

Prologue

Bad things happen in the dark.

Monsters appear when the lights are off or when we close our eyes. But you're not even sure if you can open them again. Kaya ayaw ko sa dilim. Dati akong namulat sa kadiliman at nagbago ang lahat mula noon.

"Hush for now, sweetie."

Imbis na matakot sa bulong ni Mommy ay nainis pa ako. Hide and Seek is a game we usually play, but I wasn't in the mood at that time. Moments ago, just before I sliced my birthday cake, I pleaded to sleep for a while. The next thing I knew, Mommy and I were hiding in a dark closet like we're running from the devil. Turned out, we were.

"Please, don't make any noise," bulong niya nang subukan kong kumawala sa mahigpit na yakap. I was nine back then and I didn't understand what was happening. Dahil sa pagpupumilit, nakawala ako. Tumakbo palabas agad-agad.

"It's hot!" komento ko at pinuno ng hangin ang baga. Nagkumahog siyang sumunod, hinihila ako para tumakbo, ngunit agad siyang napatda nang makita kung sino ang nasa likuran ko.

"It's always a pleasure to see you, Yumiko Kyosei."

Pagharap, nakita ko ang isang lalaking naka-tuxedo na katulad ng suot ng mga bisita. There was an air of authority around him. His smile was so bright and I thought he was a friend of the family. Pero sa kabila ng kapita-pitagang ayos, may hawak itong gunting na may

tumutulo pang pulang likido.

Mommy pulled me behind her. "Please, not with my daughter watching."

"Mom, is he your friend?"

"Ah, *principessa*, little princess," the man said. "The fruit of a yakuza and a mobster, a mix of two bloodlines. What a pretty woman you will be, soon breaking hearts as your mother did." The adoration in his face disappeared and it was replaced with disappointment. "But you should've listened to her and stayed quiet."

Sa takot, napahigpit ang kapit ko sa bestidang suot ni Mommy. Sanay na akong makakita ng mga nakakatakot na lalaki na naglalabas-masok sa bahay namin. They have scars, full body tattoos hidden in suits, and they looked tough.

As a curious child, I peeped in once while Uncle was having a meeting with his friends. One of them offered something, begging for forgiveness. Walang tigil ang pagpatak ng dugo sa kanyang kamay habang nakaluhod at inaabot ang duguang panyo. Then, I realized, it was his finger.

Uncle took out his blade and cut the man's neck without blinking. Blood spilled on the floor and no one spoke a word. His other friends just sat there in approval while watching the body shook and squirmed until it stopped moving. I heard myself scream. Doon nila ako nahuling sumisilip mula sa kabilang silid. I was terrified.

"Sorry," Uncle said. "But you'll realize sooner or later that we are not saints. You too, your blood has been tainted even before birth, little sinner. You may not understand this now, but always remember, you are a *Kyosei*."

Nagtanong ako kung bakit ganoon siya kasama, kung bakit siya pumatay, pero hinalikan lang niya ako sa noo.

"I'm envious. When I was your age, I already killed two men. Your innocence is something we can't afford. There are no bad people. There are no good people either. We are mere survivors, doing everything to live, to rule. Weakness will bury you dead or alive. From now on, whatever you see or hear, don't be afraid. We only do that for the survival of our family."

Simula noon, unti-unti kong natanggap ang uri ng buhay na mayroon kami. My only token of to goodness was my mother. Pinapaalala niyang hindi ko kailangang puwersahin ang sarili upang tanggapin ang responsibilidad ng isang Kyosei.

"You may belong to a yakuza family, but it shouldn't stop you from living your dreams."

Sa kabila ng pagkamulat sa bayolenteng mundo, naging masaya ako. I spent time with fierce men and realized they were not that evil. They were just... humans, doing crooked things to survive the crooked world.

But this man in front of us doesn't belong to any of them. Ang ngiti niya ay hindi tulad kay Uncle o ng mga kaibigan niyang laging nakaitim. This man was... different.

"Hide and seek ends here," aniya.

Iniangat ko ang tingin kay Mommy, ngunit nakatingin din siya sa akin. Pagkabigo at pighati ang nakasalamon sa mga mata niyang may nagbabadyang luha.

"Sweetie," sambit niya habang hinihila ako sa sulok, "close your eyes and make a wish." She smiled longingly, then, turned me to face the white wall. "It's not your fault," she whispered and let go of my hand.

Short silence passed, my eyes were shut tight enumerating wishes in my head; a new doll, less bodyguards, a playmate, and to go to a real school like other children. I was young, feeling invincible, selfish.

If I knew better, I would've wished something else. Something to save us.

Ang tangi kong naririnig ay mga bulong na hindi maintindihan. Then, I heard a whimper, a loud gasp followed by silence.

“Open your eyes now, *principessa*,” the man said.

Sa pag-ikot, bumungad sa akin ang mga mata niyang nawalan ng ningning habang kalong-kalong si Mommy sa kanyang mga bisig. I was supposed to run or shout pero parang tumigil ang mundo ko. Children at my age should be afraid. Ngunit hindi ko magawang gumalaw nang tumambad ang duguan at wala nang buhay na katawan ni Mommy. I knew what was happening, I've seen dead people before, people bathing in their own blood and labeled 'traitors.' My mother isn't one of them.

“Beautiful, isn't she?” Sinuklay niya nang masuyo ang buhok ni Mommy.

Nanatili akong tulala at gimbal. Are we still playing a game? How about my cake, when will I slice it? Where is my Uncle? Why is my mother dead? *Why?*

Maingat niyang inilapag si Mommy saka lumapit. “Go and tell them the news.” Kahit na kumurap ay di ko magawa habang hinahaplos niya ang pisngi ko. Tila nakalimutan kong huminga at makaramdam.

“I'll come back, but now, just go and send my message: Never make Gustavo Qapone angry.”

“Y-you.. killed... her...” I found my voice at last. Unti-unting nagsimula ang panginginig at pagkalat ng sakit sa buo kong katawan. It is the kind of pain that would haunt me forever. Everyone can die, but not my mother. She was a Kyosei. She was invincible. There are loyal people who'll die for us or kill for us, Uncle had said so.

“Keep this as my present.” Inilagay niya sa kamay

ko ang hawak na gunting na may nakaukit na mga letra. *Per il sangue*. “For the blood,” he translated. “Revenge is a bittersweet fruit, child.” There was blood in it, probably my mother’s, but at that time, all I did was stare.

“I want you to go out, enjoy the party and slice your cake. Happy birthday.” He kissed my forehead and walked away.

Nanginginig man ang kamay, mahigpit ang kapit ko sa gunting, at parang robot na naglakad palapit sa pinto. Gusto kong sumigaw, ngunit walang boses na lumalabas sa bibig ko.

You should’ve stayed quiet. I should have.

I walked out of the bedroom and stared into the empty hallway, except for two fallen bodies, bathed in a pool of crimson red. One was the maid and the other was a bodyguard. Parang sasabog nang sabay ang ulo at dibdib ko dahil pilit kong iniintindi ang nangyayari.

Bakit wala akong ginagawang kahit ano? Dapat akong sumigaw o magalit. Pero nakatayo lang ako roon, umiiyak at pinagmamasdan ang dugo sa mga palad.

Unti-unti kong binagtas ang hallway. There were whispers in my head and my vision got blurred. Throbbing headache made me stop for a few times and the spinning made me fall. Sa wakas ay umiyak ako sa hallway na walang tao.

“H-help,” I heard my tiny voice say. It was so small, so vulnerable and helpless.

Everything I said was swallowed by the music coming from the ballroom. Bakit nagsasaya pa rin sila?

Unti-unting napatigil ang mga bisita at napaligon nang marating ko ang tuktok ng grand staircase. The music kept playing a happy song.

It was my ninth birthday, after all. I’ll never forget

their fear as I stood there, my white frilly dress tainted with murder. Everything rushed in—horror, fear, and devastation.

I screamed; a cry of horror and pleading. “It wasn’t my fault.”

Then, everything turned black.

1

REPARTO OGGETTI SMARRITI

Lost and Found

Wala na akong panahon. Kahit hinahabol na ang paghinga ay hindi ko binagalan ang pagpadyak sa bisikleta, sumasalubong sa papalamig na simoy ng hangin. Kailangan kong makauwi upang buksan ang mga ilaw bago lumukob ang dilim.

Sa nag-aagawang mga kulay ng kalangitan, tanaw sa unahan ang malapad na tulay, ang tanging daanan upang makarating sa bahay. Below it was a shallow river. The other end of the bridge had a grand arch with faded carved letters that said, ‘*Castello dei Capo*’ or The House of Rulers. Sa ibaba nito, nagdikit ako ng plywood na may nakasulat na ‘KEEP OUT’ gamit ang pulang pintura na babala sa mga maaaring manghimasok.

I know there’s almost a zero chance that someone would get lost and end up here. Impossible ring may maglakas-loob na suyurin kung ano man ang nasa loob ng arko. Ilang bangkay na rin daw ang natagpuan sa ilog noon kaya pinaniniwalaang tapunan ng mga patay ang bahaging ito. Pero hindi pa rin ako naging kumpyansa at inilagay ang babala.

What lies beyond is quiet. What lies beyond is ancient. What lies beyond is my own world.

Noong una kong masilayan ang tahanang iyon, binalot ako ng takot. Isang malaking bahay na bato na malayo sa kabihasanan. Bukod sa maluhong disenyo ng mga salaming bintana at marmol, isang misteryo rin kung bakit may nagtayo ng magarang tahanan na kaunti lang

ang makakatunghay ng ganda. A jewel in the woods. Aside from the dancing trees, the surrounding was quite eerie. Deathly quiet, yet, it couldn't give me the peace that I longed for.

The mansion looked sad and haunting, fitting for an almost century-old structure. Uncle said it was a gift from a friend. Kumpleto ito sa kagamitan at mukhang lahat ay naghihintay sa aking pagdating.

After the bridge, I passed through the wide yard. Rubble, leaves and moss covered the statues of four angels. At the center, was a fountain that I've never seen come to life and spout water. Siguro minsan itong naging napakagandang hardin, puno ng iba't ibang uri ng bulaklak. Just like the main house, the front garden was dead and there was nothing but wild grass.

I quickly stepped on the brakes and jumped out of my bike. Dahil mabigat ang malalaking pinto sa grand entrance, sa side door ako pumasok. Even if the school bag's slowing down my weight, I raced up the grand staircase all the way to the master's bedroom.

1, 2, 3, 4. Binuksan ko nang sabay-sabay ang apat na switch at sinunod din ang iba na sumasakop sa buong mansyon. 59, 60, 61 and the last one, 62—the switch for the chandelier in the dining hall. Napangiti ako sa liwanag ng mga bumbilya. Brightness had always made me feel secure... and safe. Every bathroom, bedroom, corner and even the attic was lighted. I had nothing to fear.

I changed my clothes and went down for dinner. Nakalapag sa mesa ang metal tray na natatakpan ng pabilog na glass cover. I sat down and started eating everything. As usual, it tasted perfect.

Simula nang manirahan dito, hindi ko na kinailangan pang magtrabaho. Hindi na kailangang maglaba o magluto.

Walang araw na naubusan ako ng makakain, mainit na tubig, o naputulan ng kuryente. I'm living like I used to do. Ang kaibahan lang, pinagsisilbihan ako ng mga taong hindi ko kilala at halos di nakikita. They would come silently, do their task and go. Ang tanging obligasyon ko lang ay mabuhay at hindi labag sa kalooban kong gampanan iyon.

Why am I alive? I'm not sure. Since that day, I never knew my reason for breathing.



Nagpapahinga ako sa kuwarto habang ang lahat ay nasa labas at inaayos ang libing ni Mommy at ng iba pang mga nasawi. Something moved in the shadows and when I woke up, I was boarding on a plane on my way to be reborn.

Tinanggal ko ang seatbelt at maingat na naglakad. My eyes landed on the two big men sitting at the farthest end of the seats.

"Suwatte kudasai," (Please, sit down.) Isa sa kanila ang nagsalita at pinababalik ako sa upuan.

Hindi ako nakinig at dahan-dahang umatras. 'Mom. I want my mom,' I wanted to say, but no voice came out of my mouth. It was all gone from hours of screaming and crying.

"Suwatte kudasai," ulit niya.

I continued walking backwards until my back hit something, or someone.

"You're running from the wrong men, little niece."

"Uncle!" sigaw ko sa kabila ng pagiging paos, saka ako yumakap sa kanya at tahimik na umiyak.

Effortlessly, he picked me up and strapped me to the nearest seat. He then turned and told the men to go back to their seats. Umupo siya sa tabi ko at nag-abot ng paborito kong candy, pero hindi ko iyon tinanggap. "Never accept gifts

without knowing what they want in return.” That was a lesson he taught me once.

“Smart child,” he took the candy back and pat my head. “Hanna, listen to me.”

My name is not Hanna. How come he had mistaken me as another person?

“You are Hanna from now on.”

I opened my mouth and asked silently, “Why?”

“Not everyone will give you a cake on your birthday, little sinner. Others will take away something from you. I’m sorry I wasn’t there, but I promise, we will avenge your mother’s death. The only thing I can do is to keep you away from the enemy. From now on, you are now Hanna Mamori.”

“W-why...” At last, I found my mourning voice.

“That’s what your mother wanted.”

Another river of tears flowed down my cheek.

“She wants you to live. To live far from the life of a Kyosei.”

That was the last time I saw him. Unti-unti akong nasanay sa tahimik na mundo. The only proof of my past were the scissors.

“Loathe the man who gave you this,” Uncle said. “I’ll watch over you.” Then, I never saw him again.

Paano ko kapopootan ang taong aking kinatatakutan? Naiisip ko pa lang ang ngiti niya, kinikilabutan na ako. Gustavo Qapone, the demon himself.

At first, there were maids, but all of them acted like robots, only up for the task. Whenever I had nightmares, I would shout on top of my lungs but no one would come. I was alone. It was like that for a long time.

The blood, the party... it was the same every night. Haunting images would come crawling in my sleep taunting me to remember, to never forget. Then, I’d wake up and shout, cry until I couldn’t do it anymore. In the

morning, no voice would come out from my wasted throat. Hanggang sa natuto akong manahimik. It was a slow and painful process. Talking to no one and having no will to do so helped along the way. Slowly, as years go by, I had loved solitude. Silence is peace, as I wanted it to be. Silence became my friend.

I was left to do what I want and that was to live a little longer. Waiting for the time that I'd end up dead, too. I distanced myself and finally got used to it. So I told them—the maids, the staff, everyone—to leave me alone. The next day, I got what I wanted. I was living alone ever since, or it seemed like I was.

There I was, counting down for my death, an empty shell for a living person. Breathing... walking aimlessly. Waiting.

"She's just a child."

"Hanna."

"It wasn't my fault."

Napabalikwas ako pabangon, pawisan at hinihinal dahil sa bangungot. Lalong kumalat ang takot nang kadiliman ang sumalubong sa akin. Heavy rain was pouring and thunders boomed in the sky. Gamit ang nanginginig na kamay, kinapkap ko ang flashlight sa bedside table ngunit wala iyon. Panic overwhelmed me and my body started shaking. No, I never like darkness, I would always need the light.

On cue, lightning flashed and gave a temporary view of my room. My breathing hitched when I saw a silhouette sitting on the sofa at the foot of my bed.

"Found you," whispered by a masculine voice. It was like a deep rumbling hush, only meant for my ears.

"S-sino ka?" bulong ko. It had been days since I last spoke. Ngayon ay sapilitan ko uling narinig ang sariling

boses. I sounded shaky, afraid. Napahigpit ang kapit ko sa kumot, ipinikit ang mga mata at pinigilang tumakbo. The time had come. Hide-and-seek ends now.

The man sat unfazed while I quickly rummaged my bedside drawer looking for a weapon, not to protect myself but something to end my life. He probably got a gun, but I wanted to be the one to give him the tool. I was choosing to die with the same scissors that murdered my mother. It was sharp and the handle was made of metal, the pointy edge could do a lot of damage.

Perfect for my murder.

Maingat akong lumapit sa kanyang kinauupuan, nanginginig ang mga kamay na inaabot ang gunting nang nakaharap sa akin ang talim. I couldn't smell a hint of perfume. Probably because he was planning on not leaving any trace. Even the lightning was not enough to view his face. Matagal munang nabinbin sa ere ang mga kamay ko bago niya iyon tinanggap. In slow motion, I placed a hand on my chest and felt its every beat.

"Please make it quick," I begged as closed my eyes and accepted my fate. "Stab me in the heart."

2

NUOVA ARRIVATO

Newcomer

A quick death, that was all I asked.

Naghintay ako sa pagtarak ng talim, ngunit ilang sandali na ang lumipas, nanatili pa rin akong nakatayo at walang sakit na lumalatay sa dibdib. Matapos makahanap ng lakas ng loob, binuksan ko ang mga mata at sinalubong ang liwanag. The lights were back, the man was gone and so were my scissors. Naiwan akong nakatayo lang at naghihintay ng kamatayang hindi naman dumating.

Sinubukan kong talasan ang pandinig sa bawat paghampas ng puno, pag-ihip ng hangin o kahit sa kaluskos. Aside from the howling storm, everything was quiet. Quiet is good. It is like a good friend that accompany me wherever I go.

Sinubukan kong bumalik sa kama at ipinikit ang mga mata pero hindi na muling dumalaw ang antok. Nanatili akong dilat, naghihintay sa pagbalik ng di-inaasahang bisita at may iba't ibang tanong sa isip. Sino? Paano? Bakit?

Sapat na ang mga iyon upang manatili akong gising hanggang mag-umaga.

Kinaumagahan, naglibot ako sa mansyon. Walang senyales ng puwersahang pagpasok at nasa ayos ang lahat. It was still the cold and dark stone home, serene and tomb-like.

Hanggang ngayon, iniisip ko pa rin kung sino ang lalaki kagabi. If there are people watching over me, did they know what happened? Or maybe he was one of them? I did not know.

Maybe he was just an imagination that came to

life. Isang resulta ng tahimik kong buhay na puno ng katanungan. But one thing I was sure of, if ever he's real and out to get me, I am prepared. Living for eight years more after that night was enough. Come to think of it, this day would be the ninth year. A peaceful birthday for me.

Riding my bike on the way to school, I sang a birthday song to myself, even though I know my situation was far from happy.

Madali para sa iba ang pumasok sa Beaumondville High dahil nakatira sila sa mismong eksklusibong dormitoryo. Kung ang ilan ay nakakotse, ang gamit ko naman ay bisikleta. Ako lang ang may pagkakataong daanan ang malawak na bukirin at iilang bahay. Ako lang ang nakakakita ng magandang tanawin araw-araw. Hindi na masama. Ilang minuto ang layo ng paaralan at kaunting tao ang nagagawi sa dakong ito ng Beaumondville City. It's isolated, just the way I like it.

By the time I entered the gate, the haunting tune of the school hymn for the morning ceremony was playing. I parked my bike and ran to the hall. Ang akala ko, wala nang mas malala pa sa pagiging late pero isa iyong malaking pagkakamali.

Turning on a corner, I bumped into someone. Napadaing ako sa sakit, hindi dahil sa pagkakabangga sa babaeng estudyante, kundi dahil sa sipa ng kasama niyang lalaki.

“Mag-ingat ka naman!” singhal ng huli.

Dali-dali akong tumayo at yumuko bilang paghingi ng tawad. In my head, I repeated my mantra. *Don't make friends, don't make enemies.*

“Mag-sorry ka!” dagdag niya.

“S-sorry.”

Imbis na mawala ang inis, naging tusong ngisi ang

puminta sa kanyang mga labi. Pagkatapos, hinimas niya ang papatubong bigoteng hindi naaahitan nang ilang araw. Inilipat niya ang tingin sa babaeng kasama, waring tinatantya kung pinapansin ba siya nito. I've seen him bullying others and I knew what would be next. "Tatanggapin ko ang sorry mo sa isang kondisyon."

Itinaas ko ang paningin at naghintay. *Here it goes.*

"Kiss her shoes. No, lick it."

All the building tension disappeared. Acceptable. Mas mabuti na iyon kaysa sa karamihan. Some were told to drink water from the toilet, walk in their underwear, or get beaten. Masuwerte ako at pagdila lang sa sapatos ang gagawin.

Lumipat ang tingin ko sa nabanggang babae na may blangkong ekspresyon. Hindi galit, hindi rin naman naaawa. It was the same cold expression she wore everyday. Like a doll that never learned to smile, too regal to talk to anyone.

Ang ibang estudyanteng nandoon ay alam kong nakikinig, pero nagpapanggap na normal ang lahat. Natatakot silang makialam. And they should. Ngunit bago pa ako makaluhod, nagsalita ang babae.

"Magsisimula na ang ceremony, ayokong ma-late," at nagpatiuna na itong naglakad. Walang nagawa ang lalaki kundi ang sundan ito tulad ng asong naghahabol ng malaking buto habang nakalawit ang dila.

Just like that, it was over. I was forgotten and people moved on, it was a normal day again in Beaumontville High. Nakasunod lang ang tingin ko sa dalawang papalayong pigura ni Byrone Gotti at Vivienne Wies.

Simula nang tumuntong ng high school, naabutan kong naghahari-harian si Byrone, kinikilalang pinuno ng Kings, ang bansag nila sa sarili. Ayon sa mga bulung-

bulungan, nang umalis ang naunang lider ng gang, lahat ng naiwan nito ay napunta sa kanya; ang paghahari-harian at pati na rin ang girlfriend ng dating pinuno na si Vivienne.

Well, not really. Kailanman ay hindi nagpakita si Vivienne ng interes, pero sunud-sunuran ang lalaki dito. He couldn't be blamed though. Kahit sino siguro ay magkakandarapa dahil hindi lang mukha at katawan ang kinababaliwan sa dalaga. Vivienne is... a breed of her own. Sultry without even trying. Too sexy for words, even in her school uniform.

There was no trace of innocence about her, ngunit may persona itong kaakit-akit kahit hindi ipinangalandakan. Byron even described her as 'hot and f*ckable'. Siya lang din ang tanging babae na nakikihalubilo sa Kings. They were protective of her. Luho, proteksyon at pagsisisilbing hindi naman hinihiling ang ibinibigay rito ni Byron.

She was labeled a slut. A hated and envied queen of the school. In all of it, she never cared. Hindi nakitaan ng amor si Vivienne. Even though she was marked as his property, she's distant and cold towards Byron, to everyone.

Iwinaksi ko sa isip ang dalawa at tumakbo na. Pagdating ko sa ceremony hall, nagsisimula nang pumila ang mga estudyante. It was the same routine everyday. I'd go to class and study not knowing if I'd see the next sunrise. I never went on anyone's way and I only talk when needed. Maybe I was too good at being invisible that no one bullied me or even talked about random things.

Matapos ang mga paalala at anunsiyo, nagsipuntahan na ang lahat sa kani-kanilang classrooms. This would be one of those days, ordinary and uneventful.

Or so I thought.

"Listen up," pahayag ni Sir Deigo, ang adviser namin. Nakuha naman agad ang atensyon ng buong klase. For

a man in his late forties, he's aging gracefully. He would always paste a smile on his face whenever he'd enter the class. Pero ngayon, walang ngiting nakapaskil sa mukha niya.

"We have two returning students after two years. Actually, some of you already know them."

Kumalat ang bulung-bulungan ng antisipasyon.

"Come in," tawag niya sa kung sino mang nasa labas.

A bulky man who looked too old to be in high school walked in. Nevertheless, his smile was so bright that it made up for his age.

"Waddup, f*cktards—"

Kasabay ng singhap ng mga kaklase ko, dumagundong din ang boses ni Sir Dego. "Language, Mr. Alcaster!"

"Sorry, I just got excited." Then, he turned to us and stepped forward. Hindi na nakikita ni Sir Dego ang ekspresyon ng transferee. Kinamot niya ang ulo habang nananatili ang mayabang na ngisi. Hindi maitatago ng mahabang manggas ng uniform ang muscles nito. They were too big for a high school student or probably he's working out a lot or was into physical activities.

"Bino, Bino Alcaster." He sounded polite, but there was a smirk on his face. "Let's be friends," then he mouthed 'f*cktard' and discretely showed his 'middle finger' to us.

He shouldn't have done that. Isa sa mga kaklase ko si Alfonse Herod, called Alfon. Isa siya sa matataas na miyembro ng Kings. Compared to Byrone and the others, Alfon is a gentleman. Literally. Nakapagtataakang kasali siya sa grupo ng mga ito.

Don't get me wrong. Beaumontville High is a respectable school. In fact, it's an exclusive one. However, no matter how sturdy and healthy a tree is, one rotten fruit once in a while is still possible. Sa kaso ng eskuwelahan

namin, iyon ang Kings. Hindi rin daw iyon ang orihinal na pangalan ng grupo. Walang may lakas loob na sumuway sa kanila. Even the teachers were cautious when dealing with them.

There are three people who are considered to be the heads; the violent Byrone who acts as the leader, Alfon the 'Gentle', and Pete the 'Einstein'. Ayon sa sabi-sabi, sila ang orihinal na miyembro ng naunang grupo, pero nang umalis ang dating pinuno, sumama ang mga ito sa ibang grupo.

And now, a transferee stirred some trouble. He won't make it until tomorrow.

"Nasaan ang kasama mo?" usisa ni Sir habang nakatingin sa labas.

"Sorry, Sir. Something came up."

Walang nagawa si Sir Deigo kundi humugot ng malalim na hininga. Base sa ikinikilos, matagal na niyang kakilala ang dalawa. Umupo si Bino sa likuran ni Alfon at kaswal na tinapik ang balikat ng huli. Hindi na ako muli pang nag-isip tungkol doon at itinuon ang atensyon sa pagsisimula ng klase.

Patapos na ang araw kaya nagmamadali akong umuwi. Masyadong napatagal ang pamamalagi ko sa library at di namalayan ang oras. Habang binabagtas kung saan naka-park ang bisikleta, muling bumalik ang isip ko sa nangyari noong nagdaang gabi. Nakapagtataka kung bakit pati ang gunting ay dinala ng estranghero.

"Long time no see, Baby By."

Naputol ang pagmumuni ko sa narinig. Minsan lang may mapadaan dito dahil sinasadya kong i-park ang bisikleta malayo sa sentro ng eskuwelahan. Nanaig ang kuryosidad ko kaya maingat akong nagtago habang pinapanood ang mga nag-uusap. Ngunit ang mas

nakagugulat ay ang nahagip ng paningin ko, ang transferee.

It wasn't the serious look that made me curious or Alfon beside him facing Byrone and the whole gang. It was the thing that he was playing with his hands. Even in distance, I could still see the details of the sharp metal.

I couldn't be wrong; Bino Alcaster was holding my scissors.

3

ARRIVANO GLI SCHIAVI *Coming of Slaves*

"**W**e heard rumors, Byrone, and it's not good. Gentle here," Bino teased Alfon's hair, "told me about it. Pinalitan mo pa ang pangalan ng grupo at kung sinu-sino ang ginawang miyembro." Then, he laughed, insultingly. "Man, you call yourselves 'Kings'. How can you stoop so low and lead a common street gang?"

Although confused, I could not help but to be fascinated on how he played with the scissors. Parang walang hirap sa kanya ang pagpaikot-ikot niyon sa mga kamay. Backing him up were a few new faces, probably ten or less, all wearing the same school uniform. Definitely transferees. Habang nasa likuran naman ni Byrone ang mas nakararaming miyembro ng Kings na naguguluhan din sa nangyayari. I could feel the brewing fight.

I should not be here, but when I saw the scissors, I couldn't leave. He may or may not be the one who tried to kill me, but I had a feeling he's somehow involved.

"Wala kang utang na loob, Alfon. Matapos nila tayong iwan, sila pa rin ang pipiliin mo!" sumbat ni Byrone sa dating kasama saka binalingan ang transferee. "You left it, now you get it back... the hard way."

Tumigil si Bino sa paglalaro ng gunting at agad sumeryoso ang mukha. "Alam mong hindi niya kayo pinabayaan."

"Bullsh*t. At bakit ikaw ang nandito para sa kanya?"

"Nililinis ko lang ang kalat bago siya dumating. I like doing the dirty work," kibit-balikat nito.

“Masyado kang nagpapakaalila sa mga Orleonne.”

“I know which side to take, Baby By. Another thing, a royalty doesn’t have to come and greet the slaves.”

“Ano’ng sabi mo!”

And before I knew it, a fight exploded. I have never seen people fighting, at least not this close before, but I was pretty sure something was not right with the new students. They were swift and precise. It’s as if they were playing around and not exerting too much effort.

Kahit na si Bino ay ganoon din. Kahit may katandaan kung titingnan kumpara sa mga kasama, kawangis niya ang kanilang linis sa paggalaw. Hitting, punching and breaking everyone that came through him with ease. Violent, ruthless, brute, yet with a certain swift.

Graceful. I couldn’t find the right words to use except for that one. Ang mga anino, alikabok at paggalaw ng kanilang mga katawan ay katulad ng isang sayaw na matagal na nilang kabisado.

Despite the superior number, the Kings were losing. Kaawa-awa at malayo sa kinatatakutang imahe ng buong eskuwelahan. Shouting, cursing and just plain violence without winning. Falling to the ground without even landing a hit. Compared to the newcomers, they were just kids. Pinaglalaruan ng mga kaaway.

Si Alfon ay nasa tabi lamang at nakamasid nang may pag-aalala. Hindi siya duwag, maaaring ayaw lang niyang labanan ang mga dating kasamahan.

Sa maikling sandali, halos sabay-sabay natumba ang mga miyembro ng Kings. Who remained was Byrone, now with bloodshot eyes craving for revenge. Bumalik na rin ang mga kasama ni Bino sa kanyang likuran, katulad ng mga kawal sa likod ng heneral. Among the fallen, he and Byrone remained standing in the middle. He then took out

my scissors from his back pocket and held it like a weapon.

“What it is gonna be, Baby By?” he taunted. “I love playing with new toys, do you want to be the first?”

Byrone lunged, aiming for a punch but it was a big mistake. Bago pa umabot ang kamao niya, sinipa na siya ni Bino, sentro sa pagitan ng kanyang mga hita. Kumislot ako nang marinig ang paghuhumiyaw ni Byrone sa sakit habang nakahandusay sa lupa, katulad ng kanyang mga kasamang walang malay. Hindi nakuntento si Bino at tinapakan ang ulo ng kalaban.

“While you were playing gangster, we were away breaking limbs and slashing throats. Kung magtatraydor ka, siguraduhin mong hindi kung sinu-sino lang ang ihaharap mo sa ‘min!” Nawala ang mapaglarong ngiti ni Bino at napalitan ng matinding galit. Pagkatapos, walang habas nitong pinagsisipa ang duguang si Byrone.

Cruel. It’s too cruel.

“Ginoong Alcaster, tama na,” mahinahong pigil ni Alfon at nag-abot ng panyo.

Tinanggap iyon ng lalaki at pa-squat na umupo sa nakabulagatang katawan ni Byrone. Unti-unting bumalik ang ngisi sa labi huli habang pinapahiran ang namumutok at duguang mukha ng bumagsak na pinuno. “So, any last words?”

“My father will hear about this!”

“Oh, scary,” he teased. “Your father will lick Zachary’s shoes soon. I could kill you and get away with it like a free man.”

Nanlamig ang buo kong katawan nang mapagtanto ang nangyayari. Am I witnessing a murder? And it was within school premises of all places. *Who are these people?*

“Fun, isn’t it?”

Umalpas ang singhap ko nang marinig ang nagsalita

sa likuran ko. Before I knew it, I was dragged across a short distance with the unknown person pulling my hair. Wala akong nagawa kundi sumunod kahit ilang beses na akong natumba.

“Late na ba ako sa party?” sigaw ng may bitbit sa akin. Napahikbi ako sa sakit ng pagkakahila sa buhok ko.

“You’re next, Einstein. After I slash Baby By’s throat here.”

Einstein. I know a person who goes by that nickname. Pete Charleswin, the brainy one. He was not excelling academically, but many were saying that he could if he wanted to. He had impressive grades a few years back to prove it, but along the way, he stopped trying.

Nakalulusot ang gang sa mga legalidad at parusa ng paaralan dahil kabisado niya ang batas at patakaran. Pati na rin ang iba’t ibang gimik para magkaroon ng pera ang grupo, siya ang nag-iisip. However, he and Alfon never took part in it.

He was someone passive in action, but a threat if he’d set his mind on it. At alam niya iyon. Kaya bilang pampalipas oras, paminsan-minsan niyang binu-bully ang top students pati na rin ang student council. He would threaten the positions that cost a lot of money and hard work to achieve.

Hinakbangan niya ang mga nakabuyangyang na katawan at nakapamulsang hinarap si Bino. “Wala akong loyalty. Whoever wins, they’re my friends. Alam mo na iyan, big boy.” Hindi pa rin lumuluwang ang pagkakahablot niya sa buhok ko.

“Wala nang kontrol ang mga Orleonne sa Timog!”

Magiliw niyang sinulyapan ang duguang si Byrone. “At sa tingin mo, kaya ng pamilya mo, ng mga Gotti, ang mamuno? Come to think of it, no family took over the

South.”

Nilamon ang iyak ko ng pagwawala ni Byrone kahit na marami itong bugbog na natamo. “Traydor ka talaga, Pete! Kasama ka nilang babagsak!”

“Alam mo ang dahilan kung bakit sila umalis. *He is back, Byrone.*” Nawala ang kapilyuhan, waring isang mensahe ang pinapahiwatig na dapat silang matakot.

A short silence passed as he let the message sink in. Ngunit agad na bumalik ang pagiging masayahin ni Pete pagbaling kay Bino. “Anyway, stop that, will you? Zak is lying low, another murder will not help it. And besides, you’re scaring our guest.” Napasubsob ako sa lupa matapos niyang bitawan ang buhok ko.

“Who’s that?” Bino asked.

“Another casualty.”

I stared at them in fear but I didn’t dare to say anything. The sun was already gone and there was no moon seen. It was getting dark. Muntik na akong madala sa palangiti niyang mata, but with the situation I am in right now, I know Pete could be as heartless. “Cat got your tongue?”

No. I shook my head.

“Why are you here?”

I bit my lip to hold back the tears. Pero isang bulyaw lang ni Bino ay nataranta ako at nagmakaawa. “P-please.... l-let me go.”

“I remember you, you’re the mute.”

I’m not, I just don’t want to speak.

“What the f*ck do you want?”

Hindi. Hindi ako maaaring matakot. I came here because I want to know. Probably, it’s the only thing that I want to find out and do something about. With a shaky hand, I pointed out the scissors he was holding. “G-give my scissors back.”

Umalingawngaw ang malakas na halakhak ni Bino. Everyone stared at him curiously. Ano ba ang nakakatawa? Without warning, he held a few strands of hair stucked on my face and cut it.

“You cannot get something that isn’t yours, mutie. Masuwerte ka, buhok lang ang pinutol ko sa ‘yo.”

He then licked the blades. Up close, I could see the details of the scissors. The carving had the same words that my hand traced for many years.

“For the blood.”

“What?”

“*Per Il Sanguie*. For the blood. I-it’s mine.” Stop. I should stop! Talking leads to trouble. I should shut up. Shut up!

Nawala ang kanyang ngisi. In a hazy moment, I felt a sting on my cheek. Hanggang sa naging mas mahapdi iyon. With a trembling hand, I felt something. Blood. There was blood on my hands and a red stain on the blade he was holding.

“I said, it’s not yours. Nag-iisa lang ang gunting na ito. This is recently given to me by...” He stopped himself before he could say more. “By the time I finished counting to three, you should be as far away as possible. If not, I’ll make you silent forever.”

Hindi ko inintindi ang sinabi niya. Instead, I was just staring at him while memories flooded like a tsunami.

“*You should’ve listened and stayed quiet.*” I knew it, talking leads to trouble, to danger.

“One.”

Ang kanyang pagbibilang ay isa lamang malayong echo na natatabunan ng sigaw ng mga alaala ko.

“Two.”

“It wasn’t my fault.” Unconsciously, I covered my ears. It was coming back. My nightmares are here, real than

ever. "It wasn't my fault."

Nahihintakutang singhap ang muling umalpas sa pagdantay ng tela sa duguang pisngi ko mula kay Alfon.

"Takbo, binibini."

"You should've listened and stayed quiet."

"I didn't kill her."

Walang nagsalita. Nakatitig lang sila at inaalisa ang narinig. It was too late to take it back, now they knew something. Before I could say more, I ran.

4

IL RITORNO DEL RE

Return of the King

Lang araw matapos ang nangyari, mas higit kong iniwasan ang mga taong kasangkot sa gulong napasukan ko. Mabuti na lamang, kahit kaklase ko sina Alfon at Bino, hindi sila nagkaroon ng interes na usisain ang sinabi ko.

Understandable. Sino nga ba ang mag-iisip sa mga sinabi ng isang ordinaryong estudyante? They would think it was just a nonsense babble, out of fear and panic. Or insanity. So I was left alone.

From time to time, Bino would throw curious glances my way, but I pretend not to notice, sticking to my mantra, *'Don't make friends, don't make enemies.'*

Though I want to retrieve my scissors, I never bothered. Iyon ang presyo ng kaduwagan. So much for a peaceful birthday. Maling pagkakamali noong inakala kong ordinaryong kaarawan lang iyon. Aside from my encounter with the transferees, something more unexpected waited for me at home. A birthday cake.

I've had them before, but it wasn't blank like the ones my uncle used to send. Sa pagkakataong ito, may numerong '18' at may kalakip na isang card. It says, *See you soon*. No specific date, just soon.

Maaaring sapat na ang lumaki akong malayo sa pamumuhay ng isang Kyosei. Finally, I could go home.

Sa ilang taong pagmamakaawa ko sa mga nagbabantay sa akin para makita si Uncle, ni minsan, hindi iyon nangyari. Now that I was used to living alone, I would meet him all of the sudden.

Home. *Where is home?*

Maraming nangyari nitong mga nakaraang araw. Deep down, I felt like something was coming. Or changing.

Naging usap-usapan din ang biglang pagkawala ni Byrone na lumipat umano sa ibang paaralan. Sa ilang araw na iyon, nagtaka ang karamihan sa pagsunod nina Alfon at Pete kay Bino.

The ‘Kings’ was demolished, changed in a few days, like a new group was formed, with new faces as members. Those who had been staying long in Beaumontville High claimed that the transferees were actually the original rulers, returning from two years of absence.

They were once called ‘Fortunello, Lucky Dogs.’ I should have laughed because it sounded like a sports team, but there was a deep meaning to the name.

It was said that they were chosen, a group of elites loyal to their leader. Katulad ng mga asong sunud-sunuran sa amo. Ngunit isang karangalan umano ang mapabilang sa kanila, hence the name Lucky Dogs. Fortunellos.

Bino, Alfon, Adam and the transferees were the members. Aside from sticking together, they were not doing anything. No looting, bullying on purpose and rackets. Just a bunch of bored guys. Subalit hindi maipagkakailang kinatatakutan sila. Proof was that the old members of Kings would go the other way or bow their swollen faces whenever they’d meet.

I had nothing to do with the campus legends or drama, but it had become peaceful. I guess it was better. And again, I was proven wrong when Beaumontville High was thrown into another havoc.

“Nasaan siya?!”

Nagsusumigaw si Byrone nang pumasok sa classroom habang hinahablot ang nanlalatang katawan ng isang

babae. Lahat kami ay nagulantang nang mapagmasadan ang kalunos-lunos nitong itsura. The blue overcoat was gone. Ilang butones na rin ang natanggal sa puting uniporme nito na may manggas. Her pink bra and big breasts were visible for everyone to see. Her face was swollen. As she looked up, the same cold face stared back at us.

Vivienne Wies. Byrone beat the woman he worshipped. Why?

Kasama niya ang ilang kalalakihang may katandaan na. They were not students but real thugs. Hindi nakapagtataakang nakalampas sila sa security ng paaralan, maybe they forced themselves in. Sila ang mga uri ng tao na walang pananagutan sa school board at tumatakas sa batas. Mga taong halang ang bituka. One of them even licked his lips while looking at Vivienne's torn clothes. Some smoked cigarettes and the rest were just plainly malicious.

Hindi na nakaimik ang aming guro dahil hinampas na ito sa ulo ng baseball bat ng isa sa mga lalaki. Sa lakas ng hataw, tumilapon siya at humandusay sa sahog. That was the signal for everyone to run. Except for Bino and Alfon. I ran with the others but someone grabbed me from behind.

"Oh no you don't, mutie," ani Byrone habang hablot ang buhok ko. Sa ngayon, ako naman ang hawak niya habang si Vivienne ay ipinasa sa kasama.

"Tawagan ninyo siya kung ayaw n'yong patayin ko 'to!"

All I could do was wriggle from his grasp, which was a futile effort. Byrone's face was full of bloodlust and hate.

I was just a bystander, not involved in any of them, but I felt like being played by chance. Bakit ako na naman?

Tama na ang nangyari noong unang araw.

What happened to not getting involved? And being invisible?

Lahat ay nagsitakbuhan, maaaring humihingi ng tulong. What's left was a messy room, Sir Dego lying on the floor probably dead and another senseless fight that I shouldn't be part of.

Mula sa prenteng pagkakaupo, tumayo si Alfon. "Hindi kasali ang mga binibini, Ginoong Gotti. Lalo na ang hawak mo ngayon."

"Sit down, Gentle," saway ni Bino. "Besides, Baby Byrone here can't even hurt a fly."

Bumaling ako sa ngayon ay nakikinig na si Vivienne. Kahit na ilang sapak at sampal ang natanggap niya, hindi mababakas ang sakit sa kanyang mukha. Blangko pa rin ang expression niya kahit na halos dilaan na ng manyak na may hawak sa kanya.

What made her so... cold? Why was she letting them treat her like that? Dapat siyang lumaban.

I might not be a good example to fight for my life, but I refused to die like this, hindi ngayon na paparating ang uncle ko. I had something to look forward to, I refused to die until then!

In the middle of struggling to free myself, someone faintly knocked on the open door. "Am I late for class?"

Lahat ay bumaling sa bagong dating. He wore the same uniform like it wasn't meant for school, like it was made for walking with his head up high, like it was made just for him and no one else.

He was lean, tall alright, no tattoos or piercings as far as I could see. Compared to Byrone, he was not flashy. He had black slightly long and unkempt hair, like someone who had just woken up.

But... there was something about him. He was leaning against the door frame, looking at us through his bored gray eyes.

“You son of a b*tch! Sa wakas, nagpakita ka na rin!”

Namulsa ang lalaki. A smirk etched his face. “Ah, Gotti. Long time no see. You look,” at pinasadahan ng tingin si Byrone na bakas pa rin ang pamamaga ng mukha, “...good.”

“Bakit bumalik ka pa? At kukunin mo pa ang teritoryo ko? Lahat ng iniwan mo, inalagaan ko! Leave the city!” Lalong humigpit ang kanyang hila sa buhok ko kaya napangiwi na lang ako sa sakit.

“Sabi ko sa 'yo, padalos-dalos pa rin 'yan,” singit ni Bino.

“Zak,” called by a tiny voice.

Lumipat ang tingin ng tinawag sa ngayon ay bahagyang nakangiting si Vivienne. Actually, she looked ecstatic, like someone glad to be saved.

“Sa wakas... bumalik ka rin.”

So the vixen knew how to smile, she's not as cold as I thought.

There was no response. Instead, his face went grim, shifting his focus on me.

“I said leave the city!” Byrone pulled my hair harder and I whimpered.

“And if I don't want to?” Zak was still looking at me.

I could not look away. I stared back at the man with gray expressionless eyes. My gut tells me he's one of them. Those kind of people one should never be crossed, like Gustavo Qapone.

A shiver ran down my spine. He's someone with skeletons in his closet, but would not reveal anything; would not give away details about themselves.

Like me. Or not.

“Too bad, your little Vivienne’s too broken for you to use again. Konting-konti na lang at matitikman ko na rin kung ano ang kinabaliwan mo sa kanya. So f*cking close, but then you, you came back!”

So it’s him. The old leader. Fortunello’s master and Vivienne’s lover.

“You’re free to slash her throat.”

Nasaksihan ko kung paano napalitan ng gulat at sakit ang emosyon sa mukha ni Vivienne.

Heartless. He’s heartless.

Even Byrone was caught off guard. Kung hindi niya tutulungan ang dating nobya, paano na akong hindi niya kilala? I doubled my effort to let go from Byrone’s grip. Walang ibang magliligtas sa akin.

“Then, I’ll add this little sh*t. Some random body to bury because of your fault.”

Panic gave me additional strength. With my newfound adrenaline, I had almost freed myself. Almost.

“Stupid bitch!” Byrone slapped me.

Sa sobrang lakas, umikot ang paningin ko at bumagsak ako sa sahog. The impact left a ringing sound in my ears. With a blurry vision, I could only see fuzzy movements around the room. There were screams of anger and fear. One thing that’s unmoving, was Vivienne sitting like an undressed statue. Hanggang sa unti-unting bumalik ang paningin ko. Lalong nagulo ang buong silid dahil sa nagkalat na mga libro, sirang upuan at naghihinang na katawan at sigaw ni Byrone.

“F*ck you, Orleonne! F*ck you!”

“Shut it, loser! You’ll be dead before the weekend!” sigaw ni Bino sabay sipa sa tiyan ng nakabulagta.

Only three remained standing; Alfon, Bino and Zak.

Agad na tumayo si Vivienne at pasuray-suray na lumapit sa leader ng grupo.

Hinagisan niya ang babae ng panyo. "Cover yourself," he commanded coldly then, turned to me.

To me.

Tinulungan niya akong tumayo. I knew there was something wrong with him. He was too close that I could look straight into his soul, and he didn't have one. Hindi ako makapagsalita nang hinaplos niya ang pisngi ko na may mahabang *Band Aid* para takpan ang sugat mula sa gunting. Ngayon ay namamaga na iyon dahil sa sampal ni Byrone.

Napaigik ako sa sakit nang mapadiin ang kanyang haplos. Agad niyang binawi ang kamay. Nasa ganoon kaming posisyon nang dumating ang ibang miyembro ng Fortunello.

"Send her to the clinic," utos ni Zak.

Hindi lang ako ang naguguluhan sa nangyayari. Pinaglipat-lipat ko ang tingin mula sa kanya at kay Vivienne. Between me and her, she needed more help. Halos hubad na rin siya dahil sa punit na uniporme.

"Halika ka na, binibini," gaya sa akin ni Alfon sabay lahad ng isa pang panyong puti.

"You, too," matamlay na utos ni Zak kay Vivienne. Agad namang sumunod ang babae.

Bago umalis, yumuko ako bilang pasasalamat. "T-thank you."

"My pleasure, Hanna..."

For no reason, I felt more afraid, yet, my eyes lingered on him. He knew my name, it bothered me so much.

Matapos arestuhin ang mga nanggulo at maging si Byrone, walang nasuspendeng miyembro ng Fortunello. The school board even thanked them for the 'heroic'

deed. Dahil doon, mas magiging tahimik na umano ang Beaumondville High.

They should've known better.

Ang pagsulpot ng mga transferee ay paghahanda lamang para sa isang totoong pagbabalik.

Because on that day, Fortunello became complete.

Zachary Orleonne, as they say, the king has returned.

5

RIMBORSARE IL DEBITO

Repaying Debt

"So... how was it?"

S Another curious crowd asked me about my encounter last week. This time, four girls surrounded me with suffocating scent of perfumes, lotion and fruity shampoo. Ilang araw na ang lumipas pero hindi pa rin humuhupa ang mga nagtatanong. Asking what it was like to see the action upclose, meeting Fortunello and being involved.

I never answered. No, I was not involved, and if I were, I didn't want to.

Nang magtangka akong umiwas, nahablot ng isa sa kanila ang braso ko at binalya sa pader.

"Listen, you little b*tch. Alam ng lahat na hindi ka pipi, you're just too snob. Now, why don't you answer our question before I cut that foul thing you call tongue?"

"Well, well, it's Amber and the three little *Barbies*."

Napalingon kaming lahat sa nagsalita. Si Vivienne iyon, nakasandal sa pader habang humihithit ng sigarilyo. May kaunti pa ring marka ng pasa sa kanyang mukha, pero hindi nabawasan niyon ang alindog niya. With the golden hair cascading down her back, bruises didn't make her less perfect.

"Stop bullying innocent Hanna. You can ask me instead, I was there too." Sinuklay niya ang buhok gamit ang kamay.

"I bet you didn't know what happened. Sumarado ang mga mata mo sa pagkakabugbog ni Byrone."

Napaismid ang mga kasama ni Amber.

After puffing out the smoke, she threw the cigarette only burnt halfway. "At least, I was there. And you?" Despite the insult, her voice was sultry.

Naningkit ang mga mata ni Amber, tuluyang nalipat ang atensyon nito sa bagong dating. "You're acting like you're better than the rest of us! Using your 'tragic' past as an excuse and sticking to one person then, to another."

"Who told you I'm better? Anyway, your father would love to hear this: Amber, Mayor's little princess, searching the dark alleys, talking to... people like us."

Pagkabanggit sa ama, bumakat ang panandaliang takot sa mukha ni Amber ngunit agad din iyong nawala. "B*tch," wika niya at binitawan ang mga braso ko, pagkatapos ay umalis kasunod ang mga alipores nito.

Nang maiwan kami, nagpasalamat ako kay Vivienne. "Thank you."

"I did not do it for you. They hated me ever since, I'm just returning the favor." She pulled out a box of cigarette from her pocket and took out a stick.

"Uhm... you shouldn't smoke in school..." Hindi ko na tinapos ang sinasabi ko. Why would I care? Tinulungan niya ako pero hindi iyon dahilan para manghimasok. I should shut up and leave.

Ibinalik niya ang sigarilyo, lumapit at pinasadahan ako ng tingin. After tucking a few loose strands of hair behind my ear, she whispered, "Good girls like you should stay good. Stay in the light and be safe." Then, she kissed me on the cheeks. "You wouldn't want to get hurt, right?"

Napatango lang ako.

"Good girl." Then, she left me with a seductive smile.

Of course, I knew what she meant. Iyon din ang parati kong isinasaksak sa isip ko, pero nitong nakaraang mga araw, unti-unti kong nilalabag ang sariling paalala.

I was talking more than I should. I was somehow... open.

Nothing's the same anymore. Not just me, but around me. Naghari ang Fortunello at walang kumontra. Nabuwag ang Kings ngunit walang nagsaya. We were all anxious of what would happen next.

Pinalis ko sa isip ang mga nangyari at tinahak ang papuntang library. Dahil Huwebes, mas mabuti nang agahan ang paghiram ng libro para hindi na kailangang dumaan kinabukasan. Mas matao roon sa huling araw ng klase. The last thing that I needed now was the attention. I had loads of it the past few days.

Aside from biking near the fields, reading was my way of killing time. I would usually go for biographies. For me, there's something fascinating about the lives of other people. Colorful. Grounded on reality. However, a force was nagging me to read something different.

I chose *Cat Cinderella* by Giambattista Basile. Definitely not my usual book. Mula pa noon, iniiwasan ko nang magbasa ng fairy tales. Para sa akin, wala iyong katotohanan. Pero susubukan ko, kahit ngayon lang. Ngunit nagmadali akong umalis nang makita ang oras sa analog clock ng library. Gagabihin na naman ako ng uwi.

Tinakbo ko ang bakanteng hallway palabas ng main building. The flickering lights on the ceiling made me stop. Napapabalita ang pagkakaroon ng pansamantalang power shortage sa sentro ng siyudad, pero hindi ko akalain madadamay ang paaralan.

Not a good sign. Flickering lights were not good.

Then, it all went out.

Nagsimula akong mag-panic habang hinahabol ang paghinga, hanggang sa impit nang umiyak.

Ironic. There were times that I don't fear death, but

shivers in darkness. I don't like the dark, bad things happen in it.

Nasa proseso na ako ng pagpapakawala ng sigaw nang may humablot sa mga braso ko.

"Come," wika ng boses ng isang lalaki.

Bago pa makasagot ay hinila na niya ako habang tumatakbo. I had no time to think, I just wanted to get out. Hanggang sa makita ko sa unahan ang liwanag ng takipsilim, doon pa lamang ako binitiwang at muli niyang tinahak ang madilim na daan.

I'm certain it was Zak.

Bago pa makapagpasalamat, agad na siyang umalis. Ang tanging nagawa ko ay tanawin ang papalayo niyang pigura.



Kinabukasan, bago magsimula ang klase, lumabas ako upang bumili ng inumin sa vendo machine. Pagbalik ko, wala na ang hiniram kong libro sa desk. Bukod sa kailangan ko iyong isauli sa library, nangangalahati pa lang ako sa pagbabasa. Wala naman sigurong magnanakaw ng lumang libro lalo na at pag-aari iyon ng eskuwelahan. Subalit kahit anong halughog sa bag, hindi ko iyon mahanap. Hindi ko muna iyon ipinaalam sa library at muling humiram. Sa pagkakataong ito, isang biography ang aking kinuha.

Napagpasyahan kong mamasyal sa park nang sumunod na araw sakay ng bisikleta habang sinasalubong ng mukha ko ang hangin.

Despite the lively park, I never mingled with anyone. I just sat there alone with a book just like I did all the past weekends I spent in solitude. Halfway through a chapter,

Bino's boisterous and loud voice was distinct among the men he was with.

Fortunello walked through the park like they owned it. Nangunguna si Zak habang nakasunod ang ibang miyembro. Aside from Bino's brute stature, they looked decent but at the same time, not.

I stared for too long, huli na nang mapagtanto kong dadaan sila sa harapan ko. Quickly averting my gaze, I pretended to read.

Should I ride my bike and pedal away? No, there was no time. One more thing, it would be obvious. Kahit wala silang interes na pakialaman ang isang tulad ko, mas mabuti na ang mag-ingat at kusang lumayo.

A few more seconds and they were right in front of me, there was no time to run. Ibinuro ko ang ulo sa libro, humihiling na hindi mapansin.

"Found ya!" masiglang sigaw ni Bino.

No, he couldn't possibly talk to me.

Umahon ang kaba ko nang dahan-dahan niyang ibinaba ang hawak kong libro. The first thing I saw was black hair and then, gray eyes. Gray eyes that were boring into me. It was Zak.

"Impressive. You can read upside down."

And instead of fear, I felt ashamed. Fortunello gave me curious looks except for Pete, whose smiling eyes did not give anything. Zak was still leaning forward, his face inches from mine. All at once, he grabbed my hands tightly and pulled me away. I looked back at the bench, the book had fallen and my bike was unattended.

No. I won't be dragged like a rag. Gamit ang naipong lakas, binawi ko ang mga kamay ko. I was set off balance and ended up against someone's chest—Alfon's.

"Paumanhin," sabi niya at itinayo ako mula sa

pagkakasandal.

“Zak, you’re picking up chicks now?” natatawang pahayag ni Bino. He turned to me with a teasing wave. “Hello there!”

I tried to bolt into a run, but Pete was quick enough to discretely block my way. I was like a kitten cornered by dogs, the Lucky Dogs. People started to notice, but no one did anything.

“Zak, if you want women, I can always hook you up. Ba’t ka nagtatiyaga sa pipi? Although I admit,” hinawakan ni Bino ang buhok kong pinutulan niya at pinaglaruan, “you’re not that bad to look at.”

He didn’t bulge an inch when I pushed him. I am so weak, I’m pathetic. Someone grabbed my hand again, Zak, this time holding me gently.

He drew me closer and whispered in my ear, “Hello, Hanna.”

I turned stiff with the realization. It was him all along.

With a satisfied smile he added, “Come with me. I promise... I won’t kill you today.”

Paano niya nagagawa iyon? Paano niya sabay na nababawasan at nadadagdagan ang mga takot ko? His voice soothed my fears, pero panibagong uri ng kaba ang unti-unting umaalma.

Nakakatakot dahil mabilis niyang natibag ang mga pangamba ko. Kasabay niyon ang pagpapaalalang dapat akong mag-ingat.

This man, is definitely *him*. Somehow, I felt like I’ve found a piece of the puzzle.

“I’ve saved you twice, time to pay me back.”

Tama, kahit pa sabihing siya ang dahilan kung bakit sumugod sa eskuwelahan si Byrone at nadamay ako,

nagawa pa rin niya akong iligtas. Siya rin ang tumulong sa akin noong mawalan ng kuryente sa school.

Tama si Uncle, hindi ako dapat humingi ng tulong kung hindi ko alam ang kapalit. Now I have no choice but to repay him, and to find more pieces of the puzzle.

Ito ba ang kapangyarihan ng isang Zachary Orleonne? Ang mapaikot niya ang lahat?

He then commanded others, "You know what to do," tukoy sa gamit ko.

Hinayaan ko siyang igiya ako palabas ng park. Yes, I know it's stupid, but I could not help but let him. Hindi siya dapat pagkatiwalaan, pero nanaig ang kuryosidad ko. Ano ba ang kailangan niya? Kung balak niya akong gawan ng masama, matagal na sanang nangyari iyon at walang testigo. But he didn't.

I was ushered to a black motorcycle that I usually see on TV, not on a local parking space. Agad siyang umangkas habang nanatili akong nakatayo.

"Get on."

Hesitantly, I did while the other part of my head screamed that it was a stupid decision.

He drove like a monster, never not slowed down on traffic lights, lanes, anything. Kahit ano pa ang pagnanais ko na yumakap sa kanya dahil sa takot, kinontrol ko ang sarili at humawak na lang sa laylayan ng kanyang jacket.

Humantong kami sa Upper District kung saan mga maykaya lang sa buhay ang nakatira. People with money, respectable or not. Middle District is where middle class families live, while the farthest South is the Red Light District, the most dangerous part of the city. Castello dei Capo, where I live doesn't belong to any of them. It was at the city border, where the farms and plantations were located.

Zak took a turn at a narrower flat road. Ahead was a black gate that automatically opened. Maybe it was one of those computer-generated houses that had sensors and stuff.

Further ahead, lay a big white house with a beautiful wide garden. Unlike Castello dei Capo, it was beautiful inside as it was outside. Halatang alaga ang mga halaman at namumukadkad ang mga bulaklak.

Sa sentro ng hardin ay ang tree house at playground na may makukulay na swing at kung ano pang mga bagay na nanaisin ng isang bata. The side's building wall went up and revealed a long line of cars and motorcycles. I didn't know much about vehicles, but I knew this garage amounted to millions. Pumarada rin ang mga nakasunod na miyembro ng grupo nila.

Pagkapasok ng bahay, ilang lalaking nakaitim ang nakasalubong ko at lantarang may bitbit na mga baril ang mga ito. Kasabay kong naglakad si Zak habang nakasunod ang iba sa likuran.

Everytime I took slow steps of doubt, someone would lightly push me from behind, until we ended up in room meant for entertainment. There were two billiard tables, a minibar, a token machine for games and a black circular leather couch.

On one side of the wall was a big flat TV screen, game controls and stacks of CDs. Based on the speakers placed at every corner, this room had a good sound system. It overlooked a view of the whole Beaumondville City through the glassdoor and a terrace.

Isa sa mga miyembro nila ang sumipol, then, Bino chimed in and said, "Na-miss ko ang tumambay rito. As usual, wala kang kupas, Gentle. OC ka pa rin sa kalinisan."

"Maraming salamat, Ginoong Bino."

“It was not a compliment. I’m saying it’s gay!”

“Don’t scold him for being clean, it’s his job.” Pete played the Rubik’s Cube, changing the colors and the pattern with his quick hands. Then, he turned to Alfon. “You like... cleaning, don’t you?”

I swear it had another meaning. Those smiling eyes did not fool me.

“Don’t listen to him, Gentle. I still like you even if you do gay things,” alo ni Bino habang ginugulo ang maayos na buhok ni Alfon.

“That’s so wrong, dude,” singit naman ng isang miyembrong may mahabang dreadlocks at kayumangging balat.

“Shut it, crackhead!”

“Whatever... dude.” At walang anumang umupo ito sa sofa upang matulog.

I just stood there, listening to the banter. Now that I’m here, what am I supposed to do? Awkwardly glancing around, I couldn’t help being in awe.

I may live a comfortable life, but this was too much. Zak must be living like a king.

Muli niya akong iginiya sa nag-iisang pinto sa dulo ng malaking silid. Kung ano-ano ang nakadikit na stickers doon ng cartoon characters at *Disney* princesses. Hindi bagay ang makulay na pinto sa pamamahay na iyon. Walang sabi-sabing binuksan ni Zak iyon at pinasok ako.

“For a while, little Hanna.” Then, he closed it and locked it from the outside.

Sinubukan kong kumatok upang pagbuksan ako mula sa labas. Hindi ito pagdukot dahil kusa akong sumama, ngunit walang lohikal na paliwanag kung bakit ako ikinulong sa kuwarta. Hanggang sa sumuko na ako at nilibang na lang ang sarili.

Ngayon ko lang napansing isa iyong maliit na library. Silid-pambabae na may puting bookshelf, kurtina at dingding. May sofa at mga gamit na may iba-ibang shades ng pink. Sa liwanag ng ilaw at kulay, para akong nasa isang life-sized doll house.

Matapos pagmasdan ang goldfish sa bowl, itinuon ko ang atensyon sa bookshelf. It was a collection of fairy tales. At the bottom, a familiar book cover stood out. I took it out for a closer look.

Cat Cinderella.

Pagbuklat ng cover, tumambad ang library form at pangalan ko. Kaya ba hindi ko makita ito dahil kinuha ni Zak? Pero bakit?

I started reading while I sat on the sofa. Siguro naman, walang magagalit kung nakialam ako sa gamit nila. In the first place, I borrowed the book from the school library.

According to the description, this was one of the oldest versions of *Cinderella*. Kids knew that she was the kindest of all, but with the book that I'm reading now, she wasn't always innocent. In fact, she was a murderer.

I knew it, no one is innocent. Kahit sa libro, may tinatagong sikreto ang mga karakter. They were not perfect, they were all sinners.

Ilang pahina na lang at matatapos na ang aklat, subalit inabot ako ng antok. Alam kong hindi iyon ang oras ng pagtulog and it wasn't the safest place either.

"Come with me. Promise, I won't kill you today."

Hindi ko alam kung ano ang pakay niya sa akin, but with the things that he had done, isang bahagi ng utak ko ang nagsasabing huwag akong mangamba.



Nagising ako nang masakit ang aking batok. Marahil mula sa matagal na pagtulog sa alanganing posisyon. Nang maalala ang pagkakakulong sa kuwarto, mabilis kong tinungo ang pinto bitbit ang libro. Bukas na iyon.

Tahimik na ang nasa labas. Bottles of beer and boxes of pizza were the evidence of the past fun gathering. Now, there was only silence and people were gone. Well, there was one.

Zak stood by the glass door, alone. In a dim-lit room, he stared at the city. As he heard my footsteps, he walked to the exit.

“Let’s go.”

Hindi ako sumunod, nakamasid lang sa kanya. I needed answers, a lot of them.

“I said, let’s go.”

Wait. Mungkahi ko gamit ang mga palad.

Dali-dali kong inilibot ang paningin sa silid upang maghanap ng panulat at papel. Wala mang nakita, panibagong ideya ang naisip ko. Binuklat ko ang hawak na libro at may hinanap. Nang makita iyon, lumapit ako sa kanya at itinuro iyon.

Why. The word was printed on the bottom of a page. *Why,* then pointed to myself. *Why did you bring me here?*

Why. I pointed at the book again. *Why do you have my book?*

However, I knew it was not enough. Even a few uttered words could not cover for all my questions. I should break my rule... I should speak, ask... involve myself.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” My shaky voice started out as a whisper. “That night, in my room. You came and took my scissors. It was you.” I emphasized every word to let him know I am sure.

“I know it was you.”

My heart beat wildly as he walked closer, looking down with his intimidating eyes. I’m afraid now. Not because of him, but because of the things I might know.

“Ah, little Hanna... of course it was me.”