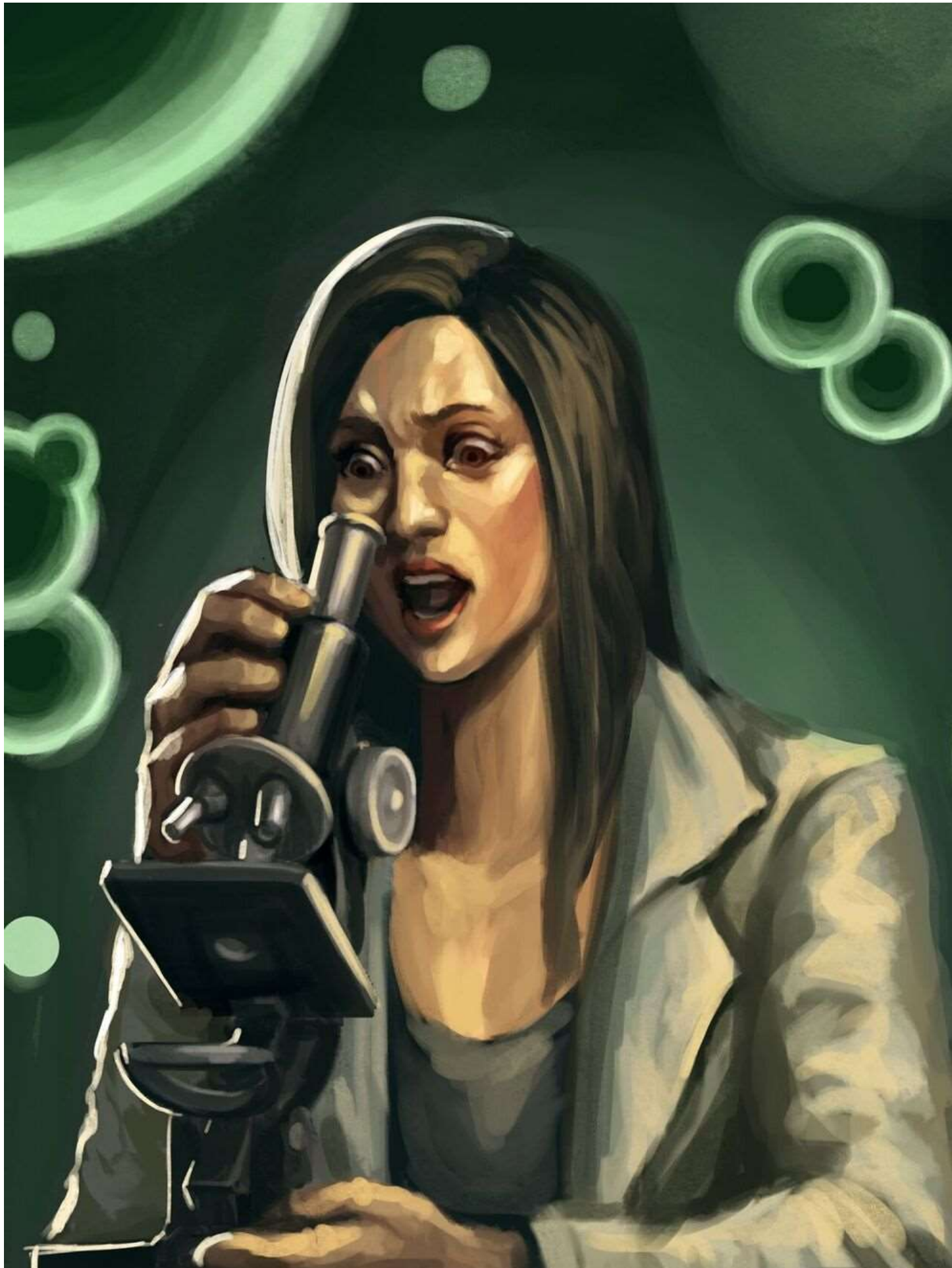


Ombak



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Ombak

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Fruit of the Earth

By Nidhi Singh

Mother tossed on the heated bed, wheezing. Her plump, rugged hands clutched the fur quilts close to her chest. Uncle Hulago dabbed the corners of her mouth now and then, wiping away the blood that she spat with the long sleeve of his deel. A rugged herder of the bleak grey steppes, he loved bright colors – but considering the grimness of the situation, was inappropriately dressed in a red hat, purple frock coat, and blue trousers stuck into upturned leather boots decorated with appliques.

"She will not last till the new moon," he muttered in despair, rocking back and forth. Men may come and go due to hunting and war obligations, it is the mother, *Eej*, who keeps the hearth going. Therefore, represented by the golden sun that is resplendent and beautiful, she is central to the nomad family.

A few men and women, all nomads from the Khot Ail – their small community of a few hunter-gatherers – were huddled around the large white tent eating meat and onion dumplings, and loudly sipping salty butter tea. Mother's end was near; they wanted to be present when it came – a mark of respect owed to the wife of a famous warrior-hunter, with many a legend that had carried over the barren landscape by hushed, deferential word of mouth.

Chimeg, his only daughter, carried the mantle of herding livestock and hunting in this precarious, barren, lunar landscape after he'd passed on. The young girl pursed her lips and blew into the hot bowl of meat and dough crumbs soup she'd cupped in her hands, cooling it so that mother may sip of it. The merciless fall winds howled outside, but the Mongolian ger, with its felt and sheepskins, and the toasty warm stove, felt sinfully snug and cozy.

"But the blood of the vegetable lamb might yet save her – there's hope still," muttered a gnarled old woman. She rubbed her hands hidden in the long sleeves of her tunic, chanting Buddhist prayers under her breath. "It cures the blood-spitting disease."

"But who will go so far up North to get it?" asked a Yak herder from the Altai highlands. "The cliffs are steep and slippery – even the most sure-footed yak could slip to certain death."

"And the winters are upon us," rose another worried voice in the ger. "The lakes are freezing already – I fear for the livestock." All eyes in the ger flitted toward the beautiful, fresh face of young Chimeg, and then guiltily swept away. The last winter had been unexpectedly harsh, wiping out nearly a quarter of their animals in the Zud – the fierce blizzard that wiped out all light from the face of the earth. The animals were their true wealth – the totem of their existence – and the only insurance they had in this precarious existence in the unforgiving landscape.

"It's no easy errand: the tree they say might yield a lamb, but the beast is vicious, hides sharp fangs and packs a mean butt to boot," whispered a spice trader from the Far East. His travels took him as far as Europe along the Silk Route. He had roamed wide and knew of the strange creature that grew on a tree. "The trees are far up North, in the Khaigai Mountains, where forests and alpine pastures abound. A hard place to reach for any man or girl – the child might she be of even the brave Burkitshi," he added, referring to Chimeg's father, who had been a cavalry general in the Mongol army.

"Those are wonderful trees, which bear tiny lambs on the ends of their branches. These branches are so pliable that they bend down to allow the lambs to feed when they're hungry," explained the spice trader.

"Stop," cried Uncle Hulago. "Even to suggest that the girl would go!"

"My herbs will cure Eej soon, for sure," argued the Tibetan medicine man. "There's no need for the girl to take chances – she should stay here and help with the animals." He rubbed the *boodog* stones between his palms while they were still warm and greasy, as he prepared to dig into the succulent marmot meat offered by the Burkitshi's family.

"Your grass and weed are good only for reindeer," sneered a retired soldier. "Can't you see? Eej's getting worse, the blood's filling up her chest. Someone from the Khot Ail has to go and fetch the lamb's blood. I would've," he sighed, "– but for the coming winter and the chill in my bones."

"But take chances for what? – Just a legend? Folklore? What good might come of such superstitions? The old days are gone," sneered a miner who'd worked in that great city of the Karakorum, founded by General Ogodei, the heir to the mighty Genghis Khan.

"Many a great fever and chill and *breakbone* have these clouding eyes seen cured by the blood of this lamb," spoke the Shaman. "The Lamb of Tartary must be found and her blood got. The question being, who will go?"

"I will go. I've already told the elders," spoke up Chimeg, the Burkitshi's daughter. "It is my calling, and I'm not afraid."

"You're brave, a fine hunter," said the Chieftain "Yet, you're nothing but a child."

"I will go – so long as the Khot Ail will take care of Eej and our herds while I'm gone."

"Of that, we promise. No harm will come to your mother or your wealth. We need all the young working hands here, since dark will be the days of wintertide. The tribe has to survive."

"I will accompany her," announced Uncle Hulago, rubbing his sister's ice-cold hands.

"You take care of Eej, Uncle – I need you to be here," replied Chimeg. "I'll take Nergui with me."

"What – Nergui the wolf?" cried the retired soldier. "No dogs?"

"I trust Nergui with my life. I've fed him with these hands since I rescued him from a cave, freezing and dying. And he's quiet. Dogs will warn the lamb much ahead of us and the lamb will smell us out if we are many."

"You're a wise one," said Yesugei, their clan chief. "But the lamb is cunning and dangerous – don't expect it to be meek or shy."

"You've seen the Lamb of Tartary with your own eyes then, old man?" asked the skeptical miner, waving him away with his snuffbox.

"As true as they can see you and the blackness and grime you bring from the bowels of the earth. The lamb is connected to the plant by an umbilical cord, which follows the animal as it grazes the nearby land. Once all foliage within reach is gone, both the plant and the lamb dies."

"Its blood tastes sweet like honey," the medicine man said, smacking his lips. "Its wool exceeds in beauty and goodness than that of any sheep."

"One may only harvest the creature by severing it from the stem that attaches to its navel: and undone not by arrows or darts, but by sharp teeth that must plunge deep in its life-giving cord. Once separated from its plant, the lamb dies. You must draw the blood from its belly before it dies, though."

"The teeth of Nergui," exclaimed a woman wearing her hair in a massive headdress, decorated with silver and corals. " –That must rip out the cord."

"So you'll have to approach it close."

"Not too close – for it conceals a deadly blade behind an innocent bleat. It can easily fell a fox in one fatal swoop. Beware, it casts spells as well. It can control your mind and drive you mad."

"Do not scare the girl unnecessarily. It can't be hard ripping open a sheep's belly, grow it might oddly on a tree!" laughed the butcher.

"Chimeg has powers. She will overcome the brute, of that I'm certain," rasped Mother for the first time, as the weight on her chest lifted for a brief moment. Her eyes shone momentarily with pride in her daughter, before the heavy lids closed on them again.

"It's settled then, Eej approves," said Chimeg, kneeling by the bed and pressing mother's hand to her moist cheek. "Please, bless me, for I alone must go."

The gathered elders conferred briefly and finally agreed to let Chimeg go up north to fetch the vegetable lamb's blood. The hard part of the day done with, Uncle Hulago played the host and passed around large ceramic bowls of *Airag* – fermented horse milk – and meat dumplings late into the night as the winds howled and screamed outside. As the folks got drunk on *Airag*, their stories and laughter becoming louder by the hour, Chimeg slipped unnoticed out of the ger with a strapping young man.

She sprinted like the wind to the lush potato fields, ripe for harvest in the fall, and stood playing with her ponytail until the boy caught up. He held her in his arms and then gently pushed her down on the soft mulch, their long felt tunics protecting them from the frosted earth, as they kissed and made passionate young love. Autumn leaves circled above them in flying coveys while stars swept down so low they seemed to sink in the vast sea of grass.

When they were spent, the boy whispered something in Chimeg's ear but she shushed him with a finger to his lips. "It can wait," she said.

"No later than your return then: I will certainly ask Uncle Hulago for your hand."

Chimeg nodded and pulled him close over her again, but the boy drew back and rose by her side on his elbow. "Why can't I come?"

"Because, and again, I need you here, to be there for my animals. There's no one I would trust more." And with that, giggling, she wrestled the boy to the ground and heaving over him, crushed his lips with hers.

The boy was there to help Chimeg load up before dawn, and so were many others from the tribe. Chimeg wore a felt wool hat with long flaps that she tied tightly around her face to protect from the fierce winds. Over her loose hooded felt cape – that could function as a tent or as a blanket when the occasions arose – she tied a red waistband from which hung her eating gear, cups, firestones, and father's knife covered in an ornate sheath. She chose *Luolo*, a small, compact cart made of birch for the journey, and a hardy, iron-hooved packhorse to pull it. Nergui, the handsome wolf was tethered to the *Luolo* – both animals had been fed already. She bent down and patted the wolf, who eagerly grabbed her face in his jaws and squeezed lightly to show his affection.

"Songs are our wings and horses the legs," the ladies sang, as Chimeg swung onto the horse in one fluid motion. The longhaired Medicine Man slipped from the crowd and sought her out. His long, gnarled fingers wrapped around her knee, almost covering her entire thigh; his sharp nails bit into her skin even through the thick hide of her trousers.

"Take this," he whispered, handing her a *tolu*, a Shaman's mirror. "It belonged to your father; it served him well, as well as he served the faith." The device was two-sided: one reflective, and the other a dull blank, representing the teeming other world populated by spirits. The mirror had a design showing a woman, a man, a hare, and a tortoise, depicting Wu-Huang, the goddess of the Great Bear. An initiate could trap spirits in the mirror, and once in communion with them, peer out into the world and make and mar destinies. However hard was the mirror polished, it remained a darkish, cloudy, mottled surface, impossible for a common human to see their reflection.

But Chimeg, as mother had said, was no common girl. The night was beginning to blush a dull scarlet as she waved to the gathered people and prodded the horse into a light trot.

On every side were broad, stretching horizons ending in a black abyss into which she goaded the willing horse. The vast sea of grass made it easy for the mount to cross the steppe toward the looming highlands, beginning to show against the brightening sky as they pressed on. Small lakes and streams ran through the swaying grasslands, with poplars and aspens growing in clusters on their banks. She stopped to water and feed the animals; she longed to lie on the soft riverbank and dream, but people back home were waiting and they depended on her.

The vegetation grew sparse as the valley began to rise and they started their ascent in the foothills of the Khaigai Mountains. Craggy rocks began to jut out from the soggy grass, till by evening, as the pallid moonbeams washed over the river now running well below them, the grass vanished altogether, and they were making way over slippery boulders and loose gravel. But the horse was sure footed and climbed steadily on the steep and narrow mountain path, the small cart swaying as it creaked and thudded behind them.

Chimeg decided to untie the wolf so that they all could move faster – and should the cart roll over the cliff, the wolf wouldn't get dragged after it as well. The peaks around her were shining silver with the snow from last winter, and the winds were beginning to rage and whimper. Phantom bands of waxwings and black flies with their unceasing moaning and wailing seized Chimeg's heart with icy hands, and she decided to look for a clearing where she could light a fire and halt for the night.

As soon as she came upon a lichen-covered boulder field on a turning, she stopped the horse and climbed down from it. Undoing the ropes on the cart, she first fed the wolf with meat – complete with fur, bones and fat – and then the horse, with dry hay and grains. She lay down beside

the horse and the wolf, tucking herself into her warm felt tunic and had a meal of *aaruul* - dehydrated and dried curdled milk - and salt tea boiled on the fire.

The spice merchant had said it would take her three nights of a precarious journey in the mountains before she came upon alpine sedge meadows where the strange trees with the lambs at the ends of their branches grew. She sighed, and wrapping herself from head to toe with the fur-lined quilts she'd unloaded from the cart and drifted into a calm sleep that only comes to the weary traveler. The wolf snuggled close to her, cocking his ears only when wild wolves bayed in the distance, calling out to the pack to the hunt.

Three days and three nights the girl and her companions bore on through the great far-reaching solitudes, slipping and bruising, gasping and huffing; it was the thought of Eej with her raspy breathing and ashen face that kept Chimeg going. She'd climbed down from the horse and now walked beside the poor exhausted animal, helping it pull the cart over the jagged stone and slippery trail. The high wind was upon the withered heath, but on the rocks black and stark, not a leaf was there to stir. The skies clouded o'er, and the shadows lay, be it night or day, while dark things crept underneath. The first snow came upon them, showers of whirling snowflakes curling up like smoke from her ger's chimney. They breathed and snow flew from their lips. Eyes plastered over with white, they could scarcely see the path ahead. The ground became a sheer sea of ice, and the air a frosted wall of mist, as Chimeg goaded the animals into the dampening voids.

On the fourth morning, the whirling snows eased and the first orange of dawn filled the east. Chimeg stretched and sat on a wet rock, waiting, with her Tartar lance long and strong. The ridgeline tapered off to the left and ahead of her was a defile - a verdant alpine pasture through which ran a merry stream - on the far bank of which grew a cluster of rain-washed firs, still green and fragrant after the bitter winds and biting chills. The fogs rose out of the stream, but all the land along the it was silent and still the birds were hushed in sleep. And there, quiet and still, all by itself, right in the midst of the green valley, stood a solitary tree.

Chimeg deployed her looking glass and peered closely at this tree. Its bark was ashen, its sinewy branches, like the arms of a tired old man, scarred with deep wrinkles and knotty throbbing veins. At the end of the tree's stump emerged a twisted branch, bowed wearily to the ground, tipped at its end with a coil that trembled and swerved across the grass. The grey twisted yarn was attached to a pretty lamb's navel. It coiled and snaked behind her as she stamped the grass with her cloven hooves, and munched without a thought in the world: blissful in her errand of feeding and sleeping, unaware of the riches she hosted and ignorant of the hunting eyes that squinted and laid siege. The plant was leafless, void of fruit, its beast a lustless, sexless mute.

Sharp teeth must gnaw through the umbilical cord while it's still warm and bloody.

Chimeg recalled the words of the retired soldier: "No dagger, no arrow must pierce through it, no stone may cast the coil asunder. Catch the lamb before she finishes grazing the grass around, or then she'll die on her own, her cold blood and withering flesh laid waste. Too close and too noisy she'll sense, and attach herself to the tip of the tree's shaft and her cord will be sucked out of sight. Yet, the poor, unnatural beast is mean and has long fangs, a bleat louder than a roar."

How to trick her, how to keep her grazing the ground green and moist and free from frost? Chimeg hadn't given the problem any attention till now. 'How to lure her into the forest deep?' Chimeg thought long and hard, the wolf at her side getting restless and hungry. She thought of Eej and the strength and life that ebbed out of her each moment as they sat on their haunches without a clue, wasting precious time.

Why couldn't this lamb be uncomplicated, and innocent, like the ones she'd played with at home – always following her, ready to give milk and shed their wool for the asking?

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me. Each flock follows their shepherd – they listen when he calls them. Why can't you be like them, you poor blighted lamb, simply following the one ahead of you? But there was nothing to follow.

'Follow – ' Chimeg rose on her knees with a jerk at the thought. *Wasn't it the sheep's instinct to follow; so how could this one – inwardly might be a ravening wolf – be any different? Sheep must follow their shepherd and other sheep, even if they sprouted from the ground.*

There was little choice left. Mother was dying; the green pasture around the lamb was balding fast, the clouds were rolling down from the mountain tops, and the snow was threatening again to fly thick and fast around them now. Soon there would be a blizzard and all would be lost.

Chimeg felt no qualms about killing the lamb. After all, she was just the fruit of the earth: nature's harvest, god's plenteous bounty, ready to be plucked and had. The girl and the wolf each coveted her: she for the blood, he for the flesh. Chimeg made up her mind about what she was going to do.

"So here's the plan, Nergui with the gleaming eyes," Chimeg said, sitting on her knees beside the wolf, stroking his thick fur. He nodded as if he understood her perfectly well.

"I'm going to change shape into a sheep and approach the lamb in the pasture yonder. I'll graze innocently around her and then walk toward the grove of trees near the riverbank. You'll wait out of sight there, sharpening your claws and lying in ambush. The lamb is sure to follow me if it has even the basic instincts of a sheep. As soon as we're close, you'll pounce the lamb and tear off her head. When I've drawn the spouting blood from her neck in my canteen, you'll bite her cord to send her into a peaceful sleep. Do you understand?" she asked, turning his handsome face toward hers.

The wolf blinked his eyes and grunted. He opened his wide jaws and closed them around her face, chomping gently to show his affection.

"And be sure to attack the second sheep, for I'll be in the front." She rubbed her nose against his wet snout and laughed. "I'll change back into human shape as soon as the lamb is down."

Chimeg did next what she'd been taught – by the Medicine Man who'd honed her powers, and before him, by father who'd introduced them to her. She built a small mound of earth and raised on it a low, crude pyramid structure of bamboo tied together with rope. She tied colorful ribbons on the branches and made a libation of sacred horse milk from a painted ceramic urn. She took out from her tunic the Shaman's *toli*, the mirror, and rubbed it vigorously with the edge of her elbow, but it remained dull and opaque. She poured sand on its surface and scrubbed some more, deburring it like emery paper. She held the *toli* against the moon with both arms outstretched and prayed to the deity Tenger to trap the Earth-Mother spirit. She throat-sang in a monotonous, insistent tone the chants her father had passed on to her:

*"I call to the power of Thunder Beings,
I call to the Power of Earth-Mother,
I sing to the Worlds Low and High,
I call to the Power of the Raven and the Bear:
Behold, the time has come,
The time has come to unite as one,*

*Behold, the hour has arrived
To encircle the Earth with our power."*

As the chants grew desperate and frenzied the sway of her arms against the dark skies, the spirits relented and the mirror cleared somewhat. In it appeared a white-robed man who slept leaning against the bronze pillar, with spit dried on the corner of his lips. As Chimeg squinted and stared, the man woke up with a sudden jerk. He looked around dazed as if he'd woken up after ages of unconsciousness. His face had been pressed against the conical pillar for so long, it had molded into the contours of the stone: it was long and tapered, like that of a horse, with narrow deep-set eyes that flowed back over the sides of his temple. A thin channel, shiny and bronzed, was formed over the tip of his nose, running down his lips and chin, where his tears had flowed and baked dry. His lips were drawn back over decayed gums and teeth in a slight snarl. His mouth was ajar as if a scream had been stifled midway. He was of black hue, with chocolate shades where the grimy moonlight - mottled with specks of dust and bugs - shone off them. The only other color on him was the pale of his eyes, with tiny red streaks, and the blue of his long twisted fingernails. The man looked around till the haze covering him gradually lifted as if a dull lamp had come on above him. He stared out of the mirror till he found Chimeg. His gaze transfixed the girl, boring right through her soul like a Tartar lance and pinning her to the frosted dirt beneath her feet.

Chimeg bowed before the spirit trapped in her mirror and touched it with her forehead in respect.

"I ask in the name of father the power to change my shape," she said to the spirit.

The man's lips widened into a hideous grin and a great black cloud of bugs and dust blew out of his mouth. He waved his arms frantically before him in refusal and then tore out his robe. On his matted chest was the vision of blood and black hair, which faded out into two slain bodies lying on a riverbank; the vision lingered for a moment and vanished before Chimeg could recognize the prostrate forms.

"In the name of father, the ancestor-spirits, and Wu-Huang the Goddess of the Great Bear, I command you to grant me the power to change my shape at will, or you will remain locked in forever," she insisted, louder this time.

"Heh!" the man scoffed, wrapping his grimy white robe around him again. He muttered noiselessly and shook his head a few times in protest, his tangled locks flying out like coiled serpents. Finally, relenting, he bent down, and grabbing a fistful of sand, chucked it at her. The mirror clouded over once more, and when Chimeg rubbed the mirror again, the spirit had vanished. The deed was done, her prayer reluctantly granted.

The wolf yelped and bounded away when his mistress disappeared in a wisp of smoke and in her place stood a delicious sheep. He emerged from behind the boulder where he'd hidden and approached the sheep cautiously, his padded feet making no sound on the frost. There was the unmistakable smell of Chimeg on the sheep. It was she indeed; he recognized her, remembering her instructions before she'd vanished.

"Go silently across the river and hide in those trees," the sheep commanded Nergui. "There wait till I lead in the lamb."

Chimeg, now changed into a woolly sheep with curly black strands, bounded on the boulders across the stream and hushed along near where the vegetable lamb ambled grazing. She

bleated, the lamb looked up and saw her, staring for a moment before resuming her pleasant occupation on the glistening sward. Round and round her flexile neck she bent, now cropping the grey coral moss and hoary thyme, now lapping with rosy tongue the melting rime. She eyed Chimeg with mute tenderness and seemed to softly cry "Baa."

"Baa," cried back Chimeg, now fully in the play. Where Chimeg went, the lamb began to follow, trusting and innocent. When their bellies were full with the grazing, they paused for a drink at the waterhole, near-frozen with crinkly-crackly ice. When the lamb strayed away, Chimeg called her back in a tender voice. Animated with the company, the lamb became playful, bounding around Chimeg in merry circles, laughter writ large on her adorable face, till they tired and lay on their woolly sides.

Out there, as the day passed, alone in the deep solitude, void of human company, Chimeg felt a tender bond growing between them. The black sheep, born to betray, her soul became a shepherd. When the lamb was lost, Chimeg brought her back into her fold, and when wild things on the prowl snarled, Chimeg sheltered her in the cove. Motherly instinct borne of long years of herding overcame the hunter's killing drive; the lamb became her pure white dove; nails that were formed to tear her apart became like fingers that lightly brushed her hair, and Chimeg's dark eyes made to hunt, now gazed softly into the lamb's with love. The little lamb was shy; she was vain, pausing long at the end of the shimmering pool, taken in with her reflection, her soft curling fleece, her round innocent eyes, and her pink lips. She was a picky eater, chewing on juicy tassels and spitting the coarse stalk; drinking only sweet water as it trickled cold and pure from the crack in the rock, snubbing the moss-covered gruel as it lapped the lake's banks.

Chimeg longed to let the lamb live another day. The black deed she could execute when with the grass the lamb had had her way. There was still plenty of it, and more grew on the rim of the hills; crystal clear water sparkled in melting ponds, and the snowy fleece of the little lamb grew whiter as the dusk settled on the treetops. Chimeg whistled out to Nergui, to calm him knowing he must be restless, to tell him to wait out the night.

But the wolf misunderstood. Taking it as a sign to attack as Chimeg watched in horror, faithful Nergui sprang out of the woods, yelping and snapping at the lamb's heels. In a moment he would have torn the lamb's adorable face from her fat body, had not Chimeg changed back into the hunter, and raised the scythe. The wolf bucked and yelped, hollered out and cried God's name, but the hand had fallen, and the scythe buried deep in his neck. Recognizing the betrayal of her shepherd, glint sprang into the lamb's cold eyes and she stood stiffly there. No sooner had Chimeg pulled away from the slain wolf, the lamb was upon her back, crunching through her shoulders, breaking in her ribs to crush her beating heart.

As the blood gushed from her in a thick spout, coloring the moonbeams swathing the frost red, Chimeg realized the prophecy of the spirit in the mirror, and recognized the slain bodies in that vision. "Forgive me, Mother," she whispered, "for I'm just the fruit of the earth, going back from where I came."

Kamui

By Meihan Boey

The box was very large.

It was certainly an effective way to stop Catherine crying. Her children had never seen her without tears in her eyes, not for years.

"What is it?" she asked tremulously, the sheer shock freezing the path of her handkerchief to her eyes.

Her son said, "It's a birthday present."

Her daughter said, "Happy birthday, Mum."

Catherine's face began to screw up again. "Oh, now you're giving me presents," she wailed. "You think you can give me expensive presents, and everything will be okay? You two, you've always been ungrateful-"

Marcus and Janet waited it out patiently. Marcus had not brought his wife and children. Janet, who had a female spouse, had never come out to her mother. Since their father died, Marcus and Janet had made a pact to be dutiful children in small, controlled doses. They only ever went to visit their mother together, and without their spouses. They only stayed an hour each time. They kept quiet and did not lose their temper.

This was extremely difficult. On particularly tough days, they split a Xanax between them.

Catherine found this very trying. When they were growing up, Marcus had been the rebellious one, shouting, throwing things. He was the one who snatched the rotan from her when she beat him and broke it under her nose. Janet had been the quiet one. She rarely spoke to Catherine and stayed out of the house as much as possible. Catherine had slapped Janet more than once, and called her fat and dirty. It was important for a girl to be slender and fresh, not sloppy and grubby. The pimples on her!

They'd grown up with all the advantages. Extra lessons, music classes, and all the good food they wanted. Each child had a room, though Catherine demanded the doors were never closed. She used to go through their drawers and bags, searching for evidence of misbehaviour. Parenting

was so stressful.

Then they grew up, and it seemed they couldn't wait to get away. Marcus did his National Service with the army, then found a friend to rent some shabby government apartment with. Janet went to University, stayed in a dorm, then also never came home.

Ungrateful little brats!

Shouting at them was not so satisfying when they could now simply walk out the door. So she'd taken to crying at them after their father died. But they were cold, hard creatures, her children. There was no pity in their faces when she shed tears, and wailed about how they wronged her.

They just stared at her, and waited. Marcus checked his watch - Catherine saw it - and said, "All right Mum, we have to go. Bye."

"But this box! What is it?"

"You can open it."

She did. It was a child.

At least, it looked like a child, about four years old or so of indeterminate gender. It had large, long-lashed eyes, rosy cheeks, and pretty little bow lips turned up in a smile.

"It's a Kodomoko," said Janet. "Marcus and I both chipped in to get it for you."

"A... a what?"

"It's... like a toy," said Marcus. "A kind of game. It's like a real child. You can programme whatever character traits and personality you want. You can select the gender, give it a name, change hair and eye color. Just plug it in every night."

"It will save its progress every time it charges," said Janet. "You can either play with it on your own, or go online and join the Kodomoko community, and compete with other players on how well your Kodomoko is doing. It's just like a real child. You can give it lessons, teach it music, sports, whatever. You earn points each time the Kodomoko masters a skill."

"It's like, the perfect child," added Marcus.

Catherine stared, dumbfounded. "But... why?"

"Well, you always said if you had another chance, you would raise better children," said Janet. "Here's your chance."

Catherine looked at her sharply, searched for signs of irony, and analysed her tone for resentment. But Janet was always blank and dull in front of Catherine.

"Well, bye Mum," said Marcus.

"Wait! How do I... I mean..."

"Instructions are in the box. Bye Mum."

They were gone. Catherine sat down and had another good cry about how beastly her children were, always leaving her on her own. The Kodomoko smiled sweetly at her. Her actual kids had not smiled that way at her since they were babies.

Catherine approached it warily. She peeled the plastic wrap of the box with trepidation, cut the wire twists with a pair of nail scissors, and lifted the Kodomoko from its cardboard coffin. It made her think of her long ago childhood, removing dolls from pink and purple packaging.

It came with a little control panel, no larger than a phone. **Select Gender**, it prompted in glowing cheerful letters.

Catherine stared into the thing's bright eyes. A boy, she decided. She always liked boys more. And this one would be a nice boy, not like Marcus.

Something seemed to change subtly in the Kodomoko's facial structure when she chose Boy. **Select Hair Colour**. She scrolled through the choices - Hazelnut - Mocha - Berry - Mahogany... she picked Dark Chocolate. The Kodomoko's hair faded from black to dark brown in

a charming manner. **Eyes** - violet eyes. Why not? Exotic eyes.

Personality Matrix.

An incredibly complicated panel popped up. Catherine stared hard before pressing the button **Basic Settings**.

The panel buzzed for a moment, then asked,

Am I Shy or Outgoing?

Shy, decided Catherine.

Am I Sporty or Academic?

Oh, definitely Academic.

Do I love Math & Science, or Arts & Humanities?

What was the use of Arts and Humanities? Math & Science.

Am I Patient and Loving, or Fun and Energetic?

Patient and Loving.

How Do I React to Discipline? Tears or Tantrums?

Catherine stared. React to Discipline? Why, accept it, of course. Tears or Tantrums? What sort of option was that? There was no Skip button, no other options. She checked the instructions on the box.

To Start Game, Press Switch on Inside of Left Cheek.

She opened up the Kodomoko's soft lips, searched a little - it was a disturbingly lifelike mouth - and found a button.

"Oh!" She couldn't help instantly jumping back. The Kodomoko was blinking, yawning... moving.

Catherine grabbed the control panel, intending to immediately turn it off again - it was so very odd...

Please Enter Name.

It was now looking up at her expectantly. Such big bright violet eyes - such a sweet smile. "Hello Mama," he said in a soft, appealing voice, reaching out to take her hand.

Please Enter Name.

Out of the depths of memory, Catherine suddenly thought of the first Japanese comic book she ever read which a classmate had once lent her.

She typed: **KAMUI**.

Kamui was one of the best-dressed Kodomoko at the convention, and this was saying something. There were thousands of participants, mostly older women. Not because men did not

purchase Kodomoko, but because quite a lot of men, unfortunately, had put their Kodomoko to such disgraceful uses that the company now required male buyers to undergo a background check.

The Kodomoko were all of the same size, but they were a riot of colour and pageantry. The female Kodomoko especially were mostly in outlandish, cartoonish dresses with multiple layers of petticoats, bonnets, lace, bows, and patterned socks. They had very long, very thick, very elaborately curled hairstyles in all colours of the rainbow. Looking at a child with rainbow-streaked hair, orange eyes, and a heavy dress with a train six feet long, Catherine was pleased she had not chosen to make her Kodomoko female.

Catherine had joined one of the online communities relatively recently, and had been pleased to find that Kamui more than matched up to the others. He was a math prodigy, was studying astrophysics at university level, could play four instruments, and had acquired a Bonus Skill of Cordon Bleu level cooking, an add-on Catherine had willingly paid for. He was, in addition, the most charming little boy, always clinging affectionately to her, never speaking to strangers, always happy and cheerful to see her each morning.

Even when she lost her temper at him (he was, after all, a human-shaped computer, and had his glitches - he might freeze, or interpret instructions wrongly), he neither wept nor argued back. He merely smiled, and said cheerfully, "Sorry Mama, it's my fault!"

Catherine had stripped and renovated Marcus' old bedroom for Kamui. Kamui liked everything she liked, and it had been such fun choosing wallpaper, curtains, shelves, and bedding for him. Unlike Marcus (or, indeed, Janet), Kamui was not interested in plastering his walls with pictures of laser guns and robots and dinosaurs and other horrible things. His entire room was a blue sky festooned with fluffy white clouds, colourful balloons, and little winged cherubs. His bed was also white and blue, and there were stuffed toys in every corner. He was happy to wear little sailor suits and sweet little tuxedos with adorable bow ties. He always smiled. He was always happy.

Catherine had also purchased (very expensive) add-ons that allowed her to bathe and feed Kamui. She'd had to send him away for two days to be fully waterproofed, and to install extra components that would convert any food he 'ate' into compost, which could be used as garden fertilizer or simply discarded. She had even considered putting in the components that would allow him to 'go to the toilet' but decided against it, purely because of cost. Kamui did not actually have genitalia; none of the Kodomoko had, a safeguard against potential abuse of what was meant to be - essentially - an elaborate computer game.

She'd been wary of joining the online community, but when she finally did, she instantly made friends. Her closest friend was a lady who called herself BlueBlossom16, whose Kodomoko was female. They'd bonded over secret confessions of how much more wonderful their Kodomoko were compared to their real children, who were cold, nasty, hardhearted creatures. And of course, the Kodomoko had the great advantage of eternal youth. They would never grow up into sullen teenagers or uncaring adults.

There were hundreds of stalls at the convention, selling upgrades, add-ons, patches, or just clothes and accessories. There were manufacturers who specialised in just Kodomoko wigs - hair that could glow in the dark, or had iridescent streaks, or could float and defy gravity. There were extremely specialised add-ons - angel or fairy wings, for instance, or even mermaid tails. There were programmers who could give the Kodomoko ethereal voices or devilish growls, or change their facial structure so that they resembled elves or vampires.

There were even programmers who could recreate someone's dead child. Constructing a specific face, body, and personality type, matched as closely as possible to what was described.

They used video footage, sound clips, and the memories of mourning parents to design a bespoke Kodomoko, as young as two years old or as old as twelve. Older than that, they said, the complexity of a human being in puberty and beyond made it impossible to properly replicate a person in a biotronic shell.

"That was originally what I was going for," said the lady beside Catherine, as she stared at the Bespoke Kodomoko Studio booth. "But it was too expensive. My daughter, you know - she isn't dead, of course. But she was such a lovely little girl. Then she turned thirteen... and it's like I never saw that sweet little girl again. She just... disappeared into this dreadful, rebellious, horrible person."

Catherine looked at the blue flower pinned to the lady's lapel. "BlueBlossom16?"

"Yes. 999RoseGold?"

"Yes!"

They embraced. Catherine, for her part, was fighting down a certain sense of horror.

BlueBlossom16 - whose name, it turned out, was Aishah - was, firstly, very, very fat, and secondly, was a Muslim woman in an elaborate headscarf. She was so vast that Catherine could not get her arms quite around her, and she was perspiring from the effort of hobbling around the huge convention hall.

"Let's go get a drink," said Catherine, and Aishah beamed in gratitude. "Come, Kamui."

Aishah's Kodomoko had been obscured by her enormous Mama, but she now stepped forward to allow Aishah to lean on her. She was beautiful, in a gold and red baju kurung, with very long, straight, glossy black hair hanging in two thick braids over her shoulders. Her skin was smooth and coffee-coloured, her eyes were pale green, and she smiled prettily at Catherine as she took the weight of half a car on her tiny shoulder. There was just the faintest sound of pneumatic suspension kicking in - Aishah had reinforced her Kodomoko.

"My real Ida would never help me like this," Aishah said breathlessly. "She used to, you know, when she was small. After a while she just said, Umami, you are just too fat. I can't help you. You go and lose weight. Very cruel, you know? Cuts my heart." Aishah beat a plump fist into her chest.

"Careful, ummi," Idadua - the second Ida - said sweetly.

Kamui, who was carrying Catherine's handbag, asked prettily, "Mama, do you need help too?"

"No, no Kamui," said Catherine hastily. "Um... why don't you... run ahead and order for Mama."

"Yes, Mama. You want a low fat hazelnut cappuccino. Madam, what can I order for you?"

"Umami would like the chocolate frappuccino please," Idadua replied for her. "And please check it is halal."

Kamui bobbed a little bow - he was programmed to bow to all ladies - and bounced away.

"Too expensive, those designer ones," said Aishah as she heaved herself with a sigh into a seat. "But I don't need it. My Idadua is good enough, yes?"

"She's lovely," Catherine murmured.

"Isn't she? She gives a good massage. And her curry! She makes it from scratch, you know. Pounding rempah the whole day. Such a good girl. My Ida used to be so lazy. Never helped me for more than one hour. Idadua, she does the cooking, cleans the house, I even upgraded her to do accountancy, so she can even do the family's taxes. When the grandchildren come, she has the babysitting upgrade too. I'm thinking to get her the homecare app also, so she can nurse me when I'm older."

"Ah," said Catherine, trembling and trying not to show it.

Kamui brought their drinks, cheerful as ever. "Such a good boy," said Aishah, patting his head. "Ah, what pretty eyes! Tell me, Kamui, what skill sets have you been upgraded with?"

"Advanced mathematics, physics, chemistry, astrophysics, French cooking, and music for piano, flute, violin, and clarinet."

"Ah," said Aishah.

There was a silence.

Both Kodomoko spoke at once as they were programmed to fill melancholy silences.

"Are you feeling well, ummi?"

"Mama, do you need anything?"

"Yes, ok, Idadua," said Aishah distractedly. "Catherine. You haven't programmed any practical skills in your boy?"

"He can cook," said Catherine weakly.

"Ya, but... French cooking? Why do you need that? And why all the maths and astrophysics and all this? You know he isn't going to grow up to become a scientist or anything. He won't grow up at all."

"Yes, but... you see, my children..." Catherine found she didn't know how to explain herself. "I always wanted my children to be good in maths... my son, he works in hotels, my daughter is just a salesgirl... I always wanted..."

"What's wrong with that?" Aishah looked surprised. "Good honest jobs, hotels, retail. Steady. You don't get too much nonsense in those types of jobs. My daughter works in a bar, you know. What kind of Muslim she thinks she is, I don't know. Boyfriend Chinese, got motorcycle..." Aishah sighed. "If my daughter was a salesgirl I would be so happy. Take my advice, Catherine. Programme him for something practical. First Aid, at least?"

"But Aishah... you know... your Idadua is kind of... like a maid?"

"What's wrong with that?" demanded Aishah again, offended. "I bought her and all her upgrades. She doesn't need food or sleep, doesn't get tired or angry, can't get stressed, can't get bored. She's better than a human maid. What's the point of having a boy who can build rockets, or whatever?"

The two Kodomoko spoke again simultaneously.

"Umami, let's go get ice-cream."

"Mama, would you like to go shopping?"

Catherine and Aishah stared at each other. Then, silently, each picked up her drink and allowed their Kodomoko to steer them away.

He won't grow up at all.

Catherine stood over Kamui's bed, staring at him. Kamui lay asleep, face-up and completely still, recharging his internal battery. He was wearing pyjamas covered in little cartoon ducks.

He won't grow up at all.

Wasn't it a good thing? Kamui would never grow up to hurt her. He would never ignore her, argue with her, date a girl she disapproved of, fail his exams, or drop out of university. He would never do anything, or be anything, other than what she wanted him to be. What she specifically designed him to be. He could never be naughty.

He was the perfect child.

"Kamui," said Catherine, and Kamui immediately opened his eyes and smiled up at her.

"Hello Mama," he said cheerfully. It was never a challenge to get Kamui out of bed, as it had been for her real children. Marcus, tumbling out, groaning. Janet, groping her way to the bathroom. Messy children, spilling Milo, refusing to eat oatmeal, once in a while falling sick so they vomited up all their breakfast. Kamui would never be sick, never spill anything, never refuse anything.

"Kamui," said Catherine, "Be naughty."

Kamui stared at her, still smiling. "I don't understand, Mama."

"Be naughty," said Catherine. "Just get up, now, and be naughty."

Kamui sat up. But he did nothing. "What do you want me to do, Mama?"

"Just be naughty. Throw something. Hit me."

"I am not allowed to hit you, Mama."

"You're a very naughty boy."

"I'm sorry, Mama."

Catherine slapped him. It hurt. He was made of titanium under a flexible carbon-fibre shell.

Kamui said, "Mama, you are hurt. Let me help you."

Catherine slapped him again. "Naughty boy," she said, trembling, then shouted, "Naughty boy!"

"I'm sorry, Mama. It's my fault. You are hurt. Let me help you."

"Naughty boy," she cried. "Naughty boy. Bad boy!"

"I'm sorry, Mama. It's my fault. Let me help you."

Kamui kept smiling.

Catherine wept.

The Promise of Sinaing na Tulingan

By Joel Donato Jacob

Christine had to stop just as she reached the ridge's peak. She pulled her bandana off so she could douse it with her drinking water, stretching it back over her head to use as a dust mask that covered her button nose and wide mouth from the soot that drifted up with every step she took on the mountain ridge. Her unruly hair fell in an unglamorous mess over her dark skin.

On either side of the mountain path, the world fell away from under the ridge in clumps of scorched earth and patches of blackened stubs of grass. Every here and there, a little razor's edge of green would peek out from the ash. Kuya Roger, their guide, never missed a step despite being a hand span shorter than Christine. He kept walking forward, neither bothered by the soot nor the smell of burnt grasslands. Because the path was only wide enough for one, Robbie had to stop just behind Christine. Robbie took her hand and she had to keep herself from shrinking away.

"You know, they burn the grasslands because the cows won't eat the *talahib* when it's all tough and old, but they love the sprouts that grow after they burn down the grass," Robbie explained as he held her hand. His reddening *chinito* skin looked comically like a ripe tomato, but was not as dark as Christine's. They have been dating for seven months, drawn together - as they would tell their friends - by a similar interest in mountaineering. But sometimes Christine admits to herself that they were probably dating for lack of anyone else who was a mutual swipe right. Christine had given up on the euphemistic adjectives, ranging from exotic, to plain. Robbie gladly laughed and described his own looks as *siopao*-like.

Christine wondered how what he had just said could be interpreted as romantic. Sweetness and softness after a blaze? Maybe. He wasn't even sensitive enough to be bothered by the smoke and soot. Kuya Roger, Christine could understand; he lived here and was a local. They burned down the grasslands by the sections several times a year from what she understood. The few cattle and goats they had grazed between the allocated sections, while the other lands recovered from being burnt, trampled on and eaten. But Robbie grew up in Laguna, in the same town as she did, a town flanked by Makiling and Laguna de Bay. How could he tolerate the stench for sour molasses

from the burned grass? His nostrils must be full of soot that would turn into black boogers. Christine's nose crumpled and her upper lip curled in disgust under by her bandana-turned-mask.

Christine turned to Robbie. From underneath the mask, she smiled at him as if to ask his permission to shake his hand off hers. She hurried down to catch up with Kuya Roger.

"How far are we from Silanguin, Kuya?"

"There it is," Kuya Roger pointed at a silver glow capping the tree line. His arm has been buffed into a wrinkled shine by consistently being sunburnt; his finger arched up then down to show that they were still quite far. He squinted at the horizon and pouted his lips with a nod in the manner of the province folk to signify the distance.

Christine had to stretch her imagination to realize that the silver glow was the afternoon sun on the water. She checked her watch and it said that it was a little after two. "Oh good! Will we reach it before dark?"

"At our pace, very likely. It's just an hour after the rocky river."

"How far are we from there?"

"Two hours or three... It depends on our pace." Kuya Roger has been very diligent about reminding Christine and Robbie of their pace. He would often keep walking, leaving the two behind as they stopped to drink, take pictures, or catch their breaths. More than once, Robbie and Christine have had to call out to Kuya Roger to stop and wait for them. She knew it was because they were both overweight and people had often reacted with surprise that Robbie and her hiked mountains together for fun. Christine can carry her own weight in gear and supplies if necessary, she knew.

"Kuya, what is that?" Robbie had caught up to them only to make all three of them stop on the trail. His finger pointed at a shelter, no wider than an arm span and no taller than the knee, made of twigs and browning knotted *talahib* leaves.

"Hunters hide there at night. They wait for deer or boar that might be attracted to the *talahib* sprouts. A little added income, a little something better than vegetables, you know? We cook the worst parts for ourselves but the best parts we smoke. Fetches a lot with tourists... *tapang usa* or *tapang baboy na ramo* sells for a hundred by the scale's notch. Not that we have shot anything down in months. Guiding is still the more consistent source of income."

That was the most Rogar had spoken the entire day even after they had tried to engage him for small talk over the packed breakfasts and lunches Christine prepared for the three of them. Christine speculated at the tone; Anger? Frustration? Christine knew that Philippine deer and wild boar were both protected animals. But she could not bring herself to get angry at Kuya Roger nor whoever would lay down in the little shelter and wait through the night for the possibility of shooting down some game to sell to tourists. They had passed trenches dug out by chrome mining. Burning grasslands for grazing cattle and hunting game was still more reasonable than mining; the locals knew it but many of them sold their ancestral lands to the miners. The mountain guides have been trying their best to earn without hurting the environment, but it was an uphill battle. And just as Christine was about to settle on a kind judgment, Kuya Roger turned on his heels and started down the path again, leaving Christine and Robbie behind.

The landscape changed from burnt grassland to grassland to secondary forest. *Madre de cacao*, *balite*, and coconut trees claiming the land after it has been stripped of valuable wood trees like *narra*, *apitong*, *molave*, and *kamagong*.

Soon they came upon a dried up rocky river, less than an hour after the hunter's shelter. Christine inquired, "Is this the river you spoke of, Kuya?"

"Not yet." Two more rocky rivers broke the repetition of the forest. But over and over,

Kuya Roger said that it was not the river that signaled the end of their trek. The sky turned orange then purple above them and they were still walking. Robbie and Christine pulled out their headlamps but Kuya Roger seemed unaffected by the encroaching darkness--he knew the terrain well enough to rely on memory and silhouette.

Whenever Robbie or Christine would ask if they were close to the cove, Kuya Roger would only respond, "I told you to keep up. It depends on the pace."

Eventually, it got too dark to distinguish the wind in the trees from the splash of wave on shore and Christine started to imagine the shore just ahead of her. It surprised her when her trekking shoes landed on a rivulet and she felt a chill in her toes as she got her socks wet. She traced the glistening surface with her headlamp and found the sea--flat and silent.

Kuya Roger immediately entered a *kubo* that neither Robbie nor Christine had seen just a moment ago--they had been too focused on the paths they were placing their feet upon. There, a hot cup of instant 3-in-1 coffee was given to him by a smiling woman, triple-chinned, baggy-cheeked, and gap-toothed.

Christine and Robbie entered the *kubo* without being asked in but they were welcomed by the woman. "We just made *tinola*, it is still hot. Sit down and rest."

"How much for the coffee, Ate?" Robbie asked.

"Twenty," she answered. And without being asked she added, "The *tinola* is only a hundred for each of you, and you can get as much rice as you want."

"Coffee for me, Christine?"

Christine shook her head.

"Just one then." Robbie looked at Christine.

She shrugged, "We have spam and corned beef and uncooked rice. I am not too tired to cook but if I could rest sooner, the better."

"*Tinola* it is. For two... I mean three," Robbie told the *Ate* as he remembered that they were responsible for the guide's meals too. *Ate* stood up from her Monobloc chair which did not improve her height by much. The *tinola* came out of the kitchen in less than a minute; three heaping bowls that spilled a little with each of the woman's steps. The bowls steamed with the aroma of ginger and chili pepper greens. The surface of the soup shined with the floating fat of the chicken.

Christine and Robbie sat down with Kuya Roger. Christine realized how hungry she was after taking her first bite. She felt all the strength draining from her knees as she made a single exhausted sigh before fully diving into her meal. The chicken was tough and gamey, and the *sayote* was overcooked, but these only helped Christine, Robbie, and Kuya Roger go through their rice like construction workers. Each tiny bite of chewy chicken took long enough to soften in her molars for Christine to shove three spoonfuls of soupy rice along with it.

After, the *Ate* happily took their money; she didn't charge for Kuya Roger's meal so Christine guessed it was his cut for the referral. She cleaned up after them and served them room temperature water. "We sell ice. Five pesos for a small block."

Christine shook her head, "Thank you."

"I sleep here," Kuya Roger explained curtly.

Christine wondered if the woman was his wife or something else like a sister. They didn't really have much similarities in features--but they were both dark skinned, the shiny kind you get from working in the sun all day.

Kuya Roger continued, "You can pitch anywhere but we have *kubo* there you could use. You can sleep on the table if the crabs or the dogs come bothering you."

Robbie and Christine stood up and put their hands on their packs to get started on settling

down for the night.

"Is there anywhere we could wash up and brush our teeth?"

"At the back," Ate smiled eagerly. "There is a *poso*. You could pump for yourself, or I could wake my son up to pump for you. You can shower by hanging the hose on a tree branch. He only charges twenty pesos."

"Uhh, that would be nice. Thank you," Robbie answered. He whispered, "I guess we get to help the local economy."

The woman shouted from where she sat, "Terrence! *Igib!*"

She then faced Christine and Robbie again, "I just put *sinaing na tulingan* in a clay pot on the fire. It should be perfect for breakfast if you want to share with us. Still a hundred for each of you."

Christine answered, "That sounds wonderful."

Christine was a genuine fan of *sinaing na tulingan*. She was tempted to ask if it will have *kamias* and strips of pork fat simmering with it because that was exactly how she wanted it every time.

She was full with the *tinola* but she found herself salivating for the breakfast waiting for her the following day.

Robbie and Christine washed up with the help of Terrence, who turned out to be a skinny boy no older than nine years old by the looks of him. Though he claimed to be twelve, he admitted he was only in the second grade.

Robbie finished first and told Christine that he would wait for her in the *kubo*. By the time Christine got there, Robbie had unzipped his bedroll and spread his sleeping bag over the bamboo table. He looked shyly at Christine. "Thank you for arranging this trip for us."

Robbie hopped up on top of the table and patted the space beside him to signal where he expected Christine to lay. Christine struggled to keep her face under control. She sat where Robbie's hand was, but immediately shifted her weight so she could lie on her side facing away from him. Robbie lay behind her, his anxiety sounded like a giggle bubbling under his Adam's apple.

"I think we are doing well," he said, "I think we are going to get over this. Right?"

Christine nodded but Robbie couldn't see it from where he lay.

She closed her eyes and fell asleep as soon as she could, knowing she might not sleep at all if Robbie put his arms around her. She comforted herself with the promise of *sinaing na tulingan*.

Christine woke to wonderful smells. Ate and Kuya Roger were having coffee. Christine stood up from their makeshift bed and Robbie's arm fell away from her but he did not wake up. The wonderful smell came from a blackened clay pot behind the *kubo*. It was balanced atop a wood fire between three large blue angular rocks. It smelled of the sea and of grease, with just the right amount of sour. Christine found herself drawn to the clay pot but before she could inspect it, Ate called out to her, "Have some coffee first while I prepare your breakfast."

Christine contemplated brushing her teeth first, but did not want to ruin the wonderful meal with the taste of toothpaste in her mouth. She was ushered by Ate to the same *kubo* where they had their *tinola* last night. It looked vastly different in the daytime. Christine saw a pile of fresh laundry waiting to be folded on top of a cot; on the floor was a skinny boy--definitely Terrence--fast asleep. There were two dogs in different shades of brown, equally gazing hopefully from atop lowered muzzles, craning their necks and wagging their tails at Christine.

Ate came back with a heaping plate of freshly steamed rice and another plate that carried

a single young tuna, a hand span and a half long that its tail stood at an angle beyond the plate's edge. It was wrapped in a banana leaf and surrounded by a clear pool of brine.

Ate put the plates down in front of Christine and smiled proudly. "Just tell me if you need more rice."

Christine smiled back at the woman. Using her fork, Christine undid the banana leaf that wrapped around the fish and chunks of pork fat and kamias tumbled out. The pork jiggled with all the oil rendered out of it; the kamias burst, its green long gone. As she was about to dig in, Ate returned with small plate with a single chili and a bisected *calamansi*. Christine looked up and smiled at the woman who seemed to have predicted everything that could make her happy that morning.

"Make sure you don't flip the fish as you are eating it," the woman warned.

"We say that in Laguna too, but what does it mean?"

"It's bad luck. Usually it wouldn't mean anything I guess, but you are riding a boat back to Subic later, right? The whole saying goes, if you flip the fish, the fish will flip you--your boat in particular. The fisher folk wouldn't challenge such an old saying even now during the modern times. Even as we pull the fish out of the pot, we are careful not to turn it, you know?" The woman shrugged and Christine shrugged in agreement as she shoved her third delicious spoonful.

The fat melted on her palate, the *kamias* was just enough to cut down the fishy taste, the tuna was very well cleaned so that it didn't cook in its own blood, and the banana leaf kept the meat from getting tough from being cooked for so long. As she finished her *sinaing na tulingan*, Christine saw that Robbie was starting to stir atop the table. Christine called out to the woman, "My boyfriend will have one, too."

Ate nodded. "Oh, he's your boyfriend *pala*."

Christine fidgeted at the comment. It was hard to act like a girlfriend again since she had found out that he splurged thousands of pesos in massage parlors. She felt disgusted; but knew that it was wrong to feel that way. She wanted to be a liberated and strong woman so she hated herself for judging Robbie's activities. But then Robbie claimed he'll never indulge in such activities again, so maybe his guilt proved she was in the right after all.

When Robbie's meal arrived, Christine took the plates and smiled at the woman. "I'll bring it to him there, if that's okay."

Ate smiled back. Christine stood up and balanced the fish's plate between her thumbs and forefingers while the rest of her fingers carried the plate of rice. She felt like she could have carried a plate on each hand but she wanted to steady the plates as she walked on the sand. While the sand was white where it was dry, it was black where the sea soaked it. As Christine walked back to the *kubo* where she and Robbie had slept, her thumb touched the corner of the banana leaf. Her fingers shifted between doubt and anticipation.

Christine steeled her resolve and decided that if her indignation was irrational as she thought it was, then no one, not even nature nor superstition, would side with her.

In a single breath, Christine lifted her right hand from holding the plates, pinched the banana leaf by its edge and pulled it off from around and under the fish. Sure enough, the fish was turned over itself on the plate. Christine dropped the banana leaf on the sand and resumed carrying the plates with both her hands.

"Robbie, have your breakfast. We still have an hour or two before the boat arrives to fetch us and take us to Subic."

"You aren't having breakfast?"

"I'm done. I'm going to brush my teeth and get my feet wet."

"*Sige*, that sounds nice. I'll eat and join you after."

"Okay."

As the water played between Christine's toes, she looked out into the sea and thought she saw a patch of water more silver than the rest. In the corner of her eyes, try as she might not to see, she watched Robbie cleave through the tuna, suck on its eyeballs and pick on the bits of flesh, darker than the rest, nearest the spine, more tender and rich. Christine likened it to being unable to veer one's gaze away from the gory parts of a bad slasher flick.

Robbie soon finished his meal and insisted on photos. Christine let him take a few before she reminded him, "We need to pack up before the boat gets here."

Robbie nodded and they made the short walk from the water to the *kubo*. As Robbie was rolling up his sleeping bag, he noticed that Christine was putting her mobile phone inside a plastic ice bag. "Your phone is splash proof you know. You don't have to do that anymore."

Christine nodded, "Habit I guess."

The boat arrived and they paid Kuya Roger his guide fee. Ate was nowhere to be seen. She was tending her garden, or so says Kuya Roger; but she did remind him to ask for the payment for the breakfast, and the rental of the *kubo*, as well as the fee for the beach. Robbie counted the money and commented that it didn't seem like a lot for all the things they enjoyed. Robbie gave Kuya Roger an extra two hundred pesos to split between him and Ate.

Curious, and also mindful of her etiquette, Christine managed to ask, "*Oo nga pala*, what is Ate's name?"

"Rubi," Roger answered nonchalantly.

"Please say goodbye to Ate Rubi for us," Christine said. "And Terrence too."

The boat was rowed out of the shallows before the motor was started.

The boat followed the coastline, which is to say that it curved several times as it went through the many coves of Zambales. Every other moment, Christine would look out and seemingly spot the same patch of silver in the sea. Each time it seemed closer than before.

She tried looking out to the coves. Some coves sheltered beach resorts with bigger and more *kubos*. One of them even had what seemed like a hotel that had its own jet ski rental. One cove was abandoned, its cliff inhabited by cattle that seemed to tiptoe on the face as they looked for edible grasses.

Robbie cupped his body around Christine's without actually touching her, somewhere between protective and awkward. At most their windbreakers would touch in the wind but that was enough to send a shudder down Christine's spine. She saw the patch of silver in the water again.

As they approached the town of Subic, Christine asked for a life vest. Robbie held her hand again, "What's wrong, Christine? We're almost there."

She had just finished putting on her life vest when she saw the patch of silver in the sea again, less than ten feet away from their boat. She now saw it was a large school of fish packed so dense that they pushed each other out of the water. In midair, the lidless eyes of the fish looked angry and accusatory. The two fishermen manning the boat crouched from where they had previously been seated and pointed at the strange sight while throwing amused expletives. So when the school of fish pushed against the boat, they were thrown off before the boat was overturned. Many fish missed the bottom of the boat and was pushed by other fish out of the water.

Christine was cut by sharp spines on slippery fins. As she fell into the water, she swallowed a mouthful of sea. The boat's shadow fell onto her as a predator would a prey. She couldn't see much else except for the bubbles her own breath made as she screamed screams the water could

not carry to any ear. She feared that she would hit herself on the boat or cut herself badly on its still spinning propeller.

Less than a few heartbeats later, her life vest tugged her by the armpits and Christine was floating on the surface. Though she was only underwater briefly, panic gripped at her even as she gasped for air and choked. Her throat burned from screaming and saltwater. Her stomach sloshed with fluid but she was terribly thirsty. She could taste her own blood from a cut in her mouth; and feared that sharks might smell her bleeding in the water. The silver mass of fish was nowhere to be seen. The two fishermen were treading water, in no worse shape than she was. A few feet away, their small boat floated upside down, its propeller looked like a silly pinwheel, uselessly turning in the air.

Robbie was gone. Christine's eyes stung and teared. It was from the saltwater, but she should at least make a show that she had been crying for Robbie. The swim back to Subic might take hours if they fail to flip the boat right side up.

"Sir... Sir?" The two fishermen were calling out for Robbie. Christine realized that she should make the pretense of doing the same. "Robbie! Ro--!"

But she choked on some seawater and coughed violently before she could shout his name a second time. She paddled her palms to push herself toward the boat's *katig* and shouted again as she struggled to regain her bearings, "Robbie!"

The sea rocked the boat like a mother cradling a calm baby after a tantrum. Christine looked out as a quiet settled over her. She knew Robbie was gone but shouted anyway, "Robbie!"

At best, the seawater in her eyes would make it seem like she had been crying. The fishermen swam over to the overturned boat to ask her if she was okay.

She nodded a little too eagerly.

The two men went about trying to flip their boat back upright, which involved rocking it in the water so that the momentum lent to it by its buoyancy aided them trying to push it up and over. The two men likely expected Christine to still be in shock and not likely to help. They were only partially correct.

Malebolge

By Allison Thai

Borgia One - Seduction

Pathology is more than a science. It's the art of putting a name to the problem.

"Uyen, how do you figure it out so fast?" My colleagues would ask.

"Keep quiet and listen," I'd say, but who would believe me? Bacteria and viruses aren't supposed to talk. Only I have an ear for them, somehow.

I squint through the microscope--unnecessary, really, just an act to convince the world I'm not batshit crazy. Then I hand back the cell culture to its original recipient, the newest intern. "Your sample's positive for TB."

"But I found nothing."

"Check again."

His lips press to a hard white line. Pinched fingers wiggle the petri dish.

Can't say I blame him. My eyes fail me, too. They tell me there's nothing growing in that culture. My ears, though, pick up whispers of the early stage. I should be sorry for ruining his morning, but I have my own work to do.

I am a zookeeper for micro-sized menageries that put people into beds and graves. No culprit goes unnamed. Sure, I could play around more with the specimens. I could run the serotypes and stains; bathe their shells in dye and unzip their scripts with heat and enzymes to watch a mosaic of shapes fixed on slides, colonies built on plates, and genetic codes spelled out on computer screens. But these textbook methods waste my time.

These single celled denizens of flesh and blood murmur like bees in a hive. Talking among themselves. Never to me. I am just the bystander, after all, and every biopsy is a chance to eavesdrop on them. *Grow, split, eat* is the mantra for them, no matter the dialect or accent. It's all they do. They don't say much else.

Then, through a foot eaten up by gas gangrene, I hear my name for the first time.

Uyen.

Clostridium perfringens. I recognize that deep bass call, that twang of exotoxin growing hollow grapes on the foot's skin. Still, my heart skips a beat. Everyone's out for lunch break. No one's around to call me. I lean in closer to hear not only my name, but a message:

Dearest Uyen,

Yes--you, Uyen. For your ears only. You are used to hearing the voices, I know, but now I feel it's time they speak to you on my behalf. Know that you are loved.

Who's speaking?

That question chews at my brain like a prion disease, up to my last biopsy for the day. I try to think nothing of it as I drive home.

Bolgia Two - Flattery

I've not been the same since my brother Khang died. Can't get a wink of sleep at all. He used to be the reason I would cook a big pot of *phở*. I've had no one to please since then. No standards to uphold. I used to make the perfect bowl for Khang, with the right amount of spice and salt tailored to his high blood pressure and aortic stenosis. To hell with that now. Alone in my flat, I only eat to survive.

All those hours in the kitchen trying to teach you, wasted, my mom would say. She nags at me, hounds me from the back of my mind as I drive to work. Once in the lab, the little voices take over. Only there, with them, do I find solace.

The relief is short-lived. I can't stop thinking of that gangrenous foot. Maybe it's a one-hit wonder. Delusions of an insomniac. The specimens would return to their secret murmurs and I'd resume my biopsies.

I assume wrong--I get another message, through a slice of chancre infected with syphilis:

Dearest Uyen,

Have you remembered yet? We have met before, I assure you. Try to remember. Don't worry, take your time. The answer will come. You are not only beautiful when you think, but beautiful always in my eyes.

Treponema pallidum croons up at me, streaming a warm, pleasant flow down my ears.

Praise is a foreign language, strange and hard to understand. My streak of efficient, accurate diagnoses, untarnished as it may be, did not come easily. Seasoned pathologists used to scoff at my results. Beginner's luck, they'd say.

Then there's Mom. The kind of woman who could see only the fly in the soup or a stain in a work of art. Nothing ever pleased her.

I guess she had been better when Dad was around. Not that I remember--I was three and Khang was barely a week old when a collision on the highway took Dad's life. To raise us, Mom managed to open her own sandwich shop, thanks to the connections and condolences from her many friends.

Mom wanted me to succeed her. She never dared demand much of my brother, given his condition. But I had no excuse. An allergy to social contact didn't count, though my face turns red, ears pound, and gut twists enough times for me to firmly believe that it should. I just didn't have it in me to run a business. Mom fought to prove me wrong; selfish became my second name. I seized that full ride to college by the neck, because anything was better than a life sentence in the kitchen,

trying and failing to perfect Mom's five-star *bánh mì*. It took half of my life and a third of Mom's for her to give up and let me go.

I'm used to shedding blood and tears for approval and respect. But this praise I'm getting, from someone I'm supposed to know feels off. Undeserved.

Borgia Three - Simony

Doesn't take long to hear back from my secret admirer. It's *HIV* this time. Carving a voicebox through leukocytes, it hijacks to deliver a meek whisper, a sick kind of ventriloquy:

Dearest Uyen,

I apologize for my approach earlier. I didn't mean to make you at ill at ease. The voices you've been hearing are my gift to you. In return, I only ask for the honor of your company. I hope you can join me soon.

This isn't the first time I've received strange gifts. On my sixteenth birthday Khang had handed me a mixtape, and on it he had written *For Emergencies*.

I popped it into the tape recorder and pressed "play." Nothing. I waited. Then I tensed and turned the volume knob to the max. Leaned in. Still nothing, and I frowned. "Playing a prank on me, Khang?"

He didn't laugh. "It's for emergencies, remember?"

"If there's an emergency, I'll be calling the police or an ambulance, not playing this. Besides, how am I supposed to listen to a tape with nothing inside?"

He shrugged. "You never know when you'll need it."

To this day I hate that I still don't know. The mixtape's tucked away in my closet, collecting dust.

Borgia Four - Sorcery

Whoever's sending these messages at least gives me the relief of not hearing *every* kind of microbe in existence. Our bodies are oozing and crawling with them, mostly with microbiota: the good kind. Only when they go viral, go bad, I hear them.

Trauma cases mean no messages for me. Instead I get bodily fluids and tissues obtained through questionable means. Like a severed penis. The guy got wasted and tried to sleep it off in his trailer. He mistook his morning wood for a snake and took aim with a pistol. *Bang*. The surgeon didn't have to do much--the shot saw to most of the work.

Later, as I lay wide awake at night, only one thing crosses my mind, back and forth, in ricochets: *We have met before*. Where? When? *Who*? I turn to the window, hoping to find answers somewhere in the smog. Nothing glitters above the Hanoi skyline.

Khang used to look up with me and mourn over the lack of stars. One night, when I was thirteen and he just turned ten, he proposed going camping. "If I can't be an astronaut," he said, "then I want to get a good look at them from down here."

Mom gave in to his birthday wish, giving us a weekend at Nui Chua National Park. Summer - tropical heat at its best - had sucked the rivers nearly dry. Cream-colored gorges carved their way through the park.

"*Bye, bye Miss American Pie*," Khang would sing on the hike, "*Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry*." Singing to his favourite songs from 70s America made his English very good.

Once we pitched camp, he hunched over a tome on outer space, while bobbing his head to the latest mixtape he made. His finger traced over the constellations--he would look for them later, for sure. We took off after dinner. Mom's sweet rice still warm and stuck to the roof of my mouth. I didn't want Khang lugging that book around, so I had him tear out just the double-page spread. We picked our way around the campsite, through the web of trees, and into a field. Khang trained his flashlight over the map and as he glanced between that and the cosmic canopy above us, he seemed to nod in reverence.

He murmured, "Ooh, it makes me wonder." I wondered if Led Zeppelin wrote *Stairway to Heaven* to this spectacle.

"Look out for Lyra, Cygnus, and Aquila," he said. "They make the Summer Triangle. There's a spot where we can see all three at once."

The thrill of the hunt brought him to life more than any medication. I wandered through the field, spellbound by the sky.

When the ground dipped, I fell with it.

Somehow I twisted fast enough to grab the rocks behind me. Dirt stabbed the inside of my nails. The flashlight dove past my dangling legs into the darkness below. "Khang," I called, over and over. I prayed that he'd hear. A beam of light waved overhead, then hit my face.

"Uyen!"

Uyen, Uyen.

My name, above and below me. Khang's hands scrambled over mine and pulled. I squirmed and kicked my way up until my belly reached the ledge. Only then I let go and buckled onto the ground. Khang followed suit, wheezing. Stars smeared into a creamy swirl through my tears, as if I reached out to stir up a cloud in a pot of uncooked rice.

I thanked the dark for hiding my heated face. "Don't tell Mom," I muttered.

"Of course." His face must've been redder than mine, like a lychee.

That was enough stargazing--that much we agreed on without a word between us. Later I could not stop shivering in my sleeping bag. Someone had called to me from below. Someone besides Khang. That sweet, soft voice beckoning... I've heard it before. I know its name now.

Death.

Bolgia Five - Extortion

I run a few red lights on my way to work. I have to get my hands on something, anything to confirm or deny my hunch. I pass voiceless tumors on to the intern while I claim the pathogens, perusing slides and dishes for a message. Then, from mumps bubbling and simmering in sputum:

Dearest Uyen,

I knew you'd remember. I've waited a long time to feel you are ready to hear me out. Please don't be scared. For now, for you to know my name is enough.

"Hey, you okay?" the intern asks.

I wave off his concern. What gives me away? The blood draining from my face?

Bolgia Six – Hypocrisy

A gall bladder comes to me bulging with bile stones, each yellow lump hardened by a myriad of enteric bacteria. The host of *Salmonella*, *Klebsiella*, and the classic *Escherichia coli* take turns talking:

*Dearest Uyen,
I know you're suffering. I can save you. Join me, and I promise you the gift of eternity without pain.*

Hypocrite. Death's words hurt me now. Or did I just hurt because I'm alive? My heart, nerves, and brain--everything works, and everything hurts. The dead feel nothing, and for that I envy them.

As my days in residency waned, so did Khang's life. His weak heart grew weaker. I had to commute between the lab and the ICU. He died on May 1st, just a week shy of his birthday and my graduation. Even on that last day, I had brought in his favorite green tea with rainbow jelly "from DadDad Dad," as we liked to call it. We used to hang out at Boba Cha for board games, free Wi-Fi, and of course, boba tea. Break up Boba Cha into *Bố*, *Ba*, and *Cha*--all Vietnamese words for "father"--and you get DadDad Dad. Those were the dads we grew up with. He sipped the drink without hurling. Propped up in that big white bed, hemmed in by boxes and tubes that beeped and hissed, Khang looked like an astronaut ready for launch.

I drew a curled hand to my lips and mimicked the crackle of static. "T minus three minutes."

That was our cue to start the rocket launch game. Khang always played along, ever since we were kids. He checked off every imaginary control, tank, and exit, as he always did without fail, and this time I said, "Cosmonaut Khang, this planet is no longer big and clean enough to sustain us. We need a new home beyond Earth." I lowered my voice for effect, swallowing the lump in my throat. "This will not be a return mission. There's nothing left for you here. Are you prepared?"

"I've trained for this all my life, Mission Control. I'm ready." His hand grew cool under mine.

"The hopes and dreams of mankind rest on your shoulders. Godspeed, Cosmonaut. Take us to the stars."

The mountain range etched on his heart monitor softened into hills. All systems go.

Khang struggled just to breathe, too weak to mimic the roar of rocket thrusters. Maybe it filled his ears as he fixed his eyes on the fluorescent lights. Then beyond them at the swath of stars that waited for him.

Three. Two. One. Liftoff.

Bolgia Seven - Theft

As I scrutinize a stool sample, *Helicobacter pylori* belts out the tune of a stomach ulcer, merry and bubbling like nighttime revelry over foaming mugs of beer.

*Dearest Uyen,
I admit that I am a jealous lover. Time has enslaved you, and grief does not go away with passing seconds, minutes, hours, days, years. Why do you still cling to Time? Let go, and let me steal you away. I will treat you better. I won't hurt you. Let me steal you awa-a-a-y.*

Bolgia Eight - Deception

The sample of vaginal discharge has long cooled and clumped together in its journey to the pathology lab. Still, *Chlamydia trachomatis* sears through me like a spit:

Dearest Uyen,

If you want to join me, you must do it with the utmost conviction. Don't turn back. Anything less than a firm "yes" will hurt. You deserve better. You deserve me. Back when you fell, I almost had you in my arms. You couldn't give me your heart just yet, and you slipped from my grasp. I had no choice but to let you go. I left behind my gift in hopes that I'd reach you again. Please, come back to me.

Death's not talking about my camping mishap. My old apartment had a balcony, and how I went over it was no accident. Khang wasn't there to help me up. That numb darkness the instant I hit the ground--had that been Death's embrace? I didn't fall hard enough. Instead I woke up in the hospital, in a world of hurt, put on suicide watch, with my leg broken in five places.

Maybe Death is giving me another chance. I have to be on fire, sure of what I want to do. What I *need* to do. There's an allure in completely committing myself to its whims. It's hard to resist.

My new apartment's on the first floor. No balcony to tempt me, like the last time. My left leg aches from the thought. The urge weighs me down worse than Mom's disapproval.

Bolgia Nine - Discord

Debrided tissue comes to me sporting rims of healthy skin--the sloppy work of a surgical resident. I bend over to clean after the last guy's mess, and *Vibrio vulnificus* has its say on behalf of Death:

Dearest Uyen,

Surrender. Choose. If not for me, then for your brother. Don't you want to see him again?

The voices are relentless, ruthless, promising a release from all that pain. I have to escape. It's beneath me to call in sick, but I do it anyway and take a bus home. God forbid if I try to drive. I'd ram into something. I'm a sweating, trembling mess and sink to my knees as soon as I get home.

I bite back the urge to grab a knife in the kitchen, or a bottle of pills to chug down. My stomach churns. White spots dance in my eyes. I dig into the closet and pull out the mixtape. I rub off the dust with my thumb. *For Emergencies*, it still reads. I play it. What the hell am I doing? Why did I strain to hear anything other than the ringing in my ears? There's nothing in that tape. It's dead. Like Khang.

The tape turns and turns, a silent wheel I'd been getting for years. Then, a crackle. Static. And, somehow, a voice: "This is Khang speaking. I repeat, this is Khang, over."

Is that really him? How? I squint at the tape recorder and turn it over, this way and that. I call out his name but he goes on, reporting his vitals, the stars he passes, the planet he thinks he'll reach. A one-way transmission, then. A scientist always looks for answers, but this time I don't bother to ask. Some things are better left as mysteries. Miracles.

I press a palm to my mouth, squeeze it hard. It takes everything in me to keep in the sobs. I can't drown out his voice. I don't want to miss a word.

"Happy to report that I'm still on course, Mission Control," Khang says, sounding so close even as he's lightyears away. "It sure gets quiet and lonely out here, though. I play songs to pass the time. This next one's for my sister, as always."

He sings something I hadn't heard before. New lyrics. Ones he had written just for me. Freed from the constraints of his weak heart, he has the voice for his own songs now. The plunge

of a knife, the tip of pills through parted lips, a noose around the neck, the fall of a body from a jump, or a bullet to the head... these thoughts pull me down, down, down, but Khang is here to pull me up again. His voice in space holds me tight, with more power than the thin frail arms he had in life.

Bolgia Ten - Lies

If Death is sending me more letters--rants, pleas, laments--I couldn't hear them anymore. I would plug in Khang's mixtape, to hear of stars or 70s music, to tune out the lies and lust Death has for me. My little brother sings me to sleep, a good night's sleep, and greets me when I wake up ready for a new day. I tune in whenever I can. There's always a new song to look forward to.

Maybe I'll see Khang again, but not now. I'll die someday, that much is true. Maybe from old age, surrounded by grandkids, or maybe from a car accident, like Dad. But not by my own hand. No, I would smile and sing and live in defiance to the tune of a lie:

This'll be the day that I die.

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