

The Wolf in Kawit Cavite

The gobernadorcillo's house was brimming with guests on the warm evening. He was hosting a party in honor of the great Don Inocencio del Rosario, who had finally returned to the Philippines after years of study in Europe. Don Santos, the gobernadorcillo of Kawit Cavite introduced him to his guests, presenting a tall man whose well-built frame showed underneath the black suit. The man stood in the midst of the flustered visitors dressed in barongs, habits, and sayas. His curly dark brown hair sprung as he lifts his chin, introducing himself as the son of Diego del Rosario. They were awed by this youth, their eyes trained on him as he detailed his exploits from England, to France, to his motherland of Spain, his cheeks twinging pink over the light tan as he spoke. The face of a pure Spaniard. Inocencio was the center of attention in the gobernadorcillo's *caida*, a ring of the most influential guests formed around him. He kissed the hand of the Dominican friar and exchanged courteous greetings with the rest. Some of the less important guests were satisfied taking their comments to the sidelines, whispering behind their hands and engraved fans.

“Que guapo!”

“Muy inteligente tambien!”

“Que hombre tan galante!”

Inocencio smiled at them, followed by a brief nod. He understood why Don Santos had surrounded him with priests and officials, insulares and peninsulares alike, who knew him from his father, the alcalde of Cavite, and who wished to converse with him about business and politics. They were fickle beings, jumping topics like fleas on a

dog: from his father, his studies abroad, back to his father, to business, to the local politics, then back to business, where they offer their ‘favors’, certain they could be of use to him hereafter. But unlike them who were concerned only with such frivolous matters, Inocencio only cared for one thing: Esperanza Santos, his fiancée, betrothed to him since childhood. They had been introduced while their fathers were discussing business, on a brief trip returning to Carmona. Most unfortunate it was when he began his studies abroad, and their communication had ceased. Presently, he was excusing himself politely from the herd, and they relented as he headed out the *sala*, for they knew why he had returned to Kawit first instead of his hometown Carmona.

Inocencio restrained himself from skipping with each step. Grateful to escape the noise, he remained pacing back and forth by the *caida*. Painted images depicting saints lined the walls, John, Bartholomew, the two Apostles, Saint Hubertus, and others watched over him. Disappointment was etched on his face thinking how Esperanza was not *present* earlier to greet him, even though Don Santos assured him his daughter would make her appearance. They had much to talk of his time abroad and he wanted to give her a present: a simple necklace with a cord of black silk an inch thick, drooping with the weight of its pendant: a glittering sapphire cut in the shape of a teardrop, surrounded by diamonds and backed by silver, crafted by a famous jeweler in Paris. It had cost him a small fortune, but no price was too great for the sake of his Esperanza’s happiness. She should know; a few hundred francs was nothing!

The thought of her gratitude filled him with warmth. Oh Esperanza. His pulse quickened at the thought of returning to her graces. Eight long years in Europe, cruel fate

had separated them. Without much of a choice into the matter, he vowed to return a better man—educated, gallant, and strong, while she should have aged like wine, maturing to become a proper wife for him and spend the rest of their days happy in a home with their numerous offspring to come. He touched his breast pocket, containing his precious gift.

“Don Inocencio!” Don Santos’ marched up to him, his boots thudding against wooden floors. Inocencio saw him belly-first, round and pink face second. The handlebars of his moustache twitched with each word he spoke. “What are you doing outside, the party is back there!” He gestured at the caida bustling with noise. “Dinner will begin soon, *mi hijo*, there will be much to eat! Adobo, tinola, *arroz caldo*...” He trailed off expecting Inocencio to yield to the enticement of food. However, Inocencio was no simple beast!

He shook his head. “I yearn for her, Don Santos. Esperanza, *my* Esperanza. I rather not to intrude upon the women’s parlor, so I went to fetch help.”

Don Santos’ face softened like pudding, and he nodded. A sensitive, sensible man. “Of course, of course! How could I forget? Bulan! Bulan!” He shouted. Shortly after, footsteps hurried upstairs and Bulan appeared from the *escalera* across them, short of breath, undoing a cloth wrapped around her forehead to dab at her shining brow.

“Don Santos...” She bowed while her eyes, made larger by her thin face, remained on Inocencio. Like her face, Bulan was a wisp of a woman nearing his age, darker-skinned like most of the servants were, and dressed in a crumpled, old-looking saya. The edges of her skirt were dusted with dirt from outside, and a number of dark

food stains dotted her blouse, explaining the familiar savory scent of adobo she carried with her.

The gobernadorcillo barked orders in a clumsy dialect Inocencio did not bother to comprehend other than mentions of ‘Esperanza’ in it. Bulan’s nods hardly differed from her shaking as hurried past them trailing ‘*opo, opo*’ after her. Don Santos looked displeased with his round nose wrinkled up like a dried prune. “Ah, *indios*,” he muttered. “Forgive the servant, she is skittish as always. N Arrived a few years back, and has yet to change. Rest assured, Don Inocencio, Esperanza will be with you soon. Now, excuse me, I shall attend to the dinner party.”

Don Santos left with the floorboards thudding and creaking behind him. Inocencio only had to wait for a while before Bulan returned. He expected Esperanza, any part of her to appear, a hand, or her dress to be visible, but instead Bulan awkwardly ushering him over to the direction of the parlor. He followed her down the hall, turning until he saw the warm glow of the parlor room emanating from a sparkling chandelier. Inside, a number of women sat on *butacas* and *abaca* settees absorbed in their chatter. Silence spread among them at the sight of Inocencio, replacing their faces with an awestruck expression as he approached. He puffed his chest out, offering a friendly smile and nod. The women turned their heads to one side of the room, where a sigh, then a creak was heard.

Inocencio sucked in a breath through his teeth. There she was, as clear as the sun, her face like stealing the breath from his chest. Esperanza lifted her skirt, the fabric pinched delicately by her hands, so slender and dainty much like the rest of her; with a

trim waist and wide hips accentuated by the skirt which hovered over the floor as she took light steps; almost deliberate in its slowness, teasing him, testing his patience.

Time had matured Esperanza like the finest *Rioja Tempranillo*.

Inocencio was stunned, speechless. *Dios mio*, her face! That alone sent shivers down his spine. He stepped forward, trembling, drawn to her bright eyes, hazel like her father's, and framed by the rich dark hair of her mother; the loose ringlets outlined by the parlor room's warm yellow glow. She wore a lovely dress with a black skirt that shimmered with embroidery of golden flowers and their curling stems, worn with a black *pañuelo* framing her beautiful collarbones and neck, over the translucent piña fabric of the blouse, lending her pale skin an ethereal, otherworldly glow.

Inocencio's palms were sweating, and he stuffed the necklace inside his pocket. His heart beat hard against his chest. All those years spent waiting for her; days and nights spent pining for her existence culminated at this very instant, when fate would bring them back together once more.

"Esperanza," he exhaled. Inocencio swallowed the hard lump in his throat. "I have returned from Europe."

She jerked her fan open, a harsh slapping noise that jolted Bulan from her stupor. Inocencio as well, had straightened upright. Esperanza fanned herself lightly before placing it above her lips, a signal of distaste in the young lady. Her eyes remained firm on his blue ones, and he couldn't help but ask himself if she were transfixed upon them.

"So you have." She said.

Her silvery voice rang like a choir of angels had descended upon him, gracing his ears with their song. “I-I brought you a present, my love. A necklace from Paris, France!” He dug through his pockets, with each passing moment rifling through, worry consumed him for he felt as if the necklace was an insult. For what could he possibly hope to achieve attempting to add more to perfection itself? Nevertheless, he drew out the necklace, presenting it to her. Murmurs of awe came from behind Esperanza. Inocencio crowed with pride at the marvel in his hands.

And yet, Esperanza remained still. She stared at the pendant for a stretch of time, as he spent torturous moments gazing at her fan, attempting to discern her expression . “So you did.” she said, a grimace flashing a second on her face, obscured by the fan.

A realization dawned on Inocencio. Esperanza’s cold behavior was a fault of his! She was upset, and he was a fool for believing a mere necklace could quell her anger after their long years apart. He inhaled deeply, relieved. Truthfully, Esperanza must be restraining herself from jumping into his arms right now into a tight embrace for it had been eight years after all, but he could control himself better than she, and all her restraint amounted to a pout. Adorable, simply adorable!

“Esperanza, Esperanza,” he smirked at her, closing the gap between them. He towered over her and she stepped back, restoring their distance. “May I?”

She looked confused. Raising the necklace to deliver his intent, Inocencio smiled. Her expression turned to acknowledge a request she could not refuse. No woman can! Not with a face like his, and not from her fiance, most of all. Esperanza glanced at him, then back at the parlor where the all women held their breaths in excitement. She looked

at Bulan, and her brows furrowed. Aha! She must have thought the same: if only we were alone! However, it was no obstacle.

“If you must,” she said with less passion than he had hoped. To curtail her own enthusiasm in public, how clever of her!

“My love, your fan is obstructing the way,” he urged .

“If you insist,” Esperanza conceded after some time, sliding the fan closed into a single length over her lips.

Inocencio was growing mad— not with anger, of course, for he could not ever bring himself to anger over his love, but mad with passion! The prickle of his skin was a testament to that. Esperanza was playing games with him, as she was a mastermind at this, for he could never ascertain what it was she desired, yet the pursuit of her whims was a game never to exhaust him. He knew they were both holding back; the prospect of touching one another must be the most tantalizing thing on this earth. Man to woman, lovers to lovers; the thought of even grazing fingertips was to him as sweet as ripe grapes from vineyards in Rioja. He stepped behind her, obscuring the view of the parlor ladies with his back. Esperanza stepped away still, to keep them apart but he leaned down to whisper comforting words to her neck:

“It’s alright my love, they won’t see anything.” He was aware of the modesty women in the Islands subscribed to and ought to protect hers. Though it was undeniable: he relished in her reaction. Why, Esperanza trembled all over! Like a loose leaf quivering on a branch as it yearned to join the wind in jubilee, she was as elated as he! He pulled the necklace to her neck, the heavy pendant brushing over her chest, certainly by

accident, His arms pressed against her shoulders, placing them into the closest approximation of a hug. This limited intimacy after years of separation frustrated him; eliciting the desire to curse at the parlor ladies and at the servant for their mistake of being present.

Unlocking the clasp, he separated the ends of the cord and fastened her neck with the cord. Inocencio gulped as his knuckles brushed against her jaw. He locked the clasp, thankful for her updo which allowed him a full view of her slender, pale neck. Finished, he left her with a tender graze upon her neck.

Esperanza stepped outside of his grasp. She spoke to Bulan in hushed tones and faced him, her eyes fiery. She too felt anger at the norms of their society!

“I will be retreating to my quarters for the night. Good eve, and goodbye.” She turned her heel and began walking away. Bulan followed after her, shooting him a nervous glance before departing with Esperanza.

“Wait, my love-!” Inocencio stopped himself from reaching out. He took a sharp breath and tugged on his blazer with a huff. The ladies at the parlor stared at him in stunned silence that filled his ears. He gave them a sheepish grin, one he was told to charm women across Europe. They were expectedly flustered, and he excused himself after apologizing for Esperanza’s capricious tempers. With Esperanza gone, this party was senseless.

Despite Don Santos’ persuasions, he resolved to leave. Outside the paved streets of Mascardo, Inocencio hailed a *kalesa* to take him to his quarters, a room provided by a distant relative, Don Hermano, third cousin of his father’s and an insulares at that.

Reasoning such a close proximity to his fiance may bring nothing but temptation after such a long reprieve, they suggested Don Hermano's humble estate instead.

His room was one of the best, naturally, filled with imported furniture that had found its way to the Philippines since the Suez Canal had opened.. His father had taken the opportunity to expand their trade business then and provide him an education, and the steamboats made the journey safer and swifter than galley boats. From these ships were the exquisite Oriental rugs and crystal chandeliers from France, and the leather upholstery from Italy which were soon overtaken by his possessions. Lavish and spacious the room was, but appeared rather modest from all the luggage occupying what nooks and crannies they could take fit in: large suitcases stuffed with lavish clothing of European styles and origin: French breeches, Italian-made shoes, English embroidery ; bottles of spirits reserved for celebration (or for a casual drink), and various other knick-knacks he had accumulated over the years abroad. He had only arrived yesterday, after all, and saw no sense to unpack a majority of it, especially when their wedding was six months from now. Changing into his sleepwear, Inocencio laid over the bed and dreamt of Esperanza and her fan, a white length over her lips. Pink like petals, her lips cushioned the length; distance nonexistent between the soft and solid. Warmth welded them together. . The following morning, he woke with a start.

He appeared at their doorstep the following morning, dressed in single-breasted jackets, finished with a bright red Steinkirk cravat, as did the French. Spritzed on his wrists and neck was authentic *Eau de Cologne*; the fragrance wafted around him like a cloud. A servant had met him at the *zaguán*, hastily opening the door. He apologized

profusely, bowing as if a stroke had overtaken his system. Inocencio ignored him and moved past, heading up the *entresuelo*. He looked familiar, though with indios he was never certain; he never paid a single one longer than a second's glance.

“Don Santos?” He called out. “I have invited myself in, if you don't mind!”

He didn't wait long to hear the creak of floorboards. Inocencio hadn't forgotten the formalities of the Islands, pressing the Don's meaty hand on his forehead. The old man welcomed him with a firm (albeit sweaty) handshake afterwards, before leading him to the *sala* where they sat down on the rattan couch. Inocencio scanned his surroundings.

The Santos' *sala* was a place of familiarity and comfort. He had spent a portion of his childhood here in their estate, where he had gotten to know Esperanza. On multiple occasions he had accompanied his father on business trips to acquaint himself early with the duties of the *alcalde mayor*. More often than not he'd end up here in Kawit while his father moved on to the other territories, collecting him a week or so afterwards. Not that he was the slightest put off by that, for he had Esperanza whom back then was all fun and lively. Last night's Esperanza was nothing like he remembered, but this was likening a rosebud to the rose: she had matured, and they would be the better for it. Nevermind her standoffishness at the party! An ounce of complexity completed his perfect lady.

The windows were slid open to allow the summer breeze in, returning memories of his youth to Inocencio. In this *sala* he had first met Esperanza. Here, in a house he could almost call his own, familiarities came easy; he knew exactly where to look. In the corner of the room was a dark stain on the wooden floorboards which persisted no matter the method of cleaning, so they left ornaments there: namely a tall porcelain vase Don

Santos had received from a businessman. He had bumped it once, leaving a chip on its side but after three coats of paint it was invisible at a passing glance. Across it was the painted Virgin Mary, with dust gathering around the frame's edges. The imported glass chandelier, and the grand piano he played for her as a child. These things, the little details, came flooding through; insignificant things he thought had dissipated from memory.

"I'm afraid Esperanza is out for the day," Don Santos said, interrupting his thoughts. "She won't return till noon, as she and her mother are out for the dresses."

"Ah," he was dejected, "if that's the case, then I shall be on my way," he stood up, tugging his coat straight. Don Santos waved him back down.

"Why the rush, my boy? Or should I say, my son-in-law?" He chortled, shoulders quaking. He said 'son-in-law' as if he were practicing. "Slow down, come and take a look around! I'm sure you can spare an hour or so exploring the house and reminiscing. Things have changed, I'm sure you know,"

He recalled Esperanza; how her rounded cheeks from childhood had curved into more delicate features; how she carried herself with an air of dignity and grace unlike the wild child who picked up rhinoceros beetles with her bare hands. "Yes," he said, "things have indeed changed. Then if you don't mind, I shall take a look for myself. Will you be joining me, Don Santos?"

"Heavens no, I'm afraid! I have business to attend to downtown," he said. He glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. "In fact, I must make haste. Well then, my son-in-law," he stood, bringing Inocencio up with him, a hand latched onto his shoulder.

A remarkable grip for an old man. Don Santos paid him a few affectionate pats on the back. “I shall be on my way. If there’s anything you need, anything at all, do not hesitate to ask the servants.”

“Thank you for accommodating me,” Inocencio said, bowing in politeness .

Don Santos chuckled. “Why the formalities? Inocencio, my son-in-law, this is your home too!” Inocencio smiled. The Don was right. He had spent his childhood days here; it had already been his second home. Once Don Santos left, and he made his way through the *sala* and into the *comedor*. A long dining table lined with ornate chairs occupied the center of the room. Cleared of plates and utensils now, but even so memories of eating with the Santos family; while his father attended to their business exporting *tabaco* and *azúcar*. He was fond of their version of *arroz caldo* served with crunchy bits of fried garlic and a slice of *calamansi* on the side. The sharp contrast of savory chicken porridge and the distinct tang of the *calamansi* was unheard of in Europe where their primary spice was salt and herbs. He missed the unique sweetness found only in the Philippines as well: on special occasions they would be served his favorite *espasol*, which he and Esperanza gorged over, chewing the rice cakes with much gusto, licking the toasted flour off their fingertips and patting it all over the tablecloth lest they get scolded for being unkempt. He chuckled to himself, running his fingers over the fine embroidery of the tablecloth.

Next he found himself peeking through the *galeria*, a narrow corridor between the walls of the house and its rooms.. Subject to the searing heat of noontime, it was a space reserved for servants to travel between rooms unnoticed, as they should be, only to

discover later on that Esperanza ran through these corridors because there, where no masters dare step, was nobody to tell her off from bunching up her skirts and running barefoot while panting for breath. What a joy to discover such a thing! He replaced the servant boy that served as her lookout and it was as if he had obtained front-row a front row seat to a private spectacle.

The stage was set. All she needed was a space wide enough to let her run; hidden from the eyes of her parents, and a lookout in case. Nevermind the hot needles of sunbeams piercing through the *capiz*. Nevermind the old dust her feet kicked up thundering over the floorboards. Nevermind the repercussions of being found. Nevermind the boy who was at her behest, choked with breathlessness. Everything else was nonexistent to her once she ran.

He asked her if he could participate in her little game. Surely there must be rules to this running game! She responded with such ferocity, his voice died in his throat. Oh, how difficult it was to swallow that Esperanza wanted to be left alone.

He'd follow her into that hot corridor anyways, knowing her restlessness indoors. Endless summers spent clamped by the humidity, his clothes a moist second skin, witness to the girl's secret. He should have cherished those times more before he decided to tell. Just once, he ran with her and he realized as she pulled ahead with ease how heavy their footsteps were, and he was only being considerate to the floors. The Santosos were the most hospitable people he had ever met, and so he kept a duty to report what could threaten his comfort.

When her parents found out, they had reprimanded her, instructed the servants never to let her back inside the *galeria*, and forced her to carry out a punishment even as she sobbed for forgiveness. He could have defended her back then, but what could he have done? She started it, and he was just a boy, a guest, and they could indulge him all he wanted; father said the discipline of his future wife wasn't his concern. Girls shouldn't run and kick up dust and be untidy.

Inocencio passed the *galeria*. He found the *oratorio* where Esperanza knelt often, veiled head bowed in front of the altar, images and idols of the saints and the crucified Jesus, sharing her misery the times she knelt over crystals of sharp sea salt while her mother listened to her recite prayers of forgiveness until her face was dry and her face no longer anguished. "It's for the best," her father said. "A woman is no use disobedient," His father agreed so he did, too. A sense of pride swelled in his chest being in agreement with the adults, so he held the notion with regard. Esperanza was young, and it was better to start early. Inocencio watched her punishments throughout, and found her most beautiful like that, her gaze unwavering at Christ, and her skirts bunched up in her fists.

He left the *oratorio* and proceeded towards his *cuarto*. To his disappointment, it was locked. He stopped himself calling out to a servant and glanced at the ends of the halls. Turning his heel and grasped the doorknob of the room across his: Esperanza's. He tested the knob before twisting it open in increments, pushing forward, face cringing with each creak of the hinges. With enough allowance he slipped inside, closing the door after him. He sucked in a breath, heart racing as he leaned against the walls.

Even her room was different. A single beam of light from a gap between the windows lit the otherwise dim room. It was no longer the room of a girl, but the room of a *woman*. Gone was her small bed, replaced by four-poster heaped with pillows and their frilly trimmings. Above a fine desk beside the bed, framed collections of taxidermied butterflies and beetles with labels underneath which caught Inocencio's attention. Taxidermy of this sort belonged to universities, typically for the odd students who were fascinated by such disgusting creatures. It appeared Esperanza hadn't shaken off her odd habit regarding insects. Did she go out and collect them by herself? Touching dirt and filthy bugs? He ignored the thought. It must have been a gift, and he admitted their iridescent shells and gossamer wings made for passable decoration. Far more interesting was the desk; he expected a table for receiving guests and for tea, but this desk was of solid mojavite, with pull drawers and carvings decorating its edges. A fine desk, albeit too practical-looking for a woman.

Scattered over the drawers were, peculiarly, papers. Some filled with clumsy and hesitant scrawling, and some with elegant loopy handwriting. He was careful not to touch any of it, merely leaned over to inspect the worst of the bunch. The shoddy script and inkblots were difficult to decipher. He could make out individual letters and syllables, but a legible few caught his attention: 'tuta', 'mangga', 'buan', 'kitsilyo', and 'esperansa'.

He snorted. Was this an attempt at writing? Oh *Esperanza*, so full of surprises! Despite her dainty fingers, she must have held the quills in a vice-like grip to create marks like these. Unbefitting and yet intriguing all the same! He clamped a hand over his

mouth, to squeeze the grin off his face. The attempt was adorable; no doubt she was copying from the letters.

He took his attention away from the papers and pulled open the drawers. Inside were more papers and a spare quill, confirming his suspicions. He opened another, finding various handmade trinkets. Before he could open the third drawer, Inocencio heard the voices of Doña Isabella and Esperanza. He shut the drawers and made sure everything was still in place before slipping out of the room. He moved through the halls in a roundabout fashion before returning to the *sala*, surprising three women: Esperanza, Doña Isabella, and Bulan. He caught them in the midst of their conversation about an *Aling Leal*, their trusted seamstress.

“Oh, good afternoon *mi hijo!* Danilo told us you were inside,” Doña Isabella walked towards him, offering her hand. “It’s been so long!”

“Doña Isabella,” he pressed her hand to his forehead, “good afternoon to you as well,” he said. They hugged, and he felt comfort in her embrace. Esperanza turned her head away from him. Inocencio coughed politely to get her willing attention. “If I may be so bold, *mi amor*, may I invite you for a walk tomorrow morning?”

“A walk! How exciting!” Doña Isabella clapped her hands in delight. “Esperanza, say yes, say yes!”

“Yes.”

Inocencio’s stomach fluttered. “Wonderful!” He grinned. “Then I shall be here tomorrow, at eight in the morning. I can hardly wait!”

Doña Isabella gestured at the *comedor*. “*Mi hijo*, why not join us for lunch? Come tell us of Europe! I hear it’s a lovely place.”

“With pleasure, Doña Isabella,” he said, following after her. Esperanza had this unreadable expression on her face. They held each other’s gaze for a moment that stretched, and Inocencio was caught speechless, dry throat, and wondering what she could have been thinking with her fists clutching her skirt.

“Come, come!”

They broke their stares and followed after the doña.

He spent the rest of the day with them, and he could say with confidence that the Doña adored his presence. How could she not? He was like a son to her, and she loved him like so. He bade them farewell and promised to return the following morning.

And he did, dressed in his European finery. He took the gawks of awe the indios paid him as a positive reaction, not that he needed it. Bulan met him at the door, her voice quick and hushed as if she was withering to dust in his presence. Although she didn’t speak a word of Spanish she understood why his presence was there, and was obedient.

Soon enough, Esperanza was downstairs to meet him. She was dressed much simpler, no more the ornamentals of the party gown, yet her beauty shone in the sun. A scapular rested on her chest and she held a *bayong* in her hands. He could not resist an odd look at her, for the dull woven basket was quite unbecoming. He drew comparison between the fashions of England, with the thick fabrics of women’s dresses and tight corsets sharply defining their waists while in contrast the *saya* was composed of loose-fitting garments meant to catch wind and cool the body. Inocencio couldn’t help

but attempt to scan her figure underneath the gauzy *piña* cloth. She had certainly grown mature.

“*Buenos dias*, Esperanza.” He greeted her with a smile. Esperanza held her open fan over her chest. Bulan held a parasol behind them. “I was under the impression we’d be alone today,” Shooting a glance at the help, he gestured at her to leave. Bulan looked uncertain, her head turning from him to Esperanza, and back to him again.

“She stays, Don Inocencio. Bulan will shade us from the sun. *Bulan*,” Her voice was gentle, like calling out to a puppy. And Bulan relaxed, nodding at her master. She pushed open the parasol, raising it above Esperanza’s head.

“If you insist,” said Inocencio.

They walked through the streets of San Sebastian. The day was bright and the streets were bustling with people, all who recognized Esperanza immediately. They called out to her, greeting her with wide smiles on their faces, asking questions out loud as *indios* usually do. *How are you? How is your mother? Are you well? Who is that man?* Esperanza greeted them back with her light voice, waving her hand at every person who spoke at her.

The two of them stuck out like sore thumbs; though it wasn’t a quality he objected to. Some of the onlookers, the less casual folk, took at the couple and bowed out of respect before scurrying out of their way. Inocencio smiled at a number of women who giggled to themselves. Both storekeepers and passersby greeted Esperanza with respect; a mestiza, the daughter of the *gobnadorcillo*.

Throughout the walk, Inocencio attempted to usher conversation between them. He began with questions asking if she would like to hear more about his studies in Europe, or how often he thought about her, or how he already had plans in mind for their future together. None of which bore any good results. Esperanza wasn't falling for any of his offers, so in an effort to pique her attention at least, he began to talk about Europe.

"It truly is wonderful there, Esperanza," he said. They passed a *sapatero* busy hammering away at a pair of shoes by the street, his finished wares lined up over a woven mat. The old man's forehead gleamed with sweat, holding small, uneven nails between his wrinkled lips, dark brown as the leather he was working. "See that man carelessly pummel away at the shoe? He treats the leather with no respect! Why, respect is an important part of shoemaking. Back in Europe, the shoemakers worked with style and aplomb, my Esperanza. One day we shall have you the finest shoes from *Italia*, the most fashionable designs!"

Esperanza stared at the *sapatero*. She called out to him. "*Mang Honesto! Magandang araw po!*" She waved at him, and he waved back before returning his attention to the shoes. The sun was hotter than Europe, and Inocencio squinted at the road, pulling at his collar. They passed the *sapatero*. This time, he pointed out a waiting *kalesa*. The driver was sitting inside eating *suman*, and the horse gnashed on rice straw from a dirty bucket. The look of disgust was etched onto Inocencio's face.

"That *kalesa* driver here is an insult to the *fiacre* of France. Even in the provinces such as Arles, their horses were majestic and well-fed on apples and jade-green grasses! Not these bone-thin creatures fed the same material of baskets and brooms. Not only that,

but the carriages were ornate with gilded carvings! These are naught but bits of wood hammered together. And! The drivers are well-mannered and knowledgeable folk unlike this *indio*,” he pointed.

“Then,” Esperanza said, “perhaps you should walk home, Don Inocencio, if you are so averse to our rudimentary vehicles. Mang Carding is an excellent coachman.”

Inocencio pulled at his collar once more, swallowing hard. The morning heat must have been getting to him, for a strange gripping sensation occurred in his chest. He refrained from talking against the *indios* for perhaps Esperanza was being courteous, taking care of her image amongst the common folk. So he told her of the other things he had seen in Europe: tall, magnificent buildings such as the Crystal Palace in London, a glass structure made for showing off the greatest British inventions; the elaborately constructed Arc de Triomphe in Paris, and the grand Seville Cathedral in Spain. Though Esperanza was mostly unresponsive, he knew deep down that she was truly listening to his words. Why, there was proof! Once he'd mention an automobile she'd turn to him for a second, then ask a question about how they worked, their size, or how long they ran on their power.

Thinking he could pursue this thread further, he asked her: “Would you like to get on a steamboat somewhere?”

“Perhaps, someday.”

“With me?” He grinned suggestively.

“Ah, Bulan,” she pointed to a nearby stall. A woman was selling mangoes on the side of the road. Large and fragrant, the mangoes were piled up in clumps of bright green

to perfectly ripe gold. Esperanza and Bulan crossed over, Inocencio following after them. The delicate spark of her interest had been snuffed out so easily by a mango vendor! Esperanza greeted the vendor with a smile and had begun to inspect the mangoes when he stepped behind her.

“Have I told you about that time,” he paused, considering what could hold her attention. He remembered the dead insects framed above her desk. He had no insects, but he had something far more interesting. “Where I hunted a *lobo*?”

“...*Lobo*?” She repeated with a cant of her head, and adorable, curious, hazel eyes.

“Yes, a *lobo*, my love! A fearsome animal unfound in the Philippines! I tell you, it is the father of all *perro callejeros* you can find wandering the city! The fearsome creature was in the midst of a prowl while a... friend and I were hunting in the forests of Zamora. Imagine it large, with massive claws,” he raised his fingers, groping at air inches away from her bayong, which she had raised to her chest in fright. “It reached up to here,” he gestured at his waist, “and was longer than a man!” He raised a hand above his head, indicating the length of the ferocious beast. He had Esperanza’s attention, her head turned towards him. Fancy that! The barest hints of a blush adorned her cheeks!

“You see, my good friend Enrique and I were in the forests of the Sierra de la Culebra seeking worthwhile prey. A bear, perhaps? Or a boar? I’ve had foxes and stags before, but that is another tale, my dear.” He smiled.

“What of the wolf?”

His smile widened. “Whilst he and I traversed on horseback, by some miracle we had chanced upon a wolf! Yes, and a large one at that! Why,” he glanced his fiancée

up and down then touched her shoulder, “it was about this tall, yes! Truly, a frightening thing! It stood before a deer carcass it had mercilessly slain, with all its guts and blood and innards strewn about. The largest claws and sharpest teeth I had ever seen! A massive beast with brown fur like the bark of trees, and its eyes of honey-”

“Were you scared?” She interrupted, her eyes wide with intrigue. As it should be!

“More scared than anything *mi amor!* Quickly, I drew my hunting rifle, for it had noticed Ra... No, Enrique and I, but it was too late to run! It lunged for Enrique, digging its sharp jaws into his arm and I had to think fast! I took out my hunting knife, and with no time to lose, I plunged it into its heart. The wolf died in an instant, for I pierced it in one blow.”

Having left Esperanza speechless, the urge to kiss her open mouth reared its head, and his body moved of its own accord to pounce.

“*Lobo... lobo...*” She whispered to herself, mouthing the unfamiliar word as if she would come to know the real thing through repetition alone. . In that moment, the space between them begged to be closed. He inched closer, fixated on the plush of her cupid’s bow lips while oblivious Esperanza’s eyes were cast down, long lashes fluttering with each ‘lobo’. Her lips were full and pink, puckering with each syllable, infiltrating his ears despite the clangor of vendors shouting over one another; despite the clack of rickshaw wheels and horse hooves against stone; despite the buzz of fat black flies swarming the mangoes, , for there remained two beings: man and woman, Inocencio and Esperanza; dissolving into one as the sight of her was consuming him, and only she

remained. How he wished to touch, to caress, to experience her warmth against his skin away from the harsh sun and underneath the cool covers of a bed.

Oh, Esperanza.

“Don Inocencio? Is there something wrong? You are quite red.” Esperanza said, while turned to the vendor, handing the woman an amount of coins, her bayong laden with mangoes.

He snapped out of his trance and blinked. “I... Esperanza, my love,” he wiped his forehead with his palm. Wet. “You were just so breathtaking, and I just—”

Her cold gaze cut through the heat of day. “We have finished the chore of buying mangoes for mother. Thank you for *accompanying* us today, Don Inocencio,” she spoke curtly, turning around before he could say anything. The pair walked off, leaving him by the stall. He watched them cross the street, both women huddled underneath the shade of a single parasol, the bayong barely a barrier between them. A knot formed his stomach. Esperanza approached the kalesa driver, the very same he had treated with disdain.

Inocencio was left staring at the vehicle, the clip-clopping of hooves and the buzzing of flies filling his ears. He must try again.

The week followed a similar fashion. Dressed in his finest, bearing gifts for the family, Inocencio appeared at their doorstep, offering to take Esperanza for a walk in town, or to some other frivolous attraction women tend to like. He was pleased to hear her ‘yes’ each time, though her usual frigid nature meant the duty of entertainment and conversation was relegated to him. Unfortunate as it was, Esperanza insisted on Bulan’s presence to hold the umbrella over her.

It was a cloudy day, perfect for a stroll. He decided to take them downtown. Less smelly than the markets, and away from the noise of the plaza. He still remembered which streets led to where, and he sniffed, seeing that not much had changed in Kawit. They passed a few stores while telling her of this time he and a colleague had participated in a game of croquet, a British sport involving mallets and shooting wooden balls through hoops.

“Splendid sport,” he tells her. “I’m amazing at it.”

She grunted.

“Let’s continue, ” he said, leading them past a store. They kept walking, with nothing but Inocencio’s attempts at conversation to fill the silence. With each block passed he attempted to eke out something more substantial than a hum, or a grunt. O Even a phrase, if he were lucky.. Shouldn’t she fill the void of his absence with her stories? Or at the very least, show an inclination towards his tales for the Esperanza he knew loved such new and interesting things! For what could be more interesting than Europe and croquet? Bugs? He scoffed internally. She should be fawning over his every deed, every achievement he mentioned! She was his future wife! She wasn’t like those horrible stuck-up girls who sneered behind their hands; she was his demure angel, his dear childhood friend of many years and memories, and yet talking to her was like throwing stones in a well: he’d hear the splash, but never see the ripple.

He wanted nothing more than to see her heart flutter, and her skin blush red. He wanted to touch her; shut her in an embrace, and he would have, if it weren’t for the busy

streets. Inocencio turned sharply around a corner, away from the hustle and bustle of the main road.

“Where are we going, *señor*?” Esperanza glanced around.

“You’ll see,” he said. “Come along now, dear.” In fact, their destination was to be left a surprise. A brief silence passed between them. Esperanza stood, defiant, as she remained firm in her position. Aiming to fill the silence but robbed of words, his attention strayed to the red petals of a tall hibiscus shrub beside her, overgrown and untamed in its pot. He plucked a delicate flower and reached to tuck it behind her ear, thinking it would brighten her hair.

She cruelly swat his hand away. The poor flower was swat at the muddy streets, dirty and forlorn. “Don Inocencio!” Her eyes were wide as if scandalized; but if anyone were to be, it should have been him! For what transgression had he caused for her hostility? None!

“My mistake,” he said, crushing the flower with the heel of his shoe, smearing the petals into the wet dirt. Of course, it was his mistake. Esperanza was not to be blamed, for they were outside, and she must have been shy. How indulgent, how callous of him and his lack of consideration for her modesty in the presence of her betrothed. Modesty is, after all, to be admired in women. How fortunate were they to lack spectators for his poor conduct. Once more, to convey his apologies: “Truly my mistake. Shall we?” He grinned and gestured at the streets.

They trudged through the streets all the while Inocencio held his silence in the grip of his fist tucked away in a pocket. Instead, he preoccupied himself with the sights of

Kawit; foregoing the crude shanties lining streets to gaze upon her. Esperanza was no different from before, with a wandering gaze as if looking for something; something worthy of her appraisal, the most interesting things, and interesting people of which he should be the center of her attention yet she had foregone him and stopped in front of a small and shabby storefront, the figure of dilapidation looking like a moldy block of white cheese with its chipped *adobe* walls, and dingy windows missing squares of capiz.

For reasons unbeknownst to him Esperanza made a beeline for the shop, urging Bulan to come hurry alongside her. Left outside in the heat, his clothes sticky with sweat, He followed, taking refuge from the sun under the eaves of the roof. All sorts of knick-knacks and odd things filled the store. Woven chairs, broken clocks, yellowed books, mismatched shoes, and faded toys huddled in a gray pile for sale at a few centavos, or a peso at most. Things nobody would trifle with, and yet there she was, with Bulan in tow; enchanted by the imperfect. . The two spoke in hushed tones, their faces inches apart. Esperanza would point, and Bulan would nod as if her opinion mattered. He scoffed and rolled his eyes.

There was a time they came across a place like this in Carmona when they were younger. Esperanza and her family were visiting, and on a stroll headed for mass, he caught Esperanza staring at a hawker's wheeled cart. Brightly colored toys and trinkets piled over a set of books.. He told Esperanza he could buy the doll for her if she pleased, but she said to him, even while staring so intently at the doll: "No, I don't want it."

Ah, she had always been like that. Always denying herself desire! He supposed such traits had its strengths, but shouldn't she come undone by his hand?

“Señor?” The old clerk called out. “Your companions have left.” he wheezed.

“Where have they gone?”

The old man pointed a gnarled, trembling finger outside. Inocencio searched the streets for any glimpse of her; her hair, or even her umbrella. Without her in his immediate vicinity he thought he must have looked like a fool swinging his head back and forth like a maniac. His impatience swelled with was only until he inspected the tight alleys between the houses did he find them.

Esperanza was misplaced in this alley of dull colors of dirt roads and crumbled rock walls; her colored saya stark against the drab and the ringlets of her long hair illuminated by the sunlight that fell between the buildings; a halo well-deserved. She was grinning, then she was laughing. The sound of her laughter he had longed to hear again; indelible to his memory after all these years. . It was like the chime of church bells; pleasant and ringing, and his attention submitted to Esperanza alone. , Who was he fooling? Esperanza had his complete attention from the start. All his frustrations melted away as he was transfixed by her beauty, and he wanted to immortalize it as an obra maestra in his memory. Inocencio was glued in place, his breath caught in his throat. His ribcage was pounding.

The splendid beauty of it all!

He grit his teeth, sucked in a breath, clenched his fists, and stormed over. All those days spent trying to pry at her shell and all it took was tickling a dirty mutt to bring her joy!

“Esperanza!” He shouted.

She flinched from the puppy being carried by Bulan. Her hands flew behind her skirts as if scalded.

“And you!” He jabbed a finger at Bulan, who nearly dropped the dog, her yelp caught in a choke. “You dare let her touch such a dirty thing!” He raised his hand to strike a blow to the cowering *indio* only to have it stopped by Esperanza. Her nails dug into his wrist.

“Don Inocencio, stop!” She hissed. “Bulan, apologize!”

On the brink of tears, Bulan lowered her head and stuttered out a weak apology. She set the puppy on the ground and it wagged its tail, whining to be picked up again. Inocencio swung his foot and kicked the offensive thing away. It tumbled off with high pitched cries as it picked itself up and limped away. Esperanza cried out. She held her chest like he had kicked *her* instead! She drew in a shaky breath. The corners of her eyes glistened with tears threatening to fall and Inocencio held his breath, anticipating the sweet droplet.

“How could you? It was just a puppy!” A tear slid down her cheek. She looked crushed, but for what? A dirty animal?

He sighed, sated; and quite amused with her simple compassion. “*It,*” he said, “like you said, my love, is *just* a puppy. A dirty one, at that. In fact tomorrow, I shall show you something better! I hope you haven’t forgotten about my dear friend Enrique...” And so he went on, gesturing for them to walk on. How fortunate were they that he would never run out of stories! Once the sun set, he abided by his duty to escort

her home, promising to show her proof of the hunt the following day. For once she seemed enthused!

It filled him with joy until the next day. Eager, with a spring in his step, he arrived at the Santos' residence carrying a large suitcase. The servants knew him at this point, allowing him inside to meet Esperanza. Each footstep of his creaked with the weight of the suitcase, but he refused to have it carried for him, adamant on bearing the weight of his surprise. . Upon the entrance of the parlor, he was stunned once more.

Esperanza was leaning against the window. A gentle breeze billowed her hair, framing her cherubic face as she inhaled. . Her chest rose with each breath while he was robbed of his. Poised with such grace, her hands neatly folded over her lap, carrying her fan, a staple to her appearance. Inocencio wanted to savor each moment of it, but as promised, he was to deliver.

He rapped his knuckles against the doorframe, interrupting the precious scene. Esperanza turned to him, and her face hardened as if reproachful. Was it his tie? His coat? He wore his finest today! .

“Esperanza, buenos di—”

“Don Inocencio.” She said, curt. Her eyes roamed elsewhere, though certainly not on him. “Is that,” she pointed with her fan at the suitcase, “the interesting thing you promised?”

“Yes,” he said. “A most interesting thing indeed. I am sure you will like it. You,” he pointed at Bulan, then wagged his finger at the door.

“Bulan, stay.” Esperanza said.

“My love, I thought we would be alone today, perhaps Bulan could be excused?”

Inocencio suggested with a sheepish grin.

“Bulan remains. She does not understand Spanish, señor.”

“Alright,” he smiled, straining the corners of his lips. “Come, come.” He raised the suitcase while approaching her, then laid it over a table. “Bulan may also take a look, if she wishes to.” He coaxed her over, unlatching the suitcase.

Esperanza approached with hesitation. She stopped a meter short of him, but he paid it no mind. Inocencio flipped the lid over, revealing its contents. There was utmost satisfaction as she gasped aloud, stumbling backwards.

The wolf pelt, a pile of black and brown fur folded on top of each other, topped with the wolf’s head itself. It was large, with sharp triangular ears jutting out despite having been kept inside the suitcase for weeks. A hard muzzle lined with sharp teeth. Gleaming eyes of amber glass, replicated so perfectly they seemed alive when struck by the sunlight, glistening.

“Fear not, my love! For it is dead. This is the wolf Enrique and I hunted! Come close, it won’t bite!”

Hesitant, but curious nonetheless, Esperanza approached the wolf.

“Touch it.”

Her fingers quivered in the air, marked with the same hesitation as she brushed her fingertips on the wolf’s head, before slipping them through its fur, petting it like a dog. Esperanza’s hand trailed further down to feel its scruff. She halted.

“Did you...” She stopped herself and shook her head. She kept stroking the wolf; her eyes smoldering with an expression he couldn’t quite place. Had he finally taken her interest? Overcome with the urge to know, he anticipated any questions or even the most miniscule of remarks from her. When nothing came, he couldn’t even be disappointed. Not one bit! Ah, truly he was helpless. Helpless against her very being. He stood to admire her, lips, long hair, and neck. Desire mounted to kiss every exposed part of her, to trail his fingers over her skin and leave goosebumps in his wake. He edged closer and then, when she stopped petting, took her into a tender embrace, burying his face into her shoulders and her hair. Jasmine! The faint aroma of her skin was intoxicating. Within the reach of his embrace contained a sin in society: contact between two beings meant to be, but nothing, not even God could stop them now. Esperanza was as stiff as a board, shocked without a doubt, at their misdeed, writhing against him to follow his form.

Not a moment spared for them before a pair of treacherous hands tore them apart!

The scrawny servant dared to stand between him and his fiancée! Inocencio grit his teeth. She had been meddling far enough! He struck her, the sound of his palm hitting her flesh like the crack of a whip that sent her toppling to the floor. She held her cheek and whimpered in pain, the insipid, insolent wench!

“How dare you!” He yelled at the trembling mess. Again, he raised his fist to teach the filthy *indio* some manners. Let her know her place was nowhere between them!

Esperanza shoved him aside, preventing him from hitting the *indio* to his surprise. He stumbled against the table. The suitcase slid off the table and onto the floor, wolf pelt spilled with its jaws splayed, the felt tongue lolling out. Inocencio faced her, his

darling fiancée, love of his life and betrothed. He took in a deep inhale, and exhale, inhale, and exhale, to quell the bubbling heat choking his throat.

“What is going on here?!” Don Santos’ voice boomed through the parlor. He was followed by Doña Isabella, his wife.

A hand smacked Inocencio’s cheek. Don Santos and his wife stopped in their tracks. From no other than Esperanza! Her face was red, filled with tears wetting her cheeks and neck. Inocencio wanted her kneeling.

“Esperanza! *Mi hija!*” Doña Isabella cried out. Don Santos stomped to his daughter, wrenching her by the wrist away from Inocencio.

He touched his cheek then flinched, stung like a hot brand had been pressed into his flesh. Hardly anyone had ever hit him. Not even his own father! “Don Santos, is this how you’ve disciplined your daughter?”

Stuttering, at a loss for a response, Don Santos raised his fist to hit her, and she put up her arms in defense, but it was no use; his meaty hands smacking his daughter across the face. Esperanza staggered, a whine of pain escaping through her pursed lips. Don Santos took her by the wrist and began to drag her out of the parlor. “I humbly apologize for my insolent daughter’s misdeeds, Don Inocencio! Worry not, I shall remedy this!”

“Father! Father, no!” Esperanza struggled, digging her heels into the floor but it was no use. Her tears gleamed over her reddened skin, beautiful face wrinkled in a detestable attempt at struggling as Don Santos dragged her away. Doña Isabella was in disarray, pleading for her daughter to give in lest she receive harsher punishment. Bulan

remained sobbing, a crumpled heap on the floor, and the bubbling heat subsided, guilt washing it down, curdling unpleasantly in his stomach, only to rise back up and gather at his throat. Like bile.

He packed away the wolf pelt and returned to his quarters at Don Hermano's, quite at a loss for himself. Esperanza, the love of his life had dared to raise a hand against him! At a loss for an explanation, he excused himself early, isolating himself in his room for the remaining hours of the day, agonizing over her. By evening he had concluded it was his mistake: his absence had robbed her of a positive influence; with her father a bumbling fool and her mother obsessed with frivolities, she was left with the company of the *idios* like that Bulan, and thus adopted their savage mannerisms. Oh poor Esperanza! How could he ever blame her? No matter, with his return she shall be disciplined forthwith!

That night, he would lay in his bed, stewing in his thoughts. Should he trust the Don to correct her, then he'd best oversee. Satisfied with his mental endeavors, his eyes drifted to the wolf pelt consuming the chair with its dark and fuzzy size. A streak of moonlight shining through the gap of the sliding window passed over its head. Its amber eyes stared at him, glistening, the pearl snarl in its open maw directed at him. Its teeth were like blunt daggers but with enough force and brutality could snap a man's neck in a single bite. The hunter told him even if the animal was sedated, such a large specimen may wake up and snap his hand off. Haste then, was essential when skinning the wolf.

In the end his prowess in all manners of the hunt had proven itself. Alas, a fine pelt he had produced! The very same thing keeping vigilance across him. Somehow, it wasn't enough for her. Somehow, despite all his efforts he had come up short. What more was to be demanded of him? He wanted nothing more than her to treat him as he treats her: as a spouse! He deserved it!. So for her sake, he decided, he shall forgive and forget the shameful state she was caught in; her bright red wrists caught in the cruel grip of her father. She could be kneeling in salt at that very moment, reciting prayers until morning, or made to endure a lashing with a thick leather belt. What poor fate! To have such lovely skin sullied.

He closed his eyes, prepared to enter the bliss of sleep. In this tranquil darkness she was there, perfection in a single being. The sun illuminated her face, lips wet with moisture, and her eyes crawling up his arm to gaze at his. The wolf pelt sat on her lap, her fingers crawling through the fur, exploring each nook and cranny, stroking its head over and over and over again, tracing the contours of the wolf skull with a finger, from the nose until her finger dug deep into the back of the skull, and *dios mio* her hands were surely the craft of both St. Joseph and the devil himself, working like tenderly, like the lover's touch he hadn't received. Esperanza stroked the wolf's head while gazing into his eyes, until they were both spent with each other, and it ended with something streaming down her cheeks, her chin. Was it her tears? He knew what it was and slept with the covers kicked aside; the summer nights hot, and the fabric clung to his skin.

Before visiting her the following morning, he wound up in the church. Not after faith or repentance, for his thoughts were accompanied by inaction, but merely to offer

his patronage to the church that would hold his wedding. Though he could hardly stand to remain in such a dilapidated building for long, and so he hailed a kalesa towards Don Santos' house. As Don Santos had promised, Esperanza had been reformed during their succeeding encounters. Bulan, thankfully, was no longer present. Esperanza had also apologized for all her misdemeanors in the past stating that she was merely pouting, playing coy with him, resentful of his years in Europe, confirming his suspicions. As he expected! Her childishness was to blame. Now, having been ironed out, Esperanza was to carry herself befittingly; with the grace of an adult woman. She wore jewelry and perfume; and finer outfits with bright colors and intricate patterns. Her necklace sat between her collarbones, the sapphire becoming an object of envy, though she was oblivious to the envious stares of the commoners. After all, a woman of her standing need not concern herself with the opinions of the lesser folk.

He believed they were truly getting somewhere. As a reward, he purchased a scent bottle of jasmine from one of the merchants as a gift. It was one of those bottles with a circular pump to disperse a cloud of jasmine. Insisting on staying inside for the day, he asked if he could apply some perfume to her.

“If you insist,” she said in her silvery voice. He grinned as she tilted her neck for him. He sprayed a small puff of jasmine on each side of her neck and inhaled deeply. It suited her perfectly, his beautiful love, his woman, *his*. The skin was moistened from the spray, and Inocencio followed a bead of perfume as it traveled down her neck, past her collarbone, before disappearing beneath her pañuelo. He wanted to pull the shawl down and follow it as far as it would go. Goosebumps crawled all over his skin and he must—

he *must* kiss her this instant. Glancing up, he was startled by the anguished expression on her face. Blood dripped from the thin line her tightly pursed lips formed.

Inocencio stood upright, and coughed into his fist. “Er-*hem*. You are correct, my love. We must wait until our marriage. After all, it was only a week standing between us and our official union. No doubt! Our patience is wearing thin, I can see it,” her head bowed to his words, fists clenching tightly the fabric of her skirt. “You and I are the same. We are both waiting, in *need*. I must leave you now, before our temptations get the better of us. Goodbye, my love. Be well for our wedding.” He left her in that parlor, briskly walking outside the house. The sun was setting and *faroleros* were out, igniting street lamps with their flaming rods. He hailed a *kalesa* to the plaza. The horse’s clapping over the paved roads couldn’t drone out the hard thumping against his chest, and again the hot sensation had returned, burning hotter than ever, spreading through his body despite the cool night. The ride was brief and he found himself stumbling towards the church, thinking confession would rid him of this strange affliction. He stopped halfway through the doorway.

The scent of jasmine infiltrated his senses. Sampaguitas! He scanned the area, finding nothing, only strangers surrounding him, and no child vendor held any sampaguitas nearby. The church bell tolled six times, the loud ringing accompanied by a short burst of flapping wings. Inocencio turned left and right in search of the scent until his eyes were drawn into a dark alley. Staggering inside, it led to a dirty street, ending in a doorway. A woman stood before it, wearing a *saya*, without an undershirt; the *piña* fabric helped in no way to cover her bared upper extremities. What struck him the most

was not her shamelessness, a commonality in the streets along the river Seine, but her long hair, much like Esperanza's, and the shape of their face being nearly identical. He could see the face of his fiancée over this *dama de noche*.

“Ah, señor,” she crooned, giving him a ‘come hither’ gesture, waving her shoulders and hips. He swallowed hard and approached. “*Muy guapo señor,*” she said with that Filipino lilt to her voice. She opened the door to him, and Inocencio licked his dry lips, entering with her.

The whore was no *educada*, but she was as pliant as he wanted. She knew how to undo the buttons of a suit and she spoke in broken Spanish phrases, with enough of the accent to make any lesser indio believe it. It would not matter. He placed a finger over her lips and she licked it, like a puppy, silencing her; she would make no noise then, only the softest moans to contribute to their furtive cacophony. He, on the other hand, groaned deeply between the valley of her breasts Esperanza's name. *Esperanza, Esperanza* was nothing more than sullied to him at that moment, and it was infuriating, though he could not blame her, she was perfect and worried for her image; she was raised correctly, disciplined thoroughly; modesty of a saint like when she refused his kiss and clenched her skirts, the same way he clenched the whore's hips. And that spectacle with her bloody lip; pure, pure sport to keep him on his toes, the warm blood, warm sweat, dripping liquids disappear into the rocking, rickety excuse for a bed. *Esperanza, Esperanza*, he moaned again, fingers raking across her back, *Esperanza's* back, who broke her silence with a high-pitched whimper. He bit her neck to stifle her whines to a sharp gasp, and Inocencio, relentless that night, would chase visions of his love, closer and closer with

each thrust until Esperanza was clothed in the white of his conjugal sin at the altars of the church.

The days after the incident of his, Inocencio was a pendulum, swinging between Esperanza and her pliant graces and cold gaze in the hot May summers, then finding his way back into the alley, under the safety of the cool night rocking away on the bed and returning to his room at the crack of dawn a few pesos less. Inocencio was a pendulum, confined to the clock and he was ticking, ticking, ticking. Between the hours of Esperanza and lady of the night, he found he could no longer tell the difference. Esperanza's face would meld into the contorted visage of a whore, and her moaning would fill the silence Esperanza gave him outside of his questions and her mechanic answers. It was lovely, and it was twisted, this construct of her inside his head. His pure lady, the only one he deserved acting like a bitch in heat surrendered to him.

What suddenly came as a surprise, however, was Esperanza. As if obliging his deeper inclinations, her actions had taken towards a coquettish demeanor unlike her usual self. Had she experienced his desire from his dreams? Never had her words been so suggestive! Invitations to her house were like barely-disguised attempts at a more private encounter. Being a man of resolute endurance against temptations, he would always steer the conversation elsewhere for a direct rejection may dissuade her from acting like such a tart. Though, he won't deny her the satisfaction of knowing her... effects on him. He was subtle, like her. When given a lighthearted lecture on her decorum she always denied such actions. Adorable! Women were such capricious things. She'd pout and fluff her cheeks, and yet when she spoke, it was as if she dragged her words to form this enticing

lilt that kept him clinging onto her voice. That pesky modesty of hers was disappearing fast, and sometimes he wanted to apologize for his effect on her, but it gave him deeper gratification to see her attempts at seduction.

Then came a test of decorum. They were informed by Don Santos of an invitation to a party to be held the following evening in celebration of their engagement by a woman named Doña Ramona dela Cruz. She was a widow living off the wealth her husband left when he died years prior, and a friend of Doña Isabella. Likely the party was to curry business between her and the nobles, Inocencio included. Though a simple strategy, he would humor it. At last, an opportunity to show everyone his bond with Esperanza! He could already imagine the praises rolling from their tongues. What a perfect couple! How close they are! Only one could hope to have a love so passionate!

Come that evening they arrived at Doña Ramona's manor together, with locked arms. By far his favorite style of arrangement; having her clinging onto his arm while she, purposefully, pressed her bosom against him. It would have made for the perfect night: being the star of the function, socializing with his fellows, enjoying fine beverages, basking in praises all night, while his love accompanies him.

Had it not been for the maid.

Like worms in an apple, Bulan wormed her way through, acting as if Esperanza needed her assistance. Damn *indios* cannot understand the situation! What manner of assistance would Esperanza possibly need? Someone to straighten the crease of her dress? To tuck a wayward lock of hair behind her ear? To escort her up and down the

stairs? All of which he can do, and gladly so for his love! And yet, adamant in Bulan's necessity, Esperanza urged him to calm down.

"This is between you and I," She said, "Bulan will stay, and come as needed."

He considered her words for a moment, recalling a sharp sting on his hands and cheek.

"Then she better act accordingly," he told her. "Lest something unsightly were to happen."

Once in the vicinity of others, they resumed their usual camaraderie. Nobles left and right greeted and congratulated the, showering praise as Inocencio expected. Doña Ramona was among the first, eager to start conversations. They exchanged greetings: Inocencio pressing her wrinkled brown hands to his forehead after Esperanza. She was dressed in her finest; finely-embroidered blouses and colorful skirts, with shining jewelry displaying her wealth. Rouge colored her lips, though perhaps a bit much. He could almost hear her lips smacking together from the stickiness each time she opened her mouth. She welcomed them both to her abode, gesturing at the line of wealthy guests and the entertainment. They did their part to uphold the niceties, but the Doña made it clear she intended to speak with him alone, frequently pointing out acquaintances of Esperanza whom she must surely greet. So Esperanza did, parting ways with Inocencio.

"So it seems Esperanza had finally straightened herself out," she said. "How does it feel to have conquered her, boy?"

"Pardon?"

Doña Ramona closed her fan against the palm of her hand. The loud sound drew his full attention to her. “She’s quite the rambunctious girl, Don Inocencio. Now, not a single trace of her spark. Funny how quickly one can bring about change.”

“That is correct. Esperanza had quite an unsupervised upbringing, hence her ‘energy,’ if you will. Fortunately her discipline was of no difficult matter.”

She laughed, smacking the fan against her palm. “Yes, yes. Her energy. I miss it. Every day she and that servant of hers would walk the ends of Kawit and back. They would visit me too, and we had a lovely time. Such a shame her walks were cut short.”

Inocencio did not quite understand where she was headed with this. He was about to excuse himself to find Esperanza when Doña Ramona intrigued him with stories of her whilst he was away in Europe. Stories Esperanza neglected to tell him anything of. Once, Esperanza bought goods off savage *timawas* before the guardia civil could catch them loitering around the marketplaces. A whole cluster of rattan despite having no use for it. So she gave it away.

“She was a charitable girl, even to those kinds of people.” She said. “Truly one of a kind. To take such interest in things below her stature, and deem it enjoyable.”

Inocencio agreed with that. To the Doña’s pleasure, he shared with her a story from when they were children, playing outside in the heat of summer. Though she was a girl she held a fondness for insects and often teased him, pressing beetles into his skin where their hooked claws dug into his sensitive flesh. “It’s unwomanly,” he said. “But rest easy Doña Ramona. She has been ‘straightened out’ as you said so.”

Doña Ramona sighed. “Is that so?” She said. The fan hit her palm again. “That girl will surprise you.”

“Of course. And it is one thing to love about her.” He smiled.

Doña Ramona declined to answer. Her gaze drifted off to a painting of her and her husband, young and stern, hanging on the wall. After a while, she spoke. “You remind me of my husband.”

Inocencio glowed. “Why thank you, Doña. Such a shame, his... untimely departure.”

“Shame indeed.”

With that, Doña Ramona excused herself, leaving him to his own devices, and while he was immediately swarmed by dons and doñas seeking conversation, he couldn't help but seek out Esperanza. Doña Ramona's *sala* was half as large as Don Santos' and yet he couldn't find her anywhere. He declined conversation in favor of finding his fiancée, but after a few minutes he grew impatient and waited by the *escalera*. He was fuming. This was supposed to be a perfect night! They were supposed to be together, partaking in merriment! And yet at the first opportunity, Esperanza would leave! His chest burned. The old crone just had to separate them! Without him, she could be anywhere, gallivanting with other men who could sway her into their arms. No, that was silly. Esperanza would never love another. Esperanza was his alone! All the more this fact had driven the pain of deprivation into his throat; it ached as it burned, unhelped by his rising temper the longer time passed without her.

Then, after a torturous stretch of time, Esperanza emerged from the *escalera*.

The insolent woman!

He marched down, yanking her by the arm.

“How dare you.” He hissed.

Shocked, all she did was struggle against him. Her arms wriggled uselessly.

“You left me!”

“I was merely checking on Bulan---”

“Bulan this, Bulan that! Can’t you forget that stupid *indio* for a second and focus on your husband?”

“We are not married.” She jerked her arm free of his grasp. “Yet.”

Yet. The word came across as a harsh slap to his face. “You are impossible!” He yelled, storming past her. He went home, abandoning the party. Forget it! Forget his happiness! Forget it all! No sooner did he lock his doors, a bottle of brandy found its way in his grasp. Mouthfuls burned his throat. The contents disappeared before he knew it, and he dropped the bottle, hearing it thump against the carpeted floors. Instead of the familiar sedation he had come to expect, the alcohol became fuel for his rage. His body was aflame as Esperanza’s spark of defiance replayed over and over in his mind.

They were not married.

They were not.

Yet.

He shouted. “Yet! Yet!” Then laughed like a madman. But he didn’t care if anyone heard him! His rage should be heard! Just think, what would a person think, hearing his fury and knowing the cause? Shame on Esperanza! Shame, shame, shame!

Where was her gratitude? Where was her respect? Isn't she so fortunate to have been bestowed upon a man like himself? A man who toiled just so they could be happy, taken for granted in exchange for some common, dirt-level maid.

Inocencio unleashed his anger on the pillows. The white covers reminding him of a neck. Before he knew it, his fingers had begun to sink into the plush, squeezing until his knuckles were as white as the cloth. He released, leaving it wrinkled. He got some satisfaction out of that but it was short-lived. He searched his room for an object to crush between his fingers, something that wouldn't yield as easily as the pillow.

Then he came across the wolf pelt.

Then he yanked it off the armchair by the leg and pulled it towards him. By its white neck he squeezed. The leather beneath the fur proved harder to grip, providing the tough resistance he liked. It was different from when he had strangled the wolf before its demise. Living things are much softer, warmer, and kicked in their sleep when they were hurt. This one was perfectly lifeless. Perfectly unharmed.

And so he took off in the middle of the night to the alley near the church with a tight fistful of change shoved in his pockets. It disappeared as soon as he entered the dark alley. There, he was reprieved; finding first the familiar sedation which quickly turned into bliss, bliss, bliss. Sweet bliss. Dear God, what bliss! He found it pliant yet it resisted. He found that he could strangle it, bite it, spank it; allowed to leave his marks. And when he finished he would leave it red and helpless. Perfectly hurt.

Afterwards, he had a revelation.

Since Esperanza was so concerned with Bulan, and not with him, then perhaps he ought to discipline her. The plan would take time before implementation, but he can most certainly execute it. He maintained the structure of visiting Esperanza in the mornings, but one day he paid a visit whilst knowing Esperanza would have been at church with her mother. Bulan would likely be at the house, doing chores. His hunch was correct, naturally. Keeping his distance, he observed her closely. Bulan was different away from him, but otherwise was indistinguishable from every other maid in existence. Her voice was barely above a whisper; she worked like free time hurt; was courteous but had little elegance nor etiquette, and withered under the scrutiny of her superiors. The same could be said of her work. She was preoccupied with a neverending list of menial labor: cleaning the house, doing the laundry, and cooking. Hardly had she finished with a task before a new one would be prompted, and she'd finish whatever she was doing haphazardly. At present she was sharpening one of the kitchen knives, sitting on a low stool by the *cocina* with her skirts bunched up to her knees. The wet sharpening stone lay flat on another stool, which she passed a dull blade over and over.

It infuriated him. He couldn't understand what made her so special! Her behavior was standard; her work competent at most; and neither were her looks anything to boast about! Her face and the rest of her body was thin like a sprig. Her clothing was worn and faded like she had been using the same set of clothing for decades, and her fingers were disgusting; stained with some black residue from cleaning all the soot and charcoal from the ovens, caked under her fingernails.

If only she was the slightest bit interesting, then perhaps he would have felt a sliver of guilt for what he was about to do.

Entering Esperanza's room, he sifted through her belongings, retaining great care to keep things looking like he had found it. He wanted something small and precious; just enough to tempt a poor maid into taking, but not big enough to rouse immediate suspicion. A ring, or perhaps bracelet would suffice. He noted the lack of anything like a jewelry box on her table, so he began pulling open drawers in hopes of finding something suitable. However they were filled with nothing but the usual odd junk Esperanza liked to keep. Nothing she wouldn't miss, and therefore nothing worth taking. He considered leaving to search elsewhere, but noticed a faint shine under the unkempt stacks of paper. Careful, he lifted the stack. His stomach dropped.

It was his gift. His precious gift, tossed aside and battered! The golden backing had been scratched up, and some of the tiny diamonds surrounding the large sapphire had loosened and fallen away. Who would have done this? What sort of monster would dare damage such an important thing? And Esperanza's, too! They must have been someone vengeful, no doubt!

Momentarily he considered the possibility of the perpetrator as Esperanza herself.

He gripped his fists.

Unacceptable. In no way would she... She wouldn't.

He pushed the thought aside. Clearly this was the work of some green-eyed monster! And who else could it have been but Bulan? The maid likely had free access to her room whenever, and from the way she stuck to Esperanza's side like glue, he

wouldn't be surprised if she was doing so to get a taste of the wealthy life she could never achieve!

He found her at the *cocina* still, this time chopping vegetables for supper. What terrific timing. He strode over, and called her attention. She flinched at his voice and began trembling as she turned to face him.

“You.”

Bulan nodded, though with the tremors wracking her body he couldn't be sure. He stepped closer, trapping her inside a corner. He doubts she understood his words, as he began criticizing her appearance and demeanor in Spanish. From her wiry, unkempt hair, to her unsightly old clothes, and even to her dirty fingernails. All her impurities, while he took great satisfaction hitting her where he rebuked. He had smacked the side of her head, jabbed at her shoulder, seized her wrist. She could only whine in pain, shrinking further into the corner with each hit, unable to fend back. For what he was doing to her was far less of a punishment than the consequences of fighting back. While he pulled at her skirts, he managed to slip the necklace into a pocket. Quickly, he retreated. He had an urge to wash his precious hands after laying them all over this filthy indio.

He left her cowering and made sure to wash his hands well in one of the bathrooms. Once finished, he waited in the *sala* for Esperanza and Doña Isabella's return. He didn't have to wait long; they arrived after twenty minutes, complaining about the heat outdoors. Inocencio shocked them with his presence. Doña Isabella apologized profusely for their absence while Esperanza paled, though she apologized alongside her mother.

“It is of no trouble, Doña Isabella. What is twenty minutes to years in Europe?”

He chuckled.

Doña Isabella laughed, and so did Esperanza, mimicking her mother’s.

“Say, my love?” He smiled at her. “Where is your necklace?”

Esperanza touched her neck. “I was not expecting you to visit at this time, Don Inocencio.”

“Fetch it. You should be grateful! What better way to show gratitude than to use it?”

Esperanza hesitated, but when her mother gave an insistent look, she obliged, heading for her room. Moments later, she returned, looking quite frantic.

“I must apologize, Don Inocencio. But I cannot find it.”

Doña Isabella gasped. “Oh my, Perhaps you’ve misplaced it?”

She shook her head.

“Then we have us a thief.” Inocencio said, ushering them to the kitchen. He pointed at Bulan, stirring in a pot. “Call her for us, would you?” He glanced at Esperanza.

So she did. Obedient, yet fearful of Inocencio’s presence, Bulan hesitantly approached. Her head was low, and she held tightly onto her skirts. He told them to observe how guilt-ridden she was, so fearful of their presence that she could barely stand to look in their eyes. Doña Isabella lapped it all up, clinging onto his every word.

“Tell her to show us what’s in her pockets.”

Esperanza did. She spoke slowly, and swallowed after. At first, Bulan was confused, but as she rifled through her pockets, her expression shifted into that of wide-eyed horror. With a trembling hand, she pulled out the necklace.

Doña Isabella gasped, and began demanding answers. Esperanza was silent, as she and her maid shared the same expression. She must have felt betrayed, surely! To see her precious maid a thief! She looked at him, and her eyes were saying “it’s impossible!” and “there’s no way she would!”

”Doña Isabella, despite all your kindness, this indio dared to steal from your beloved daughter! And my precious gift nonetheless! Shall I punish her for you?”

Before the Doña could respond, he took the liberty of forcing Bulan to her knees, then used the heel of his boot to have her keel forwards, so that her forehead touched the floor. Too terrified to resist, Bulan remained in position, quivering in fear. He stood over her small body, fighting a sneer.

“Don Inocencio, I’m sure it was just a misunderstanding! Surely this is unnecessary!” Esperanza said.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry my love, but once you spoil your animals, they will lack control over themselves and act improperly. Consider this an act of mercy. Shall we have her flogged by the *guardia civil*, or shall I administer the flogging myself? She means a lot to you, I know as much. Hence, I shall be gentle. Yet firm.” He unbuckled his belt.

“Bulan, get up.”

Inocencio shook his head, as he kept her down with a foot on her neck.

“Please. Don’t.” She pleaded. Her voice cracked, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“My love, this is for your safety! A punishment like this will keep her from acting out in the future.” He wrapped the belt around his palm so that the buckle stood out on end. He could feel her tremble beneath his foot and it took all it could not to break out into smiles. He took his foot off her back and thought it was a mercy to leave it clothed knowing she was but bone underneath her skin. Raising the whip, he struck her hard. She screamed in agony, and he hissed at her to shut up. Then he hit her again; the sound of the buckle hitting flesh accompanied by her muffled cries. Soon, Bulan’s faded white blouse was spotted with red, as the prong of the belt had bit into her flesh from the impact of his blows.

Esperanza was on her knees begging for him to stop. Enough, enough, it was enough! But was it? He thought not. Insolence like hers deserved this much of a punishment! Doña Isabella couldn’t look, and had taken to hiding behind her fan. Not until Esperanza’s face was dripping with tears and she was kowtowing like Bulan did he stop himself from hitting her exposed back, too. An unexpected anger flared up. How could she lower herself to the same status of the maid? Not even the slightest hesitation! Would she grovel for him like that too? Would she get on her knees for him? He grit his teeth and raised the belt once more, and struck Bulan the hardest blow, A dash of red blossomed across her back, and a scream filled the kitchen. The ordeal had taken its toll on him. Out of breath, he stopped.

“I told you, if you don’t act accordingly, unsightly things will happen. So, have we learned our lesson?” The question aimed at Esperanza.

She nodded. “She’s learned her lesson, please forgive her. She won’t do it again.”

“Excellent.” He said.

Though he wondered if Esperanza meant those words for Bulan or for herself. His body still burned and his fingers had gained a displeasing tremble to them. It wasn’t the first time he had disciplined a maid, and yet this had turned out to be unpleasant. He had what we wanted, didn’t he? Bulan, punished for being a nuisance; Esperanza on her knees and begging for him, and the release one obtains from using flesh. The feeling plagued him as he left their house. Without thinking, he had taken himself to that familiar alley. There, was another form of release.

Today he hadn’t come for sedation. He came to unleash this feeling. He descended upon the alley like a beast stalking prey; skulking down the path in search of willing bodies. It didn’t take long. The corner ladies beckoned him with sultry movements of their hands, and he chose the one with the palest skin and the darkest hair, and the one who could take it from behind best. She took him upstairs to a secluded room and presented herself to be his. The smooth expanse of her skin served as a canvas for his marks; his tools made of teeth, nails, and flesh. When the slender neck presented itself he swooped in with hands, squeezing with his nails. The act was free of speech; filled only with the grunts and the sounds of flesh striking against each other. As evening descended and robbed them of light, he became spirited; pleased because his delusions could take over in the cover of darkness. Esperanza, Esperanza.

This could be Esperanza.

This will be Esperanza.

It was Esperanza, when he finished, and it shall remain as Esperanza when he visits again. Again, and again, and again.

So did the memory of belt and buckle, blood and bruises, repeat itself. The noise of leather hitting flesh became indistinguishable from his art. Oh tender skin, blossoming into alstroemerias! Oh sweet symphony of human chorus and instruments! He left them better than he had found them. He left them perfect.

But was he perfect himself? Despite his fleeting satisfaction, there was an incompleteness to the act. A missing element he couldn't quite place. And as he continued, it gnawed on him. No matter what he'd do, the gnawing feeling pervaded, reminding him of his incompleteness. It overwhelmed much of anything else he felt, and before long it had morphed into a chill that settled into his bones so that the moment he left the alleys, he felt as if he, Inocencio, would be hollow if it wasn't replaced. If there were no women, he turned to drink. If there were no drinks, he turned to women. And if there was neither present to him, he surrendered to the feeling in bed. Days passed spent in such a fashion, but he no longer felt the passage of time confined to a bed and subject to sobriety. He avoided the Santos' house then, for if he went any closer the chill would spike, so much that he'd shiver where he stood. And when he returned to Don Hermano's, without much else to occupy himself with, he'd pile blankets over himself and wonder if Esperanza missed him. The answer was never pleasant. The cold would overtake him, and once more he was sent in search for the warmth of a bottle, or a woman.

Of course, Don Hermano expressed his worries. He was a distant cousin and was within the right reason to be of concern. He whined like a pup outside his door; those bothersome sentiments of his passed along to Don Santos who couldn't bear the thought of his precious son-in-law ill. They groveled for his presence, yapping about a fiesta that day celebrating the acquisition of funds for the church. Annoyed into compliance, Inocencio hauled himself out of bed, kicking a path open from the litter of empty bottles and debris. The wolf pelt among them.

He and Don Santos rode a *kalesa* to his manor. A headache overtook him as the clamor of instruments blared throughout the streets. He cursed the marching band and their ruckus. Was everything in the world out for his misery? Caterwauls of peasants and the horse's hooves harmonized with the despicable cacophony. The *kalesa* swung too much and the open walls allowed in harsh sunlight that stung his eyes and had him curled over the seat. His jaws hurt from gritting his teeth, but it was preferable to the migraine. The worst of them all was Don Santos, who prattled on about some tonic he knew would help. The old fool! A concoction of herbs would do nothing to soothe his condition. However, he was too encumbered to talk back, and so he endured in silence, blood drained from his fists and pooling to his head.

As if cruel fate had decided he was deserving of all the misfortune in the world, upon their arrival, both he and Don Santos were shocked with the news: Esperanza was gone! She had already departed for the festival. Don Santos was red, angry gibberish coming out of his mouth. Rather than stay to experience such drivel, Inocencio stepped outside, contemplating returning to Don Hermano's. The damn chill had returned,

numbing his migraine. Its ill effects had all but evaporated, save for the dull pounding at the back of his skull like a gavel to a block. He wished for it back, instead of the chill, but the world would not grant him this.

Inocencio walked without thinking, down the stony road towards the plaza. With each step the music humming in the air grew louder, the crowds thickening; men, women, children dressed in their best, chattering amongst each other like rats. He searched for her. The crowd was deceptive. People melded into an indistinguishable mass containing bits and pieces of Esperanza. The curls of her hair, her fine skin, the smell of jasmine, and even her unmistakable laughter. He staggered towards the source: two people dressed in oversized and worn out clothes, the dirty brown pants rolled up to their knees. Though straw hats obscured their faces, they recognized his status and bowed in deference. The two scampered off, disappearing into the crowd and Inocencio was invigorated to follow. How callous of them to think he would miss the unmistakable swell of women's breasts under their shirts! He walked briskly, his eyes trained on those two straw hats, knocking into bodies and pushing his way past them. Nevermind their cries of protest!

They broke into a run and so did he. The taller of the duo dragged the other with a slim, paler hand. They darted into an alley and he followed. They took to the streets and he, despite his mounting frustrations, and with all the diligence in him, kept in pursuit. They held onto their hats to keep their faces hidden but he already knew. Simpletons! He laughed, adding a spring in his step. Terrified, the women ran faster. They arrived at the plaza after minutes of chase to shake him off their trail and dove into the audience

gathering in front of a staged play. His temper flared. He's had enough of this farce! Oh how he wanted to tear off their shoddy disguise and expose their naked bodies for the public to shame! A far more striking display than some commoner's show, do doubt!

Try as he might to push through the spectators, he could not progress. Their bodies were oddly compacted against one another as if preventing him. The straw hats bobbed up and down between the sea of browns and blacks, and it seemed a never-ending endeavor; being pushed and pulled away and towards his targets. Finally, he had somehow drifted closer to one of the straw hats. He grabbed their shoulder. He pulled them towards him, only to be greeted by an old man trembling in his grasp. Inocencio scoffed in disgust and pushed him away. He cursed to himself and left. It was easier to elbow his way out than in.

Free from the sea of spectators, once more he shared a laugh to himself. The bitter memory of losing games of chase resurfaced. He returned to Don Hermano's house, embittered. He remained in his room, infuriated for some time until the night came in, and he had exhausted all his thoughts, so it was time to return to the alleys.

Eventually he realized he had hated that part of him. This— this perversion of his usual great self, like a depraved hound humping at the legs of strangers. At once he realized it was no way for a gentleman to act, and him, a Spaniard most of all, stooping down to rut indios who opened her legs as fast as he could his wallet. He decided enough was enough of silly emotions and drunken stupors. He shall act accordingly himself! After spending days cooped up in his room, he finally ventured outside for a walk.

The streets of San Sebastian were busy. It was Sunday, and alongside the special Sunday mass was the public market. There, he chanced upon the same mango stall he and Esperanza visited together. The busy streets and the sweet smell of mangoes filled him with memories of their first walk; with Esperanza glowing underneath the soft shade of the parasol, then her lips mouthing *lobo, lobo* before him.

As if on cue, the very same parasol appeared in his vision, and underneath it two figures dressed simply, nothing but a bayong between their hands to part them. Inocencio thought to look past; perhaps it was only a coincidence, but there it was: the same faded pattern of a skirt, the same spindly ankles of the help. Dainty hands reached, cupped the brown chin, a thumb stroking the bitten flesh. Pale fingers to the split lip.

All the noises filled Inocencio's ears. Murmurs of passerby, incomprehensible conversations, vendors shouting and haggling; the buzz of flies over fruit and fish, the clapping of horses, and the crack of a whip jolting him. He was glued to the pavement. There was bubbling in his throat. His nails were digging into his palms. He saw red. Torrents of thought crashed into his mind. Was it wrong of him to wish for reciprocation for once? To have her smile in his presence, and to hear her silvery voice speak to him, sing to him, and coo at him? His heart was pulled from his chest by the sight of Bulan and nobody but his dear, dear and perfect Esperanza underneath the shade of a single parasol, whispering to themselves, their shoulders touching so, their elbows locked to fill the gaps between themselves with each other, and their eyes trained on nobody else, uninterrupted by the crowd and the noise from vendors, the clip-clopping of hooves. And there he stood at the other end of the road, a helpless spectator to this happenstance.

It was the simplest gestures that meant something. He could only speculate what had come out of the maid's mouth, something unintelligible, and yet Esperanza laughed. He heard it across the street, clear as crystal; the silvery chime missing from his symphonies. At that very moment, something ticking away inside of him stopped and so began the destruction of what he knew, or rather, what he had made for himself: the art of the perverse Esperanzas who fills the dark depths of his imagination.

He returned to the house. Each step to his room was increasingly hurried, ending as he slammed the door, followed by the click of the lock. Inside, he walked to the center of the persian rug where a wooden table rested, and swept its contents to the ground. Bottles flew and thudded over the carpet. Afterwards, he flung the table against his suitcases.

Nearby, a chair he grabbed by the legs to strike against the bed's footboard, causing the wood to splinter as a chunk of wood flew from the engraved backrest. Inocencio was in a heated frenzy hitting the chair against everything—the floor, the walls, the paintings, and his suitcases until he was left with nothing but a stump of a chair leg, his chest heaving in and out. The room was ruined. The only thing left intact was a mirror on the wall reflecting him.

His hair was tousled and untidy, parts of it slick against his face from the sweat dripping down where his necktie had loosened itself, and his dress shirt was drenched. He had torn his suit jacket. It was split apart at the seam where his shoulder met the arm. Stumbling towards the mirror, he dragged his fingers over its surface, staining it with his fingerprints.

What was wrong with him?

Nothing!

He was the best of men, and she, the most exquisite of all the women he had ever desired! Yet, so adamant! Inocencio wanted more than anything then to tear her face apart, starting from her lips.

Was he inadequate?

He laughed at himself, both his eyes obscured by the streaks of fingers he had caused. What was not to adore? He was wealthy, powerful, intelligent, handsome, and most importantly he was of pure Spanish descent, a peninsulares at that!

“Que guapo!” He hissed, gripping the mirror by its sides.

He was intelligent! He had studied, all this time, for her!

“Muy inteligente tambien!” The mirror groaned as he pulled hard. His face was a distortion; a twisted fury in pieces of his own doing.

He was an upstanding gentleman!

“Que hombre tan gallante!” The nail holding the mirror from him gave way. He raised it above his head and brought it down upon the floor, shattering the mirror to pieces. The sound like chimes. Pieces flew around him. The room was a mess and there he was, standing in the middle of it; shards of glass and ruined silver depicting him from angles beneath him: he was happy, he was sad, he was angry, he was crying.

Only the wolf pelt was witness to his state. Only the wolf pelt survived his fury. Through its amber eyes it saw Inocencio for what he truly was.

Empty of rage, the chills devastated his body.

With his room destroyed and void of liquor, there was only one place left to go.

Inocencio visited the alley, intending this visit to be his last. He found a young girl: short, thin, and most importantly: pale, with hair that cascaded down to her waist. He took her upstairs and in his impatience tore the clothes off her body. He gripped her hard, but found no satisfaction in her gaunt body. Barely any meat on her bones! At the very least his hands could wrap around her neck well. She was so slender; so thin, and so inexperienced. She made all sorts of annoying, high-pitched noises and moved with awkwardness to rival a newborn doe. Hardly any pleasure to be derived from her! Surely even this pathetic body should follow the basics: the tighter his hand on her neck, the tighter her body should be. The chills weren't going away, and the girl had stopped fighting back. Frustrated, he released her and dressed himself; tossing loose change at her limp body.

Cold in the dead of night, he trudged home.

Days that followed were spent locked away in his room, refusing food or drink, nor any inquiries about his ruckus the other day. He teased his fingers with shards of glass left over the floor. The need to replace this coldness with any other sensation like hunger, or thirst, or pain was insurmountable. He was a prisoner. Only under Don Santos' orders did he emerge. Hollow-cheeked, and bags under his eyes; the handsome chiseled face of Inocencio del Rosario had been replaced by a husk of a man who had forgotten the day of his own wedding . Had he not been dragged to a bath, he would have went and gone the way he was to the altars.

Servants flooded his room to pick up after his mess. He threw the pelt into the suitcase and handed it to them to place in Don Santos' house. Seeing all the hustle and bustle around him was strange. No longer did he feel excited about the wedding. Emptiness surrounded their actions; for why care about the colors of his barong when Esperanza did not? Even so, the barong was laid over his re-made bed, woven from the finest piña fibers, and embroidered with utmost care, yet he felt hollow inside. He was withering before their eyes, his cheeks sullen, eyes sunk, and the color drained from his lips. No longer could anything rouse him. Not even the thought of Esperanza, dressed in a magnificent bridal gown, but it made him feel dirty, and he would retch out what little his stomach contained shortly after.

The wedding was a blur. It was a spectacular ceremony; half the barrio was there dressed in their finest, only to fade into a blur once the ceremony began. Words were spoken, vows were exchanged, and now he was in front of his bride. A thicker veil covered her face, but the shape of the sapphire necklace was unmistakable. The friar proclaimed he may now kiss the bride.

Inocencio pulled up her veil. Esperanza, her glorious face, beautiful and done up with pink powders and lip rouge. He trembled before his bride, hesitating, recalling his night of frivolity and sin, he leaned close, finally pressing their lips together. Their fate was sealed.

Inocencio felt nothing, only the pangs from the depths of his soul and the vague memory of tearing flesh at the back of his mind. They separated into the applause of the

masses, and he felt his eyes were smoldering. In his heart lay a great desire. Is this what Esperanza felt when she saw the wolf pelt that day?

Rice grain was being pelted at them as they departed the church, surrounded by the congratulations of the folks. Don Santos and Doña Isabella were at the sidelines, and the Doña was crying into a handkerchief, bidding her only daughter away for good.

They arrived at Don Santos' house by carriage after the celebration. All his things were brought in and he inspected his bags for the wolf pelt, asking a servant to take it where the honeymoon was to be. Not even the celebrations could arouse his hunger. He was picking at his food and smiled when he had to, and his darling Esperanza was the same. Funny, that was the only time they ever agreed on something throughout their time together. Not the kiss, not the wedding, and not their joining. Before their consummation, Esperanza requested somebody to come remove her jewelry and the cumbersome dress. Inocencio didn't care, and allowed her to do as she wished, and he would have been satisfied with it too, had it not been Bulan who entered. Oh he could wait it out, but soon the rhythmic tapping of his foot as he sat before *his* room soon turned to stomping, until he himself rose from the chair and burst in.

Esperanza stood by the dresser and whipped around to face him while covering herself. A thin chemise stood between their bodies, and it pleased him more to see the necklace remain on her slender neck. Try as she might to shield her body, Inocencio's eyes roamed all over her skin, sending chills all over his body. Her shame was for naught, for the idea of being husband and wife had only been driven into him at that instant. He had the right to her body, and he shall exercise it!

“Bulan!” She shouted. The servant had been fixing the bed, perhaps fluffing up the pillows.

“Away with you, *indio!* Go!” Inocencio barked at the servant, who, like their encounter weeks ago, glanced to and from her mistress to her master, undecided until Esperanza nodded. Bulan fled the room, shielding her face from Inocencio. The door slammed shut behind them.

Inocencio glanced around the room. He spotted the suitcase and opened it. The wolf pelt fell to the floor in a heap. He picked it up, approaching her with it. The pelt dragged across the carpeted floor in its full length, the wolf head pointed at Esperanza.

“Look, my love! My gift to you, the symbol of your beauty, ferocity...”

Esperanza was backing herself into a corner, so he threw the pelt at her, closed the distance between them, took her by the wrist and dragged her to the bed. She yelped. He ignored it. The wolf pelt lay on the floor, its teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

“Esperanza, Esperanza,” his voice trembled. She tried to escape, but he had her pinned between both his legs. The bed was no wobbly bamboo; this time of solid mahogany, and the sheets of silk and pillows stuffed full of down. He grabbed her arm, and the woman struck him across the face with the other. For a second, everything was still. The open windows allowed the sound of crickets to infiltrate the room. The lamplight flickered by the bedside table.

Blows were exchanged. Inocencio raised his fist against her; she bit and scratched back. They both grunted in pain as they struggled over each other on the bed, lashing over at each other with their fists and teeth. He tore at her dress; she dug her nails into his

barong, gripping hard over the fabric. One in their struggle, two souls aflame with their desires; Inocencio losing sense of who was winning, focused on the heated touch of their bodies, melting together in this dimness, their shadows a writhing mass across the walls.

Esperanza twisted herself from his grasp, and kicked him in the stomach, sending him off the bed. His head hit the edge of the table. Bile rose to his throat and he vomited acid, searing his throat. After retching, he struggled to stand. The most he could do now was to stay on his knees, to stabilize himself while the room spun beneath him.

“Don... Inocencio.” Esperanza spoke.

He lifted his head up, and saw her obtaining a knife from the pillows. He froze.

Esperanza’s voice was steady. “Let me go. Let me go, and I promise, we shall put this behind us... Call off the marriage, let us separate, and I won’t hurt—”

His laugh cut through her words. It was amusing enough to rouse him to his feet. Steadily, but shakily, he made his way to her while she held the knife close. He could see her trembling as he approached, and the closer he got to her, the tighter she gripped the knife in her dainty little hands. Soon enough he towered over her, with a smile on his face, gently shaking his head as he gripped her hands hard. She gasped and he shivered. What could she possibly do to him? Esperanza and her audacity surprised him even at this moment.

“No, no, no, Esperanza. Don’t be silly. Once a man and a woman unite, they cannot be separated. You and I,” he jerked her close, “are *inseparable* now.” He leaned close to her ear while drawing circles over her knuckles. “*And if you try this again, I—*”

He cried out before he could finish, pushing her away with great difficulty. With a grunt, he shoved her back onto the bed, clutching his bleeding left ear while howling in pain. Esperanza scrambled to her feet. She spat at his feet a tiny pink thing and slammed into him with a loud cry.

Inocencio crashed against the wall, stunned once again, the wind knocked out of his chest from the impact. He reached, gasping and grasping for air and was met with a kick to the head. The room was spinning harder and he could see the wolf pelt, and Esperanza's feet. He longed to kiss them, even as she kicked his chin, filling his vision with stars. His head hit the wall, ceasing his actions for a moment. A few moments later he was groping around for something to support himself. Gripping the edge of the side table, he stood shakily, like a newborn doe, his face swollen, nose, and mouth dripping with warm fluids.

"I hate you," she growled, "all this time, I've hated you." The blade was glimmering in the light.

'Bulan!' His mind yelled. His vision had begun to fade when her shoulder slammed once more against his chest, her whole weight driven into the single strike. There was a revelation, and there was the knife embedding itself deep inside his stomach. Blood spilled from his mouth like a stream. He grit his teeth, seething, and brought up his hands. Slender neck, it must be easy to crush. Nails gripped deeply her smooth flesh. She grunted, and dug her feet into the floor, the blade penetrating further into his body.

Moonlight filled the room with silver.

Esperanza's hazel eyes were turning red and her lips purple. They gleamed with such ferocity and slowly, Inocencio's grip loosened. The pale moonlight radiated her face, bringing tears to his eyes. His hands fell from her neck, swinging down to his sides and she drew back, from his body that was slowly descending to the floor. Love filled him in an instant and he gripped the blade embedded in him. It was the last he could do for her.

A soft breeze filled the room. Her chemise billowed from underneath her, and she saved the wolf pelt from the puddle of blood forming under Inocencio's body. Digging her fingers underneath the necklace, Esperanza snaps it from her neck.

The news of the Don's suicide spread through Kawit. Some say he had gone crazy with happiness being wedded to his beloved. Others say the guilt of his depravity was too much to bear. They praised Esperanza for trying to stop him, and pitied her for her great loss. "On her wedding night, too!" they said. Her parents sent her away to live with a relative, somewhere south where they hoped the countryside would heal her. She packed little; emptying her desk, taking down her framed insects. The necklace she couldn't bear to keep as it came from her late husband. The pelt she kept for reasons they don't know. Grief was difficult, confusing, so they sent Bulan with her to the *haciendas*. It was a great shame to Don Santos and his wife, for their daughter so beautiful, so kind and so delicate, to witness something so gruesome, so abhorrent, and so indelible to the memory. The stain of Inocencio's acts would ensure no man would touch Esperanza ever again. To think, while living and while dead, he was capable of such things.

