beside him. That she still loved him despite his changes. Some days, he wished she would leave him and take their children, Vivica and Violet, with her to a life anew. It would pain him greatly, yes, but at least he would know that they were safe at least. Not a day went by that he didn't think of Dao, his bassist and longtime friend. Mars would never forgive himself if he did the same to his beloved family.

It was an accident! Mars quickly defended to himself. Thoughts flooded back to San Diego Rivers Memorial Hospital as he blinked away tears. *Why, why did I survive?* Just like every day, the haunting thought returned. Ever since he woke up in the hospital, such awful thoughts and wonders visited him day after day, relentless and pervasive. *I should be dead.*

Danielle turned carefully to her husband, sure to catch a piece of glass in the act, maybe. She looked at his forlorn face. The same face that still warmed her with its wonderful brown sienna chilled her to the core all the same. She smiled at him.

“Morning,” she softly greeted.

Mars looked up at her. Her face always reminded him every day that perhaps life could still be worth living. He returned her smile weakly.

“Morning,” he mumbled sleepily. Mars remembered how Danielle would comb her gentle fingers through his long, reddish-black dreadlocks as his eyes adored her face. What bliss seeing that face had brought him through all the eleven years they had been together. He wanted to caress her cheek but dared not to.

Reminding her arm to keep close, Danielle gazed upon Mars playfully. She asked, “How are you feeling?”

The question was like a soft blade on a vital vein, it stung Mars so. He used to hide it so well, but his cape of illusion had worn quite threadbare by now.

His eyes fell askance. “Okay, I guess,” he murmured.

Danielle assured him, “‘Okay’ is good.”



Breakfast was served and Mars prepared to go to work – or, as Mars saw it now: the worst part of the day. He wore his tahms more often now since Dao’s incident. He wore a navy and black tahm today, bloated with his thick, hip-

length dreads. It matched his black basketball jersey from Mindware and dark blue canvas shorts. Mars grabbed his keys off the table next to the glass-paned door as the rest of his family prepared for a new day of elementary school in the back bedroom Vivica and Violet shared. He could hear light fussing waft out the door as there was a small squabble over shoes Danielle tried to quell. Mars stopped short of placing the keys in his pocket. Mars just couldn't go. He couldn't harm another. Moving through the world felt cold and alone but, he sighed to himself: there was no other way. Danielle came out from their daughters' bedroom to get an apple from the dining table, she needed a quick break from the early morning chaos. Instead, she found Mars standing there in front of their door, gaze tossed to the wooden floor, arms limp and keys loosely cupped in his hands. *Mars*, she thought mournfully as she started towards him, her slippered feet padding across the floor.

Hearing his name being lightly called, Mars looked up at his wife behind him. She held his hand and touched his face, forgetting her precautions. "Mars, you have to get to work, babe. You can't stay here all day." She curled his thicker hands into hers and held it to her heart. "We'll all see you tonight. Have a great day at the studio." Danielle pecked Mars on the cheek. She wished for his lips but it was too much of a risk.

Mars wanted the same. There was so much he wanted but so little he could have now. Even the grasp of a hand ached his heart, how long it had been since he had much more than that.

Danielle turned around to go back to the girls' room. She was sure there was more chaos in her absence, she could hear playing. Mars wrapped his heavily tattooed arms around her neck and waist in desperate comfort. It caught Danielle off-guard. Her face blanked with panic but Mars couldn't help but to hold her tight and mutter to her, "I'm sorry, I just really love and miss your embrace. I feel so alone. I need you." His face nestled into her shoulder and against her neck.

Danielle felt abysmal and torn. She didn't want to get nicked or worse, suffer a fatal slip – but the forced distance, it bred nothing but clanging loneliness. She relaxed herself, she tried to. Danielle missed the comforting touch of her husband. She could tell that he missed her more. His arms wrapped around her closer, tighter.

"I love you, too," she replied softly.

The moment passed, quiet and calm. Then Mars' arms started to feel ... jagged.

His skin jutted and moved, as if rumbling rocks rolled underneath his tattooed skin. They sharpened and jumbled about, biting into her skin.

"Mars?" She choked as she grew into a gasping panic. Danielle tapped his arm fervently as she tried to keep her voice low so the girls wouldn't hear, "*Mars.*"

He held on, Mars couldn't bear to let go. It had been too long since he's felt her touch–

Danielle wrenched herself away from her husband. She tried to hold in her sniffles, her eyes filled with hot tears. She

stared at him with the fear she hated. Again, distance was between them.

Mars' skin settled. Another surge, another day. He couldn't control them, he barely knew how. Or even if he could. The fear in her eyes stung him like ice, he turned his head away. A small surge rolled about underneath his skin in simmering spurts until they quelled into nothing.

Danielle tried to blink back the tears but more came instead. *It wasn't on purpose*, she tried to remind herself. *Mars didn't mean it. It's not his fault. Not his fault.* She knew Mars didn't ask for this, for what he changed into. But still she kicked herself: just had to slip back to normal again, that she could be comfortable again, that she could let her guard down again. Even the best days felt like the worst and she hated every minute of it. She remembered what she promised back when Mars was in the hospital, *We'll make the best of it, honey. We're all going to get through this. You, me, and the girls.* No one said this was going to be fair. Then again, almost no one knew anything about Mars' new condition.

"I'm – I'm fine," Danielle sniffed. She quickly wiped away her tears. "Hon-honestly, Mars. I'm fine." Her throat and hips still burned with the shadows of his surging touch. How sharp everything became. "It's fine. *You're fine.*" She padded forward to hold his hands, just like she always would, but stopped short.

Her words rang hollow to Mars. Memories of Dao bleeding out on the studio floor flooded in. How the bassist clutched his face, how the blood smeared over everything as it dripped from his deep mahogany skin. Dao's cries of

mercy and fear filled Mars' ears. Mars couldn't break from the guilt, the wild stare Dao shot him with his remaining eye wouldn't leave him. A loose thought sailed across his mind, *I did it again*. He glanced at his wife, her feigned smile and fearful eyes. *All my doing*.

Mars mumbled out a feeble apology as he clutched his keys and left. He tried not to slam the door.



A heavy jam session was underway in the decorative studio, tucked away deep in a distant corner of Mindware's storage warehouse. Mindware was a local store for skaters and trick bike riders. They were the first supporters of the band playing in their studio, Lumination Rising.

It was only the guitarist, Isaiah Corbin, and drummer, Alvin 'Amos' Zavala, also Mars' cousin. Amos and Isaiah created Lumination Rising back when they were in high school during lunch one day and stuck together since. The music that grooved in the studio was moving but with Dao out, it failed to thrive without their low-end anchor. Amos and Isaiah tried their best to make up for the absence, but it wasn't the same. No one to joke about how little energy drinks were part of the meager budget of their second proper album. No one there to show a new card trick they picked up. No silly antics, nothing. The studio had less life. The doctors said Dao would be back and playing in three more weeks, maybe a little sooner. His right eye was healing fine and he was lucky to only have a nick to his jugular

instead of a whole sever but he would forever suffer blindness. Despite such news, Dao seemed to improve in spirits in each video call he had with Amos and Isaiah. Amos wanted Mars to be part of the calls but Isaiah always refused the idea, he figured it was smarter to leave Mars out. Unfortunately, Isaiah was right, Dao avoided any subject to do with Mars and the scars he would bear forever from his brow to his neck. Every time the conversation steered towards Mars, Dao would do anything to steer it away.

Mars sometimes would attend the video calls, mostly by accidentally walking in on them. Every time, Mars and Dao would exchange polite pleasantries but not much else. Mars had to work to be involved in any video conversation. Phone calls were shorter and texts sometimes went unanswered. Eventually, Mars resigned himself to ask Amos the questions and get updated that way.

Riffing his diamond blue guitar one last time, Isaiah announced over Amos' drums, "Break time!" Amos stilled his cymbals as Isaiah repeated himself, "I wanna take a break, man." He had shock silver curls, they suited his deep copper complexion, which was covered in countless tattoos.

Amos nodded, his skin a sweaty, rose-gold brown. He rubbed his face with the hem of his gray Mindware shirt. The design on the front featured an open head displaying a brain shaped together with Tetris pieces. Amos threw his sticks on the crimson towel beside his feet as he got up. This session felt more rewarding today than it had that whole week.

Isaiah took a swig of water from his dingy yellow sports bottle. Amos stretched his broad shoulders and then stepped out from behind his drum set to stroll into the mini kitchen nestled in the corner of the crowded room. On the opposite wall stood a towering ornate mural of the Lady of Guadalupe, hand painted by one of Mindware's longest artists, a young college kid who never went anywhere without at least a king marker and a stubby can of spray paint. Amos once caught her tagging the back of his bass drum. He paid her to do the rest. Now, his studio drums were the centerpiece of the room.

The studio was a bit atypical. The walls were professionally sound-proofed but it was glaringly obvious the room used to be a lounging area. There were still couches, rugs and chairs among the mics and amps. Headphones were laid upon spent boxes of pizza and calzones. The space was put up by Mindware as a gift to the band for their successful first album, *Carnival of the Casualty*. It went gold in ten months, silver in the United Kingdom. The success was in part thanks to their tiny, local label, Delirium Shack Records. In efforts to cut creation costs and keep the money in the community, the band saw nothing but good things from this. They now had a place to practice that wouldn't dig into their pockets and a merch deal to boot from Mindware, giving them clothes to wear and sell. As far as bands not on major labels go, Lumination Rising had struck lucky. Decent space, amicable people who actually did timely studio repairs and didn't try to shaft them. What was not to love?

They were also lucky neither the label or the clothing company knew what truly had become of Mars and how Dao was actually disfigured. Amos' quick thinking was to thank for that.

The kitchen was truly a speck of space – it was a salvaged coffee table loaded with a hot plate, a spent pan with bits of yellow rice dotted along the grease streaks, a half filled electric kettle, a sticky bottle of honey, an opened box of tea and a fair amount of used dishes. Amos checked the water level of the kettle and turned it on. Soon, it started to gurgle and hiss.

Isaiah propped his guitar against a travel case almost as tall as him and sat down on the cool, stone floor. The band's name was spray painted in silver on the rough, black sides of the case. A little dog doodle lived on the bottom corner, silver and silly, signed by "Azteca". She had bombed the case when on break from doing Amos' drums. Isaiah leaned on the case next to the doodle and checked his phone.

Between the two stacked pillars of amps, a metal door creaked open and clanged shut. Mars finally came, albeit a bit late. He used to be the first one there, fixing tea and coffee for everyone. Now, the clock didn't matter much. He was there when he was there, he wasn't when he wasn't.

The familiar, heavy footsteps snapped up Isaiah's attention. He wasn't exactly afraid but he was cautious. No one wanted to wind up like Dao.

Isaiah clambered to his feet as he greeted, warmly and loudly for Amos to hear with his baritone, gruff voice, "Mars! How ya been, man?" He was mindful not to touch his

bandmate, no hugs, no daps, no accidents. It was rough welcoming Mars like a stranger, the band had been together for six years and he's known Mars longer than that. But Isaiah managed, or at least he tried to make his stilted actions look less awkward.

Amos had set out foam cups he found in a package under the table and poured out steaming hot water as he kept his ears perked. Isaiah sounded kind but nervous, Mars was quiet. Amos threw in some tea bags and announced, "Mars, I got you some tea! You, too, Isaiah. Come get some!"

Mars could see his bandmates' efforts to be warm and welcoming, but he could also hear their racing thoughts.

He's wearing a hat today, Isaiah noted, alleviated. *Thank you, God.*

Hopefully Mars is in a good mood today, Amos wondered. *Gotta get this song done and he gotta re-do his tracks.*

Mars tried to reassure them. He smiled as warmly as he could feign. "How you two doin'?" Amos, what tea is it?"

Isaiah headed over to Amos as the drummer described, "It's the orange and ginger one. We low on it but got enough left for a couple days. I'll run to the store later for more."

Mars sauntered up to the packed table and picked out a cup. The warmth of the cup felt good against the chill of the air conditioning. He suggested, "Why can't Isaiah do it? He seeks out the best deals."

Isaiah paused, cup in partially tattooed hand. A light chill ran over his wiry frame.

Amos retorted, "Nah, I can do it—"

"Cuz, *Isaiah* should go." Mars insisted with a kind smile.

He wants to talk, Amos guessed. He asked the frozen guitarist, “Ey, Isaiah, you think you can do the store run? You are a coupon-master, after all. Probably come back with half the store and only spend three dollars,” he lightly jabbed.

Mars chuckled along with Amos as he nibbled on his cup, “It’s true, you know.”

Slow to catch on, Isaiah reluctantly agreed, “Uhhhh ... sure. I-I’ll go now since we just took a break.” He patted his black shorts to check for his keys and phone and then left. Mars wanted to talk. Alone. Isaiah just hoped the studio would still be in one piece when he got back.

Mars quietly drank his tea as the metal door creaked open and clanged shut.

Amos watched Mars for a moment. “Dude, what is going *on?*” he asked.

Mars kept drinking his tea quietly.

Irritation bit into Amos. He could tell Mars was in a mood. “Man, seriously. *Talk to me—*”

Mars pursed his lips and pulled out a curved shard of glass. He stared at it. Smooth, like the side of a bottle. Just like the bottle Amos lied about to the label. The memory came back to Mars, hearing his cousin say through a closed door on the phone, *Yea, it was a bottle. Nah, it wasn’t on purpose, Mars’ not like that ... I was there, that’s how I know. He got passionate and threw it at the wall. Some of it hit Dao. Nah, Dao’s banged up but it ain’t that bad. Coulda been but thankfully, it wasn’t.*

“Why can’t one of these just end me already?” Mars

mused, his voice flat and dead. He flickered the shard between his fingers, captivated.

Amos stepped over to pluck the shard from Mars' fingers. "Mars, stop talking like that," said Amos as he went to the trash can beside the left pillar of amps.

"Like what?" Mars asked, feigning innocence. He watched his cousin's face flash with anger as he stood beside the trash can.

"Jacob, you know what I mean!" Amos shot. He was beyond irate, Amos rarely used Mars' real name.

Mars stood there, unaffected. His face blank, he reasoned, "I'm a monster, a freak. And you know it."

Amos stalked up to Mars, "No! No, we are *not* going down this road aga—"

"I hurt Danielle this morning! What *else* does that make me?" Mars roared. His skin rumbled out a single jagged roll.

Amos threw out his hands and kept his distance. "Whoa. Whoa. Ey, Mars. Calm down, man. Just. Chill. Please be chill. *Please* chill out."

Another rumble rolled over Mars' skin as he tried to quell his nerves. His cousin's mind moved too fast to read.

Careful and cautious, Amos asked, "How ... how bad?"

Mars closed his eyes. He could see her tears and hear her watery voice. *I'm fine.*

"Mars?"

Mars willed away the feel of disgust towards himself, "Nothing ... now. No blood."

Amos sighed in peace. *Thank God*, he thought. "Mars, man, you gotta work on this. You'd be better if —"

“*Better?*” Mars spat bitterly. He approached Amos, slow and angry. They were roughly the same height but Mars’ fuming made him feel even taller. Amos started to back away towards the mural. “*Better?*” Mars caustically repeated. “You think there’s a ‘*better*’ of this that somehow don’t end with my casket?”

Pressed against the mural, Amos reminded, “You gotta have faith, man! Handle this!”

Mars stopped. His face became blank again.

Amos grew concerned, “Mars, man. You okay?”

Tired, Mars asked, “Why am I like this? Why did I have to survive the explosion?”

The billion dollar question and one Mars always asked Amos at least once a month since he came home from the hospital.

It had been eight months since the accident that changed him. Mars was taking a stroll by the docks when an old chemical factory blew up beside him. There was an overlooked gas leak, thanks to the many ignored calls and requests to the city. The blast sent him over a hundred feet, covered with glass from the windows. He ended up so laden with shards, the doctors in the ICU debated whether it would be better to leave some of the glass in him as some were just too deep to get out. Mars was already in bad shape, they didn’t want to risk severing additional nerves or veins to get them out. Even sedating him was hotly debated. They also toyed with the thought of taking the risk anyway and hope for the best. They decided to take out the surface shards and work as carefully as possible for the dangerous

ones. They took care of removing what they could the day Mars came in but for the riskier ones, the doctors placed Mars' name on the surgery sheet for the next morning when the top surgeon could come in.

Next day, doctors found during their pre-surgery checkup that Mars was healing up fine. Whatever chemicals struck him made him heal faster than any medicine or surgery ever could. His body changed to accommodate the glass and chemicals, he even could create glass on his own. From time to time, glass would be found in his bandages or laid beside him in bed. The doctors and nurses shared the discovery with Amos and Danielle in private. They were glad that Mars was, for lack of a better word, okay but begged the hospital staff to keep this new condition secret, citing every health privacy rule and law they could think of.

Amos broke a censored version to the label, that Mars was recuperating better than the doctors guessed, thanks to having a dedicated and outstanding surgical team, a strong will and good faith. Danielle told Dao and Isaiah the truth, neither believed her until they visited Mars with Danielle and saw her pull a shard caught underneath a bandage when she tried to redress his arm as he napped. When Amos found out that they knew, he first swore and then swore them to secrecy.

The label told the fans of Lumination Rising that Mars was indeed at the fateful factory blast but his condition had stabilized and he may be moved out of the ICU soon, thanks to the amazing doctors, nurses and staff at San Diego Rivers Memorial. Since the news broke, fans piled outside daily and

even more sent gifts. Sometimes, the remainder of the band would do signings outside the hospital but Mars was only greeted by hospital staff or loved ones. The day he left was quiet and in secret, ushered by his wife and cousin into a waiting car.

From that day, life radically changed.

Everyone thought it was pretty cool Mars could make glass and turn it into beautiful sculptures, especially for Danielle and their daughters. But when it was just Amos and Mars, it was a much different story. Even in the hospital, Mars would beg for Amos to kill him. "Please," he pleaded aching when they were alone, "Put this pillow over ... over my head. I don't want to live anymore. Kill me, please. You don't have to look, Amos. Just help me out." Amos never told the nurses or doctors. Amos also didn't tell them that Mars told him he tried every day to kill himself with the glass as he laid in bed but his body wouldn't allow it. Eventually, Amos just walked away when the request would come up during Mars' hospital stay. Out of the hospital, Mars would still quip to Amos from time to time, "I'm still offering."

However, Mars never ever shared to anyone that he could hear thoughts about him. They sounded like invading whispers. At first, he thought that he was hearing things but when it dawned on him what was actually happening, it made him feel even more distant and like a freak. He felt cursed and that everyone would be so much better off without him.



Isaiah drove down the sunny streets of San Diego in his beat-up car. The doors didn't match and sometimes there was an alarming cough under the hood but it still ran. Next year, he could register it as a "historic" car. Isaiah still debated on whether or not he would want to.

He headed towards a great market over in southern Chula Vista that always had the best deals, Sol Markets. Most of the product tags in the store were in Spanish but Isaiah had his parents' tongue and their knack for deals. His family was obscenely frugal but still wanted to eat and live well. None of the band members were born with silver spoons, everyone came up from hard-working families, but Isaiah had a special skill to stretch a dollar when it came to food and supplies.

Dao was on the phone, his deep voice loud and clear through the old speakers. They crackled from time to time. Isaiah's aux cord was on its last leg, covered in a thick cast of electrical tape at the plugs, but still worked well enough. He had been on the phone with Dao since he first called him as soon as he got in the car.

"Bro, don't forget to get the snack cookies I like," Dao commented, interrupting himself on a previous subject he was talking about.

Taking a left turn, Isaiah asked, "The red ones with the cherry in them?"

"I thought they were raspberries?"

Isaiah shrugged. The sun beamed on his skin, covered with musical art. His silver curls gleamed in the sunlight. “I ‘on’t know. Maybe they got both.”

“Oooh, get Viper!” Dao threw in, “The black can.”

Isaiah snickered, “I ain’t gettin’ that for you, man. That stuff is straight basura, holmes. Energy drinks get you too live, man.”

“Energy drinks *keep* me alive, man. Especially Viper. Nectar of the gods,” Dao rebuffed playfully.

“Sayeth the Black Buddhist. I thought you supposed to reject material stuff and stuff,” Isaiah reminded as he waited for the light to change.

“Hey,” Dao remarked with mock defensiveness, “I’m still a work in process. And get the gold can instead.”

The light changed, and Isaiah was back on the move as he suggested, “How about you get one of those smoothie drinks? Healthier for you.”

Dao thought on it for a second. Then he said, “Viper got a version called Viper: The Garden. Two birds, one stone.”

“And no hits, you are *not* gonna be bouncing off the walls when you come back. You just gonna be a half blind Speedy Gonzalez. No way.” Isaiah laughed, Dao didn’t.

“How long do we have to turn in the album?” Dao asked.

Isaiah noticed the change in subject and mentally kicked himself for the faux pas, “Savalez is giving us to the fall, it looks like. We got an extension so you can get better but he wants us out there and touring. He wants us to get on Dowry’s level.”

Dao moaned, “Maaaaaaan, The Dowry Effect just a

machine. All them chicks, straight up moving day and night. Complete Terminators, all of them. Do *any* of those girls ever sleep?”

Isaiah shrugged as he waited for a pedestrian to cross the street. He was in no rush. He was certain if Mars leveled the studio, showing up in the aftermath was far safer than arriving during the action. “I honestly have *no* idea but they crank out records and tours at a rate Savalez *loves*.”

Dao joked, “I guess Punk isn’t really dead.”

Isaiah broke into a fit of hearty laughter, “Better not be or we are partially *screwed*. If not *completely*. You know I’m deathly allergic to Pop.”

The bassist laughed, “I think we all are.”

The dingy red roof of the store broke over the horizon as Isaiah reminisced, “Remember when we got our first Grammy ballots? I just wrote random swear words on mine. Ain’t you draw the middle finger on yours or was that Amos?”

“Me but Amos drew a butt on his,” Dao confirmed.

“Mars sent his in half torched ...” Isaiah trailed off. He had waded back into acidic waters once again. Isaiah turned into the sparse parking lot. Plenty of customers but few cars. A bus on the curb briefly stopped, dropping off a few more shoppers.

Dao blustered a long, loud sigh. “How am I going to do this?” He muttered to himself.

“How you gonna do what?” Isaiah asked as he found a spot close to the front door.

Dao stammered, caught off guard, “I – ehhhhh – I dunno–”

“Spit it out, man,” Isaiah turned the car off, it sputtered quiet. He snatched out the aux cord and brought the phone to his ear. The case was covered with bumpy, colorful sugar skulls.

“I was I might come in tomorrow?”

Isaiah was floored with joy. “Dude, that’s amazing! Did your doctor say you could?” Isaiah got out the car, the roaring heat that met him made him glad his A/C didn’t conk again. Last summer was torture and the repairs equaled an extra long tour he was already sick of half way through. The guitarist wasted no time getting under the shade of the canopy of a melon stall outside the store and went inside.

“Nah,” Dao answered. “Just bored. I just can’t do nothin’ there, though.”

Inside Sol Markets, Isaiah murmured close to the phone, “What about M, though?”

Dao gave it a moment’s ponder. He sighed again, “I ‘on’t know, bro. I ... I just can’t face him yet. Has he gotten better about his ... condition?”

Isaiah tugged at a curl or two in thought. He weighed between telling a sweet lie or the bitter truth as he grabbed a red, worn shopping basket and started towards the produce section that lined the long wall. He came clean, “I ‘on’t know, man. Nothing much else happened since but A knows better than me.” Isaiah always shorted the names of his band members since the one day he got mobbed by a

small horde of fans at a flower shop about a year ago. As if his silver hair, countless tattoos and gruff voice couldn't make him stand out enough, someone overheard him on the phone as he flipped through a sales book. "I think you'll be fine if A is around. I'll make sure you stick to him like glue. M wears hats more, too. We've found far less ... 'stuff' since that."

"Hmmm," Dao considered. It had already been almost a month since his injury. And this album needs to be finished – the sooner, the better. Downloads and streams don't keep musicians fed, tours do. "I'll try. At least get in around two. I'll catch you later, ok?"

"See ya, man. Feel better, ok?" Isaiah picked up a pineapple and weighed it in his hand. Fairly round and pretty heavy, Isaiah calculated the price in his head and tried to find a lighter one just as thick.

"Sure thing", Dao hung up. His phone sat in a charging port that mimicked a red rotary phone but had the smartphone in the place of the dial. He wanted to come back, being home dulled him to tears. But facing Mars again... Dao headed up the stairs of his small home. A little house on a quiet street, what he always wanted.

Minutes later, the phone bleated an impressive funk tune with jarring trumpets. The screen read "Savalez the Overlord".

Dao hurried back into the living room. The phone rang loud atop his old, tall amp. He was in the middle of changing the bedding in his hamster's cage. Dao thundered down the stairs, lined with family pictures and gold records. He kept a

careful hand over his pet, Chunks, as the little gray hamster rode his shoulder. He snatched up the receiver on the last ring.

“Hola, Savalez.” It was almost a third of the entire extent of Dao’s Spanish, outside of the swears and insults the rest of the band taught him.

Savalez replied with a warm drawl, “Dao! How are you? How is your eye?”

The warmth unsettled Dao a bit. Savalez rarely made cordial calls just to chit-chat. And whenever Savalez called with a voice so warm, something was hot on his mind.

“Everything is good so far. Doc said I’m getting better—”

“Oh! So you’ll be 20/20 in both eyes again? And the scars are soon gonna disappear?” Savalez questioned.

Dao winced at the back-handed compliment. “The eye is gonna stay busted and so will my face.” He petted Chunks out of self-comfort, who happily chewed away on a near dreadlock. Dao attempted to stream the dread from Chunks’ nibbling paws as he asked, “Is everything fine?”

“Absolutely *lovely*,” Savalez reassured. “I just wanted to check in on you as you healed. You know how everyone is familia to me. When Mars was in the hospital, I did the same.”

Dao nodded, “Ah, okay. I’m doin’ good. Writing up some tabs and always in the kitchen with something new. I can’t sit around doing nothing,” he laughed. Dao hoped it would be enough to placate Savalez.

The label head laughed with Dao, “That’s good, that’s good, Dao! Always good to hear that. Don’t work yourself

too hard, getting better is priority.”

“I agree.” Dao wondered where the conversation would turn next.

“Dao,” Savalez inquired, “how *are* things in Lumination? You and Mars good? Amos said it was an accident with the bottle – was it a bottle or a glass? I forget.”

“Bottle,” Dao piped. How could he forget? Amos drilled him over and over again even in the hospital until he knew the tale by heart: Glass bottle. Mars threw it out of passion while singing – *no* malevolence intended whatsoever. Dao accidentally got caught in the spray of shards. Mars is entirely innocent and regretful. And does not have any unusual abilities of any kind. Perfectly normal. And happy. And *normal*.

“Ahhhhh, yes, I think Amos *did* say ‘bottle,’” Savalez said. “Forgive me, I’m old.”

“It’s fine. All is good between Mars and I. He wouldn’t stop apologizing,” Dao lied. Mars had hardly said anything that could even barely resemble an apology, even a scarce one. Either too busy brooding or Amos would pipe up and speak for Mars instead. If anything, it was Amos who apologized over and over. Or attempt to suppress the topic altogether.

“Wonderful,” Savalez replied, pleased. “You two are like brothers, I don’t want any bad blood happening. Especially as this album is coming out. If all goes well, this could go far. I wanna make sure everyone is happy during the whole trip.”

“I get it, I get it,” said Dao, stuffing his true feelings. He

took Chunks from his shoulder and stroked the hamster's soft coat with his long thumb. Chunks nuzzled his palm. "I'm healing fine – not perfectly but fine – and everything between Mars and I is fine."

"Fine'," Savalez snorted. He resumed his lovely tone, "As long as everything is 'fine'. I'll let you get back to your day, okay?"

"Okay," said Dao. "Bye bye."

"Talk to you later." Savalez hung up.

Dao returned the receiver and rubbed his head. He ruffled his thin dreads, "Chunks, you are *so* lucky you do not have to put up with people-problems." He petted Chunks with his other hand as he started back up the stairs. "The worst you have to think about is how many spare treats you can sucker out of my brother, Slice. Whatever Savalez called for, it better not bite us later. Hmph, knowin' Amos, I'm probably gonna have *new* lines to learn. More lines, more lies."