

And Then There Were Four

“Huh?”

Papa scratches his head. It’s that fat, annoying, slime-shaped person again talking inside the television. Even his ill-fitted barong can’t figure out the shape it should take. He’s holding a stick, pointing and mumbling at the blocks of colors projected on the screen.

“Can you turn up the volume? I can’t understand anything,” Tita Kris tells Papa. He complies right away.

The volume’s getting louder, but the fat bastard is still incomprehensible if not worse. It’s like his chin is crushing the words forming in his throat before they can hope to escape his fat lips. Certain words manage to come out, but they’re so mangled that we have to pick up and piece them together ourselves, then figure out the rest of what he’s saying through context clues.

“Lockdown? Did he just say lockdown?” Tita Kris bolts up from the couch and snatches the remote from Papa’s hands. She heads closer to the television. Are the words clearer from where she’s standing? Not according to that creased up face.

“*Tangina*,” Tito Felipe curses from behind. “It’s already Christmas next week! Why not do this next year? *Bwisit!*”

“They say there’s a new variant.” Papa is checking his phone. His eyes squint against the light. “Omega variant, they’re calling it.”

“*Putangina*, how many variants have we had already? Is this ever going to end? It’s the same shit every six months!”

“Shh! Don’t curse in front of the kids!” Mama hisses at him. The scent of coconut lotion is making me drowsy.

“Who’s here? It’s only Aloy!” Tito Felipe looks at me. “Why are you still awake, ha? It’s almost midnight! Go to sleep already.”

“Hoy!” Tita Kris scowls at us. It’s always scary when she glares at us like that. “Can you all keep quiet? I’m already having a hard time listening to this baboon talk and you guys are sitting there, quacking like ducks in front of a picnic!”

The room is awash by a wave of silence. I don’t think I’m alone in thinking that Tita Kris is *terrifying*. Terrifying in a commanding way. Like a ringmaster controlling us by the crack of her whip. She looks back at the television, and we all follow her lead. Papa leans his body forward, while Mama sits on the armrest beside him. I can hear Tito Felipe’s slippers shuffling against the floor. He’s probably headed outside to sneak a smoke. Kuya June’s still outside, I think? Maybe he’ll meet him there.

I try to close my eyes and zero in on what this fat bastard on TV is trying to say. Lockdown. Yeah, you’ve said that already. Mega... something. A bunch of letters. Can’t they get someone else for this job? Literally anyone who can read a teleprompter can do better than this. Okay, I heard NCR. What are we in? Damn it. Alert level... what? He’s starting to list restrictions. What’s new? Don’t go out unless you have to. Did he just say quarantine pass? So we’re back to that. No quarantine pass? God, he’s incomprehensible *and* confusing. What did he just say?

“*Ha?!!*” Tita Kris exclaims. My face probably looks as puzzled as hers looks right now. I must’ve misheard that, right? “Are they serious? Four people per household?”

I turn to Mama and Papa and they both have the same look of befuddlement drawn across their faces. Figures. So I didn't mishear. Oh, God. If I didn't, then... Unbelievable! Who comes up with this?!

"What's happening?" Tito Felipe emerges from the backdoor. Behind him is Kuya June. They both reek of cigarettes.

"I don't know anymore." Tita Kris's nose wrinkles. "Wash your hands, both of you! What's the alcohol by the door if you're not going to use it?!"

"Okay, okay! No need to get mad about it." Tito Felipe turns back and whispers something to Kuya June.

"Do you think they're serious?" Papa asks. He's looking at Tita Kris, but I'm sure that question is directed to everyone here.

"Better safe than sorry." Tita Kris turns off the television and heaves a long sigh. "*Ay nako!* This government's making my head hurt. As if I already don't have enough *useless* people living in this house."

A nervous laughter echo from behind me. I turn my neck ever so slightly to catch a glimpse of Tito Felipe's hunched back.

"*Hayy,*" Tita Kris exhales another long sigh. "I really do have the worst luck. I thought I can go to the market early in the morning and shop for ingredients in peace. But now, I'm sure that place is going to be jampacked no matter how early I come."

"I can go with you if you want," Mama offers.

"No." Tita Kris spits out the word with so much venom that it leaves a trace of disgust in her face.

Why does Mama keep on trying to ingratiate herself with Tita Kris? Ever since we moved back to Lola Buena's house, Tita Kris has been nothing but unwelcoming towards us—particularly with Mama. I tried asking Papa once why that is, but he just smiled at me and said, "That's just how your Tita Kris is." If she didn't make the best *sinigang na bangus*, I might've grown to resent her. Mama and Papa doesn't have a problem with it, so I shouldn't have, too.

"Bright side is," Tita Kris continues, "this Christmas, I only have to cook for four people instead of thirteen."

"Are we really going to do this?" Papa shifts in his chair and shoots a look of disbelief at Tita Kris.

"You want to get raided by the police? I sure don't."

"Why are we going to get raided by the police?" Tito Felipe rejoins us with Kuya June following him like a shadow. *Phew!* They did not hold back on the alcohol. I can feel my nostrils burn just by sitting here.

Papa starts explaining to him, with a heavy emphasis on the new restrictions.

"Ha?!" Tito Felipe's face turns dark. His eyes dart automatically towards Tita Kris. "How are we going to comply with that?"

"Oh, why are you looking at me? You think the answer's written on my face?" My heart punches through my chest as the hairs on my forearm pickle. It's not me who's on the receiving end of her rage, yet the way she throws her words with so much gravity shakes me to the core even though I'm nowhere near her crosshairs. "I already do everything around here. You want me to think of everything else too? Fine! You freeloaders can draw lots to see who gets to stay. You want that?!"

Tito Felipe has his head down. So does Kuya June. Papa's twiddling his thumb, and Mama stands up from the armrest and heads to the kitchen. No one is daring to speak. Everyone's trying their best to

avoid meeting the deadly gaze of Tita Kris. The fear in the air is so palpable that it feels scary just to breathe it in.

Tita Kris scoffs. “Good-for-nothing. Don’t worry, I’ll come up with something tomorrow. As usual! Just for you!” She storms past us, and Tito Felipe quickly chases after her. I prop myself up on the couch and follow where they are going with my eyes. My view is cutoff by Mama standing akimbo in front of me.

“Aloy, it’s already past midnight. Go to sleep!” I can still hear Tito Felipe’s voice through the thin walls, but the sound is so muffled I can’t make out what he’s saying. If I stay for a little while longer, I might be able to decipher it—just like listening to that fat bastard on TV. But Mama’s intent on not moving until I make my way back to my room. *Hay*. Guess this is where my night ends.

Willy’s hogging my space in the bed. Again. Thank god he’s a heavy sleeper. I carefully push aside his limbs encroaching my area and lie on my side. I wonder what Tita Kris and Tito Felipe are talking about? Or more accurately, what Tito Felipe is telling her while she ignores him? I’m sure she’ll snap at him and that’s going to be the end of it.

Mama’s footsteps are growing louder. Better close my eyes before she catches me. I just hope Willy doesn’t push me off the bed. Again.

**

Ah! Why is it so noisy? What time is it?

“*Hoy!*” The clanging of hollow metals blares into my ears. Then there’s Tita Kris shouting at the top of her lungs. Did I just wake up into a nightmare? “All of you, get off your beds and go down! Quickly!”

Willy’s arm is draped over me. How the hell is he still asleep? My heart’s still in shock and this brat is drooling all over his pillow like nothing happened. Should I wake him up? Might be funnier if I let Tita Kris go back and *she* wakes him up.

I sit up, dislodge Willy’s arms off me, and rub the sleep off my eyes. On the other bed, Kuya George’s also starting to get his bearings. He gets up, snatches the pillow underneath Willy’s head, and whacks it across the back of his head. “*Uy*, wake up! Ma’s going to get mad at us again!” He keeps whacking him until Willy raises his arms in defense from his brother’s assault.

Man, Tita Kris really has her ducks in a row. Even when she’s not around, the very invocation of her name is enough to make people move, as Willy is groggily doing right now. Both Mama and Papa are too nice that even when they try to be strict, it doesn’t have the same gravitas as when Tita Kris barks orders. Maybe that’s why she dislikes them?

There’s a congregation happening downstairs. Ate’s standing by the wall closest to the couch, staring at her phone. Her brows look furrowed as she swipes her thumb upwards against the screen. It’s subtle, but she still moves her lips whenever she reads.

“Do you have any idea what’s going on?” she whispers to me as I stand next to her.

So she hasn’t seen the news. What has she been browsing on her phone then? I bet it’s a Thought Catalog article or an instruction on how to be a girl-boss. She keeps saying that she’ll start a business once this pandemic is over. Don’t check the current events feed, Ate.

“Wait, we’re on lockdown?!”

There you go. At least that validates that what I heard last night wasn’t some sort of fever dream.

“When did they—what?! Why did they announce it so late? Is that why we’re here?”

Christ, Ate, use your inside voice! No need to be so shrill. Everyone's starting to make weird faces at us.

Thankfully, she notices and reverts to a whisper. "Mega Community Lockdown? Such a scary name. I bet they're just running low on acronyms so that's why they called it like that." She continues scrolling down her phone, and her expression instantly sours—the same way my expression and Tita Kris's soured last night. It's the only rational reaction to absurdity. "Is this true? *Baka* this is just a hoax?" She's on Google right now, scrolling down a list of articles. "Oh em... How is this even possible?"

I'm just as lost as you, Ate.

With everyone gathered in one place, it's only now that it dawns upon me how many we are in this house. We've been living here for more than a year, and yet I don't see most of them as often as I'd like to think.

On the couch, Emilia and Ethel are sitting together. Ethel is cooing at her older sister, while Emilia is looking at her nails and pretending that her younger sister doesn't exist. I'm amazed that Ethel is managing to sit still. In the few instances that I see her, she's always running around screaming bloody murder. I'm supposed to be just two years older than her, but I don't recall being that explosive when I was fourteen. This house can be as silent as a crypt, but with Ethel around, it's always a party at a mausoleum. I'm just glad that I don't have to bear the brunt of all that unbridled energy. Poor Emilia.

Mama and Papa are standing a few feet away from us. Papa has his arms crossed, nodding at something while Mama is leaning on his shoulder with an anxious look on her face. They were there yesterday when Tita Kris snapped at everyone—okay, it was just Tito Felipe but it feels like she has a score to settle with everyone. And now, she has called everyone for a meeting. That's just how Tita Kris is, right Papa?

As usual, Tito Tomas is right by the door, standing directly underneath the beam of sunlight entering this house. His gaze is far away, staring at nothing. Is he even aware that Tita Kris called everyone to go here? He's always at the exact spot every morning that this can just be a normal Saturday for him. He might get bewildered once he sees—if he hasn't yet—so many people gathered in the *sala* all at once. I heard Papa once said that routine and a steady dose of sunlight is helpful for his recovery. How recovered can he be if he's standing there every morning like an abandoned mascot?

Next to the TV, there's the reason why we're all here—Tita Kris. She's flanked by Tito Felipe on her left, and Lola Buena on her right. Tita Kris has a mean, crumpled expression etched on her face. I can already tell that we're not here for a jovial family affair. In contrast, Lola Buena is like a saint statue with a serene, can't-be-bothered disposition. She's watching over the two sisters on the couch with a quiet smile. Where does Tita Kris get her dictatorial streak? I can't imagine Lola Buena in her early parental days being as domineering as Tita Kris. Papa's nothing like her and Tito Tomas is—well, Tito Tomas so I'm sure it doesn't run in their family. Maybe it was after marrying Tito Felipe. Here he is beside her with his disheveled hair and a look that can't give more than two craps. He's looking wobbly as hell, too. His eyes are fighting for their lives just to stay open. If he collapsed right there and then, he might bash his head against the corner of the coffee table. Honestly, I don't mind seeing that happen.

Footsteps. *Heavy* footsteps pounding the wooden stairs like a disgruntled horse. Unmistakable. Even though Kuya George isn't big enough to be considered gargantuan, he always plants his foot firmly on the surface whenever he's taking a step. Right behind him is little Willy, his eyes barely open as he holds on to the railing and heads down one step at a time. The sound of his footsteps is masked by his older brother's, though I bet even by itself, it'll still be barely audible. He's not as animated as usual. Still beholden by sleep, I guess. Let's keep it like that.

"Where's June?" Tita Kris asks Tito Felipe. Is he even awake? "*Hoy!*"

Now he is. He almost falls over as he tries to ascertain what place he's in. Too bad. He looks so goddamn clueless. "Where's your *unico hijo*?" Tita Kris asks again. She's not the type who you want asking the same question twice, so get on with it, old man!

"Maybe he's outside. You know, smoking," Tito Felipe answers, almost mumbling.

"What do you want me to do? Get him for you? Fetch him!" Wow, she's not taking any bullshit.

Tito Felipe flinches, his eyes now have some soul in them as he scurries quickly to the backdoor. Someone's snickering, and he definitely hears it. His eyes turn sharp, but where those daggers are pointed, I can't tell. Maybe the snicker came from Willy or Kuya George. It's hard to tell with their backs against me.

Tita Kris snorts and clicks her tongue. "It's so early in the morning and already, that boy is feeling like a prince again. He wants special service, huh? How 'bout you get a job! You're already a grown-ass adult!"

"June! *June*! Come over here! Your mother's looking for you!" Tito Felipe shouts with his head peeking out of the screened door. "Faster! She's already angry!"

Damn right she is.

Kuya June's silhouette passes over the curtained window. He pushes his way through the door, and the metal frame bounces on Tito Felipe's shoulder. "*Uy*, alcohol!" Tito Felipe reminds him.

He moans as he begrudgingly pushes down the pump and squirts some alcohol in his cigarette-laden hand. I look back at Tita Kris. It's hard to tell if she has gotten more irate since her last sermon. Kuya June passes right by me and this time, the alcohol doesn't feel as assaulting as yesterday, though I can still smell a tinge of nicotine on his fingers.

"Thank God, *señorito* is here." Tita Kris ganders at the crowd that she has gathered. "Okay, we're all complete." She clears her throat. "If you don't know yet, we're in a new kind of lockdown starting from Monday 'til next month. This one's a bit different. As usual, you can't go out for unessential reasons. But more to that, they're also limiting the number of people per household into four. There's thirteen of us right now."

"Thirteen?! Is that right?" Tito Felipe starts to mumble our names one by one. "Tomas, June, Willy, Mac, Tonya, George, Emilia, Ethel, Isa, Nanay, Kris... then me. We're only twelve!"

"You forgot Aloy *po*," Ate pipes up.

"Ah, Aloy! I didn't see you there! Better speak up next time! I thought you were a lamp!"

Fuck you. He starts laughing like it's funny. Nobody else thinks it is. Pathetic old man.

Tita Kris rolls her eyes at him. "Stupid oaf. Anyway," she continues, "it's Christmas next week and New Year the week after that. Only four people can celebrate here. The rest will have to find somewhere else to stay. It goes without saying: Nanay's staying because she owns the house, and I'm staying because I'll be cooking our *Noche Buena*. The rest, you'll have to—"

What? Is she serious?

"—earn your place here. There are two—"

Even Willy doesn't get to stay automatically? He's a kid! I bet he has no idea what's happening.

"—spots available. You'll have to win them from everyone else by—"

"Wait, wait," Tito Felipe dares to interrupt her. Tita Kris shoots back a glare so deadly his balls must be shriveling right now. Why are you making her mood worse for everyone? "Why... why am I not included? I'm your husband, for god's sake!"

"Okay. Tell me: how will you contribute to *Noche Buena*?" Shut up, Tito Felipe. That's obviously a trap question. Shut up. Shut up.

"Um... ah! I'll help you! I'll help you cook! Aw!"

"*Hayop ka!*" Damn! That slap cracked the back of his head! Check the old man for a concussion, quickly! Oh boy, even my ears are ringing just listening to that splat. "Twenty-five years! We've been married for twenty-five years! And just *now* you offer to help me cook? *Bwisit ka*. Join the rest of them or get the fuck out of here!" She shoves him away towards Kuya June who catches him before he trips. Tito Felipe is seething like his head is sizzling from where he got hit—I won't be surprised if there's a fresh palmprint brand somewhere in his head. Just look at the grimace on his face! Ah, priceless. "Who else wants to claim that they *deserve* to stay? Ha? I do everything around here, and all you do is eat *my* food, shit on *my* toilet, and make a mess for *me* to clean. I'm *sick* of all you freeloaders! For once in your life, I'm going to make you *earn* the things that you all take for granted."

"How about Mama? She's also—aw!" What the hell are you trying to do, Ate? Mama did the right thing by stopping you. She still has her fingers pinched on Ate's skin above the back of her elbow. Don't fight it, she's just going to pinch you harder! Why don't you get it, Ate? Just look at Mama! She's shaking her head no. That means shut up!

"*Ano*, Isa? You wanna say something?"

"It's nothing, Kris. Don't mind her," Mama says. Her fingers are no longer pinching Ate's skin. "We're all very grateful for the help you've given us."

"*Nako*. As you should! You'll be walking around the street with your children if it weren't for Nanay and me."

Mama quietly retreats and doesn't say anything else. Ate's kneading the part of her arm that Mama has just pinched. "If only Tita knew that Mama's doing all the chores whenever she's not around," she whispers to herself, but loud enough for me to hear. If Tita Kris had heard that... oh boy, she might have jeopardized all of us! Papa's whispering something to Mama as he rubs her shoulders. This one, I can't overhear.

"You all know Trip to Jerusalem, right?" Tita Kris asks the room. I instinctively nod my head. "*Ayan!* You'll play that. Final two gets to stay. Whoever's eliminated has to go up, pack their things, and leave before the day ends. It's not yet lockdown tomorrow, so you have a day to figure out where you'll all go. My God, don't make that my problem anymore. You people need to learn how to get things without it being handed to you on a silver platter. Questions? No? Okay. Clear the *sala* and get ten monobloc chairs outside then bring them in. Quickly!"

**

The stage is set. Or is it more of a playground? Weird to call it that when there's grown men looking visibly hungry for the monobloc chairs in the middle. Especially Tito Felipe. He's cracking his knuckles, stretching his back, and rotating his neck like he's preparing to run a freaking marathon. Ethel's looking pumped up as well. She's one of the favorites to win, in my opinion. I've seen her run and grab things with intense viciousness. She's bound to outrun and outmaneuver everyone of us, especially the older men. They don't look so agile. Kuya June's smoker lungs will probably collapse before he can reach the center. Papa has gout issues so he can't run fast or stand up for a long period of time. Won't be surprised if he's the first one to get eliminated. Willy can probably contest Ethel for being the most agile among the crew, but he looks so out of it. Poor kid. Does he even know what's at stake? What an unfortunate time to be low on energy. I don't know much about Kuya George, but just based on his

hoof-like stomps, he might try to intentionally step on someone's toes and injure them out of the game. I also don't know much about Emilia, but she's tall and thin. She can easily be boxed out. Or maybe she can run as fast as her legs are long. Then there's Mama and Ate. I don't know how they will fare on this one. Same with me. Our family's not exactly known to be athletic types, though Ate's generally very competitive. Maybe that will give her the edge she needs. On the other hand, Mama's a gentle creature. I can't ever imagine her playing rough with the others. Maybe she can use that to her advantage and guilt the others into giving her a seat. Tito Tomas hasn't joined us in the circle. Is he playing? Someone should really tell him. Ah, no, never mind. He's coming over now.

While setting the chairs up earlier, Tita Kris told us to maximize the space and make sure that everyone's as far from the center as possible. "If I see any of you standing closer than where you should be, I'll send you immediately upstairs so don't even try!" she warned us. She doesn't seem like the type of person who would lay out a threat and not deliver, so it's better to err on the side of caution. Everyone seems to think that way as none of us is stepping beyond the masking tape demarcating where we can and can't stand.

"Aloy! Isa! Come here." Papa gestures us to come over. "No matter what happens, we're all sticking together, okay?"

"Remember to take care of each other. Especially you, Isa. Keep an eye on your brother," Mama tells us.

I nod. So does Ate. She has such a staunch, stone-faced resolve etched on her face. She actually looks formidable. Yikes. Well, there are two spots available anyway, so I don't think we have to fight over that. I've seen her will to win—or more accurately, the will to not lose—and that's something I wouldn't want to go against.

Wait, wait. Did Papa just say we'll *all* stick together? But that's impossible, isn't it? Unless we all lose. Does he want us all to lose? 'Cos I don't plan to. And judging by the look on Ate's face, so does she. I don't know about them, but I don't want to spend my Christmas anywhere else but here. It's Christmas, goddamnit! The decorations, the gifts—well, we're probably not doing gifts this year again, but that's beside the point—but most importantly, *the food*. Especially Tita Kris's Cinnamon Chicken. Oh god, it's the only food I want to keep eating ever since I got a taste of it last year. She has never made it again since then, so I'm assuming she only cooks it during Christmas or New Year. Then there's also the other Christmas deserts like *Leche Flan* and refrigerated cake. I love those, especially the way Tita Kris makes them. Her *Leche Flan* is always as syrup-y as possible, and her refrigerated cake is bathed in cream and topped with as many mango slices she can scrape off the skin. These food items come around only once a year, and there's no way in *hell* am I gonna forfeit the opportunity to eat them.

I should feel terrible. I'm choosing food over spending Christmas with my family. But I don't. They're *that* good. Makes me forget that we're in a terrible situation.

Ahh! A long screech almost pierces my eardrums. What the hell is happening?

"Mic test, mic test." Tita Kris pounds the head of the microphone twice. *Ahh!* Another feedback.

"Can everyone hear me?" I nod along with everyone. "Is everyone in place?" Yes. "Alright! It's time to start your. Trip! To! Jerusalem!" She starts cheering off mic. Thank god there's no feedback this time. She's never been this ecstatic over anything before, so seeing this side of her come out, especially at a moment like this, is a very jarring experience.

"Imagine," she starts, "you're all wise kings coming from different parts of the world. But! There are only two camels left that's headed to Jerusalem. Look around! There's eleven of you! Who will be the two wise kings who'll make it to Jerusalem just in time to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ? We'll find out shortly. Nanay!" She points at Lola Buena holding a phone. "Hit it!"

Strings plucking. Bells ringing. I know this.

*Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock.
Jingle bells swing and jingle bells ring.*

Fuck, my heart's pounding.
Looks like Lola Buena's having a fun time.
She's swaying and singing along!

*Snowin' and blowin' up bushels of fun.
Now the jingle hop has begun!*

Damn. I can't get a read when she'll stop.
Everyone's moving so slow. Eyeing those chairs
like vultures.

*Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock.
Jingle bells chime in jingle bell time.*

Why isn't Tito Tomas moving?

*Dancin' and prancin' in Jingle Bell Square
In the frosty air!*

Yo, move!
Someone tell him!
No one?

What a bright time! It's the right—

Oh shit. Straight ahead! Nobody trample me, please! There we go! I'm in. So is Ate. Kuya George almost leaps towards the chair. Christ, I hope it doesn't break. Ethel's in. Emilia's in. Papa's wobbling his way through but he's in. There are no more chairs left! Oh no.

"Tomas!" Tita Kris shouts at the microphone. "You. Are. Eliminated! Let's give him a round of applause, everybody!" She claps her hand while still holding the microphone. *Ahh!* Damn it! The feedback's just getting worse! Nobody else is clapping. Wait, Lola Buena is. She looks so jolly as though we just didn't send someone into the streets for Christmas. Does she even know what the whole point of this is?

"Tomas! Head up now. Go on." Tito Tomas isn't moving. He's seriously checked out. "That, ladies and gentlemen, is what happens when your brain is fried with shabu! *'Wag tularan!'*" Wow. She really went there. That's a little bit mean even for Tita Kris. "Can someone... Ugh, fine. Of course! I'll do it myself. Just wait one minute!"

She puts the microphone right next to the—oh, no, not there!—okay, the microphone is turned off. Good. She walks towards Tito Tomas and places her hand on his shoulder. "Tomas, let's go up, ha? Start packing your things already." He doesn't react, but he's walking forward with Tita Kris. They gingerly make their way up the stairs. One step at a time until they're no longer in sight.

Everyone starts getting off their seat and back to their respective markers. Except for Kuya June. He's still seated, arms crossed and looking *pissed*. "This is bullshit!" He springs out of his chair and kicks it back. None of the chairs tip over, but they're now spread in disarray.

"*Huy!*" Tito Felipe puts a finger on his pursed lips. "She might hear you! Go back here!"

Yeah, Kuya June. Calm down! For once, Tito Felipe is making sense.

"Why are we letting that witch toy with us like this?!"

"June! Just keep quiet!" Boy, the panic on his face is *real*. His eyes are fixed on the gap between the ceiling and the steps, surely hoping that Tita Kris's foot doesn't pop out of there anytime soon. If this is not a testament to how scary Tita Kris is, I'm not sure what is.

"Why should I?! Unlike you, I don't have my balls kept on Ma's purse!"

Ooh! Za-za-zing! But Tito Felipe doesn't look fazed by that insult. Come on, where's your clapback? Nope, he's just watching the staircase. Too late for a response now. You've just proven his point.

A footstep echoes. Tito Felipe swallows. Oh no.

"Why are you airing your grievances when I'm not there? Ha?" Tita Kris stares down Kuya June, but he manages to stand his ground. She takes her time walking towards him, not once breaking eye contact. "Oh, where's your spunk? You called me a witch, right? Tell me more about it. What's so witchy about me? My long nose? The haggard hair? Speak!"

Kuya June keeps his mouth shut. You should've done that earlier. His fists are clenched and shaking. He *needs* to calm down. He tries to keep his head straight, but as soon as Tita Kris gets within a breath's length, he folds and looks at the ground.

Tita Kris scoffs. "I thought so." Everyone has their heads down. It's hard to watch; heck, it's hard to just be *here*. "You know what's worse than being a lazy, useless bum? Being a coward on top of all that. *Everything*, I did for you. All the things that I've sacrificed just for you. All the time I spent on you. And *this* is how you turn out?! What a disappointment."

Kuya June mumbles something.

"Ano? You're gonna say something?"

"I said *fuck you!*" He tackles Tita Kris by the shoulder and walks past her. She remains firm and barely budes. "I'm getting the fuck out of here. I don't need this bullshit. Don't fucking expect me to come back!"

"Oh, thank God! About time you stop depending on me!" she shouts back at him, chasing him until the base of the stairs. "Do me a favor and don't end up a drug addict like your Tito Tomas! You'll get *tokhang*-ed if you don't get your life together!"

Tita Kris stomps her way back into the front and swipes up the microphone. Lola Buena hasn't moved during the entirety of that altercation. She still has her smile on. What's there to smile about?

"Mic check, mic check." She pounds the microphone head again. Thankfully, there's no feedback this time. "Anyone else wants to say something while I'm here?"

Silence. Everyone's trading looks with one another, perhaps trying to prevent whoever's stupid enough to do a repeat of what has just happened.

"Okay. How many are left?" She tips her toes and starts pointing at us one by one, mumbling each number on the microphone. "Make sure there's only eight chairs in the middle. Go!"

Here we go again. With Tito Tomas and Kuya June out of the picture, there's more space for us to move. To walk in circles. To run. But the center has also shrunk. Collisions are going to be more inevitable the longer this game goes on. Ate's focus remains unchanged even after that episode. Papa's rubbing his knees, while Mama's looking around like a lost deer.

"Alright! Is everyone ready?" She looks over us, then points to Lola Buena. "Nanay, play the next song please!"

I like this jazz beat.

You better watch out.

You better not cry.

You better not pout

I'm telling you why.

Lola Buena really likes her Michael Bublé, huh?

*Santa Claus is coming
to town!*

He's making a list.

He's checking it twice.

He's gonna find out who's naughty or nice.

Tito Felipe's walking so slow he's delaying the circle.

Move faster!

*Santa Claus is coming
to town.*

Even Ate's looking annoyed.

Although that can just be her serious face.

He sees you when you're sleeping.

And he knows when you're awake.

He knows if you've been bad or good.

So be good for goodness' sake.

Any second now.

Just run straight ahead.

Oh, you better watch out.

You better not cry.

You better not pout.

I'm telling you why.

Willy seems fully awake now.

When is it gonna stop?

*'Cause Santa Claus is coming
to—*

Go, go, go! Ate breezes through me like the wind, and she's in! Fuck, Tito Felipe's charging towards me. Ha! No, you don't! Okay, now I can breathe. Willy's almost here and—damn! Jesus, is he okay? Tito Felipe just pulled out his chair underneath him! That's your own kid, you dick! Unbelievable. And I'm pretty sure Willy was already sat on that chair, too. Did Tita Kris catch that? If she did, she would've called it out. But she's just watching us.

Willy's on his ass, wailing with increasing intensity while Tito Felipe, his *father*, is laughing at him. "Nonoy," he says to him while mussing his hair, "consider this a lesson. In the real world, if you're not fast enough, someone else is going to take your spot." What the fuck is he talking about? This bastard is laughing maniacally while his son is in pain. God! I hate this old man. Everyone's on their seat. That can only mean...

"Willy! My sweet boy!" Tita Kris shouts at the microphone. "You. Are. Eliminated! Don't cry, *ano ba!* You just fell down. That's nothing! Toughen up, will you?!"

Mama stands up from her chair and picks up Willy whose face is already covered with snot. His cries are only getting louder. "I'll take him upstairs," Mama offers. She whispers something to him that calms him down a bit. His wails are still painful to hear.

"Hoy, Tonya. Don't go spoiling my child. I don't want him growing up soft, you understand?" Mama looks back at Tita Kris and nods. She then walks with him upstairs, his cries dwindling down into snuffles. "It's going to be a tough month for him, for sure. But he needs to appreciate the things we have here. I don't want him growing up like his ungrateful brother. Everyone, give him a round of applause!"

Tito Felipe claps and cheers, making sure he rubs as much salt he can to the wound that he has just opened. Ethel starts clapping too, but not as thunderous as her father's. He's possibly the worst role model any family can have. I hope he goes out on the next round. I can't stand this old man!

We all stand up, and Papa removes one chair from the circle. Eight of us left. Seven chairs to fight for. After the last two rounds, I realize that it's not speed that determines who win. It's reaction time. That's why Ate's always ahead of me—not because she's faster, but because she moves first. Mama has returned and she heads straight to Papa. He's rubbing his knees again. He nods at something that Mama has told him.

"Alright!" Tita Kris is on the microphone once again. Lola Buena's looking relaxed as usual, like she's in a completely different world than us except when the music plays. "You're all doing well so far! You just have to outlast six more people and you'll get to stay here for the next month! If you want extra motivation, remember: that one-month Mega Lockdown isn't guaranteed. It can extend to another month for all we now. You guys ready?!"

"Yeah!" Tito Felipe shouts. Imagine getting revitalized from cheating your son. God.

"Nanay! You know what to do!"

*Santa baby, slip a sable under the tree
for me.
Been an awful good girl.*

*Santa baby,
so hurry down the chimney tonight.*

*Santa baby,
A 54 convertible—*

Papa's limping.

Is his gout acting up?
Even Mama's slowing down.
She looks so worried.

I don't think Ate notices it.
She's focused as usual.

Ah, fuck! How can Ate react this quickly?! She's already seated. Emilia and Ethel are, too. Phew, okay. I'm safe. The song must've been one of Lola Buena's least favorite. I thought that was gonna go on for a little longer. Kuya George is seated. So is Tito Felipe. The bastard. There's still one seat left. Oh.

"Papa!" Ate springs out of her chair and rushes towards Papa, who's on the floor clutching his knee. The grimace in his face tells the entire story. Mama's beside him, trying to help him up.

"Go back to your chair!" Papa barks at Ate. He turns to Mama. "You too. There's still a chair available. Come on! I'm fine, I swe—aah!"

"I'm staying with you." Mama drapes Papa's arm around her shoulders and slowly lifts him up. Should I go there and help them? "Isa. Do what your father tells you. Go back to your chair."

"But Papa—"

"Now!" This is the first time I've heard a sense of urgency in Mama's orders. Her soft voice makes it hard to take her seriously sometimes. Not right now. "Remember what I told you a while ago? Keep an eye on your brother. You two need to stick together, okay? Your father and I—we'll be fine. Knowing that both of you will be safe with your Tita Kris, that's all we need. Can you do that for me?"

I can feel Ate hesitate. But she does turn back and make her way to her seat. Mama struggles to stay upright with Papa's entire weight heavily leaning against her. "Kris," she says, "thank you for your hospitality and everything you've done for us the past year. We're truly grateful. As you can see, my husband can no longer continue. I'll be staying with him."

"Does that mean you're forfeiting?" Tita asks through the microphone.

"Yes. We'll start packing our things upstairs."

"Well, would you look at that! A two-for-one elimination! Give them a round of applause, everyone!" She starts clapping again while still holding the microphone. Tito Felipe's causing a ruckus, going out of his way to be condescending. I *really* hope he goes out on the next round. The rest—except for Ate—are clapping politely. It's no standing ovation. "As consolation, here's a piece of advice: Don't borrow money unless you're sure you can pay it back! *Especial*ly don't borrow from a 5-6! C'mon! Let's not be stupid! Nanay and I might not be as gracious the next time you ask us for help."

Ate runs back to Mama and Papa, who are moving forward at a snail's pace. I follow her.

"I'm okay," Papa tells us. He's seething and gritting his teeth. He's not okay. "Both of you do your best on the following rounds. Your mother can take care of me, so don't worry too much. Just make sure both of you stick together, okay? We'll see you next month."

Mama and Papa make their slow ascent upstairs. Papa's face twitches in pain every time he has to climb a step. Mama's fingers are wrapped tightly around the handrail. They're at such a precarious position that they might tumble down with just a small misstep.

"Let's go back." Ate has already turned around. Shouldn't we stay around for a bit? At least wait for them to get past the stairs? I guess not.

Everyone's at their positions. Tito Felipe is twisting his waist and cocking his neck. Ethel's tugging Emilia's sleeve, while Emilia is trying to deny her that. She looks visibly annoyed. George is doing squats, while Ate is standing still, her eyes set on the chairs. She is *scary* determined. Then there's me, skirting along this game. I just have to react faster than everyone else.

"Final six!" Tita Kris announces through the microphone. "You just have to knock out four more people and you'll get to stay! Are you all ready?" Yes. "Okay. Nanay, music please!"

A lot of these Christmas songs open with string instruments.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas

Everywhere you go

Take a look at the five and ten

It's glistening once again

With candy canes and silver lanes that glow!

Another Bubl  song. Lola Buena's favorite, I suppose.

This should take a while.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas

Toys in every store.

But the prettiest sight to see

is the holly that will be

on your own

front

door.

Kuya George is in front of me.

We're likely to collide.

Please don't bulldoze me.

How cute. Lola Buena's using the phone as a pretend mic.

*A pair of Hopalong boots and a pistol that shoots
is the wish of Barney and Ben. Dolls that'll talk
and will go for a walk is the hope of Janice and—*

Tito Felipe has such a sinister face.

What's he planning this time?

Fuck, that's sudden. Don't look anywhere. Just ahead. Did someone splat? Sounds like a nasty fall. Don't look back! Secure that seat! There we go. Survived another round. What happened to Kuya George?

A resounding laughter ring across the *sala*. Of course it's coming from Tito Felipe. "What's wrong, boy? Having a hard time standing up? Haha!" You can help him, you know. But you won't. Surely, this old man takes some sick delight in seeing his sons in agony.

All the chairs are already occupied. That can only mean...

"George! You. Are. Eliminated!" Tita Kris must've seen what happened, right? I'm one hundred percent sure Tito Felipe pushed him to the floor or something. Just look at his face! He's guilty as sin. "Pick yourself up and stand with dignity!"

"*Yan kase!* Look at where you're running next time, dumbass!" Someone shut this old man up! "Be careful when you go up. Maybe you'll trip again. Haha!"

George's makes it to his feet and dusts himself up. "You're the one who tripped me!"

"Why are you blaming your clumsiness on me? Go up, loser!" Tito Felipe stands up and mockingly extends his arm towards the stairs. This is some father-of-the-year behavior here. "Go on! *Ano*, what are you looking at, ha? Go—"

Oh, shi—motherfucker gets clocked and goes down! That was a heavy right hand. Damn, is he out cold? Okay, he's staggering to his feet. This old man *deserved* it and *then* some. Ooh boy, that punch is going to be a cherished memory. For sure!

"I wish I never get to see you again." George walks away and heads upstairs. What a hero.

"Come back here, you ingrate!" Tito Felipe screams but doesn't bother running after him. His hand is covering the right-half of his face. When he removes it, I hope there's a big black bruise underneath his eye. "You punch like a sissy!"

"Hoy, Felipe!" Tita Kris shouts at him through the microphone. Lola Buena's laughing her ass off. She must've been so satisfied watching that unfold. "*Ano*, can you still participate? Or you want to quit like Mac and Tonya?"

"Hell no!" Tito Felipe snaps. "This is my house, and I'll be staying here for Christmas!"

"Then go back to your position and shut up! And bring a chair with you!"

Whatever fire that's been ignited within Tito Felipe has been smothered just like that.

The only players left are myself, Ate, Tito Felipe, and his two daughters. I wouldn't put it past him if he tries to cripple one of us just to secure a seat. Tita Kris should really penalize him.

"Look at what you did to me!" I hear Emilia shriek from the other side of the *sala*. "My knee's bruised!"

"Huh? That's nothing!" Ethel slaps her on the shoulder.

"Aw! Don't touch me! You're going to bruise me again!"

"Ate, you're such a brat!"

"*Basta!* Don't go anywhere near me later. I won't hesitate to push you!"

Ethel sticks out her tongue while Emilia walks away from her. What is the deal with this family and violence? That's another thing I have to keep an eye on.

"Okay, okay!" Tita Kris is holding the microphone once again. "Wow, there's only five of you left! Very impressive. You gotta fight harder now from here on. Is everyone settled?" Yup. I'm three chairs away from eating that Cinnamon Baked Chicken. Let's get it on. "Nanay, press play!"

Have to keep an eye on Tito Felipe.

*Santa tell me,
if you're really there
Don't make me fall in love again
if he won't be here
next year.*

We'll likely gun for the same chair.
So can Ate.
But why would she?

Wow, Lola Buena's enjoying this.
An instant Ariana Grande fan.

*Santa tell me,
if he really cares.
'Cause I can't give it all away
if he won't be here
next year.*

Ate should be worried about Ethel and Emilia.
They both have that ruthless vibe.

*Feeling Christmas all around
And I'm trying to play it cool
But it's hard to focus when I see him walking
around the—*

My heart's gonna explode.

Shit, shit, shit. Tito Felipe's right on my heels. He might grab me by the collar and pull me back. Who the hell is screaming?! Yes! Okay, I'm part of the final four now. Jesus. Emilia, look out! Boom! Down she goes. Ethel just charged through and tackled her to the ground! Talk about a wrecking ball. And now Ethel's seated. Ate's seated. Tito Felipe is seated. Poor Emilia.

"Emilia! You. Are. Eli—Hey, hey! Stop that!"

"You filthy rat! I'm going to kill you!" Emilia shrieks. This got out of hand real quick. She has just dragged her little sister by the hair off the chair and is not letting go! If this continues, she'll surely rip out a handful of her hair down to the roots! Is anyone gonna stop them?

"Get off me, Princess Sarah!" Ha! Right. Because of her forehead. It's not that funny now, though. Ethel's trying to claw her way out of Emilia's grasp, but her arms are just too short!

"I'll kill you!" Now they're both screaming. It's hard to tell who's got the upper hand at this point. Hard to tell which is worse: this, or the mic feedback. Lola Buena's having a blast, though. This is probably like Pacquiao versus Morales for her.

"Enough!" Tita Kris shouts at the microphone. They're still going at it. Someone should really separate them before—nope, too late. Tita Kris arrives and twists both their ear. The screaming instantly ends, and they both relent their assault on each other. "*Ano*, you want to murder each other? Go ahead! Just do it elsewhere! Emilia, you're eliminated. But you, Ethel. You want to join your sister? I won't stop you! You can be at each other's throat once you're in the streets. I can even give each of you a knife, if you like! What's it gonna be?"

"I want to stay here, Ma," Ethel answers. The high energy that seemed second-nature to her has just been subdued.

"Good." Tita Kris lets go of both their ears. "And you—" she turns to Emilia— "Go upstairs and pack your things. Your sister beat you. Don't bring your makeup kits! At least for a month, stop being a *kikay*! They're still gonna be here when you come back."

"Yes, Ma." Emilia slowly gets up on her feet and drags herself towards the stairs. Poor Emilia. She looks so defeated.

"*Hay*, you're all giving me a massive headache!" Tita Kris heads back in front and grabs the mic. Everyone's already in position. Just waiting for Tita Kris with bated breath. "Final four! Felipe, Ethel, Isa, Aloy. Two of you are going to stay here for Christmas, New Year, and the weeks to come. Who's it going to be?" Me. I'm in too deep now to fall off. I'm sure Ate's thinking of the same. "We'll find out soon. Nanay, play it!"

Any second now.

"Nanay?" Tita Kris heads towards Lola Buena. I can't hear what they're saying. "We're having a bit of a technical issue here..." Tita Kris says on the mic. "Okay! I think our internet just died, so we can't stream on Spotify. Fucking Diverge. It looks like we'll have to wa—What is it, Nanay? Oh! You want them to play Pinoy Henyo?" Lola Buena nods and claps her hands. "*Ayan*, perfect! There are four people left. That's two teams. Whoever wins, stays. Deal?"

The others are nodding their heads. I should too. To be honest, I prefer that over the Trip to Jerusalem. No more running. No more Christmas songs. No more Tito Felipe trying to maim us. And I think we'll shine better here. Ate's pretty smart. I don't think I'm stupid. That should be enough for us to beat this father-daughter team that includes Tito Felipe. Tita Kris might as well hand us the victory.

"For the teams," Tita Kris says on the mic. "We'll have Aloy and Ethel—" Wait, what?—"then Isa and Felipe. Talk amongst yourself who'll answer and who'll guess."

I turn to Ate and shoot her a look. Shouldn't we be teamed up together? She's as puzzled as me.

Ate raises her hand. "Umm, Tita?"

"What is it?"

"Can I be partners with Aloy instead?"

"No." Sharp. Concise. Definitive. That's it. It's going to be me against Ate. There's no changing that now. Crap. "I think I've sacrificed more than enough for you lot. I want to spend the holidays with at least one person from my family. The most deserving one of them. You have a problem with that? Go upstairs then get the hell out of my house." Yep, no chance in hell.

Knowing Ate, she would want to win. She'll just be as competitive—maybe even *more* competitive now that we're on the final stretch. She's the sorest loser I know, and no way is she going to take a dive. Not even for me. Aside from not wanting to lose, what other reason does she have?

Now that I think about it, she might want to lose. But will she? It's hard to get a read on her. She and Tito Felipe are talking now. Let's just assume that she would want to win and start from there.

"Kuya?" Ethel's tugging at the sleeve of my shirt. "Do you want to be the guesser? My mind goes blank when I'm nervous. Tita Tonya also told me that you're very smart!"

Did she now? It's hard to tell whether a mother is sincere when giving out compliments to their children. I nod.

"Alright! We can do this, Kuya!" Ethel raises her hand. Does she want a high five? Okay, then. Appear!

"Both teams ready?" Tita Kris asks through the microphone.

"*Reding-redi!*" Tito Felipe answers.

"Ready!" Ethel answers for both of us.

"Alright! Both teams will have three minutes. Fastest time wins. Let's start with Ethel and Aloy."

Ethel takes a seat and I take the one across her. Tita Kris is behind me. A lump forms on my throat. Having her so close to me is freaking nerve wracking. She tacks something on my forehead. "Can you see it?" No. Oh, you're talking to Ethel. She gives a thumbs up. "Good. Alright. Timer starts... Now!"

"Is it a person?"

"No."

"An object?"

"No."

"Animal?"

"No."

What the fuck is this? "Umm, is it food?"

"Yes!"

Okay, that's one. "Is it sweet?"

"Umm, maybe?"

"Salty?"

"Maybe?"

"Sour?"

"Also maybe."

Okay, this isn't helping. "Uhh, breakfast?"

"Hmm, no."

"Lunch?"

"Maybe?"

"Dinner?"

"Maybe?"

Okay, so a proper meal. Probably served with rice. "Uhh, is this fried?"

"Umm, no. Wait, maybe?"

So which is it? I'm guessing it's a flexible kind of meal. "Meat?"

"Yes!"

Okay, that narrows it down.

"Chicken?"

"Yes! Yes!"

She's getting super antsy. Her hands are gesticulating. I'm close. "Tinola?"

"No!"

"Fried Chicken?"

"No!"

How else do you cook chicken? Damn it! "Chicken fillet?"

"No, no!"

Fuck, I'm super close! I can feel it. Chicken, chicken, chicken. "Chicken Inasal?"

"No!!!"

"Mang Inasal?"

"No!!!"

She's getting pissed. So am I. What the fuck is this?! Ah! Tita Kris is super smart. Of course it is!

"Cinnamon Chicken?"

"No!!!"

That's it. I'm out. There should be more than what I've already mentioned, right? Oh, god. Chicken. Chicken. Chicken. How else do you eat chicken?! Chi-cken. Chi. Ken. "Chicken wings?"

"No!!!"

"Chicken adobo?"

"Yes!!!"

Goddamn it. How long did I take? That felt like forever!

"Impressive! Let's give a round of applause to Aloy and Ethel!" Tita Kris is pounding her microphone. Ethel's jumping in joy, pumping her fists in the air. I don't think I did that well. Shit. Tito Felipe's doing a slow clap, while Ate's just looking at me. I still can't get a read on her! She looks determined, that's for sure. Determined to win? Determined to lose? Ugh. Whatever happens, happens. "Alright! Felipe, Isa. It's your turn!" Looks like she won't be saying the time just yet. "Who's guessing?"

Ate raises her hand. "Me."

"Good choice. My husband's kinda stupid." Tito Felipe chuckles as he sits down. That must hurt for him even a little bit, right?

"There you go. Can you see? Felipe? Felipe!"

"Ah! Yes, ma'am. Yes." Oh, good lord.

Tita Kris pats Ate on the shoulder twice and snorts. "Good luck. You'll need it." The word is *Vigan City*. "Timer starts... Now!"

"Is it a person?"

"Mm, no."

"Animal?"

"Nope."

"An object?"

"Nope."

Ate's throwing her questions like a tennis ball machine. She's in it to win. 90% sure.

"Food?"

"No."

"A place?"

"Yes!"

They're one step closer.

"Umm...local?"

"Yes!"

Okay, that's super narrowed down. We're gonna lose.

"Hmm. Is it famous?"

"Huh? Yes? No? Maybe? I don't know!"

Those are the three options, Tito Felipe. Ate must be fuming right now.

"Is it near?"

"Ah, no."

"Is it in Manila?"

"No!"

"Okay... Region 1?"

"What? I don't know! What's in Region 1?"

This bastard's cheating again. You can only say yes, no, or maybe! Look at Ate. She's visibly pissed.

"Ilocos Norte? Ilocos Sur?"

"No!"

Is that right?

"Pangasinan?"

"No."

"La Union?"

"No."

Is she just going to start listing provinces by region?

"Pagudpod?"

"Ha? No!"

"Uhh, what do you call those... the windmills?"

"No."

Tito Felipe doesn't look like he's trying anymore. C'mon! Ate's doing the best she can with nothing!

"Uhh...San Fernando?"

"Nope."

"Uhh...Laoag?"

"Nope."

"Vigan?"

What?!

"Yes!"

How the hell did she get that?! Tito Felipe looks at Tita Kris. Vigan should already count, right? Tita Kris isn't declaring. That means no. He turns his attention back to Ate. His lips are pursed. His eyes are as urging as they can be. C'mon, Ate. You can do it!

"Uhh...Vigan. Vigan City?"

"Yes!!!"

I still can't believe she got that. She only had... two clues to work with? A place that isn't in Manila. That's literally anywhere. Her genius carried Tito Felipe to the finish line. That's annoying. If she wins—a well-deserved win—Tito Felipe's also going to reap her rewards. For doing practically nothing.

"A-mazing!!!" Even Tita Kris looks impressed. That's not very common. So, who won? "The times are in! And let me tell you, this was a *close* one. One team had a time of one minute and fifty-four seconds. The other had a time of two minutes and one second. The ones who'll get to stay here for the next month are..."

Okay. Breathe. Calm down. Whatever the result is, it's good. It's either me or Ate. Mama and Papa would be happy whoever gets to stay. Aww, but that Cinnamon Chicken. I *really* want it. C'mon, Tita Kris. Enough with the suspense already. Who won?!

"Ethel and Aloy!" I won? "Congratulations! Very well-fought, both of you. Enjoy your stay here." I won! Fuck, yes! And the way Tita Kris said it...sounds like I just got her respect, as well. That's not something she gives to anyone nilly-willy. Oh, but that means...

"As for you. Isa, Felipe. Especially Isa. You're a smart lady. I would've let you stay if five people were allowed. But the rules are the rules. Time to go up—"

"Kris!" Tito Felipe staggers towards her and drops to his knees. His eyes are watery, and his entire face just sums up pathetic. He clasps both his hands and starts pleading. "Kris, please. Let me stay here. I don't want to be away from you. Please! Especially this Christmas! Twenty-five years, Kris. We've spent Christmas together for twenty-five years! Please, I'm begging you." He crouches forward and bows his head on Tita Kris's feet.

"My God, stand up! Have some dignity!" Tito Felipe doesn't budge. "If you don't stand up, I will kick your head off!" He hurries into his feet and pats the dust off both his knees. He wipes the snot drooling off his nostrils and sniffles. A little smile forms on his lips. "Felipe," Tita Kris starts, "I want to look you in the eye when I say this: you're a useless sack of shit and I don't mind if you no longer come back here next month or whenever the lockdown ends. You disgust me, and not a single day passes by that I don't try to remember what I liked about you in the first place. Now, get the hell out of my face and start packing."

Wow. He might've been a dick through and through but watching the way his heart shatter in real-time is gut-wrenching. I feel sorry for the dude. Did he deserve that? Maybe. But the payoff isn't as satisfying as I thought it would be. Crestfallen, Tito Felipe turns and begins trudging towards the stairs.

"Hey, congrats." Ate pulls me in for a hug. She's never hugged me this tight before. "Don't worry. I'll take care of Mama and Papa. You enjoy your stay here." She lets go and wipes her eyes with her forearm. "Take care, okay? I'll see you next month." With one final smile at me, she briskly makes her way up.

"Aloy! Ethel!" Tita Kris calls us, and we immediately come over like good soldiers. "Clean this place up. Put everything back from where they were this morning. I hope you'll both be done before lunch. I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything."

Ethel begins sweeping the floor while I drag the furniture to their original positions. At the corner, Lola Buena is watching over us with a smile etched on her face. Did that smile ever leave her lips? I don't recall a moment where she was frowning.

I can hear the muffled sizzle coming from the kitchen. The aroma of freshly cut pan-seared garlic and onions is leaking through the doorway. It smells lovely. And I can't wait to smell it again this Christmas.