

The Final Wager

A short story by [Nora Bailey](#)

The flickering light illuminated enough of Luis's cards to show him that he had a losing hand. Again. Not a muscle on his face moved as he tapped the table to pass the bidding on. Bluffing in kinetic poker was a risky move, but Luis had long since stopped caring about that. It did not even hurt when the chubby redhead across from him won the hand, raking Luis's chips into his own pile. Luis would win it back eventually; he always did, one way or another.

"Serves an upper like you right," sneered the redhead. His fat fingers were surprisingly deft as he dealt another hand.

"I've been a grounder for almost eight years." A pair of queens to start, excellent. The redhead spat onto the dirty floor. "You still stink of upward."

"Rather that than smell like you." Luis tossed a few chips forward. *Fat fuck*, he thought, adding his own spit to the floor.

He glanced at his wrist implant. The dial was fading and he couldn't afford a recharge, but it was still sufficient to show that it was almost time to meet Avary. Time for one more hand, and then he'd go.

A dozen hands later, Luis scraped his meager pile of chips into the feeder and collected the credit chip it spit back at him. His back ached and his eyes were smarting from the dank room, but he was already late. No time for even a short rejuv.

"Better luck next week, dreggy upper!" the redhead called as Luis ducked out the door. He ignored the taunt. He'd been called much worse.

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"If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought you stood me up," Avary said, but she smiled and nearly tackled Luis with a hug.

"Of course you knew better. I'm a better brother than that. I brought you some things."

“I’m fine, Lu. Don’t worry about me.” But she took the bag of groceries he offered and stowed it quickly into her bare refrigerator.

Luis shook his head as he settled onto the dilapidated couch that filled most of the tiny apartment and doubled as Avary’s bed. The room felt like it was closing in on him, ready to collapse at any moment. It wasn’t a good place for a young woman to live, but Avary refused his countless offers to help her get a new place. She claimed it was a steal to find such a nice place in Lower City.

“You’ve lost weight.” He could see her shoulder bones poking at her thin t-shirt. “And you need new clothes.”

Avary looked down at herself and gave him a wry smile. “I’m clothed and alive. Please, stop worrying. You should be looking out for yourself. I know you’ve been gambling down at Jaker’s again.”

“And winning.”

“For now, anyway.” Avary crossed her arms and glared at him. “You couldn’t find a shadier place?”

That elicited a small smile. “Maybe if I put some effort into it.”

Avary shook her head. “I’m serious, Lu. If you keep winning there, you’re going to wind up with a knife in your back. And this isn’t Upper City—no one will even *try* to find who did it.” She sighed. “Mattis came by yesterday. He really wants to talk to you.”

Luis’s stomach clenched. He let his breath out slowly before replying as calmly as possible, “Again?”

“He says they want you back. You know there is no one as good as you at hunting, and Mattis still hasn’t found a new partner that’ll stick. He says they’re all nothing compared to you.”

“It’s bullshit, Avary. You know that as well as I do. Nothing but sharks and vultures up there. I’d spend weeks hunting someone down only to find out they were well-connected and released with an apology for wasting their time. No, I’m not going back to that. You’ll see, I’ll win it big soon, and then we can move back to Upper City and retire in a nice little place. We’ll get Addy and Sam, too. It’s what Mom and Dad would have wanted.”

Avary didn’t reply for a long moment, staring at him with her piercing green eyes. “You really think so? Notice that you didn’t quit the force until after they died. It’s been

eight years, Lu. If you still think that you're going to hit some jackpot from this sleazy gambling..."

Luis felt a wrench in his gut when he realized that those green eyes were brimming with tears. "I promise I will. And you promise me you'll get some sleep, you look exhausted. I need to go; there is a game over at Linnae's that I have a good feeling about."

She rubbed her eyes with the palm of her hands and looked away. "I am tired. Be careful, Lu. You're coming back on Thursday?"

"Of course."

#

His implant almost showed midnight by the time Luis made it up to Avary's place. He knocked on the door, but there was no response. He banged louder. "I know you're home, Avary, open up! I'm sorry I'm late!"

He would have tried to explain that he had been very close to coming through big on a game of roulette, but he knew she wouldn't understand. So he persisted in hammering until finally the door cracked open a few inches.

"You're late."

"It's still Thursday if you let me in now," he said. "C'mon, sis. I'm sorry, truly, but that's no reason to leave me out here." The hallway was poorly lit and covered in various stains that Luis would rather not think about. He knew that more than one person had lost credits and life in this hallway.

"Sorry, I was asleep." Avary opened the door wider and Luis squeezed in.

Avary looked as if she had lost another ten pounds in the three days since he'd seen her. Her face was gaunt, and the circles around her eyes were so dark he almost thought she'd been punched. When he hugged her, she felt like a brittle pile of bones.

"Avary, what's wrong?" he asked, ushering her over to her couch. She did not protest as he settled her down and tucked a blanket around her. "When did you last rejuv?"

"This morning. I'm fine, just a little tired."

“You’re flushed and trembling,” he said. Her normally bouncy blonde hair was lank against her head, and it looked as if it were thinning in spots. “Avary, you are *not* fine.”

“I am,” she protested, but her voice was so weak that even she did not seem convinced. “I’ll rejuv again tomorrow, if I have time. The line was so long today that I was late to work.”

“You’ve been going to work like this? And no one said anything?”

Avary shrugged. “We don’t talk much, except with the clients.”

Luis ground his teeth together but did not argue. He could feel bile rising in his throat. Avary was ill with something rejuv couldn’t cure, and it was his job to take care of her. He was failing, yet again. He swallowed hard and made her lie down on the couch and drink water. He tried to keep the worry from his face, but Avary murmured, “Don’t be so anxious, Lu. I’m fine. I just need a little sleep.”

She fell asleep a moment later, to Luis’s relief, but his relief did not last long. It was not a restful sleep; she threw the blanket on the ground every time he tried to put it over her, and she tossed and turned constantly. The bile rose again, and Luis had to blink against tears. “I’ll fix this,” he whispered to her. He would be late to a big game of kinetic poker, but he did not care.

#

“You were right. This is definitely something more than exhaustion,” the lab tech said, peering at a battered screen.

“What is it?” Luis gripped the counter to keep himself from launching over it to look at the test results himself. The lab tech’s tone did not reassure him.

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “The system doesn’t recognize it.”

“Do you?”

She gave him a flat stare. “Yes, I do know more than a fucking computer, and you’re probably Superman, huh?”

“Fine. Just tell me what I need to do.”

The lab tech shrugged. “Make funeral arrangements. As far as I can tell, from the symptoms you’ve described and the bloodwork here, there isn’t much we can do. Unknown pathogen.”

He let go of the counter and lunged at the woman, grabbing her coat and lifting her off her feet. “Listen here, this is my fucking baby sister we are talking about and I am not just going to let her *die*. So tell me what I can do!”

The lab tech reached under the counter and zapped Luis with a mild paralyzer gun. She never even so much as flinched. His arm fell to the countertop with a thud, pain racing up his elbow.

“Your concern for your sister is touching, but I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do. You can try Upper City. Their labs are usually decades ahead of ours. My equipment was built in the 30’s.”

Luis swallowed. He gave her a nod and left the lab shop with his arm hanging limply at his side. It had taken the last of his credits to get the lab tests done, except for his reserve emergency seed fund. He needed that to buy into games to get more credits, and meanwhile Avary was *dying*. He felt as if his whole body had been paralyzed. He made his way numbly through the streets of Lower City, moving with ease through the perpetual shadow from Upper City. *Fuck but I hate that place.*

#

“Luis? Is that really you? Avary said she’d pass on my message, but I didn’t think—please, please, come in.”

“It’s good to see you, Mattis. Sorry to bother you so late.”

“Not a problem at all. Anything for my partner.”

“It’s been eight years since we’ve been partners,” Luis said, stepping into Mattis’s home. It was so clean and well-lit that it unnerved him. He’d forgotten what it was like up here, with the sun in his face and clean wind in his nose.

Mattis waved an immaculately manicured hand. “Trivial detail. Does this mean you’re coming back?” His belly shook under his shirt when he laughed. “Sorry for my bluntness, I’m too excited for social niceties!”

“Mattis, I’m not coming back. But I need help, and you’re the only one I could trust up here.”

“You say that like a true grounder.”

“I am. Mattis, it’s about Avary. She’s sick.”

Mattis frowned and gestured to Luis to have a seat. He grabbed them both drinks from the autobar and sat across from Luis on a davenport. “Doesn’t Lower City have rejuv stations?”

“Of course,” Luis sipped at the drink. Manhattan. *God, how many years has it been since I’ve tasted one of these?* He let the drink sit on his tongue, savoring the flavor. “She’s been a few times, but it’s not helping. She’s losing weight and hair—she looks like a skeleton, Mattis. It’s terrifying. I had a lab run some bloodwork, and they said it was an unknown pathogen. Nothing they could do. I need Upper City help.”

“I always liked Avary. I know she’s your favorite.” Luis opened his mouth to protest, but shut it at the look Mattis gave him. “Of course you love Addy and Sam too. I’m happy to help. I have a great lab that I go to for my anti-aging treatments, if you have some samples I can get them in on priority, I’m sure.”

Luis, suddenly conscious of his graying hair—when was the last time he’d had an anti-aging treatment?—nodded. “I have samples with me. I’d be so grateful.”

“It’s done. Please, enjoy your drink and tell me how the Lower City is treating you.”

#

A clattering on his door woke Luis. He peered at the old clock on the floor—his implant was useless now—and was tempted to go back to sleep when he saw it was 3 AM. His tournament hadn’t ended until one, when his valiant last-ditch effort had cost him a month’s rent. The clattering, however, continued.

“This better be fucking good.” He cracked the door open on its chain. The peephole had been broken for as long as he’d had the place.

“Luis, thank God I found you, I need to talk to you right away.”

“And here I thought you came down at 3 AM to make an appointment.” Luis took the chain off and opened the door for Mattis. “I’d offer you something, but I’m afraid booze is one thing I don’t squander my credits on.”

Mattis shook his head, looking around the apartment before perching on the edge of the sole, dilapidated chair. “Not here for drinks.” He sounded almost out of breath, as if he’d run from the nearest level transfer. “I heard back from the lab.”

The last traces of drowsiness fled and Luis found he was holding his breath. He let it out in a hiss and nodded for Mattis to continue.

“It’s no wonder a lab down here didn’t recognize the pathogen. It doesn’t exist.”

“I can take you to see Avary for yourself—”

“Let me finish! I should say that it *hadn’t* existed until quite recently. No record of anything like it. Not in a single lab in Upper City *or* Lower City. I made them do the full search twice and pulled in some Force favors, and it is definitely the first of its kind. No, shut up, I said let me finish! There was another thing that the lab was very clear about. The pathogen is unquestionably manmade.”

“I...” Luis swallowed. “I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

Mattis leaned forward, his gaze intent on Luis. “You know what this means?”

Luis could feel his blood boiling up, his anger overcoming his reservation. He nodded. “We hunt.”

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The screen swam before Luis’s tired eyes, but he persisted in clicking through the pages. He ignored the steady stream of chatter in his ear from Mattis—“Device number three locked in place, sound check sat, visual indication sat, motion detector sat, currently no double looks from the guard, moving on to point B...”—and tracked down the current page, hungry for a clue. Any clue would be better than the series of dead ends they’d hit over the past few days. Wasted days, while Avary dwindled away and more of her colleagues turned up ill.

“Luis, are you listening?”

“Say again,” he said. He was tempted to take another alert pill. At this point, he was so overdosed that one more would hardly matter.

“I said, the devices are in place, I’m moving back in. At the door in ten.”

“Door in ten, aye. It’ll be available.”

Luis punched in the command and then went back to the list of files downloaded by Senator O’Kelly. It was more of the same irrelevant bullshit. He’d uncovered enough evidence of affairs to keep the tabloids happy for weeks, but there was not a hint of a clue about creating new diseases. He sighed and entered a perfunctory keyword search to finish out the account before he moved on.

The search pulled up three hits, which was about what Luis expected. He glanced through them—the Senator had written to one of his colleagues about the “worrying epidemic of complacency” and complained to his wife about the Senate being a “diseased body.” Similar to the rest of the accounts. The last hit, however, made Luis’s pulse quicken. It was a short message from someone identified only as “The Chairman” and the entire contents read, “Meeting about the Black Death in 2 days at the usual location and time.”

“Mattis, hurry up, I want you to see this,” he said, just as the door chimed to announce Mattis’s arrival.

“What is it? Can’t I get a bite to eat, first?”

“No! I may have finally found something, and you want to take a fucking snack break?”

Mattis laughed. “Okay, let me have it.”

Luis leaned back and let Mattis read the message. His heart was thudding in his chest. One of Upper City’s most powerful senators involved in a secret meeting? That was more than tabloid fodder, unless Senator O’Kelly had an unusual method of conducting affairs.

“I think you’re on to something, although it doesn’t do us much good without knowing where they usually meet.”

“Let me worry about that.” Luis hunched over the screen, his fingers already flying across the surface. “You can make me a sandwich.”

“Hi, Lu,” Avary whispered. Her face moved slightly, as if she were attempting a smile that she was too weak to finish. Luis’s skin tightened and he thought he could feel his heart break.

“Shush, Avary. Save your strength, you’ll need it. I’m going to find a cure for you.”

Her chin moved an inch: a nod. Luis adjusted the makeshift IV and held her hand as she drifted into an uneasy sleep. He didn’t want to leave her even for a moment, but Mattis had a promising lead about the Chairman. Luis extricated his fingers and kissed her dry, too-hot forehead before slipping out. He glanced down at his newly-recharged implant—there were advantages to working with an upper—and hurried his steps.

Mattis was waiting for him on the corner two streets away, looking out of place and on edge. He fell into step behind Luis without saying anything until they arrived at a level transfer.

“Are you sure about this?”

Mattis snorted. “Am I sure that I think a new senator is the chairman of a secret cabal developing their own diseases? Of course not. But it’s the best we’ve got, isn’t it?”

Luis nodded, watching the dark visage of Lower City sink away beneath them. “The devices are in place?”

“As many as I could plant. If this turns out to be nothing but a tryst, maybe we’ll at least be able to blackmail Senator O’Kelly into talking.”

“If we have the time.” Luis could still feel Avary’s frail fingers in his hand.

Mattis did not reply, and they made their way in silence to what Luis had dubbed HQ—their rented hideaway in what passed for a bad neighborhood in Upper City. They both slipped on a pair of headphones, settling in to listen to static and the passing chirp of an odd bird. Luis had almost fallen asleep when the sound of a woman’s voice jerked him into alertness.

“Gawain, you’re late,” she snapped.

“Nicknames?” Luis mouthed to Mattis, who rolled his eyes in reply.

“Sorry, Chairman.” That sounded like Senator O’Kelly, although the faint brogue he normally affected was missing.

A long silence followed that, and Luis worried that perhaps they’d moved on to a different location or activated a sounding, but eventually the woman’s voice came again, crisp and commanding. “That’s done, then. First order of business, Bors?”

“Chairman, Perceval will be speaking first about Project Damsel.”

This turned out to be about fundraising for an upcoming campaign, which while interesting for the various illegal tactics employed, did not help Luis’s hunt. There were five or six different speakers—he only recognized Senator O’Kelly and the Chairman, the recently-elected Senator Kern—and they seemed to have an elaborately formal method of conducting their secret meetings. Luis couldn’t help but laugh when he heard them refer to themselves as the “Knights of the Round.”

“Gawain, what is the status of the Black Death?” the Chairman—Luis couldn’t think of her as Senator Kern—asked at last.

“Moving forward admirably, Chairman. After our initial infection failed to take hold last time, I personally ensured there were enough changes made to—”

“You tire me, Gawain.” Luis could hear the warning in the Chairman’s voice. O’Kelly was apparently not a favored knight.

“Yes, Chairman. This time the infection has taken hold. Current estimate is that over a dozen are showing symptoms, and it is poised to spread quickly. We could see as much as a sixty percent cull rate amongst the undesirables.”

“See to it that it does not fizzle out this time, Gawain, before you try my patience further.”

“Yes, Chairman. I will have a detailed report for you tomorrow, and I will personally track the progress of the epidemic. We have lost track of patient zero. We believe she is already dead.”

“Very well. Bors, is there any further business?”

The rest of the meeting was filled with administrative makework that Luis barely heard. It was ludicrous. It was impossible. There was *no way* that a secret society of Upper City senators was planning an epidemic to cull the Lower City, but when Luis saw the expression on Mattis’s face, he knew that he had not misheard.

“Fuck,” Mattis whispered. “Just fuck.”

“You can say that again.” Luis pulled off his headphones and threw them against the wall. “I’ll kill them.”

“Assassinate a senator? We wouldn’t stand a chance, and anyway, it wouldn’t stop this. We need a plan, Luis. Take a few deep breaths, and we can figure this out.”

#

Luis checked over his gear for the fifth time. A gun, obtained with no little trouble, but satisfyingly heavy in the holster beneath his arm. A paralyzer, several knives, body armor, and no few flashbombs. He wished he could have more, but their funds weren't unlimited, and he didn't want to weigh himself down too much. He looked down at his implant--it was still five hours until he was supposed to meet Mattis.

He left HQ trying to look innocuous but knowing he was failing. He replayed the plan over and over in his head, but it did little to calm his nerves. He forced himself to take several deep breaths as he walked down the disturbingly clean and wide streets of Upper City.

The senator's mansion was not hard to find, a pretentious building designed to look modestly ostentatious. Luis's implant buzzed. It was a message from Mattis. *All set?*

He tapped out a reply on his handset. *See you at 23.* Then he set his alerts to silent and approached the side gate through the deepening dusk. He didn't dare breathe as he punched in the security code and let his fingerprints get scanned, but somehow their hack had worked and the gate clicked open.

There was no going back from here, but Luis did not hesitate as he entered the gate. The grounds spread out in front of them exactly as expected, and his feet took the much-planned route without even needing his guidance. He patted at his weapons again, relieved to feel that they were still there.

Getting access to the house itself had been much more difficult, but eventually they had bribed the right person and now one of the small side entrances opened without a sound for Luis. Once inside, he had to stop and take a couple pills to calm himself. His heart was beating so hard he didn't know how the alarms hadn't picked up on it.

"Stay focused," he muttered to himself. The household was buzzing with activity. Not what he and Mattis had planned with their late-night approach, but Luis did not let it faze him. He nodded at the various household domestics he passed, their neatly starched uniforms a ridiculously unnecessary touch that made Luis grind his teeth.

Based on the plans of the house, Senator O’Kelly’s study was on the third floor near the rear, where his wide windows gave him a sweeping view of his immaculate lawn. Although it was past suppertime and there were a thousand places the senator might be, that was where Luis headed. He could almost see the senator sitting at a large desk, sipping brandy and smoking a cigar and pretending to live in some bygone era of aristocracy.

It was almost too easy to barge through the door with his gun drawn, using a quickform plastic to hold it locked behind him. Luis barked out a laugh when he saw the senator’s leather chair behind a mahogany desk. The senator merely stared, as if Luis were a poorly done hologram show.

“Game’s up,” Luis growled. He made certain that the senator could see the gun was loaded and the safety was off. “I know all about Black Death and the Knights of the Round.”

“Really?” Senator O’Kelly took a long puff on his cigar, blowing the smoke out in a perfect ring. “I have no idea who you are or what you are referring to, but I assure you that this will be over in a moment.”

“Will it?” Luis took a step closer. “Did you hit your alarm, Senator? Do you feel safe and untouchable?”

Senator O’Kelly sipped at a glass filled with a liquid too clear to be brandy, which Luis found oddly disappointing. He said nothing.

“I suppose it never occurred to you that the alarm could be shorted. Yes, and that one too. No one is coming, *Gawain*. It’s just you and me and, unless you cooperate, it will very shortly just be me.”

The senator leaned back in his chair and smiled. “I suppose you have me, then. Of course all of my personal security systems can be overridden by some jumped-up grounder.”

Luis smiled. “I didn’t have to get them all. Just enough to buy some time. It will be small comfort to you, Senator, to know that I am in custody if you are dead. And I assure you, you will be dead if you don’t tell me how to cure the Black Death.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Am I?” Luis took a step closer, the muzzle of the gun directly in the senator’s face. “Patient zero is my sister, and you have no idea what that means to me.”

He was pleased to see that patrician face pale ever so slightly.

“There is a cure,” he said. “I will need to access my safe.”

Luis nodded. “I’m watching you, and there is more than just this gun for you to worry about.”

Senator O’Kelly got up with careful movements and made his way over to a painting on the wall. It did not surprise Luis when it swung aside to reveal a glowing display. The senator scanned his fingerprints in and whispered a passcode, and the safe’s door withdrew. Luis could see into the safe, and to his relief there did not appear to be a weapon inside.

The senator withdrew two containers and let the safe close as he turned to face Luis. He held them out in front of him and smirked. “I think this is what you had in mind. This is an antidote.” He shook the container in his right hand. “And this is, given a good enough chemist, the information you’d need to produce the antidote yourself.” He nodded towards his left hand.

“Give them to me,” Luis snapped.

“I don’t think so.”

“What makes you think I won’t just kill you and take them?”

Senator O’Kelly smiled. It was not a pleasant one. “They’re very fragile containers.”

“Hand them over!”

“Which one would you like? I’m afraid this antidote isn’t much. Just enough to cure one person--a small person, perhaps a woman. You could take the other, of course, and make enough antidote to stop the whole thing. It would take time, though, and who knows what casualties might result in the meantime.” The senator was still smiling his sickly smile.

“You’re bluffing.”

“Am I? I assure you, I have no desire to die.”

For a long moment neither spoke. Luis could faintly hear sounds from the other side of the door. It would not take too long for them to break through the quickform and get inside. Images flashed through his head--the sad, downtrodden populace of Lower City, the pale shadows of people trying to eke out a living beneath the oppressive bulk of Upper City, Avary laughing at him, Avary’s paper-thin hand in his--and he could not

move. The senator was bluffing, Luis was sure. How many games of kinetic poker had he played? How many hands won and bluffs called? The senator couldn't have foreseen this, and no one would be so foolish as to put such important solutions in fragile containers.

Luis lunged towards the senator, letting the gun fall in order to grab at both vials. The senator tried to hurl them both away, but Luis caught one. The other smashed against the floor with a tinkle of breaking glass, and the contents--the antidote--sank into the thick carpet. Luis watched it in disbelief, the other vial clutched in his hand. When he looked up, the senator was gone, the door of an escape-hole slamming shut behind him.

Then Luis had no more time to think, throwing himself through the window to effect his own escape.

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She looked peaceful in death, Luis thought. Her green eyes were closed, of course, and she would never laugh again, but she was at peace. He held onto that thought as hard as he could, his jaw clenched so tight he didn't know if he would ever open it again.

Addy was wailing, great big tearless wails that filled the air in a terrible way. Sam clung to his arm, tears silently coursing down her cheeks. She hadn't stopped crying since they'd gotten there, and she refused all offered tissues. The tears were forming a dark spot on her thin shirt, and still she cried without a sound.

There were others there, but Luis did not see them. He could not see anyone but Avary, so thin and light that she might just blow away in the wind before they got her into the fire. His other sisters held on to him for strength, but his strength was gone with her.

"I'm sorry, Luis." Mattis patted his shoulder awkwardly. "You did everything you could."

"I didn't," Luis whispered. "I gambled away her life."

Mattis sighed and Luis looked up, surprised to see that his partner was crying. "You saved everyone else. They say there's no more than a dozen fatalities, and since you

were smart enough to record the whole damn thing, we'll be able to take down the Knights of the Round. You can't beat yourself up like this."

Luis turned his gaze back to Avary and did not hear.

#The End#