

# A Dark Place

## Jordan San Miguel

### > In A Dark Place

[...It has been wandering these cosmos for millennia, accompanied only by its six moons. Untethered to any star, this world is destined to lie in eternal darkness, save for the blinding white-hot magma at its core which had long ago sustained the first signs of life: hydrothermal bacteria deep in the Amniotic Oceans. Now, billions of diverse lifeforms crawl above and below its surface—among them, the curious variety of organism you know as “human”. They have formed empires, started wars, and built cities; but most important of all, before any of that, they named things. And the name they gave to this world was “The Night.”

### > Lara – [The Night]

Hungover and head aching, she lies in a fetal position on the wet, creaking wood. The sound of incomprehensible screaming wakes her up, followed by a few swift bludgeoning blows, then silence. When she finally gathers the strength to sit up and look around at the other prisoners on the boat, it's clear that she's made some mistake yestercycle that she will now come to regret. The last thing she can remember is having to piss, really, really bad... Then nothing.

A crazy old man says his name is Archeus. He offers to help her escape, claims he's done it five times before, but Lara doesn't believe him.

“We're almost there,” he says. “Ex Nihilo. The darkest city.”

“Great,” Lara says. “I hate the dark.”

“Don't let the god of Darkness hear you,” he jokes. “And it's not really that dark. They only call it that because...I don't know. But it wasn't always one city. Used to be three smaller cities, then there was a fourth city that took over, and now they're all somehow one big city. Funny how that works, huh?”

“Can we stop talking for a second?”

Storm clouds approach and the rowers above deck begin chanting in a language she doesn't understand. A huge wave knocks the boat sideways, and suddenly guards and prisoners alike are forced to swim ashore. Only about half of them survive; the remaining guards slap handcuffs on the remaining prisoners as soon as they're out of the water.

“It's funny,” she turns to the old man. “I didn't think the water would be so warm.”

“Yeah,” he replies. “Like soup.”

### > Isaac – [Ex Nihilo: Oblivion District]

Head hung low, walking away from another failed mission; once again,

he has blown his cover. What kind of a secret agent can't keep a secret? Isaac could see it already, the other officers' smug faces waiting for him in the HQ hallways. He's beginning to regret this line of work - maybe he really should have become an architect, like his mom always said. Lieutenant Bishop isn't happy to see him (is he ever?), and punishes him by assigning him to train the new rookie. His name is Adam - one of those Blond-haired, Blue-eyed types the Order likes to fetishize. Isaac can tell he's one of those agents that are way too devoted to the cause. Yes, it's true that all of them, Isaac included, actively work to uphold a fascist regime, but you've got to have some level of detachment from all the propaganda. Otherwise, you just turn insane...

"GLORY TO THE EYE!" Adam shouts, standing up straight and saluting. Isaac can already tell this one is going to get on his nerves. Bishop briefs the two of them on the mission; they're supposed to track down the location of Madame Kovilak, yet another rebel with one of those huge master plans to take down the Order of the Eye. You know, the super big ones? The ones that seem to spring up every other week? It's all starting to seem a bit trite.

**> Dominic – [Ex Nihilo: Lilith District]**

"Good. There are four sporas in a cycle - those are called Vespورا, Luspora, Nespورا, and Respora. Can anyone tell me what the length of our cycles are aligned to?" The instructor's eyes wander the room, searching for the student who seems the least prepared. They settle on Dominic, whose attention was focused elsewhere, fixed on a strange orange light rushing past the stars.

"The orbit of the largest moon around the planet," Dominic mumbles in a deadpan voice, wondering what exactly it is about him that makes people assume he's stupid when in reality he's just distracted-

"Ahem. Night to Dominic!" Professor Ward snaps her fingers in front of his face. "Would you please tell the class what this moon is named?"

"Oh. Uh, sorry," he replies, trying to refocus his attention. "It's Aetheris, the moon of time." His seeming unenthusiasm was not due to ignorance; on the contrary, this topic is one that Dominic has come to know far too well. It's just hard not to be bored in class when they're still going over basic astronomy and physics and you're already into the *advanced stuff*, you know? - multiverses, superposition and the like.

In the corner of the dining hall, he eats his grilled heartfish with moon-grain - alone, because the white kids always make fun of the scent of the Darkfolk herbs in his lunch. Let them laugh all they want; it reminds him of home, and that's all that matters. He doesn't care. He also doesn't care that the other colony-kids won't accept him into their group, no matter how annoying it is to be the only lone Darkfolk on campus. They'd probably just get on his nerves anyway. Who needs friends when you have books?

Oh, yes. He's been very excited to crack open this one. Yestercycle, he found it

on an old dusty shelf, nestled deep in the academy's labyrinthine library - someone must have forgotten that it existed. "Melanchronic Symbiosis: On the Topology of Temporality in a Sunless Cosmos," the cover reads. To be honest, Dominic has no idea what any of it means, but he likes it that way. Makes more sense than the rest of the world around him, that's for sure. As he gets pleasantly lost among the pages of jargon and abstraction, his mind's eye begins to wander. Those images pop up in his head again, the ones that seem to dance on the border between a memory and a dream. He sees the place. The Green World, everything effortlessly glimmering in bright radiance; the orb of blinding fire powering it all. It's warm too, like standing in front of a geothermal heater, only it's not just hot air, you can feel the *light itself*.

"What are you still doing here?" The security guard asks. "It's almost Respora, shouldn't you be getting back to the dormitory?"

Dominic watches the words on the page turn back into a random series of lines and shapes, and lifts his gaze to look at the guard, then directly over his head, where Aetheris is hanging bright. "Sorry. I must have lost track of time." He shuts the book and hurries to the dorms before the next spora.

### > Julia – [Ex Nihilo: Carthago District]

In the halls of the Carthago Senate, Julia watches Diocles Kronon pace back and forth, repeatedly reciting the soon-to-be first speech of his campaign. Five years ago, she met him in a political science class, and they've been in a testy relationship ever since. She's trying to be supportive and calm him down like she always has to do, but he's being annoying again, freaking out over every little word.

"Relax. You don't need to change anything. Your speech is fine," Julia assures him, grabbing him by the shoulder to halt his frantic movements.

He widens his eyes at her. "Fine?! What do you mean, it's fine!?"

"It's a *good* speech. Maybe there are some rough spots," Julia replies. "But it's way too late to change it now."

"Rough spots!?" Diocles shouts, panicking. "Why didn't you tell me earlier!?"

"Oh, shut up! I *did* tell you. You just never listen," Julia says, rolling her eyes.

The two of them make their way to the podium. Leon Strong is saying his parting words, voice echoing through the humongous senate hall. Diocles is up next, and he's wiping his sweaty palms on his toga.

"You got this," Julia says, patting Diocles on the back before he walks on stage.

He gives the speech. Julia's trying to gauge the audience's reactions, which are teetering between vacant and vaguely unenthused. She's trying not to cringe at his long-labored words falling on deaf ears, but it's too hard; when he draws a blank halfway through the speech she's heard so, so, many times, she can't help but run

up on stage and finish it for him. She fails to ignore the way the audience's ears perk up once she starts talking.

Just as she finishes her last word, the lights go out. Amidst the pitch-black chaos, small lanterns in the hands of fleeing politicians turn on across the senate building. Everyone is scrambling to find the light, terrified of the creatures that were soon to come lurking in the darkness. Centuries ago, they erupted from somewhere in Ex Nihilo, slaughtered half of the population, then spread to the rest of the continent - the Feared Ones. Contorting masses of limbs, faces, and flesh crawl around the building. Everyone covers their ears, trying not to listen to their horrible shrieking songs that can drive you mad. The guards fire their guns as Julia and Diocles make it out of the senate, to a well-lit area. Once they're in a safe place, he vents to her.

"What the hell?!" he exclaims. "I'd rather you'd just let me stand there in silence! Do you know how embarrassing that is?"

"If you don't want to be embarrassed," Julia replies nonchalantly, "then do a better job at memorizing your lines next time."

### > Tomas – [Ex Nihilo: Vibrio District]

Usually Tomas finds these parties fun, but this time around he's just not feeling it.

"A bit more drink will do the trick," he thinks to himself, right before swallowing a large and sour gulp of gloomwine. He sits back and feels the alcohol flow through his veins, then watches the iridescent gowns flutter, glimmering in the yellow light that shines through the mouth and eyes of the Golden Children, who are floating silently at the corner of the ceiling. All around him, the courting chatter of the other young aristocrats blurs together into a single voice. Cousin Charles plops down in the seat next to him, head hung low, hands resting on his knees.

"You weren't lying, huh?" Charles says, pausing to catch his breath. "Those Eboncourt girls *can* really dance..." He tugs at his ruffled collar.

"Yeah, I told you. They're kinda insane," Tomas replies.

"No kidding. And I bet they're even more rough in bed." Charles grins at Tomas. "You hit it off with any heiresses yet? I've been talking to that one over there," Charles brags, pointing over at the dancing crowd, at the girl with the purple dress. "Apparently she's a daughter of the Brousseau family. You know, the ones that own that entire strip of land between Lacrimosa and Vesperos?"

"Dude," says Tomas. "It kind of just sounds like you're only into her because her family's rich."

"That's not true," Charles retorts. "She has a very nice body as well."

Tomas tilts his head to the side and looks at Charles. "Do you even know her first name?"

"Of course I do," Charles scoffs. "It's Anna. Or Victoria... Something like

that. Who cares? I think you should be focusing on scoring some heiresses of your own, cousin.” Tomas gives a disingenuous, half-hearted chuckle and sips more gloomwine.

“Anyway,” Charles says, looking up at the moon. “Looks like it’s gonna be Respora soon...”

This is the part everyone looks forward to, and the reason why these parties always went on so late. Typically, Respora, being the last spora of the cycle, happens while everyone’s asleep, but those who stay awake to see it receive a kind of indescribable celestial catharsis, the events of which are usually forgotten about by the next, waking spora - the perfect way to end a party.

Cousin Charles goes off to dance with Anna or Victoria again and Tomas paces the room, looking for someone interesting to talk to. He smiles at a group of girls, but they pretend not to see him. What the hell? Looks like they’re all crowded around someone. He can’t see who it is, but he can hear them all fawning over him, calling out his name.

“You’re so funny, Louis!” “That coat looks great on you, Louis!” A light blue mist begins to fill the air as the hour of Respora arrives. As Tomas breathes in the faintly sweet air, everything takes on a sense of lightness and he can no longer tell the difference between his body and the world around him.

And then, the eyes. Who is he even looking at? Or who’s looking at him? It’s the guy, Louis; the one they were all trying to talk to before. The two of them can’t seem to take their eyes off each other. The crowd of girls begin to scatter, distracted by their various revelations, but Louis and Tomas stay frozen, almost like they’re in a staring contest. It’s not exactly a look of love per se; more so awe, taken-aback-ness, an oscillation between confusion and recognition. The kind of look you’d give upon seeing an old friend for the first time that looks completely different from how you remember them; except they didn’t know each other.

Tomas wakes up at Vespora. This is the last thing he can recall happening last cycle; after that, it’s all blue dust.

### [The Elysian Realm - Olympus]

“Tomas wakes up at Vespora. This is the last thing he can recall happening last cycle, and after that, it’s all blue dust.” The goddess of Voice clears her throat and the god of Darkness leans in closer, expecting to hear more, but Voice just yawns and stands up from the chair.

“Wait, is that it? What’s happening now?” Darkness asks.

“I’ll tell you later,” Voice says. “I need to rest my vocal cords.”

“I don’t understand why you’re adding all these extra details about their personal lives and the Night,” says Darkness. “I already know how it all works down there. Can’t you just tell me where to find them?”

“No,” Voice replies. “That’s not fun.”

“Ugh, I don’t have time for this. He’s been trying to find those damn

people for years, and they're just crawling around that city right under his nose!"

"Hey, all I can do is tell you what's happening. I never promised to get involved in your weird scheme or whatever. You know we're not allowed to mess around in mortals' business like that."

"Come on, what am I supposed to do? Tenor's my second son - I'm not just gonna let him aimlessly wander that godsawful place for the next decade."

"He doesn't even like you, you know," Voice retorts.

Darkness sighs. "I know."

### [Tenor - Veins of the City]

Deep underground, a maze of tunnels interconnects the four districts of Ex Nihilo, where beggars and thieves have created their own makeshift communities and literal black markets. The Feared Ones are many down here; in fact, somewhere in the tunnels is the place where they originated from.

In a cavernous chamber filled with stalagmites, a cult gathers daily, under the command of Tenor Antonis. Although the cultists are passionately devoted, Tenor himself doesn't really believe in it; it's just some made-up religion he invented to get people to do his bidding. Right now, he's sitting in his chambers, preparing to go and address them.

But he's concerned with other things. For decades, every cycle since it happened, the event has been repeating in Tenor's mind - he looks down at the same hand which thrust the bloody dagger through his oldest friend all those years ago, hears the sound of Felix's voice falling down the tower, the screaming fading into the distance. He betrayed his closest friend, but it was for his own good, right? That's what he keeps telling himself. Who knows what they would have done to Felix if he had lived? Surely the Gods would have sentenced a mortal like him to a fate far crueller than death. Even though Tenor took the blame for all of it, they spared him at Olympus because of who his father was. Thus, the son of Darkness was merely sentenced to a life of banishment.

The ugly crawling things are their own punishment, though. Mortals call them Feared Ones; Tenor thinks that's a stupid name. He prefers to call them "Ugly Crawling Things". Ever since Felix released them into the city, they've been inescapable, singing those awful gibberish songs, reminding him of all the mistakes that were made.

No matter. It's ancient history, spilled milk. All that Tenor needs to focus on now is capturing one descendant from each of Felix's children, five of them, if he recalled correctly. Then he'll be able to do the sacrifice, and get rid of the Ugly Crawling Things for good. That's it. Then Olympus will surely let him back into the Elysian Realm. It would be so easy, if he just had the slightest clue where to find any of them...

It's time. Tenor gives his phony speech to the crowd of cultists, face covered by an ornamental bronze mask. One of the Ugly Crawling Things

intrudes into the room. He hums a resonant note, causing a purple light to glow through the robes, around his navel. As he manipulates the note into a strange rhythm, the light begins to flow out of his mouth, forming a thin glowing sheet. He motions forward with his hands, sending the sheet flying towards the monster, cutting it in half, straight down the middle. When Tenor looks back at the cultists, he's disturbed to find that they're all bowing down in his direction, resembling something like a swarm of pathetic worms. Disgusting. He doesn't say a word, puts his hood up and storms out.]