

BLACK MAMBA

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Across the green felt, on the opposite side of the kidney-shaped poker table, Muriel's opponent stared at her and boldly declared, "All in!"

The crowd that followed the game had been waiting for the all-in moment. The crowd was composed of kids barely out of college in their poker attire of hoodies, large headphones, and designer slippers, office workers in their short-sleeved barongs, and even senior men and women wearing what could pass off as sleepwear. The kids excitedly whispered to their companions, some of the adults were yawning, wanting to go but unable to leave until they learned who would be crowned champion, some took fleeting looks at the LCD TV screens mounted on the walls of the room. But the whole crowd fell silent when Muriel's opponent started pushing all his chips towards the center of the table.

Muriel had been playing really tight poker up to that point. She had come in with a standard raise and it was fold, fold, until action got around to the big blind and he re-raised all-in.

Muriel literally took her time. A quick glance at her watch told her it was already three o'clock in the morning. She was one of the three players left in the final table of the First Shawarma Joe Multi-Million Poker Tournament or 1st SJMMPT held at the Parañaque Poker Stars City.

Poker Stars City was the latest of the dozens of poker rooms that sprouted all over the metropolis in recent years. It occupied the entire second floor of a red and white four-storey building owned by Shawarma Joe, Inc. The walls and the floor of the 1,000 square meter poker room were likewise painted red and white. The one hundred or so poker tables were evenly spaced, and even the deeply cushioned chairs assigned to each table used blood red colors streaked with white. Despite having played in Poker Stars City several times already, Muriel still could not shake off the feeling that the Queen of Hearts would storm in anytime through the front door and order her minions to cut the heads off the many impostors who pretended that they knew enough about poker to make a living out of it.

Muriel tried to read her opponent's facial expression but she could not find anything. She thought: "Did he think I was on a steal, rising from the cut-off position?" Her tired and weary eyes were hidden behind dark Pradas. Her small hands slightly trembled. She looked at her cards again. She had two black tens. She thought they did not look like much but they were a statistical favorite against what she felt were unpaired cards. The all-in player was at risk. Muriel had more chips than him, but not by a lot. If she called and won, her opponent would be busted. If she lost, she would have to go all-in herself in the very next hand. Her small jaws tightened as she paused and closed her eyes.

To call or not to call, that was the question. What added to the pressure of the decision was that the all-in player was Alberto, her husband, the last man she wanted to face in any tournament. Leaning against the backrest of the plush red and white chair, behind her shades, Muriel tried to maintain her poise, her poker face.

Muriel met her husband Alberto nine years ago. At that time, Alberto was a young proprietor of a soap manufacturing business which he had just put up with a loan from a wealthy aunt. He was attending a one-month seminar on entrepreneurship in a hotel in Makati when he caught a glimpse of Muriel who was standing behind the concierge counter. He

thought her looks were as fresh as the early morning rain and he could not wait for the following day to see her again.

Muriel's physical looks belied the fact that she had come from a family that struggled through poverty. She was even often mistaken for a *colegiala*, with flawless white skin, the face of a Spanish *mestiza* and the bewitchingly curly brown hair that went just below her shoulders. She was also gifted with optimism and a vibrant personality so that she had never been inclined to give up during tough times.

Alberto, on the other hand, had a strong athletic build. His skin was burned from too much exposure to the sun while playing golf.

Muriel and Alberto became engaged after a short courtship. One day, as she went inside the hotel's personnel office, she took out a fancy medium-sized box that contained the invitation cards for her wedding. While she handed out each one of the glossy cards, she would get the same reaction from her female officemates, "Oh you're marrying a rich entrepreneur! How lucky can you get?"

The couple was the envy of their friends. Muriel and Alberto honeymooned for three months, travelling to places in the country where neither had gone before. A few months after living in a simple apartment that they used as love nest, they bought a townhouse in one of the subdivisions in Manila. They lived content until they realized that something was missing in their life. They wanted a child.

After three years of unsuccessful attempts to have a child, they sought the help of medical experts. But the doctors saw nothing wrong in either of their physical conditions. They thought that the couple was just stressed out especially Muriel who had a full time job that usually extended into the late evenings. Alberto's business was starting to flourish too so finding a common schedule was becoming increasingly difficult. When he was not in his soap factory, he played golf with his clients and his buddies.

It was a difficult decision to make but Muriel's yearning for a child prompted her to relinquish her job.

"I am not getting any younger Alberto. I will have to give up my job if it means bearing a child," Muriel said.

Alberto readily agreed and promised his wife, "Don't worry, I will take care of you."

But each year that passed became more unbearable for Muriel. Alberto would spend his days at the golf course with his friends while she stayed at home. She spent her days watching syndicated TV series recorded on DVD format and surfing the Internet. One day, her doctor detected a lump in her thyroid gland. The condition made her weak and sluggish. Her personal savings dwindled due to expenses in the house as well as medications and check-ups.

She did not realize how selfish her husband turned out to be. Alberto did not keep his promise to take care of her. Every time Muriel went to the doctor, Alberto would go berserk blurting out hurting words to his wife: "You have not been able to contribute financially in this house for years! And now, I still have to pay for your medical bills?"

Their neighbors would hear Alberto shouting at the top of his lungs, slamming the doors. Muriel would be left weeping. Many times, she would answer back and defend herself but Alberto's hands were faster for a beating.

She desperately attempted to look for a job through the Internet and job fairs. At the same time she did the household chores. On one occasion, she appeared for a job interview with bruises on her right arm and cheek that even a thick coating of make-up could not conceal. Employers would regret that she was over-aged for the position she would apply for. Many of her applications did not even get a reply.

The worry lines on her face were beginning to be noticeable through the years. On many occasions, she would sell her valued possessions which she had bought in the past like jewelry, leather bags, wallets, shoes and clothes to her friends.

She needed the money so that she could also continue the religious pacts she made with her favorite saints. Since she was brought up as a devout Catholic, Muriel's week was not complete if she was unable to attend the Wednesday morning mass at the Redemptorist Church in Baclaran. In May, she would also make a pilgrimage to Obando, Bulacan to join the fertility dance. During the early years of their marriage, Alberto had grudgingly accompanied her to Obando but he soon gave up on it. He said the old hags who joined the dance looked pathetic.

While the good-natured Muriel was trying her best to make the marriage still work, Alberto believed that she had turned into a pathetic, pale-looking, sickly freeloader.

One time in May, Alberto came home past midnight. He was drunk and reeking of cigarettes. But he was rejoicing as he boasted of his wallet padded with money.

He said, "Look! I got this from poker!" and he chuckled impishly like a boy who had managed to trick his elders. This incident did not only happen once but countless times — the same nights that Muriel would find herself having dinner and going to bed all by herself. She began to suspect that something foul was going on.

"Was he telling the truth? How could one really make money at it?" she wondered.

Her desperation to find a job had shifted to a queer fascination with the poker world. Every time her husband would be out for work, she would devote hours of studying poker on the Internet and watching featured poker games on TV on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Poker was just like playing *pusoy*, she thought. One had to make pairs, trips, straight, flush

or full house. Unlike *pusoy* where a player would have thirteen cards, the Texas Hold 'em game which was featured on TV and the Internet would only require two cards as the player's hand. The five cards on the board were community cards that the other players may use to complete their hands. Muriel learned that in no limit hold 'em, being "all-in" meant betting all one's chips.

After two months of studying poker, Muriel decided to join a poker tournament at the Grand Casino in Parañaque. She phoned in early and asked for the tournament mechanics. She learned that poker tournaments were held everyday at 1 p. m. at an entry fee of P100 and that the guaranteed pot was P20,000.00. She thought that the entry fee was very small considering the size of the pot. There were also other poker tournaments at a higher fee with big cash bounty but she could not afford the fees. Besides, she was new at the game.

After taking her early lunch and medication, she took a bus going to the casino. Clad in black jeans, black T-shirt and black sneakers, she started to question her actions while she was in the bus.

"Am I doing the right thing?" she was beginning to doubt as the heat of the noonday sun heavily plowed into her outfit.

Sweating profusely from a long walk in the casino's vast compound, she arrived at the lobby thirty minutes before the tournament. She stood in awe as she had never been to a casino before. Inside, the glittering chandeliers shone on every corner of the place and the ushers welcomed her like one of the most valued guests. The multiple rows of slot machines and baccarat tables on the ground floors were untouched.

After being informed where the poker tournament was going to be held, she dragged herself nervously on the red carpet covering the wide staircase leading to the massive second floor. She prayed that nobody would recognize her as she hastened to pull out from her big black tote bag a black pull-over and her wide-framed Prada shades, the only valuable thing that remained

with her. There she joined a hundred poker players gathering slowly like an upcoming storm. People would come in packs of three or four in jackets with hoods. There were lots of noise and chatter. Most of them looked amused and amazed as they exchanged their poker stories. Some were also wearing shades and caps and a handful could be spotted in barong.

She followed the registration queue and signed herself with a different name. The registration clerk looked at the list. She smiled at Muriel as she handed her seat card. Muriel entered the cordoned area where ten kidney-shaped tables with green felt tops welcomed her. In a few minutes, the tournament director called on all the participants to take their respective seats as young dealers in black vests went to their assigned tables.

Muriel handed her seat card that stated Table No. 9, seat 7 to the lady dealer on the table. As she settled on her seat, she looked around and saw only a handful of female players aside from the more than eighty male competitors. Although these women looked fresh and seemed barely out of college, their appearance looked deceiving as they seemed perfectly at home in their seats while riffling their chips. But she blended well as scores of players also wore hooded jackets and dark shades. Some were plugged with iPods and more men were even older than her. At her table, she was the only woman flanked by eight merciless-looking males.

Then, the tournament director announced, "Shuffle up and deal!"

The competition started with Muriel getting all trash hands. She kept on folding and just patiently waited for the right hands to play. During the game, there were nasty players who picked on her, addressing her as *Hot Mama*. But she managed to maintain her composure as she offered them a quick but friendly smile. Some uttered insulting jokes as when they found out that she was a novice, a fact they instantly knew the moment her hands trembled every time she bet out with a winning hand.

But she was determined to outlast these men. She would stay silent and focus on the game and how her opponents played their cards. Looking at their facial expressions through her dark shades absorbed her.

As the amounts of the tournament blinds, or forced bets to start a deal increased, Muriel saw her opponents at the table get busted or transfer to another table. She saw grown men who, upon getting outdrawn, curse like children having a tantrum after stuffed toys were grabbed from them. She learned that day that poker actually had a name for that behavior – tilt. The childish behavior reminded her of Alberto.

After six grueling hours, only ten players were left in the tournament. These players composed the final table. The arrogant and noisy men who had been busted earlier were dumbfounded to find Muriel as the only woman left for the final table. Muriel became more nervous but she thought of just getting in the money. But since she was in the final table already, she wanted nothing more than getting the first prize.

She was tense and uneasy all the time. Her hood hugged her head tightly and her dark shades were unnervingly glued to her face. But lady luck must have been on her side that night. Muriel could not believe that she was able to beat her opponents and was finally declared as the champion of the tournament. It was already eight o'clock in the evening when the competition ended but her opponents could not stop talking about her dumb luck even over dinner or on another cash games. Muriel collected her P12, 000 from the cashier and hurried home. She knew that her husband would be in the casino any time soon.

This time, she picked a cab on her way home. Inside the cab, she removed her glasses and jacket. She felt drained and exhausted. At that moment, she received a text message from her husband. She began to speculate if somebody they knew saw her inside the casino but she felt relieved when all he said was that he would go home late as he had to play poker.

It was already past midnight but she could not fall asleep. For weeks, she had been used to her husband always coming home late. Muriel kept on tossing on her bed because she felt restless as the sudden surge of adrenalin in her body refused to subside. She could not believe how she survived the game. The number of instances that she went all-in suddenly flashed through her mind, followed by the faces of her opponents tilting or even mocking at her. At the same time, she wanted to celebrate. Then she felt a strong urge to go back to the casino the next day.

For the whole week after that, she played in the 1 p. m. P20, 000.00 tournaments. She eventually became comfortable with the place and with her attire – the jacket with hood, T-shirt, pants and sneakers that were all black and accessorized with dark glasses. She decided to make it her poker costume as she thought that attire brought her luck in the game. She played her cards seriously and did not bother to utter a single word to people beside her. What was astounding was that she would always land in the final table, and was always the only woman in the most coveted table. She played four times a week for a month, including weekends, and she won the top prize four times in her first month. On other days, she was either in second or third place. Players noticed that after she collected her winnings, she always left hastily like Cinderella who was speeding to get home before the clock ticked midnight. She also became the favorite topic among players. At the end of that week, a handful of regular male players whom she often encountered at the final table became intrigued with her.

“How come we don’t even see her face? Who is she?” One of the players was really bothered. Then he threw a question to the regular lady players in the table, “Didn’t you even try to have a chat with her on the table or even have the chance to see her face in the restroom?”

Nobody knew her name and the eager player thought of going to the registration table. Since the registration clerk knew the player as he always flirted with her, she easily gave in to the player’s request.

"I know her. Her name is M. That's what she always puts in the registration sheet," the young clerk said with a seductive look trying to show him her cleavage as she leaned forward on the table. "I like her. She's nice and she always gives generous tips even to the cashier and waitresses."

The player returned to his friends and told them what he had gathered.

One of the ladies, who envied Muriel for being a better player, said sarcastically, "Hmm... M...? M for *Mangkukulam!*", laughing and imitating a witch's wicked sneer.

On the other hand, a male player who admired Muriel's play all the time, interrupted and said, "Maybe M for Mamba! Black Mamba, from the movie Kill Bill!"

"That's right! It fits her as she always comes in that bla-a-ack outfit! Ohhh... scary!" remarked another player who cuddled his big belly as he laughed.

The following week came and Muriel joined the 1 p. m. tournament again. Her opponents did not only try to speculate on what she looked like behind her wide-framed dark glasses and beneath the thick, black hood but they also stared at her red lips and tired hands defined by the branching out of some puffy veins – the only features of her body that stood out from the black covering, aside from her small chin and forehead.

However, at home, there were times that Muriel would catch a glimpse of herself at the mirror while undressing. She would notice the lines on her forehead, the paleness of her skin and the dryness in her hair and fingers. She too was questioning herself, "What have I become with my black outfit?" Sometimes, she would find herself crying like a child with no one to talk to.

But the outfit was just half the story. Muriel figured out early on the best way to play the P20,000 tournaments. She would patiently sit in the early levels and play only premium hands.

As the blind levels increased, she became more and more aggressive. She developed plays that were built around her tight-aggressive image. She used, as a bluff, a naturally trembling hand to her advantage every time she moved her chips to the middle of the table.

She would often be the first player in an encounter to declare "all-in". When challenged, she often had the best starting hand and it would hold. The few times that she was caught bluffing, her hand would catch up and she would, as the poker lingo went, "suck out" on her opponent.

Her aggressive play left a lot of male players eviscerated. After a while, most players started to dread the thought of going heads-up against her. This further cemented her reputation as a feared player. Nobody dared to talk to her. Nobody had the nerve to pick on her anymore.

Still, some jealous female players insisted, "Here comes the witch!" But most of the other players became more challenged as she earned their respect. They started whispering, "Here comes the Black Mamba!"

After that week, Muriel decided to tell her husband about her winnings in the poker tournaments. She wanted to tell him her decision to become a poker pro. She was tickled to brag that she was also good at it.

As she waited for him to rise, she prepared some breakfast. It was already ten o'clock in the morning when he woke up since he came home at the crack of dawn. When Alberto was already at the table, Muriel also primed herself to tell him her plan.

"I have some good news for you...I already have a job," she said slowly.

Alberto, still dazed from a night's hangover tried to sound pleased at what he heard. "Really! Hmm...that's great! Somebody

finally hired you! Where are you workinh?" he asked woozily as he eyed the crispy bacon and garlic fried rice on the table.

"I...I found..." all of a sudden, she changed her mind telling him about poker, thinking that he might get furious instead because that was his world.

"I found a job... as a call center agent in Makati. I got the afternoon shift."

"Finally, darling! I heard call center agents earn a lot."

She felt numb at her husband's reaction.

"By the way, don't bother to wait for me during midnight. I might always come home later than that. I will go straight to the casino after work. I want to practice more poker because I am joining the grand tournament," Alberto said.

"But that would still be more than two months from now!" Muriel thought as she sipped her cup of black tea.

"I've heard that there's a very good player at the casino now. They call her Black Mamba. I don't think she'll do well in big tournaments. Her run-gun style of all-in-all-the-time may work in small tournaments, but not in big ones," Alberto asserted as he munched on the crispy bacon.

"Black who?" she asked in surprise.

"I told you already! Black Mamba! How many times do I have to repeat it?"

"Why do they call her the Black Mamba?" she wanted to probe more but she stayed calm.

"They say she always comes in black, alright! And they say she's deadly because she's unbeatable, alright! What else

do you want to know? Look, I'm late already and I have to get some place else!" Alberto irritatingly blurted out.

She thought, "Is that me? Is that what they really call me?" She wanted to laugh. She heard some players in the card room talk about a Black Mamba but she could not believe until now that she was getting a *nom de guerre*. She rather liked it.

At the same time, Muriel felt that her husband had changed into a totally different person. Although she still loved him and missed him so much, the last nine years of their relationship taught her to be stronger and less affected by his inattention. She did not even let her family or friends know what was going on in her married life. Her utmost concern was to earn as much money as she could and then she would decide how to proceed from there.

Days blurred into nights. Muriel could not remember the last time she cared about what day it was. Her schedule began to revolve around tournament schedules. She began spending more time learning about the demanding game. She bought books about poker and absorbed them like she was preparing for her own dissertation. She studied video streams on the Internet that showed World Poker Tour and World Series of Poker tournaments as well as high stakes cash games featuring world-famous players with colorful nicknames like "Texas Dolly" Bronson, Mike "The Mouth" Matusow, Phil "Unabomber" Laak, and her favorite Tom "Durr" Dwan. At times, she felt closer to these persons than the people that she knew in real life. She made a promise to herself that if she made enough money in this game, she would make a trip to Las Vegas to play the Main Event of the World Series of Poker.

Muriel became the most talked-about player in the casino. Players would even make side bets if she could continue her crazy streak as the winningest player in the P20,000.00 tournaments. She would be invited to dinner at the restaurants in the casino by some players but she often declined. During one tournament, a player cried out when he beat her into an "all in" declaration.

“Try me Black Mamba!” he dared amusingly. That got plenty of laughs from the table and the onlookers. Muriel smiled.

She remained calm and polite to everyone. She was also always cautious not to have any conversations with anyone.

Muriel moved up to join the larger tournaments that offered P200,000.00 pots. From her winnings, Muriel slowly built her bankroll until she reached the P1 million milestone. She began to prepare for the big one, the 1st SJMMPT, with a grand prize money of P3 million for the champion.

The tournament was advertised in every known internet poker site in the city and poker hardliners were all abuzz with excitement. It was the first poker tournament in the country to offer a prize pool of P5 million. The champion would get P 3 million, P 1.5 million for the second placer and the rest would be distributed in increments from the third placer down to the thirty-third place. First two places would also get a seat to the Asian Poker Tour main event in Macau, which was scheduled one month after the event. Each seat in the APT event would cost at least P 200,000.00.

Some posters on an internet site mused how the prize money could possibly start one off as a poker pro in Macau where, allegedly, action was really heavy and most of the players were weak, “fishes” they were called. The poster said the action was so soft that some Las Vegas pros even made the trip and regularly made a killing from sons of retired Chinese generals who had nothing better to do with their father’s money. Or more likely— other people’s money stolen by their fathers. Muriel thought that the only way one could verify these stories was to visit Macau herself.

The 1st SJMMPT would be held for three days with 750 players scheduled to cont end on the first day and another half on the following day. Play would continue for the last ten tables on the third day until the final table was formed.

Muriel chose to play on the second day. The place was extremely packed and filled with noise from the animated crowd. The media crew and cameramen were all over the place. Poker Stars City even hired commercial models wearing regulation bustier with matching patches from various poker rooms playfully stickered above their bust lines.

From afar, she saw Alberto from afar. He looked haggard and gloomy in his stubbles but he had the same defiant look that he carried with him when the going got tough.

The game lasted for twelve hours. During breaks, Muriel rushed to the restroom, and sat on a vacant chair and tried to catch a nap until she would hear the tournament director announce through the built-in speakers that the game was about to resume.

Muriel made it to the twelfth level of the game. It meant that she was qualified to play for the third day.

Barely getting enough sleep, Muriel went back the next day to the tournament venue. She scanned the leader board to find out where she stood among the rest of the players. Her chip position was exactly in the middle, number 50. Alberto's name was in the top 10.

When play resumed, Muriel caught an unbelievably lucky string of cards. At one time, she had ten successive pocket pairs, five of which turned into sets that went up against top pairs. Her pocket aces held up and she kept winning races with Ace King in her hand. The Black Mamba killed more than ten players that day. Her chip stack steadily grew until she became the chip leader in the tournament. When she decided she had enough chips to make it to the final table, she stood up and surveyed the other tables. She had so many chips that she could afford to lose blinds and antes while taking a self-imposed break.

She saw Alberto's stack, once a mighty citadel of chips, kept getting depleted. He kept clawing back, however, by smartly playing position. He too made the final table.

Alberto had spotted Muriel but was focused on his game. During the break, while the final table was being set up, Alberto swiftly followed her and pulled her arm.

"Hey, you think I didn't recognize you?" Alberto hissed at her, obviously displeased.

She started to talk but the tournament director interrupted their conversation with his last call for the participants to take their places before the cameras. The cameramen focused their lenses back on the final table. After a couple of hours, only three players remained.

Back to that penultimate hand, Muriel thought hard and stared at the man she married through her dark glasses. For a second, she felt compassion for the man she once loved. Then he started talking, "You're ahead, for now. I have Ace King and you have a pocket pair. But I want a race now because if an ace or king shows up on the flop, I won't get any more action."

She could not believe Alberto was talking trash. She continued staring. He continued talking: "On the other hand, you can just fold your hand. It's still a long night."

For the first time since the tournament began, Muriel spoke at the poker table: "You really have Ace King?"

"Yes, I'll even show if you fold," came the reply.

Pocket tens are a really good hand, Muriel thought. Plus, tournament poker prohibited a player from telling the truth about his hand. So, she continued thinking, if Alberto did have Ace King, she could actually call the tournament official and declare the hand mucked. But not if he had Ace Queen, or Ace Jack – against these cards, she was still in a coin-flip situation.

Muriel studied him again. She thought: "He looks too confident to be holding just Ace King, even Ace Queen. The way he plays, he probably has a higher pair than mine and is baiting me to call."

Then she thought, "Could he really be lying to me?"

Her thinking process was cut short when Alberto said loudly to the camera, "I'll help you decide. Call the clock!" The dealer promptly said: "60 seconds!"

Muriel blushed with anger. If there was a last straw in her relationship with Alberto, he just broke it with that most boorish move. How could he, with the tournament on the line, with their joint lives in the balance, so childishly call time on a player who was clearly agonizing through a difficult dilemma?

Muriel let the count drag on to the last five seconds, the whole time watching Alberto's face turn from smile to a sneer to an outright puerile pout. Then she said, "Call."

As she suspected all along, Alberto showed pocket kings. He proudly stood up in his chair when she showed her pocket tens. As the dealer burned the top card, Alberto started to shout, "No ten, no ten, NOOO!" just as a beautiful red ten came out of the window on the flop.

The whole crowd whooped it up, genuinely happy at the comeuppance of what they saw was easily the most bullying kind of behavior in a poker tournament. They started cheering, "Black Mamba! Black Mamba!" glad to once again see luck and charm win against a bully. Muriel sat impassively, silently praying for her set of tens to hold up.

Alberto clutched his head as the dealer showed the turn and then the river card, both of which did not give him his miracle two outer. He sheepishly walked up to Muriel to offer her congratulations in front of the cameras. Muriel shook his hand and said, "Good game. Goodbye, Alberto." And even by watching

constant replays of that segment of the TV coverage of the 1st SJMMPT, one could not tell that a marriage ended during that day.

A few hands later, Muriel went all in with Ace King and was instantly called by Augie, the owner of Shawarma Joe himself, who showed pocket queens. The Queens held up and Muriel proudly claimed second place.

While she was about to claim her check at the cage, a representative from Poker Stars City approached her, gave him his card and asked her to call him the next day so that they could discuss a possible sponsorship deal with Poker Stars International. Muriel just thanked the man.

Putting the check inside her bag, Muriel went down to the ground floor and headed to a Starbucks that had recently opened shop. She treated herself to a grande café macchiato and sipped her drink leisurely while she watched the rest of her poker brethren file out in droves, undoubtedly swapping bad beat stories with each other. Some saw her at the coffee shop and smiled at her and some even offered genuine congratulations.

After her last sip of coffee, she stood up and went outside. A cool breeze touched her face. She got inside one of the yellow airport Taxis that were waiting in the corner.

"Where to, miss?" asked the driver.

"Take me to the international airport, please," Muriel said with a smile as she removed her shades. "I'm going on the next flight out to Macau."