

The Annual Gathering

By Janine Maika D. Alderete

"They are here." That's what I heard when my mother woke me up.

I rubbed my eyes, trying to see who had arrived. It was the people from the village next to ours. They came with their families, carrying their belongings in large plastic bags. We watched as the newcomers from the south were guided to their assigned tent. The mother looked hopeful as she clutched her children, who looked terrified. It was obvious—they were new here, unfamiliar with what was really happening.

Today is our annual gathering—the time when people from different villages come together. Every year, the higher positions organize this event. They prepare a wide open space, and each family is given a tent. They say it's a way to unite all the villages—and I must admit, it works. We share food, clothes, stories, and even nightmares, as if we've known each other for decades. But I fear for those children who don't yet know what this gathering truly means.

The higher positions believe unity must exist through thick and thin. That's why they created this tradition. There's a strict routine: in the morning, we go out to explore and hunt for possible goods—enough to sustain us for a few weeks. But when night falls, everyone must stay inside their tents—zipped shut, ears covered, and never stepping outside.

Because when darkness comes, different screams roam the open space.

Some cry for help. Some call out for their mothers. Some beg to be spared. At first, we didn't know where those sounds came from. We tried asking the higher positions what was happening, what we were hearing—but they only said it must be a dream.

It's 10 p.m. now. Everyone is preparing to get into their tents, securing everything—everyone except me. Tonight is no longer unfamiliar. I should know better; it's my 23rd year attending this gathering. And still, the screams grow louder. Louder. Louder.

Tonight, I've decided to sneak out—to see what really happens at night, where those screams come from, and why they keep getting worse.

I left my mother in our tent and walked quietly through the open space. The screams were near now. I heard the first one not far from where I stood, so I crept closer. When I was about to peek, hundreds of voices erupted around me—these were the same screams the villages had been hearing for years. I didn't know where to look or what to listen to. Then, I saw an open tent. I moved closer, checking if the family inside was all right.

I froze at the sight before me. The family was screaming—watching a small monitor that showed their home being swept away by a raging flood.

What is this?

I looked at another tent. There, a family was wailing as a video played of a father trying to save their house from a hungry fire. Their cries echoed through the night.

I turned in every direction. Every tent had a monitor. Every family was screaming—forced to relive the tragedies that had once destroyed their lives. And then, I heard my mother's cries. I ran back as fast as I could.

Inside our tent, my mother was sobbing, watching a small monitor showing me—lifeless, drowned beneath the floodwaters.

I froze. What was happening?

Before I could reach her, the higher positions arrived. Their devices flashed and flickered as they took photos—shaking hands with elders, smiling at children, pretending everything was fine. And suddenly, I remembered. This was all familiar. I used to be the child they hugged for the cameras. *We were the ones who screamed—while they were the ones who covered their ears.*

Everything came rushing back. I thought all the villages were gathered here because we had survived the disasters. But no—the real threats were here with us all along. It was never nature that destroyed us. It was never the storms, the floods, or the fires.

The true disaster has always been the higher positions—watching, controlling, and leaving ruin in their wake, year after year, in every gathering, in every tent.

“They are here,” my mother whispered, welcoming the annual gathering.