

The cover art depicts a woman in a dark, hooded cloak holding a glowing lantern, standing in front of a man in a dark vest and white shirt who is holding a dagger. They are in a dark, misty forest with bare trees and a dark bird perched on a branch in the upper left. The overall mood is mysterious and dark.

VANESSA

THE
DREAM DANCER
TALES FROM MIRAGINATA

Sierra tries to seduce the man of her dreams but wakes up the next day with a stranger in her bed. She makes him leave but realizes he stole her jewelry. She runs after him and gets hit by a car.

She wakes up inside a wheeled cage, being transported off to only God knows where. She sees the thief, Amani. He tells her that only the Dream Dancer can take her back to her world.

Pinilit niya si Amani na tulungan siya sa paghahanap sa Mananayaw. Hindi siya natutuwa sa lalaki pero wala siyang choice dahil wala siyang pera; walang kakilala sa mundong iyon na ni walang phone, at lalong walang Google Maps; at wala rin siyang ideya kung saan magsisimula sa misyon.

As Sierra continues her search, she confronts her mortality in a world where everyone lives forever, except her. In Miraginata, she is no poor little rich girl, but a slave, whose time is quickly running out—she needs to remember this so she can stop thinking that maybe she has a place there, with Amani.

THE
DREAM DANCER
TALES FROM MIRAGINATA

PREVIEW

VANESSA 

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

The Dream Dancer Text Copyright © 2021 by Vanessa
Artwork Copyright © 2021 by Arnel Coronel
Cover Illustration Copyright © 2021 by Shekinah Adlawan

Other images, illustrations, and fonts are copyrighted and used with permission from their owners.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Printed in the Philippines

Whimsical Books Ph

www.vanessa-writes.com

1 : THE ONE

“You’ll be mine tonight, Caleb.”

Napangiti si Sierra habang nakatingin sa salamin ng vanity. Hawak niya ang isang pulang lipstick. It was the most seductive of colors, she had been told. At kailangan niya ang lahat ng pampaganda para masigurong walang ligtas si Caleb de Rossi. He was an Italian-American businessman-adventurer. Anak ito ng kilalang bilyonaryo. Nagpunta ito sa Pilipinas dahil na rin sa waves of Siargao. Madalas ito roon. Doon sila nagkakilala. They were both staying in a high-end resort.



Caleb was everything. Hindi lang social status ang aangat sa kanya, kundi maging ang kanyang financial status. Not that she needed any more money because she was a rich man's daughter. Hindi man anak sa asawa ay anak pa rin at kinilala nito, hindi nga lang maipangalandakan tulad ng ibang mga anak dahil na rin sa asawa.

Sierra was the product of an affair. Ang affair ay isang open secret sa lahat. Everyone knew but no one dared to ask about it. Masyado lang bang magalang ang mga Pilipino? Parang hindi naman dahil madami ring tsismosa. Maybe people were just scared of the awkwardness.

Hindi niya ikinahihiya ang lahat dahil wala naman siyang kasalanan. Isa pa ay hindi naman din naghiwalay ang kanyang ama at ang asawa nito. Her mother married another man though. A rich man. Ang stepfather ni Sierra ay mayaman at mayroon ding mga sariling anak sa unang asawa. Wala itong anak sa kanyang ina.



Sierra had been living alone since she was fifteen. Hindi nagkulang sa sustento ang mga magulang niya. Kahit anong hilingin niya sa mga ito ay agad na ibinibigay. A lot of times, she felt that the reason was so that she would shut up since they didn't really have time for her. May sariling buhay na ang mga ito at hindi siya kasama roon.

Bata pa lang ay mayroon na siyang yaya. She didn't mind at all.

But Caleb, he was a dream. Her new dream. Mula nang makilala niya ito ay para siyang tinangay sa kaitaasan ng mga pangarap. He was everything. He was tall, dark, handsome, smart, and everything a girl would wish for. Napakaraming nagkakagusto rito at hindi lang basta-basta.

Caleb was as elusive as a gazelle, but she had observed him for quite some time. And tonight will be the night that she would be able to seduce



him completely.

Rumor has it that the man did not sleep around and that he believed that sex meant commitment. Kapag daw nakasama nito ang isang babae sa intimate na paraan ay sigurado nang may relasyon ang mga ito. That was what she was shooting for. She was going to take advantage of Caleb's antiquated beliefs and who knows, she might just be Mrs. Caleb de Rossi.

Yes, Sierra had been considering it. Hindi pa ngayon dahil ang plano niya ay thirty-two years old magbuntis. Pero kung gusto niyang magkaroon ng pamilya sa oras na iyon ay dapat na ngayon pa lang ay magkaroon na siya ng isang seryosong relasyon. She wanted to enjoy a romantic relationship first for maybe three years before getting married and then having a child or two. Maximum of two, for sure. She wanted to maintain a good figure so two was her limit.

Ah, planning a future with Caleb took up



most of her days. There was something about the man that almost obsessed her. She had been in love with him from the moment she laid eyes on him.

Ilang ulit na rin naman silang lumabas ni Caleb. In fact, she was one of the few he went to dinners with. Sa pagkakaalam din niya, base sa pakikipag-usap sa kaibigan ng lalaki, ay siya lang sa mga nakaka-date nito na mismong ito ang nagyaya. The others invited him. He was just too polite to turn them down because he was a true gentleman. That was hard to find these days.

Mayroon siyang nadamang kilig. She had to admit that it had been a year since she met Caleb. Sa loob ng isang taon na iyon ay may limang ulit pa lang silang lumabas. It was the first time that it happened to her that someone she liked was still a non-boyfriend after a year. Ang mga nakilala niyang lalaki noon ay mabilis kumilos. But that only made being with Caleb much



sweeter.

To put it simply, Caleb was different from all the rest. He was *the one*. And tonight, she would make sure that he would be hers forever after. And soon, she would have a family of her own, with a decent man who was everything.

Ipinasok niya ang kamay sa tagiliran ng boobs para lalo iyong ilapit sa gitna para sa mas malaking cleavage. These days, it was no longer enough that one had perky breasts, they had to be double Ds. At C lang ang sa kanya. In the Philippines, that was enough, but Caleb was an international traveler. Nakita rin niya ang pictures ng ex-girlfriends nito. Those women had double Ds and then some. Pero ano ang ginagawa ng push-up bra?

It took her two hours just to get her hair and makeup done. It was ironic that it took that long to look “natural.” Well, natural except for her deep red lips.



She put on a little black dress that she had created herself. Nang makontento sa nakikita sa salamin ay umalis na rin siya. She lived alone in a condominium. Bigay iyon sa kanya ng ina. She had been living alone in that house since she was fifteen. Gusto na niyang lumipat sa bagong condo na bigay ng ama pero pamilyar na siya sa nakasanayang bahay.

At age twenty-seven, Sierra had enough money to last her a lifetime, provided that she didn't overspend. Bukod sa nakukuha niyang share sa kompanya ng ama ay may sustento rin siya mula sa ina. Binigyan din siya ng mga paupahan ng kanyang stepfather. Maybe he felt guilty that his wife left her own daughter to fend for herself at fifteen as she took care of his children.

Sierra had a degree in Fashion Design and Merchandising, but to be honest, she had no plans of being a full-time designer. Mayroon lang



siyang boutique at online store na ipinapamanager sa isang kaibigan. She had her own workshop. Mayroon siyang dalawang mananahi. Every now and then, she would have her own fashion show.

Ilang ulit na niyang narinig sa mga kakiala na seryosohin daw niya ang negosyo pero hindi niya magawa. She loved design and she was always learning new things and coming up with new styles, but she did not like the idea of spending most of her time building up a business. Kung tutuusin, puwede siyang kumuha ng sariling designers para tuluy-tuloy ang production, pero mas nag-focus siya sa haute couture. In fact, she was making a name. She was able to make money, too. Not as much as she would if she expanded the business, but she had no plans to do that.

May limit siya na dalawang clients sa isang buwan. Kung minsan ay tinatanggihan pa niya ang iba. Simply because she wanted to live a



pressure-free life. It was the reason why all her designs were celebrated. May mga sumusubaybay sa kanya dahil mismo sa style niyang iyon. Mas tumataas ang value ng creations niya. Besides, everyone knew her as the daughter of a rich man. Natural na ang pagsikat niya.

Sierra had created several wedding gowns and all of them were featured in bridal magazines. Parang instant na kapag ang gown ay isang Sierra Alvez creation ay kinukuha na agad sa magazine ang bride para i-feature. She had also been interviewed in magazines several times. Her brand was exclusive and sought-after. And she hoped that that impressed Caleb.

Hindi man isang dinner ang date nila ni Caleb ay masaya pa rin siya dahil siya ang naisip nitong yayain. It was a huge party. Launching ng isang alak. Nang makaparada sa labas ng club kung saan ginaganap ang party ay agad niyang tiningnan ang phone. May message si Caleb na



sinasabing pumasok na siya. Magkita na lang daw sila sa bar. Doon daw siya nito hihintayin.

Nakangiting sinipat niya ang repleksiyon sa rearview mirror at nang matuwa sa nakita ay nagmamadali nang lumabas ng kotse. Nakalista na ang pangalan niya sa guest list kaya pinapasok siya ng bouncer. Madami siyang kakilalang nakasalubong. Great, more people would know she was the one Caleb wanted. Siguro naman ay mangingilag na ang ibang mga nagpaparamdam sa lalaki.

Tumuloy na siya sa bar at nakita ito.

“Caleb!” aniya, itinaas ang kamay kahit medyo malayo pa. She hoped she didn’t sound too giddy.

Pero nakapagtata kang hindi tumingin man lang sa kanya si Caleb. May iba itong tinitingnan. His attention seemed to be focused on whatever the hell that was. Madami nang tao kaya sumiksik siya para marating agad ang bar. Pero



hindi pa man siya nakakalapit ay tumayo na si Caleb at naglakad tungo sa tinitingnan nito na hindi niya alam kung ano.

WTF? Hindi niya malaman kung ano ang gagawin. Susunod ba siya o maghihintay sa bar? She was still a couple of steps away.

“Caleb!” tawag niya pero ni hindi ito lumingon, parang ni hindi siya narinig. It was strange because the man behind him looked at her. Ibig sabihin ay narinig siya niyon.

Nang makarating na sa bar ay tiningnan niyang muli si Caleb. Something seemed off. Sino o ano kaya ang tinitingnan ng lalaki na parang lahat na ng atensiyon nito ay napunta roon, sa puntong hindi na siya narinig pa? She decided to wait. Pero kinabahan siya nang makitang parang patungo na sa kitchen ang lalaki. Sumunod siya rito.

The man disappeared. Pumasok ba ito sa kusina? Maybe. Iyon lang ang nakikita niyang



daan. Ang restroom ay nasa kabilang panig ng building. Kaya pumasok na siya sa kusina at nakita sa dulo si Caleb, naglalakad pa rin. It seemed as though the man was in a hurry. Mabibilis ang hakbang nito.

WTF, Caleb? Hindi pa rin madesisyunan ni Sierra kung susunod o pababayaang ito. In the end, her desire to be with the man won. Sumunod siya rito.

“Caleb?” she called out, confused. Nasa parking area na ito sa likuran, palinga-linga na parang naiwan ng kung ano. The man looked stressed. Nakadaklot ito sa buhok habang panay ang lingon sa paligid. Tulad kanina, parang ni hindi siya nito narinig na tumatawag. *The hell?!*

Tumakbo ang lalaki, tumingin sa langit na parang mayroong nakikita roong kung ano, saka humawak sa ulo gamit ang magkabilang kamay.

“Are you all right, Caleb?”

Muli, parang hindi siya nito narinig. Now she



was suspecting the man took some hallucinogens because this was stranger than strange. Nilapitan niya ang lalaki at hahawakan sana sa braso pero hindi pa man ay nagapi na nito ang kanyang kamay, saka siya ipinihit, sa gayon ay nasa likod niya ito. She gasped.

His arm was now against her neck, pulling her to him.

“Caleb, what the fuck?!” singhal niya.

Agad siya nitong pinawalan. “I’m so sorry.”

Even stranger was his voice. Hindi lang sa naging mas malalim ang tinig nito kundi nagkaroon din ng kakaibang accent. She couldn’t place it though.

“What’s going on?”

Napailing ito, kasabay ng isang buntong-hininga. “I’m just not feeling well.”

“What did you take? E?”

“I need to go.”

Where the hell did that accent come from?! “You



can stay with me. I can take care of you. It's not smart to be alone at this time." Tootoo ang kanyang concern. She had a friend who overdosed and died alone. Mas maigi nang mabantayan niya ang lalaki at sa unang senyales na hindi nito kaya ang na-take na drugs ay isusugod niya ito agad sa ospital. Malapit lang ang ospital sa kanya sa BGC.

Caleb was still acting weird. Pinagmamasdan siya nito ngayon mula ulo hanggang paa, parang pinag-aaralan kung sasama sa kanya o hindi, na para bang hindi man lang siya nito nakikilala. Malapit na siyang mainsulto, sa totoo lang.

Pero tumango ito mayamaya at sinabi, "Let's go."

"Are we gonna use my car?"

Tumango ito at sumama sa kanya. Hindi na sila pumasok sa loob ng club. Sinabi niyang umikot na lang sila sa building. Habang naglalakad ay tinanong niyang muli ang lalaki



pero “I don’t know” lang ang sagot nito. Naisip niya na baka may kakilala itong nagbigay ng kung anong party drug. Hindi siguro alam ni Caleb dahil mukhang wala pa itong experience sa ganoon. He still looked stressed. Hindi na tuloy niya ito itinanong kung ano ba ang tinitingnan kanina dahil obvious naman na nagha-hallucinate ito.

Tumuloy na sila sa kotse niya. She drove silently. Pinakikiramdaman niya ang lalaki. He was restless. Gumagalaw ang hita at binti nito sa aktong hindi mapakali, panay ang himas ng baba.

“Why don’t you drink some water?” Inabutan niya ito ng water bottle. Palagi siyang may dalang ganoon.

Kinuha nito ang bote at hinila ang takip. Napanganga siya nang masira nito ang boteng gawa sa plastic. In the first place, bakit nito hinila? May spout na inuman at kung bubuksan talaga nito ay dapat na paikutin ang lid. It was a



very good brand. Paano kaya nito nagawang sirain? Ah, baka naarawan kaya naging marupok ang plastic?

Sinaid nito ang laman ng bote, walang pakialam kahit na basag na ang rim. What the hell? Umaagos na halos ang tubig sa katawan nito sa pagmamadaling maubos iyon. It must be E then, or something similar. Ganoon ang karamihan ng party drugs, nakakapagpauhaw sa gumamit, nakaka-dehydrate. But unlike others who are high on party drugs, Caleb didn't seem to want to party. Sa pagkakaalam niya, masarap ding *pagtripan* ang makulay na liwanag sa mga high. Isa pang trip ng mga ito ay sex. Kaya nga madalas sa mga dance club makita ang mga itong sumasayaw nang sexy habang may hawak na bote ng tubig at umiinom niyon.

Nang makarating sa condo tower ay sumakay na sila sa elevator sa parking area. The man was still acting bizarrely. He seemed amazed at the



elevator.

“Flying box,” he whispered.

The man was tripping. He was probably as high as a kite. How disappointed she was. Sa lahat ng scenario sa isip ay iyon ang huli niyang inasahan. Kailangan niyang malaman kung ano ang tinira nito para ma-research niya kung ano ang epekto at kung gaano katagal sa sistema ng nag-take.

“Was it E?” tanong niya.

“What?”

“Did you take E?” direktang tanong niya.

“Take E?”

“Yes. Did you?”

Itinaas nito ang mga balikat. Parang may kausap na baliw si Sierra. Tatawagan na lang niya ang isang kakilalang doktor para magtanong kung ano ang tamang gawin sa ganoong pagkakataon.

Nang bumukas ang elevator ay humakbang



ito palabas at tumingin sa paligid, fascinated. Naglakad na siya patungo sa unit. Nang mabuksan iyon ay pinatuloy na niya ang lalaki. Dere-deretso ito sa loob, tinitingnan ang bawat silid. She had two small rooms and one master. Dalawang unit ang okupado niya.

Nang makita ang bawat silid ay nagtungo ang lalaki sa kusina at pinagbubuksan ang mga cabinet, parang may hinahanap. Hinayaan na lang niya ito at nag-Google kung ano ang gagawin sa isang high sa party drug.

Pagtingin niya sa lalaki ay nakita niyang binuksan na nito ang ref. Kumuha ito ng ilang boteng tubig at magkakasunod na ininom ang mga iyon. Nilongon siya nito. “Why so small? Makes no sense.”

“What is small?”

Itinaas nito ang bottled water. She had some reusable bottles good for one. Lahat ng kanyang tubig ay nakalagay sa mga ganoong lalagyan para



ma-track niya ang water consumption sa araw-araw. She needed her skin and body to be perfect and hydrated so it was the solution she thought of. Para aware siya sa konsumo niya.

“Just drink as much as you can, Caleb.”

“Caleb. Right.”

May nakita siya sa Google na comparison ng dilated pupils ng iba't ibang droga. Nilapitan niya ang lalaki para tingnan ang mga mata nito pero paano niya gagawin iyon nang hindi maliwanag? Bakit kasi ayaw na lang nitong sabihin kung ano ba ang ginamit?

“Would you like something to eat?” aniya.

“What do you have?”

She ignored the weird voice and accent. Lord knows she had a flirty voice when necessary. And his accent? A part of his trip.

Binuksan niya ang freezer dahil alam na wala siyang pagkain sa ref. Mayroon siyang frozen roasts na ilang buwan na roon. Eternal diet siya.



Her looks meant the world to her.

Sure siyang edible pa ang roast beef dahil mabilis niyang na-freeze. “Is frozen roast beef, okay? I will heat it up.”

Ikinibit nito ang balikat. Isinalang niya sa microwave ang roast. It was a full roast beef meal with mash. Habang hinihintay iyong uminit ay pinagmasdan lang niya si Caleb. He took his shirt off. Siguro ay init na init. Ganoon kasi ang epekto ng E, sa pagkakaalam niya.

“Is this your first time taking E?” tanong niya dahil mukhang hindi alam ng lalaki kung paano i-handle ang high nito.

“What’s this taking E you keep asking me about?” tanong nito.

Wow, lakas ng tama. “Never mind.”

Pumasok ang lalaki sa kanyang silid. Nang hindi ito agad lumabas ay sumunod siya. He was now totally naked and inside her bathroom. Nakaupo ito sa gilid ng bathtub, parang pinag-



aaralan kung paano bubuksan ang mga gripo. Hindi niya masyadong matingnan ang hinaharap nito. Of course. How can one stare at a man's penis? But from her splitsecond gaze, she can say that he was well-endowed. Anong bilis ng tibok ng kanyang puso. God, the man was gorgeous.

Nilingon siya nito. "I want to fill this thing."

Siya ang nagbukas ng gripo, ipinakita sa lalaki kung paano iyon gumana. She offered to make him a bubble bath. Tumango lang ito.

"Maybe later we can have some sex," he suggested.

She gasped. Hindi niya kailanman naisip na magiging ganoon kakaswal ang pag-aalok nito ng ganoong bagay.

"We'll see," aniya, noncommittal. Yes, she wanted him but not this way.

Iniwang na niya ito at bumalik sa kusina. Naghain na siya. Makaraan ang ilang minuto ay lumabas na rin si Caleb. May tapi itong tuwalya



at iyon lang. The huge bulge of his crotch caught her attention, but she looked away.

Dumulog ito sa mesa, hinintay siyang maupo sa tapat nito, saka nagsimulang kumain. It seemed as if the man had been deprived of food for weeks.

“You should never take party drugs again,”
aniya.

Hindi ito umimik, parang hindi naintindihan ang sinabi niya. She silently sighed. This was the worst date ever. Ever.

2 : THIEF

Mariing ipinikit ni Sierra ang mga mata. She wanted to make sure that she was okay because it seemed almost as if she took E, too. Mabigat ang kanyang ulo, parang kulang sa tulog. That was nothing to her but the scenes that played out inside her head were too intense.

Last night with Caleb was too much.

Too much pleasure, too strange, too wild, too unforgettable, too dreamlike.

Pinakiramdam niya ang sarili. Did she have sex last night? She was sure that she will feel it if she did.



Yes, indeed, she had sex last night. Nadarama niya iyon. Lahat ng eksena sa isip niya ay totoo at hindi imahinasyon lang. Pero hindi niya kayang ipaliwanag kung bakit parang panaginip ang lahat. It was simply surreal. May pakiramdam na para bang lasing siya o high pero alam niya rin na hindi.

Did the man slip her some E, too? O kung anumang sex drug? Sa pagkakaalam niya ay mayroon ding mga ganoon kaya nga may sex parties. She was not into drugs. Ang mga party na dinadaluhan niya ay iyong mga walang ganoon o kung mayroon man ay hindi lantaran. Some of her peers used recreational drugs but that was their business. None of that for her. It was bad for the skin and reputation as well. She didn't want to be known as a cokehead.

A tingle went up her spine when a memory of last night's lovemaking flashed inside her head. Oh, it was divine. Surreal but divine. She could



still hear herself moaning. She could still feel herself coming.

Nakangiti siyang pumihit. Nakatalikod sa kanya si Caleb. Nakatalukbong ng kumot ang lalaki. He was still asleep. He was sober now, she guessed. Gigisingin sana niya ito nang matigilan dahil gumalaw ito at nahila pababa ang kumot. Napansin niya ang kakaibang kulay ng buhok ng lalaki. Caleb's hair was dark, almost jet black. Nagpatina ba ito habang tulog siya at naging dirty blonde? Agad siyang napabangon, sabay sandal sa headboard. Inuga niya ang balikat ng katabi. Pumihit ito.

It was a complete stranger with long dark blonde hair.

“Who the fuck are you?!” sigaw niya.

Sinakmal na ng kaba ang kanyang dibdib. Hindi niya naiintindihan ang lahat. She felt like she was losing her mind. Why was this man with her now? And why was her memory starting to



show a different man from last night?!

Did she sleep with this man?! How?! Where the hell was Caleb?!

“I’m gonna ask you again and you better answer me, mister. Who are you?” He was a man in his thirties, buff, tan, Caucasian. Lagpas balikat ang buhok nitong magulo at parang ilang araw nang hindi nasusuklay.

Nakahawak ito sa noo, halatang masama rin ang lagay. He stood up. Wala itong pakialam kahit na walang saplot sa katawan. She gasped seeing his body. It was the same penis, she was sure of it. How can two men have the exact same penis size—length and girth? Higit pa roon ay ang obliques ng lalaking ito. It was very pronounced. Nakita na niya ang almost naked body ni Caleb sa beach at wala itong ganitong obliques.

She didn’t mind last night. Alangan namang kuwestiyunin niya ang lalaki sa katawan nito? But



now she was looking at a different man and she had absolutely no idea what the hell happened. This was the man she slept with... only with Caleb's face... or did she hallucinate all that?

“Where’s Caleb?!” singhal niya.

“I don’t know Caleb,” sambit nito.

“Get out of my house!” sigaw niya. Wala na siyang pakialam. Mukhang high pa rin ito o baka may tama dahil hindi alam ang ginagawa at sinasabi. How can she possibly sleep with this stranger?!

He probably roofied her!

Sukat sa naisip ay agad niyang kinuha ang phone at kinunan ng picture ang lalaki, saka niya ito ipinagtabuyan. Kandalundag itong isuot ang pantalong brown. She had no idea where the atrocious clothing came from. And was that top made of fucking burlap?! Hindi niya sigurado dahil nagmamadali nang umalis ang lalaki matapos maisuot ang pantalon. Bitbit lang nito



ang ibang damit na hindi alam ni Sierra kung saan nagmula.

And then it hit her. The stranger could be a scammer. He could be a thief. Baka pinainom nga siya nito ng kung anong droga nang nagdaang gabi pero ang totoong pakay ay ang pagnakawan siya. Hindi niya alam kung paano at saan siya pinainom ng droga dahil hindi niya maalalang uminom ng kahit na ano kagabi sa club.

Baka naman habang kumakain sila? Pero kung habang kumakain sila siya nito pinainom ng droga, bakit inakala niyang si Caleb ito doon pa lang sa club? It did not make any sense at all.

Hindi kaya at kasama niya talaga si Caleb pero umalis din at iniwan siya? Maybe some new tenant came in and somehow drugged her or something. Hindi niya matanggap na magagawa ni Caleb na ito mismo ang maglagay ng drugs sa inumin niya kahit ito lang talaga ang nakasama niya kahapon. Could it be a betrayal? That Caleb



planned to drug her and then give her to the foreigner? But why?

Hindi niya alam. But she was sure she was scammed. At dahil sa isiping iyon ay agad siyang natigilan at napaigtad. She had jewelry outside of her safe. Hinanap niya agad ang mga iyon ay napanganga nang makitang wala sa drawer ng nightstand ang kanyang kuwintas!

“Bastard!”

It was a gold chain with a ruby pendant. Bigay iyon sa kanya ng kanyang lola noong nabubuhay pa ito. Makapal ang chain niyon, eighteen karats. It would probably sell for about a hundred grand without the pendant.

“Fucking thief!” aniya habang nagmamadaling magdamit.

Hindi na siya nag-abalang magpunas o mag-toothbrush man lang. Kailangan niyang abutan ang magnanakaw. Tumatakbo siya sa hallway habang itinatali ang buhok. Sumakay siya sa



elevator at pagbukas niyon sa lobby ay nakita niya ang lalaki na papalabas ng pintuan. Malayo-layo rin sa elevator ang front entrance ng condo.

“Guard! Guard, pakipigilan ang lalaking ‘yan!” sigaw niya, tumatakbo, panay ang turo sa lalaking bahagya lang siyang nilingon.

Tumingin dito ang guard pero parang walang nakita. Oh, heaven help her, she was going to have him fired! Anong klaseng guwardiya ang hindi man lang kikilos kahit sigurado naman na narinig siya nito?

Patuloy siya sa pagtakbo at nang nasa tapat na ng guard at masamang tingin ang ipinukol dito. “You let him get away, imbecile!”

She kept running. Mukhang wala siyang aasahan sa guwardiyang inutil. Nakatawid na ng kalsada ang magnanakaw. He can hail a cab at any time, taking with him the only jewelry her grandmother left her.

“Please stop!” aniya, saka tumawid.



It was too late before she realized that an SUV just took a turn and was now heading straight at her. Hindi niya kayang umiwas. *The thief is getting away*, was what she thought before the car hit her.

3 : ALIPIN

Ang tuluy-tuloy na banayad na pag-alog ang nagpagising ng diwa ni Sierra. And then she smelled a stench that woke her up completely. Nagmulat siya ng mata at ginapangan ng kilabot nang maunawaan kung saan nagmumula ang mabahong amoy—sa mga taong nakapaligid sa kanya.

Am I in hell? But why? I'm not a bad person.

Sinakmal ng kaba ang kanyang dibdib nang maunawaang nakaupo siya sa sulok ng isang... Ano nga ba iyon? Her mind was trying to figure out. Everything was too much to take in.



Ang mabahong amoy ay magkakahalang body odor sa iba't ibang bahagi ng katawan ng tao—sa paa, kilikili, ulo. The air was heavy with the stench of shit and piss, too. Human and animal. Amoy malayong probinsiya. Well, at least that's what that stink reminded her of. Amoy fertilizer.

Nagsimulang mangati ang kanyang katawan at manlamig ang kanyang mukha. Naunawaan niyang ang suot niya ay patong-patong na damit na gawa sa telang ubod ng gaspang. Halos parang sako ng kape. May rumehistrong imahen sa isip niya, ang mukha ng estrangherong nakasama. She was almost sure it was the same disgusting fabric he wore. Hinawakan niya ang suot at natuklasang poncho pala, may hood, nakapatong sa patong-patong niyang damit.

Nang hilahin niya ang damit upang tingnan ang katawan ay napangiwi siya nang matuklasang hindi na maganda ang kanyang amoy. She couldn't remember stinking that bad. Parang



tatlong araw siyang hindi naligo matapos mag-gym. She refused to smell her breath when she felt the thickness on her tongue. She needed a shower but first, she needed to figure out where the hell she was.

Marahan siyang tumayo. Every movement made her ache all over. She was slowly seeing the faces of the people around her. Hindi niya nakita nang mahusay ang mga iyon mula sa pagkakasadlak sa sulok. Iba't ibang lahi ang nakapaligid sa kanya—black, white, brown, yellow. May babae, may lalaki.

She was sure she was dreaming. This can't be real. Everyone was wearing a costume. Pero ano ang theme ng costume party? Roman slaves? Everyone wore the same horrible clothing—maruming poncho na nakapatong sa marumirang damit. Madungis din ang mukha ng lahat. Matted ang lahat ng buhok ng taong naroon.

Dahil siksikan ay halos hindi siya makakilos at



nasusuka na siya sa amoy ng hininga ng lalaking pinakamalapit sa kanya. He was a mouth-breather. He was old, probably in his sixties. Pero halatang malakas pa ito. Maybe he only looked old because of physical work. Kita sa ugat ng kamay nitong nakakapit sa matabang rehas na kahoy.

Pumihit siya para makahinga, inilabas ang mga kamay sa rehas. The coldness clawed at her arm when it got exposed. Naunawaan niya kung bakit nanlalamig ang kanyang mukha. Iyon lang ang exposed sa lamig. Wow, that fabric worked extraordinarily well for winters.

Wait, winters? Where the hell was she?! February sa Pilipinas at malamig pero kahit sa Batanes pa siya magpunta ay hindi magiging ganoon kalamig. It must be at least negative ten degrees. She remembered that kind of cold when she was in Canada.

What the fuck.



Ayaw pa ring ma-absorb ng utak niya ang nangyayari. It didn't make any sense at all. Ano ang ginagawa niya sa gumagalaw na cart? *Shit, it's a moving cage. A cage! I'm with slaves! In winter!*

Nasa likod siya ng kulungan kaya hindi niya alam kung ano ang humihila roon. There were at least thirty people inside the cart. Not a soul dared to speak. O masyado bang pagod ang mga ito para magsalita? Pagod ba talaga o may sakit? It was hard to tell. The faces of the people were blank. The mood in the cart was bleak, hopeless.

Kailangan niyang malaman kung nasaan siya kaya inisa-isa niyang tingnan ang mga kasama sa kulungan. She could see a tall, black woman at the other side of the cart. Nakababa ang hood nito, parang bale-wala kung napakalamig ng paligid. Ito lang ang mukhang approachable kahit paano. Kumpara sa tatlo pang babae roon—isang mukhang Chinese na nanlilisik ang mga mata, dalawang babaeng puti na mukhang



meth addicts dahil walang ngipin.

May katabing pigura ang babae na nakatingin sa unahan. Noon lumingon sa kanya ang pigura. Nagtama ang kanilang mga mata. Instantly, she recognized the man. It was the stranger who had sex with her! The one who drugged her. The thief!

Halatang nabigla ang lalaki. Mabilis siya nitong nilapitan, sumiksik sa mga tao, walang pakialam kahit may ilang tumulak dito at nagalit.

“Paano ka nakarating dito?” tanong nito.

“The hell if I know!” She pinched herself. It hurt like hell. This was not a nightmare. “How do I get back home?”

“You need to find the Dream Dancer.”

Who the hell is that?! Bago niya pa naitanong ay hinigit na siya ng lalaki patungo sa unahan ng cart. The passengers were mean. Itinulak siya ng iba roon at ibinalya ang mga ito ng estrangherong nakahawak sa kanyang braso.

“Isa na naman ang nabawas sa atin,” anang



isang malagom na tinig.

“Akin ang panlamig.”

“Akin ang lalagyan ng tubig.”

“Akin ang sinturon.”

“Akin ang sapatos.”

Napalingon si Sierra sa pinagmumulan ng komosyon at nabigla nang makitang parang sa concert na may nag-stage dive at pinagpasapasahan ng mga nakataas na kamay ang isang katawan. Babae, wala nang saplot maliban sa pang-ibaba.

“Jesus,” sambit niya.

Ang hantungan ng katawan ay sa labas ng cart. Just like that, the body was thrown away, discarded, like it was merely an object. Like it was garbage. Nakanganga siya, lumapit sa rehas para tingnan ang babae sa gilid ng daan. There she was, slumped on ice, with nothing but a piece of cloth to cover her genitals. That's it. How disrespectful of life... of death... of a human



being.

“Uminom ka muna,” wika sa kanya ng estranghero, inabutan siya ng isang water canteen na gawa sa leather.

Nadama niya ang uhaw, pero halos tulala pa rin. Hindi niya nagawang uminom. “Did they just throw a dead body on the side of the road?”

Tumango ito. “At ganoon din ang mangyayari sa `yo kapag namatay ka. Kaya uminom ka ng tubig.”

Sukat doon ay agad niyang inabot ang lalagyan. Uhaw na uhaw siya at naubos ang laman ng canteen. Nadama niya ang pagkalam ng sikmura. “I’m very hungry.”

“Pasensiya, wala akong pagkain.”

Sasagot sana siya nang mabigla sa pag-angat ng kulungan. Literal iyong umangat sa lupa. She thought they just hit some bump, but the cart levitated on a steady height. Sumiksik siya para makarating sa puwang na natatakpan ng isang



malaking lalaki. Mula sa pagitan ng mga rehas ay nakita niya na ang humihila sa cart ay isang elepanteng may pakpak.

“Holy shit...” she whispered. Nakatutop ang kanyang mga kamay sa bibig, hindi makapaniwala sa nakikita. Sa unahan ng elepanteng lumilipad ay mayroong caravan ng mga kulungan na tulad ng kinaroroonan niya. Magkakadikit ang mga iyon. Hula niya, mas malaking elepante o mas marami ang humihila sa unahan. It was impossible to see beyond a few meters. Mababa ang hamog.

“Where am I?!” she asked the man.

“Miraginata.”

“Mira what?”

“Miraginata,” ulit nito.

“What is this place?”

“‘The Border’ is what your kind calls us, such ignorant fools.”

“My kind?! My kind?!” Nang tumaas ang



kanyang tinig ay bigla siyang nanigas. “What the...?” Napatutop siyang muli sa mga labi. She suddenly realized that the words coming out of her lips were different from how they were created inside her mind.

“What?” tanong ng lalaki.

Lalo na siyang napanganga. She understood him perfectly, but it was dawning on her that the man was speaking a strange language. It didn’t make any sense. Para siyang nanood ng isang pelikula na dubbed sa Ingles pero halos sakto ang galaw ng bibig sa salita kaya hindi niya agad napansin. But speaking that language came naturally to her. This can’t be real life. Impossible.

Muli niyang kinurot ang balat at napaigtad sa sakit. Huminga siya nang malalim at muling naamoy ang lahat ng baho sa paligid. There was something that smelled nice though, and it was the strange man. Hindi niya alam kung ano iyon pero pamilyar sa kanyang ilong.



“I don’t understand,” aniya, gusto nang maiyak pero hindi pa man siya nakakakuha ng buwelo ay umangat na ang karitela. Napahawak siya sa lalaki. Agad siya nitong niyakap, inalalayan sa baywang.

Ang kanyang sigaw ay na-trap sa kanyang lalamunan. She felt as though she was losing her mind. The flying elephant was soaring high now, flapping its wide wings.

And then the skies cleared up from a certain height. And there, she can see the flying caravan in front of theirs. Mas lalo na siyang napanganga nang makitang isa rin lang ang elepanteng tumatangay sa caravan. It was either the mother or the father of the baby that was flying theirs.

But the strangest part of the experience was the fact that air up there was normal. Mahangin pero hindi tulad ng dapat. Hindi ba kapag kasintaas na sila ng hot air balloon ay dapat na pumapagaspas na nang matindi ang kanilang





mga damit, tinatangay na mismo ng hangin ang isang karitelang yari sa kahoy, at malamang din na kanina pa ubos ang mga tao roon dahil tumaob na sila.

“How are we not falling? This defies the laws of physics,” sambit niya.

“Why would the slaver not cast a spell to keep us safe? We are a commodity,” anito. Sa puntong iyon, tinanggap na ng isip niya na naiintindihan niya ang lalaki sa salita nitong hindi pamilyar sa kanyang tainga pero alam na alam niya.

“S-slaver?”

“Alipin ang lahat ng sakay dito. Kabilang ka na.”

4 : CHIMERA

T*his is not real. It can't be.*

Sumiksik na lang si Sierra sa sulok ng karitela. Pilit niyang inaalala ang nangyari. Kanina, ang huling memory niya ay nabundol siya ng sasakyan kakahabol sa estranghero. But now she can also remember glimpses of herself in a dark place, waking up and seeing darkness, or people's feet, and then losing consciousness again. She also remembered being carried by someone, drinking water from a spout, being fed stale bread soaked in water, and a gentle voice whispering in her ear...



“Hindi ka itatapon hanggang may hininga ka pa. Lumaban ka.”

Tinig iyon ng isang babae pero hindi niya kilala kung sino.

She was overwhelmed. Hindi niya alam kung saan magsisimula. At heto, lumilipad pa rin sila. She was scared. No, that was an understatement. She was terrified. A slave. God, she was now in a different world indeed. How can she become one when she can probably afford one?

Miraginata... The Border. Hindi niya makulit ang lalaki dahil binulungan siya nito na huwag na munang magtanong.

“What’s your name?” naalala niyang itanong habang nakaupo pa rin sa sulok. Nakatayo ang lalaki sa unahan niya.

Yumuko ito para tingnan siya. “Amani.”

The bastard never bothered asking what hers was. “I’m Sierra, in case you want to know the name of the woman whose life you’ve ruined.”



“Hindi ko alam kung paano ka nakarating dito, pero kailangan mong bumalik. Hindi ka tatagal dito. Lalong hindi ka tatagal na alipin.”

“Why, thank you. I didn’t know that. Where the hell is the stop? Maybe I can take a train home from there?” sarkastikong sabi niya.

“Kailangan mong hanapin ang Mananayaw.”

“You said that earlier. Dream Dancer, you said. Where can I find it and what’s its name?”

“Walang nakakaalam.”

“What the hell?”

Noon biglang bumaba ang altitude ng karitela. Napakapit siya sa binti ng lalaki dahil may malaking mama na nakaharang sa kahoy na rehas at hindi niya iyon makapitan. Mas pinangangambahan niya ang sasapitin paglapag nila.

“You have to take me back,” pakiusap niya sa lalaki.

Umiling ito. “Kahit gusto ko, hindi ko kayang



gawin.”

“Ano’ng ibig mong sabihin?”

“Isa lang ang makakatulong sa `yo, at hindi ako `yon. Siya lang ang dahilan kung bakit ka napunta rito.”

“Saan ko siya hahanapin?” Gusto na niyang umiyak.

“Hindi ko alam.”

Gusto niyang magwala pero sa huli ay hindi na siya makapaghagilap ng lakas. Lumapag na ang karitela sa isang malakas na kalabog. Siguro ay hindi pa sanay ang kanilang “piloto” sa biyahe dahil baby pa.

Somehow, Amani’s presence comforted her. Siguro ay dahil ito ang koneksiyon niya sa totoong buhay. God, totoong buhay. At ano ito, pekeng buhay? Was she in a coma after being hit by a car and currently in between life and death, and she somehow turned into a slave?!

Coma nightmare probably. If so then was she



trapped in this God-forsaken world until she regains consciousness in the real world? Napatingin siyang muli kay Amani. “Am I fighting for life in my world?”

“Hindi ko alam.”

“So ano’ng alam mo?”

“Wala.”

Sisigawan na sana niya ito nang matigilan. Bakit niya inuubos ang lakas sa isang bagay na wala namang kahihinatnan? Maybe she only needed to concentrate to get back, to regain consciousness.

Napaigtad siya nang marinig ang hagupit ng isang latigo. Nakita niya ang isang malaking lalaking kalbo na naglalakad patungo sa likod ng karitela, may hawak itong latigong pagkalaki-laki at may spikes na kumikinang sa dulo.

“Labas, labas! Bilis! Gusto kong nakapila kayo nang maayos bago dumating ang bibili sa inyo,” sigaw nito nang mabuksan ang likuran.



“Do they really sell slaves in the middle of nowhere?” tanong niya. Wala siyang matanawang siyudad.

“Illegal slave trade is done this way. No witnesses.”

“May legal?”

“Natural. Makinig ka sa akin. Dito tayo maghihiwalay,” bulong nito. “Mag-iingat ka.”

“What?! Where are you going?! Please, please don’t leave me!”

“Kailangan kong umalis. Hanapin mo ang Mananayaw. Hindi ko alam kung paano, hindi ko alam kung saan. Pero siya lang ang makakatulong sa `yo.”

“Please don’t leave me like this.”

“May mga bagay na kailangan kong tapusin. Hanapin mo siya.”

Bigla niyang kinapa ang damit, naghanap ng bulsa. She had empty pockets. Wala siyang pera, walang gamit, wala lahat. Pinitserahan niya ang



lalaki bago sila umandar sa pila. “Give me back my fucking necklace! The one you stole!”

“Pasensiya, kailangan ko ng pera. Isa pa, pinalitan ko naman.”

Bago pa siya makasagot ay narinig na niya ang latigo ng slaver. “Bilis-bilis!”

“Tumakbo ka sa pinakamabilis na paraang kaya mo.”

“H-huh?” sambit niya, nangingilabot na ngayong malinaw niyang nakikita ang hitsura ng slaver o mangangalakal ng alipin. The man’s face was too cruel and terrifying. His nose was crooked, so were his teeth. Pero ang mga mata nito ang pinakanakakakilabot sa lahat dahil walang puti ang mga iyon, sa halip ay itim. His pupils were mere vertical slits, like a snake’s.

She gasped seeing his tongue when he spoke again—it was the tongue of a snake, thin, forked. Nakatayo na ang balahibo ni Sierra sa puntong iyon. The creature was not human, his body only



looked like a man's though he was about seven feet tall.

“What is it?” nanghihilakbot niyang tanong kay Amani.

“Chimera.”

“Chimera?”

“Hybrid. Mixed race.”

She was still terrified. “More like mixed specie.”

Inignora nito ang sinabi niya, saka inilagay sa kanyang kamay ang leather water canteen. “Kailangan mo ito. Tandaan mo ang sinabi ko, Sierra. Takbo. Sa pinakamabilis na kaya ng mga paa mo. Yumuko ka. `Wag kang titingin sa mata niya.”

“W-what are you gonna do?”

Hindi ito umimik kahit lumarawan sa mukha ang matinding determinasyon. Such cool determination though. The man looked certain in whatever he was going to do. Sa puntong iyon,



halos manginig na ang katawan ni Sierra sa pangamba.

Naglakad siya patungo sa nakabukas na pintuan ng karitela, habang si Amani ay nagtungo sa pinakalikod ng pila. Bumaba na siya, nakayuko tulad ng habilin sa kanya. Mabilis siyang naglakad patungo sa grupo ng mga alipin. Mayroon pang ibang kasamahan ang slaver na pinapababa ang sakay ng ibang karitela ng caravan. Isa bawat karitela, mayroong limang kasamahan ang chimera na hindi niya alam kung chimera rin.

She was waiting for a commotion. Mukhang desidido si Amani. Hindi lang niya alam kung ano ang gagawin nito. Natatakot siya para sa lalaki. Mukhang suicide mission ang gusto nitong gawin. Pero hindi siya tanga para hindi tumakas. She had seen quite a number of crime documentaries and knew that a victim should never ever allow herself to be taken to any



location because that would be her end.

Pasimple siyang lumalayo, nakatingin sa pinagmulan. Nakita niyang malapit na si Amani sa pila. Nang ito na ay hindi ito bumaba.

Humakbang siya paatras, pero nakatingin pa rin sa lalaking ngayon ay sinabi sa chimera na ayaw nitong bumaba. Ikinumpas ng chimera ang latigo nito. Sa isang iglap, lumundag si Amani at pinatama ang paa sa mukha ng chimera na agad bumagsak sa lupa.

Lumingon sa kanya si Amani, alam na alam kung saan siya titingnan. Kahit sa malayong distansiya ay alam niya ang ibig sabihin ng tingin nito. She needed to run. And run she did.

She ran like she had never ran before. Wala siyang pakialam kahit sa snow siya tumatakbo, hinihinal kahit sanay sa cardio, nanghihina ang katawan, nanlalamig ang mukha. Everything was white and brown, with a hint of green from the evergreens. Ang destinasyon niya ay ang



natatanawang kakahuyan. She had never seen trees as big before. Mula siguro sa malayo, mukhang lalamunin siya ng mga puno sa liit niya kumpara sa mga iyon.

Nang lumingon siya sa pinagmulan ay nakita niyang nagtatakbuhan na rin ang ibang mga alipin pero hindi sa gawi niya karamihan, kundi sa kabilang direksiyon. Isa lang ang tumakbo sa direksiyon niya—the tall, black woman.

Hindi niya alam kung nasaan ang mga illegal slaver, baka iyong mga pigurang nasa lupa. And the flying elephants? Now up in the air. Walang bitbit ang mga iyon na karitela. They were flying too fast now, the parent in front of the baby elephant. Sakay si Amani sa mas malaking elepante.

The bastard hijacked the ride and left her there. Kalabisan bang isama siya nito?! Napakawalanghiya! Matapos siyang dalhin sa lugar na iyon ay iniwan na lang siya basta kahit



malinaw ditong ni hindi niya alam kung nasaan na siya, kung paano siya mabubuhay, kung paano babalik sa pinagmulan. Worse, he took her necklace! Pinagnakawan na siya ay iniwan pa sa alanganin. Hindi man lang siya naisipang i-drop off sa lugar kung saan mas accessible sa... Saan nga ba? Any major fucking thoroughfare, at least! Bastard!

Patuloy siyang tumakbo papasok sa kakahuyan. Namamanhid na halos ang kanyang mga pisngi at ilong sa lamig kaya nang makitang nakakubli na siya sa mga puno mula sa pinagmulan ay tumigil siya at pinunit ang laylayan ng poncho. She fashioned a face covering from that. Kung kanina ay nabubuwisit siya sa tela ng suot, ngayon ay namamangha na siya. It was the best thermal fabric she had ever seen. Hindi niya alam kung anong klaseng fabric iyon pero parang burlap na mas mapusyaw ang kulay at mas manipis, pero kayang takpan ang



matinding lamig.

Mayamaya ay napansin niyang nasa bandang likuran na niya ang babaeng alipin. She had a leather canteen, too. Humanap ang babae ng malapad na dahon ng puno at doon kumuha ng snow na inilagay sa loob ng canteen. It was amazing to watch her do it. Ang snow na puti ay parang likidong umaagos papasok sa maliit na bibig ng canteen. It was almost magic.

Tumingin sa kanya ang babae, saka itinuloy ang ginagawa. Sinubukan niyang tularan ito pero hindi niya magawang isiksik sa canteen ang snow. Kaunti lang ang nailalagay niya sa loob. It will take her an hour to fill the canteen and she was thirsty as hell.

Nabigla siya nang agawin ng babae sa kanya ang canteen at walang imik na nilagyan ng laman.

“H-how do you do that?” tanong niya sa wika ng lugar na kusang lumabas sa kanyang mga labi.

Pinagmasdan siya ng babae, nakatingala siya



rito dahil matangkad itong talaga. Siguro ay six-footer. The woman could be a supermodel. Her cheekbones alone were worth a couple of million dollars. Designers would kill each other to sign her up. So model ba ang babae kaya nasa coma dream niya?

Coma dream ba talaga ito?

As far as she can remember, she never had a dream as realistic as this, or as long. Kadasalan din na ilang eksena lang ang panaginip niya. Lalong hindi siya nakakaamoy sa panaginip. She may know what something in her dream smelled like, but she couldn't smell it as vividly as this. Lalong hindi niya nadarama ang lamig at init sa mga panaginip niya. She may know it as a detail, but she never could feel it.

“Ano ka?” tanong nito sa buong tinig, may bahid ng kuryosidad.

“A-ano'ng ibig mong sabihin?” Bigla siyang kinabahan. Wala siyang kaalam-alam sa kung ano



ang kalakaran sa lugar na iyon. Dapat ba niyang sabihin ang totoo? Would that get her in trouble?

Pinagmasdan siya ng babae, saka hinawakan ang katawan ng leather canteen. Iniabot nito iyon sa kanya. She controlled her gasp when she felt that it was warm. Agad siyang uminom at naubos ang laman niyon. Muling pinuno ng babae ng tubig ang lalagyan, saka ito nagpatiuna na sa paglalakad.

“S-saglit,” aniya. “Puwede ba akong sumama sa `yo? Sierra ang pangalan ko. W-wala akong makakasama.”

Umiling ang babae. “Nagmamadali ako.” Itinuro nito ang direksiyong pinagmulan nila. “Doon may maliit na nayon, siguro walong kilometro mula sa pinaglapagan natin.”

“B-bakit hindi ka doon pumunta?”

“Dahil doon tayo unang hahanapin ng mga mangangalakal.” Itinuro nito ang direksiyong tinatahak. “Nasa timog-kanluran nitong



kakahuyan ang bayan ng Suria Rosa. May daungan doon, pero marami ring mangangalakal ng alipin. Sa timog-kanluran ang bayan ng Mikri Sutar, lugar ng lahat ng bagay na gawa sa luwad.” Humakbang na ang babae pero muling huminto. Pinagmasdan siya nito at mayamaya ay may kinuha mula sa bulsa—isang punyal at isang batong manipis at mahaba.

Banayad nitong ikiniskis sa bato ng dulo ng punyal. It sparked. She understood that the rock was a flint. Iniabot nito sa nakalahad niyang palad ang mga iyon.

Kasyang-kasya lang ang kamay niya sa hawakan ng punyal, ang talim ay kalahating dangkal lang. Ang sheath niyon ay improvised din, yari sa tinahing pira-pirasong leather. Inalis niya iyon sa lalagyan at nakitang ang talim ay hindi patas ang tabas sa kabilang side, habang sa kabila ay napakatalas.

Napatingin siya sa babae. Nagmuwestra itong



parang hawak ang patalim na itinusok sa binti, pinaikot, saka hinugot. Ibig-sabihin, ganoon gamitin ang ibinigay nitong armas sa kanya.

“Virathium.”

“W-what?”

“Hawakan mo ang talim.”

Idinaiti niya ang dulo ng daliri sa dulo ng talim. She felt a searing pain that seemed to pierce through her finger, spine, skull. She was sure she was going to die. She saw a drop of her blood on the blade rolling from its tip, down to the base. The red of her blood produced a glow on the blade. She knew instinctively, the dagger was hers forevermore. It will not kill her. It will not hurt her.

Paglingon niya sa babae ay nakita niyang malayo na ito sa kanya. Agad niyang binalot ang patalim at itinago sa bulsang malalim. Naisip niyang sundan ang babae kahit ayaw nito. She had no choice. Pero mayamaya lang ay hindi na



niya makita ang mga bakas nito. There were literally no more footprints on the snow. They vanished just like that.

Sinakmal ng takot ang kanyang dibdib. She was in the middle of the woods and it was getting dark. She was hungry, thirsty, tired, aching all over, and didn't know which way to go. Gusto na niyang umiyak pero hindi ginawa dahil alam niyang kapag bumagsak ang kanyang mga luha ay hindi na iyon maaangat pa.

Find shelter, her mind told her. Tumingala siya. Kung pagbabasehan ang posisyon ng araw sa langit, mayroon pa siyang dalawang oras bago tuluyang dumilim. She knew the woods had foxes, wolves, and bears. She had to find a place to stay for the night. But where?!

Huminto siya para mag-isip, kahit napakahirap gawin ganoong nanghihina na ang tuhod niya. Kailan ba siya huling kumain? Hindi siya gutumin at kung ganito ang nararamdaman



niya, malamang ay kahapon pa siya huling kumain.

Her mind quickly estimated where she was from where she had been. Thankfully, she was great with directions. Mabilis din siyang magsaulo ng mga mapa. Pagdating sa direksiyon ay hindi siya naliligaw. Her ex told her she was some sort of map and directions savant. She was also great with distances and math. Iyon ang isa sa mga dahilan kung bakit maganda palagi ang fit ng mga gown na ginagawa niya. What better way to use her talent but to survive?

Salamat sa sinabi ng babae kanina, alam niya ang direksiyong tatahakin, kahit hindi alam kung gaano pa kalayo ang mga nabanggit nitong bayan. For now, she needed to find food and shelter.

She kept walking until she found a tree with an underbrush so thick that it could be used as a shelter. Mababa man iyon ay malalim at mahaba.



Patong-patong ang mga lumagong sanga ng underbrush at sa ibabaw ay mayroong niyebe.

Kinalkal niya ang loob niyon at biglang napatili nang mayroong lumipad na mga ibon palabas. Napatihaya siya sa lupa at napanganga nang makitang parang nakatitig sa kanya ang ibon. Mukha iyong kalapati pero doble ang laki. Her survival instinct took over. She grabbed the bird and snapped its neck.

Just like that, the bird was dead.

And just like that, she knew exactly what to do.

Lumayo siya sa underbrush na tutulugan. She cleaned the bird with her dagger like a butcher would. She no longer questioned how she was able to do all this. As far as she was concerned, she would survive the night, as long as no wolves would eat her. She will have “chicken” dinner and though she felt bad about the bird, she did not regret surviving.



Hindi pa nagtagal ay may dressed “chicken” na siya. All this could have been hilarious if it weren’t for the looming threat of death. Napakadaming maaaring maging dahilan ng kanyang kamatayan. Kung hindi mga mababangis na hayop, hypothermia, at pagkagutom kung hindi siya makakalabas sa kakahuyan agad at wala na siyang matiyempuhan na pagkain.

She had to get out of the woods tomorrow. Walang plan B. Dahil kung hindi siya makakapunta sa lugar kung saan makakapaghanap siya ng impormasyon tungkol sa Dream Dancer, mananatili siya sa lugar na iyon. God, if this place was created by her mind, her imagination was a lot more creative than she thought. Hindi lang niya maintindihan kung paano nangyari ang lahat ng ito dahil minsan ay narinig niya sa kung saang podcast na lahat daw ng karakter na lumulutang sa panaginip ng isang



tao ay nakita na nito.

The black woman was probably a model.

Amani was probably a model, too.

But all the slaves? Napanood niya ba sa kung saang pelikula? How about the chimera?

“Oh, right,” sambit niya nang maalalang dumalo siya ng prosthetics convention noong minsan. Still, she couldn’t remember any forked tongue darting in and out of anyone’s mouth.

What about this bird? Where have I seen this before? And this place? Lord knows I haven’t been in any place like this before.

The worst thing about this whole ordeal was the fact that she had no idea about... anything! Ang alam lang niya ay naka-survive siya kahit paano. Pero hindi niya alam kung hanggang kailan. At ni hindi niya alam kung paano sisimulang hanapin ang Dream Dancer.

She sighed and kept on working on dinner and her survival. Ginamit niya ang flint para



paapuyin ang mga sangang nilikom sa hinukay na butas sa yelo. She was able to make fire quite easily. Itinusok niya sa isang stick ang ibon at ipinatong sa dalawang sticks na inilubog sa snow.

“Andok’s,” bulong niya. And then she laughed and laughed until tears were falling down her cheeks. And then the laughter turned into sobs. She was soon sobbing like a baby. Nabaliw na yata siya.

Or maybe not because as soon as she saw the bird was going to burn, she rotated the stick. She was not going to waste food she had no idea how she was able to fucking catch with her fucking bare hands!

This must be a dream. It's the only explanation. Maybe I have never had a dream as long as this one, but I have never slept as long before if I'm in a coma. I have to find that Dream Dancer before Mom pulls the plug.

She felt a pain in her chest knowing that her



mother would give up on her. Of course, her mother would, so she needed to get back before they decided to end her life.

With that, she felt reenergized, even before she started eating her dinner. The bird was surprisingly tasty, its meat as soft as chicken but tasted more like beef. Nang makatapos ay naghagilap siya ng dahon kung saan puwedeng tunawin ang yelo sa puno para ilagay sa canteen niya.

She checked her shelter for the night. What do you know, there were eggs inside of it. May breakfast na siya.

Sinapinan niya ang sahig niyon ng dahon. Surprisingly, she felt warm. The bird's meat was warm to the body. Parang noong una siyang nakakain ng venison at lamb. Good then. She just hoped it will last her until morning. If not, the fire she was going to build should help.

Bago lumatag ang dilim ay nakagawa na siya



ng apoy malapit sa kanyang tulugan. Tinakpan niya ng dahon ang pintuan ng tulugan gamit ang mga tuyong sanga. She fell asleep almost instantly.

She must have slept for at least three hours because when she was awakened by a cold breeze, the bonfire she thought would keep her warm until morning was gone. Wala na rin ang tabing ng kanyang shelter kaya siya pinasok ng malamig na simoy ng hangin. It was brighter than she expected outside the shelter though, even for a full moon.

Nakadapa siya sa kutsong mga dahon at sanga. Babangon sana siya ngunit may nakitang mga anino sa labas. Tatlong pares ng asul na mga mata ang tumutok sa gawi niya. The creatures were moving silently under the moonlight. She could make out what they were. Wolves.

Alam niyang kung mananatili siyang nakadapa sa kinaroroonan ay walang magiging



buwelo ang kanyang galaw. How the hell can she defend herself like that? Oo nga at sa palagay niya ay hindi siya makakalaban nang sabayan pero kahit paano ay mas may chance siya kung babangon siya. They already saw her anyway.

Marahang-marahan at habang hindi inaalis ang tingin sa mga lobo ay pumihit siya. No quick movements, just smooth and slow ones. Natatakot siya na baka naririnig na ng mga ito ang lakas ng tibok ng kanyang puso. She had been controlling even her breaths. Finally, she was upright. Nakatiyad siya ng upo, marahang inaabot ang kutsilyo sa kanyang bulsa habang nakatingin sa mga lobo. She wished they would just go away. Mukha ring hindi sigurado ang mga ito kung lalapit ba sa kanya o ano.

Oh, no! she thought when one of them slowly started walking toward her.

Who's a good boy? She was terrified. Hindi pa niya naaabot ang kanyang patalim dahil natakot



siyang gumalaw lalo. Hindi ba, ang sabi nila ay hindi raw dapat gagalaw para hindi habulin ng aso? And dogs came from wolves, right? In fact, dogs are domesticated wolves... right? Hindi na niya alam! Shit, she was so scared she could feel tears falling down her cheeks.

Lalo pang lumapit ang isang lobo. She could smell its breath and fur now—wet dog aroma, but stronger. It was three feet away from her. Yumuko ang lobo, naghandang lundagin siya. Kung masasakmal siya niyon ay katapusan na niya. There was no way to fight off three wolves.

But she had to try.