

Santos

by Paul de Denus

Private Antanna stood in the heat, squinted at his Lieutenant. He held one arm over a sweating brow, an odd salute against the broiling sun. The other arm hugged thin stocks of rolled butcher paper tight to his chest.

"Pardon?"

"Cemetery of the world," Lieutenant Dorta repeated. He was looking at his men moving about down the long alleyway.

"It's what the merchant captains call us... this place. The cemetery of the world."

Antanna glanced down the alley, turned uneasily, surveyed the surface of the wall behind him as if it were a leached and neglected tombstone.

"But we aren't dead, are we Private," Dorta continued. *"We are alive and well, with work to do."*

He flicked ash from his cigarillo, watched as his soldiers worked their way along the street toward Easter Square, the heart of the city. A musty odor of decay reeked from the dirty gutters. Further down a small group of men lolled near a doorway. Some leaned precariously as if they were drunk. Some sat on the curb, elbows on knees, feverish, their heads hung low. A brown man with a swollen purple neck stared at the white sky. A harsh cough barked from his throat. Soldiers weaved through them, kicked and prodded with their muskets, covered their mouths as they ordered them to move out of the street. The sick men rose, faded through the doorways, loose like ghosts.

The soldiers continued on, carrying pails of paste and flashing their knives. They tore at the plaster walls, scraping and grunting, ripping ragged bulletin-sized handbills from the blistered surface. One of the men unrolled a sheet of butcher paper as another, wielding a thick brush, slathered paste over the wall surface. Together they slapped the rolled propaganda over top, smoothing it roughly with their palms. The announcement was one of many

government notices, a minutia of distraction meant to consume the public's interest: ship arrivals, slave auctions, merchant goods and fresh produce, the church's mission, official pronouncements, dates and times for entertainments.

Lieutenant Dorta studied the wall behind Antanna. Near the bottom, the partial words flared through the mulched paper, as if rats had torn and scratched their way to it, eager to reveal the past notification hidden there. Dorta knew the bulletin well. The word, partially showing read — *Santos* — and the warning words obscured before it — *A peste em.*

PLAGUE IN SANTOS

Dorta pushed a boot through the mush of paper and debris, absently toed the dry rat droppings. He dropped his cigarillo, still burning, then followed his men down the alley.

"Alive and well we are," he muttered. *"For now."*

