

1

BENVENUTI A CASA

Welcome @ Home

What it's like to hurt? To loathe? To live?
 I didn't know. I was beyond broken I couldn't
 feel anymore. I had no more tears to cry.

On the private plane, I cried myself to sleep, woke up and cried some more until I got tired and fell asleep again. Kung inakala ninuman na wala akong pakialam at kinatatakutan, isa iyong pagkakamali. I was in for a long cycle of nothingness, fear, and helplessness.

It all started when I woke up on a bed, with someone on top of me, muttering words that I could not understand. Memories of Leo forcing himself to me, his death, and even my suicide attempt flooded in. Dahil sa panic, itinulak ko ang taong iyon saka kumaripas ng takbo.

Run. Don't look back.

I had no idea as to where I was, I just ran barefoot from room to room, along hallways until I reached a garden full of roses. Eventually, I ended up running toward the woods with the moon as my guide. Natinik man at ilang beses sumabit ang puting bestida, nagpatuloy ako sa pagtakbo.

"Yuhoo!"

Umalingawngaw ang matinis na boses ng babae pero hindi ako tumigil. I was running in fear, not knowing where I was or who was chasing me. With my lungs burning and energy dropping, I stumbled and fell over a big root. Sumubsob ako sa lupa. My knees bled and my ankle got twisted. Sa sakit, hindi ko nagawang tumayo.

"Signorina, come out! Come out wherever you are!"
 With her high pitched voice, she had been calling me that.

Gamit ang mga braso, ginapang ko ang malaking nakausling ugat kung saan ako nadapa at doon mismo



nagtago, hinihiling na sana ay ikubli ako ng dilim ng gabi. Ang mabibilis na mga hakbang ay bumagal, hanggang sa tuluyang tumigil.

There was a sniffing sound followed by a taunting tone with an Italian accent. "I... can... smell... you."

Kinagat ko ang aking labi upang hindi mapasigaw nang may kung anong gumapang sa paanan ko.

"Just kidding." Sinundan iyon ng papalayong yabag.

Nagbilang ako ng ilang daan sa isip ko, siniguradong wala na siya. Making a brave decision to move on, I raised my head, popping out from the large root.

And there she was, squatting in my direction. Even under the faint light, her blue hair was eye-catching, loose and wild.

"Wow," aniyang tila nahihipnotismo, pagkatapos ay biglang tumili at nagtatalon, binubulabog ang buong kagubatan. "*Sei qui! Sei finalmente qui! (You're here. You're finally here!)*"

Nagpabalik-balik siya sa paglalakad habang nagbibilang sa mga daliri, sinasambit ang mga salitang Italyano na hindi ko maintindihan.

Dahan-dahan akong tumayo upang tumakas, ngunit napasigaw dahil sa masakit na sakong. Bago pa muling bumagsak, nasalo niya ako.

"You are not good in hide and seek, no?" she asked with an accent, then, her nose wrinkled, as if she had smelled something unpleasant. "*Puzzi! Urezza mi ucciderebbe per avverti lasciato cosi (You also stink! Urezza will kill me for letting you run of like that.)*"

"*Idiota.*" It was from another voice, husky and monotonic. Kamukha ng bagong dating ang unang babae, ngunit mas seryoso ang ekspresyon. Instead of loose blue hair, hers was black, tied in a bun. "She doesn't understand Italiano." Then, she talked to me with utmost modesty. "Apologies, Signorina. Udine is my twin sister, yes, but sometimes she's *stupida.*" Bumaling siya sa kasama,

nagsalita nang may obvious accent pa rin. “Maybe you scared her with your disrespect of personal space.”

“Boo.” The one called Udine pouted. “You’re always mean,” she said then, whispered to me, “Urezza is boring, no?” It was followed by a conspiratorial wink. “Our secret, Signorina Camilla.”

Camilla. Hearing my real name snapped me out of confusion. I pushed the blue-haired girl. Wala akong pakialam kung sino sila o nasaan ako, ang importante ay makatakas ako.

“Take her back to the villa,” bungad ng bagong dating na si Signor Gustavo. Nakasunod sa kanya ang ilang lalaki.

Kung maraming bantay, bakit hinayaan nila akong tumakas? Para ipamukhang kailanman ay hindi ako makakawala sa lugar na iyon?

“We made a deal. This is your home now.” He smiled. Masidhi ang pagnanais kong burahin ang ngiting iyon.

That’s right, we made a deal and I had to keep my end of the bargain... for now. Darating ang panahong magagawa ko ring makaalis.

Mariin kong ipinikit ang aking mga mata, saka sumuko.

“Welcome to the North, Camilla.”

Ngayon ay mas masakit ang pagsakal ng katotohanan. Hinayaan ko ang mga tauhan niya na buhatin ako pabalik sa malaking bahay. What was the point of running away anyway? Kailangan ko munang makahanap ng paraan para tumakas—lugar, pagkakataon, gamit at lakas. Kailangan ko munang tuluyang gumaling.

So I stayed, never went out of the room, did not see anyone... maliban sa nerbyosang maid na nagdadala ng pagkain ko at babaeng may asul na buhok na kumakatok sa pinto ko ilang beses sa isang araw.

“Do you want to eat?”

“Play with me!”

“Signorina... come out, come out!”



“Do you want to hear a song?” Then, she would proceed with singing nursery rhymes.

Kailanman ay hindi ako sumagot. Imbis na maengganyong lumabas, nagmistula iyong pananakot para sa akin. All I did was take a peek from the window, observe the activities outside, and find escape routes.

Armed men were a common sight. Ang malaking gate ay bumubukas lamang kapag may pumapasok o umaalis na sasakyan. It was always closed, keeping any trespassers out and prisoners in. Prisoners like me.

Nadiskubre ko din na ang tinakbuhan kong kakahuyan ay parte ng malawak na hardin. The villa itself was on top of a huge hill, overlooking a city. It was a fortress, a home fitting for a mafia boss where attacks were stoppable, and authorities would find hard to infiltrate.

Makalipas ang ilang araw, ibang tao ang kumatok sa pinto. *“Camilla?”* It was Gian. Hindi ako sumagot at nanatiling nakatingin sa labas ng bintana. *“Signor wants you to go down for dinner. Kung hindi ka lalabas after ten minutes, he said... he said I can drag you naked if I have to.”*

“Go on then,” I mumbled, *“tear off my clothes. It’s not mine anyway.”*

Pagkatapos ng sampung minuto, tuluyan iyong nabuksan mula sa labas. Hindi ako natinag sa papalapit niyang yabag.

“How could you, Gian?” I asked without looking at him, my voice hoarse.

I still couldn’t believe how naive I was, how gullible. Kaya pala tinutukso niya akong prinsesa noon, it was a metaphor for the mafioso’s daughter.

“I had to.”

Hindi ko mapigilang masaktan nang tingnan siya. Sa tagal ng pananatili rito, ngayon ko lang ulit siya nakita. Wala na ang palangiting si Gian. No more camera around his neck. Nothing’s normal around him anymore.

“You were my friend.” Disappointment, conviction and anger were all in my voice.

When he tried to touch me, I flinched. “Don’t touch me, please.”

Humugot siya ng buntong-hininga; his expression apologetic. “Then, follow me.”

Pagod makipagtaló, sumunod ako palabas ng kuwarto. Walking around and passing corridors, the house was decorated with flowers and bright paintings on the wall. Katulad ng Castello dei Capo at ng mansyon ng Orleonne, malalaki rin ang bintana. The house was too bright to be a nest for criminals. What’s more odd, we passed by a view of an isolated building resembling a chapel.

“That’s the *cappella* (chapel). Dahil minsan lang makababa sa siyudad ang mga nakatira dito, bumibisita si Padre Bonno tuwing Linggo para magmisa.”

Nanatili akong tahimik at nag-iisip. Religion and mafia, I never understood the connection between those two things. Kung nagdadasal sila para sa mga kasalanan at uulitin lang din iyon, ano pa ang punto niyon?

Finally, we ended up in the dining hall. At the center was a long table full of food. Ngunit ang anumang kulay at aroma ay hindi nakapukaw ng aking gutom.

Signor Gustavo Qapone at the head, coaxed me to sit beside him. But I sat on the other end of the table to mock him. Imbis na makipagtaló, inutusan niya ang mga tagasilbi na bigyan ako ng plato, kubyertos at pagkain.

“I have been told you only eat small portions of food. That’s why I prepared a feast for you. Some are the same as the ones you eat before, some are new. Enjoy.” Then, he started eating.

Nakatitig lang ako sa pagkain, hindi magawang magutom. The colors and the smell didn’t appeal to me. I had no appetite. I felt numbed. I was robbed of my senses. Ang tanging dahilan sa patuloy kong paghinga ay ang



pagnanais na makaalis... na tila isang napakaimposibleng bagay.

“Go on, eat,” he encouraged.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You don’t like the food?”

Kapuri-puri kung paano siya nanatiling nakangiti na parang totoo. The twinkle in his eyes seemed so real, like that of a father eating dinner with his beloved daughter.

“I can’t taste anything.”

Katulad ng pinong kilos ng isang maginoo, uminom siya ng tubig at tinuyo ng table napkin ang bibig. “Then... shall I kill the cook for you?” He called Gian. “Please bring lovely Elleanor here.”

Natulala ako; hindi makapaniwala. Isa lang iyong biro, di ba? Ngunit makalipas ang ilang minuto, bumalik si Gian kasama ang maliit na pigura ng isang dalagita.

“How long have you been here, Elleanor?”

“*Cinque anni* (Five years).”

“Use what you learned in school. *Inglesse, per favore* (English, please).”

“F-five years, Signor.” Nakayuko man, kita ang panginginig ng mga daliri nito na nakakapit sa mahabang asul na uniporme.

Tumangu-tango lamang si Gustavo. “My daughter doesn’t like your cooking. It was a mistake to let you take over your sick mother’s job for today. Perhaps, I’ll send you to Madam Ollis.”

Elleanor raised her head, panicking. “N-no, Signor,” she shook her head, “not there.” She turned to me and pleaded, hands clasped together. “I... I’m sorry. Signorina, I’ll cook again. Whatever you like.”

“I cannot accept that. You are the reason my Camilla looks sick. Maybe she hasn’t been eating these past few days because the food is terrible.”

“Signor?”

Doon ko tuluyang nakilala ang nahihintakutang mukhang babae. It was the same girl who brought me food for the past days.

“I promised to give her the best, and if you can’t satisfy her wishes, then, I have no choice.” Sumenyas siya kay Gian. There were no words, but it was an obvious order.

Walang anumang tinutukan ni Gian ng baril si Elleanor. It was not a joke because a devil never jokes.

“What are you doing!” I asked, horrified.

“What do you think? Her terrible cooking made you like that.”

No, it was a lie. Hindi si Elleanor ang kanyang pinaparusahan dahil sa luto nito. He was punishing me, for ignoring him... for resisting to obey him.

Elleanor was now kneeling on the floor, begging for her life. “Signorina, please forgive me. I... I don’t want to die.” Nag-alpasan ang kanyang luha.

“Such a shame,” Signor Gustavo pondered. “Little Ellie could have been a good doctor. She is smart, you see. But I do not tolerate mistakes.”

“Gian,” tawag ko, “please stop.” Ngunit wala siyang sagot, nakahanda lang gawin ang anumang utos ng amo. Mariing ipinikit ni Elleanor ang mga mata, nagdadasal at umiiyak.

My stare zeroed in back to Gustavo Qapone. As a man who had killed his wife, the former Southern boss and Leo with no hesitation, he would not think twice killing the maid.

Now, a demonic grin was on his face. Isang araw, gusto ko iyong burahin. *Just for now*, I said to myself. I would surrender, temporarily. I picked up my spoon and started eating, quickly putting everything in my mouth without chewing or tasting it. Not that I could even taste it. In fact, I wanted to puke at his face.

“You can go back to the kitchen, Elleanor. It seems



my daughter loves your cooking after all,” sambit niya kalaunan.

At the corner of my eye, the maid cried again in relief and uttered a silent “thank you.”

“I am a lucky man,” Signor commented, satisfied. “My daughter is obedient.”

2

PRIMA LEZIONE
First Lesson

Matapos ang nangyari sa hapag-kainan, tuluyan nang itinalaga si Elleanor bilang personal maid ko. Her mother—a soft spoken woman—did not have a bit of complaint. She just held my hand and uttered her gratitude in broken English.

“Thank you... my daughter,” anito. Pagkatapos ay bumalik na sa kusina, iniwan kami ng kanyang anak.

I was clueless on how to talk to Elleanor. After all, my stubbornness put her life in danger. “Uhm... hi.” I extended my hand for a handshake.

Imbis na tanggapin iyon, iba ang kanyang tanong. “Do you want some tea, Signorina?”

I felt more awkward as I rested my hands on my side. “Y-yes, please...”

She curtsied and hurried away.

Signor was indeed a manipulator. Nagawa niya akong mapasunod dahil kay Elleanor. Nagsisilbi siyang paalala sa pagiging suwail ko. Isang banta na sa aking bawat pagkakamali ay maaring buhay ang maging kapalit.

Sa ilang araw na paninirahan sa villa, kapuna-puna kung paano sunod-sunuran kay Signor Gustavo ang lahat ng mga naroon. Gaya ni Elleanor na naglilingkod sa akin nang walang reklamo. Isang malaking misteryo para sa akin kung bakit sila nagpapakaalipin.

“How did you end up here?” tanong ko. Habang pinapalitan niya ang kobre kama, naupo ako sa sofa, tinititigan ang dala niyang tsaas.

As usual, she never uttered a word except when asking if I feel comfortable or if there’s something I need. She did not even try to meet my eyes, only did her job like nothing happened, while I was still uneasy. She had moved

on, I didn't. Hindi pa rin nawawala ang pangambang baka dumating ang panahon na may mamatay dahil sa akin. A little more push and I might explode and go insane just like the people of the North.

"You can talk to me, you know," I added, trying to convince her. Nakakabaliw ang takot lalo na't animo ako lang ang nag-iisang apektado.

Thinking maybe it was an order to answer me, she reluctantly explained little details as possible. "My mother works here as a cook."

"Then, why did she let you come here too?"

"I grew up here, Signorina."

Siguro nga matinding pagtataka ang gumuhit sa mukha ko kaya kusa siyang nagpaliwanag.

"Signor own our lives. My father couldn't pay his debt at the casino, so he sold us. We were sent for Casa Dei Ollis."

"Casa Dei Ollis?" Ilang beses ko nang narinig ang pangalang iyon.

"Madam Ollis manages it, and some establishments that Signor owns in the city. Girls were sent there to be trained or... or sold."

A *whorehouse*, that's what I understood.

"But your Papà said we should work for him. So here we are. Ever since, *il mio madre*... my mother, follows him like a god. He... he is not a god, but Mamà trusts him more than anyone."

Nahahati ako kung iisiping naging mabuti ba o makasarili si Signor Gustavo. Ang pananahimik ay sinamantala niya upang magpaalam. I was left alone, thinking I could never trust a man like him.



Kinabukasan matapos ang agahan, kumatok si Udine at iginiya ako sa malaking gusali sa likod-bahay. It was the first time I strolled outside the house. We passed by an

Olympic-size pool.

Looking around, I saw that the villa itself was surrounded by nature. Trees were everywhere, giving shade and a cool breeze. It was lovely, too bad the inhabitants were polluting such beauty by their mere evil existence.

“Faster, faster, Miss Camilla!”

I am not Camilla, gusto kong ipagsigawan. Pero alam kong walang silbing makipagtalo sa kanya. Si Udine ay may sariling mundo. From what I’d seen, she was all flowers and smiles, asserting her own happiness to others. Somehow she reminds me of Lilo, minus the whining and the death threats.

She was a free spirit in bright-colored clothes, blue hair, and cropped shorts.

“They’re waiting! Miguel doesn’t like it when we’re late. He is *rigido*, no? You know, strict.”

Tumigil ako sa paglalakad dahil sa binanggit niyang pangalan. Ang galit ay muling nabuhay nang maalala ang ginawa ng lalaki kay Zak.

Walang anumang hinablot ni Udine ang kamay ko at hinila ako papasok sa gusali. She cheerfully urged me to walk faster as if we’ve known each other for a long time... as if we’re friends. I had no choice but to follow despite my anger.

Once inside, the men there stopped and stared, then greeted us.

“*Boun giorno, Signorina.*”

“*Salve, ‘ñorina.*”

Iniyuko ko ang ulo at di sumagot, hinahayaang mayakag sa kung saan. Nang sa wakas ay narating namin ang metal na pinto at pumasok doon, nalaman kong iyon pala ang indoor shooting range.

Wonder, fear and anger mixed in my heart when I saw who were waiting: Miguel, Gian, and Urezza. Nakaupo sa sulok ang isang pigurang nakasuot ng pulang tracksuit at natatabunan ng hood ang ulo.

Bumitiw si Udine at sumali sa kumpol.

“Okay. Are you guys ready?” excited niyang baling sa mga kasama. “Three counts. Three, two, one... Welcome home, Signorina Camilla!” She extended her hands in a grand gesture.

Ngunit siya lang ang tanging bumati, at nagmukha siyang istupida. Everyone was wary, anxious even... well except for Miguel who just stood there, enjoying the view of my pitiful state.

“Oh, come on!” Udine whined. “We practiced it, right?”

“You practiced it,” sagot ni Urezza. “Stop fooling around.”

“Mood killer.” Udine stepped forward, the whiny pout was erased, then, she introduced herself. “*Salve*, Miss Camilla! I’m Udine, short for Beaututidine, meaning ‘happiness’. This is Sicurezza, you can call her Urezza, or Ezza if you feel lazy,” tukoy niya sa kakambal. “You already met Gianni and Miguelito, no? And that creepy figure is Ro.” She leaned and clasped my hand. “You know... I researched for cool names that you can call us.” Pagkatapos, hinugot niya ang papel sa bulsa ng kanyang maong shorts. “Lotus Attack, Rose Thorns, or Red Lilies, but they sound like flower shop names, no? You can call us anything you like. Anything!”

I cocked my head. Hindi ko maintindihan ang gusto niyang mangyari. “Bakit kailangan ko kayong bigyan ng pangalan?”

This time, it was her who got confused. “I do not understand, Signorina.”

“Bakit kailangan kong binyagan ang walang kwenta n’yong grupo? Close ba tayo? Magkaibigan? Dahil sa inyo, nakakulong ako. ‘Wag kang umaktong parang matagal na tayong magkaibigan. Sakit ka sa ulo.”

Unable to understand the language, Udine’s cheery face turned helpless. “Well,” she said, clueless for an answer, “I should study that language, no?”

“She asked what’s the purpose of the group,” Gian chimed in.

Dahil naging espiya noon, siya lamang ang nakakaintindi ng sinasabi ko. I was not thankful nor surprised why he didn’t explain further.

It was obvious the others didn’t believe that that was the only meaning of what I’d said. Nevertheless, it was Miguel who answered.

“To protect you, of course.”

Going through a lot must have messed up my hearing. *Protect... me?*

Maybe it was not just my hearing, I think my sanity left me as well. A bubble of laughter escaped my mouth, and then, I was laughing like a lunatic. Maybe I had gone totally crazy.

To protect me? How funny, how definitely stupid. They hurt my friends and Zak and ruined everything I know, to protect me? My laughter stopped, replaced by a surge of anger.

“What a sick joke.” I raised my trembling fingers at Miguel. “You! F-f*ck you. You understand me? F*ck you, f*ck all of this...”

I did not know what to do anymore. I was trembling so much and was hopeless. Filled with hate, loneliness and fear, I wiped the tears that flowed down like waterfalls.

“Signorina Cam—”

“I’m not Camilla!” I hissed at Udine. Camilla this, Camilla that. When would they understand that this is not my home?

“But your name is Camilla, isn’t it?”

“I’m Hanna! You insensitive lunatic!”

Shouting and cussing at people, when did I become this mean?

Thinking she was the reason for my outburst, she turned to her sister. “Ezza, I made her angry. Did I do something wrong?”

“You and everything else is wrong!” I shrieked.

This time, Ezza spoke. “I apologize for my sister’s behavior. After years of not knowing your whereabouts, she’d been looking forward to meet you.”

That did not clear up anything. In fact, I got more confused. Bakit kailangan nilang maghintay? To protect me? A group was made for my sake, just like Fortunello?

Sa pagitan ng malalim na pag-iisip, sumingit si Miguel. “You want to kill me, am I right?”

Yes. Sa dami ng gulong nadala, nagkapatung-patong na ang galit ko. I hate his guts, despite the fact that he’s Bino’s brother. “I hate you.” Finally, I had no tears to cry.

“Enough to kill me?”

Maybe. Kung may kakayahan lang akong gumanti, baka nagawa ko iyong sabihin.

“Miguel, you’re gonna make her cry. I don’t want her crying...”

“Don’t interfere, Udine.”

Agad siyang sumunod sa babala. Lumapit si Miguel; sinusukat kung gaano kalalim ang galit ko, saka ngumiti nang mapait. “Hatred towards me is acceptable. At least, you have a goal.”

Sa malapitan, hindi maipagkakailang magkapatid sila ni Bino. Ngunit hanggang pisikal na anyo lamang. Bino was a teddy bear, tough exterior with a heart. While this one’s just pure stone.

“Then, give it your best shot. As a first lesson, let me teach you how to use this gun,” tukoy niya sa hinugot na baril mula sa leather jacket. “When the time comes, you can properly put a bullet between my eyes.” Walang pag-aalinlangang inilagay niya iyon sa palad ko. “Let’s see how terrible you are, Ca...mi...lla.”

“I am not Camilla!” Itinutok ko ang baril sa kanya.

Si Udine ang unang umalma, nagtangkang lumapit. “Signorina, please don’t be mad.”

My aim focused on her, then to Ezza, to the hooded

man called Ro, and even to Gian. I felt like being surrounded by monsters, not knowing which one to defeat first.

“Hanna...” usal ni Gian, animo naawa.

“Don’t call me Hanna! You don’t have the right to call me that!”

“Then, shall I call you Camilla?” It was Miguel, plain mocking.

Hanna. Camilla. I did not know anymore. Sino nga ba ako?

Unti-unti siyang humakbang palapit. “What if one day I’m holding your little friends, choking, killing them by the second, and only you and the gun in your hands could save them?” He paused, pretended to think deep. “Let’s say, Lilo... ah, the little hellion. She would grow very pretty; soft flesh, right curves. Imagine her, under my palms asking for your help.”

Habang palapit siya, ako naman ang umatras.

“Would it be too selfish if you won’t help her? Only you, me, and the helpless little Lilo, what would you do?”

Pagkatapos, itinuro niya ang pagitan ng kanyang mga mata. “Save your friend, Camilla. Pull. The. Trigger.”

Hindi lang pala ako ang nawawala sa katinuan. His taunt was somehow effective. What did he want? To die? Kahit na hindi ako marunong bumaril, sa lapit niya ay hindi ako magmimintis.

“Signor was right, you’re weak... spineless. You can’t even kill the enemy. Remember how I shot Zachary?”

“Stop it,” I warned.

“It was twice, or more. Poor boy. I should’ve aimed at his head.”

“I said stop it!” sigaw ko, pilit na iwinawaksi ang duguang katawan ni Zak habang tinatawag ang pangalan ko.

“Go on, pull the trigger, Camilla. Save your friends... avenge your beloved Zachary.”

“I said f*cking stop!”



And just like that, I finally exploded, nothing but temporary insanity. I pulled the trigger.

“You have a terrible aim,” Miguel said, clutching his stomach. A thud echoed as his body fell to the ground.

3

AUGURI
Granting Wishes

There's a certain point when hate disappears and you are left with all its damages. Then, you stare at the ruins of hatred and ask why.

I looked at the fallen Miguel. As if cold water was splashed over my head, I woke up from the monster that I had been. Everything disappeared and guilt set in.

“Why?”

Just like that, I hurried to his side, kneeling and remorseful. He was right, I don't have the guts to kill. Matapos siyang barilin ay ako pa mismo ang unang dumulog.

Spineless.

Kahit na duguan, narinig ko ang nanghihina niyang tawa, katulad ng isang nagwagi sa labanan.

“Why did you let me do that?”

“We really need to work at your aim.” Hindi man lang siya kinakitaan ng takot sa kabila ng pagdurugo. He looked satisfied, as if a heavy load was taken off him. “Welcome home, Signorina.”

Iyon ang huli niyang sinabi bago siya kuhanin at ilayo ng mga bagong dating. Ako naman ay inalalayan ni Udine palabas ng shooting range. Naging sentro ng atensyon sa mga tauhan ang duguan kong mga kamay.

“*Lei spara il consigliere...*” were the whispers.

“‘She shot the consigliere.’ That's what they are saying,” paliwanag ni Udine. “Miguel is Signor's *consigliere...* you know, advisor, his most trusted person when it comes to business.”

Kahit hindi pamilyar sa pamamalakad ng Hilaga, batid kong mahalaga ang papel ni Miguel. I shot one of them, it

was normal for doubts and accusations to arise.

"This is bad," bulong ni Udine sa tabi ko. "He is *stupido*, idiot! I knew it, if not that *bastardo*, that Leonald, his principles and guilt will kill him one day."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, Leonald, the pervert. They don't get along. Good thing he is dead, he hurt you, no?"

"What do you mean about his guilt?" pagtatama ko.

"Oh, that," she said. "Miguel is *rigido*, strict. But if he thinks he did something terrible, he repays it. So maybe, he did something bad to you. The bullet on his body is his apology. Very *stupido*."

Yes, he did something terrible; hinimok niya akong traydurin ang Fortunello, sirain ang party at barilin si Zak. Those were his sins, ngunit isang kabaliwan ang kanyang ginawa. Hindi ko maibibigay ang kapatawaran ko.

"Now the men are doubting your loyalty," dagdag ni Udine.

Absurd, twisted and just wrong. I never pledged my loyalty to anyone except to Uncle and Fortunello.

"Does Signor know this?"

"Of course, there is nothing we do that he doesn't know."

Hindi ko alam kung alin ang mas mali; ang paraan ni Miguel para magbayad ng kabayaran o ang pagpayag ni Signor Gustavo. Another thing, I felt guilty about it which I shouldn't. I hate Miguel. I should hate him and every single day that I would be here.

"Where is he?"

"In the office."

I knew where the office was. Iyon ang parati kong nadadaan bago makarating sa dining hall. Without saying goodbye, I ran.

"Signorina! He has a visitor—!"

Hindi ako nakinig at tinakbo ang direksyon ng opisina sa kabila ng madugong kamay.

Why would he do that? Why would he let me shoot one of his trusted men? Wala bang hangganan ang pagpapakaalipin ng mga taga-Hilaga sa kanya?

Nang sa wakas marating ang opisina, binuksan ko ang pinto nang hindi kumakatok. The mild smell of tobacco and burnt wood invaded my nose. He sat behind his desk, back leaning on a black leather chair. Mula sa pakikinig sa kausap, natuon sa akin ang kanyang atensyon, lingering longer on my bloody hands. Sumunod din ang kanyang kausap.

It was an older woman, in short gray pencil-cut skirt, covered by a loose fur coat in tiger print, her lips as red as her heeled shoes.

“Why?” I asked him, not minding the audience. “Why did you let him be shot?”

“Uncivilized,” the woman uttered. Ngunit imbis na iritado, wari siyang naaliw. “But pretty. Give me a month and I’ll be able to tame her like my girls.”

“Be careful, Ollis, it’s my daughter you’re referring to. She is not one of your puppets.”

“Ah, Gustavo, Gustavo...” She gently shook her head. “Being a father makes you charming. I like it,” she purred. “I’m kidding. But don’t forget, my girls are top-class, well maintained. Those little puppets are not mine. I’m their guardian, you are the owner.”

Reading between the lines, I was not surprised about the kind of business that they were talking about. Prostitution. Bakit pa nga ba ako magugulat? This was the mafia, literal and metaphorical ‘trade of flesh’ was a norm.

Tumayo ang babae at nagpaalam. “I shall take my leave for your... family time.”

“Won’t you say hi to the sisters?”

“No need. It pains me to see Udine and Ezza, such potential doing a man’s job. Just don’t forget my request. It’s been years, no replacement has been given. Give me the kitchen girl.”

“I shall think about it,” he answered as Madam Ollis

kissed the ring on his finger. It was definitely awkward to see a woman kissing a man's hand, but maybe it's how they show respect.

Then, she turned to me and scanned how I looked. I flinched as she touched my cheeks. "Beautiful," she whispered, the Italian accent audible.

Then, she sashayed away. Sa kabila ng edad, hindi maipagkakailang minsan siyang naging maganda noong kabataan. Hanggang ngayon, taglay pa rin niya ang mapang-akit na aura. Maybe Vivienne would be like her once she gets older. Ripe. Experienced.

"*Arrivederci* (Goodbye), Don Gustavo." She left the room.

Now that we're alone, his arrogance completely disappeared. Nagsalubong ang kanyang mga kilay, pinagmasdan ako mula sa kanyang kinauupuan.

"We pride ourselves of being respectful."

I did not care. As far as I was concerned, the word 'we' would never imply to him and me.

"I shot him," I uttered looking down at my hands. "I... I shot him down. Why? Why did you... just to pay off his guilt? You let him get shot, because you know how much I hate him, you, and this place. Just why... Signor... why?"

Why was I crying? Why was I feeling guilty? This was the same feeling when I betrayed the Fortunello. Kung ganito kalalim ang ngatngat ng konsensya, siguro nga ay wala nang pakiramdam ang mga katulad nila.

Tumayo siya at lumapit. His hands settled on my shoulder. They were heavy like a man carrying the weight of the world. "I just granted your wish, *mio carina*. You hate us so much you wanted something to bleed... to hurt. That is what you want, right?"

If the followers were stupid, the master was insane. Ginawa niya iyon para sa akin, at para saan? Para mabawasan ang galit ko? As if it was that easy... or possible.

"Now, is there anything I can do to make you happy?"

Shall I tell Gianni to do it, too? He betrayed you after all. Pretending to be a good friend, how bad of him..."

Shaking my head, I did not know what to think. He sounded mocking, but it wasn't a joke. He never made jokes.

"Ah, how about this... after you complete the training, you can kill us yourself. Tell me, Camilla, isn't it satisfying?"

Umatras ako at tuluyang tumakbo palabas. I just ran, passed by the worried Udine, Eleanor and even Gian who waited outside my room. I locked myself and washed my hands. The rinsed blood did not lift off the weight of what I did. I sat by the window looking at the city below the hill, just like back home where I saw the whole Beaumondville with Zak. The darkening skies and the waking city, it was just like back home.

Except I was watching it alone.

"That's what you wanted, right?"

Yes. That was what I wanted. Kaya nang kinabukasan ay natuloy pa rin ang pagtuturo sa akin sa tamang paggamit ng baril. Dahil kasalukuyang nagpapagaling si Miguel, si Ezza ang naging guro ko.

Katulad ng dahon sa ilog, sumabay ako sa daloy. In the following days, I was told to do a lot of things. Eat this, learn that, avoid those. Nagmistula akong makina na sumusunod sa bawat utos. After all, it was for the good... for my own good.

Ang pagtuturo nila ng iba't ibang bagay upang maging malakas ako ay katulad sa pag-aalaga ng ahas. It had been clear that I would escape this place whenever I could, but they didn't budge.

Ironic. Upang matalo ang taong nanakit sa akin at mga kaibigan ko, kailangan kong matutong lumaban. Ngunit paano kung ang kalaban mismo ang nagtuturo sa akin para gawin iyon? That's another twist to a story that was already messed up.

They trained me so hard I felt like dying, but I did not resist. They even took all light bulbs in my room. Pagsapit



ng gabi, kahit ang ilaw mula sa siyudad ay hindi sapat upang punan ang kadiliman sa kuwarto ko.

Bad things happen in the dark, but I was forced to face them.

“Your fears are unreasonable. I’m teaching you to stop being afraid of me,” Signor told me once.

If the time would come that I’d stop hating him, that would be the day when he’s buried deep in the ground.

4

CASINÒ DI GUSTAVO
Gustavo's Casino

Hindi ko maintindihan noon kung bakit pinoprotektahan ng Fortunello ang isa't isa. Nakipagkaibigan din ako kay Gian at tuluyan siyang pinagkatiwalaan. Based on these, it was safe to say I was not good with knowing the truth on my own. I was clueless. I was not good at judging people, that's the bottomline.

Ngunit unang tingin pa lamang kay Elleanor, alam ko nang may mali. Her eyes seemed to had cried a lot and was trying not to more, the fear on her facial expression, and her shaking hands were all signs that something was definitely wrong.

"Elleanor, are you okay?"

"S-si (Y-yes), Signorina," sagot niya habang inaayos ang mga damit ko sa walk-in closet.

Liar.

Walang paalam na sinapo ko ang kanyang noo upang siguraduhing wala siyang sakit. Ngunit ang natitigilan niyang anyo ay agad naging desperasyon nang hinuli ang dalawa kong kamay at lumuhod.

"*Per favore*, tell Signor to let me stay. Don't give me to Madam Ollis, I don't want to work there. I promise, I promise...." Halos mautal na siya sa magkasabay na pag-iyak at pakikiusap. "I promise to serve you all my life, just don't send me to the *bordello*, the whorehouse, Signorina." And with that, she clutched at my clothes, sobbing.

"*Give me the kitchen girl.*" Iyon ang sinabi ni Madam Ollis noon. Ibig sabihin, siya ang tinutukoy na kapalit nina Udine at Ezza.

"Signorina, *per favore.*"

Magagawa ko bang humiling kay Signor na huwag

siyang ipadala? Then, I shall be under his debt. Bakit ko kailangang makiusap? Hindi ako apektado sa mangyayari dahil babalik din ako sa Timog, malayo dito.

"I..." It was their matter to discuss, not mine. "I want to drink tea. Get a cup for me."

I did not care because this was not my home.

Pinagpag niya ang sarili at yuko ang ulong umalis ng kuwarto; hitsurang talunan, walang magawa at sunod-sunuran.

Katulad ko. Kung tutuusin ay halos wala kaming pinagkaiba. But she was none of my business. I did not care. I did not want to get involved.

"Damn it," I mumbled and went to the door without thinking twice. Dapat ay maging makasarili ako upang makatakas, pero heto't mabilis na tinatahak ko ang direksyon ng opisina ni Signor Gustavo.

"It's me," sabi ko pagkatapos kumatok. Bumukas ang pinto at tumambad ang mukha ni Miguel na ilang araw ring hindi nagpakita, simula niyong nangyari sa shooting range. Ang tangi kong nagawa ay ang tanawin ang kanyang papalayong pigura.

I entered the office without permission.

"Never polite as usual, but it's a sweet surprise to see my lovely Camilla visit me."

After shouting a million '*To hell with it's* in my mind, I went straight to the point. "I want to go sightseeing."

Tumaas ang kanyang kilay at gumuhit ang mapaglarong ngiti sa mga labi. "I believe 'sightseeing' term is used by tourists and guests. As far as I remember, you consider yourself a *prisoner* in your own home."

Touché. Sometimes it was amazing how he knew what I think. "I, ah, I want to visit your... *establishments*," I said, whiny and demanding.

"My establishments? I have a lot of them, all across Italia and other continents. Which one do you want to visit?"

Kahit malayo kay Uncle, lumaki akong alam na hindi basta-basta ang yaman ng mga Kyosei. Ngayong narinig ko mismo mula kay Signor Gustavo ang lawak ng kanyang impluwensya, hindi ko maiwasang ikompara ang dalawa.

“The casino you own in this city and also the one run by Madam Ollis.”

“You mean the *bordello*,” he emphasized.

“Yes, the whorehouse,” I mocked.

Shaking his head lightly, he didn’t try to hide his disappointment. “Casa Dei Ollis is a whorehouse, but women go there willingly, chosen and taken care of. It is also a way of living, better than being politicians or entertainers. They give happiness of highest quality to anyone who needs it, at the right price of course.”

It’s still prostitution, flesh trade, and the women were hookers, nothing could change that. Ngunit imbis na makipagtaló, iginiit ko ang aking gusto. “It doesn’t matter, I want to go.”

As the thin line formed on his lips, he looked reluctant. Sa totoo lang, hindi ako interesado sa casino at iba pa niyang pagmamay-ari. Sigurado namang ilegal ang mga iyon. Gusto ko lang talagang makita kung paano pinapalakad ang lugar na pagdadalhan kay Eleanor.

“Why do you want to see them?”

“Curiosity.” Lying is best in short answers. However, there’s no denying that my father is a smart man and short responses won’t fool him.

“Sneaky, aren’t you?” he said leaning on his chair. “I’ll play along. And since I am a good father, your request is granted. You can also visit the town and buy anything you like. Miguelito and Gianno will be your guards. If ever you disappear, of course they will pay, together with young Ellie.”

“Deal,” I agreed, offering only a nod as agreement.

“Enjoy your day at the wonderful city of Reggio Calabria.”



Kinagabihan, natuloy kaming pumunta sa siyudad. Nang bumukas ang malaking gate, nagmistula akong paslit habang nakatingin sa dinadaan ng sasakyan.

Siguro ay napansin ng magmamanehong si Gian ang pagkasabik ko sa pansamantalang kalayaan, kaya mas mabagal ang takbo ng sasakyan. Hindi na nagkomento ang katabi niyang si Miguel. Yet, it was only until the trees slowly disappeared as we passed by the foot of the hill, guarded by armed men waiting at a checkpoint.

Tumakbo ang sasakyan sa kalagitnaan ng siyudad. Buildings, some bricked houses and a few fountains made the scenery appealing. We passed by a few people doing different things and it made me envious. The City of Reggio Calabria was beautiful even at night. It was full of life, where contemporary and archaic structures blended together.

Farther East, the trees had grown thicker until we ended up at a sole building surrounded by lush greens of forest. Rather than a skyscraper, it resembled a dome, with Greek pillars at the entrance.

“Casinò Di Gustavo,” I read the huge sign.

As Miguel opened the door for me, employees lined up for a greeting in unison. “*Benvenuto, Signorina Camilla.*”

My white flowy dress paired with strap sandals in nude made me hesitate. A place like this represented glamour, while I looked like someone strolling at a park during summer.

“You look fine,” bulong ni Gian mula sa likuran.

Isang may katandaang lalaki ang sumalubong sa amin. “Welcome to Casino Di Gustavo,” bati niya sa tuwid na Ingles. “Signor Qapone called, informed us that you will come. I am Federico Rizzi, at your service.”

Tinangka niyang hawakan ang kamay ko upang halikan, ngunit nanatili iyong nakakuyom. “I am Ha... Camilla,”

tangi kong naisagot. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“My pleasure. I hope you don’t mind me saying, but you are the loveliest woman I’ve ever seen,” he praised.

Dahil na rin siguro sa titulo bilang anak ng kanyang boss, masyado siyang galak na sundin ang anumang hiling ko. Kung mapi-please niya ako, na-please niya na rin si Signor. Mr. Rizzi was a typical man climbing up the power ladder.

Siguro ay halata ang pagkailang ko kaya kusang nagdesisyon si Miguel. “She’d like a tour of the casino now.”

“Of course, of course! I’ll personally show—”

“Thank you, Rizzi, but we can tour her ourselves,” putol niya at iginiya ako papasok.

I should have uttered a ‘thank you,’ but stopped myself. Nang tuluyang makapasok, mas lalo akong nanliit. Glitz and glamour filled the entire hall. Passing by slot machines, game tables and people, it was not a place for someone like me. People gamble thousands, even millions everyday and sometimes, stocks, company shares, art collections, lives—all for the sake of thrill.

“Kanina ka pa nakatingin lang, ayaw mo bang maglaro?” tanong ni Gian.

Umiling ako patuloy sa panonood sa card table, may ilang sunud-sunod ang panalo habang ang iba ay panipis nang panipis ang chips, malapit nang maubusan ng pangtaya.

“Hindi ka ba nag-i-enjoy? Akala ko ba gusto mong pumasyal?”

It was a lie. Ang talagang pakay ko ay ang Casa Dei Ollis. Ginamit ko lang ang casino upang hindi nila mahulaan ang totoo.

“He gambled everything,” I said instead, pitying the man who just lost his last bet.

“Because he can.”

“But nobody leaves this place a winner. Everyone loses.”

“The casino is where we gamble, Signorina,” pagsali ni

Miguel sa usapan. "Call it dirty, but it feeds thousands of employees, pays millions of tax money. As men come and enjoy the night at the right price, we give them what they want. It's a fair trade, don't you think?"

Wala akong maisagot. Kahit na gustong sumalungat, mayroon siyang punto. Walang pumilit sa mga kliyente para magsugal. If gambling made them happy and left them with nothing after, it's their own doing.

"Let's visit Casa Dei Ollis," turan ko. Sapat na ang oras na inilaan namin sa sugalan.

"Your father called earlier, he said it is not the right time to visit that place," tutol ni Miguel.

"No. He agreed before we left."

Sa kabila ng ingay, naglabanan kami ng titig, habang si Gian ay pinaglipat-lipat ang tingin sa aming dalawa. I tried not to budge or flinch. Tatal umabot na dito, itutuloy ko ang pagbisita sa brothel.

Heaving a sigh, I thought he gave in, but he had another idea. "Fine. Let's gamble the result."

Mas mabuti na iyon kaysa kaladkarin niya ako paalis, di ba?

Pagkatapos pumayag, kinuha niya mula sa bulsa ang isang barya. It was the first time I've seen a coin like it. Walang nakaukit na numero bilang halaga kundi simpleng disenyo lang ng araw at buwan.

"Whoever's side wins and gets to decide. What's yours?"

"The moon," was my answer.

"Then, Mr. Sunshine's mine."

Inihagis niya sa ere ang barya, pagkatapos ay sinalo at ipinatong sa bukas kong palad.

"I won," he said grinning at the sun on my palm.

"Let's do it again," sambit ko, hindi matanggap ang resulta.

"Playing unfair, are you?" he mocked yet shrugged as permission. Sa pagkakatong ito, ako ang nag-toss at sumalo. Removing my other hand on top of the coin, the

smiling sun mocked my second loss.

“I won again,” he said.

Ngunit imbis na sumunod, nanatili akong nakatayo at nagmatigas. Wala silang nagawa kundi bumalik.

“Let’s go.”

“No.” Si Signor Gustavo mismo ang nagbigay ng permiso at hindi na niya puwedeng bawiin ang desisyong iyon. Hindi ko matanggap na natalo ako sa pustahan nang dalawang beses. Asking nicely would definitely not work, maybe being stubborn could save me.

“That’s not fair, Signorina. We had a deal.”

“Signor and I had a deal, then, he changed it without a reason. Tell me, isn’t it unfair on my part, too?”

Despite the tension, Gian enjoyed the argument. He didn’t even try to hide his grin while looking at Miguel and me.

“Why won’t you let me in the Casa Dei Ollis?”

“Why would you badly want to go?” he retorted.

Because I want to see what kind of place it is. “Because I want to,” I lied and tried my best to intimidate him. I crossed my arms and held my head up, prayed I looked demanding and whiny enough. “Y-you will have to... have to drag me back to the car. But I’ll scream and fight you even if you’re big a-and strong.”

This was not me. When did I become this stubborn and threatening? Dapat gamitin ko ang oportunidad para tumakas, hindi tulungan ang kung sinu-sino at magtapang-tapangan. Even Gian wasn’t convinced and he couldn’t stop laughing.

“Try me,” I challenged. Dahil likas siyang matangkad, kinailangan kong tumingala. Siguradong madali lang akong buhatin pabalik sa kotse. Sa pagsasalubong ng kanyang mga kilay habang nakatungo sa maliit kong pigura, inihanda ko ang aking sarili.

“That’s it, Camilla, be a brat for once,” sulsol ni Gian.

Gaining confidence, I continued my awkward arrogance.



"I... I order you, bring me to Casa Dei Ollis!"

Imbis na tuluyang magalit, hinilot ni Miguel ang noo. He heaved a sigh of surrender. "If that's what you wish, Signorina," he complied, dragging every word with a bit of sarcasm. "Don't say I didn't warn you." At nagpatiuna na ito.

"Hey, can we drink while we're there?"

"Shut up, Gianni. We are here to babysit, not to have fun."

"But I'm enjoying so far. You're not." Kumindat sa direksyon ko si Gian. "You're in for a fun night, princess," he added.

I did not know I was in for a big surprise.

5

GITA SELVAGGIA
Wild Field Trip

Dahil nga sa pagpupumilit ko, dinala ako nina Gian at Miguel sa Casa Dei Ollis. Nasa loob din pala iyon mismo ng casino, inookupa ang likurang bahagi ng dome. Unlike the brothels in Red Light District, it had its own touch of class.

No neon lights flashed its name, instead there were white lights and the words ‘Casa Dei Ollis’ in Italicized font, and nothing else. Bouncers wore suits, looking more like businessmen. They even had valet parking. Men and women who entered wore formal clothes and acted respectful. Inside was a bar. Ngunit iilan lang ang nandoon.

“This is the waiting room,” pagkaklaro ni Gian.

“Kailangan pa ba nating maghintay?”

“No need.” He grinned and went directly to the door at the far side. Pinagtitinginan kami ng mga umiinom habang kinakatok ni Miguel ang pinto. Bumukas ang kwadrang butas na nagsisilbing peephole. They talked in Italian and my name was mentioned. Sinuyod ako ng tingin ng lalaki mula sa peephole. Matapos isara ang butas, bumukas ang pinto.

“We’re VIPs,” Gian beamed.

“*Bevenuto, Signorina,*” bati ng guwardya. I nodded and followed the two into the other door with another man opening it for us. The second I entered a dimly-lighted room, I felt total regret and shock.

Under a spotlight, a woman and a man were dancing in the middle of a stage. It was a sensual yet artful dance to the jive of Italian opera. They were not wearing any clothes except for white masks—naked, all for the audience to see, including me. To top it all, another naked masked woman led us to our table which was at the front, only a few meters

away from the stage.

The smell of cigarette, alcohol and women's perfume lingered in the air.

Once there, Madam Ollis came and greeted all of us with a kiss on the cheeks. Katulad ng isang magaling ng hostess, nakipagkumustahan siya at tinanong kung ano ang gusto namin. All of them looked at me, expecting orders.

"I... I, uhh."

Miguel and Gian's smirk made it worse.

"Is there anything you want, Camilla?" Si Madam Ollis.

Thank god you're not naked, too, muntik kong masabi. I was too dumbfounded to say anything. Kaya pala binawi ni Signor ang desisyon at labag sa loob ni Elleanor na magtrabaho rito.

The performance may had been executed artistically, and the whole room resembled a circular theater, Casa Dei Ollis is still a brothel.

"Give us anyone who can speak English," ani Miguel.

"Of course. Ruby and Ciela will be perfect. How about Camilla? Would one male be enough—"

"Please don't. I... I'm fine."

"I'll send our best food instead," she offered and sashayed away.

Dahil na rin ako ang nagpumilit, hindi ko magawang humiling na umalis agad. I needed to observe more and prove that I could stand on my own decisions, no matter how terrible it was.

Ngunit higit na nakakailang ang lahat nang dumating ang dalawang babaeng tanging pulang lace panties lamang ang suot. I was sure the two men enjoyed my discomfort, as a punishment for being stubborn. Sinadya ni Miguel na paupuin ako sa pagitan ng dalawang hubad na babae, habang sila ay kapwa nasa gilid.

Despite everything, I took the courage to ask about their jobs, if they're happy or was being treated well. It's rude I know, pero tutal dahil napasubo na, itinuloy ko na

lang ang imbestigasyon. Hindi ko alam kung saan titingin upang hindi dumako sa kanilang hubad na dibdib ang mga mata ko, I couldn't even look at the stage or to other clients who were either groping or almost fornicating in public.

"Sweetie," anang nagngangalang Ruby. "You looked tense." Sinimulan niyang hapusin ang balikat ko.

"Please don't do that." My voice cracked.

"Are you a virgin?" she whispered, her hands traveled almost near to my breast.

"I'm... I wanna go home!" I burst out and stood up, ballistic. "Please let's go home."

The two men never got the chance to laugh. Isang pagsabog mula sa entrance ang bumulabog na sinundan ng umalingawngaw na putok ng baril.

At first, I thought it was a raid. I had heard rumors that police do that to phony establishments and businesses. Ngunit ang tuluyang pagpapaputok sa kisame at pananakot ay hindi gawain ng mga otoridad. Ang dalawang babaeng kasama namin ay nagsitakbuhan tulad ng ibang naroon.

Maybe the intruders were there to save me, but all of them wore black bonnets. I didn't feel any presence of the Fortunello. One of them pointed a gun at my direction, but a force pushed me aside until I was hidden under the table.

"Target sighted!" a voice boomed.

Horror daunted me when I realized, they weren't here to save me.

Sa magkabilang gilid, kapwa hinugot nina Gian at Miguel ang baril mula sa kani-kanilang coat.

"Merde!" the latter cursed. "Of all the days, these f*ckers decided to come here on your first field trip. All that we prepared were sandwiches."

"W-what?"

Sa dilim ng kanyang mukha, tila hindi iyon biro. "Seriously, Gianno prepared food in case you want to eat... I forgot to feed my gun." Hiding behind the couch we were sitting on earlier, he fired at the nearing forces.



Bumaling ako kay Gian nang may pagtataka. “Why did you prepare sandwiches?”

“Well, you like going to the park back in Beaumondville, I just thought you’d like to visit one here at night, and you know, eat.”

In embarrassment, he turned around to shoot, too. Ilang minuto rin ang lumipas habang nakikipagpalitan sila ng putok. Searching for an escape route, we crawled towards the emergency exit. The brothel security were armed as well. Ngunit sadyang mas marami ang kalaban kaya pagdepensa lamang ang kanilang ginawa.

“Where’s Ro and the twins when you need them?!” Miguel shouted to no one in particular.

“Can I...” Pinigilan ko ang sariling tapusin ang sinasabi. No. Offering my help would not be right, I should let them do their jobs, die even, if needed.

“*Al diavolo!*” he threw the empty gun. Nilamon ang kanyang malulutong na mura ng dagundong at sunud-sunod na putok ng baril. Kumpara sa mga naunang putukan, mas malalakas iyon at walang tigil.

“Don’t worry, princess, back-up’s here,” nakangising pahayag ni Gian. Without permission, he hugged me, resting my head on his chest as if shielding me. To tone down the loud explosions and shouts, he covered my ears. Pero hindi iyon naging epektibo, narinig ko pa rin ang kanyang sinabi.

“You’re safe now, you’re safe with us.”

Hindi na ako nakipagtalo at ipinikit ang mga mata. I did feel safe, like when I was with the Fortunello.

It took a few minutes more before the shooting stopped. Kung inakalang nasira ang pandinig ko, pumaimbabaw ang kakaibang nursery rhyme kasabay ng ‘Fallback’ at ‘Retreat’ ng mga sumugod.

*Humpty bastards sat on the wall,
Humpty bastards had a great fall,
All of the dumb shits*

*come and attack,
You're all gonna die,
I don't give a f*ck—*

“Udine!” saway ng boses ni Ezza.

“What!”

“Stop singing and find Signorina Camilla!”

“Merde! I almost forgot.”

Pero nauna na kaming mahanap ng isa pang boses.
“Qui... here.”

Tumayo ako at bumungad ang mukha ng isang binatilyo. He was a pretty boy with short black hair and dark piercing eyes, yet the thick lashes around it made the gaze softer. The small lips and the button nose were just right for his small face.

“Are you, are you not hurt, Signorina?” he asked with an Italian accent. Kung gaano siya ka-cute, kabaliktaran iyon ng lalim ng kanyang baritonong boses. Ang pamilyar na hood ng oversized black jacket, ay kasalukuyang nakababa.

So this is the face of Ro. Bakit niya itinatago ang ganitong mukha? Sa sobrang ganda niyon ay mapagkakamalan itong babae. I stared too long that he quickly averted his gaze then, covered his face. Someone hugged me from behind then, twirled me around.

“Are you okay, Signorina? Are you hurt? Did they protect you well?”

“You’re still holding your gun,” I reminded her despite the questions. And what a big gun it was.

“Oh, sorry.” Udine took off the sling and put it on the ground, and hugged me once more. “It was a good thing we followed you here, no?”

Looking around, the brothel was a disaster. Bullet holes, debris and few fallen bodies decorated the damaged room. Sa kabila ng pag-aasikaso at paninigurong hindi ako nasaktan, bakas ang matinding galit ni Madam Ollis. Who wouldn’t? A few of her girls and boys died, some wounded and everything was beyond saving. Dahil na rin



sa mga nang-uusyoso sa labas, dumaan kami sa backdoor at mabilis na sumakay. We left behind the mess and the burning brothel.

We were following Ro and the twins' car as precaution. Habang nasa biyahe, nakabibingi ang katahimikan sa loob ng kotse. Not because I didn't like to talk, but because I was thinking a lot.

There were three things that were made clear for the night. One, I will never set foot at Casa Dei Ollis again. Two, the North is dangerous—be it inside Signor Gustavo's villa or outside. And three, Ellie will never work there, I'll swear on it.

And why do I call her Ellie? Binibigyan ko ng palayaw ang taong iiwan ko rin naman. And who were the masked men?

"Who attacked us?" basag ko sa katahimikan.

"Enemies," matipid na sagot ni Miguel.

"We have a lot of enemies," sabat ni Gian habang nagmamaneho. "The resistance within the North, outsiders and even rumors of The Commission... I mean seriously, an international agency supported globally to fight against the mafia is just scary."

"Shut up," Miguel snapped.

Another noticeable thing, the clothes of the masked men were the same as those who attacked my party and when Signor visited. I remembered the day I left. Signor's men were fighting against the masked men, too. There was someone else involved.

Questions, a lot of unanswered questions. In the end, I was somewhat glad, that Miguel, Gian and the others were there. Ngunit hindi ibig sabihin ay tanggap ko na sila nang lubusan.

"Gian," mahina kong tawag. Agad siyang sumulyap mula sa salamin ng kotse. "Do you still have those sandwiches?"

Walang paalam na ipinarada niya sa daan ang sasakyan at binuksan ang compartment. Iniabot niya ang maliit na basket na may lamang sandwiches. He restarted the car beaming, proud of himself.

“*Smettere di sorridere come un pazzo*,” saway ni Miguel, aburido pa rin dahil marahil naubusan ng bala. Nangunot ang noo ko, hindi maintindihan ang kanyang sinabi. “I told him to quit smiling like a fool,” he translated.

I thought for a moment and called him out. “Miguel...”

“*Si, Signorina?*”

“Quit frowning like a fool,” I answered and took a big bite of the sandwich.

I didn’t care if Gian’s rich laughter echoed in the car or Miguel’s face went grumpier, I just ate. So much for my first field trip, everything made me hungry.

6

COMMERCIO DI LADRI *Trade Among Thieves*

I begged for a lot of things in the past; to not be left alone by uncle, for someone to send my childhood nightmares away, and even for my own life itself. I admit, it was pathetic. Ngunit mas higit akong kalunus-lunos kung kahit sa taong aking kinamumuhian ay makiusap ako. Isang pabor na wala namang ibubuti sa akin, but all for the act of helping Ellie.

Pagdating sa bahay at masigurong gising pa si Signor Gustavo, dumerecho ako sa kanyang opisina. As expected, he was there waiting for me, asking eagerly, “Did you enjoy sightseeing?”

Siguradong alam niya ang nangyari, pero nauna pa siyang mang-inis. I didn’t answer and went for my purpose. So here I was, asking rudely for a favor with him as my audience.

“Don’t give Ellie... Eleanor to Madam Ollis.” As much as I hated it, no matter how much I tried my best to be demanding, it still sounded like a plea.

“Why?”

“Because... because I want her to be my personal maid.”

He raised an eyebrow, amused at my fake arrogance. Sumandal siya sa upuan habang sinusuri ako ng tingin. “A prisoner can’t ask for favors. Why would I grant it?”

“Because...” *Because I’m your daughter, damn it. Your own flesh and blood!* Pero hindi ko iyon sinabi. He would laugh for sure or think that he got power over me.

“Give me a reason and I’ll reconsider.” Then, he leaned forward. “Now, Camilla, why should I grant your wish?”

Instead of an answer, I admitted defeat. No. I won’t say the reason out loud, acknowledging I’m his daughter. Ang

tangi kong nagawa ay magpakumbaba. "Please, Signor." I hated begging, but I hated a nagging conscience more.

After a disappointed sigh, he answered, "Is it too hard to admit that you're my daughter? That I can spoil you once in a while?"

Yes, it is. "Please, Signor, let her stay."

"Call me *papá*, and I'll grant your wish."

"No," mariin kong tanggi saka dahan-dahang lumuhod. "*P-per favore*," I pleaded and hoped the words were pronounced right. "I'd kneel if you want me too, but I will not call you that."

Bahagyang tumaas ang sulok ng kanyang bibig. "Interesting. You didn't kneel for your own freedom, but for a maid."

Interesting indeed. Nanatili akong nakaluhod, hindi alintana ang panliliit at hinintay ang desisyon ng ama.

"Stand up. You are a Qapone, never bow your head to anyone. Never beg, even to me. Look at me straight in the eye and say it again, what do you want, Camilla?"

Sinunod ko ang utos niya at tumayo. I held my head regally and proclaimed, "I want Eleanor to be my personal maid."

"In other words, you want to save her."

I did not flinch from the truth.

"Don't you think that's cowardice? Selfishness? She will be sent to Casa, trained by Ollis herself. She will learn how to be a woman; grace, giving pleasure, and be wooed. If good enough, she'll belong to the top class, might have a regular client, become a mistress and live a comfortable life. It is more than just a trade of flesh."

"It is still prostitution! And they were n-naked and..." Hindi ko na itinuloy ang sinasabi, pilit iwinawaksi sa isip ang mga nakita. "Another thing is, the brothel and half of the casino are damaged. I doubt if they will resume business soon. Most of all, it's disgusting!"

"That, and among other disgusting things give you a

roof on your head and food on the table.”

Tinitigan ko siyang mabuti, wala siyang bakas ng galit. Pagmamay-ari niya iyon, pero hindi man lang apektado. “Why do you act so passive?”

“One attack does not affect everything. It is just one casino. I told you our business is all over Italia and other continents.” He shrugged. “Now, I’ll spoil you a little and grant your wish but on two conditions.”

Kinuyom ko ang mga kamao at inihanda ang sarili sa pakikipagtalo kung sakali. Tama nga si Uncle, lahat ay may kapalit. I was talking to a criminal, what did I expect? I came from a family of yakuza and he’s in the mafia. Was there honor among us thieves?

“It depends,” I answered.

Mula sa desk drawer, kinuha niya ang isang libro at iniabot. I walked closer and reached it without touching his hand. It was a small blue book with the picture of a smiling star. Doodles of crayon and the slightly faded cover indicated that it wasn’t new.

“*Papà, Please Give Me a Star,*” I read the title. Ano ba ang gagawin ko sa librong pambata?

“Every afternoon, come here and read it to me.”

Hindi ko nagawang maitago ang gulat. “That’s it?”

He smiled, this time reaching his eyes. “Yes. Why, do you expect something extreme?”

“Yes.” Masyado iyong madali at nakakaduda. Ridiculous. Ano’ng kinalaman ng maruming libro sa lahat ng ito?

“Well, as a businessman, it’s fair. I’ll reap bigger profit with this.” He then motioned to the pink couch beside the fireplace. “You can start now.”

Sa ilang beses na pagpasok ng opisina, ngayon ko lang iyon napansin. It seemed out of place in a room full of neutral colors, dominated by wood. “I hope you find that comfortable. I’m not sure what color you like. I assumed it’s pink as suggested by Udine.”

So he put it there for me. Hindi na ako nagkomento,

tuwid na umupo na lang at nagsimulang magbasa. “Do I... uhm, do I need to read the title?”

“You can skip it, if you want.”

Awkwardly, I read the first page. *“Once upon a time, there was a girl who loves to look at the...”* I stopped, unable to read due to a doodle over the word. Kahit na ang larawan ay naging madumi dahil sa iba’t ibang linya ng pangkulay. Kung sino man ang nagmay-ari nito ay napabayaang ng magulang o kaya ay wala pa sa tamang edad kaya pinaglaruan ang aklat.

I squinted my eyes, hoping to understand the words.

“The stars,” salo niya, na sa ngayon ay nakatanaw sa labas ng bintana, nakatalikod sa akin. “A girl who loves to look at the stars.”

Bakit kailangan ko pang basahin gayong memoryado naman niya ang aklat?

“Every night,” I continued, *“she would look at it from her window and wish to own one. One day, she told her father. ‘Papà,’ she asked. ‘Please give me a star.’*

‘But it’s too high I can’t reach it,’ was the answer.

‘Use a ladder.’

‘Our ladder is short.’

‘Then, make a longer one,’ she insisted.

‘They are very hot, my little love,’ he said.

‘How can you tell? Have you gotten a star before?’

‘No.’

‘Then it’s not true. Please, Papà, give me star.’

The father’s smile was apologetic and kissed her goodnight.

Everyday, the girl begged for it. She cried, wailed and screamed. All the time, he would say, ‘I’m sorry.’ One night, tired of asking, she stormed in the living room where her father was. ‘Papà, why can’t you give me a star?’ and went back to bed crying in disappointment.

The next night, her father went to her room. ‘Do you really want a star, my little love?’ he asked.

The girl turned her back and answered, ‘It doesn’t matter.

You can't give me a star anyway.'

Her father left the room without a reply. Then, at midnight, she woke up from the bright yellow light outside the window. It was a star! So bright and beautiful.

Leaning closer, she felt its heat. Her father was right, stars are hot! She was happy and ran around the house looking for him. But he was gone and so was the star when she looked again outside her window. She had no choice but sleep, wishing to see it again.

In the morning, she found pieces of burned clothes outside and a black spot on the ground like remains of a camp fire.

Her father was never seen again.

Years passed and she only wished for two things: to see her father and another star. To this day, she still didn't know it wasn't a star she had seen.

It was her father burning bright for her."

I blinked in disbelief and re-read the last sentence. *It was her father burning bright for her.*

It was too dark for a children's book. Too twisted. Malaking pagkakamali ang pag-imprinta niyon. Agad kong isinara ang libro at inusisa ang pabalat.

"There's no name of the author," I said.

Nanatili siyang nakatalikod at nakatanaw sa labas ng bintana. Marahil ay masyadong maganda ang liwanag ng siyudad sa gabi at hindi niya magawang lumingon.

Imbis na magpaliwanag, tinaboy niya ako. "Take it to your room."

Tumango ako at hindi nagpasalamat. It was not a fair trade, but being thankful meant that a part of me was accepting him.

Before I could leave, he reminded me, "Take care of it, Camilla."

I just nodded and suddenly remembered something. "What's the second condition?"

"You'll find out soon."

7

NORD VALLE ACCADEMIA

North Valley Academy

Ang tangi kong konsolasyon sa pagpapakabayani ay ang abot-langit na pasasalamat ni Ellie nang malamang hindi na siya ipapadala sa casa. She cried while clutching at my clothes.

Naging maikli ang kasiyahan ko nang maalalang may ikalawa pang kondisyon si Signor Gustavo. Hindi kagulat-gulat kung isang araw ay ako ang gawing kapalit ni Ellie, o kaya gawing pambayad sa mga negosyo. Ngunit sa lahat ng posibilidad, ni isa ay walang tumama sa mga hula niya.

It was something different... way different.

After the exhausting training for basic self-defense, I was walking toward the office to read the twisted story. Sa kalagitnaan ng pagbagtas, bumagal ang mga hakbang ko nang may napagtanto. Di tulad noon, ako na mismo ang kusang sumusunod sa araw-araw na gawain. I trained to death, followed every step and eagerly listened. There were a variety of things that I was learning about—target-shooting for a few hours in the morning, dagger-handling and basic self-defense in the afternoon. Sa lahat ng iyon, hindi ako nagrereklamo.

Remembering how I felt happy when Miguel praised me this morning after I shot the bullseye thrice, I cringed inside. Unti-unting nababawasan ang takot ko habang lumilipas ang mga araw. I was finding this routine enjoyable enough.

And this shouldn't be. I wanted to go home. Home. Katulad ng tanong noon, mas lalo akong nalito. *Where is home?*

Naaalala pa kaya ako ng mga naiwan sa Timog? Ano ang naging reaksiyon ni Uncle nang malamang dinukot ako?

At si Zak... my Zachary. Matatanggap pa kaya niya akong muli? Ang Fortunello, ano'ng reaksyon nila?

Then, I realized I didn't have a home, nowhere to return to. Hindi ba't mas mabuti na ring mapalayo sa kanila? After all, I *am* the daughter of their enemy.

Sa gitna ng pagmumuni-muni, narinig ko ang sunud-sunod na shutter ng camera. It was Gian, taking a picture of me.

"Sorry," aniya na agad tumigil sa ginagawa, pero hindi nabura ang ngisi niya. Looking at him now, muling nagbalik ang dating siya na nakilala ko noon.

"Akala ko ba props mo lang ang camera?" tanong ko.

"Hmm, sort of." He shrugged. "Among other things, I learned a lot during my stay in the South. Natuto akong mag-Tagalog, kumuha ng litrato, lots of it. I've learned to love this." Then, he scratched his head in embarrassment. "I kinda missed being a good guy, a pretend good guy at least."

This was the best time to mock him, but I was not up for it. Kung noon ay gusto kong manumbat, wala na iyon ngayon. I was torn between missing my friends and refusing to accept my current situation.

"You're not a bad guy," I mumbled, audible enough.

Ang panandalian naming pag-uusap ay naantala dahil sa sigaw ni Udine.

"Signorina!" Sa lakas ng boses, binulabog niya ang buong villa, na nangyayari araw-araw. Katulad ng nakagawian, niyakap niya ako nang mahigpit. I was used to her lack of respect for personal space and her choice of revealing clothes.

"*Finalmente! Finalmente!* (Finally! Finally!)" she squealed. "We can see each other more often. You can ask me about anything, I can even make your projects and homework. And if you want to skip class," she leaned closer and whispered, "I can help."

"Hearing that from someone at the bottom of the ranking is pathetic. *Ridicolo* (Absurd)," singit ng sumunod

na si Ezza. Nakabuntot si Ro rito.

“Bohoo, you will die a virgin,” ganti ng kakambal nito pagkatapos ay bumulong, “I’m fun, she’s really the boring one, no?”

Pinaglipat-lipat ko ang tingin sa kanilang apat, baka-sakaling may maintindihan. “What are you talking about?”

Udine raised her hands, as if stopping everyone. “No! No, no, don’t you dare,” babala niya. “Being Signorina’s happiness official, I’ll be the one to tell her.”

Imbis na kontrahin ang kusa niyang pag-anunsyo ng nakakatawang titulo, pinili kong mag-usisa. “Tell what?”

“You’re going to school!” pahayag niya. “Ta-dah!” she screamed and waved her hands as if it was something big.

Well, it *is*. Ibig sabihin ay magkakaroon ako ng kaunting kalayaan. Dahil minsang wala ang iba upang mag-aral, si Signor, si Miguel na nagtuturo sa akin, at ang mga tauhan lang sa villa ang tangi kong nakikita.

So here I was, fulfilling my part of the deal by going to school. Wala na akong pakialam kung anuman ang magiging benepisyo ni Signor Gustavo sa naging desisyon. Kahit na magiging panandalian lamang ako sa Hilaga, mabuti na ring tumapak ako ng paaralan. At least, my routine was changed.



Looking up, the big letters of *Nord Valle Accademia* were carved in stone. Base sa entrada, higit na mas maliit iyon kumpara sa Beaumondville High. It had high walls and even a watchtower.

“Don’t worry, it’s an international school. English is mainly used as teaching language.” Iyon ang isa sa mga detalye na ibinahagi ni Udine. Aside from attention-grabbing persona, she had a knack for research—well, only to things that interest her, academics not included.



"It's going to be fun!" sabik niyang pahayag nang makapasok kami sa parking lot at nagpatingin lumabas ng sasakyan.

Mula sa driver's seat, sumunod si Gian upang pagbuksan ako ng pinto. Sakto rin namang pumarada ang motorsiklong minamaneho ni Ro. He was now out in his hood, wearing a P.E. tracksuit. Angkas niya sa likod ang nakapambabaeng upo na si Ezza.

Except for Ro, we all wore formal uniforms: white longsleeves with blue lace ribbon on the collar. The blue plated skirt was knee-length long. As for me, my shoes were not the usual leather but black sneakers.

Habang binabagtas ang patungo sa paaralan, doon ko napagtanto na may kalakihan pala ito sa loob. The bricked walls and huge stone columns made it look more medieval, like a castle turned into a school. In fact, it was too big for its population, which was a quarter of a thousand. Hindi na nakapagtataka. Ayon kay Udine, piling-pili lang ang nakapasok doon, or in honest words, iilan lang ang maglalakas-loob na mag-enroll.

Not all students were wealthy or smart. Ang tanging pagkakatulad namin ay may iba't iba kaming koneksyon sa mafia; anak ng mga miyembro mula sa pinakamababang ranggo hanggang sa pinakapinuno, which in this case, me.

The school was located farther from the main city of Reggio di Calabria, which was not known for prestige, but for housing future mafiosos.

Pero ayon na rin sa mga kasama ko, hindi ibig sabihin ay magulo, puno ng gangs at walang kontrol ang mga guro sa paaralang iyon. It was the opposite. Traditional mafia was specific about discipline. Parents sent their children to learn and make future connections. Ano ang silbi ng paaralan kung hindi makontrol ang estudyante? Sure, there were troublemakers, pero katulad rin naman iyon sa ibang institusyon.

"A mafioso should be smart. Stupid ones are already behind bars or ended up dead." Iyon ang biro ni Signor. A joke that I didn't find funny.

"Here, nobody will judge you," singit ni Gian.

"Unless you're the daughter of Don Gustavo Qapone," tutol ni Ezza, pansin ang pagbubulungan ng mga estudyante.

"First day and you're already famous!" Udine beamed.

Pagkatapos ang basic briefing, agad kaming pinapunta sa classroom.

Magkaklase kami ni Gian. Katulad ko, isa din siyang transferee. Siguradong ilegal ang papeles, o di kaya ay ginamit ni Signor ang koneksyon upang makahabol kami sa kalagitnaan ng school year. Naging kaklase namin si Ro na kasalukuyang sophomore, habang ang kambal ay freshmen.

Sa pagsisimula ng klase, agad kaming pinakilala. Gian was called Gianni Vitale, his true name.

"Hello. I'm... Hanna," I said on my turn.

"But your name is Camilla Qapone right?" usisa ng isang estudyante. She spoke in straight English with no Italian accent. What stood out was her bright blue eyes, contrasting the color of her blond hair in a messy bun. She seemed to be a class leader, authoritative and inquiring.

"I am. Camilla *Kyosei* Qapone, but you can call me Hanna."

She only raised her eyebrows, unfazed.

We were assigned to sit at the center back, where we could see the whole class, and far from the entry points, the door or the windows. Nakaplano nga ang lahat.

During lunch time, I found out the name of the girl who asked me in class, it's Ameli. And she's a close friend of Via. Ayon na rin sa dagdag-impormasyon, ang huli ang nagsisilbing student president. But she's beyond that; she was maintaining order in school and ruling it like she owned it.

"Via is the daughter of your father's second-in-

command, Don Euvelo Rizzi.”

Hindi ako sumagot upang iwasan ang pagdagdag sa mga detalyeng di naman kailangan, pero sadyang matabil si Udine.

“They say those two, Ameli and Via are secretly dating. They’re both girls, disgusting!”

“That’s the reason you’re not on their good side,” tutol ng kambal.

“I do not like them. Since Olivia started hanging out with Ameli, she became a snob. She forgot us, no? But I’m not worried, it’s Signorina they should be scared of.”

“I’m just saying we shouldn’t cross the line. The underlings are already wary. There are talks that Signor has gone soft, Don Euvelo is the likely candidate to be the next boss. Fighting his daughter will do no good.”

“Why?” tanong ko. Nakatatak na sa isip ko ang tibay at lakas ng Hilaga. Ngayong nandito na ako sa kanilang teritoryo, nalalaman kong hindi pala ito kasing-tibay ng inaasahan ko.

Like the South, there were also skeptics and those who wished to lead. Pero ang katulad ni Signor Qapone ay nararapat na maging pinuno, hindi dahil siya ang aking ama, but because he possesses qualities of a monster. Most of the time, he’s heartless. Ano ba ang tanging dahilan upang pagdudahan siya ng kinasasakupan?

“You,” sagot ni Udine sa kabila ng pagnguya.

“Wha... me?” turo ko sa sarili.

“They think he’d gone soft... again, and that he’ll make trouble or something.”

“Ano’ng ibig mong sabihin?”

Tumigil siya sa pagkain at tila nalito. “I’m sorry, what did you say? I should really learn that language.”

Dahil na rin sa kuryosidad, nakalimutan kong hindi siya nakakaintindi ng ibang lengguwahe maliban sa Italian at Ingles.

“Udine, shut up. *Quello non e la tua storia da raccontare* (That is not your story to tell).” Ezza said something, whatever it was, her twin continued stuffing her mouth with food, *sinasadya upang di makapagsalita*. “If you want to know the story, you can ask Signor, not us.”

Gian and Ro did not comment, but exchanged meaningful looks.

“Then, I will.”

Pagkatapos ng klase sa hapon, derecho na kaming umalis. Imbis na paakyat pabalik sa villa, tinahak ng convoy ang siyudad. We ended up in a line of small colorful bricked buildings. Flower shops, bakeries and pizza parlors lined in the lively street.

Passing by different people enjoying afternoon bites and sip, we stopped in a small bookshop called ‘Adorato,’ which, as they explained, meant ‘dearly beloved.’ Tanging si Gian lamang at ako ang pumasok habang ang iba ay naghintay sa labas.

May dalawang lalaking nakaupo sa ilalim ng malaking payong, nagkakape at naninigarilyo, tumango sila bilang saludo nang pumasok kami sa bookshop.

The interior resembled a small children’s library. Short white shelves stacked colorful books. Ang puting dingding ay dinikitan ng makukulay na doodle at guhit ng bata. The whole room was lighted by circular bulbs and the natural glow of sunset.

Bago pa makapag-usisa kung ano ang ginagawa namin doon, nauna nang bumati ang pamilyar na boses.

“Welcome to Adorato.” It was Signor, in plain white longsleeves, sitting behind the cashier. I would’ve thought it was a different person, resembling the Northern boss, ngunit ang pagbati ni Gian at magalang na pamamalaam ay patunay na hindi ako nagkamali.

“Gianno said you wanted to ask something, I told him to come.”



“Why are you here?” Iyon ang tanging namutawi sa bibig ko. His mystery and air of supremacy were gone. As of now, his aura was that of an elderly man running a small children’s bookshop in a lively street. Nothing more.

“Business, of course,” he shrugged. “My most precious enterprise, I personally handle it.”

But a bookshop... for children? Dito rin kaya niya nakuha ang librong ipinapabasa sa akin? Kahit saang anggulo tingnan, hindi ako makahanap ng lohikal na paliwanag. Well, except if he was using it as front for something illegal, o ang lahat ng negosyo dito ay nagbabayad sa kanya katulad ng nakagawian sa mafia.

Our conversation never took off when Gian returned; alert and uneasy. “There are... new customers, Signor.”

He calmly nodded and turned to me apologetically. “I’m sorry, beloved, but our little chat will end for now. Go home and wait for me.”

I wasn’t able to avoid his kiss on my forehead. It was quick, like how he commanded Gian. “Use the backdoor, there’s a car in the garage. Take her to the villa, I have customers to entertain.”

“Ba—” There was no time to ask about the sudden tension.

Agad na akong hinila ni Gian pa-backdoor, tila nagmamadali.

Before we could shut the door, Signor reminded us, “Tell Miguelito I will be late for dinner. Until then, he is in charge. Take care of my Camilla well.”

We ended up in a small garage. Agad akong pinasakay ni Gian sa front seat ng kotse, di tulad ng nakagawiang sa likod. After making sure I’ve worn my seatbelt, he told me to hold on tight.

“Keep your head down, princess,” utos niya.

The engine roared, the car sped through the garage door. Umingit ang mga gulong, napuno ng usok at alikabok

ang paligid dahil sa pagkasira ng garahe at mabilis na pagmamaneho. Nagsimula na ring magtakbuhan ang mga tao. It was like in the movies; we were driving so fast, turning in corners as if someone was chasing us.

Nasagot ang mga tanong ko ng isang pagsabog sa lugar kung saan kami nanggaling ang gumulantang sa lahat.

Adorato was under attack.

8

PER MIA FIGLIA CAMILLA *For My Daughter Camilla*

Sa kabila ng mabilis na pagmamaneho ni Gian, kita ko pa rin ang usok mula sa nasusunog na bookstore.

“Gian... Gian, ang shop. Inaatake ang shop! Udine, Ezza and Ro are still there. Even... even—”

“He’s safe, Signorina, all of them. Besides, there are guards there, too. Don’t worry.”

Sa narinig, agad akong tumuwid ng upo at ginawang blangko ang ekspresyon ng mukha. “I am not worried about him,” giit ko. “Sinasabi ko lang na inaatake ang shop. Dapat bumalik ka at tumulong.”

“He is still your father, princess. Kahit na gusto kong tumulong, I have orders to follow. Taking you home safe is his priority.”

Kaya pala derecho sa daan ang kanyang tingin. He was focusing too much, clutching the wheel and driving through the city like a maniac—all for orders.

“Kaya mong iwan ang mga kasama mo at sundin lahat ng gusto niya?”

“Yes.”

“Even if it’s against your will?”

“Yes.”

But why?

“Noong inutusan ka niyang patayin si Ellie, gagawin mo ba talaga?”

“No. Because I trust him.”

Trust him to do what? To spare the life of the maid? Ang taong tulad ni Signor ay hindi marunong maawa.

“Just like how he trusts you,” he added. A small smile peeked on his lips.

Trust me for doing the right thing? Dahil alam niyang

hindi kaya ng konsensya kong mamatay si Ellie sa ganoong dahilan. If that was the case, it's either he wanted me to follow or test how far I'd go against him. Thinking back, I almost let her die. If I did, Signor's trust in my judgement would be wrong. Absurd.

Imbis na sumalungat, hindi na ako sumagot at nag-isip.

"They think he's gone soft again." Iyon ang sinabi ni Udine. Nagdududa ang ilan sa kanyang liderato dahil sa pagdating ko. It was his fault for dragging me here. I was not feeling guilty, at least I shouldn't be.

Marahil ay naabisuhan na si Miguel sa nangyari dahil pagdating sa entry point, mas marami nang lalaking nakabantay. The gate opened for our car to enter. Driving up, nakasalubong namin ang dalawang kotseng pababa. Gian explained that they were reinforcements.

I realized how many worked for my father when we returned at the villa. Men were posted in every corner, some guarding and sealing the gate shut. Inihanda na rin ang maliit na klinika sa villa para sa mga maaaring masugatan. It was a preparation for war, waiting for the nameless enemies to attack.

Kasama si Ellie, pinapasok ako sa kuwarto at pinagbawalang umalis. Peeking outside the window was all I could do, staring at the ugly, chaotic sight.

Three hours later, the door opened and a worried Udine snaked her arms around me.

"Signorina, are you okay? Are you hurt somewhere?"

Bakit ako ang kanyang inaalala gayong siya ang may gasgas sa ilang parte ng katawan at bendado ang balikat?

"Are you okay?" tanong ko sabay hawak sa magkabila niyang pisngi.

Obviously, she wasn't. She reeked of burnt wood and dirt, a proof that she went through hell, katulad ng mga kasamahang nakatayo sa pinto. Nabura ang kanyang pag-aalala, natigilan at tuluyang umiyak.

"She's worried, Ezza," sumbong niya sa kapatid. "She

asked me if I'm okay... I told you she cares about us!"

"Stop crying, *idiota!*" saway ng kakambal niya pero walang bakas ng galit.

Not to give any false hopes, parang napasong binitawan ko ang kanyang mukha at umatras. That did not stop her from hugging me tighter.

"Signor wants to see you," singit ng bagong dating na si Miguel. Bagaman walang palatandaang galing sa gulo, bakas ang kanyang tensyon.

"*Until then, he's in-charge.*" Iyon ang sinabi ni Signor kanina. A big responsibility was on his shoulders.

"How did he escape?" tanong ko habang binabagtas namin ang hallway.

"He is already known as a mafioso, but still likes to keep a low profile as a bookshop owner. To guarantee safety, men were posted there everytime he comes. But it was not enough, everyone barely made it out if it weren't for the backups. This rarely happens."

Tumigil ako sa paghakbang at sinakop ng kaba. Kung ganoon kalakas ang kalaban, may posibilidad na masasakop ang villa.

"Don't worry," aniya, nahuhulaan yata ang iniisip ko. "The villa is hard to infiltrate, we're up hill so we have advantage. There are men down the border, too. And... we can 'borrow' men from loyal underlings."

Of course. Bakit ko ba nakalimutan ang lawak ng kapangyarihan ni Gustavo Qapone? At kung sakaling umabot sa news ang nangyaring pag-atake sa Adorato, ilang detalye rin ang maibabawas para itago ang totoo. That was how it works.

Nang magpatuloy sa paglalakad, muli akong nagtanong, "Who did it?" In my mind, I was praying it's not the South nor the Orient.

"We are not yet sure, Signorina. But the most likely theory is the Commission."

"Who?"

“The Commission. In the past years, there was a rumor of creating a new international agency, supported by different governments globally, including Italia. It is said that they were created to wipe out the mafia—North, South, the Orient, everything. But there were just rumors.

“Then months ago, a smuggled shipment disappeared before it reached the port. A few bosses complained about the failed operations but nobody knew who did those. Until a man was caught during an attack on one of our businesses, and confessed. After confirming the existence of the Commission, he shot himself.”

“So the good guys are behind this?”

The knot in his forehead relaxed as a small smile finally appeared. “Good guys? You could say that.” He shrugged.

Kung totoo, hindi ba dapat matuwa ako dahil makatarungan iyon? After all, we *are* the bad guys.

Naputol ang pag-uusap namin nang sa wakas ay narating ang kuwarto, katabi ng opisina. Miguel opened the door for me, just in time when the doctors and his assistant went out to give us privacy.

Kahit walang malubhang tama ng baril, the explosion took its toll on him. Gustavo Qapone’s body was not that young after all.

Unlike the office, his room was far from luxurious. Katamtaman lamang ang laki, may nag-iisang itim na sofa kaharap ng maliit na fireplace. Sa ulunan ng kama ay ang brown na kurtinang nakatakip sa bintana. Beside it was a small wooden shelf, stacked with different old books. Based on the cover, those were children’s books.

Ang mga bakanteng bahagi ng shelf ay pinunan ng iba’t ibang litrato; a bunch of different colorful doodles, drawings of distorted flowers, stars and other shapes that did not make sense. It was a shrine for a child’s art.

Sa bedside table, naroon ang larawan niya kasama ng isang babae at batang sanggol na may hawak na aklat. It was a picture of a younger him with my mother, and probably

me. A picture of us that looked so happy.

“That was from your second birthday,” Signor Gustavo explained despite his difficulty in speaking. “I gave you your first book.”

Kinuha ko ang frame at tinitigan iyon. We looked so happy and I couldn't even remember it. So it was true, we were once a family. Inside this bedroom were the memories of the happiness that he once had.

Sa isa pang litrato ay mga batang masayang nakaupo, karamihan ay nasa edad isa hanggang tatlong taong gulang. Dahil ang ilan ay halos sanggol pa lamang, hindi makilala kung sino ang mga iyon. Natuon ko ang pansin sa pamilyar na batang pinakamatanda sa litrato.

“That's Leo, Leonald. Such a waste,” pahayag niya. “Gianno, the others, and that's you.” Itinuro niya ang batang nasa pinakagitna at malaki ang ngisi. The two pictures were probably taken on the same day, my pink fluffy clothes were the same.

“Welcome back, Signorina.”

Kaya pala sadyang mabigat ang mga linyang iyon ni Miguel. They were not strangers after all, but friends from the past that I could not remember.

“You were too young to remember,” aniya.

Ibinalik ko ang litrato at umupo sa kama; puno ng maraming katanungan ang isip. “It's true then,” I said. “What you told me before was true... that our family was once happy.”

Instead of an answer, he looked at the ceiling with a poignant smile. “Before you came, Yumiko was my life.”

“Then, why?” I asked almost in a whisper. “Why did you kill her?” Wala iyong halong panunumbat kundi derechang tanong na nangangailangan ng sagot.

“She killed herself.”

It took a moment for that to sink in. “What...”

He explained everything, pausing to catch his breath. “That day, I snuck into the party, killed who are in my way,

but not her. There are many things I'd like to tell you, but maybe when I get better. We live complicated lives, my beloved. It would take time for you to understand."

"You're lying, she wouldn't leave me alone." Dahan-dahan akong umiling.

"She didn't leave you alone, I was supposed to be with you."

"If that were true, then why? What kind of... of a mother would run away from everything and kill herself?"

Mariin niyang ipinikit ang mga mata. "I feared this day would come. I wished to carry this secret to my deathbed. But it's impossible now. Yes, your mother is a coward. She left because she's afraid, leaving us to fix the mess."

"Live, honey, it's not your fault."

Iyon pala ang ibig sabihin ni Mommy. She died not because I came out of hiding from the closet and was found. She died because she wanted to and her husband took the blame so that she would die a victim. Not the woman who left her child and stabbed herself. What kind of sin did she commit that she had to kill herself like that?

Kaya ba pinagpipilitan ni Signor na maging malakas ako at matapang, upang hindi matulad kay Mommy? Isang duwag.

I stood up and left him without saying anything. Wala na akong lakas para mag-usisa. Sapat na muna ang isang baluktot na sagot para sa araw na ito.

"I loved her, too," amin niya bago ako tuluyang umalis.

Ikinulong ko ang sarili sa kuwarto. Hindi ko rin nagalaw ang hinatid ni Ellie na pagkain. All I did was stare at the ceiling and thought of all the twisted truths I might learn in the future.

Ilang sandali pa, kinuha ko ang libro at muli iyong binasa. This book used to be mine. Ang mga kulay, tupi at sulat doon ay gawa ko. Habang pinagmamasdan ang bawat pahina, napansin ko ang mga pangungusap na hindi maintindihan dahil sa mga guhit ng crayons. Dahil sa pag-

aakalang pangalan iyon ng author, maingat kong kiniskis ang kulay at bumulaga ang mga kataga: ***For my daughter Camilla.***

Hindi iyon sulat-kamay kundi nakaimprinta sa libro. Kaya pala walang pangalan ng author doon, dahil si Signor mismo ang may-akda.

"I'll come back," he told me before, *"...but now, just go and send my message: Never make Gustavo Qapone angry."*

He staged a lie and branded himself as his wife's murderer, just to save her name.

Gamit ang nanginginig na kamay, dali-dali kong binuklat ang pinakahuling pahina at binasa iyon nang malakas. *"To this day, she still didn't know that it wasn't a star she had seen. It was her father burning bright for her."*

Seconds. Minutes. Or eternity. I did not know how long I sat there staring at the black letters. Different emotions burst—anger, guilt, longing. I felt everything. But among those, I was sure of one thing.

Barefoot with the book in hand, I walked toward Signor Gustavo's room. The guards were confused, but they still let me in. Miguel did not say anything and just went out of the room.

I just stood there, watching the sleeping old man—frail and weak, but he was never spineless. Sa ilang taon na nakalipas, inako niya ang kasalanang hindi niya ginawa.

I sat beside his bed, and slowly read the book. Hearing my voice, he woke up but did not say anything. He listened like it was the first time; he listened as if he wasn't the one who wrote it.

After the last sentence, I held his hand and smiled. There were still a lot of unanswered questions: kung bakit umalis si Mommy, o kung totoong siya ba ang pumatay sa dating Orleonne. But as of the moment, the missing pieces of the puzzle did not matter. Finding out the rest of the twisted truth could wait.

Among many things, there was one thing that I wanted

to do: to be a monster's daughter.

"I'm here... *Papà*. I'm here now."

9

REGNO DEL NORD *Kingdom of the North*

Dahil sa nangyari, hindi na muna kami pumasok sa eskwelahan. Funny, I only went to school at my first day, then, I was gone again for a few days. We kept ourselves inside the villa, yet unlike before, I did not feel like a prisoner, but someone settling in a new home.

“You were down not even half of a minute,” pahayag ni Miguel. Agad siyang tumayo at inabot ang kamay. Imbis na tanggapin iyon, ibinangon ko ang sarili mula sa mat.

“Again!” sigaw ko. Nilalabanan ang pagod sa kabila ng paghahabol ng hininga at tagaktak ng pawis.

“You’re too stiff,” sermon niya. “The body movements and forms I taught were guides. Don’t rely too much on precision. Instinct comes first.”

Lalong lumaki ang nang-iinis na ngisi ni Miguel. Panganim na set na ng sparring namin at hindi pa ako nanalo. What’s more frustrating, I didn’t even last a minute in all of those rounds.

Sumingit ang matinis na boses ni Udine. “How about me? Me! I want to fight Camilla!”

“Don’t let her, *consigliere*,” tutol ni Ezza mula sa kabilang dako ng practice room. “That idiota is the weakest among us, she will also let Signorina win.”

“I’m not weak!” sagot ng isa.

“Yes, you are. And stupid, too.”

“Ugh,” gigil na tumayo si Udine at dinuro ang kambal. “You want a piece of me, huh? Huh! Come on!” Ikinuyom niya ang kamao habang naghahamon ng suntukan.

The rest who were there—Ro, Gian, Miguel and me, rolled eyes for the interruption.

Here we go again. Isa ito sa mga araw na malala

ang bangayan ng dalawa. Siguradong maliit na di-pagkakaintindihan lang iyon at pinalaki. Sometimes they fight over interrupted sleep, messy room and even card games.

“Quiet!” Dumagundong ang boses ni Miguel. “Udine! Urezza! If you don’t want to join the session, kill each other somewhere else!”

“How about they kill each other here?” suggested Gian, with a playful grin. “Camilla might learn something by watching.”

“Fine,” sang-ayon niya.

Ro gave Ezza an encouraging pat while Udine made a fierce face. Agad akong pumwesto sa tabi ni Gian upang manood. Tinawag ni Miguel ang kambal sa gitna.

“If I win, you will stop playing that awful screaming music before you sleep,” wika ni Ezza nang tuluyang magkaharap.

“It’s called Metal, and it’s an art. If I win, you will stop being boring and shave all of your hair.”

“Go die.”

“Fine. If I win, you’ll stop playing freaky songs every damn morning.”

“It’s called Opera and it’s the *real* art.”

“Whatever. Deal?”

“Deal,” Ezza agreed.

As explained, the rules were simple: any type of offense be it martial arts or plain street style were allowed, the first to stay down for five seconds or go out of the circle, would lose.

Ezza raised her fists and spread her feet enough for a stable stance defense, same goes with Udine. The moment Miguel stepped out of the circle, the latter’s stance changed to offense and quickly lunged forward hoping for a quick win.

Mabilis na umiwas si Ezza sa pamamagitan ng malaking hakbang paatras. Crouching down, she stretched



her leg. Pinatid niya ang kambal. Udine lost her balance and the older twin chased the momentum. She put her weight on top and pinned both of her sister's arms and started counting.

"Uno... due... tre... quattro—"

To free herself, Udine's spit flew on Ezza's face stopping the count and temporarily blinding her. Agad na nabaliktad ang sitwasyon. Ngayon ay si Ezza ang nasa ilalim at nakababatang kambal ang pumaimbabaw. Sitting on the opponent's knees, Udine counted with a big triumphant grin.

"Uno... due... t—"

Agad siyang gumulong palayo at humiyaw sa sakit nang tinuhod siya ni Ezza sa pagitan mismo ng mga hita. Maski ako ay napangiwi iniisip pa lang kung gaano iyon kasakit.

"That's unfair!" reklamo ni Udine kinakapa kung saan natamaan ang kanyang pagkababae. "I'd kill you for real this time!"

"You did it first!" gigil ding sagot habang pinapahid ang laway sa mukha. "You spit on my face, it's disgusting!"

"Shut up!" Muling sumugod si Udine, nakaamba ng suntok sa mukha.

On instinct, Ezza bended her torso backward to avoid it. Ngunit mabilis na itinulak pababa ng una ang huli hanggang sa muli itong pumaimbabaw. Hindi rin nagpapigil si Ezza, she forced her down to the side reversing their positions. They were rolling on each other's back, not letting go and both grappling.

I was actually amazed at how their skills level to each other. No specific techniques were used and no evidence of martial arts discipline, just plain street style with a mix of a catfight—a high level kind of catfight.

"... tre... quattro... cinque!" Umalingawngaw ang tawa ni Udine matapos hindi nakagalaw si Ezza.

"As expected, you are an idiot," sagot ng isa.

"Wha—Sh*t!" she cursed, realizing they were both out

of the circle. Inis na tumayo si Udine, nagdadabog na inabot ang kamay. Ezza took it as she stood up.

“I’m not gonna stop listening to Metal,” the former said and went back to her seat. Ganoon din ang ginawa ng isa.

Pinigil kong mapangiti sa inasal ng magkapatid. Kahit na madalas ay di magkasundo, pinahalalagaan pa rin nila ang isa’t isa.

Getting along with them and the rest did not change much. Ngunit sa pagkakataong iyon, wala nang pagdududa. Udine was loud, too physically affectionate, habang si Ezza ay kabaliktaran. Ro’s back in his hooded clothes, while Gian and Miguel were, at most times, bickering at each other. They were different from each other, awkward in a way. But I would not wish for any change.

Somehow I felt at home, like the wonderful chaos I left back at the South; with Fortunello, Lilo and Zak.

Sa takdang panahon, babalik ako at aayusin ang lahat. Maybe, just maybe, I could find a way to unite Uncle Thomas, Don Gustavo and Zak. Not the mafia and every turf, but just men. The three most important men in my life.

Ngunit bago makamit iyon, kailangan ko munang patunayan ang sarili ko. I would start it off with the skeptics of the North. That’s why I was pushing myself forward. I had a lot of things to learn. Kahit pa sabihing mayroon nang kakayanan, hindi iyon sapat sa ngayon. Watching the twins spar, I realized what was lacking. Miguel’s right, I was stiff, bordering on the basics. I needed instinct. Win in any way possible. Ibinaon ko iyon sa isip.

Pagkatapos ng mahabang araw, agad kong tinahak ang pa-opisina. Kahit na itinigil na namin ang pagbabasa ng libro, nagpatuloy ako sa pagbisita kay Signor Gustavo.

I was making up for the lost years even in a simple way. Maraming dahilan upang pagdudahan ang kanyang mga sinabi, subalit pinili kong maniwala. Of course there were still questions and they would be answered one by one. Partly, I was afraid, but whatever the answer would be, I

was sure there were reasons behind those.



“Papà?” I called like I’ve been doing it for a long time.

“Camilla, are you really sure?”

Isang araw na rin simula noong hindi na siya gumamit ng wheelchair. Ngayon ay tungkod na ang kanyang gamit upang suportahan ang sarili sa pagtayo. In no time, he would be back to his old self as if he never went through an explosion and got out of a burning building and a rain of bullets.

“Si, Papà,” I answered in Italian. Ayokong umasa sa interpretasyon ng iba upang makaintindi. After all, I’m not an outsider anymore. “I want to go back to school.”

“The men in Casa di Ollis who are after you and threatened me are still on the loose. It’s still dangerous. If you want to study, we can hire a *professore*, the best out there.”

“I don’t want to hide anymore, staying inside will make them think that I’m a coward. I don’t want to be a coward. And I know my... friends are bored,” sabi ko sabay iwas ng tingin.

“I see you have been getting along with your... friends.” The humor in his voice was evident. Kung susumahin, isa siya sa pinakanatutuwa ngayong tuluyan na akong nagiging parte ng Hilaga. “Fine, you can go to school but on one condition: Don Euvelo’s daughter will also be your protector.”

“Via?” I inquired.

“Ah, so you’ve heard about Olivia.”

Kibit-balikat lang ang sagot ko. It would be unethical to tattle sexuality rumors about her. That’s Udine’s job.

“Don Euvelo? Isn’t he the one rumored to replace you?”

“And they remain just rumors,” he assured. “I’m sure you will get along with her, you’ve been friends.”

Hindi na ako nagkomento at tuluyan nang nagpaalam. Kinabukasan, si Gian, ang kambal at si Ro ay tuluyang pumasok kasama ko. Hindi na rin nakapagtataka na pagparada ng kotse sa parking lot ng eskwelahan, may iilang estudyante nang nag-aabang. Leading them was a tall girl with brown hair in a ponytail.

“Welcome back, Miss Qapone,” bungad niya. Unang nakatawag-pansin sa akin ang may kalakihan niyang mga mata. They were black, alert and somehow intimidating, the kind that commands submission. “Olivia Rizzi at your service.”

It took me offguard when she kissed both my cheeks as customary greeting. A faint smell of masculine fruity scent lingered. In the corner of my eye, I saw Ameli’s face scrunched up in irritation.

“Long time no see,” she greeted the others. Kung sumagot ng tango ang iba, sumimangot naman si Udine.

Throughout the briefing, Via was polite. Sa kabila ng tensyon mula sa pag-aasim ni Ameli at pamimilosopo ni Udine, hindi siya kinakitaan ng pagkailang. She was composed and accommodating. In fact, it was I who felt all the tension.

Hindi naman ako nakaligtas sa matatalim ng titig ni Ameli, na kaklase ko sa kasamaang palad.

Sa bawat pagbisita ng kambal sa silid namin nina Gian at Ro, bukambibig ni Udine ang pagkainis kay Via at kung paano ito dumistansya sa kanila noon. I did not listen; I ignored Ameli when she faked a friendly conversation with me.

“Via and I are very close.”

“I hope she won’t be too busy doing unimportant errands.”

“She’s amazing isn’t she? That’s why we’re best friends.”

Sa lahat ng pagpaparinig, tumango lamang ako upang umiwas sa gulo. Ngunit sumali si Udine sa usapan.

“You know, you’re not Via’s priority, a northern associate’s daughter. Stop being jealous, no?” She blew it.

Udine definitely did.

Namumulang umalis si Ameli nang walang sinasabi. Simula noon, mas napapadalas ang kanyang matatalim na tingin.

Via continued spending time with us, despite Udine's bitter attitude. Days, weeks and maybe a month passed, Papà returned to his own self and I had finally adjusted.

Ang mabuhay habang may nagbabantang gulo araw-araw ay hindi na naging nakakatakot. Everyday was a routine I've finally come to accept. School, training and talking with him in between. So far, we dodged sensitive topics like my uncle, the Fortunello and even my mother. We both felt it was not the right time to talk about those. Habang unti-unting natutong protektahan ang sarili, lalong lumalakas ang aking kumpyansa.

'No one disrespects a Qapone.' Papà inculcated it in my head. Sa totoo lang, magkatulad naman sila ng tinuturo ni Uncle. Kyosei. Qapone. It didn't matter. What they were trying to say was I should never let others crush my spirit. Strength comes from the ability to hold my own ground, not bowing to anyone unworthy.

I am not to be belittled. If I would be brave and strong enough, maybe, just maybe I could find a way to form a truce among the people who matters to me.

"Please don't do that." A voice interrupted my thoughts, it was Via.

"Do what?"

"Running off for alone time here at the rooftop. Father and I promised Don Qapone your safety. It is hard when you're not cooperating."

Imbis na magalit, hindi ako umimik. Sa isang buwang nakasama ko siya, lumilitaw naman ang kanyang pagkatao—a born leader, believed that duty comes before anything and authority before self.

"I'm sorry. It's just that sometimes I want to be alone."

"We all want to be alone at one point, Signorina."

Umupo siya sa tabi ko.

Hindi pa kami nagkaroon ng pagkakataong mag-usap nang walang ibang kasama. In fact, this was the first time.

“Please, stop calling me that. Call me Camilla or Hanna. People treat me like some royalty, and it’s uncomfortable.”

“I can’t do that, I respect heirarchy, you are above me and shall be respected. Besides, as others jokingly call it, you are the heiress to the ‘Kingdom of the North’.”

Kingdom, what a funny name for a mafia territory. “Do you always follow the rules?” tanong ko.

“Si, Signorina. The mafia breaks the law of a state, it’s a shame if we’ll break our own rules too, don’t you think?”

“You know, you’re too uptight. You don’t have to watch over me all the time. How about you spend time with your other friends... like Ameli?”

Kahit na mas personal ang tanong, wala akong karapatang kwestyunin ang kanyang sekswalidad.

“Ameli Parson is important, but my father said you are the priority. He said Signor Gustavo saved his life once, and this is the one of the many ways he can repay him. He said, he was lucky I grew up with him, while you were taken away from your father.”

Base na rin sa kanyang sinabi, mukhang tapat si Don Euvelo. If it’s true, I’m glad. Papà found a friend in him.

Upang ilihis ang usapan, inusisa ko kung bakit matindi ang galit ni Udine sa kanya.

“Ah, she and Urezza, we were once very close. As we grew up, we separated. I am the only daughter of a don recruited for your sake. The rest were orphans taken by Signor, except Miguel, the consigliere. He came years after. When you are taken away, I was returned to my father.”

“So he did create a group just for me,” I whispered. Just like how the Fortunello was formed for Zak and Lilo. “There are a lot of things I don’t know.”

“So do I,” sabi niya. “It’s a complicated world.”



We looked at each other and smiled. It was a good conversation, something to take out any inhibitions. Without hesitation, I offered my hand for a handshake, commemorating the first time we really talked.

“It was nice talking to you, Olivia Rizzi.”

She accepted and shook it. “It was my pleasure, Signorina.” She pulled me into a hug, like friends who finally found each other.

Nasa ganoon kaming posisyon nang bumukas ang pinto at iniluwa si Ameli. Natuon ang atensyon niya sa yakapan namin ni Via. Without a word, she left. It was safe to say she jumped into conclusions, a misunderstanding that would probably stir trouble.

10

MAESTRO E CUCCIOLI
Master and Puppies

Nord Valle Accademia was like any other school. Kahit na may kaugnayan sa mafia ang mga estudyante, high school is still high school. The camaraderie of youth and everything that came with it were all here.

That was why one way or another, I got to experience it... the wrong side of high school, that was. Teenage jealousy and misunderstanding took its form in Ameli Parson and the rest of her underlings.

“Well, well, here’s the princess without her knights.”

Imbis na patulan ang pang-iinis, nilampasan ko siya at patuloy na naglakad ngunit may humablot sa buhok ko at ibinalya ako sa sementadong sahig. Out of options, pinagpag ko ang sarili at tumayo. Ang inaasahang panandaliang pahinga sa maliit na park ng eskwelahan ay humantong sa ganito. Great.

“What do you want?”

Three girls were behind her, waiting for orders. Pamilyar ang kanilang mga mukha dahil ilang beses ko na ring nakitang sunud-sunuran ang mga ito kay Amelie. I had been in this situation far too many times that I knew where this was going.

“I would never accept a halfling like you,” she began.

It was obvious since day one that she was a skeptic... no, more of a full-pledged member of my hate club. And a vocal one. Kung ang iba ay palihim ang disgusto sa pagdating ko, siya ay hindi takot ipaalam iyon.

Pinilit kong ngumiti upang bawasan ang tensyon. “The first one to tell it to my face... your family must be really important because you can do that.”

“Of course,” kumpanyansa niyang sagot sabay sinuklay ang



buhok gamit ang daliri. “Daddy is the biggest associate. Aside from being a bridge between negotiations in America, he has a network from government backup to firearms supply.”

“That’s nice,” I praised. “So... can I go now? I don’t want any trouble. It was nice talking to—”

Ang anumang balak kong pag-alis ay hindi natuloy nang muli niya akong ibinalya pabagsak sa sahig. Tulad noong una, muli kong pinagpag ang sarili ko.

“*Per favore*, leave me alone,” I pleaded, asking as humbly as possible, even bowed my head. Hangga’t maaari, dapat iwasan ko ang gulo. Bukod sa nag-iisa lang ako, mas mabuti nang hindi ko bigyan ng rason ang mga taga-Hilaga para lalo akong pagdudahan.

Lumapit si Ameli. Higit siyang matangkad kaya kinailangan ko pang tumingala. Matapos akong suyurin mula ulo hanggang paa, marahas niyang hinablot ang mukha ko. “You really are a f*cking coward,” she hissed. “Isn’t she cute when she begs?” she asked the others who were sneering at me. “So cute I want to crush her.”

Bahagya kong naipikit ang mga mata ko dahil sa kawalan ng maiisip. From the looks of it, diplomatic approach won’t work. What should I do now?

Don’t panic, think, I encouraged myself. Maybe a little intimidation would work. “Does your father know what you’re doing?”

Bahagya siyang natigilan ngunit agad ding bumawi. “No. But whatever I do, I’ll end up being a heroine. After all, it is not a secret how many questions your presence.”

If I were still the old Hanna, I would’ve cowered. Ang tangi kong gagawin ay matakot at magpatalo, o kaya tumakbo. Pero hindi lang ako si Hanna. Ako na rin si Camilla.

“*As my daughter, your case is different*,” Papà told me once. “*To rule is to be feared. You are a Qapone, if they don’t respect you... then, force them to do so.*”

Yep, I guess I had no choice.

Gamit ang lakas, kinuha ko ang kamay niya sa mukha

ko at inisa-isang sinuyod ng tingin mga babae. Then, my gaze returned to Ameli, dead in the eyes. Ako naman ang nagtaas ng kamay at masuyong hinaplos ang kanyang pisngi. "You have a pretty face, I want to draw something on it." Puwersahan niyang pinalis ang kamay ko. "Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" I asked, my friendly tone now gone.

Kung ang mga kasama niya ay nagpalitan ng nag-aalangang sulyap, hindi si Ameli. In fact, it infuriated her more. "Feisty, aren't you? If not for Via and the others, you would've ended up dead by now. All you do is hide behind them."

It's true. Sa loob ng ilang buwan mahigit, nanatili akong ligtas dahil sa mga bantay ko. But today seemed to be different than the others. The *Elitè*, as Udine calls the group, was nowhere to be found. Kahit na si Via na halos hindi umaalis sa tabi ko ay wala rin. Hindi ko maiwasang mag-alala. It was either something happened or my father gave them a task.

Well, a moment like this was bound to happen anyway, hindi habang-buhay na makakaasa ako sa iba.

"If you want me so bad," wika ko matapos bumuntong-hininga, "then, could you do it on your own?"

Knowing my limits, I was not sure if I could take down four of them at once. Learning combat skills for months, I was not even sure if I could put up a fight to one opponent.

Ameli leaned in closer with her taunting blue eyes. "Just admit that you can't fight all of us. As expected. You may be a Qapone, but also the daughter of a Kyosei who's a weakling, a whore."

Hearing her words, somewhere deep within, a fuse had been lit. "Take it back," I said without averting my gaze.

"Why should I?" She flipped her hair and crossed her arms, looking more arrogant than ever. "Signor Gustavo is now a laughingstock for taking in another Kyosei, another traitor."



Confused, I did my best to make a straight face. Why did she call my mother a traitor? “Take. It. Back.” This time, I said it firmly.

She leaned closer and whispered in my ear. “No way. She’s a traitor. Weak. A *puttana* (whore).”

Everything fueled my anger. No more fuse to burn, no more patience and excuses to spare. Right there, I exploded like a bomb.

With the speed fired by the urgent need to hurt her, I quickly snaked my arm around her waist together including her arms while the other was on her chest and slammed her down the ground. Hindi siya nagkaroon ng pagkakataong dumaing sa sakit. Mabilis akong pumaimbabaw, nakaupo sa kanyang tiyan saka hinugot ang patalim na nakatago sa ilalim ng palda ko. Should I be glad Miguel insisted that I bring this?

“One step,” banta ko sa kasamahan niya habang nakatutok ang patalim sa kanyang leeg. “One step and she’ll drown in her own blood.” The dagger might not be longer than my hand, and wider than two fingers, but it was sharp enough to cut her throat.

“D-Daddy will hear about this!” Ameli shouted and squirmed. “Hurt me and the organization will be compromised!”

“So?” tanong ko na animo walang pakialam. The internal conflict may grow bigger because of me, but anger made my mind fuzzy from logic and reasoning.

My father was not a laughingstock. My mother was not a traitor. Wala siyang karapatang insultuhin ang mga magulang ko. Whatever they did, there were reasons behind it. I didn’t know everything, but I blindly believe that those reasons were valid because they’re my family.

I am a Qapone. If they couldn’t respect me, I’d demand them to do so, in any way possible.

“You are just an associate’s daughter, a lap dog. Not a drop of Italian is in your blood, an American on the Northern

territory, *my* territory. Do you think they'd favor an outsider like you over me? A dog over a master?"

That was a lie, but a good one. Sapat na iyon upang manlaki ang kanyang mga mata. May katotohanan din ang banta ko. Isa sa mga natutunan ko sa Hilaga, magkatulad din ang kanilang prinsipyo sa Orient. Mafiosos and yakuza alike, they value their own over others. Pinapaburan ang kanilang kalahi. Though I'm not a full-blooded Northerner, Qapone's blood still flows in my veins. Ameli and the others knew it, too.

Turning to her, I saw panic. Powerless. The regret of someone that needed to be taught a lesson. Ang kanyang yabang ay naglaho. The strength and confidence to take me down was all but a bluff. She didn't even know how to free herself from my grip.

"Who's the weakling now?" I hissed, unable to control my anger. "You brought your friends because you can't do it alone. And another thing, you hate me so much not because of my identity, but because you're jealous, aren't you? Olivia Rizzi didn't have time for you and you blame me."

Naputol ang kanyang sunud-sunod na pagmumura nang marahas kong hinawakan ang mukha niya. "I told you, didn't I? You have a pretty face and I want to draw something in it."

Win in anyway possible. I demand respect.

"Now little American puppy," I whispered, "...bark."

Her howls of pain echoed as my dagger slashed her cheek—a straight line at the side of her mouth to her ear.

Bumaling ang tingin ko sa kanyang mga kasama, sinigurong walang susugod. Dahil na rin sa mga iyak, nakatawag iyon ng atensyon ng ibang estudyante, wala silang nagawa kundi manood.

Her cries became silent whimpers while she's looking up at me. Katulad ng asong basa sa ulan, sugatan at walang matakbuhan, nabalot siya ng takot.

"Now, tell me why my mother was a traitor..." Idiniin ko ang patalim sa kanyang leeg; hindi man nakakasugat, subalit



sapat upang manindak.

“I... I don’t know.”

“Tell me!”

“I s-swear!” naghihikahos niyang sagot sa pagitan ng pagluha. Tuluyan nang nabalot ng pulang likido ang kanyang kabilang pisngi mula sa sugat. “I just heard it once from Daddy... but-but I don’t know w-why!”

Seeing her fear, I realized how pathetic I was back then. Being afraid is lame. At the same time, the sense of authority made my mind less clouded. So this was how it felt... to be on the other side of the line, to be the oppressor... to be the stronger one.

“Bark...” I uttered again.

And so she did, wailing from the wound that she couldn’t even touch and drowning in humiliation as the rest of the students watched.

“Bark until other dogs like you hear it.” Bumaling ako sa mga nanonood at nagparinig. “Let this be a lesson... to never mess with me.”

Their faces were full of hatred and fear. Ilan ang tumango at nakaramdam ako ng kalayaan. Ganito pala ang magkaroon ng lakas ng loob at lumaban. Ang gumawa ng mali dahil sa bugso ng damdamin o galit.

“*Bravo! Signorina, bravo!*” Umalingawngaw ang palakpak at papuri ni Udine. Tumalon siya mula sa kinauupuang sanga ilang metro ang layo sa amin.

Katulad niya, lumabas ang iba mula sa mga pinagtataguang puno sa parke. Agad akong tumayo habang si Ameli ay naiwang umiiyak.

“Please take care of her,” utos ko kay Via nang makalapit.

Tumango siya at humingi ng tawad dahil sa ginawa ni Ameli. Matipid na ngiti na lamang ang sagot ko, saka nagpatiuna na. I was at fault, too. Pumatol ako kahit na alam kong ang totoong dahilan ng galit ng babae ay simpleng selos lamang. However, I won’t apologize. I won’t regret looking down on others for the first time.

The crowd opened up for me to pass. Walang lingun-lingon na umalis ako.

“She’s cool!” pagmamalaki ni Udine ngunit walang sumagot sa kanya.

Nang malayo na sa tingin ng karamihan, doon pa lamang ako tumigil.

“I cut her face, I really did,” I said. Pero isa iyong paghingi ng tulong. The deed had been done, things might go downhill from now on.

“You did well, princess.” Tipid na tumango si Gian. He then slowly patted my head.

Esza raised her eyebrows. “The way you held the dagger is not stable, you need a little more practice. If she’s trained, she could reverse your positions. A—”

“Give her a break!” singit ni Udine. “Ro was holding you back, you thought she will just cry. Hah! I told you she can do it!” At saka ito tumawa nang malakas.

Even Ro gave a hesitant thumbs up. “Good, Signorina... good.” Saka ito nahihiyang umalis.

Imbis na magalit kung bakit nila ako hinayaan, tahimik akong nagpasalamat. It wasn’t really a fight of strength but more like a battle of guts, pero nagawa kong ipagtanggol ang aking sarili. I did it. It was a small victory, but still.

I looked up the sky and smiled. North and South may be thousands of miles away, but at least, we have the same sky. Baka umaga dito at gabi doon sa Timog. Yet somehow, we look at the same sky, in different times.

I’ll become stronger. Please wait for me, Zachary.

“Wait, ‘norina!” pahabol ni Udine nang naglakad ako palayo. “Where are you going?”

“To the guidance office, I violated school rules,” I said showing the dagger with blood on it.

Ako mismo ang nagsuplong sa sarili ko. I was still a high school student after all, and hurting another student is against the rules.

Hindi na nagulat si Papà nang tinawagan siya ng



eskwelahan, maaaring nauna na siyang binalitaan ni Gian.
As he requested, the call was put on speaker.

“I apologize for my daughter’s behavior. We accept any punishment.” Before the call ended, he called my name and said, “Good job, little flower. Good job.”