

romance,
reflections,
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ROMANCE,
REFLECTIONS,
AND
INTERWORLD
REVOLUTIONS



When Love Finds its Way

Can we rekindle what we lost?

WRITTEN BY
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It was a Sunday afternoon, and I was enjoying my all-time favorite matcha latte at my favorite coffee shop. Sunday truly is the best day for me; it's the one day when I can finally rest and spend time with myself. I sound so single when I say that, but yes, I really am single. At 28 years old, I still can't get over the love I had when I was 18. That was my first love, and it feels bittersweet. Sometimes I find myself wondering, "What if things had worked out for us? Are we happy right now?" Maybe we already have families, since 30 is the age we had planned to get married and start our own families. OH NEVERMIND! He who shall not be named shouldn't be mentioned right now! But life is so unpredictable.

Here I am at a coffee shop, with no kids, no husband, and a mountain of work waiting for me tomorrow! Yet, I'm a successful CPA, which makes me feel like a truly independent woman, and that's what cheers me up each day. I may be single, but at least I don't have to stress about taking care of kids, an unfaithful husband, bills, groceries, or tuition fees. That's how I justify reaching 30 and still being single.

As I spent my time scrolling through a shopping app, looking for my next reward after torturing myself with a hard week of work (and when I say hard, I mean no wasting time on social media, no parties with friends, and NO DATING), the waiter served me the pasta I had ordered—and then accidentally spilled it all over my lap, ruining my best outfit. I didn't know how to react. Should I act normal and tell the waiter everything is okay after he ruined my BEST OUTFIT?! I managed to handle it gracefully, almost like I had a halo over my head and pretty white wings. The waiter apologized and promised to bring me tissues and wet wipes.

But as he walked away to get them, a familiar voice offered me his handkerchief. OF ALL THE THINGS YOU COULD OFFER SOMEONE IN THIS SITUATION—A HANDKERCHIEF?! AM I EVEN CRYING?! I NEED NEW PANTS! But that voice... it was so familiar—a deep, manly voice that used to make me promises. When I looked up to see who it was, I found myself staring at...Philip. THE MAN WHO SHOULD NEVER BE NAMED, BUT HERE I AM, GRITTING MY TEETH AND SAYING HIS NAME. Philip. PHILIP. PHILIP. My heart is racing, and not in a good way. Flashbacks are hitting me like a damn freight train, and I swear to God, the 18-year-old me would've been screaming in rage right now.

There he was, standing in front of me with that smirk on his face, holding out a handkerchief like it's going to solve everything. Seriously? You think a handkerchief is gonna fix this mess? You expect me to wipe pasta off with that thing? HOW GROSS.

He looked different—of course, he did. All dressed up now, looking so professional and polished, like the perfect little boy who somehow got his life together after breaking mine. His smile was the same, that damn smile I used to fall for, but now it just makes me want to throw up. His hair was neatly styled, framing his face like he was auditioning for a role in some perfect life he built while he was out there sleeping around.

Those eyes, the ones I used to love, still had that stupid charm, pulling people in without even trying. And let's not even talk about his lips—full and inviting, like he hasn't broken a single heart in his life. Every time he grinned, it was like he was proud of the mess he caused. I hated how confident he looked, how sure he was of himself. But honestly? It just made me want to punch him in the face, because that confidence is all built on lies.

Yet, even though the memories we shared were sweet—yeah, I'll admit it—our last moments were a total mess. We never even got a proper closure after we split. And now, here I am, sitting in this ridiculous situation with pasta all over my best outfit, feeling like a damn fool. But then, his voice. That voice. It wasn't just interrupting my frustration; it was dragging me straight back to the past, back to a time that was both simpler and a total disaster.

Philip wasn't just some random face from my past. No, he was a damn storm. A whirlwind of emotions, mistakes, and memories I tried to bury deep in my head. Our story? A chaotic mix of laughs, misunderstandings, and that weird, unspoken connection that hung around like an annoying shadow long after we'd gone our separate ways. Sure, we had some good times, but they were always overshadowed by the drama, the heartbreak, and the lies. Yet somehow, I couldn't fully shake the bond we shared, no matter how hard I tried.

And now, here he is, looking at me with those damn eyes that have haunted me for years, stirring up emotions I thought I had buried. This moment—it could've been a total accident, right? But what if it's not? What if this is some twisted sign? Maybe it's a second chance to fix what went wrong, to somehow untangle this mess of a relationship we had. But then again, knowing me, I could end up in the same disaster, heartbroken all over again. But damn, the question is: Am I really willing to risk it all again?

It all began in Ms. Soriano's fourth-grade classroom, where the scent of freshly sharpened pencils mingled with the sweet tang of construction paper and glue. I had only ONE PLAN for that school year: to be the top of the class. I always wanted to be the best, the smartest. Maybe it was because I was born to stand out in every aspect. My parents were strict, and as the eldest, they set high standards for me so that my siblings would look up to me and I could be their role model. Even if my parents weren't strict, I would still be competitive, driven by an inherent desire to succeed.

While the excitement of the new school year filled the air, I spotted Philip across the room. Philip Cimpo. He was staring at me like a ghost—or maybe someone who could read my mind. When I first laid my eyes on him, he seemed just like any other classmate. I looked back, matching his stare, but then he smiled! That smile sent my heart racing. I thought he was cute, cinto because he's half Chinese, but nah, he wasn't really my type. I figured my feelings wouldn't last since I had my ideal man in mind and, honestly, I was too young to be thinking about romance at that age.

One rainy Valentine's Day in sixth grade, he handed me a rose and dashed away quickly. It was such a sweet gesture, and I loved it—it was my first time receiving a rose on Valentine's Day. When I got home, I found a confession letter in my bag. It was from him, admitting he had had a crush on me since fourth grade. He told me I was his first crush, which I didn't quite believe, since I had mine when I was in prep. I did think of Philip as a younger brother (since he was friends with my siblings). He was a gentleman, family-oriented (a quality I admire in a guy), and kind. But I didn't have romantic feelings for him at the time; I only saw him as a friend. We didn't talk much, so I didn't know much about his life. All I knew was that he liked me and that he was my classmate—and that was it.

Fast forward to high school: we attended different schools but he never lost his connection with me. Every year as I got older, he was always there to greet me. 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, and then my 17th birthday. That's when it felt different because he was back in my life. I didn't mean it as in we were back together as a couple. Before I turned 17, he messaged me out of the blue, and we started having endless conversations.

We almost chatted every day, asking how each other's day was going and updating each other on our tasks. He was a cyclist, always telling me about the mountains he climbed, how long his rides were, and the friends he was with. He would also cheer me up when I stressed about my academics. Philip wasn't really into academics, even back then. He would remind me that being at the top of the class wasn't what mattered. What really mattered was learning. He encouraged me not to put too much pressure on myself, but he also supported my goals. Because of him, I started to shine even more.

After we reconnected, I became more conscious of myself. I went from a girl who didn't care about her looks to someone who had a monthly eyebrow threading, regular nail treatments, a six-step skincare routine, and a commitment to working out three times a week.

We would go out sometimes, sharing our favorite merienda: Japanese cake. It was our little tradition, something simple yet special. The only time we could meet was after school, though, since my parents didn't approve of me going out with a guy. Everything about those moments felt like a secret, a little thrill that came from hiding our time together from the world. We'd steal away during our free periods at school, making the most of every second we had. Sometimes, even when classes were canceled, I'd hide it from my parents and take the opportunity to spend the day with him. It felt like something straight out of a romance movie—full of excitement, spontaneity, and just the right amount of rebellion.

A few months into this unspoken connection, he asked if he could court me. Well, who was I to say no? By that point, I was already falling for him. I'd known Philip for years—he wasn't a stranger to me. I knew his heart, his quirks, and everything in between. It felt natural to give him a chance. He'd show up with flowers "just because," write me handwritten letters, and even surprise me with poems. Little things, thoughtful things, that reminded me of how much he cared. Each day, he'd do something that made my heart race, that flutter of butterflies that I thought I'd only ever read about.

I couldn't hold it in any longer. After eight months of him courting me, I finally admitted that I loved him. And just like that, we made it official. It felt surreal—like something out of a dream. I had a boyfriend. He promised me he'd never fail me, that he'd always be there. We weren't like other couples, just playing around. We wanted something real, something that would last. And as we spent more time together, we started planning our future. I met his family, and they welcomed me with warmth. But there was one thing that hung over me—I couldn't tell my parents. I knew they'd never approve. They'd never understand, and I wasn't ready to face their disappointment.

As our relationship deepened, Philip started to change in ways that made me even prouder of him. He had always been smart, but now he was determined to succeed. He told me he couldn't just be average. He wanted to be at the top, just like me, and so he worked harder, pushed himself further. It was inspiring to watch him grow, and it only made me admire him more.

Everything felt perfect. Our relationship was like a smooth-sailing boat—steady and free of any storm. He was understanding, patient, everything I could have asked for in a boyfriend. It felt like we were invincible, like nothing could touch us.

But then, two days before Christmas, everything came crashing down. I was at home when I started receiving a flurry of messages from Iris, my closest friend since elementary school and Philip's neighbor. The texts kept coming, and she was calling me nonstop. My heart raced as I saw her name flash on the screen. Something was wrong, I could feel it in my gut. When I finally answered, her voice trembled.

"Calista, it's Philip. He's in the hospital. He's been in an accident. He was cycling. I saw his mom rushing into the hospital right now and I've heard that Philip was really in a bad situation." I didn't even know how to respond. My mind went blank. "What happened? Is he okay?" I asked, my voice shaky.

"I don't know yet. You need to come to the hospital. Please, hurry." I couldn't think. I just grabbed my things, heart pounding, and rushed out the door. The entire drive felt like a blur, the world outside seeming so distant, like I was in a dream. When I arrived at the hospital, I could barely remember how I got there. I ran through the halls, asking for directions to the emergency room, my mind spinning with fear and confusion.

When I finally reached his room, I heard a loud scream—a cry that chilled me to the bone. It sounded like someone was in agony. I thought it was his mother, but as I entered the room, I saw a woman I didn't recognize. She was sitting at the side of his bed, her face streaked with tears, her hands tightly gripping his. Philip was unconscious, bruised, his body battered from the accident.

I stood frozen in the doorway, not understanding. Who was this woman? Why was she crying over him? She seemed so familiar, yet her face was unfamiliar. She looked like she belonged there, like she had a right to be with him in a way I didn't.

"Who are you?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper. She looked up at me with wide, tear-filled eyes. "I'm Philip's girlfriend," she said softly, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

My world crashed in that moment. It felt like someone had ripped my heart out, shattered it into pieces. I couldn't breathe. I stood there, unable to move, unable to speak. The words echoed in my mind—Philip's girlfriend.

She went on to explain how she and Philip had been cycling together when the accident happened. They'd been out on their usual ride when a car came out of nowhere, striking Philip. She told me she'd been by his side the entire time, waiting for him to wake up. She thought I was just his friend, and she hadn't realized I was more than that.

I was speechless. How could he have done this? How could he have two girls at the same time? Was I not enough? Was I not good enough for him? I didn't know. I couldn't process it. I left the hospital without saying another word to her, or to him. My mind was in chaos. I didn't want to be in that room anymore. I didn't want to see his face, to hear any more lies.

That was the last time I ever spoke to Philip. I couldn't bring myself to face him after what I'd learned. It was too much. The betrayal stung, and I couldn't understand how someone who claimed to love me could have hidden something like that.

I transferred schools shortly after. It was almost the end of the school year anyway, and I knew I needed to leave. I blocked him on all my social media accounts, cut him out of my life completely. I didn't care what happened to him anymore. I didn't want to know. The pain of it all was too fresh, too raw. I wanted to move on, to forget.

I ran away from him. I ran away from the lies, from the hurt. I never looked back.

Ever since that day, I swore I would never trust another man again. I focused on myself, doing everything I could to forget him. But it's not easy, especially with so many unanswered questions swirling in my mind. Why did he do it? What was the reason? Was it me? Was it because of how strict my parents were?

And now, here he is—standing right in front of me. He asked if we could catch up, and before I knew it, he had taken the seat across from me.

"How's life treating you so far, Calliboo?" he asked casually.

Calliboo. That nickname. He used to call me that whenever he teased me. How could he say it so easily after everything he put me through?!

But I didn't let my emotions show. I refused to let him see that I was still affected by what happened all those years ago. I responded as though nothing had ever happened between us, keeping my composure despite the flood of emotions brewing beneath the surface. But deep down, I had a mental list of questions—questions I had rehearsed over and over in my mind for years, like a never-ending periodic table etched into my memory. For nearly a decade, those questions lingered, unanswered.

Everything happened so quickly that I barely realized he was already apologizing. Then, his words shattered me into pieces, reopening old wounds.

"Calli, I'm sorry."

Those two words. Those two words dragged me right back into the past. Suddenly, I was reliving the most painful phase of my life—a time when I was merely surviving. The memories came rushing back: the relentless stomach aches, the loss of appetite, the weight I shed, forgetting who I was, failing classes, sleepless nights, buckets of tears, and countless prayers begging God to heal me.

Moving on was never easy for me. It took me two long years to rebuild myself, to stand tall again, and to reclaim my sense of self. Yet, even now, I have to admit—I haven't completely moved on. No matter where I go or what I do, thoughts of him are always there, lingering. I may have risen above the pain it caused, but it has never truly let me go.

After he said those words, I told him I had a lot of things to do and desperately needed to clean up after the pasta mishap on my outfit. I began gathering my things, preparing to leave. Just as I was about to stand, he reached out and grabbed my hand.

"Calli, let's talk," he said.

He's always been my weakness. In the past, I could never say no to him, but this time was different—I had to protect myself. I told him I couldn't, politely said goodbye, and added that it was nice to see him again. Without waiting for a response, I left him sitting there in the coffee shop.

He didn't give me any explanations for what he did, but honestly, I didn't want to hear them anymore. What I had seen back then was enough; it told me everything I needed to know.

I rushed home to my condo, hoping to find some peace. It was already nighttime, and while I tried to relax and fall asleep, my mind wouldn't let me. Thoughts kept swirling, refusing to settle. Should I go back? Should I let him explain?

On the other hand, part of me wondered if I should move to another country entirely—putting as much distance as possible between us to finally move on and forget about him. But wasn't that too drastic? It almost felt like I was overreacting, as if I'd done something terrible to justify such an extreme decision.

I reminded myself that I didn't do anything wrong. I shouldn't have to uproot my life to prove I'm unaffected. Still, the thoughts came in waves, relentless and overwhelming, spiraling faster and faster in my mind until I couldn't even finish a single coherent one... and then..

"Good morning, bitch! Wake up and slay the day! Good morning, bitch! Wake up and slay the day! Good morning, bitch! Wake up and slay the day! Good morning, bitch! Wake up and slay the day!" Yep, that's my freaking alarm. And it's Monday again! 7 AM, and I'm already late for work! It's annoying, but it somehow motivates me to slay whatever I do. I think I nailed it by leaving Philip at the coffee shop. I feel powerful now, like I'm finally moving on. I can't even laugh at how I left the guy I spent years crying over. Anyway, whatever. I need to get up and shower.

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"Ding dong!" For goodness' sake, now is not the time for any visitors or deliveries. "Hold on! I'm in a hurry! If it's a package, just leave it! If it's a bill, you're ruining my morning! And if you're a visitor—seriously, who shows up at 7 AM on a Monday?" I rushed to the door, still grumbling, but then a bouquet of pink peonies stopped me mid-sentence. It was left in front of my door.

Pink peonies are my favorite, just so you know. That big bouquet of peonies completely stopped me from complaining. But now I'm wondering—who would send me flowers? I picked up the note card in the bouquet. "I'm sorry, my Calliboo. Meet me later at the lobby of your condo at 8 PM. - Philip." WHAT DID I JUST READ?! HOW DID HE KNOW MY ADDRESS? And wow, is he actually trying to force me to meet him? But, I'll admit, I felt a rush of excitement. I don't know why I'm even smiling at the pink peonies. UGH, NO, I CAN'T SMILE. I'LL LOSE MY RIZZ!

After work, I went straight home (which is rare for me, since I usually go somewhere else afterward). I rested for a bit, then dressed up again—nothing too fancy, just casual clothes for what seemed like a casual night (or so I thought). As I rode the elevator down to the lobby, I felt nervous and kept glancing at the mirror—still looking good though, haha. From the 10th floor to the ground floor, I was quietly shaking! When I reached the lobby, there he was—neat, dressed well, and looking way too good. WHY DOES HE LOOK SO GOOD?! He smiled at me, and ugh, he knows how to get to me. But I showed no interest. My rizz level was at an all-time high. He walked over to me. “Let’s go?” he said. I was so confused. I asked why, and he told me we were going somewhere important. He grabbed my hand and led me to his car. He opened the door for me and told me to make myself comfortable. I kept asking why as we drove, but he just smiled, and it pissed me off—but he still looked cute. Yeah, that’s probably how he got me here. If he wasn’t cute in the first place, I wouldn’t have met him in the lobby, and I definitely wouldn’t be in this car, wondering where we’re headed.

After about half an hour of talking, he stopped at a spot with a stunning view. I think we were on top of a mountain! The city lights looked beautiful. We got out of the car and admired the scenery. He handed me a big box. I was confused, but I was too tired to question him anymore, so I just opened it. Inside, the box was filled with envelopes. I asked what they were for, and he told me to pick one, and I’d find the answer to my question. I opened the first one, and a tear slipped down my cheek. It was a letter from Philip, written 10 years ago. I didn’t count how many letters there were, but there were a lot.

“I know you won’t let me explain, and this is the only way I can do it. I’m sorry, my Calliboo. I thought I would never find you again. I tried searching for you, reaching out to your close friends to get in touch with you, but it seemed like you told them not to tell me anything about you. These letters, I’ve written one every day for 10 years. A decade of doing this made me feel like I was speaking to a ghost, because you were nowhere to be found, but I saw you everywhere I went. I love you so much, Calli.”

As I read the letters, I was stunned by what he revealed. He shared details of his day, but the biggest shock was what he confessed about the girl at the hospital during his accident—it was Agatha. He admitted that his parents had forced him to be with her because their family business was struggling, and for it to survive, they needed to get closer to Agatha’s family. Philip’s parents knew how much Agatha liked him, so they pushed him to stay close to her.

“I never wanted her, Calli. I never liked or loved her. I was so scared of their threats—that they would tell your parents about us and have you taken away from me. I was so dumb for letting that happen. I was selfish,” he said, and I didn’t expect that. “You’re always the one I’ve loved, Calli.”

That cleared my mind and lifted the weight off my heart.

A “Even though I already have my own family...” My jaw dropped. After finally clearing my head, I was hit with another bombshell. I felt like I was going to pass out.

“Just kidding though. My parents are forcing me to marry her since you’re already gone. But I never accepted that. Not for a second. I’ve fought against it in every way I could, but their pressure, their expectations, it’s like a storm that I couldn’t escape. For a while, I thought I had no choice, that I had to go along with what they wanted. But I was wrong. I realized I can’t live a life like that.”

“ Not anymore. I can’t just settle for a future with someone I don’t love, someone who wasn’t you. Calli, I’ve tried to move on, I’ve tried to do what they wanted, but deep down, I couldn’t forget you. I couldn’t stop thinking about what we had. I kept telling myself that maybe it was time to let go, but the truth is, I was never able to let go of you.”

“I’ve spent the past years trying to convince myself that what happened between us was in the past, that I should just forget about it, and that I should do what was expected of me. But I couldn’t. No matter what, I couldn’t erase you from my heart. Every day, I thought about you. Every time I woke up, you were the first thing on my mind. Every time I went to bed, I found myself wondering if you were doing the same. And in the end, I came to one conclusion: I couldn’t keep pretending to be happy with someone else when my heart still belonged to you.”

He said with teary eyes, his voice trembling, “I hope you can forgive me, for everything I did, for everything I said. I hope you can understand that all of this, everything I’ve done, was because I was too afraid to lose you. I didn’t know how to fight for us then, but now, I’ll fight with everything I have. I hope, with all my heart, that we can have a second chance. I can’t promise it will be easy, but I can promise I’ll never give up on us again.”

All this time, I had judged him too harshly. I was so quick to jump to conclusions, to assume the worst without giving him the chance to explain himself. Now, as I reflect on everything, I can’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of regret for the way I handled things. I should have listened to him, understood his side of the story, instead of letting my anger cloud my judgment. The years that followed, the silence and the bitterness, they feel like such a waste now. I realize how much of our relationship I let slip through my fingers, simply because I didn’t give him the opportunity to speak his truth.

I should have known better. I should have understood that his actions weren’t driven by a lack of love for me, but by the immense pressure from his parents, the expectations they placed on him. He never cheated on me; he only did what he thought was necessary to meet their demands. It’s only now that I see how hard that must have been for him—struggling between what he wanted and what he was forced to do. And yet, I left him, without a word, without a chance to explain. My anger blinded me to the truth, and now, I can’t help but feel a deep, aching sympathy for him. How could I have been so blind, so quick to end everything when all he needed was a little understanding, a little patience?

But what if this is just another trap? What if the moment I let my guard down, I'm hurt all over again? I should have known better. Yet the pull of the past, of everything we once had, is so strong. How do I even begin to trust him again? Can I even give him the chance he deserves, when all I want to do is protect myself from that unbearable pain I've lived with for years?

It took me months to process everything that had happened, but I'm grateful that Philip answered all the questions that had been lingering in my mind. Philip is such an amazing person—loving, a caring brother, and incredibly smart. He's always true to his word, sweet, and everything you could ask for in a husband. Philip has always been the one who held my heart. Love is mysterious; I didn't fall for him when I first met him, but now I can't imagine life without him. I still don't know the answer to the question, "Why do you love Philip?" I just love him for who he is. But do I even deserve this second chance? Do we deserve another shot at happiness after all the pain we've caused each other?

So, I found myself at a crossroads. The temptation to give in, to give him a chance, was strong. But then again, could I really risk my heart again? I didn't know if I could trust him, or if I could ever feel the same. But maybe, just maybe, for the sake of everything we once had... I was willing to find out. So, I paused, took a breath, and for a moment, I considered it. Maybe this time, I would give him a chance. Or maybe not. Only time would tell if love could really heal what had been broken.

I didn't know if I could trust him, or if I could ever feel the same. But maybe, just maybe, for the sake of everything we once had... I was willing to find out. But was that enough? Or was I simply fooling myself into believing that love could erase the past?

So, I paused, took a breath, and for a moment, I considered it. Maybe this time, I would give him a chance. Or maybe not. Only time would tell if love could really heal what had been broken. But deep down, I knew this decision would haunt me for the rest of my life —no matter which path I chose.

"From the very beginning, even at such a young age, you stole my heart, Mrs. Cimqo. You are the most breathtaking view I've ever seen. I remember how simple things felt back then, yet I knew my heart was already yours. Today, standing here with you, I promise to continue growing with you. I promise to love you not just in the big moments, but in all the quiet, everyday ones too. I'll laugh with you when we're happy, comfort you when you're sad, and hold your hand when life gets tough. I will cherish all the memories we've made and look forward to the ones we still have to make. And when we're old and looking back on our journey, I want to remember this moment and know that every step, every laugh, every challenge, and every second of our time together led us to this—my heart, forever yours."

That, right there, was one of my favorite parts of Philip's vows at our wedding. After five years of dating again, he asked for my hand, and who am I to say no?! His words weren't just promises; they were a testament to everything we had fought through, all the years of pain, the misunderstandings, the heartbreak, and the difficult choices we had made. Those years apart had given us both the time to grow—not just as individuals but as the people we needed to be for each other.

Now, we're happily married. Who would've expected this? From being a bitter, workaholic woman, afraid of love and incapable of trusting again, to a wife and mother of two—well, maybe three? We're now expecting our third baby! It still feels surreal sometimes, as though we've lived multiple lifetimes in the short time we've been together. Our journey hasn't been perfect, but it has been ours. And it's been beautiful in ways I never could have imagined back when I was standing on the edge, unsure whether or not to take the leap.

The hardest lessons are often the ones we don't want to learn, but they're the ones that shape us the most. I used to think love was all about perfection, that it would be easy and effortless. But now I know the truth: love is about patience, forgiveness, and vulnerability. It's about showing up every day, even when things aren't easy, even when you're afraid. It's about learning to trust again, even when the wounds haven't fully healed. Philip taught me that love isn't just a feeling—it's a choice. It's choosing to love even when you're scared, even when it hurts, because in the end, the love that remains is the one that truly matters.

We've learned that nothing worth having comes without its challenges, but that's what makes it so precious. The past doesn't define us; it's what we choose to do with it that shapes our future. The best things in life are worth waiting for. The pain, the mistakes, and the time we lost were all part of the journey that brought us here, to this moment, to the life we've built together. And now, with our little ones and the baby on the way, I couldn't be more grateful for the life we've created.

Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing, because everything we went through led me to this. To us. To a love that was worth waiting for.





BOUNDED BY INVISIBLE STRINGS

YASMIEN SAN JUAN

BOUNDED BY INVISIBLE STRINGS

WRITTEN BY
YASMIEN SAN JUAN

First Day of School

My family was enjoying the trip, as we were listening to the songs from Eraserheads, a well-known Filipino rock band, while we were riding a car back to Manila after spending our vacation in Bicol. It was all fun even though it was already midnight and the rain was pouring heavily, but not until my father's usually calm demeanor was shattered when he almost hit a man crossing the road. "Shit! Don't cross the road carelessly, man!" he shouted. It was the first time I saw my father raising his voice, leading my hands to tremble even though he was not talking to me. He stopped the car and was about to confront the stranger, but my mother intervened and stopped him.

"Teddy, just let him go! Are you planning to make a scene while we are with our child?!" my mother exclaimed. I saw how my father suddenly looked at me and how his emotions gradually shifted from intense fury to calm as he saw how frightened I was. With that, my father just continued driving as if nothing had happened.

In a few hours, we reached the zigzag road that looked like a chicken intestine. "Teddy, please be careful and don't drive fast. The road is slippery, and we might get into an accident," my mother said calmly, and my father nodded in agreement. After this, everything happened so quickly. The next thing I knew, a car that seemed to have broken brakes was about to hit us. My father turned the steering wheel in the opposite direction, but it was too late — the car already hit us. The next thing I knew, my face was covered by blood, and then everything went dark.

"Amara, wake up," a familiar voice cut through the darkness, pulling me back to reality. Looking around, I realized I was in my dormitory, and everything that happened was a nightmare.

"Is it the dream that keeps happening again?" Elyse asked. I simply nodded since I had no energy to speak up. She asked me this question since I told her I had been dreaming about this scenario since I was in Grade 12. To be honest, I do not understand what this dream is trying to imply. Is it something that happened in my past? Or was it just really a random dream? I shrugged this thought out since I still needed to prepare for our first day of class as college students.

After taking a bath and doing my morning skincare routine, I walked for 15 minutes to go to the university. When I reached it and looked at the name of my school, Pinecrest University, I suddenly smiled and felt excited because the realization sank in that I was already a college student at this prestigious university.

“Good Morning, Manong Guard!” I greeted him with a smile as I tapped my ID on the scanner. His warm response mirrored my own, signaling the beginning of a fantastic day. In just a few more walks, I arrived at Room 101. It was a bit too early, so nobody else was there yet. With that, I sat in the front seat on the right side of the classroom because it was near the projector, and there was also a socket on the wall beside my chair.

In a few more minutes, my classmates began to arrive, and one man completely caught my attention. Our eyes locked as he entered the room, and I instantly felt connected with him. He seemed familiar, as if we had already met, although I am still determining when and where. Well, it is unlikely that I would remember him if we had already met since I don’t know much about my past, especially those people from my junior high school years. I also don’t have social media accounts besides my Messenger and private Facebook account, so it is almost impossible for someone besides my senior high school friends and family to contact me.

When I noticed our eye contact lingering for too long, I averted my gaze. Yet, my mind was still preoccupied with him, so I found myself stealing glances during the discussion, and whenever he noticed, I redirected my attention to the professor. I continually did this throughout our whole session, and without noticing, three hours had already passed, and our first-day orientation ended.

First Interaction

“Ara, we have been best friends for so long. Whenever I see your smile and hear you laugh, I feel butterflies in my stomach, and my heartbeat beats faster. Whenever you cry, I feel the need to comfort and protect you. At first, I thought I was acting this way because I was your friend, but I have realized it is more than that. I admire you. No, scratch that; I love you, Ara, and I am determined to do anything if you will let me court you,” the boy said with his eyes filled with admiration. This situation made my younger self blush and smile widely, as it felt like she was also in love with him and she had been waiting for this moment.

“Yes, you can court me, Ja...” my younger self replied. It led the young boy to smile widely and hug her tightly. Indeed, it was a magical moment for both of them.

I woke up when the bell rang and realized I had dozed off in my seat for about one hour. It had already been about three months since I started college, and it was so stressful. There were a lot of times that I had to sleep late or not sleep at all because of academic workloads. Like last night, I had to finish my lesson plan and PowerPoint presentation for my educational philosophy class. That was why I had fallen asleep without even knowing. Luckily, our teacher in educational technology was absent.

“Hey, Amara! It seems someone is courting you, and he’s been preoccupying your mind,” my classmate said, making me curious about what she was talking about.

“Huh? What are you saying?” I replied. Hearing her remarks was random since no one was interested in me. I am usually quiet in class, and the only people I am talking to are my friends from other degree programs. So, what does she mean by that?

“You were sleep-talking earlier about how this certain guy is courting you. Sadly, I did not hear his name HAHAHAHA,” she said while her laughter rang throughout the room. Because of this, she reminded me of that strange dream about the boy who was courting me in my dream. I felt like it had happened before as if it was part of the past I had forgotten. Regardless, I pushed this thought aside as I saw our educational philosophy teacher come to our class.

“Good Day, Students! Here are the groupings for your performance task project that covers 60% of your grades. With that, kindly go to your groupmates so that you can get to know each other and plan for your project,” Ms. Sage said. I looked for my groupmates and discovered that the man who caught my attention on the first day was one of them. This led my heart to beat faster because of excitement and nervousness.

“Hi, I am Jayden Ramirez. You are Amara, right?” he said. Oh my gosh! How did he know my name? Maybe, he heard it a while ago because our classmate teased me. Self, do not be delusional. You were his classmate, so he would know you.

“Hello. Yes, I am A-a-amara,” I replied to him. I hope he did not notice how I stuttered, even though it was obvious. After this, I sat beside him since it was only the available chair. Then, our meeting started, and we divided the tasks into pairs so that all could contribute to our video project. He became my partner since our other groupmates had already chosen their pair, and we were the only ones left. I was about to complain, but he interrupted me.

“Hey, do you mind if we talk in a coffee shop tomorrow night so we can start this project as early as possible?” he said, smiling widely. “Okay,” I replied. This situation left me with no choice but to accept that he was already my partner. After all, I should not be awkward with him since he was just a classmate. But why does it feel like I am just gaslighting myself? He was not only a mere classmate. He was the only man who caught your attention, self.

COFFEE SHOP STUDY DATE

It was already 7 PM, but I was still in my room, struggling to pick what clothes to wear. Should I wear a dress? Wide-leg pants and shirt? Or a skirt and this very cutesy top? Wait, what were these questions? I should not be preparing this much since I was only going there because of our video project. Hays, whatever, I should stop this now, or I will be late.

One hour later, I was already in front of the coffee shop, and I ended up wearing wide-leg pants and a shirt. As I looked at the glass wall, I saw Jayden waving his hand as he walked to where I was. At this moment, I was mesmerized by how handsome he was in his blue polo shirt and slack. He seemed like a leading man in a movie while I was his leading lady. Gosh! Stop imagining, will you? If not, you would look like a fool, smiling from ear to ear.

“Hey, Ara! Oops, sorry, it should be Amara,” he said when he was in front of me. Wait, did he just call me Ara? How did he know my nickname when only my close friends and family knew about that? Well, maybe he just said it out of randomness.

“Hello! How did you know my nickname?” I said. When I told him this, he did not know how to answer my question, and it seemed he was hiding something from me.

“R-r-really, that was your nickname? I just guess it,” he said with awkward laughs, then he signaled me that we should already go inside the coffee shop. That’s weird, but I just pulled this thought out since I must focus on our project.

“Good Day, Ma’am and Sir! Welcome to Bounded Coffee Shop! What’s your order?” the cashier said to us. She was such a cheerful lady, and I must say that she was very suited to her job. I think I will go back here again.

“Ara, I mean Amara, what do you want? It’s my treat,” he said.

“Uhm, anything will do,” I replied. Honestly, I want to order Vanilla Mocha Iced Coffee, but I do not want to be demanding since it’s his treat.

“Miss, I will order one iced Spanish Latte and Vanilla Mocha Iced Coffee. Thank you!” he said to the cashier. After this, he invited me to walk and sit at the table.

A few minutes later, the cashier called him to pick up the order. When he returned, he placed the Vanilla Mocha Iced Coffee in front of me. With that, I was super amused since he knew exactly what I wanted. Is this still a coincidence, or did he really know me?

“Thank you, Jayden! How did you know that this is my favorite drink?” I told him, and he simply told me he has a talent for guessing other people’s preferences. I felt like he was lying since he couldn’t look at me and seemed nervous. Despite this, I decided not to ask him anymore since he seemed like he would not answer me even though I asked him.

After this, we discussed the video project where we would interview a few teachers regarding their teaching experience. Honestly, I was shocked and amazed since he was prepared and good at explaining what questions we should ask our interviewees and where to conduct them. Aside from this, he also has a list of possible teachers that we could interview. With that, I started to admire him more since he was not just a handsome man but a person with substance.

"Do you have more ideas about our project?" he said, looking at my eyes directly. I just simply answered him by shaking my head side by side.

"Okay, Amara! Let's end this since it is getting late," he said as if in a hurry. He was clutching his chest, and I saw how beads of sweat formed on his face. What's happening with him? It seemed like something was wrong, and he was not feeling well.

"Wait, Jayden, are you okay? You don't look well," I said, filled with concern.

"No, I am okay. I just need to go to the restroom. It would be best if you headed out to avoid being late for your curfew," he said, leaving immediately before I could respond. I wanted to wait for him until he returned after going to the restroom, but I couldn't since it was only a few minutes before my curfew.

The Next Day After the Coffee Shop Date

Last night, I asked my mom if she knew someone named Jayden Ramirez. She told me that she did not know him. With this, I knew I had no choice but to ask Jayden, but he was nowhere to be found. I asked my classmates if they knew where he was, but all they could say was that he was absent. Where is he? Did something really happen to him yesterday? I felt scared since it seemed like I was right that he was not okay last night. I should not have listened to him when he told me I should leave.

I decided to message him to apologize for leaving him even though he told me to do so, but he did not reply. Since I still had class, I put my cell phone back in my bag and tried to listen to the professors even though I was bothered about Jayden's situation.

When my classes ended, I opened my phone and saw a notification. It was from Jayden. He assured me he was okay and only had to attend a wedding event in Tagaytay, so he was absent. Even though I wanted to ask him if we knew each other back then, I could not since I did not think it was right to talk about something like this over the phone. So, I just told him to take care, and we must talk when he returns.

With that, I decided to leave the university, but before I could, a boy suddenly bumped into me, causing me to trip to the floor. "I am sorry, miss," he said apologetically while helping me to get up. When he saw my face, it felt like he saw a ghost.

"Wait, Amara, is that you?" he asked me, making me confused. Who is this person? Is he one of my classmates?

"Yes, I am Amara. How do you know me?" I replied. I saw how shocked he was that I did not know him, and it felt like he thought I was joking.

“You must be kidding, Amara. I am Gio, your classmate and friend from junior high school. Honestly, I should not be surprised that you must have forgotten us since you just left without telling us. Do you know Jay has been looking for you like a fool?” he said with a tone of anger in his voice. What? What is he saying? Is this some kind of scam? I don’t even know who that so-called Jay was.

“Sorry, mister. I really don’t know you. I also do not know what you are talking about. So please, excuse me, I need to go,” I said before I left him. He was about to stop me, but I quickly ran away since he might be a holdaper or stalker. Gosh! That was so close.

Let’s eat lunch together!

One week after that weird encounter with a stranger, Jayden had already returned to school, but I noticed how pale his skin was. I always tried to ask him about this, but he kept avoiding the topic by suddenly leaving or talking about something else.

Today, he messaged me on my messenger and told me we should eat lunch together. Without thinking much, I said, “Sure, let’s invite our groupmates.” After sending this message, I realized he might have meant that he and I should eat together. Because of this, my cheeks turned red, yet I did not clarify it to him. So, we ended up eating together with our groupmates at the mall near our university.

During lunch, he ensured that he sat in front of me. He also kept looking at me as if he was memorizing my face. Aside from this, he was very attentive to me, serving me my favorite dishes, chicken curry and pinakbet, and refilling my water. I was amazed and confused again that he knew exactly what I liked, even though I had not told him. Because of his actions, our groupmates started teasing us, and we only smiled awkwardly without saying anything.

After this, we decided to part ways since we had to finish our assignments. Before I left, Jayden whispered something in my ear. “I hope we can have more time like this,” he said with a sad voice as if it was impossible to happen again.

“Of course, we are friends now. Anyway, please take care of your health. I have been noticing how you look sick these past few days,” I said to him in a reply. He just nodded and fake smiled at me.

Friday Night Out

“Flowers, chocolates, and a letter for you, Ara,” a boy said to my high school self as he gave me his presents.

“Thank you, Jay! I appreciate your consistency, but please don’t spend too much penny on me. As long as you are here, I am more than happy,” my younger self replied.

"I know, but I still want to since you deserve it," he said.

"Okay, Jay. By the way, my family and I will have a 1-week vacation in Bicol, so we might not see each other this weekend," my younger self replied. I could see how the young boy's face changed from happy to sad. It was evident that he would greatly miss her, even though it was just for a week.

I woke up when I heard my alarm. It was already 5 PM. Gosh! I needed to hurry up since we would have a night out by 6 PM.

A Friday night out is typical for every college student since they tend to drink and party outside after being stressed at school. However, it was different for me since I always had to come home to my dormitory after class to study for our lessons. This would be my first time, and it was because of Jayden and my groupmates who had invited me. If it weren't for them, I would not go.

When I arrived at the chill bar, I saw my groupmates waiting at the entrance. "Ara! Finally, you're here," they said. I greeted them and started looking at them individually, but I noticed that Jayden was not there. Where is he? Is he not coming? I would not have come if I knew he wouldn't be here.

"Hello! Where's Jayden?" I asked them. They told me that he would not come since he had an emergency. I wondered what it was, but I could not message him since they had started pulling me to enter the bar.

As we started drinking, we decided to play drunk cards. I did not want to be a killjoy, so I picked a card first. "Tell us the name of the person you admire," my friend said as he read my chosen card. What the heck? Of all the possible questions, why must it be about the person I admire? Should I answer this question honestly? Well, he's not here, so I think I could.

"Jayden," I said shyly. My cheeks turned red when I simply stated his name, leading my groupmates to tease me.

"Wooh, I knew it. I was right all along. I told you guys, but you do not believe me." one of our groupmates said, like she knew from the start what I was going to say, and she was just trying to confirm it using the cards.

After this, we continued playing the cards. Then, when we were done, I told them I had to go since it was already late. They hesitated to let me go but could not stop me, so they just let me do what I wanted. But I suddenly felt dizzy before I could even walk, and everything went black.

Meaning of My Dreams

The moment that I passed out, I started remembering the past. As I saw my dreams again, they became more apparent, and I finally got to see the face of the young boy in my dreams. Wait, is that Jayden? Gosh! it was really him. All this time, I was with my best friend and first love when I was in junior high school. Yet, it was only now that I recognized him.

As my dream unfolded, I remembered that I was planning to say “yes” to him after our vacation trip to Bicol. However, it had not happened since my family and I got hit by the car, which caused me to lose my memories of him.

Now, I know why he seems familiar with me and why he knows many things about me, such as my nickname and preferences. But why did he not tell me about all of this? Is he scared? Is there something stopping him?

After this long dream, I woke up in the hospital and saw my parents and groupmates looking worried at me. Even though they were there, I was only looking for one person, Jayden, my first love since I was 14, but I could not find him.

Because of this, I asked my parents to give me my phone since I needed to call Jayden and tell him that all my memories had returned already. At first, they hesitated to give it to me since I had just woken up from passing out, but they gave it to me when they noticed that I wouldn’t stop unless they gave it to me.

I dialed Jayden’s number. After a few rings, he answered. I thought it was him, but I heard a female voice crying loudly. This made me confused. “Hello? Is this Jayden’s number?” I said on the phone.

“Hello, yes, this is Jayden’s phone number. I am his mother. Who are you?” she said while sobbing. When she answered that it was indeed his phone, I felt scared and knew something was wrong. I was only waiting for her to confirm my thoughts.

“I-i-i am Amara, whe-e-re is he?” I replied while stuttering since I was afraid about what she would say.

“Hello, iha. I think it’s much better if you come here to the hospital. I will message you the room number and address,” she said. With that, my tears started to fall, leading my parents and groupmates to be worried.

When I received the address, I started begging my parents to let me go to his room number in the hospital. Since I was crying heavily, they didn’t have a choice but to just let me.

Jayden's Room at the Hospital

When I was in front of his room, I saw his mother coming out. She told me that we need to talk first. As much as I wanted to see him, I let his mother talk to me since my guts told me this was what I should do.

“Do you know that my son loves you very much, iha? He kept telling me stories about you since you were still in high school. I also saw how devastated he was when you were nowhere to be found. He kept looking for you, but no one could answer him. As a mother, I cannot stand what is happening to my son, and I even got angry at you for hurting my son. Can you blame me? A child I cared for was just hurt by his first love.” she exclaimed while sobbing really hard. I felt sorry since I had imagined how much Jay suffered because of me. If I had not lost memories, he would not experience this pain.

“I am sorry, ma’am. I know that words are not enough to remove all the pain that I caused you and your son.” I said to her while also sobbing.

“You don’t have to say sorry, iha. I already forgave you when my son told me that you might have had amnesia since you cannot remember him when you guys saw each other again. He badly wanted to ask you about your condition, but he couldn’t since he was afraid that something might happen to you.” his mother said. Why? How can Jayden be so selfless? He suffered a lot of years because of me, yet he still thinks of my condition.

“Iha, I am not saying this to make you feel bad. In fact, I would like to express my gratitude to you for making my son happy, even in a short time. I thought I wouldn’t be able to see his genuine smile again, but he did because of you. You were his happiness, and you were the reason why he never stopped fighting.” his mother said while still crying hard. Huh? What does she mean by that?

“Fighting from what?” I asked.

“He has an incurable heart disease, iha. My son did not tell you because he does not want to burden you. Until the end, he chose to keep it from you. I am sorry to say this, but just this morning, he was not here with us anymore. My son left the earth already, and he told me to give you this letter,” she said. With that, I cried out loud since I realized it was too late, and I hated myself for not remembering him the moment I saw him.

Why does it have to happen to us, Jay? Why did I forget you? And out of all people, why did he give you a heart disease? You were so precious, a good person, and capable of providing unconditional love. Even with our limited time when I can’t remember you, I saw how you cared for me. So, why? Why did you suffer like this?

Letter of Jayden

One year has already passed, and today is your first death anniversary, Jayden. I am sorry I did not have the courage back then to read the letter you left me since I still could not believe you were not with me here anymore. I do not know if I am ready now, but I think you want me to read this letter and let you go. I said while looking at his tombstone, which was full of flowers from his loved ones.

Dear Ara,

This is me, Jayden. If you read this letter, I am no longer by your side since I cannot hold on anymore. I want to stay alive and be with you, but my body cannot. Day by day, I felt that my condition was getting worse. It feels like I have to accept the truth that my life is already about to end.

You were the light and source of my strength, Ara. I am thankful you were part of my life. I am grateful you were the first and last person I loved. And I am also thankful that we met again.

Please enjoy your life and don't be stressed too much. If things go hard, just look at the brightest star in the night and think it was me guiding and telling you never to stop fighting and always believe in yourself.

*Love,
Jayden*

As I reach the end of his letter, I deeply see his unconditional love for me to the point that he still thinks of me until the end. Why do you have to be like this, Jayden? I know that you do not want to worry me, but you should have told me your condition so that I could be there for you until your last breath. But what could I do? You have already left me, and I must accept that we could not have a happy ending in this universe. And all I can do is hope we can be reincarnated in a life where we can continue our love story and get our happy ending.



IT CLICKED WITH
AN EMPHASIS ON THE ICK

BY: FERNAN JOSEPH PAYLAGO

Alright, get ready for a deep dive into my absurd and borderline self-delusional brain as I attempt to woo my crush, Sam, despite life and my own lack of finesse throwing obstacles in my way. Picture me overanalyzing every single move like I'm narrating a rom-com directed by a caffeine-addled squirrel.

Episode 1: The Leaf Debacle. So there I was, standing just a few yards away from him in the park, mentally playing out the perfect movie scene in my head. It was sunset—the golden hour, people! It was basically begging for a romantic moment. I could practically hear some imaginary narrator saying, “It was at that moment he realized he was in love.”

My plan was foolproof: walk up to Sam casually, introduce myself with a witty remark, make him laugh, and BAM! Instant chemistry. Just as I started my approach, a gust of wind decided to blow through the park, adding a little extra flair to my entrance. I mean, I thought it was the universe helping me out. Oh, sweet, naive me.

I strutted up, all suave-like, feeling like a main character—only to catch the horrified look on his face just as he looked up at me. I blinked, totally thrown off. This wasn’t the look of someone who was about to fall head over heels for me. It was more like... someone who’d just seen a very confused bird fly straight into a wall. Not exactly the response I was hoping for.

So there I stood, silently questioning my life choices, when Sam spoke. “Uh... you have something in your hair,” he said, holding back laughter. I reached up, praying it was a small leaf, something I could gracefully flick away. Instead, my hand closed around the biggest, nastiest clump of wet leaves and twigs I’d ever seen. It was like Mother Nature herself had decided I needed to be humble.

“Oh, um, thanks,” I mumbled, trying to yank the gunk out of my hair as nonchalantly as possible. But it wasn’t budging. I tugged a bit harder, then harder still, until I ended up wrenching my head down with the sheer force of my own hand. By the time I looked up, Sam was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes. Great. My grand entrance: thoroughly ruined.

At least he laughed, as if totally charmed by me (spoiler: he wasn’t. But let me keep my delusions), I walked away, cheeks on fire. I guess I got him to notice me. But I couldn’t shake this feeling that Fate was telling me to turn back, stop my pursuit, and maybe... I don’t know, find a new crush? But I was a man on a mission. And missions don’t stop just because of some... minor tree-related mishaps!

Episode 2: The Thumb Wrestling Incident. Okay, so leaf-related embarrassment aside, I was undeterred. Next plan! I figured I’d go for something subtle and foolproof this time. Something low-stakes that couldn’t possibly go wrong. I’d read all about it in online dating guides (or maybe my dream—who knows?): the accidental touch. Nothing says “I’m secretly in love with you” like a casual graze of the hand. It’s supposed to be subtle and magical, like a little spark of chemistry igniting a slow-burn romance.

So, there we were, side by side in the library, supposedly studying. I'd made it a point to "accidentally" sit next to him because I figured proximity was key. I leaned in, ever so slightly, heart pounding, my hand poised like a love-stricken ninja. Then, with the grace of a thousand rom-com protagonists before me, I delicately reached out my fingers to brush his hand.

Except... instead of his hand, I accidentally grabbed his thumb. Like, full-on grabbed it. I froze, realizing that I had Sam's thumb trapped in what felt like a death grip. The worst part? He didn't pull away! He just... looked at me. Not in a dreamy way, mind you, but in a very confused "Dude, are you okay?" way.

"Uh... thumb wrestling?" I squeaked, desperately trying to save face, but in reality, I was already dripping in cold sweat. I gave his thumb a weak shake, which did nothing but make us both uncomfortable. "You win?" I mumbled, letting go and retreating back to my side of the table as if I hadn't just committed a new social crime: the unwanted thumb wrestling.

Sam shook his head, clearly bewildered, but to my eternal relief, he just let it go, moving right back to his textbook like I hadn't just staged the world's most awkward act of accidental hand-holding. But to be honest, at that point, my dignity was on its last thread.

Episode 3: The Puddle Hero Fiasco. After the library thumb incident, I decided it was time to step up my game. No more subtle approaches. Big moves only. So I came up with the perfect plan: the "Saved from Danger" trope. I mean, it's in all the movies! You're there, some danger looms, and you heroically save your crush, showing them how devoted and protective you are. It's like romance 101!

So the next time we were at the crosswalk after school, I saw my chance. There was a massive puddle just off the curb, and as luck would have it, a car was coming fast. It was all lining up perfectly. I imagined myself shoving Sam out of harm's way, sacrificing my own dryness to keep him safe, and then we'd laugh, soaked but in love. Beautiful stuff. I know he really isn't in danger, but this is good enough, hehe.

I saw the car speeding up, I timed my shove, and... I went for it. Except, instead of shoving him, I tripped. And not a cute little trip. No, no, no! I went full face plant into the puddle. I felt water splash up into my nose, into my ears, probably right into my brain, as I flailed like a very wet defeated fish. Sam stared down at me, his mouth agape, and I could see him trying not to laugh. But, come on, even I had to admit I looked ridiculous. When he finally offered his hand to help me up, I was the picture of soggy defeat.

"Are you okay, puddle hero?" he chuckled as he pulled me up.

I just nodded, trying to maintain any dignity I had left, which, let's be honest, was nonexistent at that point. This was supposed to be my big romantic moment, but instead, I looked like I'd just lost a fight to the kiddie pool.

Episode 4: The Galaxy Void Compliment. At this point, you'd think I would've given up. But no—if anything, my string of epic fails just convinced me that if I kept trying, I'd eventually get it right. Surely the universe owed me one romantic moment after all the embarrassment, right?

This time, I decided to try something classic: a compliment. You know, make it poetic, charming, make him feel something. So during lunch one day, I looked over at him and blurted, "Your eyes are like... the galaxy." I was trying to channel some serious Shakespeare-meets-Ryan-Gosling vibes.

He raised an eyebrow. I should have stopped there, but instead, I kept going, as one does when they're possessed by cringe. "They're... vast and... deep, like, um... like a black hole."

He blinked at me, trying to process this nonsense. "Did you... just call my eyes a black hole?"

In for a penny, in for a pound. "Yes! But in a good way! You know... like, gravitational pull and all that? It's like, you have a... a strong gravity, Sam."

He started laughing again. At this point, I was 90% sure he just thought I was a lunatic, but hey, at least he was entertained? "So, you're saying I'm a black hole and you're what? Some kind of orbit?"

"Uh... yeah?" I muttered, face blazing. Romantic orbiting, I thought miserably, trying to salvage some shred of my failed compliment.

"Well," he said, giving me a look that was somehow both kind and amused, "I guess you're my favorite orbit then." And then he just walked off, chuckling to himself, leaving me standing there like a very confused planet, still reeling from my complete lack of smoothness.

Episode ??: I Don't Like This Anymore. It was a rainy afternoon, and for once, I wasn't plotting some ridiculous scheme to impress Sam. I had accepted that I was a walking embarrassment and decided a day of avoiding him might be best for both of us. My accidental compliments, thumb wrestling, and puddle heroics had added up to one big conclusion: he was out of my league, and maybe it was time to retreat before I made things worse.

I resigned myself to hiding out in my usual corner of the library, nursing my bruised ego with a hefty book, when I felt a presence beside me. I glanced up, and there he was: Sam. And more surprisingly, he was... smiling!?

"Hey, you mind if I sit here?" he asked, looking down at me with that easy, amused smile he wore whenever I was around. I didn't get it! Did he think I was some comedy act? Or worse, a lost puppy?

"Uh, sure!" I said, my voice an octave higher than usual. I mentally smacked myself as he sat down, making my spot in the library feel like the only place in the world I wanted to be.

He set his bag on the table and leaned in just a little. I could smell his shampoo or cologne, and I lost all focus; my brain was scrambled.

“So,” he started, clearly noticing my fluster. “You’re a hard person to get to know, you know that?”

“Me? Hard to... to know?” I squeaked. Good one! Very smooth! This was going great.

“Yeah,” he chuckled as he reached into his bag. “I’ve gotta admit, you keep me guessing.”

I blinked. Keep him guessing? That was the last thing I wanted! My brain frantically tried to come up with a joke, some escape hatch out of this unexpectedly genuine moment, but I came up blank. Instead of filling the silence with nonsense, I just... didn’t. I was too flustered and overwhelmed by how he was really looking at me.

I could feel my cheeks turning the color of a ripe tomato. “I’m, um... pretty good at making a fool out of myself. So, there’s that,” I managed, staring down at the table like it held the secrets to the universe.

He chuckled, and I risked a glance up. His expression was soft, not the kind of amused pity I’d expected. “Nah,” he said, “I kind of like that about you.”

My stomach did a triple somersault. He liked that about me? What was going on? This was not how things were supposed to go. He was supposed to laugh at my flailing attempts at flirtation and then politely ignore me forever, but here he was, being nice.

I felt my mouth open and shut like a goldfish. “I... you... wait, you like that I’m a mess?”

“Yup,” he said simply, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “You’re genuine. You’re trying, even when it, uh... doesn’t go how you plan.” He raised an eyebrow, clearly hinting at the many things that hadn’t gone according to plan. “It’s kind of... refreshing.”

I was too stunned to be embarrassed. I just stared, processing the fact that not only did he not mind the sheer disaster that was my existence, but he liked it.

Finally, he leaned back, tapping his fingers on the table. “Anyway,” he continued, “I was thinking... maybe instead of trying to plan these things out, you could just... I don’t know... be yourself?”

Be myself? My brain went into full meltdown mode. How was I supposed to be myself? Myself is a disaster zone! “I don’t... I don’t know what that means,” I stammered. “I mean, you’ve seen me. I’m... pretty much the opposite of whatever ‘myself’ is supposed to be.”

“That’s not true,” he said, leaning in again. “I think you’re pretty great as you are.”

Okay, that was it. I was officially short-circuiting. My face was blazing with heat. I tried to say something, anything, but my throat had shut down. I probably looked a mix of terrified and amazed, which was just perfect, because now I was staring at him like some lovesick muppet.

“So... um, do you want to get a coffee? Or... or something?” I managed, inwardly cringing at how awkward I sounded.

Sam smiled, standing up and motioning toward the door. “Come on. It’s about time we actually spend time together that wouldn’t end in some wild, elaborate scheme, don’t you think?”

He held out a hand, and for the first time, I felt no urge to joke or break the moment. I just reached out, took his hand, and followed him out of the library, feeling—honestly? For the first time in a long time—like maybe I didn’t need a plan. There was no grand gesture or embarrassing blunders, just this quiet certainty that something real was finally unfolding.

At this point, the world decided to stop and separate in my own head. The roots from my brain expanded and weaved the world around us creating its very own... ***multiverse! Special Episode: Unlimited Story Branch***

And then it happened.

In a move so spectacularly on-brand for me, I tripped. Over what, you ask? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. One second I was walking, basking in the glow of this perfect moment, and the next, I was airborne.

“Wait, what—!” I yelled, flailing as the ground rushed to meet me.

My hand slipped out of Sam’s, and I went down like a cartoon character slipping on a banana peel. Except instead of a graceful recovery or a romantic rescue, I landed face-first on the tile with an echoing thud.

For a moment, the world was silent—except for the ringing in my ears and the distant sound of my pride shattering into a million pieces.

“Uh... are you okay?” Sam’s voice broke through, tentative and awkward, but I couldn’t bear to look up.

“Yup! Totally fine!” I mumbled into the floor, trying to convince myself this wasn’t happening. “Just, uh... giving the ground a hug.”

There was a pause, and then—oh no—he laughed. Not just a chuckle, but a full-on, can’t-hold-it-back laugh.

“Sorry, I—” He tried to stop, but it was no use. “It’s just... you really committed to that fall.”

I groaned, peeling myself off the floor and avoiding his gaze. My knees were scraped, my face was hot with embarrassment, and my soul had left my body entirely.

“Well,” I muttered, brushing myself off as gracefully as one can after kissing the ground, “at least I’m consistent, right?”

Sam grinned, still fighting back laughter. “Consistent is one way to put it.”

I wanted to melt into the floor and disappear forever, but no. The floor had betrayed me once already—I wasn’t giving it the satisfaction again.

As Sam reached out to steady me, I swatted his hand away. “I’m good! I’ve got it!” I snapped, wobbling dramatically as I tried to reclaim some shred of dignity.

“Sure you do,” he said, smirking as I hobbled toward the exit.

By the time we stepped outside, the moment was long gone, replaced by a lingering awkwardness and the distinct feeling that I had just speed-ran my way to the worst possible ending.

Sam walked me to the curb, his usual easy smile firmly back in place. “Well... this was fun,” he said, his voice tinged with amusement.

“Fun. Yep. That’s exactly what this was,” I deadpanned, my cheeks still burning.

As he turned to leave, I groaned internally. I didn’t need a plan? Ha! Maybe next time, I’d skip the romance altogether and invest in knee pads instead.

**THE END... No... That's quite not right. That's not real. Maybe a different ending will work
(insert static effect that shows it's not real. Yes that's how my mind works don't judge me)**

He held out a hand, and for the first time, I felt no urge to joke or break the moment. I just reached out, took his hand, and followed him out of the library, feeling—honestly? For the first time in a long time—like maybe I didn’t need a plan. No grand gestures, no embarrassing blunders, just this quiet certainty that something real was finally unfolding.

Or at least, it was—until my foot caught on absolutely nothing like Fate just had a grudge on me as I don’t know? I tripped on air or something, and I went down like a sack of bricks.

Before I could process the humiliation, everything went dark.

I woke up with a groggy, pounding head and a blinding white light assaulting my eyes. My brain tried to piece together where I was, and why everything felt like it had been unplugged and rebooted. Slowly, the antiseptic smell and sterile environment registered: I was in the clinic.

“Ah, you’re awake!” came a cheerful voice from my left. I turned—too quickly, regretting it instantly—and saw the nurse smiling at me as she jotted something down on a clipboard.

“What… what happened?” I croaked, my throat dry.

“Well,” she began, smirking a little too much for my liking, “you had a bit of a moment. Slipped, hit the ground hard, and knocked yourself out cold. Gave everyone quite the show, actually.”

I groaned, throwing an arm over my face. Of course I did. “Oh God,” I muttered, the humiliation already setting in. “Did anyone see?”

The nurse let out a laugh that only made me more nervous. “Oh, honey, *everyone* saw. And by everyone, I mean the entire hallway.”

My mortification was already at DEFCON 1, but then she continued. “Though what really had people talking was how that boy—what’s his name? Oh, Sam!—carried you here like it was the last scene of some romantic drama.”

My heart stopped. “Wait… what?”

“You heard me.” She chuckled again, clearly enjoying my misery. “You were out cold, and Sam just scooped you up like it was nothing. Bridal style, no less. Walk you straight here, calm as anything. And let me tell you—he had *everyone* in that hallway frozen. It was like the parting of the Red Sea. People didn’t even *breathe* as he walked by. Honestly, it was like he was moving in slow motion.”

I stared at her, my brain short-circuiting. Bridal style? Sam carried me? In front of *everyone*? My thoughts spun in every direction: pure humiliation, bafflement, and—against my better judgment—a tiny flicker of giddiness.

“You’re kidding,” I finally managed, though I knew from her amused grin that she was very much not.

“Wish I was. It was something out of a movie,” she said, shrugging as if this were completely normal. “Anyway, you’re fine. Just a little bump on the head. Maybe get some rest—and next time, watch where you’re walking.”

She patted my shoulder and left the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I buried my face in my hands, feeling my cheeks burn hotter than the sun. I'd *completely* missed the moment. The whole world got to see Sam being the ultimate romantic lead, and I was unconscious for all of it. Of course I was.

Now I couldn't decide if I was more frustrated or flustered. On one hand, I wanted to crawl under a rock for the rest of eternity. On the other hand, the mental image of Sam carrying me through a hallway of stunned onlookers like some sort of knight-in-shining-armor was doing things to my brain that I was definitely not ready to unpack.

Was this a win? A loss? Both? I honestly had no idea. But one thing was for sure—I was *never* living this down.

THE END... I can't have that as an ending! That's more of a loss than anything. None of this will happen, I will defeat fate itself right here right now! With the power of love and maybe friendship, I will conquer the tides that go against my will for this moment!

He held out a hand, and for the first time, I felt no urge to joke or break the moment. I just reached out, took his hand, and followed him out of the library, feeling—honestly? For the first time in a long time—like maybe I didn't need a plan. No grand gestures, no embarrassing blunders, just this quiet certainty that something real was finally unfolding.

I was so caught up in the moment, so busy telling myself this was it, that I didn't even see the "Wet Floor" sign in front of me. In true me-fashion, I stepped right onto that slick patch, my foot sliding out like I'd just stepped onto a banana peel. Before I knew it, I was mid-fall, arms flailing in the most unromantic way possible.

Except... the impact never came. Two strong arms caught me, holding me steady as I hovered in some bizarre half-fall position, staring wide-eyed up into Sam's face. This was the most classic romance trope out there—a literal catch. And yet, it felt real.

I looked up, cheeks burning, heart thumping so loud I was sure he could hear it. He just smiled down at me, amusement dancing in his eyes. "You okay there, hero?" he murmured, not letting go.

"Y-yeah," I stammered, realizing my hands were on his shoulders, his around my waist. "Just... wasn't watching where I was going."

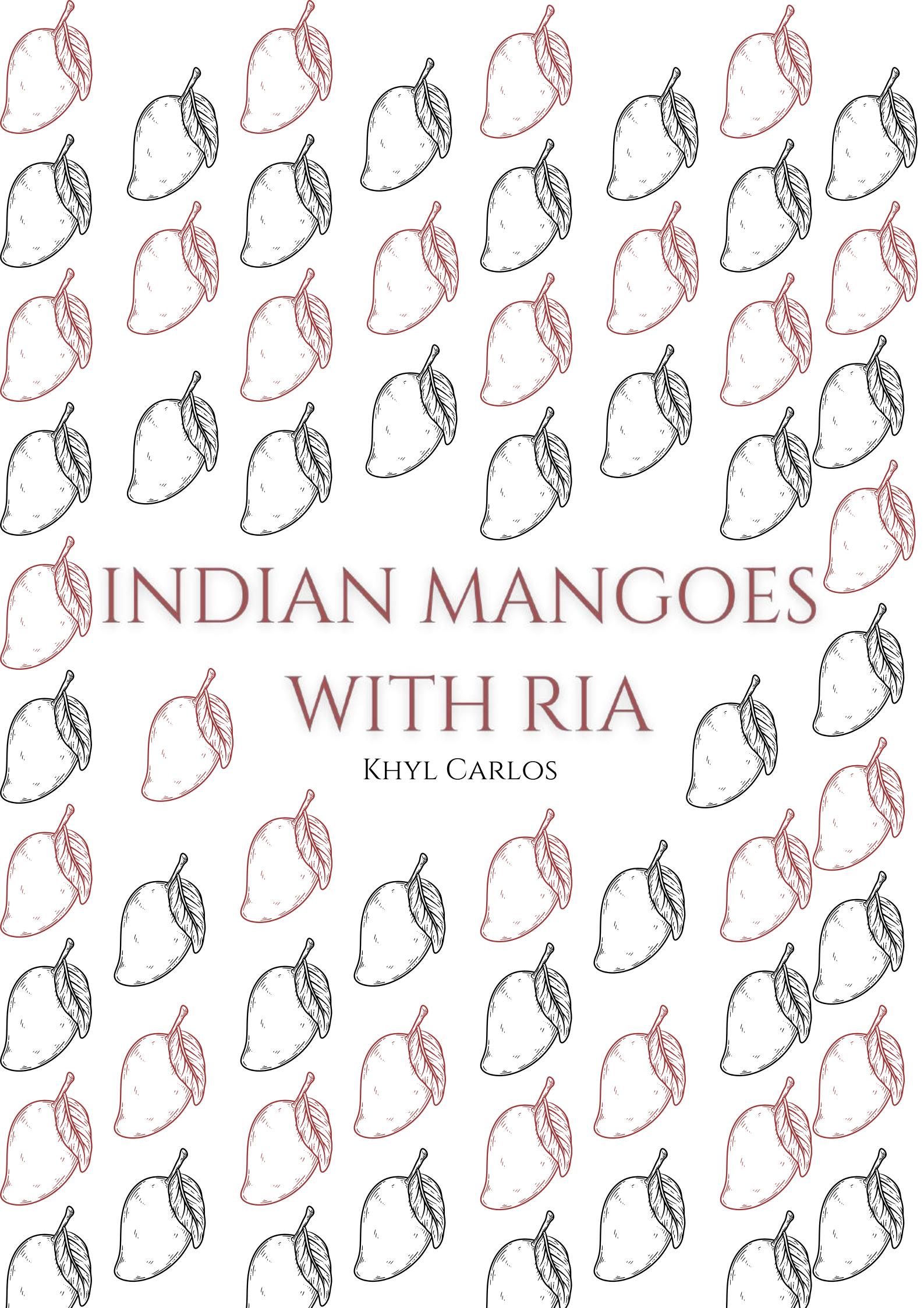
"That's kind of a theme with you, isn't it?" he teased softly, his gaze steady. "Charging ahead without watching out for wet floors—or big puddles—or... giant clumps of leaves."

I laughed, shaking my head. "I... I guess so," I mumbled, grinning up at him, flustered.

His eyes softened, his grip loosening just a bit, but he didn't let go. "Good," he said quietly. "I wouldn't want you to change, you know? Not a single thing."

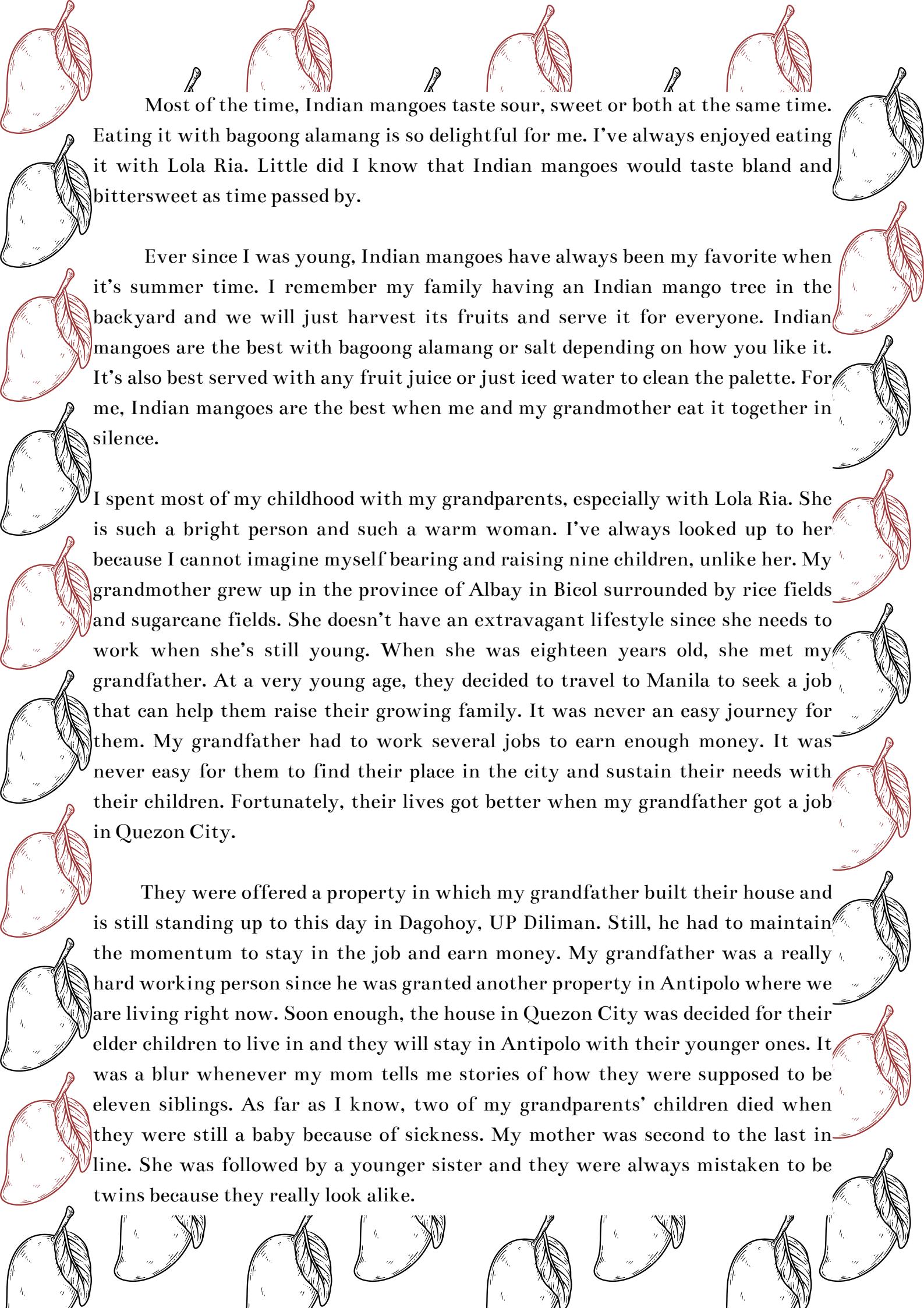
And in that moment, it was just us, suspended in this impossible, wonderful moment. No blunders, no mental notes or strategies—just the simplest truth: I was completely, undeniably, at bliss. And for the first time, that was all I wanted.

THE END (or is it?)



INDIAN MANGOES WITH RIA

KHYL CARLOS



Most of the time, Indian mangoes taste sour, sweet or both at the same time.

Eating it with bagoong alamang is so delightful for me. I've always enjoyed eating it with Lola Ria. Little did I know that Indian mangoes would taste bland and bittersweet as time passed by.

Ever since I was young, Indian mangoes have always been my favorite when it's summer time. I remember my family having an Indian mango tree in the backyard and we will just harvest its fruits and serve it for everyone. Indian mangoes are the best with bagoong alamang or salt depending on how you like it. It's also best served with any fruit juice or just iced water to clean the palette. For me, Indian mangoes are the best when me and my grandmother eat it together in silence.

I spent most of my childhood with my grandparents, especially with Lola Ria. She is such a bright person and such a warm woman. I've always looked up to her because I cannot imagine myself bearing and raising nine children, unlike her. My grandmother grew up in the province of Albay in Bicol surrounded by rice fields and sugarcane fields. She doesn't have an extravagant lifestyle since she needs to work when she's still young. When she was eighteen years old, she met my grandfather. At a very young age, they decided to travel to Manila to seek a job that can help them raise their growing family. It was never an easy journey for them. My grandfather had to work several jobs to earn enough money. It was never easy for them to find their place in the city and sustain their needs with their children. Fortunately, their lives got better when my grandfather got a job in Quezon City.

They were offered a property in which my grandfather built their house and is still standing up to this day in Dagohoy, UP Diliman. Still, he had to maintain the momentum to stay in the job and earn money. My grandfather was a really hard working person since he was granted another property in Antipolo where we are living right now. Soon enough, the house in Quezon City was decided for their elder children to live in and they will stay in Antipolo with their younger ones. It was a blur whenever my mom tells me stories of how they were supposed to be eleven siblings. As far as I know, two of my grandparents' children died when they were still a baby because of sickness. My mother was second to the last in line. She was followed by a younger sister and they were always mistaken to be twins because they really look alike.

We have a really big family but as time passed by, my four uncles became two and my four aunts became one. You know the typical family bad blood issues? That's where our family grew smaller. Of course, it affected me even when I was still young since I saw my grandparents and even my mom get stressed and disappointed about what is happening. Nevertheless, it did not affect how we chose to be my grandparents' side and continue life with them even though the family grew smaller.

I grew up mostly with my grandparents since my parents are working. Their breaks are only their days off and they make sure that they take us out to eat and go grocery shopping together with my grandparents. There was never a dull moment shared by me and my grandparents, especially with Lola Ria. She cooks really good spicy Bicol express which is why my spice tolerance is really high growing up. She tells stories about her life in the province and she keeps on saying that her grandchildren are lucky that we are not plowing the fields and getting our skin burnt. She says she's happy that they were able to achieve this life because of hard work and passion and we should also work hard if we want something to happen. One time, I asked my parents to buy me a bracelet-making set. I shared it with my grandmother and we spent our afternoons in the living room making cute bracelets. She even compared the plastic materials to what's her version of bracelet-making in the province which are santan flowers. When we get tired, we will have a siesta and I will lay beside her. This is the reason why I sleep during afternoons too. She said that my height will increase but no matter how many sleeps I get, my height is stuck at 5'1 even now.

Waking up after the siesta is my favorite since she will make merienda. One merienda that she doesn't have to cook are the Indian mangoes with bagoong alamang. This is my favorite merienda with her. It always feels so warm and calm when we're eating Indian mangoes unpeeled by my grandfather. She would dip the slice of the mango in the bagoong alamang and sit in silence. One time, I asked her why she's not saying anything when we're eating and she just said that Indian mangoes remind her so much of Bicol and her parents. She loves living in Quezon City and in Antipolo but she misses the wind and silence in Bicol. She misses seeing the fireflies in the rice fields at night. Though there are still fireflies here in Antipolo, the breeze of the wind in the province cannot replace the wind here. Eating Indian mangoes with her made me feel things that I haven't experienced before like the wind that she's yearning for, my great grandparents, and the

fireflies in the rice fields.

Lola Ria's life was never the same after she was diagnosed with diabetes. Days in the hospital would turn to weeks, then months. When we would think that she'd be alright after being confined, everything will be the opposite and she will be rushed back again. I was so confused and scared at that time. We were lucky enough to spend one more Christmas and New Year with her before she died. It was not easy for all of us how it happened. She was full of hope and she's looking forward to living more. We needed a lot of time to adjust since it was not easy at all. There were times where I would see my mother folding my grandmother's clothes even though she just did it the other day. The ambiance of the house changed. It did not feel the same as if a big chunk was taken out of it. It took time for me to see Bicol express served at our dining table as well as Indian mangoes and bagoong alamang. It also took time for me to resume my siestas because I have to do it alone now with no one by my side.

The adult me now can do nothing but to write about our happy memories so they will not vanish. I hope my Lola Ria knows that whenever I eat Indian mangoes with bagoong alamang I can see myself in her and how she yearns for her hometown because I am now yearning for her. I am yearning for her voice, her presence, the way she would call me to eat merienda, the way she would brush my hair, I am yearning for her stories that I never get tired of, I am yearning for her spicy Bicol express that trained my taste buds to be high in spice tolerance, and I am yearning for our siestas.

She made my childhood worthwhile and fruitful. My mother always says that she's strict to them but she's totally different towards her grandchildren. I hope she knows that everytime I see Indian mangoes on the street, I always remember her. The taste of sourness, sweetness and saltiness reminds me of how much she misses Bicol and I wish we had time to visit there with her one more time. I hope she was able to see the fireflies on the rice fields and feel the wind once more.

Doing all these without her feels so different because it feels like a piece is missing and that missing piece will never come back again. I hope she knows that I've written so much about her story, our story, in so many ways possible. I've dedicated poems for her, short stories, and essays because in these simple ways, I

am able to make her feel alive. I hope she's feeling the wind in Bicol again and seeing the fireflies as long as she wants.

Eating Indian mangoes is still enjoyable for me. It's just sometimes, waves of different relish start to splash on my taste buds. There are times when it tastes bland because of yearning. Most of the time, it's bittersweet because of the regrets and memories that I cannot rebuild and bring back.

you know,
i'm something
of a rebel myself!
migofermin

“Bakit mansanas? Kakagatin ko ba?” I said to my father as he held a sliced apple, prepping to pierce my ear for the first time. He laughed at me. Apparently, it was meant to be placed behind my earlobe to keep the stud steady when he’d start piercing and not for me to bite down to distract myself from the pain. Old school, he said.

The old man was ready. His left hand holding the apple behind my earlobe and the right holding the stud. I was nervous as hell, breathing heavily with my eyes closed. I’ve never done anything like this in my life. I was always the good boy that did things by the book. The people-pleaser that walked around eggshells. The homebody that never went outside their comfort zone.

But on a random April night in 2021,
I was the 20-year-old rebel getting their ears pierced by their father.

1... 2... 3... tuk! Putangina!

The deed was done. My ear hurt like hell, but it was so worth it.

I opened my freshly teared-up eyes and scurried to the mirror to witness the aftermath. I look at the stud, aching, and bleeding, and then at myself. I was in awe. “Lagot ka sa nanay mo”, my father chuckled. She would hate this, but I didn’t care. I looked so good. I felt so good. I felt as though I came of age way more than I did when I got circumcised at 10 — and with way less blood!

That night I went to sleep with a smile on my face. I felt like a whole new person. Something shifted in me and I felt I could take over the world. I was ready to experience all the things I wanted to experience without fear. I could already imagine the reaction on my mother’s face when she saw my piercing. She wouldn’t be furious. She wasn’t that controlling, but oh she would be so annoyed. In typical rebel fashion, I just couldn’t wait to see her face of disapproval the next day when I get back to her house, all planned out and scheduled accordingly.

I’d describe my mother as “maarte” to say the least, and very ambitious too. She always made sure that she presented well. She’ll always tell me that back in her college days, she’d never be seen wearing the same outfit twice (I doubt). Looking at her, you could tell she loves watching Heart Evangelista. She also makes sure that she gets what she wants no matter what. She was a kikay with a goal, kind of like Cher in Clueless. Her mindset was, of course, projected onto me, her good little mama’s boy.

My father on the other hand was the opposite. “Jologs” my mother would say. A rakista with tattoos scattered all over his body and lives by “comfort over style”. He dressed like your typical metalhead dad: black graphic band shirts and baggy below-the-knee cargo shorts. He has piercings, which he pierced his ears all by himself way back in his teenage years (old school), so it was no problem when I asked him to pierce mine.

As for me, I’d say my style was picked out for me by both my mother and father. Ever since I was a toddler, my mother would dress me up as her version of a good little well-behaved boy. I was boxed in, “Mukhang LaSallian”, she would say, with a polo shirt tucked into khaki shorts. My father didn’t have much of a say as long as I was still presented as masculine. It was only until I reached my “emo phase”, the kind that listened to Paramore, Fall Out Boy, and Panic! At the Disco; the essentials for the angst teen.

I’d mix and match my parents’ respective styles, with each piece of clothing from one parent annoying the other. It’s still so odd thinking about the idea of how my parents ever got together. It doesn’t matter now because they’ve since separated.

While my style was predetermined for me, I still wanted to break down the expected male-presenting fashion confining me. As a queer person that’s closeted from his family, I suppressed so much of my femininity inside of a box, a four-walled spaced where I did what was expected of me. I was dissatisfied, further igniting the desire of my inner rebel, to rage against the heteronormativity of it all...

...by piercing my ear!

I wanted to explore my queerness outside that box. I wanted to see the light! I needed myself in ways that I never thought I could, especially in how I express myself. Liking men wasn’t enough, I wanted to break free from the societal expectations of gender placed on me. Resisting gender conformity was crucial to the plot, and piercing my ear was the first step.

Yes, I know it’s leagues away from revolutionary. But as a queer boy living in a house where the slightest expression of femininity gets policed, piercing my ear was like me throwing the first brick at Stonewall, I think.

Morning came. The sunlight elegantly shone through my bedroom window, the birds merrily caroled in the background, my blanket cozily ruffled on my bed, and my earlobe agonizingly bled from the pain. I sprayed rubbing alcohol on it to

disinfect it as my father advised, which I now realize is something you shouldn't do because aside from it being incredibly painful, it also dries and irritates the wound. Oh well. Old school.

I gleefully went down the stairs, still processing the fact that I actually pushed through with piercing my ear. It felt surreal. I sat at the dining room table with my sister, waiting for my mother and stepfather, with my ear still hurting. As we waited I started thinking about the different earrings I'd get once my piercing healed. I also started planning when I'd get my other ear pierced, and if I'd get double earrings for both ears.

My stepfather walked into the dining room and I greeted him. He sees my piercing, smiles, and then laughs. "Hon!", he called to my mother, "Tignan mo si Migo". My mother walks in and stares at me wondering what she should be looking at. She examines me for

about 5-7 seconds, scanning my face to see something different.

Her eyes finally make contact with my piercing.

"Ay nako", she says in the most passive-aggressive Filipino mother voice as she sits down.

I was hoping for a bigger reaction, kind of like Toni Collette's iconic dinner table rage scene in *Hereditary*, but I guess I was having [insert anti-climatic moment in a film]

]The build-up fizzled out, but hey, at least she didn't like it! She said there was nothing she could do about it, it was already there. "Ang ayos-ayos ng pananamit mo dati, 'tas ngayon para kang tatay mo", she said jokingly, which I knew was half-meant. I just chuckled and smiled, but in typical Filipino parent fashion, they just had to slide in an unnecessary comment, "Dapat isang piercing lang, alam mo naman siguro anong iisipin ng ibang tao pag dalawa ang hikaw ng lalaki?" (In other words, one is enough, or else you'll look gay!).

That annoyed me, but I wasn't surprised. Instead, it made me want to get more just to spite them, which I already did because I now have 4 piercings on my ears with plans to get more (what if I got a septum piercing as well?). On the bright side, the rebel, hungry for parental disapproval, was fed and satiated. I brushed off their comment and ate my breakfast, happily irritated.

The “gay” side comment wasn’t new to me. Growing up while exploring my queerness meant that I was met with judgment every step of the way. Everything I did like watching *The Little Mermaid* on our DVD player on repeat and even the things that I did not do, like playing basketball with other boys my age, was an opportunity for me to be reminded by my parents that what I did was odd and wrong.

The younger me took all of these reminders to heart, straight to the core, questioning my identity and self-worth each time. Eventually, I did shove parts of myself down that box, to please not only my parents but the people around me. I stopped watching “girly” shows, I started trying to act more “masculine”, and I even convinced myself, for a while, that I was “straight” (this didn’t last long; thank you junior high crushes!). The heteronormative agenda shoved all that is queer in its path and I was down, making out with the floor.

I sometimes wish that the younger me was more stubborn like other queer people in my life who were able to stand their ground, living their truth. But I also try to remind myself that he was just a kid doing the best he could. One day he’ll find comfort in the fact that he’ll be able to have the courage to rebel when he gets older.

Aside from comfort, when he sees me now his jaw would drop seeing me with my pierced ears, wearing androgynous clothes, and a face beat with makeup! He would have never imagined in a million years that he’d attain the courage to live life a little more dangerously. Bittersweet as it may sound, he’ll still be sad to know that I still hide my queerness from my parents. I was out of the box, but I’m still inside one that’s even bigger.

I’ve yet to reach that point where I can be outside that box and share my joy with them, but for now, I’ll share it with my loving friends, cousins, and peers. Queer or straight, they don’t give a fuck about what I wear. They celebrate my rebellion with me, encouraging me to keep living life the way I want to, and that fills me with enough power to keep strutting on.

I admit, there’s still so much fear that I have yet to confront and so many expectations I’ve yet to defy. I was so used to being trapped inside a box, being someone I didn’t connect with, that I didn’t think I could leave it. But of course, that was until I decided to get my ears pierced on that random April night in 2021.

Now, as I wake up every morning and look at these little pieces of metal on my ears, I am reminded of my small act of defiance. In that moment I see my courage. If I could pierce my ear, I could pierce through the box that confines me, with each puncture allowing the light to come in little by little.

What lies beyond? I'm not sure. Actually, I'm still a little scared, but that's okay.

I'm ready to embrace the light, whether it's blindingly hot, or comfortingly warm.

I'd like to think it's warm.

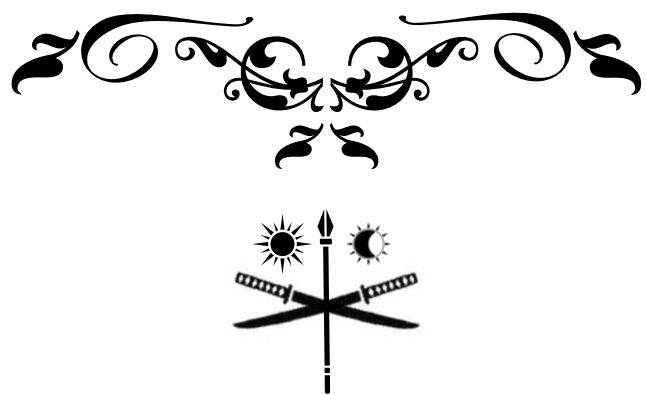




Selected Works from the Arunne Revolution

Volume 1: Prelude (1563-1585)

by An dom Itwikh (ThC: 001-09831)



Selected Works from the Arunne Revolution

Volume 1: Prelude (1563-1585)

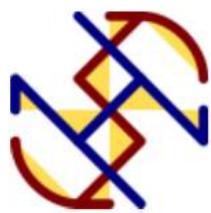
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Resources

Figure 1. A Topographic Map of Analeyar and Surrounding Islands



Figure 2. A Political Map of Arunya



Introduction: A Brief History of the Late Empire of Arunya

The Arunne Revolution was a period of immense societal and military upheaval that was emblematic of the second wave of revolutions on the Threadworld of Melarikor.

A first wave of what can be considered democratic or otherwise ‘modernizing’ revolutions had already taken place in this world roughly 50 years prior, and coincided with the beginning of what we would call an industrial era where magical and divine constructs were employed in a massive upscaling of economic and military activity. This wave ended with a seeming victory for conservative social forces, but at the cost of irreversibly transforming societies around the world.

Arunya enters the story sometime within this first wave, when revolutionary powers attempted to intervene in a domestic conflict. Before this, the island nation had been an isolationist backwater with its own magical systems separate from the mainland. The ruling government was a military dictatorship that had overridden the Imperial system a century prior, following a period of civil strife known as the Feudatory Period¹. The transformations that would ensue following the first foreign interventions, resulted in a restoration of the rightful imperial government, but at the cost of irrevocably setting into motion the forces that would erupt into revolution only a few decades later.

For the uninitiated to begin with the Arunne Revolution of 1589, we must cover much ground. Four decades of it, in fact, which we will attempt to cover in this brief timeline.

The Late Rizhelar Tayishunate (Late 1400s - 1563 EA ²)	
1549	The Emperor Azhima III dies and is succeeded by Arima IV. The manifestation of imperial divinity - the Imperial Seal is taken by the Tayishun ³ Rimaden Zhiyarin, depriving the Imperial Government of its ability to perform vital magical rites for the governance of the Empire.
1552	The High Princess Azhina and a cohort of her supporters remove Arima IV in a coup and begin a power struggle against Tayishun Zhiyarin and his faction of southern nobles. The ensuing conflict escalates into an international incident and foreign gunboats and mages bombard the coast until both parties agree to a peace in 1553. Azhina retains the throne as Emperor Azhina III and the Tayishunate retains the Imperial Seal.
1554.	Emperor Azhina issues the Shiyakan Edict, officially ending Arunya’s international isolation and allowing foreigners to settle in major cities ⁴ . A race to modernize begins between the Tayishunate and the Imperial Government, with the north supporting the Emperor and the south backing the Tayishun. Seirin remains neutral, but stockpiles its own weapons.

¹ The “Tayashinya Shigadan”, an intense period of chaotic warlord rule

² All years are reckoned using the local EA (Era Aridannlar) system, counting the number of years from the founding of the Empire and its first Imperial dynasty.

³ Tayishun being a contraction of Tarashin Ishunnlar roughly translating to “Supreme Commander of the Pacification Armies”. Usage of the title dated almost back a millennium but by the 1000s, it held no legal command authority and was instead an honorary title conferred by weak imperial governments upon the de facto military rulers of the country.

⁴ Said cities included Arsa, Eriyin, Erkos, Hirlin, Herad, and the imperial capital Arunar

1563	Tayishun Rimaden dies and is succeeded by Tayishun Kinuma amid rising tensions within the Tayishunate court. The northerners take advantage of the chaos and mobilize a small but formidable modernized army before marching south to Arunar. Azhina receives the Tayishun's resignation and the Imperial Seal is returned. Modernization efforts are refocused in the south, while Azhina begins a concerted effort to reduce the northern lords' autonomy.
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The Slinging (1566-1578)

1566	The nobility ⁵ of the north riot in opposition to the Emperor's reforms and the continuing campaign of modernization. Fiends ⁶ become commonplace in the north due to the unrest. Seirin declares its independence as a restored Kingdom of Seirin ⁷ .
1567	Emperor Azhina travels north to negotiate with the rebels, now calling themselves the Slingers ⁸ . She is instead executed with the help of a powerful fiend. She is succeeded by her son, Adarin I. A hastily-mustered Imperial Army is wiped out by Seirin and Slinger forces at Irilin. The newly-enthroned Emperor Adarin I and his brother Prince Anaras flee and seek aid abroad in Halren ⁹ .
1568	The Slinger Army marches on the sacred capital city, Arunar. The southern nobility plan a retreat to Arsa to regroup, a dissenting faction of nobles choose to stand and fight in Arunar. The peasants and townspeople ¹⁰ of Arunar, traditionally prohibited from bearing weapons, take up arms in defense of their city. The rest of the south sees similar spontaneous risings. The Common Armies are born amid the long and bloody Siege of Arunar.
1570	The Emperor Adarin I and his entourage return to Arunya, with a Halren consort ¹¹ and army in tow, marking the first time in 300 years that foreign arms march on the mainland. With their help, the weary Slinger army is routed. The north is scoured as vengeance. Seirin is pacified by Prince Anaras and annexed back into Arunya as an autonomous vassal.
1571	The High Prince Ariyus is born to Adarin I. Peace is made uneasy by the tensions between the victorious coalition of armed southern commoners, their wary liege lords, and the Imperial Government's foreign backers.
1578	The Ten Tragic Days. Emperor Adarin I dies suddenly. The foreign queen regent places Ariyus on the throne with the support of radicals in the Common Army. Prince Anaras, with a smaller but faster force, launches a coup before Ariyus can bind to the Seal. He kills the empress dowager, cloisters Prince Ariyus, and takes the throne as Emperor Anaras II. The Imperial Seal goes missing during the coup. The Common Army is halved in strength, and sent as mercenaries to fight abroad.

⁵ The Shirishin, one of the three social classes of Arunya (the others being the Commoners and the Clergy) , and the only one allowed to bear arms

⁶ Fiends or Zarashid are magical corporeal entities unique to Arunya, and are a physical manifestation of negative emotions such as discontent and deprivation. More intense and more widespread negativity creates more powerful fiends. The nobility are capable of fighting them off, but more powerful fiends require exorcism by clerics.

⁷ Seirin as a separate polity was last independent in the late 1000s

⁸ From their early practice of slingng debris at government offices and shrines

⁹ A country to Arunya's south and its closest foreign contact with which it has had a long history of animosity and trade, despite the Arunne inclination towards isolationism and xenophobia

¹⁰ The Commoners or Rorunin, another of Arunya's social classes and forming the majority of its population

¹¹ Disparagingly referred to as the "Desert Queen"

The Last Emperor (1584-1589)	
1584	Tensions between conservative and modernist nobles in Arsa leads to an attempted pogrom against foreigners in the city, which escalates into civil war within the city between rival political factions.
1585	The Imperial Seal is recovered amid an attempted uprising by foreign revolutionaries in support of Prince Ariyus. Emperor Anaras II dies in the fighting in Arunar. His eldest son ascends the throne as Emperor Anayas III. A dam in the Arunar basin is destroyed by the revolutionaries in one last desperate move, devastating the region and setting in motion a famine that would last for years in the breadbasket of the south.
1586	Due to the escalating chaos in the capital city, private security forces band together as the City Guard. The Common Army returns from its deployment abroad, a hardened and liberalized fighting force.
1587	Emperor Anayas marries a northern noblewoman, reigniting tensions between north and south. Prince Ariyus, now a student in the capital, becomes the standard-bearer for the opposition to the Imperial Government.
1588	A confrontation begins between Ariyus and Anayas. Ariyus is backed by the southern liberal nobility, urbanites around the Empire, the students of Arunar, the City Guard, and the Kingdom of Seirin. Anayas is backed by the Imperial Bureaucracy, the northern nobility, and foreign funding. He secures the support of the Common Army by promising radical reforms, ending the contention in his favor. Ariyus is forced into exile.
1589	Emperor Anayas fails to deliver on his promises. An academic walk-out in Arunar escalates into a general strike by all sectors of the population. Anayas is forced to cede absolute power to an elected government as Halren declares war to contain the revolution. Anayas attempts to flee abroad, but is caught. He and his family are executed by the end of the year. The Arunne Revolution has begun.
The Arunne Revolution (1589-1605) – Continued in Volume 2 –	

Volume 1: Prelude

The Shiyakan Edict and the Imperial Restoration

Winter 1552. Ashida¹² Kendarin¹³ lay on her deathbed. The past ten years of her life had seen her become an ideologue for the resurgent Imperial regime in its fight to reassert its power against the increasingly inept Tayishunate government. In the process; however, she defined a new ideological basis for imperial power that even the succeeding Emperors would prove unable to fully embrace.

Her new formulation (known as the Kendarin School) was designed in reaction to the decaying conservative status quo of the Tayishunate. She blended elements of old theories on imperial power, feudal-era constructions of national identity and foreign revolutionary rhetoric to create a potent mix of ideas that could awaken a nation. For this reason, her backers were always hesitant to let her fully loose in life. Strangely enough, it was in death that her ideals were able to reach full bloom.

This is an excerpt of her final masterpiece, “Contemplations upon falling silver leaves”

Who are the Arunne People?

It is said names carry the truth of men, and therein lies power; just as the Tayishun's title is a potent lie and they are weakened by it, the name Arunne carries its own mystery.

The character Run literally means ‘people’, and the sacred glyph A- sets something apart, sanctifies it. We are thus, **the people**. The people of what? For what?

When I pondered this question in the past, I was drawn to study, to serve, to seek out our people and find them where they were. I found the farmer toiling in their field, the priest in their rites, the warrior in battle, the Emperor upon their throne. Is it us being in our places that make us who we are?

Yet why does the farmer starve amid bountiful fields, the priest cloister himself while fiends roam our streets, the noble fatten himself in peace while the people suffer?

We are a people, and are only a people as we are bound together in service, equal in service. Just as men and women stand equal only upon our isle and only upon our isle, all men who bind themselves in service stand equal under our heaven. As long as the desire to serve their countrymen under heaven stirs in a man's heart, they are Arunne!

This is what the Tayishun and his cronies have forgotten. That beyond loyalty to our clans, beyond the blood in our veins, beyond our being *others* to the mainland, all Arunne men serve. And it is in forgetting this that they have

¹² Ashida, meaning “high servitor” was a title awarded to the highest members of the Service (the clergy, the third of the Arunne social classes), Kendarin received her title despite her not being a member of any major Service Order

¹³ A contraction of her full name Kenyaden Dashirin, a form of reference given to her posthumously.

lost, that they have weakened our nation and made it ripe for harvest by the godless foreigners.

Their fractious court is torn apart by self-serving ambition, driven by the lie that they and they alone are somehow above the rest of us, above the Emperor, and above heaven itself. Their corpse of a warrior-king rots upon his stolen throne, barely clinging on day by day in service to his broken regime, in service to only his family and its legacy.

Thus we stand united, in service to our people, our nation, our Emperor. Only so are we just, and only so is the world put to peace.

So I call for all good Arunne men to rouse from their slumber. The class system that hangs over us has been corrupted, made into shackles that bind us to our graves, rather than with our fellow man. Surely once the rightful order under heaven is restored, our shackles will fall and we will all serve in freedom!

Emperor Azhina, in one final act of patronage and friendship, endorsed this final tract. She is said to have whispered to her courtiers, “She will drag us down to the grave with her with this.” Indeed, the Ashida’s words would ring in the halls of revolutionaries and loyalists alike, inspiring everyone from the most ardent defenders of the old social regime to firebrand radicals fighting among themselves to shape the future of a nation.

The Slinging, the Common Army, and the Siege of Arunar

Summer 1568. This piece was a letter written by a young noblewoman from Arunar at the time of the Siege of Arunar, she had been studying at schools newly opened to the nobility by the modernizing government. She was trapped in the city when she heard news of the Emperor's death and the rebellion known as the Slinging began. Her family were northern nobility who were initially loyal to the imperial government, but this mattered little when the siege began and the Common Army began watching others of her northern descent with suspicion.

Dearest Sister Izima, may this letter find you well amid the treachery of thee and thine against our people.

They I once called family have betrayed everything we stood for, including you. Are you so arrogant as to assume that you will escape heaven's wrath for what you have done? Reading your letters fills me with nothing but purest odium and shame. The leadership of you and your Slingers say that you did not intend to kill the Emperor, our Emperor, but you refuse to bow to a trial by your peers and instead besiege our holy capital. Letters will not solve anything any longer, sister.

They should have been your first recourse before you called your banners. Have you any shame, to seek justice when you have struck the first blow against us and ours? Gone are your wits that you have chosen to take up with them. Mad are those who have risen against everything our nation stands for.

The mercy you seek is no longer ours to give, in any case. Common will and duty hold sway in Arunya now, emboldened by your actions. Armies have risen where once there were meek commoners, taking on the duty that you have shirked - to protect, to serve, to be brave. Can they win? Not a shred of doubt is within me. Triumph is within their grasp. They will shape our future. Will is the only force that drives them. To destroy is their only goal against those their will drives them against. The Empire stands upon their will, is driven by it.

We nobles know where our loyalties lie, with the Empire, with the people who would fight for it. Must there be any doubt about that? Run is the only advice I can give you, sister.

If I ever come upon you or your allies, will have no mercy in my heart. Love has had its day. You near yours.

Long live the Common Armies. Long live the Princes in Exile. Long live the Empire.

Your ever-loyal sister,
Ezina

Hidden through delicate lines of magical ink that only revealed itself to others of her blood was hastily scrawled: "Beloved Izi, seek truth where sentences begin." My rough transliteration attempts to preserve the order as much as possible, but I have also marked the intended reading for clarity.

This letter was found nailed to Lady Ezina's head in a public square in Arunar, the ink seal that hid the words broken for all to see.

The Scouring of the North and the Expeditionary Force

Autumn 1570. This was a missive written by a Wardsman of the Common Army to his superior reporting on the status of his mission. A Wardsman, typically a Common officer, commands a Ward of 1,000 men under an army led by a [Lord] Commander.

TO THE LORD COMMANDER OF THE THIRD ARMY
ATTN: DRILLMASTER OF THE THIRD ARMY

MISSION REPORT

In accordance with the Lord Commander's orders, Ward 213 has entered the Biruntar Valley as of the ninth day of the feast weeks. Ten villages were completely razed along the way, following the full requisition of their supplies. Villagers and refugees were driven in the direction of Tavizhan, in accordance with general directives.

No enemy formations were encountered en route. Resistance was similarly minimal. Forward scouts; however, indicate that an enemy force has gathered at Tavizhan. In addition, local guides predict an unexpectedly early winter. Sources in the city indicate that tensions are already rising with our army's approach. Arunar may yet be avenged.

I have set up camp across the Birun River from the city while I wait for further orders from her lordship.

With this, I would respectfully like to follow up on the winter uniforms promised to the soldiers upon their mustering the previous year. They have fought the cold long and hard in their sandals and summer coats, but illness has begun to take its toll on our soldiers as well.

In addition, the Ward requires the services of a healer to drive the dysenteric miasma from our soldiers. Our unit servitor also indicates that we may be in need of a purifier, or even an exorcist. The foul forces that the rebels have awakened in their treachery are causing a dangerous stir. Gods forbid it, but he also feels the inkling of a fiend among us here.

I am also obligated, albeit hesitant, to express my Ward's disinclination toward our foreign aid. I am His Majesty's loyal servant, and would abide by his wish that we live in harmony with our Halren friends from across the sea, but I have loyalties here and now to my compatriots. They have actively desecrated shrines along our march and exercised undue cruelty to our countrymen, despite their treachery. They have displayed frankly brutish behavior and continued their strange rituals in our presence. Worst of all, I do not like the way they look at our female soldiers.

I am aware this is not the first time I have written about this, but this behavior is repetitive. I am aware that we need their help to win this war, but could they not operate independently under their own units? Clearly the experiment of restraining them by placing them under native commanders and units has failed, but I would rather it fail with them far away from me and mine than see my fellow Arunne further defiled.

Wardsman Tashadan Harizhin

Commander, Ward 213

The counter-invasion of the north was an operation conducted by many other officers like Wardsman Harizhin, each burning their own villages and scouring their own part of the north. Thousands of northerners died, and millions more lost their homes. Many of the displaced migrated south, with some eventually finding their way into Arunar, where they would swell the city's population.

The Rogue Prince, the Desert Queen, and the Ten Tragic Days

Summer 1578. The Ten Tragic Days. I found the following crumpled in the garbage of a newsprinter. I believe it's self-explanatory. I would also like to draw attention to the editor's notes, which I think are interesting.

[IF THE DESERT QUEEN WINS]

Arunya stands triumphant! We are elated to deliver this special bulletin on the triumph of the Prince of Sun and Stone, Emperor Ariyus this evening against the blood-traitor Prince Anaras.

By the will of his own imperial forebears, Prince Anaras has been defeated decisively in the field and the siege of the Erikaten Palace has been relieved. The foreign Empress Regent and her gracious delegation will now guide our young Emperor and our changing nation into a new era, where we will be the ever-sturdy mountain stone to Halren's glorious sun. The Common Army have seen to their duty to our Emperor, proving once and for all their loyalty to the imperial order. Commoners bearing the arms and valor to defend themselves and their own must be the new will of the heavens in this coming age.

The Prince Anaras' clemency for Seirin will at last be repaid in full, and his supporters will certainly face judgment for their actions. His desired reconciliation with the wicked northerners will continue unrealized and the efforts of those who remained loyal to the Imperial House will at last be recognized. Traitors will have their due in our nation. The people cry for blood, and at last it will come pouring!

We pray for a time of renewal for our weary land, and we are confident in the hands that will bring it!

[IF PRINCE ANARAS WINS] *Desert bitch is dead, use this*

Arunya stands united! We are proud to deliver this special bulletin on the triumph of Prince Anaras against the presumptuous Desert Queen ~~and her pit of desert vipers~~.

Tone down the anti-foreigner sentiment

By the will of his own imperial forebears, Prince Anaras has taken his rightful custody of ~~Emperor Prince~~ Ariyus from those who would mislead him. We are confident that his ~~guidance~~ *divine appointment* as ~~Prince Regent Emperor~~ will be for the best of ~~our young Emperor~~ and our people. With him will our sacred land fractured by war and clawed at by foreigners stand united once more to face the challenges of a new age.

Target the commoners, but don't call out the Common Army

Justice will at last be had for the North, pillaged and violated by ~~unruly commoners~~ Halren ~~mercenaries~~. The Empress Regent and her agents ~~have met their just fates~~ ~~will be tried by modern justice~~, and the world will see we are no mere tribe of lawless barbarians. All ~~interlopers the foreign snakes~~ will be cast into the sea from which they came, and Arunya will once more be a land for the Arunne and ~~their new allies~~ the Arunne alone!

We pray for a time of renewal for our weary land, and we are confident in the hands that will bring it!

There are a few other things you need to know aside from the simple fact that absolutely nothing panned out like anyone thought it would:

- Desert bitch and company were killed in the coup
- Anaras isn't going to be as bloodthirsty as we thought aside from the whole killing the previous Empress consort deal
- The fucking Imperial Seal is missing, find a way to spin this before it gets out!

The new Emperor Anaras would rule for six years. At first, he aimed to facilitate a reconciliation between the combatants of the civil war, attempting to balance the bloodthirst, ambition, and pride of ancient southern houses, vengeful northern clans, and the up-and-coming commoners.

Realizing he could not do this without the still-missing Imperial Seal, he attempted to forge a new one in a magical ritual. The attempt failed catastrophically. Several top clerics were killed and Anaras himself was driven mad, forcing his court to cloister him for the latter two-thirds of his reign, and rendering the Imperial government even more ineffective at its job.

Emperor Anaras' unfortunate regime was simultaneously stagnant and malignant, whatever semblance of peace was maintained by an increasingly repressive security apparatus and the dysfunctional web of tension permeating all levels of Arunne society. His regime ensured any confrontation or attempt to release this pressure would be nothing less than explosive

The Arsa Incident

Summer 1584. The conflagration that engulfed Arsa resembles the Tayashinya Chigadan (“Feudatory Period”) in miniature. Areas of control were set up between warring factions, and gangs of noble warriors died for glory in the bloodied streets, while Commoners and Servitors alike stood hapless to the chaos. Nominally, the conflict surrounded the increasing infiltration of Arsa’s large and ancient high society by wealthy foreigners and the emerging business class. However, smaller personal or dynastic rifts between the nobility drove the conflict just as much as overarching principles.

Like in the Tayashinya period, death poems by the warrior class proliferated before ritual suicides or last stands. Here is a collection of some such poems, with notes about their authors.

Eramin Katarshirin (? - 1584) was a commoner who had enlisted in the Common Army and left upon its conversion into a mercenary force following Anaras I’s coronation. He became a retainer in the service of Arsa’s emerging corporate lords — nobles who got around the ban on noble participation in business by subcontracting to commoners. In this role, he was a hitman famous for his deft use of new long-range rifles. Even unto the modern day, his exploits between 1568 and 1584 are a favored topic of Arunne media, especially comics.

At the time of his death, he served the conservative anti-foreigner faction. According to popular accounts, he was killed in a nighttime sniper duel by a noble opponent who closed in behind him. His opponent granted him the honor of writing a death poem and committing ritual suicide — one never given to commoners.

*Sunbeams on rifle
A knife long-waiting finds me
Finds me unafraid*

Lady Izanen Hisharid Kazhiran (1566 - 1584) was a noble daughter of the powerful House Kazhiran raised to head her clan at the young age of 22 by tragedy. During the Arsa Incident, her family stood with the pro-foreigner faction led by the House Ishanad, bearers of one of the Fivefold Spears of the South. She was cousin to Lord Miriyan Kazhiran Ishanad, whose misadventures with his lover in the anti-foreigner faction directly led to the conflict breaking out. Her death aiding his escape from the anti-foreigners marked the end to the quiet phase of the incident and led to its escalation throughout the city.

She stood alone in a delaying action against five agents of a rival house, who permitted her to write her death poem.

*As I stand bravely
May my clan stand brave for me
Gods give by their grace*

*As I recall duty
May our people recall theirs to us
Here as I die now*

*As I seek justice
May my beloved seek mine
May she fight as I*

Rasherid Aralirin (1532 – 1584) was a Servitor for the cult of the sun god Arigesh Aralir headquartered in nearby Kashanar. He was manning the local shrine when the Arsa Incident broke out and found his shrine deep in the anti-foreigner faction's territory. He protected refugees from the chaos with his sanctuary, especially foreigners escaping the lynchings, for several weeks. In the final days of the incident as the Imperial Army marched to intervene, an unruly mob burned the shrine to the ground.

A stone tablet was found among the ashes, the poem written in the divine ink reserved for the sun god's own warrants.

*Slow is autumn's end
Arsa burns with divine wrath
Steel ships watch the bay*

*Orange leaves fall to the ground
Red the blood spilled in the streets*

The Imperial Seal

Winter 1585. Arunya had long had a prolific pamphlet-writing industry. Servitors often passed essays among themselves on such topics as theology and politics, which evolved into a culture of public critique and discourse within their circles. These discussions sometimes spilled over into the public, and in the heady days before the revolution their pamphlets became prime reading material, published in newspapers under such pen names as "The Cleric Anonymous", "A Peer of the Forebears". The Imperial Government was keen to clamp down on more vocal publications, but the clerics dearly cherished their right to discuss, and the public guarded their own right to publish these discussions. This was the state of things when one of the most powerful nobles in the Empire said his piece.

I AM A FRIEND OF THE EMPEROR By Idara Kandara Neyoran

We have seen many shocks to our system in these few years. In the span of two decades we have seen four Emperors take to the Imperial Seal — one overthrown in a coup, two dead in violence against the Empire itself. The north lies scoured, the south flooded and starving, and Seirin remains as mysterious as always. The Imperial Seal — the manifestation of Imperial might itself was missing, unusable for 6 years until it was found by the work of a few unsung heroes.

Now we watch a new Emperor, young and untested, ascend the throne of a thousand years. He watches a nation in turmoil; one in its death throes, some might say. Our nobles are going mad from either their powers or their politics, our clerics are utterly useless, and both of them are starving the commoners. Things are bleak, and they could be better. I fear not admitting that.

But I neither fear admitting that I am a friend of the Emperor. That I stand by his system. I stand by the decisions of my lordly colleagues, and I believe their actions are only in the people's best interests. I stand with the clergy, our servitors, for I have faith in their continued dedication to us and our gods. I stand by our commoners, misguided as they may be, as our comrades in the fight for our nation in this new age.

Even if we should continue starving, even if the world should continue to turn its back to us, even if triumph might never show its face, I believe in who we are, who we were, and who we must continue being.

Is it not writ in the Dialogs that the Sage said to the weary Soldier: "In the face of failure, and prophecy, and death's shadow, is it not triumph enough to stand here yet?" And in so hearing this, did the Soldier not become the Knight?

I say these words unto you all now, that all of us — Commoner, Servitor, or Noble, we might all become Knights in service of our Emperor, our nation, our people.

As our people have stood for a thousand, two thousand years, may we stand for ten thousand more!

The pamphlet was received badly throughout the entire Empire. Those who already opposed the current order saw Idara as a blind sycophant bending over backwards. Those who supported the

Emperor saw it as undeserved criticism and unnecessarily bleak. The Emperor Anayas had asked his personal friend to write freely, perhaps expecting something much more amicable to his regime. It was not to his liking, to say the least. Only a year later, Idara would stand at the head of the City Guard, an institution that would evolve into a rich seedbed for the middle class opposition to the Empire.

