

LIGAYA

Immanuel Canicosa

1.

The Warehouse

Ligaya couldn't tell where the voices were coming from. At least, not exactly. And the blindfold offered neither hints nor comfort. It only allowed her to see slivers of light coming from overhead as the sounds continued in the darkness. They seemed to flow from both near and far, reverberating and bouncing off the ceiling and walls, growing louder one moment, only to fade in the next.

She was sure they were coming from a short distance to her right, only to hear another from behind her. It was a man's voice, deep, grating, not unlike a buzzsaw laboring through an unyielding block of wood. It said something about how they should wait for orders before doing anything rash. He didn't say where the orders would come from, and whoever he was talking to didn't bother to respond.

Ligaya heard the man's heavy footsteps as he approached her, then felt something brush her hands. "The rope's secure," the voice said, and she realized that both her hands were bound and tied behind her back. She tried moving them, but all it did was constrict them more, and move the chair where she was seated. The man was right, she thought. The rope *was* secure.

The sound of the chair against the floor alerted one of the men, who shouted that she shouldn't try to escape if she wants to stay alive. His voice was indistinct, maybe due to distance, but Ligaya knew it was different from the one who checked the ropes. It was high-pitched and seemed to come from someone younger. He said that he has a gun and isn't afraid to use it. That was when the other voice boomed from behind her, saying that he shouldn't be making any threats.

"Why not?" the high-pitched voice asked.

"Boss needs her alive, or did you forget?"

"Of course I know that. I was just trying to scare her a little."

That seemed to end their discussion, as the man behind her only answered with a grunt as his heavy footsteps receded. Ligaya heard another set of footsteps fade in the distance. Then the irritating sound of metal scraping on metal cut through all other sounds, ending with a heavy thud followed by prolonged silence. A metal shutter, she thought as she moved her head in its direction. An old one. Whoever those men were, they had left her alone, at least for the time being.

The sound of the metal shutter was like the howling of a wounded beast. She recalled that it was that sound that first woke her up and gave her a pounding headache. Whether that was just a few minutes or many hours ago, she wasn't sure. All she could remember was waking up blindfolded, her hands and feet bound, with no idea of where she was or how she got there.

Ligaya was so focused on trying to free her hands that she forgot about her headache. She remembered fragments of memories, pictures of moments, out of sequence. They swam in and out of focus when she tried to recall them. *There was a wedding.* That's the only thing she was sure of, the one occurrence all the pictures seemed to suggest. There was a large garden, a lot of flowers, and a white wedding gown, the kind she always imagined herself wearing.

There was also Fernando, smiling as he stood at the altar. Ligaya remembered preparing and getting dressed for the wedding, but not the wedding itself. She tried recalling the rest of it, but the pictures of her memories were grains of sand that slipped through her fingers. If I did get married, I'm sure I'll remember it, she thought while fighting off another bout with the headache.

Suddenly, Ligaya heard the rumble of a car engine. It grew louder. She heard a door open and slam shut followed by footsteps and the sound of the metal shutter opening. She winced as the grating sound seemed to fill every crevice of wherever it was they were keeping her. As the footsteps became louder, she heard a woman berate the men. Was she the boss one of them had referred to?

"I told you not to kill her," the voice said, and she heard the men mumble in protest, saying that they hadn't and that she was probably just asleep.

"Wake her up, then," the woman insisted. "She needs to see this."

Ligaya wanted to hear the woman once more, as she sounded familiar. She had the strange feeling in the pit of her stomach that the face

that owns that voice would be in one of the memories that she was vainly trying to recall. But as she strained her ears, one of the men approached and removed her blindfold.

“Not who you were expecting?” the woman asked in mock surprise. “I’m sorry, but you won’t be seeing Fernando for a while.”

The place where she was being held was still mostly dark, but Ligaya was able to make out some of the features of the woman’s face, which *did* look familiar. The woman approached, her high heels tapping loudly on the cement floor, and stopped just in front of her. She wore a black dress and clutched a black purse, and was fumbling for something inside it.

“I’m sorry about this, Ligaya,” the woman said haltingly as she continued to look inside her purse. “But I do have a gift for you.”

Without the blindfold, Ligaya felt beads of sweat on her forehead as they slowly trickled down her lips like drops of rain on a window. Only it wasn’t just sweat, because the coppery taste of blood was unmistakable on her tongue. The woman took out something from her purse. She felt a mounting dread as she wondered what it might be.

“Best wishes, Ligaya,” the woman said, her voice tinged with child-like glee, her lips curled into a wicked smile. With both hands she pushed something into Ligaya’s face that forced the latter to recoil instinctively. But it wasn’t anything that could harm her. It was only a mirror. And as she stared at her reflection, the woman that stared back at her was wearing a wedding gown that might have been white once, had bruises on her cheeks, and dried blood from a cut on her forehead.

2.

The Writers’ Room

Kevin told himself that he wasn’t going to log on to Facebook until he finished a few more pages, but he couldn’t help it. He was now mindlessly scrolling through his newsfeed, past his friends’ dinners, living rooms, and political opinions, unsure of what he was looking for. He kept scrolling, wondering, not for the first time, why he didn’t know most of the people on his supposed friends’ list, and why someone he met at a party once five years ago had to keep seeing what was happening in his life today.

Kevin kept scrolling until the people in the pictures began to look familiar and tapped on one of the pictures. It was one of his cousins, smiling while having dinner with his other relatives. Of course. It's Tita Pinky's birthday today, he thought as he zoomed in on their pictures, which showed almost everyone from his mother's side of the family, seated around the dining room table. Even his parents were there, beaming. There was a large assortment of food laid out on a long table before them.

Why didn't they bother to tell me? he wondered, as he put his phone down. The thought had come unbidden, and was followed by another, one even less comforting: they probably did, and he just forgot that there was supposed to be another family gathering tonight. And Kevin had attended enough of them to know that the topics of their conversations usually focused on the ones who weren't present.

His parents would understand, of course. Especially his mother, who had likely told Tita Pinky and everyone who would listen (and even some who wouldn't) all about her son's fancy TV job. Most of them were already familiar with his work, as *Humadlang Man Ang Langit* was still the country's top-rating *teleserye*, despite what the other networks' ratings seemed to suggest. It was Kevin's mother who understood more than most.

She understood why he needed to be on the earliest bus ride to Manila and only went home in the small hours of the morning. She understood why he had to miss family gatherings, and was always the one who answered questions from their relatives about the nature of his work. In fact, the only thing she didn't understand was that he isn't supposed to tell her what will happen in the next episodes.

"Will Ligaya end up with Fernando, *anak*?" she would ask whenever she found him typing away at his laptop at home, usually after preparing his favorite meals. "Or does she end up with Miguel? I sure hope it's Fernando."

"You know I can't tell you, *nanay*," he would say in the most patient tone he could muster.

Kevin remembered those times with his mother as he stared at the blinking cursor on his laptop, at the empty pages that still needed to be filled with words. Family, Sir Felix, the show's head writer, had told him once, is something that can never be replaced, not by money or success. Which is why you should always put them first, he had added, putting a hand on his shoulder.

But that was then and this is now. While Kevin found his words reassuring at the time, he came to realize that Sir Felix, like most people, was a man of contradictions. The Sir Felix who told him to put his family first was the same Sir Felix who told him that he couldn't go home until he finished the draft of the script for the next episode.

The Sir Felix who said that he was open to accepting new ideas was the same Sir Felix who didn't listen when Kevin told him that they couldn't do amnesia anymore, because Ligaya had already had amnesia thrice, and that two afternoon soaps also had lead characters suffering from amnesia. How many people in real life suffer from amnesia, anyway? Kevin was all of twenty-five years old, but he couldn't think of one.

Kevin *did* end up including his suggestion of having Ingrid shove a mirror in Ligaya's face to reveal the extent of her latest scheme, the same one that ruined her wedding and pushed her to the brink of sanity. At least that was something he could tell his mother after she watched the next episode. He wondered what his parents were doing now. Were they still on their way home from Tita Pinky's? Or were they already fast asleep at home?

"Will Ligaya make it out of this one?" he recalled his mother asking him just before he left for the office. Maybe she's in their living room right now, waiting for him to get home so she can ask the same question. He wanted to reassure her and say that yes, of course she'll make it, she always has and always will. But not before being put through hell first.

Instead he smiled and kissed her on the cheek and said that he'll be home late as usual. He was just about to enter his car when he heard her say, "That poor girl has already been through so much," before turning back and closing their gate. "She has," he wanted to answer, but his mother had gone back into the house. He chewed on what she had said on his drive to the office, and again as words began to fill the page in front of him.

3.

The Warehouse

The woman introduced herself as Ingrid, although Ligaya somehow knew who she was even before she did. One of the men switched on a light above them, although it made little difference. The warehouse was mostly

empty save for a few unopened crates, wooden planks, and rusty corrugated iron sheets. Grass had grown inside some of the cracks on the floor, and every step they made seemed to create a small dust storm.

The pain in her head had subsided to a dull ache, and the blood had dried and stopped trickling down her face. Ligaya almost didn't recognize herself when Ingrid had thrust a mirror into her face. Her hair covered part of her face. She had cuts and bruises on her arm. Her wedding gown was torn in some places, but she realized that it was the same one she had been saving up for.

Ingrid was now brandishing a gun, and taunting Ligaya. She still couldn't recall exactly what happened on her wedding day and how she had gotten here. Ingrid, however, was more than willing to fill in the gaps in Ligaya's memory. She was supposed to be married to Fernando that day, Ingrid revealed, until she was kidnapped by her hired guns. Fernando and Miguel tried to stop them, but they, like the police and everyone else, arrived too late.

"I know they're planning to rescue you," Ingrid said as she paced to and fro, her hands on her hips. "But I've prepared something for them." She snapped her fingers, and the men wearing denim jackets walked over to the crates on one side of the warehouse and opened one with a crowbar. They took a second to stare at its contents, then lifted it and disappeared behind the metal shutter.

"What's that?"

"Don't worry, you'll see," Ingrid said while turning her attention back to Ligaya. "I wouldn't try to escape if I were you, or else you'll miss the fireworks."

The metal shutter rattled again and the men returned, and opened another crate. One of them wiped the sweat on his forehead before they took the crate outside.

"I can't believe my scheme finally worked," Ingrid said, sounding a tad incredulous.

"Finally? Have you done this before?"

"You really can't remember?" Ingrid replied, flashing a smile bereft of any warmth. "I've done this so many times I've lost count."

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” Ingrid’s expression changed from confusion to disdain. She walked over to Ligaya, her feet stomping like a soldier on parade, and pressed two fingers on the cut on the latter’s forehead. The pain returned until it was all she could feel. Tears blinded her eyes.

“Because you ruined my life. That’s why.”

How can I ruin someone else’s life when I don’t even remember mine? Ligaya thought as she battled another bout of pain. She tried recalling what happened before her wedding. But nothing in the fragments of her memory revealed anything about Ingrid. They only gave her a sense of foreboding that wouldn’t go away, and intensified whenever their eyes met.

“What happened?” Ingrid said, as if she had seen her face for the first time. “Is that any way to prepare for your wedding? We need to fix you up.”

She once again fumbled inside her purse, and Ligaya’s initial dreadful thought was that she would finally use the gun that she brandished like a piece of jewelry. If she wanted me dead, they would have done it earlier, she thought as Ingrid began to remove the contents of her purse. When she faced Ligaya again, she was holding a lipstick, makeup powder, and the mirror she had used earlier.

“You shouldn’t move, Ligaya, I don’t want to mess this up,” Ingrid said as she continued applying the makeup powder on Ligaya’s face.

When she noticed that Ligaya indeed stopped struggling, she paused for a moment, a hint of suspicion written on her face. That was when Ligaya lunged at Ingrid with what was left of her strength, sending them both crashing to the floor in a heap, with Ligaya on top of Ingrid, and the metal chair, still attached to Ligaya by the ropes, on top of them.

The crash apparently alerted Ingrid’s men, who quickly pulled her away from Ligaya. When Ingrid stood up, Ligaya saw that Ingrid’s dress was ruined and the contents of the purse scattered on the floor. The mirror had shattered into many shards that shone like precious stones from afar. She smiled at the thought that she had at least spoiled one part of Ingrid’s plan. Ingrid’s men set her chair upright and checked the ropes to make sure her hands were still tied.

Ingrid continued to wipe the dust off her dress, and she seemed unsure of what to do. When she moved toward the shutter, the men followed her, and Ligaya heard the sound of a gate rattling down. The sound of a car engine came to life and filled the air until it was out of earshot.

In the darkness of the warehouse, Ligaya couldn't help but smile. You're not the only one with a plan, she thought as her hands started to move. The ropes still constricted her, but she was able to move enough to produce something she had taken and hidden from Ingrid's men. It shone in the dark like a piece of jewelry. Slowly, she began using it to cut the ropes.

4.

The Writers' Room—

Kevin didn't know how long he'd been typing, but he realized it must have been a while when Sir Felix entered the office, which meant that it was past midnight.

"I can never get used to how cold this room is," Felix said, getting into a black jacket before walking over to the younger man. He smelled of cigarettes and held a cup of coffee in one hand. Sir Felix had gone to the show's taping location in Bulacan, and had promised to return to the office to help Kevin finish the scripts. They were due to start filming the warehouse sequences soon, and everyone—from the director, producers, and the cast, including Alexa Trinidad, the actress playing Ligaya—needed copies of the script.

Kevin focused on writing the sequences set in the warehouse, but he had worked with Sir Felix long enough to know that most of what he wrote wouldn't see the light of day. Not with him hovering over his shoulder like a watchful bird. After all, the show's producers and directors had determined every twist and turn in Ligaya's life well in advance, right until her wedding with Fernando. Their only purpose was to make sure it happens. The powers-that-be had already passed the sentence on her and the other characters. They were only there to swing the sword.

The air-conditioner's low hum provided no comfort, and he found himself instinctively tugging at his jacket to try to shield himself from the cold, to no avail. Should I add more lines of dialogue between Ligaya

and Ingrid? he asked himself as Sir Felix read the pages, his face betraying nothing about his thoughts. He was about to drift off to sleep when Felix stirred and cleared his throat, before saying, "Having Ingrid apply the make-up on Ligaya was a nice touch."

"Sir?"

"Come on, you heard me," Sir Felix said firmly. "This is nicely done."

Kevin learned a lot from the brain-stormers, writers, and other staff on the show. But one thing they didn't tell him was how to take a compliment from one of the creators of the country's top-rating *teleserye*.

"But—" Sir Felix began, and Kevin knew that he should have known there would be a but at the end of that statement. Of course. Nothing ever came on a silver platter from him, not even compliments. "You shouldn't let her escape so easily."

Kevin turned to look at Sir Felix, and the latter must have read the confusion on his face, because he put a hand on Kevin's shoulder. Whether it was made to reassure him, or if he simply needed an arm rest and his shoulder happened to be the most convenient option, Kevin didn't know.

"Ingrid has to capture Ligaya when she tries to escape. We need her to stay in that warehouse a little longer. And it has to be Fernando who rescues her. She can't just escape on her own, Kevin, we already talked about this," Sir Felix said, the exasperation palpable in his voice.

"Didn't Fernando rescue her many times before?" Kevin asked. He knew that this was true, and that he had done it exactly three times before. Fernando had rescued Ligaya from their family home that Ingrid tried to burn, from a car that Ingrid tried to crash, and from another warehouse after she was also kidnapped by Ingrid in one of their earlier episodes. Why would they want to trod on the same well-travelled paths in the story they were telling?

"It always has to be Fernando."

"Why?"

"Because she needs him and it's what the bosses want, Kevin," Sir Felix said, his voice rising, and Kevin knew that that was the end of that discussion if he wanted to keep working with Sir Felix, and if he wanted his mother to be able to keep telling their relatives that her only son was privileged enough to work on *Humadlang Man Ang Langit*.

“I’m going downstairs for a smoke,” Sir Felix said, after a long silence that hung over them like a dark cloud. Just before he headed to the door, he turned to Kevin and said, “Take a break when you’re done with the kidnapping sequences. But be quick. As I always say, ‘Inspiration has to find you working. Those pages aren’t going to write themselves.’”

Of all the words of wisdom that Sir Felix liked to hand out unsolicited, that was his favorite and the one employees were most likely to hear on their first day of work. He *did* always say it. And it was true, of course, but that didn’t make it any less irksome to hear.

Kevin cracked his knuckles and examined the last sequence he wrote before Sir Felix arrived. Ligaya is still alone in the warehouse, trying to cut through the ropes that bind her hands. But he knew that this escape attempt would have to be futile, since they had already planned more sequences of Ingrid making Ligaya’s life more difficult. As if she hadn’t done enough of that, he thought, remembering his mother’s words.

He checked his watch and saw that it was almost three in the morning. He had ignored his grumbling stomach for a while, but now, he felt that he needed to grab something to eat, so he headed downstairs to a convenience store. Kevin particularly dreaded revising pages that he wrote, and having a post-midnight snack was one way to put it off, at least for a while.

Inside one of the many rooms in the office building, serenaded by the hum of the air-conditioning and the occasional sound of a vehicle darting past the mostly empty roads, was the computer, the only source of light in the room. The monitor displayed a document, and near the bottom of the screen was an unfinished sentence, the last one Kevin had written.

At the end of the sentence was the cursor, blinking like a timer on a hidden explosive.

LIGAYA ESCAPES...|

5.

The Warehouse

She didn’t notice it at first, but as she cut through the ropes with the shard from Ingrid’s broken mirror, Ligaya also made accidental cuts on her hands. But Ingrid and her men could be back soon, she figured, and a few

cuts were the least of her worries at the moment.

The shard wasn't as sharp as Ligaya had hoped, and the blood made her hands slippery. It took her a while before she felt the ropes loosen. This allowed her to get a better grip on the shard and cut faster. The warehouse was silent, and she could hear the sound of the wind rustling outside.

When the ropes became loose enough to free her hands, she quickly removed them and began working on the ones that tied her legs to the chair. This was when Ligaya saw what the shard had done to her hands. The cuts were all over her palms like a strange pattern of red lines. The ropes around her feet were thicker and more difficult to untie, but she was eventually able to free herself and move.

Ligaya struggled to her feet, using the metal chair to steady herself. She tore part of her wedding dress and used it to dab at the blood on her hands. The dress barely resembled the one she remembered trying on... Was that only yesterday or a hundred years ago? I have bigger problems than a ruined dress, she thought, heading toward the metal shutter.

It took all her strength to even move the shutter. She felt her back and knees ache as she strained to lift the steel. Maybe this is why Ingrid hired two men, Ligaya thought as she remembered how they lifted it with ease. She tried peeking through one of its holes, but couldn't see anything. Eventually, it started to budge. The metal groaned in protest, but she was soon able to roll the shutter high enough to allow herself to get to the other side.

The sky outside was almost as dark as the warehouse. There were buildings and other tall structures nearby that loomed around it, but they all seemed abandoned. There was a road that trailed off into the darkness. It had cracks in many places, but parts of it were covered by leaves and dirt. Ligaya didn't know what awaited her on the other side, but it was better than going back into the warehouse or hiding in the nearby structures.

Ligaya started down the road, taking a few unsteady steps before removing her wedding shoes that had long been caked with dirt. She hadn't gone very far when her bare feet felt the ground shake and the leaves and dirt on the road begin to move. The sound of an engine roared from behind her, growing louder, as a pair of headlights pierced the darkness.

Ligaya broke into a run, as fast as her feet allowed. She wasn't sure if the car behind her contained Ingrid and her men, or other people, but she didn't want to wait to find out.

6.

The Writers' Room

There weren't a lot of establishments next to their office building, and most of the restaurants in the nearby areas were already closed. Kevin didn't want to buy the same processed food from the convenience store across the street, but he didn't really have a choice. He remembered his mother's warnings about looking after himself and eating healthy meals, as he ate a reheated rice meal.

The store was empty save for him and a couple of clerks idling on the counter. Over the radio, a young woman was getting advice regarding a relationship from an elderly DJ, who seemed mostly interested in finding different ways of telling her that whatever problems she was having were entirely her fault. Kevin was finishing his meal when he saw Sir Felix on the other side of the street, smoking on the steps near the side entrance of the building.

The store window offered an unobstructed view of his boss, blocked only by the occasional passing vehicle breaking its monotony. What could he be thinking right now? Kevin wondered.

His own thoughts were with the family gathering that he could have attended, and the food his relatives had for dinner. What other things did Sir Felix and the people in charge have planned for Ligaya?

With *Humadlang Man Ang Langit* running for more than a year, they had already done almost everything he thought they could do to her, and even some that he hadn't. Even if Ligaya were to marry and start a family with Fernando, her baby could be switched with someone else's at birth, or Ingrid could kidnap the child. "I'm sure they've already thought of something," Kevin mused. He watched Sir Felix throw his cigarette butt to the ground, and crush it under one shoe, before heading back into the building.

7.

The Warehouse

When Ligaya finally stopped, she didn't know where she was, or how long she had been running. All she knew was that the sound of the

engine had died behind her some time ago and that she had time to at least catch her breath. But with the vehicle gone, it meant that there was nothing to help her see where she was going. But she still continued down the road, because she knew that stumbling blindly in the darkness was better than being caught by Ingrid and her men.

She didn't know why the vehicle had stopped pursuing her, but she knew that Ingrid wouldn't just give up the chase. What did she say? "I've done this so many times I've lost count." If this was the only one of her schemes that actually succeeded, she would want to make sure it stays that way. Ligaya still couldn't remember why Ingrid felt that way about her, or what those schemes were, but she couldn't deny the anger she saw on the other woman's face.

Ingrid had mentioned something about Fernando and the police trying to prevent her from being kidnapped. Maybe they're on their way to the warehouse, she thought, pausing to look back at the stretch of the road from where she came. But she saw no indication that there was anyone there, not even the vehicle that had pursued her earlier. Her feet were sore from running, and her head and hands still hurt from her wounds and her bruises. But Ligaya knew she had to keep going.

There was a turn on the road that she almost missed, and Ligaya made out tall structures and lights in the distance. It was the first sign that she was actually getting somewhere, and it was all she needed to continue walking, her bare feet almost making no sound on the asphalt. She heard the sound of speeding vehicles ahead, and wondered if she was walking toward a highway. Better a highway than that warehouse, she thought, until she noticed the sound of one engine drowning out all the others.

Ligaya's senses were dull with exhaustion. She couldn't tell if the sound of the engine was in front or behind her. But when she saw a pair of headlights shine on the road ahead, she understood what she needed to do. The vehicle swiftly cut the distance between them, and she heard the unmistakable voice of Ingrid shouting at one of her men to drive faster.

The structures and lights were getting closer, and the end of the road began to take form. All that mattered to Ligaya was putting one foot in front of the other as fast as she could. She didn't notice that the structures ahead had lights inside their windows, or that the road was lined with streetlights

and that there were occasional passing vehicles. Even the pavement had changed. The cracks, dust, and dried leaves that crackled underfoot had been replaced by smooth black asphalt.

Ligaya failed to notice the shifting landscape, only that most of the establishments were closed for the night. The only structure that seemed to be open was a building that towered above all others, and had a side entrance with its lights on. I need to hide, she thought, and ran toward the building, unmindful of a white sedan that slammed on its brakes as it almost hit her. The woman on the passenger side pointed. She looked bewildered.

“Alexa? Alexa Trinidad?” Ligaya heard the woman say before the sedan drove away.

Who is that, Ligaya asked herself as she entered the building. Is she also someone who will get married? The side entrance was empty save for a security guard fast asleep at his desk. She needed to get as far away from Ingrid and her men as possible. For Ligaya, that meant forgetting the numbing pain in her feet and climbing to the top of the building.

8.

The Writers' Room

Ligaya felt the cold air-conditioning as soon as she entered the building's side entrance. It accompanied her as she ascended the stairs and reached the top floor. There were large windows overlooking the street below, but she didn't see any sign of Ingrid or her men. I doubt they'll find me here, she said to herself, as she examined the hallway. The walls were lined with posters of movies and TV shows, but she knew none of them.

There were two doors facing her. One of them was locked. The other was at the far end of the hallway, also adorned with unfamiliar posters. Ligaya approached the door and heard the sound of a machine whirring on the other side. There was a small window on the door, and she could see a faint light coming from inside. But as she reached the end of the hallway, she saw a poster she immediately recognized.

It was a picture of herself and Fernando, locked in a close embrace, with Miguel looking at them longingly from behind. Placed above them was

Ingrid, looming like a giant with her arms crossed and a smirk on her lips. Below, the words “HUMADLANG MAN ANG LANGIT” were written in a large, beautiful script, along with the names of people she didn’t recognize in a smaller font. Why is my face on a poster? she thought with increasing dread, and for a moment she forgot about escaping from Ingrid’s clutches.

The machine continued to hum behind the door, the only sound on the entire floor. There had to be someone operating that machine, she thought.

The room was somehow colder than the hallway, and Ligaya shuddered as she stepped inside. It was almost as dark as the warehouse, but she could make out that it was full of computers and framed posters hanging on its walls, although she couldn’t see if her face was on any of them. The only source of light came from the monitor of one of the computers, which was the only one being used.

A man was seated in front of the computer, his back turned to Ligaya, looking so intently at the screen that he didn’t seem to notice her. He was wearing a black jacket, and for a moment she imagined he could be one of Ingrid’s men. But he looked to be middle-aged, and didn’t seem to have their intimidating physique. The machine she heard was a printer that churned out page after page that the man gathered and tucked under one arm.

A similar pile of pages was neatly stacked on a table in the center of the room. Next to it was a half-empty pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a cup of coffee. The man waited for more pages to be printed and occasionally scanned the monitor as the papers he held in his hands grew thicker. After he took out a few more pages from the printer, the man got up from his seat to put them on the table and came face to face with Ligaya.

He gave her a confused look. “Alexa? Is that you? It’s me, Felix. I know it’s dark but it’s—”

“Alexa?” That name again, Ligaya thought, remembering the woman in the car.

“What happened? Are you shooting the warehouse sequences already? But I still have the scripts,” he said, waving the stack of pages in front of Ligaya.

“Sequences?”

“Yes, the sequences,” the man said, trying to maintain his composure. But Ligaya could feel that the calm demeanor he was trying to project was slowly crumbling, and underneath it he seemed as bewildered as she was. “But aren’t you supposed to be taping right now?”

“Why is my face on one of those posters? And why do you keep calling me Alexa?”

“Well of course your face is on a poster! It’s everywhere! Or did you forget—” Whatever the man wanted to say was lost in the maelstrom of his thoughts. His expression of confusion and mild annoyance was replaced by astonishment. Behind him, the printer spat out page after page.

“What’s that script you were talking about?”

“No, no, no. It can’t be!” the man said, ignoring Ligaya’s question. The smell of cigarettes was even stronger now that she was standing close to him.

“Am I in that script?” she asked once more. The man took one step forward, and then another, forcing Ligaya to move back.

“I don’t know how you got here, but you need to go back,” he said sternly. It sounded like an order rather than a request. “Back to wherever it is you came from.”

“I can’t,” Ligaya said in a small voice that didn’t sound like her own. “She’ll kill me.”

“She won’t, because we won’t let her. That’s not how your story ends.”

“But I can’t go back. Not after what I’ve been through.”

“You have to. You’re not supposed to be here,” the man said as he took another step towards her. “We’re not done telling your story.”

“What’s in that script?” Ligaya said in a stronger voice, which surprised the man enough to make him back off.

“It’s what happens next, or what was supposed to happen next,” he said after a moment’s silence.

The man took a couple of more steps backward. He was close to the computer, allowing Ligaya to take the stack of papers on the table. She put them under one arm and motioned for the man to give her the pages in his hands. But he shook his head.

“I don’t want to have to do this,” she said, and took out from the folds of her skirt an object which shone in the dark like a precious stone. She held it in front of the man and motioned for him to hand over the additional pages.

“Please don’t hurt me,” the man said raising one arm, his veneer of composure shattered. “We just write what they tell us.”

The man moved toward the table and placed the pile of papers, which was almost as thick as the one Ligaya held in her hands.

“Erase everything you have about me,” she said, and used the shard from Ingrid’s mirror to point at the computer. The man looked at the monitor and at her for a second, as if he didn’t understand. But Ligaya knew that he did, and when she took a step forward and the shard glinted in the light of the monitor, he almost ran back and began rapidly clicking and typing on the computer. But she knew he could just as likely be copying or saving the files, so she watched as he quickly deleted one document after another. At one point she saw the man look at her incredulously, as if he still didn’t believe she was actually there.

“Please don’t take them, we’re already behind schedule,” he said after she took the pages and made sure all the files were deleted. The man held both hands out, as if simply asking for them would change her mind. She took a page from the pile and scanned its contents by the light of the monitor. Written on it were scenes set at the warehouse, containing exactly what Ingrid had said to her and how she had reacted, as well as the actions of Ingrid’s men.

Ligaya took the stack of pages and carried them under one arm. There were so many pages that it looked like one of those textbooks that medical students carry around all the time. Here is everything I was supposed to do and everything that was supposed to happen to me, she thought as she moved to the door.

When the man made a move toward the table, she pointed the shard from Ingrid’s mirror at him. He should know how sharp this is, she thought as she saw him move a few steps back. He had both his hands on his face and kept shaking his head, mumbling something repeatedly that she couldn’t hear. Ligaya thought he might shout for help, but he knew they were the only ones on the floor. The only one who could help him was the security guard who was fast asleep many floors below.

After she had left the room, Ligaya wasn't sure if the man would try to go after her, so she used one of the posters to block the door, the same one which showed her and Fernando embracing. Before she descended the stairs, she stopped to look at the windows and the street below, which was still quiet. She looked at the pile of papers, and just the thought of carrying them all the way downstairs made her arms and legs ache. Why do I even need these, she asked herself as she shifted the weight of the pages in her hands.

She looked out at the windows, and felt the warm air on her cheeks. Then, without hesitation, Ligaya flung one of the pages out the window, and watched it tremble in the air and fall like a leaf from a dying tree. She did it again, and again, until the stack of papers in her arm thinned and finally disappeared. A multitude of papers danced in the air as they fell to the ground in slow motion.

Ligaya examined the road that stretched out as far as her eyes would permit. The road that was being covered with the white pages. She could go anywhere without worrying about Ingrid or her men. She didn't know where to go. But somehow, as she took the steps that would take her out of the building and into the city, she felt comfort in not knowing. She hadn't felt this way in a long time.

In her head she heard the man's last words before she left the room, words she didn't believe. They were spoken not as a threat, but in the voice of someone who was tasting defeat: "You can't go. There's nothing for you out there."

9.

The Office Building

Kevin had started smoking a month after he started working for the show, and it was Sir Felix who first convinced him to try it. When Sir Felix talked him into it, it didn't sound like someone convincing him to try something for the first time. It sounded more like a doctor giving him a prescription. I probably smoke more than him now, Kevin thought. He lit another cigarette. He was standing just outside the side entrance to their building, the same spot where he had seen Sir Felix smoking earlier.

Kevin wondered what Sir Kevin could be doing to the script. After all, Sir Felix attended all the meetings with the producers, directors, and

executives, and knew where they wanted the story to go. Kevin was still thinking of how he would change the script when he saw the first piece of paper fall from the sky. It was followed by another, then another. He looked up and saw that the sky was filled with pieces of paper like a flock of birds in flight. Where are they coming from? he wondered as one of them fell to the road and was crushed by a speeding van.

It reminded him of the first time he had seen snow when they spent Christmas in the US back when he was a child. You never really forget the first time you saw snow, he thought as he stared at the sky. He was still looking at the pieces of paper when a figure emerged from the building. Kevin could see her out of the corner of his eye. It was a woman wearing a white dress who walked slowly out into the road, almost unmindful of the occasional passing vehicle.

There was something familiar about her, about the way she looked, about the way the white dress shone when it caught the light. She was barefoot, and her footsteps made no sound as she crossed to the other side of the empty road, past a building, and out of sight. Before Kevin could approach her, she was gone, like a mirage or a bit of mist that lifted in the morning. It must have been nothing, he said to himself. My eyes are tired.

Kevin scanned the road again but didn't find any trace of the woman. The pieces of paper had stopped falling from the sky, but the ground in front of the building was full of them, like the morning after the first fall of snow. He sighed and crushed what remained of his cigarette under his shoe and went back inside. After all, the first few streaks of the sun were already lighting up the sky. And as Sir Felix always said, inspiration had to find him working. Those pages aren't going to write themselves.