

## Perfectly Balanced

Joaquín knocked on the weathered door of the old farmhouse and waited. He and his partner Gabriel stood patiently as they heard the muffled sound of slow, shuffling feet approach the door. Perhaps Joaquín imagined it, but he thought he heard a slight gasp as the resident inside presumably looked through the peep hole and saw what awaited on the other side. Still, a lock creakily struggled out of place, and the door slowly swung open.

A wizened old man stood and peeked his head and upper body out from behind the safety of the sturdy door, while still practically leaning on it for support. His skin was nearly yellow – whether with age or with sickness, who could say – and dotted with liver spots. He couldn't have weighed more than 120 pounds, and if he *was* any heavier, he probably owed it to his impressively long (if somewhat ratty) wizard beard that stretched just past his waist. His hands trembled a bit as he pulled the door open a bit wider, but again, that might have more to do with who he was meeting than it did with his physical condition.

All of this might have surprised Joaquín if he hadn't already read the man's medical file. It was rare for most people to ever see someone this long-lived, or this rundown. There just weren't many out there. But when there *was* someone like this, it was inevitable they would meet Joaquín or one of his fellow actuaries soon enough.

"Hello, James Poole," started Joaquín with a friendly but formal smile. "This conversation is being recorded for posterity," he said, gesturing to the button on his shirt pocket which doubled as a camera. "Normally I verify that you are indeed the person we have on file, but I think in this case I'm fairly certain that you *are* who we're looking for. I take it you know why we're here?"

The man nodded curtly and seemed to gulp down whatever words he might have said or whatever nerves he was feeling.

"Excellent," Joaquín went on. "I must say, I'm impressed. One hundred and fifty-three! Congratulations on a strong life. You must have been fortunate, the median age at death is 119, you know."

Joaquín paused a few beats to let James speak. However, the man said nothing, just clutching the door a bit tighter, so Joaquín pressed on.

"In any event, it's time. Do you have any petitions to make for your case? Any wishes for how it should be done? Or preferences on burial?"

The man shook his head quickly, his beard shaking back and forth like a ribbon being played with by a child.

"Very good. We'll take care of all of that for you, no need to worry you with the details now. And now the most important question, of course: Do you have a successor?"

The man said nothing again, and instead just looked down at his shoes. After a few seconds, he shook his head again, but more solemnly this time.

“Understood,” said Joaquín. “On behalf of the Bureau of Life Preservation as well as the State Government of Indiana, we thank you for your contribution. Gabriel will handle things from here.” Then he turned and walked back to the charcoal gray government-issued parcel van they had come in, and climbed into the driver’s seat, pulling the door shut behind him.

When he turned back to watch Gabriel, he saw his partner standing at the bottom of the front stoop, as the elderly fellow slowly slumped his way down it, clinging tightly to the handrail. Gabriel stood stock still and offered no assistance. Normally Gabriel and Joaquín would be particularly tense at this moment, and might even have their weapons unholstered just in case, but there was clearly no need here.

When the old man reached the bottom of the staircase, he followed Gabriel to the back of the van. Gabriel threw the rear door up, and hit a button to extend a ramp that quickly reached the man’s feet. Joaquín would have guessed that the man probably hesitated when he saw the three bodies already inside, but soon enough Joaquín felt the van shaking just a bit as the two men clambered into its bowels. Gabriel retracted the ramp, and slammed the rear door shut. It was less than a full minute later when Joaquín heard the door open and shut again as his partner hopped out before walking around to reenter the passenger side.

Joaquín looked at his partner as he got in, but Gabriel’s pale blue eyes reflected nothing that wasn’t there already. Coldness, but also devotion. Hardness, but also loyalty. Indifference, but also just a hint of excitement. Gabriel was a polite enough travel companion and partner, but not necessarily the best conversationalist. But Joaquín never wanted to spend much more time with him than was necessary. Those eyes reminded him of a shark’s. They weren’t necessarily cruel or malicious in any way, but they were the eyes of a man who followed his nature and did what he was obligated to do without flinching.

Joaquín looked away from Gabriel, who was adjusting his seatbelt. “Onto the next one” Joaquín mumbled to himself, and he set off on the same dirt road that had brought them here.

---

Gabriel liked the driving that came with the job. He and Joaquín had different music tastes, and different interests in general, so the van was typically silent other than the sound of Joaquín’s fingers tapping the wheel to some unknown rhythm. However, the quiet suited Gabriel just fine; it gave him time to think.

Today, Gabriel was particularly reflective, and he thought of all the things that had to happen to lead him to where he was today. Technically, his journey started before he was even born (in more ways than one), but especially regarding the creation of the Bureau of Life Preservation nearly a century ago. When the Global National Council decided that the Earth was unable to sustain a population of more than 10 billion people, it raised some eyebrows. When they tried to allocate an “acceptable population” to each specific *country*, however, it caused a little more controversy. Still, with all the larger countries on board, it wasn’t long until even the smaller ones stopped protesting, even if it took a quick war or two to get there.

The Bureau of Life Preservation was the United States' agency that kept track of its population and made sure it was kept at that acceptable number. This was a chaotic task in the early days, and required some serious overhauls to the census system, including integrating census knowledge with medical records, which was thankfully made easier by the government's transition to a single-payer system some decades before.

Obviously, the most important component of keeping the population at a certain level was to control births. A sizable chunk of the people working for the BLP were "hounds," or detectives that searched for "breeders" that tried to have unauthorized children. If they caught you, the child would be eliminated immediately, with no discussion; there was no tolerance for deviation from the population plan.

That didn't mean no children could ever be born, though. Medical advancements continued to increase the average lifespan, but it's not as if the population was immortal. All births had to be at a registered hospital and could only occur if you had a "gold card." Gold cards were sort of like birth certificates, but in reverse. They were both issued by the government, but you had to trade in a gold card to receive a birth certificate, and therefore a child. If you gave birth and didn't have a card ready to go, well... they kept a few hounds on hand in the maternity ward for that very reason.

The easiest way to get a gold card was if a family member died and bequeathed their "spot" in society to you, which would cause the government to issue you a card. Their life for your future child's, basically. You could also buy one from the state government directly, but they were ludicrously expensive. Since the number never went up or down, the government only could sell new ones when someone died with no next of kin to pass it to -- like James -- so supply was very limited. There was a whole group of financial derivatives based on the cost of a gold card, which fluctuated with a daily auction marketplace.

*Puts and calls on the cost of a life*, Gabriel thought with a chuckle. He'd grown up with it, so it was somewhat normalized by now, but whenever he really stopped to think about it, it still shocked him.

The financial sector was far from the shadiest unintended consequence of the gold card system, though. For one, wealthy people were essentially the only ones who could have children anymore. You could theoretically have a child as a poorer person, if a grandparent passed away or something, but those cases were rarer. More often than not, poor families with a card or two from their parents or grandparents had to sell them to make ends meet. There was an entire underground marketplace where people bought and sold gold cards, and most of the purchasers didn't ask where they came from. Some were legitimate sales, while others were either forged or acquired through less-than-legal means. Why just rob a man for his wallet when you could extort him for the card representing his very life itself, which was much more valuable?

Surprisingly though, most of this was pretty well accepted by the populace. Perhaps it was just that it had been in place for a long time, and they were all just used to it by now. But whatever the reason, they swallowed most of what came their way. The population restrictions? Needed. Everyone knew how hard things were already, let alone if they had more mouths to feed. The hounds? Imperfect and often too violent, but still the needed enforcement arms of the law. The black market? The

kidnapping/muggings weren't exactly great, but there was something to be said for the ability to get gold cards for a little cheaper, without having to pay Uncle Sam his cut.

However, there was one part of the system that people almost unanimously disliked. *Unfairly so*, Gabriel thought, but then again, he was particularly biased. As previously mentioned, every nation knew they had to control births, to some extent. But the United States went a bit farther. They controlled deaths too.

Now, they didn't go around executing people willy nilly. They weren't monsters, after all. It was all about logic and efficiency. Those who cost the most to society – and required the most resources to stay alive – would be removed. That's another reason why the government needed to be sure they possessed updated medical records for every citizen. Usually it was older people like James who were on their deathbeds already, but it could happen to anyone at any time, really. Babies born with complex medical conditions or disabilities were usually taken care of by the hounds, whether you had a gold card or not. Preventative care for adults had improved to the point that even getting the sniffles was rare, but an infection or a gunshot wound could be a death sentence. Why bother treating someone with a rare infirmity when you could just move on to the next person, and maybe raise a little money for the government with the sale of a new gold card in the process?

*It's really simple*, Gabriel thought with a little indignance. *Our country only has so much food and energy to dole out, and it's only right that we give it to those who require it the least. Then there's more to go around for everyone. I don't know how it could be any other way.*

Yet everyone else didn't seem to see it that way. It's unclear how the bill even passed through both Houses of Congress, since it was wildly unpopular, but indeed it had passed. The hounds were accepted, but field actuaries like Joaquín and "sanitation enforcement officers" like Gabriel were practically spat upon by most people who saw them.

It seemed unfair to Gabriel. He considered himself and Joaquín to only be removing those who no longer had a place in society, to make room for new babies to be born and new families to be made. They were a part of the circle of life, excising the uncontrolled tumors draining resources from the rest of America's body. What was wrong with that? The hounds slaughtered innocent infants and children without a second thought, and *they* were more publicly accepted? Ridiculous.

As part of their BLP outfits (a black uniform with a thick yellow stripe across the chest), both Joaquín and he also wore yellow arm bands with an insignia on them denoting their rank. Gabriel's was a horizontal line, while Joaquín's was a horizontal and vertical line in the shape of a cross, given that he was the one in charge of their little twosome. Gabriel always liked the arm bands. He felt like they were fitting; Gabriel was the one who subtracted, removing and disposing of the necessary individual, and Joaquín was the one who added, by identifying who needed to be removed but also ensuring the government determined who would get the gold card next. Perfectly balanced, as all things should be.

As Gabriel glanced down, he noticed that his own armband had little flecks of blood stuck in it, but they didn't seem particularly recent. He'd have to wash it sometime this week.

Sanitation teams like Joaquín and Gabriel went by many nicknames. Those working for the BLP liked to affectionately refer to themselves as "Thunder and Lightning," as partners tended to be inseparable, and the sanitation enforcement officer always followed right after the field actuary. Other

names were not so generous. The most commonly used one was “drones,” but whether that owed to their uniform’s resemblance to a bumblebee or their position as a mindless worker, who could say. “The judge and the executioner,” “reapers,” or “banshees” were some others, but the idea was the same. Wherever sanitation teams went, death followed.

The public perception of his job bothered Gabriel, but the job itself wasn’t too bad. As he thought many times before, he performed a necessary service to the nation, and even if he didn’t love it, someone had to do it for the greater good. It was no different than being a soldier tasked with killing the enemy in battle.

Joaquín had even started to make a name for himself as a sanitation enforcement officer. Not only was he one of the sanitizers who had the lowest rate of people left un-sanitized (which was generally considered a failure), but he also had some really progressive ideas. He was one of a few pioneers within the department pushing forward the idea of making the actuarial work a true *cost-benefit* analysis, instead of just a cost analysis. It wasn’t really his jurisdiction, but he worked enough with Joaquín to know the basic ins-and-outs, and it seemed like an oversight to him, so he’d been proposing criteria that also weighed in the *positive* value of a life. People who earned higher wages and paid more in taxes were a bigger benefit to the rest of society, so they shouldn’t be culled simply because their costs were a little above average too. Some of his department heads had pushed back on the idea, calling it “morally reprehensible” and “transparently classist,” but it was just efficient and fair, wasn’t it? Gabriel was sure they (or the people above *them*) would see reason eventually.

In any event, their drive to the next location would take a while. Time to put on some headphones and listen to his latest murder mystery.

---

In the driver’s seat, Joaquín thought about his past as well, but in a much different light. As he pondered how *he* ended up in this position, his fingers absentmindedly drilled out a staccato symphony on the steering wheel.

Joaquín recalled the difficult classwork and the long hours of studying that led to him becoming a credentialed actuary, eventually taking a job with the Bureau of Life Preservation. He remembered working hard as an office actuary and helping identify the people in need of “sanitation” for field actuaries. After a decade or two, he was eventually promoted to a field actuary, which was the most prestigious job most members of the BLP could have outside of upper-level management. Field actuaries really were the final judge, as they were allowed to prevent a person’s sanitation, although those cases were very rare. Usually, it was only if someone had made a miraculous recovery since their last medical information was uploaded, but there were a few other scattered reasons someone might be spared, at least for a few years.

More than just the career path though, Joaquín remembered the feelings. He recollected the stress of studying for his classes while also trying to pass actuarial exams, but he also brought to mind the relief he felt when he finally DID pass. He recalled the loneliness he experienced throughout the first few years of his career, but he also recalled the passion he felt when he met his eventual wife, Alondra. He relived the crushing sadness of learning his mother had passed away of a fluke stroke half a year ago,

but also his ecstasy when he found out Alondra was pregnant just a few days later. Perfectly balanced, as all things should be.

But not everything had its counterpoint. For at their first OB-GYN appointment, a few weeks after the good news, the couple was “regretfully informed” by Doctor Tillery that their child would have Down syndrome. The doctor didn’t need to explain the implications of such a diagnosis; she knew Joaquín’s job. She just quietly said “I’ll give you two a few moments,” and politely gestured from Joaquín to the phone. He understood. Before he or his wife even had time to get emotional, he placed the call.

It took less than five minutes for the hounds to arrive. They asked Joaquín to wait outside the room briefly, and then they were gone as quickly as they came. Joaquín re-entered the room and scooped his wife up in his arms, carrying her back out to the car.

They didn’t speak on the ride back, and didn’t have much to say to each other in the days after either. Neither of them ever cried about it in front of each other, but both knew the other one did it when they weren’t around. The eyes that were just a little too red for allergies, the fresh tissue box by the bedside, the throat that catches on the first few words; there were too many little hints to ignore.

Joaquín wanted them both to open up, but to put it simply, he was afraid. He felt that it wasn’t his place, wasn’t really his experience, wasn’t his conversation to broach. And perhaps more importantly, he didn’t know how his wife felt about *him*. Alondra had been distant ever since it happened, but was that due to a typical grief over the loss of a child? Or resentment over a husband that didn’t fight for their child, and went off to work in a system complicit with what happened to them? Maybe Joaquín wasn’t just afraid of being pushy and starting a conversation that Alondra wasn’t ready for; maybe what he really feared was having his questions answered resolutely.

One day, Alondra did want to talk about it. She said the hounds were polite, and professional. They numbed her up and went about their business, and left no mess behind. Alondra claimed that physically, she didn’t feel a thing on that day. Perhaps that was true. But what a pittance of comfort that was when compared to what the both of them felt every waking second of the four months, three weeks, and six days since.

Mentally back in the van, Joaquín tilted his head to the left so that it was facing as far away from Gabriel as possible while still being able to see the road. He wasn’t going to cry, not here; he wouldn’t let a shark smell him bleed.

To distract himself, he thought back to Jason earlier that day. Or was it James? The names all blurred together now. On the surface, Joaquín was always happy to experience a candidate like James. People that had come to terms with their own mortality, or at least could be brave in the face of the greatest fear man knows... that was impressive. It certainly made his job cleaner and easier too, with no tearful protests or desperate escape attempts.

Yet another part of him *wanted* them to fight. To not “go quietly into that good night”. To assert that it was their life, and that they weren’t done living it yet.

And if they were too scared, if they cowered in the moment, Joaquín wanted them to have a loved one nearby. Not just to experience their last moments with the folks that matter, but to have a champion. To have someone fight for them. To see their closest ally boldly stand their ground, and face

the fury of the entire country if necessary, but claim that this life will have to be taken over their dead body.

In short, Joaquín wanted to see someone do what he failed to.

---

Joaquín and Gabriel walked up to the dingy apartment door, but each step seemed to be too fast for the actuary. He wished that time could stop where he was, and this could be one call he didn't have to complete. To stall for time, he double-checked everything on his chart.

**Name: Maya Garcia.** Check

**Location: 7 Windsor Ridge, Apartment 13-F.** The F was barely hanging on to the door, but this was definitely the right place.

**Reason: Spina Bifida** Really? They usually caught that right at birth, or even before, and the hounds would take a case like that. Maybe this was a mild version that took decades to present itself...

**Age: 8 months.** Oh.

Joaquín put his clipboard back in the briefcase he carried with him, and set it down on the ground. He raised his hand and formed a fist. He only paused for a few seconds, but an eternity passed within him, as he thought again of everything that led him to this point. Then his shoulder slumped a bit, his head bowed, and he let his hand fall onto the door, emitting one soft knock.

Within a few seconds, a young Latina woman who couldn't be more than twenty years old cracked the door open with the chain still in place. Joaquín raised his head with a smile plastered on his face. "Hello, Ms. Garcia? This conversation is being recorded for posterity."

*If you enjoyed this story, check out Love, Death & Robots S2E3 - "Pop Squad" which provided the inspiration for it and is set in a similar universe*