



IN LOVE
WITH
THE
SEARCH

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IN LOVE WITH THE SEARCH

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Behind the Curtains

by Elysa Nasreen

Rui liked to think her experience was easier than that of other closeted queer kids her age. With her flawless makeup and perfectly styled hair, she fit the mold of the ideal, feminine daughter. Each morning, she'd stand before the mirror, embodying everything her parents could wish for. For a moment, confidence would swell within her, and she'd imagine she could keep living like this forever if it meant making her family proud.

But with her act came the endless comments that ranged from "You must have so many guys lining up for you!", "*Ba't wala ka pa ring bf?*", to "*Napakaganda siguro ng magiging anak mo in the future!*" They were well-meaning, but each one felt like a tiny paper cut to her identity. It stung to hear her future imagined in ways that left no room for the truth of who she was. In school, at home, even among friends, assumptions equating her femininity to heterosexuality followed her like a shadow.

It would have been easy to correct, just a few words to set the record straight. But whenever she imagined saying, "Actually, I'm—", fear would envelope her. She knew what was expected of her, the perfect daughter with a perfect future that fit neatly into her family's ideals. So, she would hold her tongue, swallowing her truth along with the quiet, simmering frustration of never being fully seen.

As she smoothed on her favorite lipstick, its sweet scent filled the air, mixing with a surge of excitement and anxiety. *Today feels different*, she thought, her mind racing. *The event is coming up, maybe it's my chance.* A small part of her wondered if this was her time to finally stop being so afraid.

As she entered the school grounds, excitement and anticipation filled the air. It was the week of their Foundation Day, the one time of the year when students got a week break from academic requirements. And for Rui, it would be the last time her band gets to take the center stage before graduation.

I could say it before the song, she thought. I could be honest and be free of this heavy weight on my chest. My parents won't be there, and it would be the perfect opportunity. But what if it goes wrong? So many things could go wrong. The familiar fears held her back, anchoring her in silence.

Music had always been where Rui felt most like herself. Growing up, she had never been the best at expressing herself, but with music it came naturally. Through the tone of her voice and the beat of the song, she felt confidence and strength she couldn't find elsewhere.

"And she looks as beautiful as always." A raspy voice by her left snapped Rui out of her thoughts.

"Complimenting me doesn't mean I'll be less strict on you during practice, Mav. But thanks. *Tara?*" Rui responded lightheartedly as she bumped Mav's outstretched fist with her own.

They made their way to the music room that's become their home over the past 6 years of highschool. In it was the worn out couch that's hosted countless naps after all-nighters, the long wooden wobbly table they've spent way too many hours writing lyrics upon lyrics on, and the gray unfurnished concrete walls covered with flyers of all their school performances.

On the couch, Luis was sprawled out, lazily fidgeting with a pen. "Ready to practice?" He asked, waving his pen towards Rui who's made her way towards him.

Rui grinned as she sank onto the couch beside him, feeling the familiar comfort of the worn fabric beneath her. "As ready as I'll ever be. But maybe try not to fall asleep on me this time, okay?"

Luis chuckled, propping himself up on one elbow. "No promises. *May pampatulong* magic *ata 'yang boses mo.'*"

"Don't go blaming others for your innate ability to fall asleep anywhere." Mav chimed in, tossing a crumpled piece of paper at Luis. At the same time, Ven enters the room, completing the band. "Now, are we going to run through that new song or *mag-chichikahan na lang tayo?*"

Rui leaned forward, the excitement building as she pulled her guitar from its case. She strummed a few chords, feeling the strings vibrate beneath her fingers. This was where she felt the most alive, where her worries about her identity felt like white noise as it faded into the background.

“Okay, let’s start with the chorus,” she said, her voice steady.

As they practiced, Rui felt connected to the lyrics more than usual, each note carrying a piece of her truth. In those moments, she could almost forget about the expectations outside the tiny music room—the image she had to uphold, the assumptions she couldn’t correct. Instead, she let the music take over, her voice soaring in harmony with her friends. *With them, I feel accepted and I feel free.*

As the song came to an end, Rui’s thoughts wandered. She glanced at her bandmates, feeling a deep sense of gratitude for having friends that accepted her for who she was. They had become her safe space, an outlet where she could express herself freely. She imagined that no matter what response she might receive from her parents, she could handle it—because she had them, her chosen family.

“Hey, Rui?” Mav’s voice broke through her reverie. “*Ayos ka lang?* You spaced out for a second.”

“Yeah, just... thinking about, you know... again,” she replied, forcing a smile. “*Tara, isa pang round.*”

“*Hay nako.* You know we’ll always be supportive of whatever you decide on, right? This is our performance, after all. You should be able to be true to yourself.” The others nod in agreement.

“I know. *Salamat, guys.*” As they ran through the song one more time, Rui felt the weight of her thoughts pressing down once again, mingling with the thrill of the upcoming performance. This was the year of their graduation, so to Rui, this was one of her last chances, not just to entertain but to be seen.

The day of the performance soon came, and with it were her anxious thoughts as she contemplated on her opening speech once more. *This would be it. Eto na ‘yung chance ko.*

As Rui stood on stage, the auditorium buzzed with anticipation. She felt a rush of nerves, her heart pounding against her ribcage. As she grabbed the microphone, she took a deep breath, glancing at her bandmates alongside her one more time, their encouraging smiles grounding her. *I think I'm ready.*

"Music has always been my refuge," she began shakily. "It's where I feel most like myself, where I can let my guard down. This song we're about to perform is special to me because it reflects the journey of people like myself, often misunderstood yet hiding out of fear. Though it's taken me time, I wanted to use our last performance to be true to myself in front of you all. And I want it to be known that who I am, who we are, is something to be proud of, celebrated, and loved."

The stage lights shifted as a rainbow of colors illuminated the stage. "At the end of the day, *I'm—, and I've always liked—,*" she breathed. "And this song is for every girl who's been on this journey. For every girl who's ever felt unseen, know that your femininity and queerness together is the most beautiful thing."

Rui strummed the opening chords and poured every ounce of emotion into her performance, letting the lyrics carry her truth. At that moment, it felt like it wouldn't matter if her parents approved of her or not. She was no longer just performing; she was declaring her truth, standing firm in her authenticity despite the fear that lingered in her heart.

With each note, Rui felt freer. As they reached the climax of the song, with her head held high, her confidence through the roof, and her truth laid bare for everyone to see, she looked at every section of the crowd, adrenaline coursing through her.

But as the song ended and applause erupted, her gaze found her parents' in the crowd. She hadn't expected them to be there—she knew they were busy and didn't think they would make it. But it didn't matter. Seeing them here meant they heard her opening speech, her truth. She saw the disappointment and disgust that marred their faces, and Rui's heart sank. The exhilaration of the performance disappeared, replaced by a cold wave of dread. She had poured her soul into the song, hoping

to connect, to be understood, but now, her parents' gazes felt like a heavy anchor pulling her down.

In that fleeting moment, the applause of the audience faded into the background, replaced by the deafening silence of her own thoughts. Their expressions—her mother's tight lips, her father's furrowed brow—spoke volumes, sending a chill through her veins. She felt exposed, vulnerable, as if every carefully constructed wall she had built around her identity had crumbled in an instant.

Rui barely registered that the event had ended. The clattering sounds of chairs being stacked, the excited chatter of classmates discussing afterparty plans—none of it reached her. The night felt like a haze, the familiar sights of the school suddenly a blur. She walked through the crowd, exiting the comfort room with her body moving on autopilot.

As she entered the cramped backstage area, Mav and Luis were seated at a corner and talking animatedly, their words lost in a swirl of emotions Rui couldn't quite name. Noticing her, she nodded and gave them a tight smile, her thoughts far away. She needed to leave. She needed to be somewhere quiet.

"Rui, *ayos ka lang?*" Ven's voice broke through her haze. She turned to find Ven watching her, concern etched in their eyes, the warmth in them making Rui's chest tighten.

"Yeah, I'm okay." Rui lied, her voice trembling. "*Pero parang mapapaos na ako soon.*" She joked, trying to hide her shaky breath behind laughter.

"Girl, that was the best performance of the year. Ang galing mo, the crowd loved it!" Mav said, standing and pulling Rui into a tight hug. "We're so, so proud of you! We know how much you've been wanting this, and I'm so happy for you, Rui."

Despite the support, Rui couldn't shake the image of her parents' faces in the crowd, their expressions cold and unreadable. She could still see the way her mother's eyes flickered away, unable to meet her

gaze after the song. Rui's throat tightened, and the knot in her stomach twisted further.

Mav, still holding her, pulled back slightly, tilting her head to study Rui's face. "You sure you're good? We can hang out, *chill lang after nito*. You don't have to be alone if *ayaw mo. Andito kami*."

The words chipped away at Rui's fragile defenses, and she felt her eyes misting over. She had no reason to put up a front and act brave, not with them. "My parents were out there. In the crowd," she admitted, her voice shaking. She didn't say more, but the tears in her eyes and the shaking of her voice were enough for Mav to understand what was left unsaid.

Mav's expression softened as understanding dawned. She pulled Rui back into her arms without hesitation. "Oh, Rui. I'm so sorry. Come here."

The others got up, closing the gap between them and forming a cocoon of quiet solidarity. Luis placed a steady hand on her shoulder, his usual playfulness replaced with sincerity. "Rui, we're here for you. *Kung ano man 'yung nangyari kanina*, you don't have to face it alone."

"You don't," Ven echoed, their voice soft but firm. "Tonight was about you. *Napakatapang mo kanina*, Rui. We're proud of you."

The words brought fresh tears to Rui's eyes, but they carried a different weight—less of grief, more of comfort. In that moment, surrounded by her friends' unwavering support, she let herself cry. For the first time since leaving the stage, she felt less alone, the heavy shadow of her parents' disappointment tempered by the light of her chosen family.

It didn't make the situation better nor did it magically change her parents' reactions. She'd still have to face her parents once she got home. She wasn't sure how it would go, but it felt better to know she had friends that loved and accepted her like family.

Luis' sincerity remained but the playfulness resurfaced. "Okay, *tama na ang iyan*," he said, fanning her face. "*Masisira 'yung makeup*

mo, sayang! Bagay na bagay pa naman sa perfect mong outfit tonight, I couldn't focus!"

Rui let out a laugh, swatting his hand away. *"Wow, galing pa talaga sayo, ah. Patingin nga uli ng mga OOTDs mo noon?"*

"Ano ba! Past is past, I've evolved. Tingnan mo nga 'yung suot ko tonight. Pwede na for modeling," he replied, then spun around showing off his bedazzled jacket and pants that were indeed praiseworthy.

"Aba, syempre. Ako pumili niyan for you, eh. 'Wag ka nga!" Ven jumped in, shoving Luis lightly.

"At magsisimula na naman ang away," Mav resigned, crossing her arms as she let the two be in their bubble once again.

Watching the banter unfold, Rui leaned her head lightly against Mav's shoulders, feeling a sense of relief. The normalcy of the conversation soothed the storm in her head. Though the event didn't end how she expected it to at all, surrounded by her friends, she felt brave enough to brace whatever might greet her at home. She was proud of what she had done on stage. And for tonight, at least, she could breathe easy, comforted by the knowledge that she had them to turn to.

Faraway Home

by Nathaniel Macapagal

Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated with the cosmos.

Its endless secrets, the promises of its permanence, and the heavenly beings within its unending boundaries.

But at the same time, I was afraid.

The more I scoured, the more I realized just how much there was and how little time I had. How insufficient my existence was when weighed against its impossible magnanimity. How many comets have passed by me? How many discoveries will I not live to learn of? Will my feet never leave the earthen soil they were born upon? Would I never have my thirst quenched? My fear of not knowing resolved?

Whenever I asked, I was ignored. Wherever I searched, I was left unsatisfied. All it amounted to was the ramblings of a boy who thought too much. Who was neurotic to a fault.

I did not know.

I could not know.

And I was horrified by that uncertainty.

So, I sought to cure it.

Faraway Home

Darkness.

An overwhelming shadow covered the immeasurable space within the expanse I could gaze at. It was a vacuum without comparison. None of the indigo highlights of a twilight sky nor the passing luminance of an abyssal trench, not even the blurring static of tightly shut eyelids—it was a void that was at once incomprehensible and perfectly described with a single word.

Empty.

My memory is hazy, murmurs engulfing it and my mind frayed by the scattering of my consciousness—but I recall well the rules of my vessel. It is said that not even light can escape the grasp of this body, usually unstoppable—the grip of gravity was like a vice on anything that found itself near me.

The darkness felt tight, queasy as if suffocating me with its indiscernible edges that gripped my sight from impossible angles—yet I could feel it was as vast as a field of grass was to a lowly ant given the eyes of a hawk.

It was as though every familiarity, sense of comfort, and trivial sensibility I once had hid within this cloak, hiding outside the bounds of my vision, as if to taunt me with their existence but not their presence.

I felt the bars of my shadowed cage press onto my irises and hold tight to the delicate orbs. I knew what lay within this void, and that was everything and nothing. And yet I felt as though every fear, every nightmare, every primal emotion of disgust and horror grabbed at my heels as I ran through what felt like a dark forest, breaths on my nape, the cold wind on my drenched face, and teeth beckoning for my throat.

I could convince myself with logic and semantics, but the darkness felt like a cell that could span the width of a field. The dark was like eyes that traced my body's shape and caressed the hands that I could not see and bit down on the life I no longer held. It hid my greatest treasures and my most detested demons.

But beyond my sight lay another sensation, one I did not believe would be possible in my current state.

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Faraway Home

The droning was incessant, like a cicada the size of a jet. Its rumbling reached farther than even the blackness as it stopped not at my skin but welled into the core of my being as I felt each note shake me as if to tear my consciousness from its vessel.

I felt it within my core, shaking me with vibrations that felt like they had sunk to no end. It was a percussion, a roar, one that resembled no beast or moan—but echoed as if engulfing me in a noise that pricked away at every moment of my uncertain but newly found existence.

The vacuum of space should not be able to result in sound. Neither pressure nor pitch, treble or tone, but still it rebelled, granting me a chorus with no end.

Overwhelming as the bombardment was, I preferred it over the blindness. I could not stand not knowing what was beyond my grasp, not having something occupy my eyes. I did not even know how much time had passed since my entry and assimilation.

I had no frame to measure such concepts nor the fortitude to begin counting to grasp away at some semblance of the control I desperately craved. Minutes blurred into days, weeks turned to microseconds, lapses of thought into years, and millennia passed in blinks as the long arm of the clock moved in a lifetime.

I could be the oldest existence—outliving galaxies and primordial stars who have lost themselves to their own flame with an origin farther than the constellations themselves and one that looks upon a century the same one does passing breath.

Or I could be the youngest existence—perpetually born and reborn anew as any observable moment of time ceases to become known. I am younger than any dragonfly nymph, younger than any inch of the universe's constant expansion, and left to spend eternity wondering if my existence has only begun.

I needed to know. I refused to be lost. My journey to this body was to avoid the inundation of ennui and the curse of being too small in the grand scheme of the universe. And yet I could not even see, not even hear, not even count a single second. I loathed this emptiness with a hatred that could ground gritted teeth or draw blood from clenched hands.

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Faraway Home

But in that micro instant, my wish was granted.

Be it God or the Devil, fate itself, or the uncaring universe's progression, I was finally given what I sought.

I could feel a fluid begin to seep into me. It was a hot sludge that burned and wrapped around my form before siphoning within me. It was like a needle, plunged into my veins and releasing a boiling liquid that ebbed and flowed through each microcosm of my being before returning to a cold nothingness. Though I knew it was impossible, I could feel a grin paint itself upon my long-gone visage, a cackle crack from my mind, and the first hints of catharsis form in the hole left by my longing.

What followed was texture. I could feel the coarseness of rock, the brittleness of earth, and the grains of sand that my bare hands once

touched. It was beyond my expectations. I felt buried in sensation—engulfed by the weight of nebula gas and terraformed mass.

Then a light.

The most fleeting of flashes.

It was like a lightning strike in a starless eventide. Like a light held to one's groggy irises. Like the final supernova in a dying universe.

I could see glimpses—images constructed the same way one does with their thoughts and recollections—a mess of colors blurred by the mind's inability to create a perfect encapsulation of the gift of sight.

It was to give the blind a single moment of vision. One instance to see the sun bare itself upon the verdant trees and cloudless skies, one instant to acknowledge the faces of their loved ones and the image of their own hands, and one blink away before losing the fleeting blessing of the world itself.

The images flashed to death and to life over and over.

I could see them.

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Faraway Home

Stars, moons, planets.

The hazy clouds of roiling gases, the freckled surfaces of the natural satellites, and the unending spectrums of celestial bodies. I could see them torn apart and assimilated, releasing one final burst of luminescence that tempted me with the gift of sight—with the hope of something beyond darkness. I could see the flames of the sun dwindle into nothing but embers and the great expanse of plains and mountains disintegrate into dust as darkness soon enveloped everything once again.

The sound of the rumbling grew in response—as if the beast that was roaring was now feeding, sustaining itself on the death of

the heavens and their children. Like Saturn feasting upon his child, I tore solar systems apart like the god did his offspring as my hunger rumbled and shook.

I could feel myself filled.

My core swelled with something other than emptiness. It felt heavy and weighed down. It churned and swirled and radiated an energy that spanned from my center to the edges of my being. I felt a fullness that was akin to a well-fed child. One that made me settle and pause, one that gave me satisfaction, unlike anything I had felt before.

The young one who read his books with wonder at the idea of faraway planets, with fear at the death of the sun in five billion years, of longing at the prospect of traversing past the Oort cloud, I ponder if he was satisfied with this. If he could sleep peacefully, knowing that the world beyond his own was now so close that he could feel it churn in his intestines and that the entire universe had become his playground.

Of course, he wasn't.

A glimpse wasn't enough for an artist with visions of unending canvases. A taste would not sate a gourmand's cravings. Neither a pianist with eardrums burst and bled—nor a marathon runner with shackled legs would stand idly by when promised freedom for even a second. I longed for more. I longed for everything.

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Faraway Home

And I knew that, unlike the frailness of my youth, that was no longer an impossibility for I was armed with far more than textbooks and a starving mind. I now held the cosmos' permanence, its endless boundaries, and the key to the secrets within its veil.

I was the maw that could swallow planets. The origin-guiding collapse heralded by the final breath of imploding stars. The path to Eden and Hell. I was now a **Black Hole**.

Black Holes are said to be the most extreme objects in the known universe. They are the corpses of the largest stars, the unbelievable weight of which is compressed into a space no larger than Earth. It is to fit the Pyramids of Giza— nay, the entirety of Egypt in the palm of one's hand.

This form was so massive—so absurdly dense that not even photons of light could escape the reach of my shadow, hence the romanticized yet literal name, **Black Holes**. A singularity swelled from within me, like a raging monsoon that carried with it the mass and dissected form of celestial bodies torn and reshaped into the assimilation to become one with nothing—one with me.

But the core which served as my undying heart was invisible—only what surrounded it could be seen—The Even Horizon, the last passage of the damned who found themselves within my grasp to be consumed and digested by the ethereal engine that pushed me forward through the expanse of the cosmos to satiate my hunger.

However, my greatest attribute was also what quelled the fear that lay at the forefront of my mind for so long. I was to live near eternally, something I could resolve to believe in even if my sense of time had been completely mangled. My fears of dying before I could experience the death and rebirth of the stars, the passing of comets, and the formation of galaxies were assuaged as I knew that the years in my lifespan amounted to a greater value than there were atoms in the observable universe.

I was the closest one could be to the cosmic gods in sci-fi stories of yore.

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Faraway Home

My search failed not because the world did not have the answers but because I was simply too weak to bear witness to them. The universe was far too grand for one man to explore—to understand.

I needed to become more than what I was to sate myself.

At first, most accepted the consequence of being eaten by a **Black Hole** as spaghettification or something similar, but I was most intrigued by the theory concerning the Information Paradox.

It states that destroying information is a quantum impossibility, meaning that information sucked up by a **Black Hole** is not lost but instead converted. Bearing that in mind, I steeled myself and toiled for decades researching, training, competing, and sacrificing every waking moment to make headway toward my goal.

Colleagues praised me, and the world drowned me in accolades, but I can barely remember those now, and such trivial matters were no longer of concern.

My conjecture was correct. A human consciousness would not be destroyed but instead assimilated.

However, there still exists a problem.

A flaw in my existence.

While the body of an undead star was sufficient, the mind it housed was not. A single human, no matter how dedicated and ravenous, would not be able to fully behold the splendor of an entire planet, much less a solar system, and even more absurd, an entire constellation. The net I cast was massive, but I did not have enough hands on deck to sort the catch.

What I needed was a stronger processor.

Stronger insight.

More ways to think.

A way to understand more—to grasp more.

7

Faraway Home

I needed more human minds.

...Of course, why did I not consider it immediately?

Humanity was inherently curious, and I was the pinnacle of that drive. I was the finality we seek in our everyday lives as we entertain ourselves with careers and art, with morality and finance. This purpose was not mine alone—it was ours.

And now, that purpose was given need. Our reason to be could now be applied, could now become tangible. The call of the cosmos could now align with our own desires for actualization—to become something greater, to become something beyond human.

I must make haste. I cannot say for certain how I will return to my kin, for my orbit was never to align with Earth's for long, but I do believe my course is close. For the first time in my life, I feel a homesickness that could make me bite my nails, that could stir me in my sleep, that would well tears beyond my apathetic eyes.

To this, I extend my hand and an invitation to the weary and lost, to the hopeful and cynical, to the wise and ignorant, to every single person who draws breath but remains unaware of their true purpose.

Join me and voyage on an experience unlike anything in the universe. Come and bear witness to beauty and awe that is nearly indescribable. To feel as though we are at the center and the edge of the absolute macrocosm, to embody the gateway and the exit, to become the beginning and the end, to be at once everything and nothing. Do not fret, my purposeless siblings. You need not worry for much longer.

We will grasp the secrets of the universe together. Hand in hand. Mind in mind. Privy to all that once was and will be until innumerable eons pass and nothing remains.

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Faraway Home

I am returning, my faraway home.

TIME'S ENDLESS HAND

by Antonio Miguel Marcelino

I woke up to the weight of cold wood under my elbows, the scent of stale smoke and old velvet stinging my nose. Lost, I tried looking around to see if there was anyone; however, no one was there. Before me was a poker table lit by a single flickering light bulb. The Golden Bell Casino's opulent noise—a mix of murmurs, shuffling cards, wine glasses, and faint jazz—was conspicuously absent. The silence pressed against my ears.

All of a sudden, a figure cloaked in darkness approached my table, his presence oppressive and commanding. He left an ornate box made of wood, ivory, and gold on the felt table-top. His voice was smooth but laced with malice, like the hiss of a snake in tall grass. "The answers you seek are inside this box. Open it, and you will find power," he whispered. "But remember, power comes at a cost." He then stood still and silent, his face was unrecognizable.

I hesitated at first but then reached out. I opened the box to find nothing but a deck of cards; however, I suddenly stopped and felt something strange. It felt like something like this had already happened before. I looked up to see the mysterious figure cloaked in darkness smiling with an uneasy grin. As I picked up the deck of cards, a sinking feeling came over me. My pulse raced, my heart quickened, and the deck of cards seemed to shimmer and pulse like a living thing.

"You have to play! You have to play! You have to play!" The figure kept repeating as it got louder and louder, his grin widening unnaturally until all of a sudden, it stopped.

Then, darkness.

I blinked and found myself standing at the entrance to the Golden Bell Casino, the hum of life and chaos suddenly roaring back. I stood there in shock as the casino floor stretched before me like a labyrinth, patrons and customers drifted by, their laughter and chatter echoing hollowly through the halls. As I walked in, I felt like I have seen it all before—too many times to count.

However, beneath the surface, I felt like something was wrong, a faint feeling of something I scecouldn't place. Each step felt both familiar and alien, as if I was trying to recall pieces of a fever dream. The roulette wheels spun with the exact same mechanical precision, the dice tumbled in the same patterns, and the slot machines sang their hollow tunes in perfect synchronicity.

As I aimlessly walked through the bustling halls of the casino, my heart suddenly sank, the realization hit me: I was back in time. The loop had begun again.

Each loop had taken its toll. My hands, once steady as steel, trembled as I held the cards. My memories of who I was before all of this felt distant, as if I were peering at them through frosted glass.

How many times had I gambled everything—my soul, my sanity, my hope? How many times had I let the cards dictate my fate?

I decided to go to the lavatory to wash my face, hoping it would jog my memory. As I wiped my face with a paper towel, I saw a familiar shadow in the mirror. It was the same cloaked figure that had given me the deck of cards. The room grew cold and a subtle feeling left me unnerved. He handed me a sealed invitation bearing a dark red emblem of a skull and a crown.

The invitation led me to an underground passageway beneath the Golden Bell Casino. As I descended the staircase, the air grew heavier with each step. It was a labyrinth, a maze that shifted and stretched, its corridors growing darker the deeper I ventured. Each step brought me closer to the chamber I both dreaded and sought in equal measure. Memories began to resurface the nearer I got, and over countless loops, I had learned the path through trial and error. I had memorized the turns and the doors that would lead me to my end.

After a while, I found myself in a dark room with a long corridor, and at the end was a red-colored double door with the same emblem as that on the invitation. The hum of the casino faded, it was silent, all I could hear was the sound of my own heartbeat.

The chamber was as I remembered. It was vast, dark, and unnervingly quiet. The room was unlike anything I had seen in the casino above. It was vast yet suffocating, the walls lined with shelves crammed full of artifacts, antique clocks, shattered mirrors, dusty books, and jars filled with things I couldn't begin to name. A single chandelier made from bronze hung from the vaulted ceiling with its twisted branches holding flickering black candles that cast a dark glow across the room. The air was cold, the kind of chill that seeped into your bones and whispered that you didn't belong here.

At its center was the table. It was long and rectangular, carved from a wood so dark it looked like it was burnt. Chairs were placed on either side, but one was occupied. A figure dressed in black was sat at the far end.

"You've returned," he said, his voice dripping with amusement. "Again, and again you lose, but you still decide to come back?" He laughed maniacally. "Tell me, Nina, how many loops has it been? A hundred? A thousand? A hundred thousand?" I stood there in silence.

"Shall we begin?" the figure asked, gesturing toward the cards.

For some reason and without hesitation, I nodded. It felt like I was meant to do so.

The cards seemed to vibrate as I shuffled them. When I dealt with the first hand, the air grew taut with anticipation. Each card I placed down felt like a piece of my soul being exposed. The game was unlike any I had ever played. It wasn't poker, blackjack, or anything recognizable. The rules shifted constantly, dictated by the cards themselves. Some hands were straightforward; others involved riddles, puzzles, or choices so twisted they made my head spin. But one rule remained constant: the stakes. Every card represented a piece of me. Memories, emotions, even pieces of my identity were wagered with every hand.

Midway through the game, the figure-in-black played a card that made my blood run cold. The image on its surface was unmistakable—my father. He appeared before me, his form translucent and fractured, like glass barely holding together.

“Nina,” he whispered, his voice trembling. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

I went pale, my hands and feet were shaking, desperately I tried reaching out to grab him, but I couldn’t move. There I realized, how could I forget, all this time, the reason why I kept coming back here was to save my father! That’s why I felt something pulling me here.

I looked up at the figure and shouted “Why are you doing this, can’t you just let us go!?”

“Oh, dear girl, don’t you know who I am? Have you already forgotten?” He said. “For millennia, you pitiful humans have called me Vox Mortalis. I am neither man nor myth, neither flesh nor phantom,” he intoned, his voice a low, predatory whisper that filled the room with a chill that gnawed at my bones. “I am the shadow in the corner of your eye, the dread that keeps you awake in the dead of night. I have no heartbeat, no breath—but I linger in the silence between each of yours, feeding on the terror that lies in your veins. I do not simply take souls; I consume the very essence of who you are, devouring every regret, every hidden fear, every dark thought you’ve dared not speak aloud. I am the hunger that can never be sated, and I will watch you crumble, piece by piece, until you are nothing but whispers and dust.”

He leaned closer, his eyes—pits of fathomless darkness—boring into mine. “There is no mercy in me, only an endless, insatiable void. And now, dear girl, it is your time to feed it, for eternity.”

Tears welled in my eyes. “I’m here to save you, dad” I said, my voice breaking.

“Save me?” My father’s laugh was bitter and hollow. “There’s no saving me. I’ve been here too long. The only thing you’ll do is trade your soul for mine.”

“Perhaps,” Vox interjected smoothly, “You should listen to him. After all, he knows the price better than anyone.” I shook my head, my hands trembling as I reached for the deck. “No. I can do this. I won’t let you win, not again.” Vox’s grin widened. “Oh, Nina, you still think this is about winning?”

The game grew more grueling with each hand. Vox played cards that warped the room, filling it with visions of my worst fears and regrets. Shadows danced along the walls, shouting my failures back to me. I countered with cards that drew on my willpower, my determination. Each victory brought me closer to freeing my father, but the cost was steep. I lost memories of my childhood, the warmth of my mother's embrace, the sound of her laughter. Each loss felt like a knife to the heart, but I pressed on.

Vox watched me with a mixture of amusement and admiration. "You're stronger than I expected," he said, leaning back in his chair. "But strength alone won't save you."

I ignored him, focusing on the deck, and as I kept playing I felt the weight of every soul bound to the cards, and I understood the true horror of what Vox Mortalis was—a creature, no, a being, who preyed upon desperate souls, trapping them in a cycle of endless loss and despair, making them suffer until they gave out. I played Vox over and over, and no matter what I did, for some reason, Vox always knew what the cards would do.

I went pale, my hands trembling as the reality of his words sank in. My father's face flashed before me, his smile from before all of this madness began. The reason why I kept coming back wasn't for the thrill of the gamble—it was for him. To save him. To bring him back.

But at what cost?

The cards before me blurred as tears welled in my eyes. I realized, with a sickening clarity, that I had gambled away pieces of myself every time I played. I wasn't saving my father; I was losing myself to the same obsession that had consumed him. My soul, my essence, and who I was as a person was being chipped away, card by card, bet by bet.

Vox watched me with a predatory grin, his eyes glistening with amusement. He thrived on my struggle, my desperation, my unwillingness to let go.

“The tighter you hold on to that pitiful feeling, the deeper you sink. That is the nature of this game, of all games, the game of life.”

Vox’s word struck a nerve, in that moment memories flooded in of my father’s laughter echoing in my head. How his hands subtly shuffled cards as he taught me the games of chance. I had idolized him, believing that his skill was magic and how it could shield us from the world’s cruelty. But it hadn’t, his obsession ultimately cost him everything—his family, his freedom, his life

And now, here I was, walking the exact same path. Every move I made was a desperate attempt to regain what was lost. It wasn’t about strategy anymore; it was about clinging on to a man who had already been lost to me long ago before I even entered the room. It was a bet I had already lost before I had even made my first move. Vox was not just playing a game with me—I was the game. My fear, my grief, my anger—they were his trump cards, and I was letting him win.

Then, the realization hit me. The only way to beat Vox was to stop playing his game.

“I see it now,” I whispered, the words barely audible over the sound of his laughter. Vox came closer, tilting his head ever so slightly. “What do you see, my dear?”

“You thrive on control, making people believe that they would win if they just hold on longer, if they just tried hard enough. But the truth is, the only way to win is to let go. That’s your weakness isn’t it? You have no domain over someone who refuses to play.”

His grin vanished, replaced by a snarl. “Careful, Nina. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

This time, I stopped relying on what the cards wanted me to do. I understood that the game was not just about strategy; it was about confronting my fears, breaking free from the power that Vox held over me. For once I felt clarity. I pushed the cards away, the motion deliberate and final. “I forfeit.”

The room shook, the air grew heavier. “You can’t quit!” Vox hissed, his voice no longer smooth but was accompanied by pure anger. “The game is not over! It’s not over until I say it is!”

The look of rage and disbelief on Vox’s face confirmed it. The walls of the room cracked, and light came flooding through, searing away the darkness as the souls, including my father’s, were released from their prison. “What have you done?!” Vox howled, his form unraveling as the souls he had consumed tore free from his grasp. His figure shrank, his power crumbling as the echoes of his victims overwhelmed him. “How dare you dare defy me?” His body began to distort, his eyes flared with unnatural light as if his essence was fighting to hold itself together.

The walls began to crack, the tables and chairs disintegrating into ash. Vox clawed at the air as he tried anchoring himself to the crumbling reality around him. “You think this is the end? I am eternal! I am—” His words were cut off as his form collapsed inwards on itself.

For a moment, there was darkness.

Seconds later, a burst of light came erupting out from the ground shattering the darkness that lurked the walls. The dark demented room was gone. I stood in an empty room with nothing but four walls and a hard wood floor.

But then I saw them—glowing orbs of light, drifting upward. Souls. Countless souls, freed from the cards, released from his grasp. Among them was a familiar shape, a figure I knew better than my own shadow.

“Dad,” I whispered, tears streaming down my face.

He turned to me, his form shimmering like morning mist. His eyes were kind, filled with a peace I had never seen before. He gave me a small grateful smile before the light consumed him, and he was gone.

My father’s spirit and everyone whom Vox had kept prisoner were finally free, and the cycle had been broken. Emerging outside the

casino into the light of the bright sun, I knew I was no longer bound by the past, no longer shackled by anyone else's destiny.

I learned, in that moment, that true power was not in the cards nor the game, but within myself—my resilience, my courage, my determination, and my unwavering love for those I cherished. It was a reminder to me that power does not lie in control or dominance, but in the courage to let go.

When The Hibiscus Blooms

by Cyon Joaquin

Who would've thought that joining a random Discord call would change my life?

I remember the days when the unofficial Discord server for UPD Freshies had just been created. This was where I met most of my current friends; some of which became my closest friends. It always started with one person waiting in a voice chat. Then there were two. Then three. Soon, new circles of friends were formed from purely online connections—and that is how I met Mela.

It was the second week of June, almost two weeks after my graduation. My workload was finally lighter than it ever was before, with our graduation ball being one of the last events I would help organize before college. Aside from all the documents and designs required, I was pretty much free for the night. I had no clue what to do before a Discord ping caught my attention:

Mela: @everyone hi may gusto ba mag amogus dito

I clicked on the server icon and saw almost over ten people in the Sleeping Area voice chat—but they were certainly not sleeping. Only a few people had their microphones unmuted while everyone else was muted—some opted to type in chat, while others opted to lurk in the chat. I thought that since I had nothing better to do, I might as well join. This was not the first time I entered such a large group of people in one call, but for some reason I felt nervous. Maybe it was because it was my first time joining this group of people specifically, but that never stopped me before. Nevertheless, I joined the voice chat.

It was quiet at first. I honestly thought my Discord was lagging. To break the ice, I jokingly asked, “Natutulog ba talaga kayo?” Someone laughed, “Oo beh, tulog kami lahat.” We laughed altogether, which helped me feel at ease. That someone was Mela, one of the few who were talking in the voice chat. Though she didn't speak much at the time, she was the first person to interact with me.

Next thing I knew, we were introducing ourselves one by one in the Among Us lobby. Although it was difficult to keep track of all the names and voices, I noticed how open they were to each other. I've joined my fair share of voice chats before, but this was different. There was usually this barrier between the group of people and those who had just joined the call, as if they were already an established faction; but everyone in this call felt welcoming, and I didn't have a hard time fitting in. Mela was especially easy for me to talk to as she was polite and humorous. I remember her nickname in the game was "Geena Cole," a silly pun that was difficult for everyone to say out loud because of its boorish nature. Two other people hopped on the bandwagon, also naming themselves in the same fashion: "Nadia Cole" and "Jaja Cole." If you don't get the joke, try saying their full names in quick succession—if you still don't get it, you are too pure for this world.

Mela was shy at first, soft spoken; but I never expected she would be so boisterous. As the game progressed, her small giggles grew into contagious laughter, which subconsciously brought a smile to my face. The rest of the night was lighthearted and full of laughter, to the point my stomach and jaw started aching. I couldn't be more glad that I joined the call because I ended up meeting my core friend group, including Mela. From that night on, I found myself joining calls more and more often, partly for the games and the laughter, but to be honest, mostly because of Mela. There was something about the way she laughs that made me want to stick around a little longer each time. Before I knew it, logging in and seeing her name in the voice chat felt like a small highlight of my day.

Every night, I would spend hours at my desk, playing Among Us with my newfound friends. Each game was more enjoyable than the last, but at some point, they started joking that I was cheating. The teasing started out harmless, but like a weight held on for too long, it started pressing until my chest tightened with worry. We would play the Hide-and-Seek gamemode where, instead of figuring out who the impostor is among us, the impostor has to find all the other players within a certain time limit. Whenever I was the seeker, it would take me less than five minutes to eliminate them all. Each time I found

them, they would shout playfully, “May hacks ‘to!’” or tease relentlessly, “Madaya, madaya!” At first, I too found it funny, but the more they joked about it, the more I felt bad. “What if they started to think I was no fun to play with? That they should stop inviting me?” I tried to pay no attention to it, but I couldn’t ignore the pang in my chest.

It was the last week of June. In my last game for the night, we played the normal game mode. I couldn’t contain my joy that I was an impostor this time. I told myself, “This is different from Hide and Seek, surely they won’t joke about it, right?” As soon as that thought crossed my mind, my joy was cut short as someone snickered, “Guys, let’s eject Cyon for fun!” I thought they were just joking, but little did I know that the majority would vote me out the very first round.

Cyon was An Impostor.

1 Impostor remains.

“Why would you do that?!” I yelled into the mic exasperatedly. They only laughed, saying it was just a gut feeling. I wish I could’ve laughed along, but I could only see red. The one time that I got to be an impostor, I was immediately eliminated, and because of what—a gut feeling? When the game ended, Mela typed in chat, “One more game?” But without hesitation, I said, “No, I’m done.” Our other friends pleaded, saying they wouldn’t do it again; but their voices went through one ear and out the other. I huffed and angrily clicked the disconnect button—I rage quit. However, my heart quickly sank as I realized the implications of what I’ve done. “What if they think I’m a jerk who doesn’t know how to take a joke? What if they gossip about me?” My thoughts raced as I started to regret my actions. I had to calm myself down, and I had only one person in mind to talk to—Mela.

After we first met, Mela would often message me to ask questions about the admission process. In no time, we started talking almost everyday. From just answering her questions, we ended up talking about the most random things. I learned about her fixation on this YouTube series called Alien Stage, and got into watching it because of her. I learned about how she has such a sweet tooth, and how she loves

cookies. I learned about her likes, her dislikes, and even her favorite flower—the hibiscus.

Mela became my safe space; someone I could yap to about anything. That night, she and I were chatting even before we started playing Among Us. When I left the call, she messaged me, “Sali ka pa rin, sige na, bawian mo sila sa hide and seek.” My anger almost dissipated when I saw the Discord ping. Behind the screen, I couldn’t help but smile as she tried to convince me to join. But for everyone’s sake, I declined in order to cool off properly. Mela was understanding, and she didn’t make me feel bad for leaving. She didn’t try to force me to return but reassured me to come back when I was ready. Later that evening, I confided in her because I couldn’t shake the feeling of frustration. She was patient and comforted me. “Let loose sa Valorant AHAHA idaan sa barilan,” Mela joked with a hint of sincerity. I apologized for being petty in a children’s game, and she told me that she relates to the feeling. “Ako nga eh, gusto ko na sana mag-rage quit dahil may nandaya sa ML (Mobile Legends) kanina,” She added with a lighthearted tone. Her words lifted off a weight on my shoulders. Mela knew how much it sucked to have fun taken away, especially if you really were looking forward to it. She empathized with me, then we ended up talking for the rest of the night, taking my mind off of what happened prior.

As July came around, we became busier and had less time to hang out online. Despite that, Mela and I maintained our everyday conversations. After that night, I noticed how much closer we grew together. I would often message her, talk to her about how my day went, and ask how hers was. I started looking forward to her messages, looking for her in voice chats. She was the one person I felt like I could talk to about anything. I denied it at first, but deep down, I knew that I was developing a crush on Mela. I loved her presence, her voice, her warmth. It was weird, how could I feel this way about a person I met online? What’s even weirder—I had a gut feeling that she liked me too.

It was the first week of July, I was planning to go to UP to submit my admission requirements. This task was not so easy for someone like Mela who lived far away from Diliman. That night, I was on

call with her, baking cookies that I would give out to our friends. I remember how anxious she felt because she still had to get her birth certificate. “What if hindi ko makuha bago sched ko?” I could hear her uneasy breathing through the mic. Although no words could clear the uncertainty of the situation, I didn’t let her lose hope. “You will, and I’ll be there waiting for you,” I reassured. “And if you don’t, we’ll make the schedule work, okay?” I stayed in our voice chat—as if I were there beside her, holding her hand. I couldn’t help but also feel bothered by the uncertainty that is to come. What if she doesn’t get it on time?

I went to school that day, excited to see Mela. I wore a white long sleeved polo with a beige vest. I fixed my hair, and sprayed cologne on. I even brought my camera—oh, how I couldn’t wait to take photos with her. However, as the sun started to set, there was no sign of her arriving. I looked at my watch every few minutes thinking hours had passed. “This weather is good for just vibing,” I thought to myself. “Mela would’ve liked this.” With the light sunshine and cool breeze on my face, I ended up falling asleep at the Sunken Garden. Unfortunately, I went home that day without seeing Mela. Later that night, I found out that the line at PSA didn’t move for nearly six hours. While I felt upset that our meetup didn’t push through, I empathized with the fact that she was stuck in line the entire afternoon because this was certainly not within her control. I knew how it felt to not be in control. “It’s not your fault, you couldn’t have known,” I told her. Undoubtedly, it was difficult for Mela. How was she supposed to submit her requirements now? She couldn’t afford to stay at her sister’s place much longer, but she didn’t know when would be the next time she came back to Manila. Then suddenly, it clicked, “What if you submit your requirements with me?”

The next day, I called Mela to let her know I was outside. After some rigorous planning and quick chats, we were able to convince her family to let her go with me. I promised that I would meet up with her and would drop her off at her sister’s place since it was along the way for me anyway. “Nasa’n ka na teh?” As soon as I chatted, I saw her walk through the door. When I saw her—God, I was awestruck. The way she smiled at me and hugged me the moment our eyes met. She was

wearing a simple purple shirt and khaki shorts, but I couldn't fathom how a person could be so pretty. I handed the tupperware of cookies to her, and we went on our way. The ride was quiet, but comfortable. When we arrived, we bought taho and warmed up to each others' presence. Soon, she got out of her shell, and we talked throughout the admission process. I remember how she waved at a friend of ours, then hid behind me in embarrassment thinking that she waved at the wrong person. "Wala, wala, 'di ko po siya kilala, 'di ko po siya kasama," I laughed, teasing Mela for what just happened. I kept her close to me for the rest of the day; it was as if she would disappear the moment I let go. I observed in silence as Mela interacted with the people we met—so awkward yet so energetic. I got to hear her laugh in person, and that struck something in me; I realized how precious Mela became to me in just a short amount of time. On the way home, we talked about how silly we were as kids in elementary school—how we both believed in magic, and practiced it through training in dreams. It was weird to think about how much we had in common. As we approached her place, I subconsciously slowed down so that the walk together would last longer. The day felt like it had only started, why is it already ending? When we reached the lobby, Mela enthusiastically said, "We should take a picture together as a memento!" After taking pictures on my camera, she hugged me goodbye. As she walked to the elevator, I looked back at our photos longingly. I couldn't deny it any longer, "I really like you, Mela." The words slipped under my breath, but she had already waved goodbye as the elevator doors closed.

After some time passed, everything had settled down as school was only a few weeks away. One day, I decided to post an Instagram story:

Add this to your story and see who replies with a paragraph about why they love you and what they like most about you, but block out their names!

I wanted to see if anyone would say something, but the story was about to expire, and no one had sent in anything yet. I was bummed out and wasn't really expecting any response. But before midnight, I decided to open up my Instagram on a whim. Boy, was I speechless

when I saw two lengthy paragraphs about why Mela loved me. She loved me because I am Cyon, just like how I let her be Mela. She said I was a comforter on the coldest of nights; the radio your dad plays on the way home, lulling you to sleep. She loved me because I too had a contagious laugh. She even said she loved me for rage quitting in *Among Us*. “I’m so sorry, it’s so word vomit,” but I never felt so loved. I never expected to think that someone would see me in that light. On one hand, I wanted to post it in my story to let the whole world know, but at the same time, I wanted to be selfish and keep it all to myself. Apparently, she wanted to write a third paragraph, but I told her my heart would burst if she did.

“Love you, Cyon!” The last sentence echoed in my mind alongside our time together these past two months. The endless laughter, the late-night conversations, the unexpected adventures—both virtual and in person—it all felt like a chapter that I didn’t want to end. I knew that no matter what came next, I would keep these memories close to my heart. I found comfort in knowing that even if life took us to different paths, the connection we built was real. It was a bond that started with laughter, and blossomed into something more; like a hibiscus in the warmth of a sweet summer.

Blooming in Thorn

by Angel Balmeo

"Do I really have to do this?" Amaya mutters to herself, pacing back and forth before a set of double doors that lead to the parlor. Her family waits beyond with the person she's to be betrothed to and she wonders if it's too late to throw a tantrum, unladylike as it may be. Or she could run away. She's educated and well versed in herbology and medicine, perhaps she can go into trade or field.

She stops her pacing for a moment. *'Ah no, that would not work. People will still ask me who my father and husband are, not to mention it's unbecoming for someone of my standing,'* she thinks. Would changing her name and background be viable still? It's not unheard of, though most of it gossip, but surely it must be possible. Oh and her family, they'd be missed.

"Amaya? What are you doing out here, darling?" The door to the parlor opens, her mother Francisca peeking out in curiosity. Amaya straightens up at her call, running her hands down to brush the top of her skirt, remembering etiquette. Her mother had chosen the dress for her in the morning. *'To give a good impression'* she said to her and truly, she's the image of a perfect lady.

Not that Amaya cares to make an impression, she knows her place as a high breed noble but you never know with marriages. As gossips go, you never miss the stories both of romance and tragedy in a union.

"Apologies, mother." Amaya replies curtly. "I was thinking I'd perhaps wait for Paseton with the refreshments before heading in. Just to give myself a moment to ready I suppose."

"Oh dear," Francisca sighs, coming out and closing the door behind her. She takes her hands and holds them up between them, giving a soft but stern look. "You will do great. Eduardo is promising, and I'm sure he'd do well in taking care of you." she reassures.

"Of course," Amaya nods but it doesn't rid the feeling of frayed nerves, of what ifs and horror stories and rumors from peers. She looks towards her mother, thinking of her father just beyond the door. It's a joy to any girl to find a good husband and be supported as she had been by her parents. They must have chosen a good suitor, surely. They've raised her with love, providing whatever she has wished for to the best of their abilities.

She hears the squeak of the tray in the hall, signaling the arrival of refreshments. She will have to wait and see about this Eduardo, she supposes. And then maybe a tantrum before locking herself in her room where the comfort of letters and greenery lay.

Her mother taps her chin up. "Smile now, dear," she says. "Make a good impression."

Amaya takes a deep breath, then with a smile, they turn to the doors.

* * *

"Is it too late to not go through this?" Amaya asks. The maid fixing her hair looks up and gives her an inquisitive look. Her name is Liana if she recalls correctly. She adjusts Amaya's head slightly to the side, the wire headpiece set into place with pins and decorative clips. It'll only be a while till it's the veil next for her face that's been meticulously lined and powdered to perfection.

'She's beautiful' she could already hear it.

Liana smiles apologetically instead in response. The maid moves away and the tailor helps her stand up and leads her to the side where her dress is being prepared to be worn, final adjustments and fixes being done. It was colored pristine white, shimmering with its satin fabrics and delicate lace and embroidered patterns, gold threads glinting in between the design. The tailor moves to the side, checking on a pair of gloves and Amaya hopes she doesn't have to wear them till later. She turns, seeing her sister-in-law, Camila walk closer, distinct footsteps echoing in the busy room.

“Getting cold feet?” Camila asks. “Is Eduardo so bad? I thought you two got along quite well?”

“We do,” Amaya sighs, “He’s a lovely man, Camila.” And he is. Amaya has spent the past three months with the man in the estate in preparation for the wedding. They’d met and Eduardo is polite, well read and a successful merchant. They’d have tea at times to talk and get to know each other and really, it’s more than what other women have gotten. He talks about his businesses and endeavors to her, ambitions and growth. And a future, heirs and all. Traveling. There was a new colony in the east in the past century and how he’s hoping to expand through the Galleon Trade. Dreams *he’s* eagerly promised for her. For them.

“Then what’s wrong? Don’t tell me you’ve got a hidden lover?” Camila teases.

“Oh, heavens, no!” Amaya scoffs. She wouldn’t even count Eduardo as a lover. “He’s just... rather eager,” she sighs. Perhaps Camila didn’t quite understand. Her brother, Gerontius, is upstanding and her family has been a fortune for people marrying into it. Amaya knows her brother and whatever he has shown during their betrothal is the same as after his and Camila’s union in marriage.

“Isn’t that good?” Camila asks, stepping aside to let the tailor work and wrap the skirt around Amaya’s waist before taking another layer to put on top. “It is good to be desired and soon you’ll settle in, family on the way. He’s not ahead of your line of suitors for no reason, you know.”

“I know.” Amaya concedes. The rest of her dress is piece by piece put on her and she takes a deep breath as the bodice is set on top to finally complete the dress. Perhaps its just the nerves, or the stiff new corset tightly wrapped around her middle but she feels her breath become lighter. Gloves are set to her hands and she realizes they’re wonderfully embroidered as well.

“You look beautiful, sister.” Camila says with a smile.

Liana comes, holding onto a veil and Amaya's vision is soon muddled by the mist of threads and woven flowers and pearls.

'She's beautiful.' She can already hear it. She looks like a doll and she couldn't even see herself.

Amaya nods, releasing a breath.

* * *

Eduardo had invested in shipment trade and soon, not even 4 months after their marriage, newly married Amaya and Eduardo were getting ready to leave Spain for the Philippines. It was a year long travel by ship and Eduardo was promised a good deal out of the investment. *'You'll be set for life'* they said.

Amaya can't say she's enjoyed the entirety of the travel. The storms in the sea were a nightmare and she wasn't used to traveling by sea, making her sick for a good amount of the year. The sights and stops were a behold which feels like a good compensation, but now, standing in the ports of Manila, she's suddenly hit quite strongly how far she's from home.

It's beautiful, she tells herself.

It's the height of summer when they arrive in the Philippines. The port keeps on its busy as it receives and moves cargo and shipment from the Galleon ships. The establishments and home built near were red roofed and built in bricks and stone masonry, much like how it is in more rural areas back home. There were ships, big as the Galleon she had ridden but in the water were also smaller boats with lines of people rowing within.

"Come, Amaya." Eduardo says, taking her hand to walk through the crowd. "This is where our new home will be," he proclaims with a flourish. He smiles at her with a spark of excitement in his eyes.

Amaya laughs, seeing her husband's glee. The year has been long being with him, in a ship where none of her books, passions or family

were. She looks around once more, seeing once again the massive ships. "So this is what you do now?" she asks with a lilt to her tone.

"What we do now." Eduardo affirms. "These ships will stay here for a good few weeks before they set off to New Spain. But none of that, I wouldn't put you through such hardship again, I've secured an estate for us. It will only take a bit of travel but we'll still have the view of the sea at home." he says, holding her hand.

"I swore to your father I would take care of you, Amaya. It is away from home but I hope we can make our future here just as we had talked about."

Amaya smiles in response. This is more than what most get, she thinks. "Of course." She says. "A bit warmer but what's a bit of sun for such a lovely view?" He smiles back.

The couple call a carriage and they ride to the estate. They're greeted and introduced to the servants of the house, from the ones managing the general cleaning to the cooking in the kitchens to the gardening at the back. It is homely and later, their own cargo follows, filling the place with more familiar objects.

Amaya stands on the balcony of the upper floor. It looks towards the west, holding a view of a grand blue horizon split in two. The sun is still high in the sky and she thinks about looking into a local tailor as she feels herself swelter. Eduardo arrives, tucking a document into his vest as he puts a hand to the small of her back

She takes a deep breath, the salt of the sea permeating the summer air.

"Welcome home," he says.

* * *

When Marcelo was born, Amaya felt like she could do anything just for her son. A gleeful little babe and a joyful child more so as he grows older and she sorely hopes to keep such happiness lit for as long as she can. She sent a letter to her mother as soon as she could

through Eduardo in one of his trips. In it was a painted miniature of her and her son in a pocket mirror. Though her family had not written back, Eduardo relayed they were happy for them.

Eduardo has been set on expanding through the galleon, now going along with the trips, away for months at a time and only home for a couple of weeks (a month or two if generous) before going off again. His ambitious appetite increases every return and the men that go in and out of office in their estate get sleazier and sleazier. They sometimes leer at her as soon as they'd enter their estate but Eduardo continues to be keen in entertaining them for their status and promise to fulfill his hunger.

She wonders if they also say '*They'll be set for life*' with their proposals. When brought up, Eduardo reassures her that it's all going well before locking the office, as comfort, he says, so she knows it is all safe. Then off he goes again.

His absence is not something she is entirely bothered about, their home in Manila is comfortable and the company of the people of the estate, warm. An old lady, Clarita, tends to her and a new servant taken in recently, Mira, looks after Marcelo when they are away.

The social circles in the region are fairly active; ladies inviting and going to parties and gatherings to gossip and socialize, make connections. Perhaps even get *hitched*, as they call it, to a man well endowed. There's always foreigners around from neighboring colonies, some military men with backings to their name, and Amaya is kept busy, fortunate that her line gives her leverage and control over such meetings, giving her power to gain favors through connecting people.

In that, ladies return the good will.

Amaya receives a set of letters, privately given to her by the host of a small gathering. Two of them; one from her brother, Gerontius, and another of her mother, Francisca. Alodia, the host, had smiled at her brightly, saying her thanks for introducing her to such a lovely man, a merchant Amaya met once at the port when she bid her husband farewell.

She opens the letter that evening and left distressed in tears. They had been writing to her. Her mother inquires, perhaps in jest and in worry, about if she's forgotten about them. She is curious how the last 6 years have been, how big her family had become and if the Philippines is anything like the quaint warm province she sometimes hears. Her brother gives his regards and has heard some news of the success of the Galleons. He gives her invitation to return home if she wishes or at the very least, write back. It would be lovely to see his little sister again especially after Father had passed.

She did not know. Not of her father passing nor of the letters that never came. She wondered if her mother even knew of her grandson. The boy barely even knew his own father.

Eduardo returns from the Galleon and all he says in comfort is that sometimes things get lost in the ships because of the storms and the conversation is cut off, simply saying it was a tiring day and he'll be winding down.

Amaya stands by the doorway, three weeks later, as Eduardo is once again set to leave. "Must you do this?" she asks quietly, in the silence of the night as Eduardo sits at his office. The air is heavy and dense and she feels like if she breathes wrong, something will break.

"Amaya," he sighs, tired. "We've talked about this."

She clenches, *we have not*, she thinks but stops herself. "Marcelo seeks for you," Amaya says instead. "The boy continues to grow and you're not there. He's your son."

"I still return, don't I?" Eduardo says. "with toys and gifts for the boy and you. You know I do this for us." he pacifies, holding onto her shoulders with a tired look in the low light. She holds a breath in and lets go.

"At least, tuck him in for tonight, he's been hoping to catch you before sleep as you always leave early," Amaya says, ushering him now to Marcelo's room. "And Eduardo?"

"Yes?"

Amaya thinks for a moment as she looks at the stranger in front of him. She must send a letter back to Gerontius and her mother soon.

“Be safe.” Amaya says. “And think of us.”

Eduardo smiles tiredly, giving a kiss to Amaya’s forehead. “You know I always do.”

* * *

Clarita knocks on the door and Amaya’s head snaps up from the thick journal she’s been reading through the early morn. Her nerves frayed in anxiety, the small corner table in the bedroom of her son filled with books and journals on local plants and medicines, candle burning low and papers strewn and scattered.

In the bed, Marcelo breathes heavily, tucked in under thick blankets, fever still not broken even after three weeks and four doctor visits. His face is flushed and despite the heat of another summer, the young boy continues to be wracked with chills and heavy coughs. It was not so bad at the start but after three weeks, her son could only take so much.

Amaya has already called on two doctors as recommended in Eduardo’s contacts and she seethes at the memory of their hopelessness at her son’s condition, how he’s been plagued with an air of *evil*. Their blatant disrespect and attempts at wringing her of compensation with concoctions she was sure was only half as credible as their promises ringing through her mind. She would not have spared a single peso in the estate for her son but she was not *stupid*.

Complacent, her mind supplies. *For too long*.

A common cold. If it had been caught and properly treated weeks ago, her son would not have gotten this bad and she feels a squeeze in her stomach, the feeling of dread of his worsening condition in the last days. At her wits end, she had taken a chance on Clarita. The old woman had lived in this country her whole life, served Amaya and her son with great care and if Amaya knew anything of her studies, the

locals knew the area and their bounty better than any doctor of high standing ever could.

“Madam, this is Mira *po*,” Clarita says, stepping aside and a girl steps in, looking common as they come with frizzy hair and simple work clothes.

“Clarita said you knew the area and its plant life well?” Amaya asks, forgoing greetings. She hears the clock in the hall tick loudly in the dark. “There is a plant I need. This is my last hope for my son,” she says, hoping to convey her desperation.

Mira looks at her, face twisting in concern and Amaya almost feels her heart drop before the girl looks toward Clarita who begins to translate and she realizes she did not understand her tongue. The girl looks toward the bed where Marcelo sleeps, before looking at Amaya in the eye with determination and a nod. The girl says something to Clarita and had it not been for the look of conviction, Amaya would’ve back out by now, her anxieties once again rearing its head about the lost cause of it all.

Mira sets her satchel to the table and sets out herbs and varieties of ingredients. Amaya releases a shaky breath as she sees one of the herbs match what was in the journal she had been reading and she nods along, intently listening as Mira names each and every ingredient while Clarita helps explain their usual use by translating for the girl.

It has been very long since Amaya has taken up her old studies but she feels something in her click. Hope and a spark of light, the familiarity of old passions and memories from her home she misses dearly.

She gets to work immediately, asking questions to Mira and combining her understanding of medicinal effects with what was known in the local area. She was rusty but her body moves with familiar ease as she checks and rechecks the notes scattered on the table, grinding down leaves and herbs to paste, gums and hard shells to powder. The clock ticks on and as the sun rises, the smell of medicine in the air is interrupted by the comforting smell of soup.

“Eat,” Mira says in Amaya’s tongue, her accent off in places even for such a simple word. The girl gestures to her son then to her before trying to pass to her a bowl. “Health.”

Amaya looks towards the bowl filled with broth and chicken. She feels the weariness in her bones and sleepless nights of worry for her son. She cannot rest yet but she nods, taking the bowl from Mira and smiles. She would be no help either if she also drops.

It is three days after that Marcelo’s fever breaks and Amaya cries with great relief, holding onto her son.

* * *

Amaya looks to the western sea. She’s seen this blue horizon more times than she can count. She stares and she feels like it might just consume her, taunting her as it splits in two looking like a latch barricading her away from the home she so misses.

Clarita waits for her at the balcony entrance, ever so ready for anything she asks. She hears a laugh from inside and she can’t help but clench at the rails.

Eduardo is set to leave in a month. He’s been ecstatic, going on about how its time to let their son travel and she can rest for a while. She’ll be left behind with this wretched ocean view, as he heads to some woman she’s not even met halfway the world. She remembers the letters and news fortunately passed on to her from ladies traveling, of her husband supposedly gallivanting around in the New World with a lovely *paramour*. She remembers sleazy looks of the businessmen he deals with and their ‘*You’ll be set for life*’ promises. You’ll be set to *rot*.

Does he really think she could just whisk her away, play the long game and leave? Who does he think she was? Not the daughter of the man he wanted to impress. Of the noble family he hoped to gain favor of. He barely batted an eye at her worries after Marcelo’s sickness, how could the man she had let herself be lead by give any care now?

A quiet laugh escapes her, a feeling settling in her chest. Her mother had enjoyed her gift featuring her and her son and news of

the little family she's acquired. Her brother had given her a *generous* hoard for the years passed and understanding for her situation.

"Madam?" she hears Clarita ask.

"Clarita, I have some letters to write," Amaya begins, turning from the horizon. "Call Jose so they can be delivered as soon as possible after. I heard Lady Alodia is traveling again."

Clarita nods and leaves to do her task. Amaya waits for a moment, taking a deep breath. She had continued her studies since Marcelo's sickness, Mira having been a great resource of knowledge of more local remedies passed along housewives and daughters.

She'll need to gather some herbs soon then a ruse about a sickness to keep her son in bed, away from the hands of her wretched husband. She could sell jewels gifted to her over the years. Run away, send mail to her brother of what's to come, then at some point return back to Spain—

Marcelo runs into her, snapping her out of her thoughts. The young boy smiles up at his mother with a laugh and Amaya feels herself ease and relax. In her son's hands held a crown made of flowers, stems woven together, bursting in color. "Ma, look! Mira thought me how to weave you a crown."

Amaya kneels down to the level of her beloved son, bowing as the boy gently places the crown to her head. With a warmth in her chest, she looks up seeing Marcelo grin with glee and Mira walking in just behind him with a shy little smile.

"You look beautiful, Ma. Just like the princesses in the stories!" The little boy exclaims. "I'll be your knight then we can go on adventures and I'll slay the big serpent dragon!"

Amaya chuckles lightly, remembering the bedtime stories. "And oh valiant knight, where can you find this big serpent dragon then?" Amaya asks her son.

"In the caverns by the mountains," Marcelo diligently answers.

"Where the moon reaches the land," Amaya finishes.

Amaya nods to herself, making a decision. An adventure, to the mountains. She smiles, perhaps they can move deeper into the country, let her son enjoy it all. And then a stronger concoction. Or a slower one. Just for her *beloved* husband.

Then freedom.

And when all is said and done, she'll send word to Gerontius and Marcelo can meet his grandmother. Maybe she'll meet her little family here as well.

"We can do that." Amaya says with a light breath of laughter as her son looks to her bemused.

* * *

The sound of buzzing cicadas permeates the hot summer air. There's a slashing sound in the garden of bushes and young trees getting trimmed, while the kitchen bustles about for the coming feast. Neighbors were invited with children encouraged as it is Marcelo's 10th birthday. It's the boy's day and Amaya's not up for social control with prissy adults wanting to climb rank and she hopes the children won't be subjected to such behaviors just yet.

There's no more balcony to see the vast blue horizon in this place. The mansion she had acquired sat in the midst of green rustling trees and on the third floor, just high enough to see above the canopy, was the view of the mountain range, where at night, the moon can reach the land. The gardens were more vast, the roads a bit less comfortable but it was quiet and peaceful. The mansion had more space for the purpose of parties and social events for the region, the land held small houses in the outskirts where the servants and other guests could choose to stay. But on most days, it is just them. Her and her little family.

Amaya walks into the garden where Manong Ernesto was snipping away at a bush, carefully trimming some flowers off to put into vases later. She sees Marcelo crouched at the corner, back turned to her and cooing.

“Marcelo.” Amaya calls and her son is startled. In a blur of fur, she sees a cat scuttle away.

“Aww.” Marcelo says disappointed. “I was so close, too.”

“Marcelo, luring another cat now?” Amaya chides. “Angela will turn her hair white if she finds out, we already have three roaming around, and two we pamper inside,” she reminds him. They keep pests out well at least.

She sees her son turn now to her, dirt on his sleeves, knees and shoes. “You like them though.” Marcelo pouts. “This one had two eye colors. She’s been coming around and meows at Mingming sometimes up the trees. Maybe they’re sisters.” The boy speculates.

Amaya rolls her eyes. “There’ll be time for that later. First, go to Mira,” she orders. “You look a mess, your Uncle and Grandma will arrive soon and we can’t have the hero of the party looking rugged now, can we? Gotta make a good impression.” she says, pushing her son inside and fortunately with only little resistance, the boy goes inside.

From the doorway she sees Mira meet her son halfway, ushering him further in to change but not without some scolding for the mess. Amaya laughs with a shake of her head, meeting Mira’s eye with mirth.

Clarita comes out from a side door, “Are you ready, Madam?”

Amaya nods, smiling. Her family will be complete soon.

"inside the house"

by Lois Moyano

inside the house
the door hinges rust,
windows covered in dust,
i couldn't look out at the world
and i couldn't come out
inside the house

inside the house
i'd rather have curses
and things thrown around
than harrowing silence like tension
that comes crashing down
inside the house

i'll watch through fogged glass
and let my thoughts drown
the voices coming from outside in town
inside the house

inside the house
the talking is hushed,
whispers said in disgust,
i'd like to walk out of the door,
but i wouldn't know how
inside the house

inside the house
everything withers
and inside the house
i'm not considered
as someone to mention aloud
inside the house

i'll watch through fogged glass
and wonder about
everything i have to live without
inside the house.

“the shell of a man”

by Lois Moyano

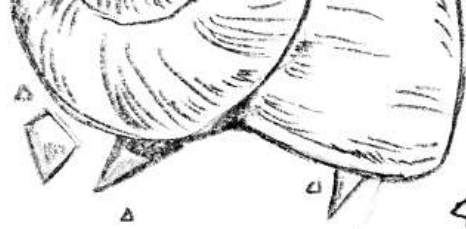
from birth i am a sinner
i am crafted by the hands
that have calcified and hardened
a shell of a man, shell of a man

you love unlike your father
‘cause what else are you to do?
you don’t have his job or his land
you’re just a shell of a man

our kin knows no contentment
you have always wanted more so you
bought yourself a lamb because
you’re just a shell of a man

and you say she understands you;
that isn’t a feat at all
what’s more to understand?
you’re a shell of a man, shell of a man

once her fleece has thinned and worn
and you have no more use of her
or she finds that you are empty
she’ll leave a man, the shell of a man.



Behind the Curtains

by Elysa Nasreen

Faraway Home

by Nathaniel Macapagal

Time's Endless Hand

by Antonio Miguel Marcelino

When the Hibiscus Blooms

by Cyon Joaquin

Blooming in Thorn

by Angel Balmeo

Shell of a Man

by Lois Moyano

Inside the House

by Lois Moyano

