

## La Sortija de Sofía<sup>1</sup>

Sofía walked around the plaza every Sunday, regardless if it was sunny, cloudy, pouring, or amidst a hurricane. She dedicated the first two hours of her day to go to mass and the same bench she used to sit on with her mother. Her mother had insisted on this ritual to start their week in high spirits while taking in the beauty that was God and his creations. Her mother had died almost a year before this particular Sunday, and Sofía found herself continuing the ritual to maintain some form of connection with her mother, as God had taken the form of a thief in the young girl's mind.

The quiet was never quiet enough in that plaza. Even as she closed her eyes, she could hear the pigeons, doves, and crows scurrying about on the cement in front of her and in the branches above her. The mix of white, grey, speckled, and black birds were disproportionate in quantity to one another, yet they lived harmoniously. The fountain around ten steps beyond her whispered moistly as it decoratively sprayed water, the breeze occasionally pushing some of the sprinklings towards her. The church some more steps away from the fountain praised the Lord who continuously granted them with strange gifts and unforeseen challenges in life, quadruplet bells ringing every so often to summon the outsiders to the up-and-coming Catholic mass. Children and their parents every so often passed by her, some parents passive-aggressively throwing comments to one another as their child ran through the waves of birds. Two older women sat on the bench besides her and noisily chattered about their friend's daughter's oldest son's children and other distant acquaintances. There were men playing dominoes not so far from them, gossiping about the women in and out of their lives while intermittently cursing amongst themselves—either at each other or in response to the women walking by.

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<sup>1</sup> Sofía's Ring

Sofía heard their comments often, so much in fact that they had permanently found a home within her subconscious ever since she was a child. Not a single sliver of skin, anatomical imperfection, and slight indecency had been left unglorified, unsaid, and at times even untouched. Her mother had told her from a very young age that from the time men noticed a certain maturity to a young woman's body, they would only seek to ravish the little innocence she had left after the time she became a woman. But when Sofía first cried to her mother about a man following her home, she was told that her uniform had been too revealing due to her prepubescence. Sometimes, these comments were replaced by praises, since her mother had found great satisfaction in birthing and raising the most gentle, beautiful, desirable woman in town—or so she said.

As the men whispered about the crease between her breasts, another body shoved himself against her left side. Her eyes screamed open as she felt her throat restrict around her larynx, a fist squeezing her heart. He smiled, wide enough for his lips to curl into his gums, while wrapping his arms round her. “¿Te asusté?”<sup>2</sup> He chuckled calmly, drawing lazy circles on her right arm as the men eyed them with an amused glint to their eyes. Sofía hummed breathlessly and affirmatively, clutching and pulling her dress further up her chest. Her eyes focused on a tiny, insignificant pebble on the ground, the edges around it slowly blurring. She blinked rapidly and sniffed before meeting his dark, glittering eyes.

Luis never seemed to be able to stop himself from surprising her. He often snuck up to her in this way, eager to hear how her screams clutched around her throat—or so she felt. He was as respectful and gentle as a woman her age could hope a man to be, romantic and charming in his own peculiar way. The child-like glow that always flowed around him made him easily

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<sup>2</sup> Did I scare you?

accepted by strangers, especially women. He made sure those around him felt secure in his presence, and he seemingly doubled his efforts with Sofía. She grew accustomed to his mischievousness, particularly after her mother had openly begun to show her approval of the boy. Although Sofía never quite understood her eagerness, she found herself excusing her mother's actions by convincing herself she felt as strongly as her mother did for the boy.

It was after her mother's death that she had come to realize that her youth wouldn't last forever, so she pushed herself to try to truly fall in love with him.

As she sat on the bench, she noticed how his normally smooth, olive cheek was tinged with a flaming red color. He looked ill, panicked, or simply nervous, as he kept darting his eyes to the small, cubic bulge in his left pocket. After a couple of strong huffs, he grabbed her sweaty hands and tugged—perhaps a bit too forcefully—towards himself, “Mira, Sofía, yo sé que nos vamos pa la uni y que we're still young and shit, pero you're the one, you know?”<sup>3</sup>

She hummed, unable to do much else as she struggled to focus on him.

Luis and she had been dating a few years prior to her mother's death, but her lack of effort made their relationship more of a public affair. As her mother's health had begun to deteriorate, she found consolation in Luis's arms and eager affection. It was not often that they managed to escape into private, as she was taught that a lady should never be alone with a man, especially during the night and for an extended amount of time. However, at times of great loneliness, Sofía found the lustful touches and teasing to be a freeing distraction, albeit one that happened on rare occasions of solitude. Luis could easily spend the night with his friends drinking, smoking, screwing whatever they wanted to without much of an excuse, but Sofía was to make her way home, alone, before the sun changed the color of the sky. The only times she

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<sup>3</sup> Look, Sofía, I know that we're going to university and that we're still young and shit, but you're the one, you know?

was out after dark were at the town carnivals and neighborhood dances her family sometimes forced themselves to attend to keep up appearances, which grew infrequent as her mother grew ill. Her mother's sickness drew the attention away from the young girl, however, so the opened window in her room was left unnoticed by everyone but Luis.

Almost all of those nights were spent with Sofía crying in Luis's arms, so it was inevitable for him to find a way into her quivering, weighing heart. He kissed her temple and tightly pressed her under his chin, only indulging in a kiss or two whenever she requested it. He filled her lungs with his woody, pheromone-filled cologne, a smell she welcomed over the stench of lingering death that surrounded her home. Her last conversation with her mother was a confession of her growing attachment to the boy, and her mother admitted to her relief in knowing that her daughter wouldn't die alone.

Sofía only shifted her attention to him when she felt something cold being pressed onto her right hand. He screwed a golden ring onto her ring finger, the three small diamonds adorning the face of the ring casting the sun's rays into her eyes. Once it was nudged into the perfect spot at the base of her finger, Sofía felt a prickling sensation on the pores that were encased beneath the ring. The corners of her smooth, rosy lips tugged slightly upwards while her brows twitched closer together at the inexplicable sensation. The tingling continued, as if the ring had clogged the pores on her skin and had begun some form of swelling.

"Se ve bonita,"<sup>4</sup> she murmured, staring directly at the ring and how the light shifted and reflected whenever she slightly altered the position of her hand. "Era de Abu. She gave it to me cuando se enfermó y pues ya sabía que you were the one,"<sup>5</sup> he continued to ramble, but his voice became a distant murmur. The ring kept her gaze. The square diamonds within the body of the

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<sup>4</sup> It looks pretty.

<sup>5</sup> It was Grandma's. She gave it to me when she got sick and, well, I already knew you were the one...

ring began to shine individually, each absorbing light eagerly before the sun shifted its attention to the rest of the ring. The golden base was less reflective by comparison, but the light vibrated off of it like heatwaves on a skin-scorching pavement. She brought the ring closer, noticing how the skin beneath the ring had shifted in color. A green tinge began to ooze underneath her skin but she snapped her gaze away as she realized her partner had become suspiciously quiet.

“Me tengo que ir,”<sup>6</sup> Sofía quickly responded, standing up and tugging her hands free from his moist, sticky grasp. She pressed her loose sundress down to cover the skin below her midthighs that had become exposed.

“Pero,”<sup>7</sup> he stopped himself, sighing as he looked away from her. After a few seconds, he met her wavering eyes. “Esta bien. We’ll talk about it later. ¿Te acompaño?”<sup>8</sup> He asked, his smile twitching somewhat as he extended his hand to her.

“No te preocupes. Papi me eta eperando,”<sup>9</sup> she bowed her head towards him, moving only when he pressed his lips against her cheekbone. She took a few steps back and waved him goodbye, hastily turning around as she made her way home. She checked her finger quickly as she crossed the busy street in front of her house, sighing before making her way inside. She hoped her father wouldn’t notice the foreign object wrapped around her finger, but she watched as the reflective jewelry immediately caught his attention.

“Mera, ¿qués eso?”<sup>10</sup> Abdiel’s voice was lower than usual. Sofía only needed to utter Luis’s name before he vividly gestured toward nothing in particular in the air. “Ese prieto no sirve pa na, Sofía. Yo no sé que carajo tú y tu madre ve en él,”<sup>11</sup> he continued to rant, his hands

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<sup>6</sup> I have to go.

<sup>7</sup> But...

<sup>8</sup> Alright. We’ll talk about it later. Do you want me to go with you?

<sup>9</sup> Don’t worry. Daddy is waiting for me.

<sup>10</sup> Hey, what is that?

<sup>11</sup> That dark-skinned boy is good for nothing. I don’t know what the fuck you and your mother see in him...

gesturing at the ring and the various objects in the house that had nothing to do with what he spoke about. Sofía often found herself in this position whenever her partner was mentioned or implied, more so after her mother's death. Abdiel often voiced his distaste for the boy to come from the lack of passion and workmanship that he had found often correlated with Luis's family, but his late wife often reminded him that she usually found people projecting their own insecurities onto others—something he seemed severely wounded by.

Sofía asked her about it a few times, wanting to understand her father's distaste, and the only reply she ever got from her mother was, "Hay gente que cree que hay que mejorar la raza. Pero no le hagas caso, ya somos perfectos."<sup>12</sup> It puzzled her, for, like the variety of birds that scattered around the plaza, she found that the immediate world around her contained people of different shades, hair textures, and features derived from their ancestors. However, as her mother gave her the same reply for the last time, she noticed the paleness of her skin, the golden hue to her smooth strands of hair, and the lightness in her eyes that Sofía had inherited. As she compared her features to Luis's, she realized her father's preferences aimed for a Spanish aesthetic, so he would simply never accept the boy.

Valeria had grown attached to Luis for a variety of reasons. She often spoke about Luis's uncanny similarities to her husband in terms of his physique. Their skin color and eyes were almost identical, and Luis's nose curved similarly to that of her husband. Despite the rumors she often heard about the possibility of Abdiel having cheated on her with Luis's mother, she had voiced on more than one occasion that her husband was a good, loyal man. Sofía never heard this from her mother directly, or even in any detailed manner, before her death. To fill the empty, four-foot hole in her heart, she found solace in hearing these stories through her aunt, as her

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<sup>12</sup> There are people that believe we have to make our race better. But don't mind them, we're already perfect.

father only seemed to mention Valeria when the lid of his composure was removed from the boiling pot that was his temper.

Andrea was similar enough to Valeria. While Sofía had not specifically mentioned her partner's name or described him to her, she seemed to have a knack for finding out the most intimate of details about her and others. Andrea often stated that women like her had a well-functioning ear, sensitive to the whisperings of the town that easily trickled into her everyday life. Her occupation as an eight-to-five, Monday to Friday nurse and her lack of company at home seemed to give her ample time to work on her craft, especially since—as Sofía had come to realize whenever she took her mother to the hospital—she seemed to not quite put as much time and effort into her paying occupation as the other nurses that attended to Valeria's needs did. So, as the afternoon blended into nightfall, she invited herself into Sofía's room and inspected every minor scratch, dent, and curve to the golden jewelry. “Mija, ese nene te quiere mucho,”<sup>13</sup> she said in amusement, her words curved in a way that only emphasized her bewilderment. She continued to speak on how finding out about her only niece's love life through the innerworkings of the town's gossip made her feel othered by Sofía, but Sofía merely hummed as a reply to her sentences as she stared at the ring.

She refused to meet those quivering, questioning eyes that seemed to beg for every nook and cranny of her personal life, for she knew she tended to do anything but say no to other people. After a long sigh, she voiced, “Lo sé... pero me ta dando un allergic reaction or something.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Girl, that boy sure loves you.

<sup>14</sup> I know... but it's giving me an allergic reaction or something.

“¿De qué hablas nena? Yo no veo na,”<sup>15</sup> Andrea quickly replied, her brows spreading wrinkles onto her forehead. It seemed that the pause her niece had taken was a sign for her to continue her train of thought, Sofía’s previous statement becoming merely an assumed nervousness while her aunt ranted about the current youth preferring the company of strangers over a singular lover. As her voice became something akin to white noise Sofía struggled to shift the ring upwards, the slightly swollen tissue on her finger sending a few, subtle stings up her forearm. This sensation lasted throughout the night, leaving Sofía no choice in her mind but to forcefully rip the constricting metal off of her finger. She delicately placed it on the nightstand, the quiet hiss of her nails grazing the glass-topped wood echoing in her mind.

She continued to think, then wonder, then dream about the ring.

As morning came, she turned her wakening eyes to the table, only to find the jewelry missing. She groaned as she shifted her weight to the edge of the bed, peering over to see that the ground showed no signs of the object. “Ñeta,”<sup>16</sup> she hoarsely whispered, crawling out of bed and onto the floor to check under the furniture where the ring could’ve fallen onto at some point of the night. Panic slowly began to bubble at the lower base of her sternum when she found that the golden shine was nowhere to be seen. She jumped up and began to dash around the room, trying to remember if somehow she had misremembered where she last placed the ring while getting dressed as quickly as she could. She shoved the hanged garments aside in large handfuls until she singled out her uniform. Her hand swiped from the mass of garments towards the uniform, but snagged on a lace, white dress before she could grab the uniform. The skin between her brows creased while she inspected the dress, finding that the lace stretched from the base of her right ring finger.

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<sup>15</sup> Child, what are you talking about? I don’t see anything.

<sup>16</sup> Fuck.

The ring, as she extracted the lace from its bite, glimmered in the sunlit room. As she tried to recall where the ring had come from a shiver vibrated through her forearm, then back, and continued to travel throughout the entirety of her body before finalizing at the base of her spine. From the tip of her nail to the base of her knuckle, a deep, chilling green had replaced her normally pale skin. The subtle lines on her ring finger had dissipated slightly, for there was a small amount of swelling on the area above the ring that made it impossible for her to remove it. She tugged at it and yelped in discomfort, the prickling sensation developing into a sharp pinch.

After tears began to pool underneath her lower lash line, she dressed herself and crossed paths with her father as they headed towards the kitchen. She found him staring at her finger, a bubbling, indigestible anxiety crawling up her stomach as she made Abdiel coffee. Silence had replaced the normally chattery atmosphere, causing her to stumble through her aggravated awkwardness. She waited impatiently, tapping her nails unrhythmically to the kitchen table before sputtering, “Me van a tener que amputar el deo, ¿verda?”<sup>17</sup>

“¿De qué carajo habla?”<sup>18</sup> The look he gave her—as if she were yelling obscenities while running bloodied and nude around a children-filled plaza—made her clench her jaw. Her teeth sank into their paralleled crevices tightly, and she began to feel the pressure at her cheekbones. Various thoughts, or rather concerns, rushed through her head, but embarrassment quickly overcame her as her father continued to stare at her, his brows creasing in disappointment. She quickly excused herself, apologizing for her attempt at a joke before going to school.

Luis wrapped his right arm around her middle as they walked through the whispering halls. More than once, a loud gasp interrupted the stream of whispers, which were soon riddled with gossip about what the ring on Sofía’s finger meant. Her body sucked itself tensely inwards

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<sup>17</sup> They’re going to have to amputate my finger, right?

<sup>18</sup> What the fuck are you talking about?

whenever her right hand was openly, eagerly, stubbornly stared at and touched, the swelling on her ring finger growing significantly as the day went on. However, no one mentioned the green undertones that continued to spread towards the rest of her hand and fingers. Instead, they focused on the golden band that continued to send shots of discomfort through Sofía's body.

The color, texture, and swelling continued to worsen and spread, forcing her to hesitantly voice her worries about the ring's effect on her hand to her few friends. Their responses seemed to excite the pinched nerves underneath the ring, adrenaline rapidly spreading a numbness through her body, for they seemed to be unable to point out her worsening condition—much like people did when they hesitantly, carefully avoided Valeria's deterioration. By the middle of the week, Sofía merely existed as her friends muffled through their gossip, wakefully asleep in the reality that stopped fully processing in her mind.

Her veins wrapped around her muscles like vines on an old, run down house. Her arteries grew and spread like roots from a flamboyant tree. Her capillaries twitched like earthworms under the moss that was her skin. The tips of her fingers had turned a dark, weathered, humid brown, a sap-like perspiration thickly seeping through her porous skin. The smell that permeated through the limb a mixture of sour, rotten eggs and humid, mold-ridden towels. Hours of nausea emptied her stomach from everything but bile, the contents of her vomit becoming a mucus, throat-sticking green with small chunks of supple, muscle-like clots. The vibration of heated whispers shook her deafened eardrums, and she was sent home by mid-day after fainting in her seat.

In the morning, she dragged her socked feet into the kitchen. Her right hand dangled loosely at her side. Her shaky, inept left hand struggled to carry the intricate movements required to open the fridge, pick out the ingredients for dinner, and place them on the kitchen counter. She

huffed as the warm, humid air licked sweat that stuck her hairs onto the back of her neck, the rancid stench oozing from her arm mixing with the plastic-like smell of the raw chicken that she placed on the cutting board.

Her skin pulsed visibly as the moss spread onto her shoulder, a few mushrooms blooming on her arm. Every time her eyes met a reflective surface, the green cells continued to spread under her skin before bile bubbled from her pores and formed into the texture that had grown throughout her arm. As the growth moistened, it began the process of decomposing, but her limbs remained intact. The rotted pores fell apart into wet, chewed-like chunks onto the floor beneath, and all that was left was the viscous, brown, muscle-like skin that now existed beneath her forearm. The ring, however, had remained unaffected by her body's transformation.

Steam surrounded the kitchen as she removed the lid from the pot containing the rice and pink beans. She used the large wooden spoon to mix the rice, beans, and large, cubic squares of pumpkin together, struggling greatly to do so with her weakened left arm. She turned to the raw chicken, sliding a large, silver, reflective butcher's knife towards her, and her left hand shook weakly. She groaned as she picked the object up, struggling to cut a few slices of chicken before placing the knife down to catch her breath.

The ring cast a shivering ray into her eyes.

The room around her faded into darkness as she stared at the ring, the bright orange tone surrounding her fading into a muted blue. Flies began to land on the uncooked pieces of chicken besides her palm on the cutting board, rubbing the tips of their front legs back and forth before sinking their claws onto the meat. A few flies migrated to her hand, but quickly flew away as her muscles continued to twitch, pulse, and shiver.

The ring glowed warmly as the moonlight reflected from the butcher's knife onto her finger. Her ring finger had become so swollen that the fingerprint underneath the tip had smoothed out completely, blisters that spurted black, runny liquid staining the pieces of chicken near her hand. The pulses that ran under her finger to the moss above her forearm were visible, continuing to push liquids between the cracks and blisters. The ring glimmered against the nail-less finger. Her left hand wrapped comfortably around the handle of the butcher knife. She continued to stare at the finger, carefully separating the digits with the tip of the knife. Her pinky and middle finger almost formed a straight line, a dark shadow reflecting off of the ring. A vibration rung softly in her ears, and, after a few shaky breaths, she thrust the knife above her head, lunging it towards the skin beneath the ring.

Abdiel grabbed her left wrist, halting the movement as he yelled. The air surrounding his mouth and Sofía's eardrums vibrated intensely, speckles of spit landing on the curve of her ear. Removing the knife from her grasp, his eyes twitched as he gestured to the air around her head. The artificial light's rays melted onto the golden ring on her finger. The diamonds grinned brightly.

Sofía turned away from Abdiel and made her way to her bedroom, bumping every so often into the objects and walls around her. She closed her eyes as she threw herself onto her bed, asleep before her head thumped against the warm mattress.

Abdiel awoke to crows frantically knocking their wings against the window's metal shutters, his body shooting up as they squabbled loudly before flying away. "Fucking puto chango esto,"<sup>19</sup> he muttered in between grunts, stretching a yawn out of his body before scratching the side of his temple with his pinky. The jagged edge of his elongated nail caused him to hiss, the scratch irritating the skin hidden beneath his thick brow. He brought the nail to his mouth and bit at it, intermittently inspecting it between bites until the jagged edge was smoothed out.

He groaned as his knees popped when he stood, the twisting of his back emitting another coupling of cracks, "Diablo, etoy viejo."<sup>20</sup> After thirteen minutes of shuffling his feet to and around the bathroom, he blindly picked a faded white t-shirt from his drawer and a pair of scuffed up jeans from his hanger in his closet. The Sunday church bells rung softly in the distance while he headed to the door to put his shoes on, and as he toed his wrinkled feet into his brown chanclas,<sup>21</sup> the thick smell of coffee wafted into the room. He made his way to the brightly lit kitchen, "Sofía, ¿eta mejol?"<sup>22</sup>

Sofía's body was hunched over the table, leaning above her right hand that was tightly pressed against the weathered wood. She shivered as sweat collected at the base of her neck while the rest of her exposed skin was covered in thick, running drips. Her transparent skin looked like raw duck meat as it exposed the veins that lied underneath the Her thin, white nightgown hung from her elbows, exposing the upper half of her torso.

Abdiel's eyes roamed slowly as he stood behind her, following the skin from the base of her neck, to her shoulder, down her back, and snapped his eyes away as they landed on her

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<sup>19</sup> These fucking crows.

<sup>20</sup> Jesus, I'm old.

<sup>21</sup> Sandals...

<sup>22</sup> Sofía, are you feeling better?

twitching breast. “Sofía, ¿qué te pasa?”<sup>23</sup> He asked, placing his hand on her right shoulder. She twitched and yanked her shoulder away from his hand, breathing in short and quick breaths as another drip of sweat and tears fell from her vibrating eyelid and onto the back of her hand. Her pupils were dilated, black irises aimed at the ring.

“Café... Quiero café,”<sup>24</sup> she mumbled through another shiver.

“Okay,” he replied slowly, walking pass her. He opened a few cabinets, first one with full of glass plates, organized by size and plainness; then one with the wine and whiskey glasses, evenly divided throughout the whole cabinet; then one full of glass bowls and cups, the latter being found at the bottom of the cabinet and organized similarly to the plates. He picked a large, plain white coffee cup and a smaller, decorated teacup. The former was filled to the top with only coffee, while the latter was filled mostly with milk and sugar. Leaving the milk and sugar containers open, he turned.

Sofía gasped softly, a high-pitched, euphoric breath spreading a smile across her paled cheeks. Her eyes momentarily twitched into the back of her head, her body physically relaxing from its previously tense position as she stopped shivering. She held her breath.

The finger rolled off the table, leaving a trail of blood behind it until it landed on the floor besides her quivering feet. Blood continued to ooze out of the finger, the ring still wrapped around the base of the pale, white dismembered limb.

“¿Qué carajo hiciste, Sofía?”<sup>25</sup> He yelled as he dropped the cups and quickly looked around him. As he grabbed the kitchen towel, he looked down at the finger on the floor and

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<sup>23</sup> Sofía, what’s wrong with you?

<sup>24</sup> Coffee... I want coffee.

<sup>25</sup> What the fuck did you do, Sofía?

gagged, holding his hand to his mouth. The scent of coffee mixed with the minty sourness of vomit circled around him, and he stepped back until his lower back hit the counter.

Sofía stared at her pale, white hand, flipping it back and forth and bringing it closer to her face. She counted the fingers left in her hand with her eyes, taking in the knob that twitched in between her pinky and middle finger. Her breathing became erratic again as her eyes roamed the rest of her pale, white arm. A gush akin to bright red rain rushed from her hand and onto her nightgown from the tip of her bony elbow. The blood pooled and soaked into the delicate, smooth fabric, sticking to the skin on her thigh and spreading to the chair below it. The ring suffered the same fate, the high-quality metal becoming encased in drying, viscous blood. The small diamonds encrusted at the top of the ring still glimmered subtly, as the blood had yet to contaminate them. The finger laid still, life pouring out of it as it began to grow paler and transparent. Her brown eyes met his, opened wide as she vibrated intensely.

The knife fell from her left hand, thumping onto the table, as she screamed, and the finger twitched slightly, causing the ring to slip onto the bed of liquified roses beneath it.