

(Music fades in)

You're back. And I'm back.

Honestly, I didn't think this was going to happen. And no, this is not a creator being super mad that their numbers aren't super high or that people aren't worshipping the ground they walk on and throwing money at their feet. This isn't a tantrum. I find that to be annoying, to be honest. And okay, that might have come across as performative. In some very small and trivial way. (Sigh) Maybe everything is performative. Maybe that's overly cynical.

But I'm used to performing, you know? That's a big part of my life. And that statement will make sense to some of you. One of you more than others.

Then again, that's what the internet is, right? We can't exist on it without some effort on our part. And that's a type of performance. We filter ourselves. We improve ourselves. We photoshop literally or otherwise.

It's like... Well, I, I really hate to admit it, but I've been watching a lot of reality television as of late. You know the kind, the trashy kind that sometimes happens in a foreign country. I don't think I can mention it by name here. The premise of the show involved someone travelling for love, but you can't have a happily ever after in reality television. That's not captivating enough. That can't hold an audience. So they have to create drama. And one of the ways they do that--for the audience's sake anyway--is mistranslation.

My mother's from the Philippines. The language there is Tagalog, and I don't speak it well, but I understand it perfectly. Can you blame me for that? I was a kid when I learned. I was a kid who wanted to know what my mom was talking about when she was on the phone with her

sister. Like it could have been about my Christmas gifts or birthday plans. Sometimes, it was something worse. (inhale) Something with my aunt and... And I don't want to talk about that.

But you know, it took a while to learn what I did learn. Language learning in an one-sided circumstances like that isn't ideal, so I can't speak it. I can only understand.

But anyway, I was watching this show, and somebody's sister was talking, right? And I noticed that the words or subtitles on the screen didn't match up with what I knew she was saying. What she was saying, in her native tongue, was a more damning criticism of a person than what the words on the screen were leading everyone else to believe. Interesting, right?

(Music cuts)

Or not. Well... Where was I?

(Music fades in)

Right, we're all that reality show, right? We changed the words on the screen to match what we want the story to be. It's natural, you could say.

You could also say that I'm back. But you could not say that I have any more to say about the Funhouse Hallway. It was a game that didn't really go anywhere. It brought people from so many different places and walks of life deeper and deeper into text that maybe meant nothing or everything, but certainly didn't mean what it said at face value. There was a mystery and a Forum for unpacking that mystery. But there wasn't a solution. That part was never found.

(Pause)

But what about Aishi, you might be saying. Well, we weren't only playing a game and talking about it. Not after a while.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

I moved recently, you know? That's partially why there was a season break. And partially why that season break was so long. Or it felt long to me. Because I do want to tell this story. A story. A collection of stories.

Your Majesty, it's partially your fault and partially not. For one, I don't care if you see me, follow me, or even speak to me. You haven't aged well. You're retired. And you were never able to do anything anyway. Not for me. Not against me. I know you tried. But intentions aren't really helpful right now. Or they weren't back then. I was still in that home. I was still stuck with them. I was still afraid. Nothing changed. You promised it would, but you couldn't keep that promise. And I'm not hurt. (inhale) Not anymore. I just want you to feel as bad as you made me feel. Because that feels like fairness. Even if it isn't.

But I don't care about you. I care about someone else finding me. Someone that maybe I don't even know to expect might... might be looking for me.

So I moved, cut my hair, got a piercing, you know. I did all the stuff you might see in a disguise or reinvention montage. I did it quickly too. I knew I needed to. For my own sake. It got to the point that I almost pierced my own nose just to get it done that night, but cooler heads prevailed on that one.

Moving wasn't all that bad. You know. I did find a bunch of journals, drafts of sort, for things I did post on the internet.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

You can still post your original writings on various websites. But it wasn't like it was now. Maybe you visited those sites. Or any one of them. There used to be dozens of them; it was a pick your poison sort of thing. And there was no way to get paid, so it was a true wild west.

The digital wasteland isn't developed until money gets involved, after all. And who would want to put money in the random, sometimes terrible writings of a bunch of teenagers or middle aged moms. That's how the line used to go, but obviously that's changed.

I mean, (sigh) there used to be a lot of websites where people could post their original fictions. Or I guess even nonfictions, but I don't think that was as common. Maybe I was overly skeptical of what was called nonfiction, true, but I can't even remember something being labelled as nonfiction on those sites. It was like Tumblr but not just Tumblr. It was like if the different tags on Tumblr got split into multiple websites. And then duplicated once or twice for good measure.

Personally, I loved reading fanfiction. I loved being so immersed in the fictional worlds that I fell in love with that I was falling into alternate dimensions or twists and turns of those same fictional worlds. Reflections. Distortions. Whatever they were. To me, true immersion involved uncertainty and a bit of inconsistency. Because that's how life worked. Love wasn't clean, from what I saw in my own life. Far from it.

However, I could not write good fanfiction. Or that's what so-called reviewers kept telling me. (Chuckles) You know (inhale) people hate that term when it comes to movies in current year, but it was so much worse when it came to fanfiction sites. Everyone just came out in spades to exercise their demons or aches. And by that, I mean, pass them onto someone else but to inflict them more viciously because you had a keyboard to hide behind.

All the while, Aishi was there with me, but if you thought they ever came to my defense, you are sadly mistaken. In fact, they might have enjoyed my misery.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

Once upon a time, there was a kingdom but not a distant kingdom. Rather, it was a kingdom so small that it hid in a forest of trees just outside of another, larger and more prestigious kingdom. In the bigger kingdom, there was gold and silver along the walls, drawing the eye in and pushing the smaller, plain if not outright ugly kingdom further from view.

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For all the flack they gave me, Aishi did find another website for me to post though, but I could never bring myself to read anything on it. And that might have been a little snobbish of me. But it was a website for original fiction. The sorts of things I could get at the library for free and of a better quality. Which also it meant not being at home, and I didn't always want to be at home. Sometimes I was trapped. And to the library I could escape, so...

(Sigh) I mean... If you could choose an escape, does it matter what you would be escaping? Let's say it was your physical safety but or not even. But it... It was a different kind of a trap .

(Suspiciously quickly) I wanted to write a story about that. But I never got around to it. That's... That's why I wanted to bring it up. I wasn't quite sure how to answer that question.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

In this kingdom, there was an older king and queen, but in their youth, they had a son and daughter. True to the character of the kingdom, neither was all that exceptional. At least at first glance. The prince proved to be likeable and clever. He learned to adapt things to serve other purposes, and once he learned that, he saw so many ways he could help his subjects. That's what he focused on, and for his creativity and care, his people were better off, and he was well beloved. People cheered for him wherever he went.

But no one cheered for the princess.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

This website was called the Symbolic Myst. And don't look at me; I didn't come up with the name. And it's gone now too. Completely wiped off the internet. Seems like I never picked the winning side, do I? I couldn't even find it in the archives. Any of the many archives out there. All the stories I vaguely remember being posted there are also gone. Mine would have been too if it were not for my journals. If it were not for terrible early drafts. The drafts any other writer would hate. Mine have saved the day. Unexpectedly so.

Symbolic Myst actually had a pretty decent community by internet standards. And that's partially because it was such a small online community. There's no negativity in a room that's unoccupied, I guess. Aishi was actually the most critical of them all. And... (inhale) Well, at the time I was ready to call it justified because Symbolic Myst wasn't just a website for original fiction. It was fantasy fiction, specifically. That's what it said all over the banner and other places. Fantasy: a genre I had never written before in my admittedly young life. But I tried. I tried because I wanted to belong.

And according to Aishi it wasn't enough. Maybe they were right. I don't know.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

Some could see that the princess had a defect in her soul. Or that's what the astrologist would say. But even he would add that that wasn't accurate. She had a soul. It was intact. It just wasn't what you would want a princess's soul to be. And he said all of this quietly in the back rooms of taverns. Because talk like that was treasonous. There could be no complaints about any member of the royal family. And in some ways, maybe there was no need to complain at all. The

princess was the second born. The prince the older. The prince would rule when the king and queen would die. That was the law of the land. The law protected the people from the princess and everything about her that everyone could see but could not understand.

So the people were uneasy, but they felt as if they could breathe. For now. Anyway. They took deep breaths and prayed for the wellbeing of the prince while wedding bells sounded in the distance. Practice, they were, actually. The prince and princess needed to be betrothed and married to their spouses in good time.

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Would you like to hear that story? That version of the story? This story I tell to fill the space of my life. That's why I got into writing when I was younger, you know. It was something I needed to do in order to get a point across. I think I tried to explain that to Aishi once, but it never landed. I tried to tell that you as well, Your Majesty, but I think you still don't know. It seems like nobody is interested in certain details, and that bothers me a bit.

(Extended - Music fades out and new music fades in)

Aishi Online is a production of Miscellany Media Studios. It is written, edited, produced, and performed by MJ Bailey. With music from the Sounds like an Earful music supply. If you like the show please consider leaving a review or posting about it on a website that might not be around in five years. Make the post vague and somewhat mysterious but still compelling if you want. Up to you.

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