

THE DUPLICATE PRESIDENT

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“Your son is not bluffing this time, Madam Emilia,” General Torres, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, told the elderly woman seated on the wheelchair. “He has been personally overseeing the technical preparations. He is finally going to do it. Perhaps he feels that it would redeem for him some of the respect he lost from the international community after he didn’t push through with his threats against China last year.”

“Yet we will not win any war that China would surely declare if the President launches the missile at Fiery Cross Reef,” warned General Roco, the Defense Secretary.

“Why don’t *you* tell that to the President?” Madam Emilia kept her calm and even tone.

“He would not listen anymore,” General Torres answered. “He has become obsessed with proving his might against the Chinese, especially after President Song’s remarks to the press two weeks ago when he called President Marquez a joker.”

The three were seated at one end of the long *narra* table in the formal dining room of Madam Emilia’s house at Forbes Park. The matriarch sat at the head of the table, where a chair had been removed to make space for her wheelchair. General Torres and General Roco, the two highest military officers of the country after the President, were seated at opposite sides of Madam Emilia.

“The opposition has the support of the U.S.,” General Roco added.

“And yours?” Madam Emilia raised a mocking brow at the AFP Chief of Staff. Olivia, her personal secretary of fifty years, had relayed to her the information she had gathered from the grapevine of secretaries serving the high-ranking officials of government, that General Roco had been sending feelers to the opposition, ready to jump ship in the case of the downfall of her son’s current regime.

“We have reliable intelligence that there are plots already in place to assassinate the President,” General Roco added, pretending not to have heard Madam Emilia’s last retort. He did not mind what the elderly woman thought of him. Not anymore. The CNN had described Madam Emilia Marquez as the most influential Filipino woman in Philippine politics today. She was known as the secret behind the success and popularity of her husband, the late President Carlos Marquez, to the masses. She became the unofficial adviser to the three Presidents who assumed their presidency after her husband’s term. The secret meetings she had held with these leaders in her Forbes Park mansion were no secret in the small world of Philippine politics. General Roco knew that with her numerous spies and informants in all branches of the government, Madam Emilia must also be aware by now of the growing dissent of the people towards her son. The general sentiment of the majority was that President Marquez had overstayed in his position, and it was only a matter of months before he would be replaced, either through a people’s revolution similar to 1986, or a military *coup d’état*.

Upon election by an overwhelming majority of votes three years ago, President Marquez embarked on an aggressive all-out war against illegal drugs and Islamic extremism. In the second year of his presidency, and riding on the high approval ratings of the people, he declared Martial Law throughout the country. He defended his strategic move on the spate of killings all over the archipelago, purported to be connected to the illegal drug trade, and a series of bombings in major cities, from Metro Manila to Davao, claimed to have been perpetrated by Islamic terrorist groups.

However, there were rumors that the killings, bombings, and mysterious disappearances were actually carried out by the police—whose Chief was President Marquez’s best friend since high school and an extremely loyal buddy—under the President’s own orders. President Marquez had also been suspected of having had connections to Islamic terrorist groups, but neither the NBI nor the PNP could come up with conclusive pieces of evidence to prove these allegations, or even dared act upon complaints against the highest official of the land. President Marquez had declared Martial Law before his staunchest critics, the lawmakers in Congress, could further investigate on the reports circulating against him.

Barely a month after the country was put under Martial law, a surprising period of peace and order followed. No more killings, bombings, and mysterious disappearances. President Marquez then shifted his focus toward nuclear research and aimed to develop a cache of nuclear arsenal that, as he described during his last State of the Nation Address, would rival that of North Korea. He had a vision—which he would constantly stress during various media interviews—on how the world would come to respect the Philippines once again.

Then came the series of threats against China that made him controversial in the international community, and a constant target of criticism by the United Nations and human rights organizations. President Marquez wanted control of a chunk of the Spratlys—or at least those which were within the boundaries of the Philippine seas as determined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea—and reclaim the reefs and islands which he believed were stolen by China over the last couple of decades. He put the country on the offensive, and impressed upon the world an image of himself as the bad guy in modern international relations, even worse than Kim Oon, the present leader of North Korea.

No dissident voice dared speak against the dictatorial rule of President Marquez. Even media was state-controlled. However, after five years in office, the tides seemed to be turning. The former members of the dissolved Congress had united to raise their opposition, buttressed by the support of the United Nations and the West. President Marquez's supporters, too, were crossing parties one by one. The Defense Secretary and the AFP Chief were themselves feeling the pressure to shift their own allegiances. In fact, this recent visit to the former First Lady was taken upon the urging of then Governor Lastrilla of Batangas, who thought that if not one of them could dissuade the President of his foolish plan to attack China, perhaps the son would listen to his own mother.

"I would like to keep my loyalty to your son as I had for your late husband," General Torres began. He could not look Madam Emilia directly in the eyes while he spoke, however. As a military man, he had been trained to obey the orders of his superior, and being the highest official of the Armed Forces, he had pledged his loyalty to the President. However, today he had come to connive with the President's mother, to persuade her to commit an act akin to a betrayal of his office.

"But I love my country more. Your husband, the late president, was my best friend. You know that. I was the best man at your wedding. We were like brothers, being the only Filipinos at West Point during our time there. I promised on his deathbed to guide your son, my godson, in his political career. Caloy was sure that his son was going to succeed him in the presidency someday. His dream came true, only..." He paused, uncertain of how to phrase what he wanted to say next.

"Anyway, Madam Emilia, this is why I have requested this meeting with you today. Out of respect to your late husband—and our long friendship. I would like to inform you in person that I may not be able to fulfill that promise of looking after your son any longer. My conscience cannot allow

me acquiesce to the plans of the madman that my godson had become. He is going to bring the country to ruin.”

“No need to profess that bit about loving the country to justify your opinions about Leonidas,” Madam Emilia waived a hand, a mocking tone in her voice. “I share your view, Frankie. You are correct. My son has turned into a madman. I have lost control of him, too. He has stopped listening to me. If he were ten, I would have given him a spanking. If his father were alive... But, yes, it is time someone does something.”

Not that Madam Emilia had given up on her son completely. Every Sunday, President Marquez, accompanied by his wife and their teenage daughter, would have lunch with her. Whenever she would broach the subject of politics, however, he would stop her in midsentence. Since he had been elected President, he had stopped asking for advice from his mother, from whom he had solicited guidance and whom he had constantly obeyed, from the time he began as a young Congressman to when he was elected Speaker of the House on his second term, until his nomination as presidential candidate of the Nationalist Party. His mother had steered his political career, cajoled and even blackmailed the men and officials whom she knew could give her son the leverage and put him into the spotlight. She hired the best spin doctors to project the right image that would make his son appealing to the masses, the poor, the uneducated—in other words, the majority of the voting populace, and the easiest to fool.

But when he was finally elected, President Marquez seemed to have outgrown his mother and refused to listen to her counsel anymore. Madam Emilia was disappointed and annoyed with her son’s shabby treatment of herself. But she was somehow consoled that he had remained devoted to her in other ways, like making sure that he was present every Sunday for lunch in her Forbes Park mansion.

“The U.S. has expressed great concern, Madam,” General Roco spoke. “They may look at China as a constant rival and antagonist, but even they realize the folly of President Marquez’s threat. Nuking Fiery Cross, even if it is only a small island—not even a real one in the strict definition of the word—would be enough to incite the anger of the huge Communist nation. America has a lot of interests in the Philippines, as well as a love-hate relationship with China. The U.S. prefers tolerance—or hypocrisy, if we may be so blunt, being just amongst ourselves—for the sake of economic profit and stability of all concerned states. Which leads us to the real purpose of our visit, Madam. They have proposed a solution.”

General Roco nodded at General Torres and the latter whipped out his phone. He pointed it at a blank space of wall above the decorative fireplace, beside a colorful Expressionist-style Malang portrait of three women standing side by side wearing traditional clothing. A point of light shone from the phone and projected a small screen on the cream-colored wall. General Roco stood up and was about to turn Madam Emilia’s wheelchair, but the old lady put up her hand to stop him. She twiddled a knob on the arm of her wheelchair and swiveled by herself to face the wall behind her.

A video clip began playing, showing at first an empty room, white everywhere like a sterile hospital or laboratory: white ceilings, white-tiled floors, and white walls. The video had no sound. The camera panned to the wall where a row of glass cases stood. Inside the cases were what looked like mannequins on stands. However, instead of the pretty faces and perfect bodies of dummies displayed in department stores, the figures in the video had beer bellies, cellulites, wrinkled skins, and other physical imperfections of real human beings. A few looked young and attractive, but most were elderly. Their sizes also varied from the short and stout old man to a lanky and towering young lady. As the camera panned at the naked bodies inside the glass cases, Madam Emilia wondered why the faces of the dummies

looked familiar. The camera was moving too fast for her to concentrate on one face and remember exactly whom it reminded her of, but she gasped when it briefly paused to focus on the face of one of the male figures. It was that of her son! While the eyes were closed, the resemblance was uncanny. Whoever designed or manufactured the dummy paid careful attention to get the details right: the thickness of the mane and the amount of grey hair, the deep crow's feet that were more prominent on the right eye, the slightly pointed ears, a mole on the right side of the temple, and the thin arms and legs that looked disproportionate to the rounded midsection of President Marquez. The video stopped abruptly after it paused on the President's face and cut to a flickering blank screen on the wall.

"What was that?" Madam Emilia looked at the two men in turn.

"That was an android copy of the President," General Torres said slowly, emphasizing every word, as if waiting for Madam Emilia to process the incredulous meaning of each one before continuing. "What you just watched was a confidential video sent by the CIA only this morning."

"An android copy of Leonidas?" Madam Emilia repeated. "And the other figures there?"

"World leaders, CEOs of multinational corporations, influential personalities, even celebrities," General Torres said.

"Why would they make android duplicates of people? Why make one that looks like my son?"

"For decades now, Madam," General Roco answered, "the CIA has been operating an experimental laboratory which has perfected the design and manufacture of advanced types of androids that do not only look and act like human beings, but can be programmed to act and interact with others, so that you would not be able to tell apart the copy from the original."

"Since when?" Madam Emilia asked.

“Since the sixties. It is a well-guarded secret, of course. Imagine the nefarious applications that the wrong kinds of people would come up with if they were granted access to the technology.”

“What for?” the old lady asked again.

“Truth be told, for anything. But in Director Burns’ words, Madam, he said they maintain the laboratory not for whatever commercial or political gains they could get out of the technology, but for more noble ones like... world peace.”

“What about you, generals? How long have you known about this android technology?”

“Only yesterday, Madam Emilia,” General Torres answered, “when I took the call from Director Burns. I relayed the information to General Roco immediately. If there is someone among the President’s men whose integrity I trust, Madam, it is General Roco. Only the three of us know about this for now. The CIA itself, Director Burns said, has put in place the strictest security measures to keep the world from knowing about the android laboratory in Washington. They only inform outsiders when they feel that it is imperative...”

“In rare cases such as ours,” General Roco finished for the other man.

“And what do you intend to do with the android copy of my son? Make him take the place of the President? Like a decoy?” Madam Emilia laughed but stopped when she realized that she just blurted out the actual purpose of the two generals for insisting that she met them today.

“We are going to prevent your son from keeping his threat of nuking the Spratly island occupied by China,” General Roco said.

“We are going to use the technology again to save the Philippines,” General Torres added.

“Again?” Madam Emilia swiveled her wheelchair to face the Defense Secretary.

“It seems, Madam, that the country had availed of this solution before, during the time of another dictator.”

“Marcos?” Madam Emilia half-whispered. She was not yet born when Ferdinand Marcos became President of the country, but Madam Emilia knew of only one other Filipino dictator, whose name had become a byword in the media recently, since her son became the second President in Philippine history to place the entire archipelago under Martial Law.

General Torres nodded. “When President Marcos called then American President Reagan for advice on how to deal with the growing call for his ouster, Reagan referred him to CIA Director Bill Casey. They prepared a perfect exit for him. Marcos was flown out of Malacañang and into Hawaii a week before he took his dubious oath of office. Days before EDSA happened they had already replaced him with his duplicate.”

“So the man who waved goodbye to the crowd in the balcony and even sang with Imelda...” Madam Emilia paused as she tried to recall the clip from an old documentary she had watched of the last hours of the Marcoses in Malacañang.

“It was an android, Madam Emilia,” General Roco said. “Not the real President Marcos.”

“Why did he need to have himself replicated?”

“He was afraid for his safety,” General Torres answered. “He wanted a secure exit. With the unruly crowd pressing on the gates of the palace, who would have thought that they would still be able to flee alive? President Marcos was already planning his comeback even before he was flown out of the country. I guess he thought of himself as some Napoleon returning from

exile, to reclaim the empire he had lost. But first, he needed to make sure that he escaped from Malacañang alive.”

“But Marcos looked so real on that last day. How did the android able to duplicate the voice, the mannerisms, or react the way only the real Marcos could have?”

“The android has a chip implant in its brain that has been fed data from the duplicated person. Electronic impulses in the brain copy memories from the person’s past into the chip. Once downloaded, the chip controls the android, and makes it move, talk, and mimic even the mental and emotional responses of the person to any stimulus from the environment.”

“Fascinating,” Madam Emilia nodded. “But if the duplicate President would think and decide like my son, don’t you think that it would simply follow the same path of action that Leonidas would have taken?”

“That was the eighties, Madam. The technology had grown by leaps and bounds through the years. One feature of the advanced version, what the CIA is offering to us, is its ability to alter the behavior of the duplicate. Director Burns said they have programmed the chip in such a way that it would not mimic the President’s—and may I quote Director Burns’s words—egomaniacal behavior. Instead, it could choose to act in a manner that would be less destructive, even magnanimous.”

Madam Emilia understood what the Defense Secretary was hinting at. “So you are going to replace my son with this clone. And where are we going to hide the real President Marquez while his imposter is in office?”

“Director Burns suggested that he be preserved in a cryogenic chamber in the meantime,” General Torres answered. “President Marcos was aware of having an android duplicate so he simply hid himself from public view and waited until the android was flown to Hawaii and deactivated. It would be up to you, Madam, as to when you would like President Marquez

revived. Director Burns said he had been advised by the American President to wait until the duplicate President had restored democracy, stepped down from office, and handed over the leadership to a successor. A year should be enough to accomplish all of those. When President Marquez is revived, the android will be deactivated and then, of course, destroyed to erase all trace and evidence of what had transpired.”

“Did they destroy President Marcos’s duplicate android?” Madam Emilia wondered aloud.

“It was only deactivated,” General Torres said. “When President Marcos died, his widow thought of playing one last joke on the Filipinos. She had the android displayed inside a glass coffin, in a mausoleum in the ancestral house of the Marcoses in Ilocos, and made everyone believe it was the dead body of her husband. In fact, Madam Emilia, it is still there today. Even after the remains of the former dictator had long been buried at the Libingan ng mga Bayani. No one cares anymore to inspect what the dummy on display is actually made of.”

“And all along we thought it was a wax replica,” Madam Emilia said. “Won’t the people notice? The android is not going to change how it looks. We can look different after a month, a year... Someone would eventually notice something?”

“You yourself have not aged a day for the last twenty years, Madam. You may have been confined to your wheelchair after the fall you took when you went to Japan two years ago, but other than that, you can still be mistaken for a seventy-year old... sixty even.”

Madam Emilia chose to ignore General Torres’s attempt at flattery and to focus on the business at hand. She understood the need to rein in her son and salvage his reputation. She knew the decision had to be done in order to save his son’s legacy and the legacy of her husband. She did not want

the Marquez name to leave a sour note every time it would be mentioned in history.

“What do you need me to do?” she asked the two generals.

The next Sunday, President Marquez visited his mother for their weekly luncheon. The First Lady and Carlota, the presidential daughter, were away in France for Fashion Week. This was no coincidence. Madam Emilia herself had paid for the week-long spree under the pretense that it was an advance gift for Carlota’s birthday the next month. Madam Emilia couldn’t let anything thwart the plan she had laid out for that afternoon.

When the President leaned toward his mother for the customary kiss on the cheek, Madam Emilia pressed her hand on her son’s forearm. A tiny but potent amount of anesthetic was injected through a microscopic needle attached to one of the four prongs on her ring holding a large emerald in place. When the old lady released her hand, she watched her son scratch the point where the needle pricked and saw it redden slightly.

During the meal, Madam Emilia kept glancing at the clock on the wall, making sure that she finished in an hour, exactly ten minutes before the drug took effect. When they had finished dessert, she steered her son into her private study under the pretext that she was going to show him an Orlina sculpture which she had recently bought at a Christie auction. They had not even reached the doorway to the study when President Marquez slinked into the floor unconscious.

Madam Emilia knocked on the door opposite the study. The room was a large private gallery, empty except for the old lady’s painting collection which filled the walls from floor to ceiling. General Torres came out of the room, followed by two young men in lab coats. They were American scientists who had arrived earlier in the morning aboard a private jet. There were other

men who arrived with them, but after they had set up the cryogenic chamber and the machine needed for the memory extraction and uploading inside the room, they left with only the two staying behind.

The scientists were quick and efficient. They carried President Marquez's inert body and placed him on a hospital bed inside the spacious gallery. Beside the bed was the memory extractor, a small boxlike machine connected to a computer terminal. While one scientist hooked wires and nodes from the memory extractor into the President's head, the second sat behind the computer screen and operated the machine.

In the corner of the room was the cryogenic chamber. Lying there was a figure that looked exactly like President Marquez, but a cold and lifeless duplicate of the real President Marquez.

It took a full hour to transfer the President's memories spanning fifty years into the computer chip inside the memory extractor. Madam Emilia and General Torres chatted and had coffee in her private study while they waited for the procedure to finish.

After the memory transfer was completed, the computer chip was inserted into the duplicate android through a slot behind the lobe, concealed by hair. The android was activated and the real President Marquez took its place inside the cryogenic chamber.

The President Marquez who went back to Malacañang an hour later was the duplicate android of the real President. Meanwhile, the gallery in Madam Emilia's mansion was locked, with the old lady keeping the only key to the door.

Three years later, the real President Marquez was revived from his almost-dead state in the cryogenic chamber. It had been a year since the end of his regime. Another President, elected through a democratic election,

had taken over the position. The country was getting ready for a convention to revise the Constitution. Everyone, even President Marquez's wife and daughter, were clueless about the switch which had happened years ago. It helped that the couple had, for the last decade, not been sleeping together and had simply been staying married for show. Nevertheless, the android duplicate exceeded Madam Emilia's expectations.

Only the old matriarch, the now-retired General Torres, and the two scientists sent over by the CIA, oversaw the process of reviving President Marquez in the room which had remained locked to the house staff all these years.

After they had moved President Marquez into a hospital bed and regulated his breathing and heartbeat, the two men left the room, while Madam Emilia and General Torres waited for President Marquez to finally open his eyes.

The former President was stunned when his mother and General Torres told him about what they did, and kept him up to date about the happenings in the country during his absence. He was at a loss at first, confused by the myriad of emotions, ranging from shock to rage to sadness, which overcame him. Eventually, he chose to accept the situation. What else could he do? Expose the truth about where he had been the last three years? Who would believe him?

He resolved to stay mum when his mother showed him an old issue of *Time* magazine. He was on its cover—or at least the android that pretended to be him and served the last two years of his presidency for him. He was the top story for the issue, having been chosen Person of the Year by the prestigious publication. The lengthy article was an homage to his leadership, focusing especially on what was perceived as his final and lasting legacy as leader of the nation. It seemed that after he reneged on his earlier threat to nuke the Spratly, the duplicate President Marquez announced through

a state broadcast about having had an epiphany which made him realize the error of his ways. He apologized to China for his scurrilous threats, embarked on a state visit to the Communist republic to personally have a dialogue with the Chinese President, before proceeding to Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, and the other countries with a claim on the group of islands west of the Philippines. Finally, the Philippines hosted a summit, at the end of which was a ratification of an amended Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which appeased everyone. And, so far, no state had violated the accord for the last two years. The *Time* article went short of pronouncing that President Marquez not only diffused a growing resentment among neighboring nations in the Far East, but may have also stopped the possibility of World War III.

The new President, a grandson of former President Ramos, was nondescript although Harvard-educated and youthful, except that he had been endorsed by the duplicate President Marquez, and had guaranteed to continue the policies of the previous administration. The economic reforms enacted by the android had also allowed the country to catch up with its better-off neighbors, Singapore and Taiwan.

After his two elderly companions in the room finished telling him about what happened while he was preserved in a near-death state, President Marquez stood up from the hospital bed. He took his time adjusting to his feet. It had been years since he had last used them. Aided by General Torres, President Marquez walked towards the corner of the room, where lying on the cryogenic chamber was his android duplicate. Madam Emilia dialed a number on her cellphone to summon back the two American scientists, who would officially decommission the android by removing the computer chip in its brain, and destroy it in front of the real President Marquez.