

The End of Tomorrow

Marikit Tara Alto Uychoco

2020, Philippines

“We only think that time moves forward, because that’s how we experience it: the inevitable march from the past to the future, from cause to effect, forever marching forward. In a parallel universe, they might experience time backward, with the inexorable march from effect to cause, future to past, a story read towards the understanding of why things are the way they are . . . What if time is not chronological, but behaves in a much stranger manner?”

Andy’s father lectured her about his theories while he tucked her into bed, his wild hair standing on end. Something about the scene alerted Andy, knowing that this was a memory wrapped in dream, and the awful realization filled her, the horrible knowing that her father was dead. She felt a dark sense of foreboding, and she struggled to wake up. When she woke, she tasted seasalt on her lips. She would always grieve for her father, no matter how much time had passed.

When she got up, she looked outside at the street below. She had been told that this would happen. Chinese soldiers marched in the roads of Makati, the look of their PLA uniforms chilling to the bone, their granite faces hard in the sun. Without the uniforms, they were a familiar sight in the city. For years, they had taken up residence in Makati. Their surgical masks made them an impenetrable mass of

Chinese eyes, and tanks were rolling up and down the avenue while people held each other in fear. The Chinese knew that as long as they had the National Capital Region, they controlled everything.

It was the third phase of their invasion. The first phase was occupation—their businesses, their money, the actual physical presence of Chinese soldiers as fake employees, the Chinese monitoring the country from their bases on artificial islands. The second phase was chaos—delivered by the Coronavirus, which made it possible to lock people in their homes while they prepared. And the third was this—actual boots on the ground.

Andy flicked on the television. The TV set showed the Philippine president and his cabinet. Behind them were a line of generals and the Philippine flag, the Chinese flag right beside him. The President spoke, his face visibly sicker and older than it was before he was elected, “Our Chinese friends are here to help us fight the virus and the terrorists in the city. They are here to ensure discipline—*kayo kasi*—if only you were good citizens, we wouldn’t have to resort to these measures. It pains me to do this, but I have no other choice.”

Andy wished she could deal them with one fatal blow. The adrenaline that filled her when she sparred in the gym roared in her ears, and she wished she could choke someone out to solve the shit that they were in. Instead, Andy gritted her teeth as she shut down her social media accounts. *Go lightly*, she said to herself, *find the flow, work the angles. Don’t let the fear get to you, don’t force anything to submission. Let the moment come and then attack.* It was a familiar litany, something that had helped her whenever she would train jujitsu.

Social media was a lifeline, but she knew it would be the death of her. She cut up her sim card and set aside her smart phone. She did everything automatically. *Pick only the practical clothes. Pack your bags. Delete files on the computer.* She knew that if she didn’t act now, there would be no future.

Karl was smoking in the balcony as he watched the Chinese take over the city business district down below.

“Can you believe it?” His Spanish profile was outlined against the city’s skyscrapers. Karl was in his prime, his chiseled abdomen and Iberian sensuality getting him on the front pages of magazines. As usual, his black hair was sculpted to perfection, even though it was ridiculously early in the morning.

She shook her head as she ignored him. She knew that Karl would stay behind and find a way to compromise. She loved him and his mercurial intelligence, but they no longer saw eye to eye. He thought she was some wild-eyed idealist who refused to see reality. He was looking at her now, back from the balcony. The next words died on his lips as he saw her bags packed.

“No explanation?” He tilted his head, his mouth wry. Somehow, he knew this day would come. Andy was one in a long line of mistresses, and he knew she didn’t have it in her to stay that long with him.

“We have to fight back, Karl.”

He took a drag on his cigarette, “You could get yourself killed, sweets.” She nodded and knew the conversation was headed to a dead end. She turned and he reached out.

“What we have is real, Andy.” For one brief moment, his eyes glittered dangerously. He wanted to shake her. But his face changed back to its cold familiar self, and he let her go.

“I never said it wasn’t,” she shrugged as she left him behind.



The church looked innocent enough. But, as Andy slipped into the basement of the parish, she saw a lot of familiar faces. There was the cardinal bringing them all together, there was the prominent

opposition senator . . . she saw several well-known activists, and a few Philippine military types.

Finally, she said to herself, as she edged toward the fringes of the crowd. She moved toward the only Caucasian in the room, his tall form making him an easy target. His blue eyes showed no expression at all as he listened to the people speaking. She tapped his broad shoulder and he looked at her, the face mask hiding the lower part of his face.

“Have you decided?”

She nodded, crossing her arms.

“Come on,” he gestured, as they left the basement to go to the church, the gold-leaf from the icons glowing in the candlelight as they took their masks off.

“Are you sure about this?”

“I am,” she said quietly. She studied his American face, the warm, open handsomeness of a grown-up Tom Sawyer. She didn’t trust white people that much, but he had offered her something she would never forget.

“You cut all ties?”

“I only had the one.”

“Good,” Mark said.



She had met Mark in Palawan a year ago. She had emerged from the ocean that morning, doing field research for an old client, Limahong Industries. One of the perks of the job was an all-expense paid trip in a classy resort, and she was concentrating on breakfast when Mark sat at her table overlooking the shore. He introduced himself and cut to the chase, while she stared at him in amazement.

“In 2020, there will be a virus from China, and it will spread to the rest of the world. At first, we would believe them, that it came from some bats in the Chinese market, a Coronavirus, but eventually the truth will come out. It is a Chinese biological weapon meant to disrupt the world and change the balance of power. There will be a huge pandemic whose reach will be far and wide, and the world will stop,” he said fiercely.

He took a deep breath and he continued, “During this time, Chinese forces will prepare to take over the world and Russia will be by her side. Once they’re done with everything, the world powers will be Russia in the West and China in the East. The United States will fall, and the United Nations, and all others, will bow down before the communist regime.”

She was tempted to set security on him, but the objects in his hand stopped her. He gave her a folded note and her father’s watch—a Christmas gift she had given her father—the watch she had placed on his wrist the day they had buried him.

“He was a good man,” Mark told her, “a smart man. Without him, we never would have gone as far in the technology. An agent went back to the past to consult with him, and he gave us this . . .”

Her father was a quantum physicist, and some people called him the Grandfather of Time Travel. His theories were ground-breaking, but there was never enough money to test their application.

“Everything that your father told you was true, including the possibilities of time travel,” Mark told her. “We only got the calculations right recently, and built the time machine . . . especially since there didn’t seem to be anything else the agency could do but use time travel to change history. With time travel, there are infinite possibilities, but so far, we’ve been ramming our heads against a wall and keep getting the same results,” he told her.

“Chinese power in the East. Russian power in the West. The death of democracy as we know it. It’s all dominos falling in 2020. Look, I know it’s hard to swallow. But when the Chinese military arrive at your doorstep, look for me here,” he wrote the address of the church at the back of his calling card. She flipped it up, amused to read Mark Clemens, Travel Agent.

“If you’re ready to change the future, look for me. But you’ll have to disappear. I need you to be a ghost. And Limahong Industries? I wouldn’t trust them if I were you. They’re a front for the Chinese government. Don’t worry,” he said, “that’s one of the reasons we picked you—we need an opening to Limahong.”

“One more thing. I need to inject you with the Coronavirus vaccine. This one is the good one, it came out in 2022. The early ones were . . . Let’s just say you don’t want to be injected in 2020.” The syringe was in his hand.

She shook her head, “I don’t know . . .”

He set the syringe back down and steeled himself. “Andy, I know this is a lot to take in . . . Believe me, I’ll be asking you to do things more dangerous than this. So, the question that you have to ask yourself is, would you trust him?” He nodded toward the watch and the note he handed to her.

Her hands were shaking as she took the watch in her hands and turned it over. There was the inscription she asked to be etched at the back of the watch, the quote from *The Magic Mountain*: “It is love, not reason, that is stronger than death.” She unfolded the note and saw her father’s handwriting: “Trust Mark, Andy. Sending you love from the moon and back. Love, *Tatay*,” she brought a fist to her mouth as she struggled to contain her tears.

She nodded, clutching her father’s watch to her chest. “I trust him . . . but an injection?”

“Yes. The Coronavirus vaccine,” he intoned, “is worth its weight in gold. Look, I’ll leave the syringe with you. If it feels right, inject yourself before the vaccine goes to waste. You have ten hours left. Take my advice—don’t waste it! You won’t find that anywhere else . . . not until 2022.”

“Bring it all with you,” he said roughly, standing up to leave, “you never know who you might see again.” After that, he left her side and strode out of her life as quickly as he had entered it.



“The vaccine?” Mark asked her, “Did you inject yourself?”

“Oh my God, yes. You can’t imagine how relieved I was that I did. I should have trusted you immediately.”

Mark studied her face in the dim church. Her low ponytail hung over her shoulder, and she was frowning at him, the gold-leaf and candles creating a halo. You couldn’t tell she was half-Filipino—her father’s half—since she looked so much like her Chinese mother.

“Have you ever been to China?”

“Hong Kong Disneyland?”

“I meant the mainland.”

“No, I haven’t,” she answered, and she shook her head, “The question has been with me after all this time . . . Have we met before? Why do you act like you know me?”

Mark folded his arms, “We have a shared history that lives in my head. You could say that I’m seeing you with eyes filtered with the future—or the past. Are you still game?”

“Of course.”

“You’ll need a skimpy dress,” he brought his palms up as she raised her eyebrows, “It’s a disguise . . . we’re going to an old US

base to get to the time machine . . . now a red-light district, so you'll have to pretend to be a prostitute . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"You're enjoying this," she tilted her head toward him.

"I might as well," he said, "things are grim enough."



They set Google Maps towards Clark Freeport Zone, Pampanga. She was wearing her father's watch and a new dress that revealed jutting breasts and an ass to die for. Mark was glad he had to drive the whole trip, because if he hadn't, he would have just stared at her. She had brought up her hair with a few bobby pins and applied some makeup—with her winged eyeliner and the sheen of red lipstick, she was a smoldering beauty. *She doesn't know a lot about prostitutes, Mark thought to himself, because she looks too classy.*

As they drove, they listened to the mellow strains of a guitar on the radio. She wondered at Mark, who seemed to have deep feelings for her. She tried to find out as much as she could about him as they drove past the endless chain of gasoline stations. She talked about her hometown and how she missed the province. He talked about his boyhood home and how he missed its river. A sense of rightness filled her, and she leaned back, wondering how she could feel so much for a stranger. His voice lulled her to sleep, and she woke up to see their sedan lined at the toll booth, waiting for their turn to pay for their ticket.

They drove by Koreantown, with its neon lights and big Korean signs. It looked like a neon-colored dream, as if a section of Korea had been displaced and relocated into the Philippines—a candied dream of K-pop videos and Korean movies. Even though it was quarantine and past curfew hour, there were still a lot of people on the brightly lit streets, mostly Koreans, going in and out of the Korean grocery shops and chatting in Korean bars.

“Don’t look now, but it looks like we’re being followed,” Mark said to her.

“Time for a detour.” He steered the car sharply to the right. He parked in front of a seedy night club, and they got out of the car. Once they entered the club, Andy was surprised to see bikini-clad women gyrating without face masks on stage, dancing frenetically to the deafening music. Men were drinking bottles of beer as if there was no quarantine, no chance of infection. *No social distancing here*, she thought, as a handful of women lap-danced on their foreign clients. Mark pulled her to a table, and she was glad she had injected herself with the vaccine as men breathed heavily at her and leered.

“There they go,” Mark murmured as two Chinese men slipped into the night club. “They’re a certain type,” he said, as they started inspecting the club, “you learn to recognize the Chinese agents after a while.” The agents were built like bodybuilders and wore dark clothing, moving like military men with their straight backs and measured pace.

The agents yanked them from the table, and Andy was ready when her feet hit the floor. Using the momentum the man had used to pull her, she shifted her weight and threw him to the ground. When he fell face down, she wrapped her legs around his back and circled her arms around his beefy neck. She set up a rear naked choke as he stood, carrying her weight, her tight dress hiking dangerously up her thighs, her legs tightening like a vise around his waist. She heard wolf whistles as he struggled to break free, flailing in the middle of the club, but she held on and tightened the choke with her biceps. After a few more seconds, he crumpled, unconscious.

She saw Mark trading blows with the other Chinese agent. She sprinted toward the agent and jumped forward, her momentum

throwing her forward harder and faster as she kicked his solar plexus. He weaved backward, and Mark dealt the blow that knocked him to the ground. Mark pulled her back and they ran toward the car, scattered applause bursting in the air.

They sped their way toward the opposite direction. Andy felt her blood sing, exhilarated as she whooped into the cold rush of air. Mark grinned in the darkness, and for a moment, Andy felt the earth stop, until it stuttered and whirred forward again.

When they finally got to the motel, the masked receptionist nodded them on. She inhaled sharply when they entered the small room. Instead of the tawdry room she had expected, the room was filled with glass and steel. There were multiple screens and knobs all over, and the closest thing she could compare it to was an intensive care unit, complete with a single bed and tent.

Mark pulled her into his arms. She sank into the inevitable fall, an object surrendering to gravity. She felt like melted butter as he sank his head for a kiss, and time stopped for a while.

“We have no time . . .” Mark groaned, “You have to go now,” Mark said to her.

“The calculations should be right,” he grimaced, as he turned toward the giant computer, making sure the destination was set to January 8, 2018. “You’ll have to go first. It’s single travel every time. Remember, you go to China and get to Limahong Industries. I’m going to need another agent to help me jump after you, and I don’t know when he’s coming,” he looked at his watch, “I told him not to be late, the fucker.”

She tried to calm her racing heart. After a few minutes, she nodded and knew that he was right. They had hours to talk about the plan. Get to 2018. Get a flight to China. Get to Limahong Industries and destroy the virus.

“Alright,” he touched the side of her face and kissed her forehead. He opened the flap of the tent and asked her to lie on the bed. “It will take some getting used to. It’s the pressure in the ears that bother most people . . . and the chest palpitations. It’s as if our bodies know we’re doing something unnatural. But you should get sorted out . . . eventually.”

She looked at him and held his hand. “Wish me luck?”

“Good luck,” he chucked her under her chin, “you’ll be fine.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as he left the tent, fiddling with the knobs and the computer screen in front of him. In a few minutes, she could feel it, a piercing pain filling her ears, making her press her head down the pillow. She felt as if her body was being stretched, and she could hear the blood rush to her head. It was as if she were going very fast but also as if she were being pinned down to the ground, until suddenly, she was torn somewhere else.

Sometime else, she reminded herself. She opened her eyes. It was the same bed, the same room, but instead of the night sky, the pale light of twilight washed through the window. She sat up and discovered that she couldn’t breathe. She felt like she was having a heart attack. She closed her eyes and waited for it to pass. After a few minutes, the pain subsided.

Hoping that the pain wouldn’t come back, she slowly stood up. She walked toward the window and breathed a sigh of relief. Instead of the empty streets with the occasional masked pedestrian, there were jeepneys plying their routes and bare-faced people getting ready for work.

She went to the bathroom to shower. She was careful to be as neat as possible, knowing this was a sanctuary for time travelers. She wore a pair of jeans and a plain white shirt. The lobby was as

seedy as it was the last time she was here, but instead of the masked receptionist, there was a bored teenager who took her room key.

She walked to the end of the street toward McDonald's. With all the strangeness of everything happening to her, she was grateful that it looked wonderfully, blandly, the same. She ordered pancakes and a cup of coffee.

So, this is what it's like to be a time traveler . . . Acting normal when things weren't. All these people eating with their friends and family had no idea this would be a distant memory. People would be isolated from each other for months, and starvation and poverty would overcome many of them before the pandemic was over. Hundreds of thousands would die. She closed her eyes as she sipped her coffee. It was 2018, and she had to act like everything around her wasn't heaven.

After breakfast, she left to look for a cab. There were a dozen outside McDonald's, and she was pretty sure she could get one to bring her to the airport. She stepped into the first one at the taxi bay and was surprised when she saw the driver.

"Karl?"

"Hello, sweets. Limahong sends its regards." She was startled to see that Karl was much older, with the wrinkles on his face and his snow white hair.

She turned to leave, but the doors were locked.

"You never know when to leave something alone, sweets," Karl told her. Chinese agents from either side entered the cab, and she felt the cold steel nub of a gun on her gut. "Trust me, we've thought of all the possibilities. I had no choice."

She swallowed fear down as she cried out, "Why are you doing this?"

He squinted, “This isn’t the movies, sweets. Sometimes, you don’t need to know why you have to die.”

The shot popped out, and she felt the pain on her side. The Chinese agents left and Karl sat down beside her.

“You think you can change history? The march of history is unstoppable and the Chinese empire will not be denied. Time travel is a joke that tricks you into thinking you can change fate. But you can’t. You’re just an insignificant speck in the universe. Change the world,” he sneered, “might as well try changing the stars in the sky. We think we can change things, but we can’t. We’re grist under the mill of history.” He spat, shutting the door with a thud.

So it’s true, she said to herself. Your life flashes before your eyes when you die. She slumped down the seat. Memories flooded her vision. Karl holding her close all those humid nights. The day she got her black belt in jiu-jitsu. Endless afternoons training muay thai. Her father’s face when he tucked her into bed. Wake up, Andy. Wake up, Andy.

“Wake up, Andy! Fight back, Andy, dammit!”

Her eyes flew open as she heard Mark’s voice. She looked down at her wound, amazed to find that it was no longer bleeding.

“I thought I was . . . dead.”

“You’re not dead. I fixed you up. I found you with your father’s watch . . . I placed a tracking device on it . . .” He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “I’ve still got a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“Sneaky,” she whispered. She looked at her wrist, upset to find that her watch was broken. It was no longer ticking, its glass face cracked and its hands frozen. She closed her eyes. She felt him carry her from the cab and into an SUV. She felt that her father was watching over her from somewhere not too far away . . . she saw his face in her mind’s eye.

“Sometimes, what’s more important is what we have now,” his father told her when she cried about her mother’s death, “think about her the way we think about the moon . . . Sometimes, the moon looks like it’s gone, but we all know that it’s still there. Love is stronger than death, Andy,” he hugged her close. He read a passage to her from *The Magic Mountain*, “Love stands opposed to death. It is love, not reason, that is stronger than death. Only love, not reason, gives kind thoughts.”

Tears fell as she lay still. She knew that there were some things the heart understood better than the mind. She curled her hands into fists. She didn’t know what would happen tomorrow . . . all she had was today. All she had were the people she loved and those that anchored her in the here and now.

They moved forward toward an uncertain future. She was wounded but not beaten. *Find the flow, work the angles*, she said to herself. *Let the moment come*. Nothing was impossible, she thought to herself, and history wasn’t chiseled in stone. *Time is an illusion*, she whispered, and everything, including the past and the future, is made today.