

CHAPTER

One

66 **M**other, you're wasting your breath. I will never take over dad's company." Tiim-bagang na inayos ni Ivan Arkain Sevilla ang pagkakaparada ng kanyang motorsiklo sa gilid ng pader. Binunot niya ang susi sa ignition saka humakbang papunta sa direksyon ng maliit niyang apartment.

"How could you do this!" His mother's voice trembled on the other line. "You're our only son! Who else would inherit the company if not you? Naisip mo ba kung ano'ng mangyayari sa kompanya natin kung hindi mo 'yun patatakbuhan? Naisip mo ba kung ano'ng mangyayari sa pamilya natin? How could you turn your back on us like this?"

Shaking his head, Ivan shoved the keys in

his pocket.

Nobody could lay on the guilt-trip like one's parents. He supposed every family had their own brand of bullsh*t. Some parents treated their children as investments and expected them to pull the family out of poverty. Some expected their offspring to carry on their dreams and ambitions as if the kids were extension of themselves. Some parents just didn't give a f*ck. There were healthier families out there, he was sure, but one way or another, everyone's got their own bullsh*t.

"Ivan, you need to understand—"

"No, Mother," he bit out. "It's you who don't—"

"Ano ba'ng ginagawa mo sa buhay mo?"

His jaw clamped down hard.

Ah, here the f*ck it is.

"How old are you, Ivan? You're twenty-four and you still don't have a decent job. We didn't send you to all those private schools just so you could post practically naked pictures online. Your cousin Anselmo is running for vice mayor this coming election, your cousin Hanna just got into law school. Janna, who's two years younger than you, just got selected for this year's TOYM for social entrepreneurship. And you? What about you, Ivan? What have you been doing?"

His jaw hardened as he strode toward the

stairs.

Ladies and gentlemen, meet his mother, the classic Asian parent comparing her kids to other people's kids as if it was her obligation to the future of mankind.

How f*cking cliché.

Tiim-labi siyang umakyat sa hagdan patungo sa pinto ng apartment. "I'm done discussing this. I'll talk to you later—"

"You're still painting?"

The condescending tone made his muscles lock.

He shut his eyes tight and breathed through his mouth. Could this day get anymore f*cked up?

He just came from a twelve-hour photoshoot that involved grease, dirt, and copious amount of fake blood. He had been running on three hours of sleep and he had just gotten off a two-hour motorcycle drive.

He didn't need this sh*t.

Nagmulat siya at nagpatuloy sa pag-akyat ng hagdan. "Mother, this conversation is going nowhe—"

His eyes snagged something at his periphery.

Sa kanyang pinto, nakasandal ang isang matangkad na babaeng may mahaba at tuwid na tuwid at itim na buhok. Nakaitim itong sleeveless shirt at pantalon. She stood there

under the unforgiving light of the fluorescent, her dark clothes and hair a sharp tint of black against the white wall beside his door, her pale luminescent skin adding another contrast to the colors, jarring his senses for a second.

“Ivan?” pakli ng ina mula sa telepono. “I’m still talking to you—”

“I’ll talk to you later, Mother.”

“Ivan—”

Tinapos niya ang tawag at isinuksok ang phone sa bulsa.

He stared at the woman, his heart ramming against his ribcage. The woman was a knockout, but he knew that was not the reason he could feel his blood pounding in his ears.

Muscles clenched tight, his eyes took in the way the woman stood. The graceful lines of her body looked relaxed but alert, like a sleek large cat lounging, ready to pounce and tear someone’s jugular in a nanosecond.

It was irrational, the feeling that he got. But ever since he was a kid, he had always had a way of knowing things. He called it his spider sense, that uncomfortable feeling alarming him when something or someone was a threat.

Ganoon ang naramdaman niya nang mga oras na iyon, pero sandaang beses na mas malala.

Eyes narrowed, he strode to his door.

The more he got closer to the woman, the

more his heart pounded. It could have been mistaken for sexual tension. All that long black hair made him think of wrapping the inky strands around his fist and pulling it hard, of sinking his teeth into that soft milky skin to leave his mark, of ripping all those black clothes with his bare hands.

But there was something else. Something more primitive, something that had guided the human brain through million years of evolution. It triggered the fight-or-flight response, that deeply rooted instinct that warned someone that something was dangerous.

Deadly.

He stopped a few feet away from the woman; his gaze alert, his muscles taut. "Can I help you?"

His hard baritone came out curt, but he didn't give a f*ck. He had a feeling he'd better follow his instincts now or he would end up as dead meat.

Up close, the woman was even more stunning. Sharp cheekbones that looked like it could cut glass, cat-like eyes that tracked his every movement, plump lips that most women aspired to attain using fillers and other sh*t. But it was the steel in her dark eyes that had him by the balls. She was beautiful in the way wild lethal things were beautiful.

"Ivan Arkain Sevilla?" Her voice was throaty,

almost girlish, and it sent a bolt of fire to his c*ck.

Sonofab*tch. “Do I know you?” His voice was harsh. Icy. Furious that his body reacted the way it did. “What do you want?”

Tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi ng babae, at lalong napuno ng tensyon ang kanyang mga kalamnan.

Humakbang ang estranghera palapit sa kanya at inangat ang isang kamay nang nakaharap sa kanya ang palad.

His eyes widened and he jerked back, stepping away. “What the f*ck?”

May kung anong init na sumingaw mula sa palad ng estranghera.

Lumawak ang ngiti ng babae, at biglang nagtayuan ang mga balahibo sa kanyang batok.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

We?

His gaze flew around, expecting other strangers to jump out of nowhere and whale on him. That was his mistake. He shouldn’t have taken his eyes off the woman.

A blast of liquid fire shot at him.

Sonofab*tch!

Tumilapon si Ivan sa ere at umarko ang nagbabagang sakit sa kanyang sistema na para bang may asidong kumakain sa kanyang mga ugat at laman. Narinig niya ang marahas niyang

pagsigaw.

Bumagsak siya sa sementadong sahig ng hallway.

He choked on air.

He couldn't breathe... couldn't feel anything.

F*ck. F*ck. F*ck.

Sonofab*tch!

Sinubukan niyang gumalaw, pero hindi niya magawa. Unti-unting nagdilim ang paningin niya.

Naaninag niya ang anino ng babae sa kanyang tagiliran.

Sonofab*tch.

“You have a lot to learn.” Iyon ang kanyang huling narinig bago siya tuluyang nawalan ng malay.



“Sonofab*tch!” Marahas na bumukas ang mga mata ni Ivan, at hinihinal na napabalikwas siya ng upo.

His heart rammed in his chest and his muscles burned as if he just ran a six-hour long marathon with barely any break. Sweat dripped down his temples and chest, dampening his white shirt.

F*ck, f*ck, f*ck!

Lumibot ang tingin niya sa paligid.

Nasa loob siya ng kanyang apartment, nakaupo sa kanyang sariling kama.

He jumped out of bed and ran his hands down his body—his arms, his torso, his legs. Everything was intact. Walang pasa, walang sugat, walang dugo.

“What the f*ck...”

Nanghihinang napaupo siya sa kama at napahawak sa ulo. The memories of last night burned through his mind. The shot of fire, the blinding pain, the way his body crashed on the cement floor, the way his mind blanked out.

Naihilamos niya ang mga kamay sa mukha.

What the f*ck happened?

Hindi siya naka-drugs. Kahit kailan ay hindi siya nag-drugs. He tried weed once when he was in high school, but it only gave him a headache. He never touched that sh*t again. What the f*ck happened?

“Mabuti at nagising ka na.”

The woman’s throaty voice punched him like a gunshot.

“You have good regenerating abilities. I helped jumpstart your system, but your body took care of itself after minimal prodding.”

Lumagatok ang tunog ng mga yabag sa tiles na sahig ng silid, at huminto ang babae sa tapat niya. Tumambad sa kanyang paningin ang black combat boots nito.

“I know it’s a lot to take in. But we need to discuss something important.”

He jerked his head up to face the woman standing in front of him.

She could have been carved out of every man's twisted fantasy. Her long black hair fell down her back in a sleek waterfall, framing the strong lines of her angular face. Every line and curve of her features were a study of perfect proportion as if God himself calculated and measured each f*cking one. Her pale smooth skin was a glaring contrast against her dark hair and clothes. And that goddamn body? She's a f*cking sex bot with her heavy breasts and tiny waist encased in that sleeveless top. Her shapely hips and legs in those black pants could star in wet dreams of many men. If she turned around, Ivan was sure she had a f*ckable a*s.

F*cking sh*t. What the hell was this?

Tilting her head, the woman stared back at him with a harsh glint in her eyes. "Hindi panaginip ang nangyari kagabi at hindi rin panaginip ang ngayon."

Gritting his teeth, he clenched his muscles for a blow. "Who are you?"

He wanted to deny it, but goddamn it, he knew the woman was not bullsh*tting him. It was his spider sense screaming at him again. Last night was not a dream.

"Eleina Razaiden, Captain of Isoff Planetary Defense System. Isoff is a planet a billion

lightyears away from Earth.”

He froze, his eyes widening. What the f*ck?

Planetary Defense System? A planet a billion lightyears away from Earth? He knew what happened last night was out of whack, but a goddamn alien? Hindi ba p'wedeng secret CIA agent muna na gusto siyang i-recruit para sa mga taong may superpowers? O miyembro ng kung anong secret tribe sa mundo na mayroong hidden powers?

A f*cking alien?

The woman's smile widened, and a sudden rush of fire gripped his c*ck like a f*cking curse. Lalong nanigas ang kanyang mga kalamnan. Sonofab*tch. This was not the time to get a f*cking hard-on!

“Does this man look familiar to you?”

Itinaas ng estranghera ang isang braso at ibinuka ang palad. May isang maliit at itim na cube doon. Kumawala ang liwanag mula sa aparato at nabuo ang three-dimensional holographic image ng isang may-edad na lalaki.

“Do you know him?” she intoned.

He wanted to yell at her to get the f*ck out, but a mixture of shock and numbness only made him stare at the holographic image.

The man looked like an older version of him who had his sh*t together. The guy wore a three-piece slate gray suit, dress shoes, and had

his perfectly cut hair brushed back. He looked dignified, in-control, and loaded as f*ck. He probably ran on four hours of sleep, controlled an empire, and attended galas every weekend. This man was the version of him that his parents could only dream of.

It was not him.

“That’s Arkain Rauscher Sevilla,” the woman explained in her goddamn f*ck-me voice. “He’s one of the top soldiers of the Isoff Republic.”

Dumoble ang tensyon sa kanyang katawan. Soldier of Isoff Republic. A soldier from another planet. He did not know what the f*ck she was talking about, but he sure as hell knew that the ridiculously perfect man was his great-great-great grandfather. The grandfather who built the town of Sevilla in Camarines Sur. Ito iyong ninuno nila na sinasabi ng mga kamag-anak nila na kamukhang-kamukha raw niya. They had this guy’s huge-a*s portrait hanging on the foyer of their ancestral house.

Nagpatuloy ang estranghera. “N’ung 1800s, pinadala siya sa mundong ito para sa isang misyon. Sa kung anong dahilan, pinili niyang tumira rito. Nobody exhibited potential extraordinary abilities from his lineage so the Republic chose not to intervene.”

The image shifted, iba’t ibang mukha na nakilala ni Ivan bilang mga ninuno niya, ang

tumambad sa kanyang harapan. The Sevillas were an egoistic clan that had portraits of their ancestors hanging on their ancestral house to remind everyone what a f*cking big shot they were.

Mabilis na sumulpot at nagpalit-palit ang mga imahe na parang mga channel sa telebisyon na nililipat ng dalaga. Pabago nang pabago ang mga ito hanggang sa dumating sa tatay niya. Tapos ay dumating at huminto sa tatlong dimensyonal na imahe niya.

“Then, you came.” Binalingan siya ng babae.

She had dark gray eyes and facial features that looked Eurasian but not quite. It was as if she had traits from almost all races and blended them all together to create the most perfect facial structure.

May napanood si Ivan sa *YouTube* noon na sinabi na darating ang araw na mag-i-interbreed ang populasyon sa mundo hanggang sa puntong wala nang matatawag na race dahil naghalu-halo na ang mga ito. It would probably look like this. Like her. This homicidal woman was the future of goddamn mankind.

Sinara ng dalaga ang palad at nawala ang kanyang holograpikong imahe.

“It was a simple case of passing genes. Sa ’yo lumabas ang genes ni Arkain. Tell me, you’ve always had strong instincts, don’t you, Ivan?”

His stare remained icy. Alam niya ang sinasabi ng babae. Mula pagkabata, mayroon na siyang malakas na pakiramdam. Hindi siya nakakakita ng multo o kung ano pa man, pero naroon ang kakaibang pakiramdam kapag may mali, kapag nagsisinungaling ang isang tao, o may mangyayaring hindi maganda. He could smell bullsh*t a mile away. He never got lost. Even if it was his first time going to a new place, he could find it with barely any directions. When he discovered *Spider-Man* as a kid and learned about spider sense, he thought it was a lot like that.

The corners of the woman's blood red lips curled as she examined his reaction. "You know what I'm talking about. It's a basic sense for those who possesses our abilities. We feel that way because we can sense certain wave patterns. It's due to our genes that could harness energy and matter and convert them at will into whatever form needed."

Binuksan nito ang isang palad. "Like fire."

Blue flame ignited and danced across the woman's palm, making Ivan jump back. The heat radiating off the fire warned him it was not a visual trick.

"Or wind." Namatay ang apoy at napalitan ng isang maliit na ipu-ipo. The spinning air stirred strands of the woman's dark hair, swaying it

lightly. “Or water.” Water pumped out of her hand and spilled to the floor.

Sinara nito ang palad at tinitigan siya.

Her gaze could cut through metal.

“Last night, I attacked you to test the synchronization level of energies in your body. Your body’s energy could only block about five percent of my attack. Your current ability is way below average. But you have potential.”

Sinipat ng babae ang buong katawan niya at nagtagis ang kanyang bagang nang mapadako iyon sa pagitan ng kanyang mga hita. He was f*cking hard as rock.

As sick as it was, he knew why. The woman was danger and sex, like she could f*ck you and kill you while you cum. The combination of danger and shock messed up with his system. It was a lot like how male blackwidows still f*cked female blackwidows despite the risk of getting devoured alive. It was a primitive biological urge engraved in the DNA. There was no way to fight it.

A flush darkened the pale skin of the woman’s cheeks as she stared at his hard-on. Her pulse fluttered at the base of her throat and a hazy glint glazed her eyes.

A sadistic smile twisted his mouth. He wasn’t the gambling type, but if he was, he’d bet a month’s worth of earnings that Captain Eleina

Razaiden was wet between her thighs.

Her gaze flew back to his face as if she heard his thoughts, and her eyes narrowed into slits when she saw the derisive sneer on his hard mouth.

Tilting her head, she raised a brow. “Isang pruweba na nagawang gumaling agad ng katawan mo matapos kong buksan ang daluyan ng enerhiya ng mga ugat mo.”

A scathing laughter almost spilled out of his throat.

The woman practically said, ‘moving on...’

“What do you want?” pakli ulit niya.

Hindi pa rin nito sinasagot ang pinakaimportanteng tanong: What did she want to do with him? Why the f*ck was he here?

“I told you, no one in Arkain’s lineage showed potential ability to harness and manipulate energy for the past hundred years so the Republic did nothing about your family. Then, you showed up. I’m here to take you to Isoff. We will teach you how to control your abilities and—”

“Sonofab*tch!” He shot to his feet and jumped away from the woman. He should have known this was what she wanted! “Get out!”

“As I’ve said, I’m here to escort you to Isoff—”

“No f*cking thanks. Get out!” Itinuro niya ang pinto.

“Well, then.”

Before he could curse again, she pulled her arm back and shot it forward, blasting him with an energy burst that hit him straight in the gut. It felt like he'd been rammed by a freight train. The force threw him back and slammed him against a wall, jarring his flesh and bones. That goddamn b*tch!

Snarling, he jerked up, but the woman was on him, her thighs straddling his hips, her forearm pinning his throat. Her long straight hair spilled across his shoulders and chest, shrouding him in shadows and a heady sweet scent. Her eyes glowed silver.

“Get off!” he roared and bucked his hips, trying to throw her off, but she only pushed her body harder against his. “You goddamn—” He froze, his breath hitching in his throat.

The woman stilled above him, too.

Her soft mound was pressed tight against the length of his c*ck, and he could feel himself thickening and throbbing against her softness like a goddamn school boy having his first taste of porn. Sonofab*tch.

“This is non-negotiable.” Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing carefully controlled. “You do not belong in this world, Ivan. Did you stop to think—”

He pushed forward until his face was inches

away from hers. He bared his teeth. “You’re the one who’s not thinking. I don’t know how you do things in your world, Captain, but we don’t do this sh*t on Earth!”

His fingers gripped her wrist to pry her off, but the woman only pressed her forearm even harder on his throat.

Fury burned inside him. “Get the f*ck off!”

“You should be honored. It’s your duty for having such potential. It’s in your blood, this is your destiny—”

“F*ck destiny!” Something blazed within his core.

But the woman ignored him and flicked her other hand in the air. The space above the headboard distorted and twisted, and electricity streaked and crackled, ripping a swirling blackhole about the diameter of a regular-sized door in the air.

Ice froze Ivan’s blood. God-f*cking-damn it.

Enraged, he bucked his large body underneath her, but the woman remained in place, her thighs clamping tight around his hips as if welded by an invisible force. F*ck, f*ck, f*ck! He should have known the laws of physics wouldn’t work on a goddamn alien!

He felt heat radiating off the vortex, and his heart banged on his ribcage. Brute force did not work on the woman. He needed to think of

another way fast.

“GET THE F*CK OFF ME!”

A searing sensation spread throughout his body in a rush of acid fire. It arched through his spine and snapped, exploding, slamming into the woman and sending her flying off.

Pati ang vortex sa ulunan niya ay biglang nagsara sa lakas ng impact ng enerhiyang kumawala mula sa kanya.

Nagtatagis ang bagang na bumalikwas si Ivan ng tayo.

He didn't know what the hell that was. But he knew he had to use it again if he wanted to remain on this planet. He just f*cking wished he knew how he did it in the first place.



Sa bilis ng mga pangyayari, ni walang oras para lumaki ang mga mata ni Eleina. The powerful energy blast hit her like a cannon ball.

Kusang gumalaw ang enerhiya sa katawan niya at gumawa ng isang force barrier upang protektahan ang sarili mula sa atake ng binata. But the impact still threw her flying off. Clenching her teeth, she manipulated the energy around her mid-flight to stop her rapid backward momentum, compressing the air particles to block the force. She stopped and dropped to the ground, landing on her hands and knees a few feet away from the bed.

She narrowed her eyes at Ivan.

He stood by the foot of the bed, breathing hard and snarling like a deranged wild animal. His corded muscles bulged with strain, and his towering height loomed over her even from where she knelt. Fury tightened every rigid line of his face, his eyes glowing like molten gold. She could feel his energy vibrating like a bomb about to detonate.

Huh. Look at that.

Ivan's energy blast was strong but not concentrated. Sabog-sabog ang enerhiyang lumabas dito at tumapon iyon sa iba't ibang direksyon. But he produced it without training. And she only opened his energy channels last night. It took her three years of intense training before she could produce a high intensity energy shot like that. And she's a pure Isoff, graduated top of her class, and considered a genius.

Tiim-labi siyang tumayo mula sa pagkaluhod.

Ivan's energy crackled violently around him while his muscles bunched as if charging himself for another blast.

Pursing her lips, she reassessed her strategy. This could turn into a warzone if she wasn't careful.

"You need to calm down," saway niya sa binata. "Your energy is spiking out of control."

A dark laughter scraped out of his throat.

“You’re telling me to calm down now?”

Even his voice had changed. It had gone deeper, rougher, and it rasped across her senses like coarse silk, making her blood pound through her veins. She ignored the way her nipples tightened, or the way heat pulsed between her thighs. She’d analyze her body’s reaction to him later.

“I won’t use force again,” matigas niyang saad.

The curve of his hard mouth remained derisive and his muscles were still strained and pumped up. The memory of his steely muscles mashed against her curves made her clamp her jaw. She could still feel the echoes of his c*ck throbbing between her thighs. He was so thick and large, and it had taken a good amount of willpower to stop herself from rubbing her sex against his hardness.

She clenched her fists.

She didn’t need this right now.

“Your energy is unstable and it’s dangerous not just to you but to the people around you,” pakli niya. “I won’t do anything to agitate you further. Pero kailangan mo ring maintindihan na narito ako para sa isang misyon. You don’t belong in this world, Ivan. After what you did just a few seconds ago, you should know that, too.”

Nang ibigay sa kanya ang misyong ito, akala niya ay pagsasayang ito ng oras, pera, at pagod. Pero kahit na nagdududa, sinunod niya ang utos. She's a soldier. It's her duty to obey her superiors. Ngayong nakita na niya ang kayang gawin ni Ivan, tama nga ang mga nakatataas sa desisyon ng mga ito na dalhin ang binata sa Isoff.

Ivan Arkain Sevilla was a f*cking wonder boy.

“You are untrained,” punto ni Eleina. “And you possess extraordinary abilities. Untrained power is dangerous. Kahit hindi ako dumating dito, lalabas at lalabas ang kakayahan mo, at delikado 'yon hindi lang para sa 'yo kundi para na rin sa mga tao sa paligid mo. Think of the people of this world. This is for your own good and theirs.”

Hinayaan niyang maiproseso iyon ng binata sa loob ng ilang segundo. Something other than fury hardened the steely angles of his face, and shadows darkened his masculine features into something harsher.

Napakuyom-palad ang lalaki.

Tumaas ang sulok ng kanyang mga labi.

He knew she was right.

“You will come with me to Isoff,” pinal niyang hayag. “There is no other way around it.”

And she would make sure he did.

Tumalikod siya at lumabas ng silid.

CHAPTER

Two

Leina Razaiden watched Ivan Arkain Sevilla beneath the sweep of her lashes as he stood in the doorway of his bedroom. His strong muscular built radiated aggression, and his mouth was twisted into a sneer as he stared down at her. His energy still snapped around him like sharp vicious fangs, but it wasn't as brutal as it was a few hours ago.

Tatlong oras iyon matapos ang insidente sa silid ng binata kaninang umaga. After she got out of his room, she parked herself in the living area, mulling over the events of the last twelve hours, analyzing the data she had uncovered to plot out her next moves.

Ivan had locked himself in his room for three hours, but now he's out, and he looked just as

pissed as before.

“What the f*ck is this?” Matalim nitong pinukol ng tingin ang duffel bag niya na nakapatong sa mahabang itim na couch nito.

Clucking her tongue, she raised a brow. Where did he expect her to go? Walang ibang lugar sa apartment nito kung saan siya puwedeng tumambay.

The guy had sparse furniture. Isang malaking sofa, mahabang coffeetable, at TV lang ang mayroon sa living space sa labas ng silid nito. Microwave, maliit na ref, hot plate, electric kettle, at ilang kaldero at kitchen utensils lang ang mayroon sa kusina. May mga kahon sa isang sulok. She supposed bachelor life was the same for almost everyone no matter what planet or galaxy one lived in.

Napabaling ang tingin ni Eleina sa pinto sa tabi ng silid ni Ivan. The door was locked, and she hadn't tried to break inside yet, but she could feel tendrils of energy emanating from the room. Naningkit ang kanyang mga mata habang nakatitig doon. She would have to find out what's inside it.

Ibinalik niya ang titig sa lalaki. “What do you think?”

Nagtagis ang ngipin ni Ivan. “Get out. You're not f*cking staying here.”

Curving her lips, she crossed her legs. “Do

you honestly think you can make me go away?”

She was not trying to provoke him, but she had to make him understand the situation. She was staying, and he had to deal with it.

His eyes darkened and his powerful muscles bunched even more as if readying for a fight, but he remained rooted in the doorway, his breathing carefully controlled.

“First, let me say this.” Slowly, she uncrossed her long legs and rose from her seat, watching Ivan watch her.

A different type of strain gripped his corded muscles, and she noted the way his pitiless gaze raked over the curve of her hips and the swell of her breasts. She felt her own skin heating up, felt her own flesh trembling under his fierce stare.

“I won’t apologize for the attack last night,” malumanay na saad ni Eleina sa kabila ng pagkapaos ng boses. “I needed to do that to test your energy level. But the incident this morning was unnecessary. I should not have been rash. I should have tried diplomacy first. It was a mistake. I apologize. I will not do it again. Your energy is more powerful and unstable than I had expected. You could cause an intense explosion if I try to forcefully subdue you again. Puwede akong tumawag ng backup para puwersahan kang dalhin sa Isoff, pero maaaring marami pa ring masaktan kapag hindi mo nakontrol ang

enerhiya mo. Nobody wants that.”

“Bullsh*t.”

She forced herself not to shiver at the way his rough voice lit up her nerve endings.

“I’m not lying,” marahan niyang saad. “Your energy level is spiking. Alam mo ba na kaya mong pasabugin ang buong lungsod na ito kapag nawalan ka ng control sa enerhiya mo?”

He froze, his breath hitching, and a crazed glint flashed in his eyes. Shaking his head, he tore his gaze away from her.

Alam niyang alam nito na nagsasabi siya ng totoo.

“Now do you understand why you have to leave Earth?” sambit niya. “You’re a danger to people here.”

“That’s your reason?” His cutting gaze snapped back to her. “Then, why do you have to kidnap me? If you’re just worried about the people here, then train me here and teach me how to control whatever the f*ck it is I have.”

“And why would I do that?” hamon ng dalaga. “Why would I do you a favor if you won’t do anything for me? If we train you, it’s only right that you work for us. May kasabihan kayo sa mundong ito tungkol doon. *Quid pro quo*. Tit for tat. Nothing is free in this universe, Ivan.”

Pagak na tumawa ang lalaki at bahagyang dumukwang sa kanyang direksyon habang puno

ng galit ang mga mata. The heat of his energy clawed at her, and a dark part of her relished the aggression trying to grip her throat.

“There it is. There’s your reason. Quit using other people to justify your actions.”

Itinaas ni Eleina ang noo. “It doesn’t make it a lie. You are a threat here. You don’t belong here. You need to stop being selfish. With your energy level and natural talent, you could do wonders. Some things are bigger than you—”

“Why the f*ck would I want to be anything bigger than me?” His energy flared and singed the air particles around him, burning them until the air smelt of ozone.

Tumiim-labi si Eleina. What a f*cking—

Tumunog ang alarm sa kanyang wrist watch, at agad siyang napatigil. Agad niyang sinipat iyon.

Smart watch on Earth had nothing on her Ultra watch. Isoff’s watches could detect poison in food, noxious gases in the air, and even an impeding earthquake. Tungkol sa huli ang sinasabi ng Ultra watch niya nang mga oras na iyon.

Nanigas ang mga kalamnan ng dalaga. “F*cking sh*t.” Pinindot niya ang gilid ng relos.

The watch projected a 3D map in front of her.

“Location,” she barked. “Magnitude and

depth.”

A male electronic voice answered, “Location: San Isidro, Batangas. Possible Magnitude: 6.8. Focal Depth: 82 kilometers. Epicenter: Latitude: 14.79°N; Longitude: 121.63°E. Estimated time: 1 hour and 50 minutes.”

“Estimated travel time from here to location,” pakli niya. “By motorcycle?”

“1 hour and 45 minutes.”

“I need to borrow your motorcycle.” She dashed to Ivan’s room where she knew he kept his keys.

“What the f*ck-?”

His arm shot out and snatched her wrist before she could get into his room, but she twisted out of the way and shoved him back, slamming his powerful frame on the door.

“Goddamn it!”

“You heard Sernan,” pakli ni Eleina saka dumerecho sa dresser kung saan naroon ang susi ng lalaki. “In about an hour and fifty minutes, there will be a 6.8 magnitude earthquake on San Isidro, Batangas. I don’t have time to waste.”

She grabbed his keys lying on top of the dresser. “I need a ride. I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

Bumalik siya sa living area at hinagilap ang jacket niya roon.

Ivan was hot on her heels, his presence

a heavy pressure looming over her. Hinagip ulit ng lalaki ang braso niya at marahas siyang hinila paharap dito. Nagtatagis ang bagang ng binata at may baga sa mga mata nito. His energy swirled in erratic bursts. He seemed to want to say something but couldn't find the words.

Binawi niya ulit ang braso pero nanatili siyang nakaharap sa lalaki habang isinusuot ang jacket.

“Isoff is lightyears technologically advanced compared to Earth. We’ve developed a technology that can detect stress levels on tectonic plates and determine when they will reach critical levels. We’ve developed a way to stop the sudden release of built-up tension between these plates. We’ve developed a way to stop earthquake before they happen, Ivan.”

Tumalikod siya rito at dumerecho sa pinto.

But he was behind her again, slamming his fist against the door before she could swing it open.

Napigtas na rin ang kanyang pasensya. “Get out of the way, wonder boy! I have no time for—”

“I’ll come with you.” His voice was hoarse.

She shot him a caustic glance over her shoulder and saw the grim and conflicted look on his face. She didn’t have time to argue. “Don’t get in my way.”

“I’ll grab my jacket. Grab the helmets.”

Hinablot niya ang dalawang helmet sa may gilid ng sofa at tumakbo si Ivan papunta sa kwarto nito.

They hit the road in less than a minute.

Hinayaan niyang si Ivan ang magpatakbo ng motorsiklo.

She ignored the way her thighs hugged his muscular thighs from behind, ignored the way her breasts pushed against the unyielding slabs of his powerful back. Even through the leather jackets and the wind whipping around them, she could feel the heat of his body seeping into her clothes. It did not help that her lower body was smashed tight against his a*s, and that the seat thrummed against her fleshy mound until she could feel her sex throbbing in time with the harsh rhythmic vibrations of the engine.

Clenching her teeth, she connected her watch to the chip embedded in her earring to gather info. Population density, duration of earthquake, topography, soil composition, type of infrastructure around the area, the structural integrity of the infrastructures, the projected casualties. Sernan spit out the data through the chip in her earring.

Tumiim-bagang si Eleina.

The numbers did not look good.

She could have manipulated energy to flash directly to the location. But she did not have

energy to spare after opening Ivan's energy channels last night and ripping a vortex through space and time just this morning.

Ivan broke as many traffic rules as he could without getting anyone in trouble just to get to their location faster, and they reached their destination with fifteen minutes left before the deadline.

Huminto sila sa kahabaan ng isang private property na napapaligiran ng puting kahoy na bakod.

She swung her leg off the bike and took off her helmet, pushing it to Ivan as she strode to the white fence barrier.

“That's private property—”

She gripped the top of chest-high fence, lifted her body, and swung her legs to the other side. Tumalon siya pababa sa kabilang bahagi ng bakuran.

“Right,” pakli ng binata.

Hindi niya ito nilingon at dumerecho siya sa itinuturong lokasyon ng kanyang wrist watch.

Isa iyong taniman ng saging. Walang mga bahay sa paligid. According to her Ultra watch, the nearest person was about two kilometers away from them. Good enough.

Itinuon niya ang atensyon sa lupa sa kanyang harapan. “Show me the hypocenter.”

Her watch projected the image of the Earth

beneath her feet. Kita roon ang crust at ang fault line. May pulang ilaw sa lugar ng hypocenter kung saan magkadikit ang mga gilid ng mga plates. The plates had snagged together and wouldn't slide smoothly, and friction had risen to critical level. She had about eight minutes before the edges skidded roughly past each other and released the enormous tension, sending primary and secondary waves that would radiate as surface waves.

Naramdaman ni Eleina ang mabigat na presensya ni Ivan sa tabi niya, pero hindi niya pinansin.

Lumuhod siya sa lupa at inilapat ang kamay sa damuhan. In Isoff, they had developed a system to identify potential problematic areas and gradually release the tension between tectonic plates before it neared critical level. But there had been instances in the olden days before the system was perfected, when they had to slow down the sudden release of stress just as it reached a dangerous stage.

But nobody had done it in more than five hundred years. It's merely textbook knowledge now. Pero marami siyang nabasa tungkol doon at alam niya ang mga prinsipyo. Still, even in the past, more than two people would perform the operation.

At nag-iisa lang siya ngayon.

Wonder boy didn't count. He could end up triggering a worse catastrophe with his untrained abilities.

Gathering her energy, she focused it down the crust, letting it seep into the cracks, down... down...down... until it touched the pressure.

Muntik na siyang mapasubsob.

Para iyong dumagan sa kanyang dibdib, sa kanyang tainga, sa kanyang ulo. The enormous weight squeezed into each other, pushing and crushing.

F*cking sh*t.

Sucking a breath, she let her energy flow through the thick pressure and slowly...ever so slowly...pushed it out.

Miniscule waves vibrated across the plates, scattering and dissipating to infinitesimal level before reaching the upper ground.

Tumagaktak ang pawis niya sa sentido.

The stress on the plates shoved together, and she gritted her teeth to push it back gently. Hindi niya pwedeng mabilis na itulak ang mga iyon kung hindi ay para na rin siyang gumawa ng lindol.

Little by little.

She felt liquid dribbling down her nostrils.

She's bleeding.

Lumuhod si Ivan sa tabi niya. His presence was a fierce weight beside her, and she could feel

his energy pulsating with raw intensity.

She wouldn't be able to relieve all the stress slowly, but she could bring it down to a lower level. Just low enough that it wouldn't cause too much casualties and property damages.

Just a little more...

She kept pushing on the pressure gently.

More stress on the edges of the plates slowly eased away, pulsating gently along the line.

A bit more...

Her muscles burned and she coughed.

Blood splattered on the grass.

"Goddamn it," Ivan hissed. "You need to stop now."

He needed to shut up.

A little more...a little more...

More vibration spread across the plates, gently...gently...

She couldn't breathe, the pressure straining and crushing her.

A little more... a little...

Her vision started to waver.

The stress eased a bit more. A bit more. A bit-

Marahas siyang napaubo at napasalampak sa lupa.

"F*ck!" Ivan clutched her shoulders and gently pulled her against him.

She heaved and gasped for breath. Her

muscles ached, her bones felt battered, her insides felt like mush. Red spots danced in her vision and she could taste copper on her tongue. This would put her out of commission for a good one week.

F*ck.

“Don’t you f*cking die on me,” Ivan barked.

She’s going to lose consciousness.

“H-hospital,” she pushed the word out.

“What?” Ivan’s voice was just as hoarse.

“No hospital.” Iyon lang at tuluyan nang nagdilim ang paningin niya.

CHAPTER

Three

Eleina woke up feeling drained as if she just expended 90% of her energy trying to neutralize an impending earthquake. Right. She did use 90% of her energy trying to stop an impending earthquake.

“F*ck...” Umungol si Eleina at pilit iminulat ang mga mata. She must have been out cold for at least six days. Did Ivan—

“Careful.”

Napalingon siya sa pinanggalingan ng mababang boses.

Nakaupo si Ivan sa tabi ng kanyang kama, nakatiim-bagang at matigas sa tensyon ang mga kalamnan habang nakatitig sa kanya. His eyes had a stark glint that made him look feral, and the hard line of his mouth could only be

described as brutal.

“Still alive?” His low voice had a roughened edge.

“Apparently.” Paos din ang kanyang boses.

Pinilit niyang bumangon at umupo, pero may pumigil sa kanyang kamay. Napalingson siya roon at nakitang mariing hawak ni Ivan ang kanan niyang kamay.

Ivan’s dark gaze dropped to their joined hands, and with his jaw still clenched, he uncurled his strong fingers and let her hand go.

Bigla siyang nanghina at bumagsak ulit sa kama.

What the...

“F*ck.” Hinagilap ulit ni Ivan ang kanyang kamay, at muling dumaloy ang enerhiya sa kanyang katawan.

Napasinghap si Eleina at halos mahilo sa pagbugso ng lakas sa kanyang sistema. Habol ang hininga, napalipad ang tingin niya kay Ivan.

He stared back at her with a granite expression on his chiseled face.

“You’ve been giving me your energy,” bulalas niya.

“Apparently,” he intoned as if he was just commenting about the weather. “Wasn’t sure if I was doing it right.”

What the hell. “How did you do it?” pakli niya “How did you transfer your energy to me?”

Something harsh flickered in Ivan's gaze, and she felt his energy vibrating as if it wanted to lash out, but she felt him forcefully tamping it down.

Lalong namilog ang kanyang mga mata. Did wonder boy just manage to control the sudden spiking of his energy?

"How did you do it?" May bahid ng pang-akusa ang kanyang tinig. "How did you figure it out?"

Like all Isoff citizens, she was trained to receive energy from medics from a young age. Once her battered body received energy from an outside source, it would start repairing her injuries. As a soldier, she also knew how to transfer energy to heal critical injuries. Ivan was neither a soldier nor a trained citizen of Isoff. Hindi ito dapat nagawa ng binata.

"Your pulse got weak," ang tangi nitong sagot.

"And?"

"And I held your f*cking hand."

"And then what?"

"And then what?" he bit out.

Gusto niya itong yugyugin. "And then, what else did you do? How the hell did you figure out how to transfer your energy to me?"

"How the f*ck should I know?" He shot back just as irritably. "You talked about energy and

healing before, so I grabbed your hand and forced my energy to you.”

“And that’s it?” hindi makapaniwalang bulalas niya. “You just forced your energy to me and it just worked out fine?”

“Yeah, Captain, that’s it,” sikmat ng kausap. “All I knew was you look half-dead, and if I wouldn’t do sh*t, you’d be a corpse in about a f*cking minute.”

Naging matalim ang titig niya sa lalaki.

What the hell.

May ilang mga tala sa kasaysayan ng Isoff tungkol sa mga sinaunang mandirigma ng republika na kayang isagawa ang ilang mga kamangha-manghang bagay nang walang ensayo o karanasan. But they were rare as sh*t, and the last warrior to have exhibited such talent had died more than eight hundred years ago. Some even believed it was an exaggerated ability. But lo and behold, here was f*cking wonder boy Ivan Arkain Sevilla proving them all wrong. What. The. F*ck.

Bahagyang naningkit ang kanyang mga mata.

Ain’t wonder boy full of surprises?

“What?” wonder boy growled.

“Don’t get defensive, I’m just thinking.”

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

“You think you’re so smart,” matamis niyang

sambit.

Iniiwas ni Eleina ang tingin dito at tumiim-labi. First thing first, kailangan niya munang ayusin ang daloy ng enerhiya sa kanyang katawan bago sila mag-usap nang mahaba ni wonder boy. Pumikit siya para ituon ang atensyon sa sarili.

Her body had been using up all her life force, as well as Ivan's supplementary energy, to heal itself as fast as it could, leaving her with no energy to move. She had to slow down her healing so she could move without Ivan's help.

Nang sa tingin niya ay kaya na niya, binawi niya ang kamay sa lalaki. The loss of supplementary energy had her gritting her teeth. It felt like climbing up a steep incline without a harness while a ton of bricks weighed on her back. Good thing it wasn't her first rodeo.

Nagmulat siya at tumitig ulit kay Ivan.

He looked like a stone statue as he sat there, all rigid lines and unforgiving hardness. His stark white shirt contrasted with his golden tan skin, but he could have been pale as ice with all the coldness he's emanating.

"How are you feeling?" aniya.

"Are you in a position to ask somebody else how they feel?" sarkastiko nitong sagot.

"You've given me a bit of your energy. Hindi ka nanghihina?"

"You're the one who looked half-dead,

Captain.”

“Ivan—”

“Don’t do that again,” pakli nito.

Nagsalubong ang kanyang mga kilay. “Do what?”

A cutting sneer curled his mouth. “What do you think?”

Her throat hummed a noncommittal noise. “What was I supposed to do in that situation?”

“Not drain yourself until you looked like death warmed over,” he ground out and shot to his feet, pinning her with a murderous glare. “Were you f*cking trying to die?”

Ah, so that’s what got his panties in a twist.

“I wasn’t, no.”

“You think this is funny?” he snapped and clenched his teeth. Cursing, he strode back and forth along the length of the room, his hands balling into fists, his corded muscles bunching.

Muli siya nitong pinukol ng matalim na tingin. “You didn’t want to go to a hospital, you looked one breath away from death, you didn’t give me one f*cking clue what the f*ck to do with you. You think that’s funny? What the f*ck were you thinking?”

She could see his point. She wasn’t arrogant enough to disregard her shortcomings. But she knew she would have done the same thing given another chance.

Tilting her head, she considered her answer. “Hospitals on Earth wouldn’t know what to do with me.”

“And I would?” asik nito.

Again, wonder boy had a point. Still, she decided to clear the air. “If you had let me sleep for six days, my body would have healed itself without any external help, and I’d be good as new.”

“And I know that, of course,” he jeered.

Wonder Boy: 3

Captain Razaiden: 0

This was not her day.

Tumango siya para tanggapin ang punto nito. “I understand. I apologize. It was an emergency and I didn’t have time to explain everything. Hindi ko alam kung magkakaroon ulit ng ganitong sitwasyon, pero kung sakali man, sasabihin ko na. Wala kang kailangang gawin. Hayaan mo lang akong magpahinga at kusang gagamutin ng katawan ko ang sarili ko. I’m hard to kill, Ivan.”

“Great. You’re hard to kill. That’s f*cking nice to hear, Captain.”

“How long was I out?”

Matigas ang panga na tunitig lang ang lalaki sa kanya.

Sumandal siya sa headboard at kalmadong hinintay ang sagot ni Ivan.

Something dark and dangerous flashed in Ivan's golden-brown eyes as if warning her not to test him.

But it only made the corners of her lips curve up. There was just something thrilling about the savage look in his face that had her heart pounding and her blood humming.

"Well?" Her voice was throaty.

"F*ck you, Captain." His voice was just as hoarse.

Muntikan na siyang tumawa.

Ivan's shadowed gaze narrowed into slits, but his eyes dropped to her lips.

Her heart pounded harder in her chest, and she felt a flush of warmth blooming across her skin. The tendrils of heat sparked and spread out, streaking down to the mound between her thighs. Napakuyom-palad siya at pilit inayos ang paghinga.

"How long was I out?" ulit ni Eleina sa paos na boses.

Ivan's vicious gaze flicked back to her face. "Three days," brusko nitong sagot.

She forced her brain to work.

Three days. That was good.

"Thank you for helping me." Her voice came out throatier than she wanted, but she pushed through. "I would have been out for six days otherwise. I'll be fully recovered tomorrow. The

earthquake?”

“There was still an earthquake,” sagot nito sa matigas pa rin na boses. “But it was only magnitude 2.1. No casualties. Wala ring nasirang mga bahay o infrastructure.”

That was all she could hope for.

Unclenching his fists, Ivan opened his mouth. But he shut it again.

“Ano ‘yon?” usisa niya.

Tumiim bagang ito at nag-iwas ng tingin. “Nothing.”

It didn’t look like nothing. His energy was still agitated.

“Are you hungry?” matigas nitong tanong bigla.

Napakurap siya, hindi inaasahan ang tanong nito.

A sneer twisted his hard mouth. “Don’t look so goddamn shocked. I’m not a monster.”

“I never said you were,” depensa niya. “I was just surprised.”

“I already gave you my energy,” he barked. “Why are you surprised now?”

“That’s an emergency. This casual good will is another thing.”

An incredulous laugh scraped his throat. “Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You got to admit I’m right, but anyway,” aniya bago pa ito makapagpatuloy. “There’s no

need to overanalyze.”

Itinabing ni Eleina ang kumot at ibinaba ang mga paa sa sahog. She bit back a hiss. Everything felt sore. Her muscles hurt, her bones hurt, her insides hurt. But she plowed through. She had worse injuries during training at the academy and during some of her missions.

Inunat niya ang mga braso at binti bago tuluyang tumayo. Wala siyang gana, pero kailangan niyang kumain. “I need to eat.”

“I’ll bring the food here,” he declared in a clipped tone. “Or is this casual good will still suspicious to you?”

Itinaas niya ang titig sa lalaki at nakitang marahas pa rin sa tensyon ang buo nitong anyo. Well, maybe she had offended wonder boy. “I’m sorry if I had sounded ungrateful. Sa sala na lang ako kakain.”

“Do what you want.”

Malalaking hakbang na tinungo nito ang pinto at hinila iyon pabukas. His stony gaze was fixed on her. “Do you need help walking?”

He was really being very helpful.

“What now?” sikmat nito.

“I’m sorry, but you’re being very nice.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

A startled laughter bubbled up her throat, and Ivan’s muscular body froze as if she had punched him in the nut. Another laughter burst

out of her from his tense reaction, and the steel lines of his face turned harsher.

“Having fun?” he retorted.

Swallowing back her laughter, she sauntered toward him. “At ease, wonder boy. No need to get so... stiff.”

She bit her lower lip to stop another laugh, forcing her eyes not to wander down between his muscular thighs. Stiff...Oh, the puns.

“Now who’s acting smart?” he bit out, but his hard gaze tracked her every movement, his corded muscles tensing as if he was readying himself to catch her if she’d fall.

Napakunot-noo ulit siya roon. He really was being nice.

With every step she took, she felt her heart drumming inside her ribcage. She could feel a sultry heat pulsating between her thighs, and the fabric of her panties rasped deliciously over her flesh with her every step.

She passed by him, and her naked arm brushed the solid wall of his chest. His muscles got even more rigid, and she tossed him a glance. Tiim-bagang lang itong nakatitig sa harap.

They’re becoming expert at this.

Dumerecho siya sa sala.

Umupo siya sa sahig sa harap ng coffee table at tahimik na pinanood si Ivan na kumuha ng dalawang mangkok mula sa isang cabinet.

He moved with a harsh efficacy that was almost militarized. Every movement was brisk and precise. For someone so large, he moved with a sleekness that was unnatural. It was something energy manipulators like them were trained to do in order to avoid unnecessary waste of energy. Possible lamang iyon kung mula pagkabata ay naensayo ito sa tamang paraan. But Ivan never had training.

Naging mataman ang titig niya sa lalaki.

Wonder boy was really something.

Dinala ni Ivan ang dalawang mangkok ng umuusok na lugaw sa coffee table.

He sat across her from her on the carpeted floor and promptly started shoving spoonful of porridge into his mouth.

She stared at him beneath her lashes, noting his drawn brows and coiled muscles. The guy was so tense, the ridges of his muscles standing out in sharp relief.

“What is it?”

Tinapunan siya ng madilim na titig ng binata. “What?”

“You want to say something.”

His energy flared but he pulled it back just as fast.

Hinalo niya ang lugaw gamit ang kutsara. “Energy doesn’t lie, Ivan,” malumanay niyang hayag. “I don’t have training to specifically

read emotions based on energies. But any Isoff soldier worth her salt can detect energy fluctuations, and from there we can deduce the general emotions of the subject. In your case, I don't even need to feel your energy to know you're agitated. I can see it on your face and in your body language."

Nakakalokong tumawa ito. "You got it all figured out, didn't you?"

"What do you want to say?"

He barked another grim laugh, but the rugged lines of his face sharpened with restrained aggression.

Canting her head, she continued stirring the porridge with her spoon. "It's better to say what you need to say than to keep it all in."

"Dishing out words of wisdom?" he sneered. "You're just perfect all around, aren't you?"

"I'm practical."

A harsh smile curved his mouth but something stormy raged in his eyes. He stared back at her with an intensity that made her heart pound.

"You need to teach me," he bit out in a gruff voice. "You can't pull sh*t like that and expect me to sit back and do nothing. You need to teach me what to do in a situation like that."

Ah...that's what he wanted?

Her lips curved. "Isn't that just another way

of asking me to teach you how to control your abilities?”

“Is it?” he shot back without hesitation, daring her to confront him.

Tiim-bagang nitong itinuon ulit ang atensyon sa pagsubo ng lugaw.

Tinitigan niya ang lalaki sa loob ng ilang segundo. Tapos, “Gusto mo ’kong tulungan kung sakaling may mangyari ulit na gano’n.”

His muscles stiffened, but his face remained stony as he shoved another spoonful of porridge into his mouth.

“Did you realize how valuable your abilities are, Ivan?” pantay niyang untag. “How important? How it can save and change people’s lives for the better? Did you realize the endless possibilities you can do with your abilities? Did you finally realize the weight of responsibilities resting on your shoulders?”

Ramdam ni Eleina ang mabigat na pagbugso ng enerhiya ng lalaki, pumipintig iyon kasabay ng puso nito.

“You have a saying here on Earth,” patuloy niya. “With great power comes with great responsibilities. Are you feeling the burden now, Ivan?”

Marahas na tumawa ang binata at madilim na pinukol siya ng titig. “Acquainted yourself with superhero sh*t, Captain? You really know

how to lay it on thick. You're as good as my mother when it comes to laying on the guilt trip."

"Are you?"

His expression remained on edge. "What?"

"Feeling guilty?"

He barked another coarse laugh and shook his head at her, but his gaze was turbulent.

Tumunog ang cell phone ng kaharap sa may tabi ng mangkok nito, at tiim-labing dinampot iyon ng lalaki at sinipat.

She felt a spike in his energy as he read the notification. But it plunged down as if smothered by something heavy. Turning his phone facedown on the table, he continued wolfing down his food, his dark eyes flat.

Nang matapos sila, kinuha ni Ivan ang mga mangkok at dinala iyon sa lababo.

"I have to do something," payak nitong sambit habang hinuhugasan ang mga mangkok. "Go and rest in the room."

"Ano'ng gagawin mo?"

Tinitigan siya nito.

Nag-angat ulit siya ng kilay.

Cursing under his breath, he dried his hands.

Dumerecho ito sa silid sa tabi ng kuwarto nito. Tumuwid ang kanyang likod. Iyon ang silid na hindi pa niya napapasok. Lagi iyong naka-lock simula nang dumating siya sa bahay

ng lalaki, at ramdam niya roon ang pagbuso ng kung anong enerhiya.

Ngayon ay binuksan ng binata ang pinto at pumasok ito sa loob. Sumunod siya at pumasok din.

At napahinto siya pagkapasok na pagkapasok sa silid.

Large paintings lined the walls of the room.

Marami ring mga paintings na nakalagay sa mga easel stands sa buong silid. The canvases dripped with sharp vibrant colors. She didn't know what type of painting they were, but it seemed like a mixture of realism and abstract. The faces shadowed with colors stared back at her, some haunted, some furious, some whimsical, some wishful, some contemplative. But it's not the look on the people's faces that rooted her to the floor.

Nilibot niya ang tingin sa paligid.

Concentrated waves of energy vibrated and hummed inside the room, radiating off the canvases like a living breathing entity. It pulsated and writhed, brimming and saturating the paintings with its primal strength.

Tuluyan siyang pumasok sa loob ng silid, at ramdam niya ang presyon ng enerhiya mula sa mga paintings. They pulled at her, the energy pulsing and curling around her.

"Don't blow this place up," babala ng lalaki

habang ibinababa ang isang canvas. “I swear to f*ck, Eleina, I’ll get back at you if you do.”

Dinala ng binata ang painting sa isang work table at ipinatong roon. Imahe iyon ng isang bata na tumatawa habang may pilit na inaabot. Splashes of yellow, pink and orange dominated the canvas. It felt happy. Innocent. But there was a thread of wistfulness as the energy around reached out to her.

Pinasadahan ni Ivan ng tingin ang painting, malamlam ang mga mata. Dinukot nito ang phone sa bulsa at kinuhaan ng litrato ang larawan.

Kumuha ang lalaki ng isang rolyo ng puting tissue paper sa may gilid ng mesa at sinimulang ibalot ang canvas.

“What are you doing?” untag niya.

He threw a glance at her, his dark eyes guarded. Ibinalik nito ang atensyon sa ginagawa. “Wrapping it up. Someone bought it. Payment’s already wired.”

She watched him carefully wrap the painting with the tissue paper, his large veiny hands gently smoothing the fragile material over the canvas. He pulled open a drawer beside the worktable and grabbed a twine string. He tied it around the large rectangular painting. Tapos ay kumuha rin ito ng pen at isang itim na card sa may cabinet. The letters IAS were emblazoned in

blue ink across the card.

With his jaw tight, Ivan shot her a look as he sat on a chair beside the table.

“Go on,” aniya. “Write your dedication.”

“You won’t leave even if I ask you, will you?”

Her gaze swept across the room. “No.”

Tiim-labi nitong itinuon ang atensyon sa card.

She walked around the studio.

The energy kept pulling at her as she passed by.

Some people believed that some objects bring good or bad luck. Ito ang ibig sabihin noon. It was the energy embedded in objects that attracted other energies.

When a person created something with intense focus and emotions, may it be positive or negative, they manifested as an energy, and this energy became embedded in that creation and attracted similar forces.

Pinagmasdan ni Eleina ang mga paintings na pumipintig sa enerhiya ni Ivan.

As she had told Ivan, she didn’t have the training to read emotions based on energies, but she could accurately detect the level.

Lumapit siya sa pinakamalapit na painting.

May isang mukha ng babae sa canvas. Nasa bandang kaliwa ang mukha nito at nakaharap ito roon na para bang may nilingon ito. Her face was

done in various dripping shades of pink, orange and purple. Her hair fanned out to the right in myriad hues of brown, red and pink. Splatters of the same shades dripped all over the canvas.

She couldn't accurately tell the emotions imprinted on the painting but somehow this one...this one felt heavy. The one on her left felt lighter. The energy on that one felt pure. Like feathers brushing her skin. The one behind it felt sharp. Like a shard of jagged glass.

Itinaas niya ang isang kamay at inilapit sa harap ng isang canvas.

The intensity of energy left behind was directly proportional to the length of time and emotions people spent on the object. The same was true for a place. The more you loved or hated something, the more you spent time with it, the more you saturated it with your energy. Literally. You leave behind a piece of yourself with things that you treasured or loathed.

They had an ancient saying in Isoff. When you love something so much, you give it life.

It was a very old saying, and she had never fully understood what it meant.

But now...

Dropping her hand, she curled her fingers into fists as she stared at the paintings pulsating with Ivan's life force, her expression grim.

Nilingon niya ang lalaki.

He was already wrapping the painting in a bubble wrap. Tapos ay ibinalot ulit nito iyon ng itim na plastic. His rough hand smoothed out the surface, his dark gaze solemn as if the wrapped painting was his own child he was about to send away.

Then the corners of his lips curved.

Something inside Eleina's chest twisted as she watched him.

Ivan took his phone out again and tapped on the screen. He tapped a few more times and after a couple of minutes, he shoved his phone back in his pocket.

“Long time buyer?”

Ivan jerked back and swung his head to her direction as if surprised she was still there. “What?”

“You seem to know the address by heart,” punto niya, mataman itong pinagmamasdan. “That’s what you did, wasn’t it? You typed the address for the shipping label?”

Bahagyang naningkit ang mga mata ng lalaki, tapos ay tumiim-bagang ito at ibinalik ang atensyon sa pag-aayos ng balot ng painting. “You seem to know a lot about how people ship stuff on Earth.”

“I did some research once I got here.”

Tumunog ulit ang phone ni Ivan. Tawag iyon at sinagot iyon ng binata. “Sir Joey.”

Tumitig ulit siya sa mga paintings.

“Yes, I know,” she heard Ivan say. “I’m not sure I can make it.”

She could feel his energy thrumming. Naramdaman niyang sinulyapan siya ng kasama.

“Alright. I’ll go. Sorry about the other day. There was an emergency. It’s all good now.”

Hinarap niya ang lalaki.

Nakatiim-bagang ito habang nakikinig sa kausap, pero mataman ang titig nito sa kanya.

“Okay. Later.” Ibinaba ng binata ang phone at ipinasok ang mga kamay sa bulsa ng track pants nito. His eyes remained stark. “I need to go somewhere. There’s food in the fridge. Or you can call for pizza. There’s money on the dresser.”

“I’ll come with you.”

He didn’t reply, but his intense gaze scanned her body as if checking for injuries.

She ignored the warmth rising up her core from the way his hot gaze raked over her curves.

Itinaas ni Ivan ang titig sa kanyang mga mata. The raw intensity in his eyes made her toes curl. Everything about Ivan was like that. Primal, strong, simple.

“Go and take a shower,” he ordered. “Sunod ako pagkatapos mo.”

Malalaking hakbang na tinungo nito ang pinto at hinila iyon pabukas. Naghintay ito roon para palabasin siya. Obviously, he didn’t want to

leave her alone in his precious studio. She could understand why.

She flicked another glance around the room.

Energy does not lie. Isa ring kasabihan iyon sa Isoff. You could tell a person's emotions thru their energies. You could tell who committed a crime based on the energy signature left on the crime scene. Energies had memories. Energies could tell a story. It's more reliable than DNA. If souls were real, they were most likely made of the same substance as energy.

Tiim-bagang niyang iniwas ang tingin sa mga paintings at naglakad palabas ng silid. The waves continued to hum behind her as if calling out to her.

Yes, she thought grimly. Energy was a person's life force. It was practically a person's soul. When you love something so much, you give it pieces of yourself. You give it life.

And that room?

Kumuyom-palad si Eleina.

Tinapunan niya ng tingin ang binata at nakitang mariing nakatitig din ito sa kanya.

Iniwas niya ang tingin dito at tuluyan siyang lumabas ng kwarto.

Ivan put his soul inside that goddamn room.

CHAPTER

Four

Lim-labing tumitig si Eleina sa pinto ng studio ni Ivan.

Tapos na siyang maligo at nakaupo na sa may sala. She still felt like crap, but the hot shower helped ease her muscle pains. She had on her usual plain white shirt, black jeans and combat boots. Itinali rin niya ang buhok kahit basa pa iyon.

Her brain worked overtime as she stared at the door.

Kailangan niyang makaisip ng paraan para maiwan iyon ng binata. It was an anvil around his neck. Kagaya ng kasabihan ng mga tao sa mundong ito, one couldn't serve two masters. Ganoon din sa Isoff. Lalo na sa Isoff. Isoff was all about specialization and reaching your

highest potential. One couldn't do that when one's attention was divided. Once Ivan became an Isoff soldier, there wouldn't be room for much else.

Tumunog ang Ultra watch niya at sinipat niya iyon. Her watch also served as a phone, and now it projected a notification for Ivan's Instagram account. She searched him online when she landed on Earth about five days ago. May dalawa itong IG account. Isa para sa public persona nito bilang modelo, at ang isa ay para sa mga paintings nito.

The notification was from his IAS Art account.

Larawan iyon ng painting na binalot nito kanina. Ginagamit nito ang account na iyon para i-promote at ibenta ang mga paintings nito kaya puros mga paintings lang ang naka-post doon. She was sure only a few people knew the account belonged to Ivan.

Tumunog ulit sa isa pang notification ang kanyang relos. Para iyon sa Ivan Sevilla account nito.

Her lips curved when she saw the post.

It was the standard after-shower post people on Earth loved to parade on social media.

Ivan stood in front of a mirror partly fogged up by condensation. Only a white towel was wrapped low around his lean angular hips.

Drops of water sluiced down the steely planes of his muscular chest, sliding over the sharp ridges of his abdomen. The v line running from his hip bones down to his pelvis was chiseled to perfection. His brawny arms were corded, the veins along the muscles pronounced. His face was just as breathtaking. Strong jawline and nose, high cheekbones, hooded eyes, plump lips and golden tan skin. Earthlings called his face and body type the standard f*ckboy. She reckoned it was both disparaging and complimentary.

She swiped to see the next picture on the post. It was him chugging a power drink. It was a sponsored post, and the practically nude after-shower pic was clickbait.

The next was a clip of Ivan doing pull ups inside his room. Like the post-shower picture, he was shirtless in the video, too. He only wore a black trackpants that hung low around his hips, showcasing his chiseled v line.

Her eyes ran over his powerful frame as he pulled himself up the bar. The veins running along his arms stood out, the ropy muscles of his biceps and triceps bulging. The hard slabs of his chest bunched with the effort as his abdominal muscles clenched.

A woman's voice sang in the background.
He's so tall and handsome as hell.

He's so bad but he does it so well...

He had a lot of posts like that. Not quite nude pics but close. Just skating along the boundary of R18 censorship.

She understood why.

The borderline R18 posts had about ten times more likes and comments than his other posts. His face alone could launch tons of likes and comments, but showing off his eight-pack abs was just a different beast. What was the saying? Sex sells. And Ivan Arkain Sevilla was a walking advertisement for sex and testosterone.

Her mind whirled back to the way he stared at her in the studio, or in his bedroom, or practically anywhere else that they had been. She remembered how he felt beneath her, how hot and hard he was all over.

Tiniim niya ang mga labi.

Their sexual tension was getting out of hand. But then again, maybe she could use this?

Naningkit ang kanyang mga mata.

Could she?

She stared hard at the locked studio room.

She's not going to do it just for the job, she was truly drawn to him in the most fundamental sense. It's deep in her gut, a clawing urge that was as elemental as the mechanics of breathing.

She'd never felt this way before. And she wasn't sure if she ever would again.

There was the question of ethics and professionalism. But if this animal attraction could help pull him to her side, wouldn't it be a win-win situation?

Sinipat ni Eleina ang dami ng followers ng Ivan Sevilla account nito at nakitang one million na iyon. Noong huling sinipat niya ito ay 990k pa lang iyon. She checked his IAS Art Account. Wala pang 100k ang followers.

Ibinaba niya ang phone sakto sa pagbukas ng pinto ng silid ni Ivan.

And there he was—Mr. So Bad and Handsome as Hell in the flesh.

She felt the familiar heat whispering across her skin as she watched Ivan stride out of his room.

His dark gaze was on her, his sculpted mouth unsmiling. His photos and videos were hypnotizing, but the real deal was unbeatable.

The ends of his inky black hair were still damp, his golden tan skin lightly glistening from the shower. Her gaze took in how his corded muscles strained underneath his white shirt and motorcycle jacket, and she could make out the way the strong muscles of his thighs moved beneath his dark jeans as he walked. His gray sneakers were slightly muddy, but it only added to the over-all rugged masculine appeal. Signs of exhaustion darkened his eyes and hardened

the lines of his face, but that, too, only made him look sharper and rougher.

He didn't need filters and *PhotoShop*. The rawness only made him more magnetic.

Huminto ang lalaki ilang dipa mula sa kanya, mataman ang titig. Isinukbit nito sa balikat ang strap ng maliit na duffel bag. "Ready to go?" His voice was gruff.

Nodding, she stood, watching Ivan watch her. His gaze rake down her curves, lingering on her heavy breasts and hips, his lids turning heavy as his eyes darkened.

She wasn't the only doing an eye-f*cking.

Umangat sa mukha niya ang titig ng lalaki, at naroon ang mababang init sa madilim nitong mga mata.

She let her lips curve as she grabbed her helmet and jacket. Tumalikod siya at naunang naglakad papunta sa pinto. Ramdam niya ang titig ng binata sa kanyang likuran. She knew he was staring at her a*s.

Ivan caught up with her on the stairs and they climbed down together. Sabay silang naglakad papunta sa parking kung saan nakaparada ang motorsiklo nito.

He loaded the small bag in the trunk bag, then swung his muscular thigh over the bike and gripped the handles. "Get on."

Sinunod niya ito.

Isinuot niya ang helmet tapos ay sumakay sa motorsiklo. She pressed her front against his powerful back, mashing her soft breasts against the slab of his strong muscles. His frame tensed, and her lips curved as she wrapped her arms around his waist, lacing her fingers together onto his hard stomach.

Growling, he shot her an icy look. “Don’t f*ck with me, Eleina.”

She widened her eyes. “What do you mean?”

Nagtagis ang bagang nito. “F*ck you,” he spat, then grabbed his helmet and put it on.

She muffled her laughter as she tightened her arms around his muscular torso.

Sa BGC ang kanilang destinasyon.

Traffic wasn’t so bad and they got there in about under an hour. And she was saying that with both Earth and Isoff road traffic standards in mind. Because even after discovering cure for cancers, figuring out a way to stop natural disasters, and devising intergalactic travel, Isoff’s traffic was still sh*tty as f*ck. She supposed there were just some things the human species couldn’t solve.

Ivan parked his bike on a pay parking. Walang cover doon at bilad na bilad sa araw ang motor. Pinatay ni Ivan ang makina at tinanggal ang helmet nito.

Tinanggal din niya ang helmet. The scorching

tropical sun felt hot on her skin. “Leaving your motorcycle out in the sun is bad for the engine.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious.” Binunot ng lalaki ang susi sa ignition at ibinulsa.

Bumaba siya sa bike. “Then why do you do it?”

He got off the bike and pulled off his motorcycle gloves. She watched the sun glint off his black hair and golden tan skin. He took off his jacket, the heavy muscles of his arms flexing as he folded the leather. Kinuha nito ang helmet niya at inilagay iyon sa hard case trunk.

“For many reasons,” sagot nito.

“Is it because the circumstances aren’t always ideal?”

Grabbing the small bag from the trunk, he shot her a flat stare. “Let’s not discuss the meaning of life based on my motorcycle parking habits.”

“The small things are important.”

“I bet they are.”

Naglakad sila palabas ng parking.

She watched his sharp profile as they walked, noting the way the light glanced off his strong cheekbone and casted shadows under it. “I know what you think of me.”

Pagak na tumawa ang kasama at pinukol siya ng madiing tingin. “You do?”

“You think I’m a Karen.”

Napatigil ang lalaki at tuluyang napatingin sa kanya. “A what?”

The surprise on his masculine face teased a laugh out of her throat, but she bit it back. “A Karen. You use that term here on Earth to describe nosy, demanding, self-entitled women who always want to get their way irrespective of other people’s rights and comfort. They’re also generally middle-aged. I do not fit the last category, but the other classifications may apply.”

“What the hell have you been watching and reading?” gulat nitong pakli.

“Memes,” she quipped. “Slang is an important part of any culture to help one gain a deeper understanding of the many facets of everyday life. May isa pa kayong term na specific dito sa bansa mo na kahawig ng isang Karen. Bida-bida.”

Piping napatitig lang sa kanya ang lalaki sa loob ng ilang segundo na para bang alien siya na may dalawang ulo. Alien talaga siya, pero hindi dalawa ang kanyang ulo, not that she had anything against aliens with more than one head. She was a strong advocate of diversity after all.

“What the f*ck is this conversation?” sambit ni Ivan.

“An informative one.”

“F*cking hell.” Naglakad ulit ito.

Smirking, she strode beside him, taking in the throngs of people walking along the sidewalk. A car honked nearby, and a flock of birds fluttered above a powerline.

Ivan shot her a look. “Tingin mo bida-bida ka?”

Ah, curiosity, the mother of invention. But it also killed the cat. “I understand it could be a disparaging remark,” aniya. “People on Earth have the tendency to shame smart people who speak their minds on everyday social settings.”

“F*ck, I shouldn’t have asked.” Ibinalik nito ang titig sa harapan.

Lips curving, she tilted her head. “Do you agree?”

“Is this an interrogation?” he grumbled.

Suspicious, she liked it. “Yes.”

Snorting, he stopped at the sidewalk, his thick brows furrowing as he waited for the traffic light to change color. “Is this part of your mission? Finding out the weaknesses and flaws of humans?”

“Maybe. So why do humans like to smart-shame?”

“Who said we do?”

“The internet.”

“The internet knows sh*t.”

He got a point there. “You’re probably right.

So it's wrong then?"

He glowered at the cars passing by. "I don't know, Captain. Sometimes, it's all in good fun with no ill intentions. Just ribbing between friends."

"And that sounds so wrong," she drawled.

He gave her the finger.

Laughter bubbled out of her throat and Ivan froze, and it just made her want to laugh more.

He shot her a murderous glare, then strode forward when the lights changed.

She tried hard not to smirk as she followed him.

"How are people in your world different from us?" magaspang na untag ng lalaki nang hindi siya sinusulyapan. "No stupid jokes? Perpekto ba kayong lahat? Wala kayong bad habits? Walang backward mindset?"

This time, it was her who opened her mouth but shut it again. Gusto niyang sabihin na oo, perpekto na sila, pero hindi iyon totoo. Isoffians and Earthlings essentially belonged to the same species, after all.

"We still have it. But the majority don't."

"No Flat Earthers?" A touch of humor glinted in Ivan's stark eyes. "Flat Isoffians?"

She watched him beneath her lashes. He did look gorgeous with that small smile. "We have satellite colonies far away enough from Isoff to

see the shape of the planet.”

“Huh.” Nagsalubong muli ang mga kilay ng lalaki habang naglalakad sila. Then with his jaw still slightly clenched, he looked at her. “I didn’t mean to smart-shame you.”

Napatigil siya roon, hindi inaasahan ang sinabi ng binata. “Is that an apology?”

“You really think the worst of me, don’t you?” magaspang nitong untag. “Is it so hard to believe that I apologized?”

She stared at him for a moment, noting the steel lines of his jaw and the grave look in his eyes. “Alright, apology accepted.”

Hindi umimik ang kasama at nagpatuloy sa paglakad.

“I get that you need contextual cues,” saad ni Eleina.

“What?”

“About the smart-shaming thing,” paglinaw niya. “I think it’s about balance and reading the room as well.”

“You better not post that online,” he intoned, stepping to the side to let a couple with a little girl pass by. “You’re gonna get cancelled.”

“Nobodies don’t get cancelled.”

Payak na tumawa ang lalaki at tumango. “Fair point.”

“I think sometimes you need to understand if the other person wants to hear you spit out

facts or not, especially on personal matters. It might come off as unwanted advice or as if you're lecturing them."

"Personal experience, Captain?" he drawled, his brow rising.

"Just observation."

Huminto ulit sila sa isang stop light.

"For example," aniya, "talking about proper diet, the dangers of overeating, and benefits of exercise to someone who's overweight and has eating problems. Or talking about the virtues of savings and investments to someone who has financial troubles. You might be spitting out hard cold facts, and speaking in good faith, but it could come off as an attack."

"Why are we talking about this?" anito sa matabang na tono.

"I'm giving an example."

"Alright, go ahead."

Biting her lip to stop herself from smiling, she stared ahead. Usually, she wouldn't f*ck around with people, but she liked rattling Ivan.

Umihip ang hangin at tinangay niyon ang ilang hibla ng kanyang buhok. Isinuksok niya iyon sa likod ng kanyang tainga at nagpatuloy. "It can be offensive and insensitive. It can come off as self-righteous, condescending, and showing off you're better than them. I don't think it's always black and white."

“You’ve thought a lot about this,” matamang obserba ng lalaki.

“I’ve been researching Earthlings to better understand your behaviors.”

Bumuga ang binata ng hangin. “F*ck.”

“But why not just say it?” usisa niya. “Why not engage in a logical discussion to stop the other person from giving unwanted advice instead of resorting to saying ‘ikaw na ang matalino at bida-bida?’”

“Because it’s easier. You don’t always have the time, desire, or mental and emotional bandwidth to discuss your deeply rooted issues to someone else. Especially not on some social setting. And I don’t know about other cultures, but Filipinos tend to be non-confrontational. Kaya dinadaan na lang namin sa joke. It’s passive aggressive. And it’s sh*tty as f*ck.”

Tumawid ulit sila sa kalsada at sinulyapan niya ang katabi. The hard line of his jaw looked uncompromising in the stark afternoon sunlight.

“Hugot?”

Muntikang matapilok ang lalaki at napalipad ulit ang gulat nitong tingin sa kanya. “What?”

“Hugot. ‘Yung sinabi mo, parang hugot.’”

“What the f*ck?”

“Parang personal kasi ang sagot mo. Hugot ang term n’yo roon.”

“You’ve been reading too much sh*t online, Captain.”

“It’s informative.”

Shaking his dark head, he strode forward again.

Naglakad din ulit siya. “Did I offend you when I voiced out my thoughts about parking your motorcycle out in the sun?”

He blew out another breath. “Bakit pakiramdam ko kahit ano’ng isagot ko, kung anong meme lang ang ikokomento mo?”

Well, wonder boy had a point.

Pagkatawid sa kabilang kalye, humakbang si Ivan sa kanyang kanan para ito ang nasa tabi ng kalsada. His large frame loomed beside her as they walked, his shadow falling over her as the cars zoomed by on the streets. Nagtaas siya ng kilay doon. Ngayon lang niya napansin na lagi palang nasa bahagi ng sidewalk na malapit sa kalsada ang lalaki habang naglalakad sila.

“You’ve been walking on that side of the sidewalk since we got off your bike,” punto niya.

“And?” kunot-noong tanong nito.

“It’s gentlemanly but unnecessary.” He should know by now that even a catastrophic landslide couldn’t kill her.

“You’re thinking too much, Captain.”

“I guess what I did was insensitive in a way,” patuloy ni Eleina.

“What?”

“Tungkol sa pag-park mo sa initan. It was unwanted advice. It was presumptuous and self-serving of me to point out your flaws as if you’re not already aware of them.”

Napakurap ang lalaki, tapos ay nagsalubong ulit ang mga kilay.

“Yes,” aniya. “That’s a paraphrase of Taylor Swift’s lyrics. You use some of her songs on your *IG reels*.”

His gaze snapped back to her, and he stopped dead on his tracks, causing the people behind him to almost bumped against his muscular body.

“Uy!” sita ng lalaking estranghero sa likuran ni Ivan.

“Sorry,” hingi nito ng tawad nang hindi lumilingon. Nanatiling nakatitig sa kanya ang binata. “You watched my *IG reels*.”

“It’s public.”

“You’ve looked at my social media accounts.”

“Of course.”

“Did you hack them?”

She didn’t think she had to. “No.”

Nanatili itong nakatiim-bagang. Ramdam niya ang malakas na pagbugso ng enerhiya ng kasama. Malamang ay iniisip nito kung alam niya ang tungkol sa IAS Art account nito. He’d be right about that.

“What else do you know about me?”

Curving her lips, she stared back at him. “Do you want to know?”

Nag-iwas ito ng tingin at tiim labing bumaling sa gusali sa kanilang kaliwa. “We’re here.”

Nasa tapat sila ng isang mataas na gusali sa kahabaan ng abalang kalsada ng BGC. Gawa iyon sa salamin at bakal, at kumikinang ang harapan nito sa pagtama ng panghapong araw.

Pumasok sila sa loob. The cool air soothed her warm skin. Her eyes scanned the lobby. Kulay gintong marmol ang sahig gayundin ang mga pader. A large crystal chandelier drooped from the high ceiling, and black sectional couches dotted the seating area on the right. Potted plants were strategically placed throughout the floor, and from the energy they gave off, they were real healthy plants.

Hinarap siya ng binata. Strands of his inky black hair had plastered on his forehead due to sweat, and his eyes looked darker in the golden lights of the lobby. “I’m here for a casting call. I’m not supposed to bring you here.”

“Too late, wonder boy.”

“Mix in with the other models. Don’t talk too much. Or just wait for me somewhere.”

“Hmm.”

“Eleina.” Pinukol siya ng madilim na titig ng

kasama. “You can’t make a scene there.”

“When did I ever?”

“F*ck.” Mabigat ulit itong umiling at humakbang papunta sa front desk.

“Good afternoon,” bati ni Ivan sa lalaking attendant. “I’m here for the casting call on the 26th floor.”

They filled up a form and were given visitor’s ID. They strode to the bank of elevators, and she flicked a glance at the man beside her. His muscles were rigid, his posture tense. She supposed it got to him that she’d been snooping around his social media accounts.

Pagkadating sa 26th floor, dumerecho sila sa salaming pinto na may naka-emblazoned na Tala.

They walked up to the granite receptionist desk. “Good morning. I’m here for the casting call,” saad ng lalaki.

The woman was probably in her late thirties. Tracy ang sabi sa silver name tag nito. Her pin straight hair shone under the soft lights, and her makeup looked flawless. Tracy blinked as she stared at Ivan. Eleina felt the woman’s energy flutter.

“Name?”

“Ivan Sevilla. I’m from *Starlight*.”

“You look familiar. Have you been in any commercial?”

Was it just her, or did it sound like a pickup line?

“No, I haven’t.”

Matamis ang ngiti sa mga labi, binigyan ni Tracy ng form at numero ang kasama. “Oh, ikaw ‘yung nasa billboard ng *Trigger* sa EDSA.”

She had seen that, too. The billboard was along the vein of Ivan’s almost R18 *IG* posts. Naka-black boxers doon ang binata mula sa isang sikat na Filipino clothing brand. His washboard abs were a killer on that one. Maraming nagkokomento online na highlight ng araw nila ang makita ang malaking billboard na iyon ni Ivan sa EDSA.

Nodding, Ivan gave a polite smile.

“You have your portfolio and set cards?” malambing na paalala ng receptionist.

Tumango ang lalaki.

“Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

Inabutan din siya ng form at numero ni Tracy, at tinanggap iyon ni Ivan bago pa siya makatugon. Pumulupot ang mga daliri ng modelo sa kanyang pupulsuhan at iginiya siya sa isang beige couch sa malawak na seating area. She ignored the way her skin tingled at the heat of his touch.

Salamin ang dingding sa may kanan, at tanaw doon ang mga gusali sa labas.

“Ivan!”

Sabay silang napalingon ng binata sa lalaking tumayo sa kabilang couch.