

Monstress (short story)

In 1966, the President of CocoLoco Pictures broke the news to us in English: “As the Americanos say, it is time to listen to the music. Your movies are shit.” He unrolled a poster for *The Squid Children of Cebu*, our latest picture for the studio. Our names were written in drippy, bloody letters: *A Checkers Rosario Film* was printed above the title, and my credit was at the bottom. *Reva Gogo*, it said, *as the Squid Mother*.

In its first week in release, *Squid Children* played in just one theater in all of Manila, the midnight show at The Primero. “A place for peasants and whores,” the President said, tearing the poster in half, “and is it true they use a bed sheet for a screen?” Then, speaking in Tagalog, he fired us.

From CocoLoco we walked home, and when we passed The Oasis, one of the English-only movie theaters that had been sprouting up all over Manila, Checkers threw a stone at Doris Day’s face: *Send Me No Flowers* was playing, and above the box office Doris Day and Rock Hudson traded sexy glances and knowing smiles. “Their fault!” he said, and I understood what he meant: imported Hollywood romance was what Manila moviegoers were paying to see, and Checkers’ low budget horror could no longer compete. “All that overacting, that corny shit!” But here was the truth: those were the movies I longed for Checkers to make, where men fall in love with women and stay there, and tearful partings are only preludes to tearful reunions. *Real life*—that’s what I wanted to play, but my only roles were Bat-Winged Pygmy Queen, Werewolf Girl, Two-Headed Bride of Two-Headed Dracula, Squid Mother—all those monstrous girls Checkers dreamed up just for me.

I took the second stone from his hand and put it in my purse. “Time to go home,” I said.

But we did not give up. Checkers shopped his latest (and last) screenplay, *Dino-Ladies Get Quezon City*, to all the Manila studios, even one in Guam; every answer was no. I auditioned

and auditioned, and though casting agents liked my look (one called me a Filipina Sophia Loren), cold readings made me look like an amateur: I shouted dialogue that should have been whispered, and made tears of sorrow look like tears of joy.

For the next three years, this was our life: I worked as a receptionist at a dentist's office and Checkers lamented. One night, I woke to the sound of thwacking, and I found him drunk on the balcony, cracking open coconuts with a machete. "Was I no good?" he asked, his grunts turning to sniffles. I went to him, rested my head against the back of his neck. "Your chance will come again," I said. "But it's time for us to sleep."

Sometimes, when I play that night over in my head, I give it a new ending: I answer Checkers with the truth, that the most he ever achieved was minor local fame; that his movies were shoddily produced, illogically plotted, clumsily directed. This hurts Checkers—it hurts me, too—but the next morning we go on with our life, and I marvel at the possibilities: we might have married, there could have been children. We would still be together, and we wouldn't have needed Gaz Gazman, that Saturday morning in January of '70, when he rang our doorbell.

"Who are you?" I asked. Through the peephole I saw a stranger in a safari hat wipe his feet on our doormat as though we had already welcomed him.

"The name's Gazman. From Hollywood, USA. I'm here for a Checkers"—he looked at the name written on his palm—"Rosario."

I put my hand on the doorknob, made sure it was locked. "What do you want?"

He leaned into the peephole, his smile so big I caught the glint of a shiny gold crown on a back tooth. "His monsters," he said.

From the bedroom I heard Checkers start his day the usual way, with a phlegmy cough from the previous night's bourbon. I went to him. "Someone is here," I said, poking his shoulder. "From Hollywood."

He lifted his head.

I returned to the front door. I didn't want to, but I did. For Checkers. I unlocked the lock and let Gaz Gazman in.

I led him to the kitchen, offered him a plate of Ritz crackers and a square of margarine. I stood by the sink, watching him as he ate: his shirt and shorts were covered with palm trees, and his purple sandals clashed with the orange lenses of his sunglasses. A large canvas bag was on the floor beside him, and his hat was still on.

Checkers stepped into the kitchen. "The great Checkers Rosario," Gaz said.

Checkers stared at Gaz with bloodshot eyes. "Used to be," he said, then sat down.

Gaz explained himself: he was in Manila visiting an ex-girlfriend, a make-up artist for CocoLoco. He toured the studio, went through their vaults, and found copies of Checkers' movies. "I watched them all, and I thought, jackpot-eureka! This is the real deal. They said if I wanted to use them, I should find you." He pulled four canisters of film from his canvas bag and stacked them on the table. "And now you're found."

Checkers took the reels from the canisters. I could hear him whisper their titles like the names of women he once loved and still did—*The Creature in the Cane*, *Cathedral of Dread*, *DraculaDracula*, *The House on Dead Filipino Road*. "Use them," he said. "What for?"

"Three words," Gaz said. "Motion. Picture. History." He got up, circled the table as he explained his movie: en route to earth from a distant star system, the crew of *The Valedictorian* crash lands on a hostile planet inhabited by bat-winged pygmies, lobster-clawed cannibals, two-headed vampires. "That's where your stuff comes in. I'm going to splice your movies with mine." He went on about the mixing-up of genres, chop-suey cinema, bringing together east and west. "We'd be the ambassadors of international film!"

"What's your thinking on this?" Checkers asked me in Tagalog. "Is this man serious? Is he just an American fool?"

"Ask how much he'll pay," I said, "get twenty percent more, give him the movies and show him to the door."

“All our hard work for a few pesos?” Checkers looked at me as though I’d slapped him. “That’s their worth to you?” He asked if I’d forgotten the ten-star reviews, the long lines on opening night, but I didn’t want to hear about it, not anymore, so I reminded him about the life we’d been living the last three years—how I sat day after day in an un-air conditioned dentist’s office, staring at a phone that never rang, while he slept through hangovers into the late afternoon, only to reminisce about our CocoLoco days throughout the night. “Take the money,” I said, “and let’s be done with this.”

“I come in peace!” Gaz said. “Don’t fight because of me.”

I switched back to English. “We are discussing, not fighting. We don’t have lawyers or agents to counsel us over these matters. There is corruption and dishonesty in the movie business here in Manila. It’s not like in Hollywood.”

“But I’m one of the good guys,” Gaz said, and to prove it, he made us an offer: “Come to America. Just for a week. You can see a rough cut, visit the set, meet the cast. Plenty of room at my pad. I’ll even take the couch. And if you don’t like what you see, I’ll reimburse you the airfare and you won’t ever hear from me again.”

Then Checkers said, “Reva will come too.”

I shook my head. “This is your business.” I spoke in English, so that Gaz would understand me too. “The two of you. Not the three of us.”

“But I need you,” Checkers said. He came to me and held my face, then kissed me just above my nose.

Gaz winked at me. “How can you say no to that?”

There was a smudge of gray just above his lip, like dried-up toothpaste or cigarette ash. I licked my thumb, rubbed it away. His shirt was misbuttoned at the top, there were patches of stubble he missed when he shaved, and his Elvis-style pompadour showed more gray than I’d realized was there.

“I can’t,” I told Gaz.

* * *

“Someone in America is dead.” This was the lie I told the dentist when I asked for a week off from work. “Someone close to me.” It was easy to say—I told him over the phone—but part of me hoped he would deny my request. If I had to stay, maybe Checkers would, too. But the dentist said my presence made no difference, that no one could afford dental work these days, so maybe we were all better off if we simply went away. He wished me a happy trip and hung up before I could say thank you.

We left Monday morning, and our flight to California felt like backwards travel through time. In Manila it was night but outside the plane the sky was packed with clouds so white they looked fake, like the clouds painted on the cinderblock walls of The Primero. Checkers and I began our courtship there, thirteen years before. I was sixteen, he was twenty-two, and every Saturday night we held hands in the second row at the midnight double creature feature. Checkers would marvel at what he called “the beauty of the beast,” confirming the expert craftsmanship of a well-made monster with a quiet “Yes” (he gave a standing ovation to the *Creature From the Black Lagoon*) and let out exasperated sighs for the lesser ones. But I preferred the monster that could be tamed. Like Fay Wray, I wanted to lay on the leathery palm of my gorilla suitor, soothe his rage with my calming, loving gaze. “You’ll be on screen one day,” Checkers said. “I’ll put you there. Just keep faith in me.”

So I did. After high school, I moved in with Checkers, took odd jobs sewing and cleaning while he worked on his treatment for *The Creature In the Cane*. The night CocoLoco Pictures bought it, Checkers gave me a white box tied with pink ribbon. “Wear this,” he whispered, “for me.” I expected a nightgown with a broken strap and tattered neckline—standard attire for a woman in peril—but when I opened it I found a pair of wolf ears, a rubber forehead covered with boils, several plastic eyeballs. “You will be The Creature,” he said, near tears and smiling. “You.”

The night we started filming, as I rubber glued eyeballs to my face, I told myself this was a first step, that even great actresses have unglamorous starts. I told myself this again the night of the premiere, when audiences cheered wildly as a dozen sugarcane farmers descended upon The Creature with sticks and buckets of holy water. *This is only the beginning*—I repeated, like a prayer, through all the films I did for Checkers.

For nearly the entire flight over, Checkers slept with his head resting on my chest, but our landing was so rough and jolting that he woke in a panic, and his head slammed hard against my chin. “We’re here?” he said, breathing heavy. “Have we finally arrived?” I rubbed the back of his neck to calm him. But my lip was bleeding. I could taste it.

Gaz didn’t live in Hollywood. He lived east of it, in Los Feliz, in a gray building called The Paradise. “This is it,” he said, unlocking the door, “the home of Gaz Gazman and DoubleG Productions.” It was a tiny apartment furnished with a sinking couch and a pair of yellow beanbags, and the offices of DoubleG Productions were a walk-in closet with a metal desk crammed inside, a telephone and a student film trophy—second place—on top of it. A junior college diploma hung above the fake fireplace, and it was then that I learned Gaz Gazman was not his real name. “Who the hay wants to see a movie by Gazwick Goosmahn? But *Gaz Gazman*”—he snapped twice—“that’s a director’s name.”

“It’s the same with me!” Checkers said. “My real name? Chekiquinto. Can you believe?” He shook his head and laughed. “*Chekiquinto*. My gosh!”

“Horrible!” Gaz laughed along. “And you? Is Reva Gogo for real?” He said it like he already knew that it wasn’t. My real name was Revanena Magogolang, but Checkers thought all the repetitive syllables made my name sound like a tongue twister, so right before *The Creature In the Cane*, he de-clunked it down to its smoothest sound. *And Reva Gogo*, my credit read, *as The Creature*.

I took Checkers' hand and made him sit with me on a beanbag. "Show us your movie," I said. The sooner we saw Gaz's clips, I thought, the sooner we could get our money and fly home.

Gaz wheeled in a film projector from his bedroom, loaded a sixteen millimeter reel, then hung a white bed sheet on the wall. "There are rough spots," he said, "but I think you'll like what you see." He drew the curtains, turned off the lights, filled a bowl with pretzels, then showed us the footage he'd completed so far.

The film opened with a view of earth from outer space, and a voice (Gaz's) began: "*The year is 1999. The world and all its good citizens have never been better. World peace has been achieved, no child goes hungry, disease has been gotten rid of. Man is free to contemplate the human condition, and more importantly, colonize outer space.*" Entering the picture was a bottle-shaped spaceship, THE VALEDICTORIAN glittering in blue letters along its hull. "There she is," Gaz whispered, "the smartest ship in the fleet." A whistle blew, and then a weird, psychedelic montage of oddly-angled stills began: there was Captain Vance Banner, the square-jawed fearless leader; Ace Trevor, the hot-headed helmsman; the Intelli-Bot 4-26-35 ("My birthday," Gaz said); and finally Lorena Valdez, the raven-haired, olive-skinned meteor scientist. "Eyes darker than the cosmic void, lips redder than human blood," Gaz quoted from his script.

Gaz loaded a second reel, quick scenes of the actors running in a nearby canyon, which would be the planet inhabited by Checkers' monsters. "That's where I'll splice your footage in," Gaz said. The canyon scenes were comprised of reaction shots, extreme close-ups of the actors shouting, "*Look out!*" "*Duck, Captain, duck!*" and "*They're hideous!*" "I had them take expressions lessons in West Hollywood," Gaz said. "They've definitely done their homework."

I looked at Checkers. There were pretzel crumbs on the corner of his mouth, but when I tried to wipe them off he brushed my hand away. "Sssh," he said. His face glowed blue from the movie on the wall, as it once did back in the CocoLoco editing room, late at night after a long

day's shoot. I would end up asleep on the floor, and when I woke the next morning he'd still be in his chair, struggling to make every scene as perfect as it could be.

Gaz turned off the projector. "And that's just the beginning," he smiled. "So, are we in?"

Even before Gaz turned on the lights, Checkers was on his feet. "Let's do it," he said. His breathing was heavy and fast, almost desperate, and his forehead was drippy with sweat. "I'm ready," he said, "we're in."

It was still early evening, and Gaz suggested we drive to the set. "'MGM?'" Checkers guessed. "Twentieth Century Fox?"

"My mom's basement in Pasadena," Gaz answered.

Freeway traffic was slow; I fell asleep in the back seat, and when I woke we were in front of Gaz's mother's house. It was an old, peeling Victorian with a shingled roof that had almost no shingles left, and the shutters dangled from the uppermost windows, like limbs attached to a body by one last vein. That house would have been Checkers' dream set. We'd had to make do with tin-roofed shacks and three-walled huts in shanty towns far beyond Manila, where we paid impoverished locals with cigarettes and sacks of rice to play our victims for a day. "If we'd had something like this to work with," Checkers said, "life back home would still be good."

The basement was like an underground studio set, sectioned off by plywood partitions and cardboard walls: each room was a different section of *The Valedictorian*—the bridge, the science lab, the weapons bay, the space sauna. We hadn't been on a set since *Squid Children* five years before, but Checkers made himself at home, examining each room from different angles, as though he was behind a camera, filming right then.

I wandered off alone. "Explore all you want, but don't touch anything," Gaz said. But I didn't need to touch anything to know its cheapness: the helm was made of Styrofoam and cardboard, painted to look like steel; the main computer was a reconfigured pinball machine; the Intelli-Bot 4-26-35 was an upside down fishbowl painted gold atop a small TV set, and its bottom

half was a vacuum cleaner on wheels. But I was used to this lack of marvelousness, because Checkers worked this way too, attempting magic from junk: wet toilet tissue shaped like fangs was good enough for a wolf-man or vampire, and our ghosts were just bed sheets. For the Squid Children, Checkers found a box of fireman's rubber boots, glued homemade tentacles (segments of rubber hose affixed with suction cups) on them, then made his tiny nephews and nieces wear them on their heads. "On film," Checkers used to say, "everything looks real."

I found Checkers and Gaz in the space lab, the contract between them: Gaz would pay twenty-five hundred dollars up front, then pay five percent of the profits. "Jackpot-eureka!" Checkers said after he signed, though neither of us knew how much that would be worth back home.

Gaz and Checkers wanted to celebrate, so we went from bar to bar on Hollywood Boulevard, then strolled along the Walk of Fame. "A trio of visionaries should have the stars at their feet, right Chex?" Gaz said. Checkers nodded, zigzagging down the street. For so long, Checkers had resented Hollywood, convinced it was American movies that drove us out of the business. Now, here he was, lolling about in enemy territory, drunk from beer, bourbon, and all the inspiration surrounding him—the Hollywood Wax Museum, Mann's Chinese Theater, even the life-size celebrity cut-outs in storefront windows. I tried keeping up, making sure he didn't fall.

Hours later, Checkers and I made love on Gaz's couch. At first I told him we shouldn't, not there in a stranger's home. "He's so drunk he'll never wake up," Checkers assured me. He nibbled my neck and nuzzled my breasts, let out a low guttural growl. "Gently," I said, running my fingers through his pompadour, "softly." He obeyed. I knew Checkers was drunk, but this was how I wanted us to finish the day: it was the longest of our lives, thirty-seven hours since we left Manila. So I gave myself up to this moment when we could finally slow down, and I imagined us as Deborah Kerr and Burt Lancaster in *From Here To Eternity*.

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The next morning I reached for Checkers and he wasn't there. I opened my eyes and found him on the floor, asleep on his stomach. For a moment I thought we were in Manila again, that this was just another of our ordinary days. But then I saw the yellow beanbags on the floor, brighter than anything in our apartment back home.

I got dressed and went into the kitchen. Gaz was already there, sunglasses on, wearing a tiger-print robe. "Now that," he said, standing by the window, "is a Hollywood morning." I looked out. It was hazy and bright at the same time.

Suddenly, I realized Gaz was staring at me. "What?"

"It's weird to see you this way. In the human flesh, I mean." He removed his sunglasses. "I remember you in Checkers' movies, all fancy with your tentacles and boils and lobster claws. Chex got lucky when he found you. You make a good monster. You're a mistress of monsters." He chuckled. "You're a monstress."

"I am not monstrous," I said.

"Monstress," he said. "Not *monstrous*. See for yourself." He looked behind and above me. I turned around, and then I saw it, tacked to the wall: a poster for *The Squid Children of Cebu*. "I swiped it from CocoLoco, hung it up this morning. Thought it might make you two feel at home."

The edges had yellowed, but the picture was still clear: a dozen Squid Children on the edge of a lagoon, and behind them, lying on the shore, is the Squid Mother, her belly bloated with squid eggs yet to be spawned, tentacles flailing. That costume was sticky and rubbery, but by the end of the day it felt like my own skin. For hours I would and roll along the dirty sand, moaning, "Grrraargh, grrraargh," and I remember thinking, *This is it, this is my life*, as Checkers filmed me from afar. I hadn't seen the poster since the President of CocoLoco showed it to us, as an example of our failure.

At noon, we returned to the set to meet the cast. It was trash collection day in Pasadena; garbage cans lined the street, and in front of Gaz's mother's house, the parts of a dismantled mannequin lay in a pile on the sidewalk. "We can use this," Gaz said. "Help me out, Chex."

I walked ahead of them, toward the back of the house. The basement door was open. "Hello?" I called out. I stepped inside, heard giggling coming from the bridge. When I turned the corner I found Captain Banner and Ace Trevor leaning against the helm, their arms around each other. They might have been kissing. "Sorry," I said, my face warm from embarrassment.

They let go of each other, stood up straight. "We were just going over lines." The man who played Captain Banner held out his hand. "Everett Noel Dubois. But friends call me E. Noel. This is Prescott St. John, a.k.a. Ace Trevor." Prescott smiled, straightening his collar. They were the first professional actors I'd met in years, and I worried they would ask about my own acting history; a list of my roles and movies formed in my head, and they made me feel meager, shameful. I wanted to avoid the subject altogether, focus only on the good parts of my life. "I work for a dentist in Manila," was all I could think to say.

Gaz and Checkers walked in, carrying legs, arms, a torso. They set the mannequin parts on the ground, and Gaz made formal introductions. "Where's our Lorena?" he asked, looking at his watch. "If it's one thing I demand from my actors," he said, "it's punctuality. Be back in a flash." He went upstairs to call her at home. E. Noel and Prescott went outside to go over lines.

Checkers knelt to the ground and started rebuilding the mannequin. He said he was genuinely impressed by what he'd seen so far, but then he whispered his disappointments in Tagalog. "His camera work is unsteady," he said. "And his composition is so-so. But I have some suggestions for him. Lucky for him I have the experience, right?" He looked up at me. "What? Why is your face like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like this." He scrunched up his face into a girlish pout and rolled his eyes. "What's wrong with you?"

I knelt down beside him. “Maybe we should go home today. Just take the twenty-five hundred before he changes his mind.”

“Is your head broken? We have almost a week left. The American will need my guidance. This is a Gazman-Rosario Production, don’t you know?”

I slammed the mannequin hand against the ground; the pinky finger broke off. “‘Gazman-Rosario Production?’ Gazman-*Idiot* Production! You’ve already done the work he needs. You finished it years ago!” I took a deep breath, made my voice gentle again. “You were finished years ago. Don’t start this nonsense again. If you do...” I should have stopped there, but the poster in Gaz’s kitchen hung in my head like a fateful welcome home banner, and I couldn’t go back. “If you do, I won’t forgive you this time.”

Checkers set the mannequin’s right arm gently on the ground. Then he got to his feet, took backwards steps toward the wall, the way my victims would in his movies, right before the kill. “Checkers.” I held my arms out to comfort him, but he wouldn’t come to me. “Checkers?”

Suddenly, there was cursing and shouting as Gaz came running down the stairs “Crap!” he said. He kicked a computer console and it flew across the basement. “I lost my Lorena Valdez! She decided she’d rather do some bimbo role for a guy named Roman What’s-His-Face than finish my movie.” He leaned against the wall, slid down to the floor, put his face on his knees. “Where am I going to find another actress who’ll work for free? Crap!”

Then Checkers started pacing too. “Crap-crap!” he shouted. He went on the money he would lose, and he wondered how someone who once was great could slip away into a life as dead-end as ours. “I’m sorry,” I said, reaching for him. But he just pushed my arm away, told me to leave him alone. So I went to Gaz instead, and patted his shoulder to calm him down. This was the end of things, I was sure of it; the loss of Lorena Valdez was a sign that this collaboration was never meant to be, and it was time for Checkers and me to return to our real life back home.

Gaz inhaled deeply through his nose and exhaled through his mouth several times, then took my hand from his shoulder and squeezed it tight. His head rose slowly and he stared into my

eyes, almost lovingly. I thought he might try to kiss me, so I freed my hand from his and stepped back.

“What size spacesuit do you wear?” he whispered.

I never wanted to be Lorena Valdez. But Gaz insisted that I was born to play her, and besides, this was the only way to guarantee the deal he’d made with Checkers. “Think of the money,” Gaz said, and though Checkers stayed silent, I finally agreed that it was the only thing to do.

It was one hundred and two degrees the day we started filming. We were at the bottom of a canyon in Los Feliz, and all morning long, E. Noel, Prescott, and I ran back and forth, pretending to flee from Checkers’ monsters, while Gaz followed us with a hand-held camera. Checkers was alone at the top of the canyon by the NO TRESPASSING sign, looking out for cops.

At noon, we filmed a crucial scene that required me to run up the side of the canyon. “Now you’re fleeing from the stinkiest, oogiest, bat-winged pygmy you’ve ever seen,” Gaz said, “and it wants you for breakfast.” He put his hands on my shoulders, leaned in close. “Think about that as you’re running away. Understand?”

I had never taken direction from another man before. “I do,” I said.

Gaz set up the camera at the bottom of the canyon, then called action. I ran. I visualized myself from years before, chasing after me now, fangs bared and claws ready to shred, tentacles wrapping around me, squeezing me to my final breath. I could hear a hiss in my ear, and I shivered in the heat. I ran faster, staggering uphill on my hands and knees, telling myself, *Climb. Get to safety.* But when I looked up I saw Checkers walking toward me, as though he was trying to sabotage the shot. “Go!” I whispered. “You’re ruining the picture!” For a moment Checkers looked confused, like he suddenly realized he had no idea where he was, but finally backed away.

I finally reached the top. I got to my feet, looked straight down into the camera, and screamed my very first line of dialogue ever: “*They’re hideous!*” Then Gaz yelled cut, clapped twice, and proclaimed Lorena Valdez a new heroine for our time.

The day before I was meant to leave America, we shot the love scene. “Hold her here,” Gaz directed. He placed E. Noel’s hands on the small of my back, then put my arms around E. Noel’s neck. He stepped back, checked the shot.

It wasn’t cold in Gaz’s mother’s basement, but I was shivering. “You seem nervous,” E. Noel whispered. “First on-screen kiss?”

I had gouged, bitten, clawed, stabbed. Never kissed. “No.”

He smiled, like he didn’t believe me. “Well, if you do get nervous, just pretend I’m Checkers.”

Gaz called action. We started the scene.

We spoke of our failed mission and our fallen comrades—Ace had been barbecued by the bat-winged pygmies, and the Intelli-Bot 04-26-35 had malfunctioned beyond repair and turned against us—and we spoke of time wasted harnessing comet-tail energy, studying asteroid samples, mining moons for precious metals. “*All that matters to me now,*” E. Noel said, “*is you.*”

“*Captain. I, I’m frightened.*”

“*Of what? That demonic intergalactic menagerie of fanged creatures can’t touch us. Not now. Not with only five minutes of oxygen left.*”

“*No. That’s not it. I’m afraid of,*”—I took a deep breath—“*of loving you. Meteor analysis, moon colonization, those things are easy. But not love. Love takes work. Love takes time and we’re running out of it.*” I broke free from E. Noel’s embrace, walked toward the observation window, in near-disbelief that these lines, the most beautiful I had ever spoken, were actually mine.

E. Noel put his hands on my shoulders. *“Lorena. Of all the star systems I have explored, of every planet upon which I’ve walked, there is nowhere in the galaxy I’d rather be than here, on the bridge of The Vaedictorian, looking into your eyes. If this is my end, than it’s more than I could have ever hoped for.”* He pulled me close against him.

“I don’t know what—”

He put his index finger over my mouth. *“Sssh. Just kiss me, Lorena. That’s an order.”*

The slick of saliva and flesh of his lips. The running of his fingers through my wig. Our chests and hearts coming together. It all thrilled me, knowing the camera was there to capture the moment.

Then someone started laughing.

“Cut!” Gaz shouted. “What the dang is so funny?”

It was Checkers. “Pardon,” he said. “Sorry.” But he started laughing again.

I let go of E. Noel. I walked off the bridge, toward Checkers. “What’s wrong with you?”

“With me?” Checkers said in Tagalog. “Do you know what you look like up there? All that corny talk. All that overacting the American is making you do.” He shook his head, started laughing again.

“That’s enough,” I said. But he kept going, and his laughter turned to cruelty: he said the scene between Lorena and Banner was utterly unbelievable, that no two people would say such meaningless things in what could be the last moments of their lives. “They would try to stay alive. They would fight. That’s what brave explorers of outer space do, right?” He belittled Gaz’s script, insulted my acting, poked fun at the fact that I was kissing an obvious homosexual. “On film,” he said, “you will look like a whore.”

Sometimes I wonder if he meant this as a warning, a last chance to save me from starring in yet another fool’s movie. I didn’t think this at the time. Instead, my hand went up then lashed forward, a gesture I’d made dozens of times before in Checkers’ movies, and the other actor always knew the precise moment to duck. But this time, I made actual contact and inflicted real

pain: I slapped Checkers hard across the face, and my nails left red scratches just below his eye.

“Get away from here,” I said.

Checkers touched his face. He looked at the blood on his fingers.

“Get off the set,” I said it in English, so that everyone around could understand me, “and let me act.” Checkers moved away, still stunned, then left the basement.

Gaz called places. “From the top,” he said. We began again, but E. Noel kept stumbling over “*demonic intergalactic menagerie*,” and there were technical difficulties on the fifth, sixth, seventh takes. Only on the eleventh did we finally get it right: I took E. Noel’s advice and pretended he was Checkers. When we kissed, I managed to shed one single, perfect tear, just as Gaz had written in the script.

“Slight problemo,” Gaz said the next day. “We’re not done.” Checkers and I were packing for our flight back home. We hadn’t spoken since I struck him, and he did not return to Gaz’s apartment until early that morning. To this day, I don’t know where he was the previous night, or how he found his way back.

Gaz explained the situation: “You’re in the shot, Chex. When Lorena’s running up the canyon, you’re standing right there like this.” He got up, put his hands in his pockets, and looked all around like a lost tourist. “I could try to write you into the script, but at this point...” Gaz sat down, started folding one of Checkers’ shirts. “I need you to stay.” He was speaking to me. “A day or two, maybe three. There are some other scenes I’d like to re-shoot. I’ll even pay for your new ticket back. What do you say?”

Hours later, we dropped Checkers off at the curb. “Happy trails,” Gaz said, patting Checkers on the back, “’til we meet again.”

Checkers stared at Gaz for a few seconds, the way he did the morning they met, then got out of the car. “Five percent,” he said. “Don’t forget.”

I walked with Checkers to the entrance. “You’ll be okay, right?” I asked. “It’s just a few days.” I fixed his collar, smoothed his hair. I leaned in to kiss him good-bye, but stopped at the sight of the scratch marks on his face. They had scabbed over, and I traced over them with my finger. “Fool,” I said, shaking my head, weeping, “look what you made me do.” He grabbed hold of my wrist, slid my hand down to his lips, and instead of kissing it, he simply breathed in through his nose and mouth, as though I was air to him, his only oxygen. Then he let me go and went inside.

Gaz handed me a tissue when I got back in the car. “What’s a few days?” he said. What he couldn’t understand was that Checkers and I had never left one another before, and on the way to the airport, I’d daydreamed for us a lovelier farewell scene: just before takeoff Checkers exits the plane, dashes across the tarmac to get to me. We kiss so long and hard, hold each other so tight, that there is no way we can ever be apart.

Gaz finally titled the movie *The Terror of the Fanged Creatures*, and the morning after we finished shooting, Gaz showed me the screenplay for his next movie, *Pasadena RollerWars*. “I’m still looking for my BB San Juan,” he said. “The tough and sexy heroine of the deadliest rink in town. Think it over.” I called Checkers, told him all the things Gaz told me: that once-in-a-lifetime opportunities really are once-in-a-lifetime, that another American role would be good for my career, that we could always use the money. “I’m doing this for us, right?” I said.

There was a moment of silence on Checkers’ end. I thought we had been disconnected. “CocoLoco wants me back,” he finally said. “They read *Dino-Ladies Get Quezon City* and they want me to direct it. They said if my old movies can conquer Hollywood, then my new ones can double-conquer Manila. It’s unlucky for you that you’re not around to star in it.”

I had burned the only copy of *Dino-Ladies* years before, but I let Checkers talk his talk, because it was better than the truth—I could see him sitting on the couch, in his boxer shorts and dirty undershirt, waiting amidst his mess for my return. “Your chance came again,” I said,

“congratulations.” Then I hung up, found Gaz sitting in his kitchen, staring at the Hollywood morning, and told him yes.

After *RollerWars*, I did two more films for Gaz: *The Twisted History-Mystery* and *Jesse: Girl of a Thousand Streets*. All together, they took almost three years to shoot. Checkers and I spoke less, rarely returned each other’s calls, and I learned not to miss him by reminding myself that I was a working, professional actress in America; back home, I didn’t know what I was. I never returned to find out.

But of all the films I did for Gaz, only *Fanged Creatures* is remembered. I saw it again, just last year at the Silver Scream Theater in LA, almost twenty years after its original release. I sat alone in the second row; behind me an audience of college students mocked and hooted throughout, laughing especially hard during my kiss with E. Noel. But that scene still moved me—what did those young people know about the world ending all around you?

Overall, *Fanged Creatures* was still impressive: the plot was fast-paced, the camerawork was steady, and our reaction shots conveyed all the fear and dread Gaz hoped for. But the back and forth shifts between his film and Checkers’ footage was rougher than I remembered: bright Technicolor pictures alternated with yellowish, grainy ones, and Checkers’ monsters moved in a dreamy slow motion: the Squid Mother’s tentacles flowed around her like the tails of kites, the Bat-Winged Pygmy Queen glided through the air like a leaf in the wind, Werewolf Girl looked almost lovely as she bayed at the moon. It had been so long since I saw myself this way, that I was secretly mournful at the end when, after Captain Banner manages to restore power to the engines, Lorena presses the button that drops the nucleotomic bombs on Planet X. “There you are,” Gaz whispered to me, the night of its premiere, “obliterating yourselves out of existence.”

But what stayed with me then, what loops in my head even now, is what I didn’t see in the movie: that scene in the canyon, the one Gaz said Checkers ruined. I saw it only once, right before Gaz edited it out: on hands and knees I struggle uphill, a filthy, sweaty mess—my wig is a nest of pebbles and leaves, dirt smears my face, neck, and spacesuit. But it makes no difference

to Checkers. He comes to me with open arms, like I am a thing of unequaled beauty. *On film, everything looks real.* It was true: it did look like Checkers meant to help me up, to pull me to safety, and rescue me from that most hostile of planets.