

ELIZA VICTORIA

WOUNDED LITTLE GODS

a novel

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TUTTLE

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by
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PART

I

X

CHAPTER

1

Spirits used to roam the town of Heridos.

Regina knew this of course, being born and raised here. But right now, lying in the dark on the side of the road, she felt as if she had to keep telling this story, or else, she would forget who she was.

So.

From the top.

Spirits used to roam the town of Heridos, and then suddenly, they didn't.

As a child, Regina was used to seeing adults making animal sacrifices and offerings to bless a new house, to ask for the end of an illness, or to pray for a bountiful harvest. Regina's grandmother used to say, *Your mother spilled blood to give birth to you, and so too we shall spill blood as an offering to the spirits to give birth to a wish or a dream.* Which sounded beautiful to Regina, but not, as she was fond of saying, something that would sway her vegetarian friends.

(Her parents didn't approve of her jokes, which they found insensitive. Other things they didn't approve of: her whiny complaints about every little inconvenience, like the power going out, the heat, the heavy rain, the long commute, hard pil-

lows; her impatience with the slow pace of rural life; her flip-pant “Work smart, not hard!”; her hatred of backbreaking work that her parents—and her parents’ parents, and her parents’ parents’ parents, and so on since the very beginning of time—took so much pride in.)

Ten years ago, Heridos suffered a poor harvest, which got increasingly poorer as the years went by. It was as though the soil was cursed. The animal sacrifices stopped, and the goats and the pigs and the chickens moved—alive, at least initially—from the fields to the local parish, to the delight of the town priest, who for so long thought his parishioners were being annoying and pagan. Spirits sightings became increasingly rare until no one believed in them anymore. Regina’s mother continued to set food aside for the spirits whenever the family had a huge gathering at the house—a birthday, or the Day of the Dead—and her father still asked permission and gave due warning before watering the plants, *Tabi, tabipo*, but they did this more out of habit now than actual belief.

Most of the farmers became store owners, selling vegetables, root crops, and rice sourced from nearby towns. Some became hog and poultry farmers, raising pigs and chickens in backyard kennels and selling them as butchered meat in the wet market. They sold their farmlands to residential and commercial developers, and one of the rice fields gave birth to a mall.

(Though no blood was spilled.)

(At least as far as Regina knew.)

Some of the men and women went abroad and worked in factories in Taiwan or China or the United Arab Emirates, joining the deluge of skilled workers leaving the country to earn more cash for their families. The price of land in town appreciated significantly, and consumer goods, especially food, became

much more expensive. The average Heridos house, especially in the Poblacion, transformed from a simple one-story wooden house to a concrete structure with a second-floor terrace and a grotto—the house built by remittance.

What kind of spirits used to live in this town?

Well, imaginary talk show host, these were: the spirits of *palay*, of *alimuom*, of sun, silence, and rain, of clouds and lingering dreams, of the turning earth.

Of the artisanal soda. Of the matte lipstick. Of the hipster meme. Of—well, Regina, you are losing the plot. Now you are just being condescending.

“Are they gods?” Regina once asked her grandmother months before she died of old age. Her grandmother said they were nature personified; entities we could commune with and understand until we were worthy enough—or strong enough—to grasp the complexity and magnitude of *Bathala*.

“So,” little Regina said, “they’re like secretaries?”

Ten years ago, Ka Edgar, the oldest man in town at the time, said he woke up in the middle of the night and saw a young man (though to an octogenarian, penicillin could be considered young, so Regina took this description with a grain of salt) sitting on the edge of his bed. The young man was trying to tell him something, Ka Edgar said, but he could not understand a word. They weren’t even words in the first place, just sounds: a gurgling drainpipe, wind whispering through fields of *palay*, the sound of a person choking on his own blood.

The old man knew it was a spirit trying to give him a message, but he was scared shitless, and what was he to do? The spirit didn’t come with an interpreter.

That was the first year of the poor harvest. A sizeable portion of the old man's land produced rice grains as black as soot.

Okay, so that probably wasn't the best thing to think about, Regina, out here in the middle of the night, on this dark road.

Regina was lying on her back, her muscles sore, the back of her head hurting like hell. La Reina Heridos. La Regina Heridos. The wounded queen. The wounded Regina.

She was still trying to sit up. For miles around, all she could see was black against black, an outline of trees and wild grass against the night sky. She couldn't tell how long she had been lying there on the side of the road. She had seen no car or vehicle, or house, or another person. All she could hear was the low, continuous hum of cicadas, like an angry buzzing before an explosion.

So, think, Regina. Think of something else.

Regina thought of—

- attending grade school with OFW swag: the bright-green wristwatch that plays Beethoven's "Für Elise" when you lift the cover; the pencil case with the tiny piano that you can actually play; the ruler filled with water, tinfoil fish, and glitter; the large padded bags filled with markers in 140 colors, from Bittersweet Cerise to Wishful Wisteria
- her father's Taiwanese bosses dropping by for a visit, and her father introducing her and her older brother Luciano in Hokkien because her father knows the Hokkien words for "eldest" and "youngest" and he wants to impress them
- waking up at 3 AM to prepare for the school parade; the beautician sticking curlers in her hair and pumping the

atmosphere with hair spray so she'll "look like a little queen", to which she replies with a frown and a deep sigh because it's too early in the morning for this nonsense

- listening to her brother talk about his grade school years, about a classmate who hit his head and bled profusely—"I have never seen that much blood in my life"—and how the classmate got sutures and went on to live in California with his wife—"I think he's into cars now"—and Regina, filled to the brim with coffee, telling her brother how amazing it is that a tragedy today can be forgotten years from now—"Does anyone even mourn Carthage?"
- at the same time thinking of the thirteen-year-old girl who died here on this field, the one who they said ran the length of an entire barangay like a dog pursued before slipping and dying here, in the mud, her father cradling her body in his arms, terror-struck, the look in his eyes promising that he would be haunted by this moment for years and years and years

Oh awesome, Regina. What enlightening material. I feel so comforted now.

Shut up.

Shut up and get up.

A light appeared in the distance. Faint but visible through the trees.

Get up, she told herself. Get up, get up, *get up*.

Regina rolled onto her stomach, took a deep breath, and pushed herself up. (Idly she noted she was doing the beginning of an Elbow Push-Up and a Mountain Climber, two of the moves they taught in that gym class she attended once and then dropped as if it were radioactive.) The whole maneuver took her close to ten minutes.

She walked as if she were drunk, swaying, losing balance. She kept her eyes on the prize, that light in the distance. She was getting closer.

Regina veered right, getting off the road and stepping into a clearing.

The light was coming from a house.

The light was coming from a house that was not supposed to be there.

Wait.

What?

Oh, Regina.

Surely, you're still on the side of the road, enjoying a final hallucination before your untimely demise.

But it didn't feel like a dream. It felt real. (And wouldn't it be too sad if her last dream of this life involved suffering from what appears to be the hangover of the century? That would be too sad.) Regina walked-swayed to the house and placed her hand on the door. Her hand didn't sink through. She knocked, and Florina opened it.

"Regina," Florina said as Regina stared with her mouth open. "There you are."

"What?" Regina said.

CHAPTER

2

A week earlier, Regina was just ending her shift at the small offshore company where she worked as Administrative Assistant. The company took on a lot of jobs from clients in the US, and accepted anyone who could string three words together. Seriously. Anyone. HR was like a revolving door. They prided themselves on their one-day processing, which involved something called “not digging into an applicant’s background.” This would have a bearing later on in Regina’s story.

Regina took the job out of panic. She was fresh out of college with a Journalism degree she had a love/hate relationship with, three of her job applications had already fallen through, and she had bills to pay. The job that was finally offered to her was dumb and repetitive, but the office was in Makati and the pay and the hours weren’t bad. Her parents were disappointed in her career choice, and they had made their disappointment known subtly, sometimes overtly. Regina didn’t mind. She figured it was still early enough to make mistakes. On the other hand, her brother, who worked as a researcher in Los Baños and earned enough to afford a secondhand car, was simply happy that someone in the city chose to hire her. He set his bar pretty low.

She had been working for close to a month when the company welcomed a graphic designer named Diana. She looked to be in her mid-20s, definitely not entry-level, which made Regina wonder why she would choose to work in a small, borderline-black-market company such as this. They sat in adjoining cubicles next to the huge windows that gave them a view of Ayala Avenue, greeted each other every morning, and said goodbye at 6 PM every night. Diana wasn't very talkative, and Regina would be hesitant to call her a friend. They weren't even Facebook friends.

On Diana's second week at work, the following Monday was proclaimed a holiday, so on Friday she and Diana stood by the windows, nose to the glass, looking on in horror as traffic built up on the streets.

"Shit," Regina said. "Those cars aren't moving."

"This is a nightmare," Diana said. "Where do you live?"

This was Diana's first question to Regina that didn't involve her choice for lunch or *merienda*.

"QC," Regina replied.

"Yikes."

"I know. I'd be stuck on the road if I took a bus, and the train's going to be filled with people." Regina sat down. "I figure I'll just stay here until late at night."

"I live nearby," Diana said. "Want to crash there for a few hours?"

Diana was already packing up her stuff. There were still a handful of people in the office who, like Regina, planned to wait out the weekend gridlock.

"Are you sure?" Regina asked. "It won't be a bother?"

"No, of course not," she said. "It's a studio apartment, but there's space for you to sleep if you want to. We can walk there."

So, they walked. Regina insisted on buying take-out for their dinner. Diana's studio apartment was on the 10th floor of a high-rise building. Her place was cluttered with books and shoes but had a clean, minty smell, like a spa. Diana had an impressive PC setup, the computer sitting on a faux oak table near the door. She appeared to have spent most of her money on the machine, scrimping on the rest of the furniture pieces. She had a coffee table for a dining table, with pillows on the floor as seats. Boxes for bookshelves. A mattress on the floor for a bed.

Regina, who was a bedspacer in a lady's dorm in Quezon City, loved everything.

Diana turned on the PC and played some music as Regina fixed their plates and their food. She glanced at the books stacked under the table. One had a photo of a portion of an art installation from the 1920's. *Some people are born to be a burden on the rest*, the copy read in flowing script.

The books had titles like *The Secret History of Human Experimentation*. *Holocaust Experiments*. *Bad Blood*. *Eugenics: Creating the Master Race*.

"Let's eat," Diana said with a smile. She sat cross-legged across from her and reached for the rice. "Is there anyone you need to call back home?"

"Just my brother I guess," Regina said. "But I've already texted him."

"Older?"

"Yes."

"Are you guys close?"

Regina shrugged. "I guess? But we don't see each other that often."

"Where do you live?" Diana said. "If you don't mind me asking."

“Heridos,” Regina said.

“Small town?”

“I wouldn’t call it small,” she replied, and paused to think. “We now have a Mini-Stop.”

Diana laughed. They ate, and talked about work, the people at work (“I never liked that pompous jerk”), and the work they had to return to on Monday even if the rest of the workforce were on holiday because, apparently, they belonged to the continental United States. The whole time Regina kept glancing under the coffee table.

“So,” she said, when she couldn’t help it any longer, “about your books—”

It seemed as if Diana was just waiting for her to speak. “Some light reading, huh.”

“They look—”

Grim? Sad? Strange?

“—interesting.”

“I’ve been reading up on eugenics and human experimentation for a long time,” Diana said. “I’m—I can’t say I’m *fascinated*. It’s not a fascination, really. More like a disbelief. I can’t believe it all really happened, and now I can’t stop reading. It’s like I’m hoping to come across a piece of information that would tell me otherwise.”

Regina didn’t know how to respond to that.

“For example, the Tuskegee experiment in Alabama. That one ran until 1972, and could have continued running if not for a media leak. It included 400 African-American men with syphilis, who thought they were receiving treatment when, in fact, they were just being used to observe the natural progression of the disease. They were not given treatment even after the discovery of penicillin in 1947. So, of course, these men infected their wives and passed on syphilis to their children.

“Even earlier,” Diana said, “something that happened right here. In 1906, an American director of the Philippine Biological Laboratory infected Bilibid inmates with cholera. He did this without the inmates’ consent. Thirteen died in that experiment. That doctor became a medical professor at Harvard University.

“And, of course, you’ve read of what happened during the Third Reich. The Nazis sewed twins together, injected dye into children’s eyes, and exposed people to the cold until they died. Prisoners were poisoned or bombarded with mustard gas or infected with tuberculosis, and then killed immediately so doctors could carry out autopsies. Can you believe that? They sound too brutal to be real, and yet they *are* real, they *did* happen.

“The sadder thing is, all these horrible things? *They have happened before*. There were genocides before the Holocaust, and these genocides have already been forgotten. Does anyone even mourn Carthage? You would think—you would hope—that one genocide is one too many, that we would finally learn that every life is precious. That we would try to be better. And yet—”

She stopped suddenly.

“I’m so sorry,” Diana said.

“Want some beer?” Regina said at the same time. Diana smiled.

“What a stupid topic to bring up,” Diana said.

“It’s all right.”

“Do you know that I even began writing these ideas into this game I’m working on?”

“A game?”

“Yes. Do you play?” Diana stood up, not waiting for her reply. “Let me show you something.”

She talked as she opened windows on her PC. “I have some notes and I’ve started working on an interactive environment. Just something to play with. Try this. It’s more virtual tour right now than game, actually.”

Regina sat in the computer chair softened with about ten throw pillows, and moved the mouse. Onscreen were four buildings that, due to the crude CG, looked more like steel boxes with holes. The grass like shards of green glass. Three flies were painted on one wall of the nearest building. Two of the insects, separated by a plus sign, had red eyes; the one beneath, preceded by an arrow, had white eyes. Regina recognized this. For some reason, she wanted to impress Diana. The flies were fruit flies, and they referred to Thomas Hunt Morgan’s experiments with—what was the scientific name for fruit fly? *Droso*-something—Anyway—fruit flies, which proved that genetic changes could happen outside of inheritance, and which he used to criticize eugenics.

Is there a prize for people who solved Easter eggs? Regina wanted to say, feeling clever, but then Diana moved the mouse again and swiped the screen to the right.

More sharp blades of grass, now dotted with gold. *Palay*. Rice ready for harvest.

In the far distance, an outline of a house with what seemed to be a broken roof. Regina stared at this in disbelief. She knew this house, and would recognize this house and that telltale bend of its roof in a heartbeat. As a child she passed by it nearly every day with her parents. It was where Ka Edgar lived. It was abandoned after the old man died, and the roof caved in after a storm.

So instead of the Easter egg quip, all Regina could think to say was *Are you from Heridos, and do we know each other?* as she turned to Diana to demand an explanation.

Diana, sitting on an ottoman she had pulled from one corner of the apartment, stared at the computer screen with tears flowing from her eyes. Regina was shocked and disturbed by this.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Diana’s reflexes were slow. She turned her head, stared at Regina for a few unnerving seconds, and said, “Hm?”

“You know what,” Regina said, thinking, *I’m too tired to get involved in this*, “I think the streets are manageable now. I should get out of your hair.”

Diana blinked and wiped her face with an open palm. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I could take the train.” Lie. It was already 11 PM, and the MRT was already closed.

“Let me get your bag.”

It took Diana a while to retrieve Regina’s bag from the floor. She wondered if Diana was on medication and if it was okay to leave her alone.

“Will you be all right?” Regina asked as Diana handed her bag to her.

Diana looked surprised by this. *What? Me? Why wouldn’t I be?* “Of course.” As though she had not been crying just five minutes ago. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

“See you on Monday?” Regina said.

“Sure.”

Lie. Regina did not see Diana on Monday. Or the next day. Or the day after that. The office assumed Diana hated the job too much to even tender a proper resignation and just decided to go AWOL (which in the office was a frequent enough occurrence). Regina was worried. On Wednesday, she told HR about Diana’s inexplicable crying on Friday night (omitting the part where Diana started talking at length about Nazi experiments

and genocide), and accompanied her supervisors to Diana's building. They met Diana's landlord, who said he had not seen Diana around but that she had already paid her rent for the month.

Of course they couldn't bring the police in on it ("Maybe she just went on vacation!"), even though their emails to Diana's address went unanswered, they couldn't contact the numbers, emergency or otherwise, that she had written in her employment records, and the provincial address and previous employers she had provided them turned out to be nonexistent. Who knew? Maybe she had even given them a fake name. HR didn't look into unimportant things like character references, so the office didn't know anyone else who knew Diana beyond her name.

On Thursday night, Regina cleared out her bag and found a folded piece of paper in one of the pockets.

On Friday night she was on a bus that would take her to Heridos. She had not been home for months and her mother had been giving her hell for it. Might as well make the trip, she thought, even though, of course, she had other concerns.

CHAPTER

3

When Regina unfolded the piece of paper, it showed a map on one side and two names on the other.

The paper was old, stained with coffee, and creased from being folded and unfolded repeatedly. The map was drawn and annotated with a black pen. Regina knew from internal office missives (*Kindly handle—Can you please—TY!*) that it was Diana's own handwriting.

It was a very simple map. Just shapes and lines. One big square to the right was marked *EAC FARM*. Edgar A. Cajucom was the old man's full name. An arrow pointing to the bottom of the page was marked *TOWN PROPER*, followed by several squares marked *Hospital* and *Town Hall* and *Mall/Ukay Place* and *Big Church* and *Market*. Big Church (actually the National Shrine of St. Therese) was exactly what they called the church in the town proper, because the Little Church (a small square at the top of the page) was an abandoned chapel at the edge of Ka Edgar's property. To the left of the page were rectangles and squares marked *Elementary/High School* and *Residential* and *Old Farms*. The school was a big property that had already been abandoned. Now, out-of-towners used it to shoot pre-nups and horror specials. *Residential* was composed of several

squares, several houses now also abandoned. Between two *Old Farms* were two parallel lines flowing to the left of the page and beyond marked *Diversion Road to Malolos*.

At the very center of the page were five squares, with an X in one of the squares. No label, just that black X.

This didn't make sense to Regina. Everything else was correct, but there weren't any buildings near Ka Edgar's old farm.

She turned the page over and saw:

Loretta Juni

Emil Macaraeg

The names meant nothing to her.

Regina planned to only call her mother ("Did they happen to build a mall near Ka Edgar's place?"), but the moment the call connected her mother said, "So when are you coming home?"

As usual, the moment Regina stepped foot in their house her parents bombarded her with various updates about her aunts, uncles, cousins, former neighbors, and people she had not heard of before but whom her parents deemed important or interesting enough to warrant an update.

Her parents' story was the story of any other couple in Heridos, give or take one element. They were (1) in their fifties who had children in their twenties. They were (2) one of ten or more siblings. They (3) started working very young, (4) paid for their own education, and (5) worked in the city after college before returning to Heridos to raise a family.

When Regina turned seven, her father left to do blue-collar work in Taipei for five years, and her mother ran their newly opened grocery store. They saved enough money to finish the construction of the two-story house where they now lived.

Now her parents manned the store full-time, opening up at two in the morning and closing down at five in the afternoon, not changing their schedule or their lifestyle even after both of their children had finished college. They were used to hard labor. They had no use for expensive gourmet food or art films. They went to Church on Sundays, slept early, and woke up early.

Sometimes Regina wondered if they had regrets, if her father ever wished he had just stayed in Taipei, or if her mother had desires beyond raising children and living in this town, but she didn't dwell on these thoughts. In her mind her parents were always content, always happy.

"So is your brother coming home?" her father asked when they met her at the gate.

"I don't know."

"Why won't the two of you coordinate? Come home at the same time at least once so your mother will have a reason to cook me a nice dinner."

They sat down for some *caldereta*. This was Regina's favorite part of coming home, eating a meal that did not come from a can.

Her mother kept her up-to-date with her running tally of who's dead, alive, married, pregnant.

"Can you believe that Jocelyn is already turning three this year?" she said.

"Who's Jocelyn?"

"*Diyos ko*, your cousin Maia's daughter! Don't you remember?"

"Oh, is Maia the one who got pregnant in high school?"

"And she's pregnant again. With twins."

"What?"

"Well, she's married to the boy now," her father said, in a tone that seemed to say, *That should fix it!*

"Did you know that Mr. Soriano's passed on?" her mother said.

"Who's Mr. Soriano?"

"*Ano ka ba*, your father's friend, the *masahista*? We used to go visit him in Sto. Rosario, don't you remember? He'd give us foot massages. Your father would fall asleep during a back massage. Remember?"

"Oh, him. That's too bad."

"You remember your cousin Sonia's boyfriend, Arthur? He was your age, got hit by a truck last month."

"Yikes," Regina said, and thought, *Well, what else could you say to that?*

"He went home drunk, drove home on his motorcycle," her father said. "*Ayun.*"

"Do you know what happened to Len-len?" her mother said.

"Who in the world is Len-len?" said Regina.

And so on.

Before her parents went to bed, Regina stood by their door and said, "Is there anything being built near Ka Edgar's property? A mall? A house?"

Her parents looked at each other. "I don't think so," her father replied.

"Last I heard the family's still looking for a buyer for that land," her mother said. "They had barbed wire around the old farm and the old man's house. With that big sign."

"Do you know someone named Loretta Juni?"

"I know some Junis in San Jose," said her father. "I don't remember a Loretta."

"How about Emil Macaraeg?"

"I think there's a Dr. Macaraeg at the hospital," her mother said.

"The hospital here in town?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, it's nothing," Regina said, filing away this information. "Someone at work used to live here in Heridos, asked me if I knew these people."

"What's the name of your office mate?"

"Diana de Leon."

Her parents looked at each other and shrugged. "Don't know any Dianas," her mother said, and her father added, hopeful, "There are some De Leons in Sta. Rita."

Regina shrugged. "I don't know her too well, anyway. Good night."

She went to her room and called her brother. Her bedspread was new and crisp and smelled like fabric softener. Her faux-gold-gilded wooden certificate from kindergarten was still on the wall. She was surrounded by old things: old books, old photos with her old friends from high school, her old life.

"Aren't you going home?" she asked. Her brother's voice sounded tiny.

"No. I have work to finish. What's up?"

"Do you know anyone named Diana de Leon?"

"No. Who's that?"

"Never mind. Do you know that Mr. Soriano's dead?"

"Who's *that*?"

"The *masahista*? You remember him? He had this little black massager that went *brrrrrrrrmmmm*."

Luciano was laughing. "*What*?"

"That was my approximation of the sound of a massager."

Luciano laughed for a good ten seconds, and turned serious. "Sure, I remember him. That's too bad."

“How about Len-len?” she said. “You know what happened to Len-len?”

“Who the hell is Len-len?”

And so on, until she got sleepy.

The next day she got ready to look for the square marked with an X on Diana’s map.

SAMPLE