

After giving his heart and life to saving a species, at the expense of friends and family, Alejandro must wonder....was it worth it?

The Last Tangerine

by

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When all his world burned red and orange, Alejandro Polander thought only of the tangerine tree and ran back into his burning mansion. Here, in the middle of his life, when his hair had only just started turning gray, Alejandro

could think of nothing more important than that tree: not

his life, not the friends who had left him long ago, and not his brother.

Maybe his brother.

But it was too late for thoughts of family. Too late by a decade.



“The house, the estate, the grounds, and all related items shall become the property of Alejandro Polander,” read the lawyer after a long explanation about how the cash reserves would all go toward paying off medical debts. “This is the last will and testament of Umberton Polander, made of sound mind and body.”

Elian threw his folding chair and kicked the garbage can, scattering crumpled papers everywhere. He was the more fit of the two young brothers, the older of the two, and the most likely to be burned by his own passions. “I can’t believe it!” he yelled.

All Alejandro felt was numb.

“We’ll work something out,” Alejandro said. “You can stay at the house if you want. You can borrow the car if you need to take it to a job interview.”

“Job interview? Man. There aren’t any jobs, Al. You know that. Mom and Dad set us up to fail with worthless degrees and all that debt. I was counting on Uncle Umb’s cash, bro. You gotta sell the house.”

Alejandro’s mouth was dry. Selling the house wouldn’t work. “He wanted me to have the tree.”

“It’s always about that tangerine, isn’t it? That’s the reason you won’t leave this stupid town, not even after Ellen asked you.”

Heat spread to Alejandro’s limbs. He faced his big brother, fists balled at his sides. “It *is* about the tangerine.”

Elian stormed past the lawyer, hitting the papers and sending them flying on his way out of the room. Alejandro did not see him again until the day of the fire.



“I care for it,” said old Uncle Umb, his arthritis-swollen knuckles brushing against the knobby lower branches of the tree, “because it is the last of its kind. There is no other like it, and so there can be no more.”

Alejandro loved the greenhouse. It smelled of rich soil and its warmth reminded him of his mother’s embrace. Uncle Umb rarely invited his young nephews into the greenhouse, and Alejandro wanted to make the most of this visit. Elian, a teenager now, wandered out past the back hill, where he could light fires and throw rocks.

“I thought you said you made clones of this tree.” The very concept always fascinated Alejandro.

Uncle Umb nodded. “I did, I did.” The old man scratched his beard with a yellowed fingernail. “It pains me every time they take a clipping, but they’ve been able to make many trees from this lone survivor. None will pollinate this tree, however. It only can properly reproduce with a genetically different plant.”

“And there are none.”

“None that I have ever found,” said Uncle Umb. “Not yet, anyway.” He reached up to the tree, which towered high above him in the massive greenhouse, and plucked a tangerine from its branches. “The fruits are seedless,” he said, “but delicious nonetheless.”

He split the fruit, which Alejandro knew was an object worth a fortune to local chefs, with his nephew. But what was the worth of a fruit tree if not to enjoy the occasional fruit? He learned even later that Uncle Umb considered this benefit small comfort after everything it had cost him.



Umberto held Celia in his arms under the sprawling tangerine tree. They looked up past the crooked branches of the mature tree to the glass dome above. They made love there often, but that night there would be no passion. No warm embrace.

“It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity,” Celia said, her chestnut hair catching rays of light filtering through the leaves. “They’ll give me a full ride through college and all

but guarantee a job afterward rebuilding flooded islands in the Caribbean.”

For a long time, words would not come to Umberto’s lips. Finally, he said, “Will you come back?”

“You know I can’t.”

“If only to visit?”

“Umb...”

It only occurred later to Umberto that he might have left the tangerine. That night, staring up at the glass of his greenhouse, his thoughts were only on Celia’s betrayal of their love. How could she leave when their life together was here?

But, of course, she did need to leave.

“Come with me, Umb,” she had said only once.

He never answered, and that was answer enough.



His grandmother's greenhouse smelled of rich soil and the begonias that crowded every brightly-lit corner.

Umberto, his ten-year-old skinny arms straining under the effort, carried the pot with his new tree.

“You can plant it there,” Grandma said. She wore a floral print and to Umberto's young eyes appeared to be the oldest, wisest person in the whole world. “We lost the orange to powdery mildew last year, and the spot's been wanting something new.”

“Won't my tree get the mildew?”

“We've sprayed for it pretty well, and the new filtration should keep new spores out, even with the hurricane coming.”

The hurricane worried Umberto, but his grandmother didn't look worried, so he swallowed his fear. “Won't it grow too tall?”

Grandma patted him on the shoulders. “Not for a good long time, Umby.”

That night, Umberto planted the tangerine in the dark soil in the center of his grandmother's greenhouse while hurricane winds howled against thick glass. His grandmother had been right about the hurricane. This far inshore, the winds weren't so bad.

But the mildew, she had been right about that, too. Hurricane after hurricane carried mildew spores all along the coast. Citrus trees were struck dead a thousand miles from the nearest outbreak of the same disease that had wiped out a succession of citrus monocultures around the world. Whole orchards failed in the wake of the storm that hit the Polander mansion. Whole species died soon thereafter.

"Promise me you'll take care of that tangerine," his grandmother told him years later, on her deathbed. "It's the last one."

"I promise," Umberto said, tears in his eyes. "I promise."



Alejandro burst into the greenhouse. Up through the knobby, thick branches of the tangerine, he saw the yellow-red flames playing across the glass dome. It was hot and dry in the greenhouse, but smoke hadn't overwhelmed the filters yet.

He opened every watering system he could reach, but nothing watered the tree from above for fear of disease. He sprayed the hose manually, wetting everything he could find.

Outside, an explosion thundered in the night. The flames from the house grew higher. Hotter.

A crash, and waves of heat rolled in. A flaming section of the roof collapsed into the greenhouse dome. Glass rained from above, cutting Alejandro's arms. Still, he turned the hose on the flaming pieces around him.

It wasn't enough.

Smoke choked the air and blotted out his vision. He dropped low where the air was clearer. Clearer, but not clear. He coughed black smoke.

He cried at the sharp scent of burning citrus. His arms grew weak.

The greenhouse door burst inward, and Alejandro felt arms hoist him up just before he lost consciousness.



Alejandro opened his eyes to see his brother Elian grinning like an idiot. He tried to speak, but his throat hurt too much.

“It’s all right, bro,” said Elian. “We got you in time.”

It was only then that Alejandro saw that Elian wore the coat of a firefighter.

Elian saw him notice it and grinned. “Yeah. It’s not using my degree, but it’s good work.” He slapped his brother on the shoulder and his expression grew serious. “I’m sorry we couldn’t save it.”

The tangerine. The last tangerine. Alejandro felt the growing pressure of tears against his dry eyes.

Elian pressed something into Alejandro's hands. "I thought you'd want this, though. Sorry we couldn't save more. Chief thinks it was bad wiring." When Alejandro said nothing, Elian continued. "You can rebuild your greenhouse, right?"

Alejandro looked down and saw a single preserved cutting taken from the tree. Elian had wrapped it in damp cloth and enclosed in a plastic bag. A single cutting, from which he could grow his own tree.

As the medics prepared to take him away, he clutched his final tangerine to his chest, which he knew he would protect all his days. This wasn't the only cutting of his uncle's tree, but it was the last, and it would be dearest to Alejandro's heart forever. He would plant it, care for it, and continue to seek other survivors wherever they might be in the world. Through the smoke haze that surrounded him he saw that for once he had a choice where to build his life. He could take his tree anywhere now, but all he wanted to do was rebuild here in this very spot. Near his town, near his life, near his brother.

He reached over and took his brother’s hand. “Together,” he whispered through a smoke-raw throat. “We’ll rebuild together.”



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