

Title	: My Fiction Stories
Author(s)	: Wulan Tsabita Anandisa, Jihan Angrila, Qurratayun Fitrah Iman & Indra Naputra
Facilitator	: Michael AF Earley, MA Email: earley_michael@yahoo.com Dr. Samuel PD Anantadjaya Email: spdanantadjaya@gmail.com
Editor(s)	: Dr (cand) Irma M Nawangwulan, MBA, CPM (Asia) Email: mnwulan@gmail.com Drs. Didi Kurniadinata, MA Email: didi.cbs@gmail.com
Lay out & Cover Design	: Dr. Samuel PD Anantadjaya, Dr (cand) Irma M Nawangwulan, MBA, CPM (Asia) & Siti Nurfitriana, MAB
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Foreword

...excellence in English...

This book is one of three produced by semesters 3/4 and 5/6 students of IULI over the course of one year (2019-2020). The idea came from students. The normal English syllabus covers writing and presentation skills, in particular, but a number of students were already proficient in those skills and ready for a real challenge. An experiment with one student in early 2019 proved to be successful, so a number of students took up the challenge of producing either a fiction or non-fiction paper or story.

To be honest, the results were beyond my wildest dreams. Of course, some of these students had been successful in competitions, such as UI and Binus, and I had seen their written work but the sheer quality blew me away. As I result, I have not been able to pick out just 4 or 5 pieces for printing but 16 pieces spread over 3 books.

I have standardized the texts and, mostly, font 12 and have made some grammar corrections, but the body of the papers or stories is entirely the students' work. Using American or British English is up to the students.

Facilitator :	Michael AF Earley, MA	michael_earley@yahoo.com
	Didi Kurniadinata, MA	didi.cbs@gmail.com
	Dr (cand) Irma M Nawangwulan, MBA, CPM (Asia)	mnwulan@gmail.com
	Dr. Samuel PD Anantadjaya	spdanantadjaya@gmail.com

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Short Stories in the First Person

Wulan Tsabita Anandisa

Department of BioMedical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering

IULI – International University Liaison Indonesia

Email: lanabit26@gmail.com

To My Mother, A Recollection of the Apartment We Left a Decade Ago

I remember how we cuddled on Sunday morning under the blanket in our small bedroom in that apartment, the one with the wooden door you were fond of, the one we left a decade ago. Yellowish light scattered around the room, onto the walls and the bed – onto us. I was too small and could barely wrap my arms around your ribcage but you cradled most of me with your soft arms. Being covered in your cocoon felt like nothing would ever hurt. It made me think that the world was just as warm as the space between your chest and stomach. You smelled like clean laundry and lilies. You made me laugh. You would kiss me and sing songs to me – often times it was Love Me Tender by Elvis Presley, which I would follow, but hitting the wrong notes. I don't remember what we used to talk about. All I remember is we were happy. We had each other and it was more than enough.

Every Sunday morning, after we cuddled with golden specks hugging a small patch on our skin, you would go to the living room to put on some oldies: Jackson 5, Prince, and your most loved, Chet Baker. You slid into your

slippers – the ones with a brick-red color, the same color as the tiles in our kitchen floor – meaning it was time to wash the dishes. I walked bare footed because I liked the coldness of the terracotta. You did the washing up of last night's dirty dishes, wiped them dry, and I would store them on the dish rack. You would do all of that while singing along to the music – you sang a lot. In the bedroom, in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in the middle of watering our mint plant – its name was Georgie, your voice touched every corner of our apartment the same way those bits of light made love with our home. And these things, indeed, made an awful lot of love that I could feel through my toes.

I was 8 when you talked about your thoughts of moving out because our apartment wouldn't be fit for both of us in five years. But five years is a long time. It was a long time and I didn't mind touching legs and elbows with you while waiting. I was too used to the lack of space between our steps, which meant the safe place that is somewhere around your solar plexus is only one calling away; The way your soup was only a sniff away; Your soup was my favorite. The vegetables were chopped into pea-sized pieces. The pot was filled with crabsticks and fishcakes, happy colors of green, orange, and yellow. They all swirled and fumed simple seasonings of garlic, sugar, salt, and pepper – the smell of home. You talked about how our apartment wouldn't be fit for both of us in five years, but to me, the space we had didn't feel tiny at all. There was so much love and Chet Baker fitted into this place, so much that it couldn't be described as anything less than palatial.

We are now a 10-hour flight away from that palace, sleeping in different

rooms with walls that are so thick I cannot hear your singing – your definition of a better quality of life. You told me that these expensive colleges ensure a better future but, with these debts, Mom, I am seriously unsure. You working extra hour just to afford to pay for the roof for next month, Mom, is this really a better quality of life?

Mom, I miss listening to your heart beating the same beat as those lights' kisses. The life in that apartment we left a decade ago, any other life couldn't be any better than that.

The Thin Tummy

I watch my mother as she scoops the rice on to her plate, taking just enough for half a dozen spoonfuls to her mouth. When I question whether it's enough for dinner, she says she is already full from eating *pempek* at work – a local food made of fishcake and tapioca, one of her favourite dishes. I nod and continue eating my dinner that is twice the serving she allows herself to have. There is some doubt lingering in my head for she has told me similar things the past couple of weeks, the only difference is the name of the dish she admitted to having on that particular day. She might be on a diet, I wonder quietly, as I gaze at her bloated stomach as her skinny legs move up and down quickly.

My mother has never been recognized as being her age. The fact that she was fairly young when she gave birth to me might explain why people always assume that we're sisters every time the two of us go out together. With her hair and eyes being a tad lighter than normal people, she's sometimes mistaken as a foreigner in the country she was born in. Her jaw and cheekbones protrude softly, her almond-shaped hazel eyes are adorned with thick black lashes that fan out like those on matryoshka dolls. The long fringe of her hair drapes onto her face, wispy and graceful. Or maybe, the build of her body has more to do with it – there is no trace of post-pregnancy weight, her limbs stay lean and her torso skinny. Despite being used to spending my time flipping through the old photobook where I would find the monochrome photos of her modelling in white satin slip dress, I did not quite pick up how much of a beauty she is until I turned 12, my first year of

middle school.

None of my close friends in primary school went to the same middle school as me, so I was practically alone. I was the shy and quiet girl that got made fun of a lot – for reasons I still have no idea why. They’d make fun of the way my hair was cut – a thick layer of long bangs covering half of my face like the underground emo kid does – or how I’d eat my lunch on my lap instead of putting it on the table because I was too shy and ashamed. Of what I didn’t even know. Behind the layers of my bangs I observed the life in middle school – the pretty girls were the ones laughing too loudly with obnoxious, popular guys; other more “normal” classmates already had their own group of friends whom they’d eat lunch with at the same table with chairs arranged around its four sides. I’d watch them make every kind of expression – glee, confusion, embarrassment, scoffing – their face full of colors and I found every kind of beauty I didn’t see in my own face in the mirror. For the first couple of months I only talked to my seatmate – a guy named Firza who threw jokes about way too much, who appreciated my dinosaur doodles – and the people in the front of and behind my seat about school tasks. The first conversation I had with one of the girls who laughed too loud was when she saw my mother coming with me to collect my report card. She asked me whether it was my mom coming with me and I said yes, to which she commented, “Your mother is *reaaaaaally* pretty. You guys look a little different, *eh*.” She emphasized the word really with a long note stretching wide, as if trying to paint a picture of how different my mother looked compared to me. That was when I first picked up how much of a beauty she is – and how I sit on the complete end of that spectrum.

My bleak social life only lasted so long. I eventually made friends with my classmates, which was bound to happen after numerous group-assignments and shared, small jokes. Dirra was my closest friend. We shared the same humour and hobby – we watched random dank memes on Vine and amassed music nobody in our class listened to. On some Fridays, I'd crash at her place after class and stay over. On one of those Friday nights, Dirra turned the TV on to watch what seemed to be called Victoria's Secret Fashion Show. "What is that?" I asked her, narrowing my eyes at the clip of five models having their make-up done in satin robes that covered only half their thighs underneath which, I believed, was lingerie. "Well, it's a fashion show, duh. You'd like it, don't worry," Dirra said, crunching on the potato chips we had bought earlier.

And so the show started.

A familiar pop music prelude began to play as a smoke bomb vivified the grandiose stage. The very singer of that song walked up to the runway, singing the song in real time. The models followed shortly, flaunting the lingerie on their body with tantalizing walks and poses. In an instant, I was spellbound. The colors on their cheeks rosy like having been under Maldives' sun a week ago, the sheen on their skin glittering in all directions. The one thing that truly claimed a place in my brain was the chisel on their body. They looked like some goddesses have flown down to earth to sculpt it themselves. If I were allowed to have some sort of audacity, I would admit that I want to have a physique like them, or something close to it. Maybe I

wanted to own a piece of their beauty so I at least could have something to admire when looking into the mirror. “I think you can have their body if you want.” Dirra blurts it out of the blue, as if reading my mind. “You think so?” “Yeah, you already have a nice proportion,” she said as she looks at me, top to bottom, “But if you want that body, you can’t have this!” She grabbed the potato chips bag from my hand teasingly, chowing down a handful straight to her mouth. I laughed at the look of her full cheek and didn’t take the potato chips back.

I went back home the next day and dashed straight to my room. I took my clothes off after locking the door, only my underwear remained on. There it was, my body in the mirror, almost bare. Unlike those models I saw last night, there was no Venus-carved chiselled body nor twinkling glitter on my body. I probed the small pouch on my stomach, sucking it in to see what I’d look like if I lost a pound or two. I clutched the extra flesh on my lower back and thighs in silent horror. The mental comparison I did in my head between my body and the body I saw on the TV that night made the flesh my hands touched seem utterly disgusting. I wondered how on earth did I feel completely normal with all of this flesh hanging on my limbs. After twenty minutes of observing everything wrong about my body, I consulted the internet on how to lose weight, to obtain a body like those models. Dozens of webpages about fitness and diet became my personal doctor. BMI and caloric numbers turned into an ultimatum of what can and cannot enter my body. I woke up the next day with the kind of determination I never knew I had. I calculated and recorded the caloric content in every meal I took; even the smallest bite of apple counted. I worked out for an hour in the evening.

I weighed myself after a morning run at the end of the week. These new habits quickly became a religious regimen. I did not talk about these new habits of mine to anyone but Dirra and my little brother whom I shared a bedroom with. I no longer ate my meals with rice, I cut down on fatty meat. I stopped buying doughnuts and other comfort desserts I used to find solace in — which at that point had been transformed into some sort of devil to defeat. However, there was one place which these diet changes seem to refuse to touch — family dinner. As illogical as it sounds, not taking the rice in the presence of my mom felt shameful and offensive. So I put a passable amount onto my plate. My mother would comment on how little rice I took to which I'd reply with an awkward smile, adding a comment about getting into fitness. I assumed she would understand because she did model for a brief period in her life but she gave me a confused look instead. “Are you really going to be fit if you eat so little, Amel?”

My mother has a petite body. Her fingers are bony and dainty, so are her wrists and décolletage. Her pronounced bone structure is coupled with soft flesh on her upper arms and legs. Sometimes, there is a look of weariness on her stomach and thighs. Providing for two children alone is no easy job, but even with that frazzle, the soft charm of her physique still glows. With such a delicate body, it just makes sense that she was once a model. However, her body is unlike those models I saw that night – unlike the kind of body I want. I want the modestly sculpted abs kind of body. I want the strong legs, small-waisted kind of body. I want my body to be just like the cohort I saw on Dirra's TV. I want my body to be an amalgam of my own recollection of their bodies. Not hers.

After a while, my mother learned about the ambitious weight-loss-slash-body-building goal of mine. She stopped questioning the rice portion on my plate. Still, some sort of unspoken strangeness loomed every time we went out to eat. I only looked normal when we went to a sushi restaurant. If we weren't going to have sushi, we would go to a western food place where my mom and little brother would order scrumptious ribeye or sinfully creamy fettuccine alfredo. I was the only one ordering salad without mayonnaise. To have your plate looking so different than those around you is pressuring, but it couldn't budge the vision I had in mind of how my body could look like if I stuck to my calorie-bible. When we ordered desserts, I would only allow myself to enjoy one spoonful of the chocolate cake as I made a mental promise to run an extra kilometre or two. Every time we went out to eat at a western food place, I would order salad without mayonnaise. My mother would ask me if I was sure about it and I'd need to repeat myself three times before she finally told the waiter, "one caesar salad, no mayonnaise."

To some people I might have seemed to give up the world's best bliss — food. Or to be exact, *good* food. But objectively I was still eating; hell, I never even skipped a meal. I just made a more careful decision about the food I took. Eggs and green tea in the morning. Brown rice, spinach, and chicken breast for lunch. Sweet potato and red beans at night. The menu tasted just fine, I didn't feel the urge to get myself the chocolate-coated brownies or cheese pizzas my mom brought from work. Besides, I had had those things already. I didn't feel like I missed out on any pleasure. The only pleasure that mattered to me was from the vertical lines on the sides of my stomach. I'd

crunch a little more after the workout session thinking the muscles would magically emerge from the soft under my belly button as I woke up the next morning. If fitness were a religion, I'd be its pious congregation.

In a little more than one month, changes started to emerge on my body. The flabby flesh on my arms and thighs evaporated, leaving the muscle to be faintly traceable from over my skin. The slight mountain of back fat got trimmed into a womanly concave curve when I stood. And the proudest change of all, two dim vertical lines on the sides of my stomach. I was elated when I tucked in my shirt and noticed the kind of silhouette they made when the light hit from my right side – two parallel lines a couple inches away from my belly button, reminiscent of the abs those models had. This image of my body in the mirror looked so miraculous, I felt like a little girl when she saw herself in a glitter-sprinkled dress – pretty. I continued with the routine and changes showed themselves clearer and clearer every week. My friends started to compliment the way clothes fell on my body, conveying envy for the light sculpture on my stomach in easy going banter when we changed clothes for P.E. There is a certain high when you can see yourself gradually becoming the person – or an idea you once aspired passionately to be. But there is a different kind of high you get when people give you the validation you never thought needed – the girls who call you cute, and the boys who act more nicely towards you. The high was intoxicating. I slowly became more aggressive with my diet and work out. I began to intensify the workout sessions from 3 times a week to 5 times a week. In my brain, muscle pain translated into progress, so did the sensation of hunger. Some days I would only eat one meal, half the portion my little brother had on his plate.

Whenever my body signalled its need for food at 11 pm, I'd flush in a big gulp of water as if it was a placebo for a good bite of bread. Soon enough, muscle pain and stomach growls turned into a hallmark of beauty. As well as cold feet and late periods.

One day my mother came home complaining about the pain in her stomach. She blamed it on the spicy foods she had for lunch. The pain dissipated after she took on some painkillers and went about her evening as usual. The next evening somebody phoned me. It was my mother. She said she had fainted in the office and was brought to a hospital nearby. She also mentioned the stomach pain getting worse.

"Do you want me to come?"

"No need. It's far from home anyway. I just want to say that I'm going stay here for a night."

"Okay."

She hung up after we exchanged 'I love you'. The next morning she came back home, dropped off by a kind-hearted lady who drove a Benz. It didn't show on her face that she was unwell. But on that Saturday, she fainted twice in the same day.

After several misdiagnoses, we found out she had a severely inflamed appendix that required immediate surgery. During the time she was sick, my

grandparents came to accompany her to the hospital since I needed to go to school and my little brother was simply too young to rely on. My grandmother was the one taking care of her most of the time. She had quite a lot of quiet crying in the middle of her mutterings about how thin my mother was from working too much and how much she regretted not trusting her bad gut feelings about my father – the one who invited a lady friend to our home one afternoon, went out with her to buy me some Cheetos but never actually came home to give them to me. My grandfather would dismiss it with a sad yell, telling her to stop. I would be holding my grandmother's short and plump fingers to comfort her. It clearly was an emotional time for my family, yet I still managed to fit workout sessions in-between the hospital visits. Ridiculous thoughts ebbed and flowed in my head—of how I wished I could take my mother's pain, how I might as well take her thinness and call it victory.

It was a public holiday, a few days before the doctor allowed my mother to go home, so I went to the hospital two-hours earlier than usual. I packed my corn and lettuce salad to eat there. When I arrived at her room, my mother was leaning on her back, reading a design magazine. She looked more alive compared to the earlier days of post-surgery in which the pain was so excruciating she couldn't even sit in her bed.

"Oh, hello, dear." She put down the magazine to welcome my hug.

"Hello, mum. How are you feeling?" I asked to confirm a hint of vigour in her face. "So much better already. I think I can already go home tomorrow," she

chuckled.

We talked about the design she was amazed by on one of the pages of a trendy lifestyle magazine she was reading. I responded to her awe while opening up the lunch I'd packed. She continued for a bit before fixing her stare on my lunch box, with the kind of look she makes when calculating something in her head. There was some sort of carefulness in her eyes, I caught it although I didn't understand what she was anticipating.

"Your brother told me you often ask him to turn off the air-con," she asked me, smiling timidly.

"Yes, because it's cold," I replied, my right hand covering my stuffed mouth, "the past three days it has been raining non-stop."

She turned her body to the left, where I sat next to her. Her hand reached my back and pressed on the contour of my back bones.

"You're so thin nowadays."

My fork folded the salad leaves in my lunch box, unsure what to do next. I look at my mom wearing a patient's gown, thin and green. Would you want my thighs to jiggle when I run? Would you want me to return the things I paid for with sweat and self-restraint? Didn't you feel the slightest gladness to have a pretty daughter?

"Eat more, will you?"

Her request sounded like a betrayal of my morning runs. I nodded in slight stifle, my cheeks burning. "If you get sick in this shape, you will need three layers of this gown to feel comfortable." She looked at my face, grinning while holding water in her eyes.

My mother's surgery cut extended in a perfect vertical line from her belly button until the last inch of what counts as lower stomach. A tiny pink-brown creek. Her stomach was still tender to the touch, but far more fragile looking. Some days the pain from her cut persisted despite the pain killers. Some days the pain was so bad it spread out to her chest and she would bellow from just turning her body onto the other side of the bed. I helped her to walk up the stairs and pull her body up from the bed during this time. Her thin legs would shake ever so slightly from the pain, so would I, from dizziness. From maybe not eating enough. From refusing to take more rice for dinner. From trying to sustain the niceness people offered me when I was *finally* pretty. Her lady-friend who drove a Benz picked my mother up every morning to work for two months before my mom can drive on her own again. The last time she came to pick her up, we had a brief conversation where she told me, with an unexplained warmth in her face, "Your mom showed me a picture of you when you were 10. You look just like your mother when she was your age."

Later that night my mother revealed to me that the lady who picked her up every morning was her childhood friend. She lived 20-minute drive away

from our place. The day when my mother fainted in the office was the first time they had met in person after six years, although they had been talking on their phones for the longest time. “She used to be like you, not eating rice and all,” my mother told me in a teasing tone as I helped her lay down on her bed, her hand pushing on her throbbing scar. “When her father died she started to eat well again. She told me she needs the strength to help her mom so she has to eat. I just hoped she didn’t have to wait until her father died to realize that.”

It's been two years since her surgery. Something in me changed after that last sentence and it is stuck in my head. Beauty that once felt like a pinnacle of worthiness now felt laughably trivial. I cannot afford being dizzy and cold, I cannot afford not eating. I, too, need to become the untiring legs of her. She has been doing well despite the pain that comes and goes once in a little while. No longer as strong, yet the spark in her eyes still burns as brightly. Nothing in her has changed; she is still as witty as ever, except for one thing.

During the few weeks after the surgery, bloating seemed to bother my mother most. Judging from her jaded face after she ate, patting her own back to push a burp out of her stomach. Over time, the bloated stomach takes longer and longer to diminish. Her soft and tender stomach grows into a mound of flesh. Even when she hasn’t eaten, her tummy stays as a small hill attached to her slim body. Never once did she ask me about how her blouse looks on her, but today she asks me if it makes her look fat. I took a moment to inspect — her stomach bulges out like it bore, a separate being from her own body. It does not look abnormal, yet it is not the body I once

admired in the shallower sense of the word.

“Only slightly. It looks nice, though,” I commented before she changed clothes to the one that blurred the look of her rounded stomach.

I watch my mother as she scoops the rice onto her plate, taking just enough for half a dozen spoons to her mouth. I question whether it is too little for dinner. She says she is already full from eating some sort of cake at work. I will only question her once. Tomorrow I’m going to bake some chocolate chip cookies and I know me and my little brother will eat most of them, and that she will only take one bite.

A Poem in One Afternoon

One afternoon, I don't remember what day but supposedly it was during the weekend because otherwise I wouldn't have scrolled through YouTube on my bed, stumbling upon a video of a poem titled,

For Estefani...

An illustration of a girl – maybe a woman – with hollowed chest, unveiling a red heart, sitting in (what seemed like) a forest was the cover of that video. Her skin was brown, stone-like. The picture looked ancient, yet young, reminiscent to the storybook I used to read as a child. Is she Estefani? Who is Estefani? Intrigued, I tapped on the video and let it play. An animation of slightly abstract, youthful drawings of animals, flowers, and shapes moved to comply Aracelis Girmay's calming speech reading the poem out. It was a beautiful animation, a beautiful poem, revolving around a beautiful word (suppose it is);

Loisfoeribari

Girmay pronounced the B in Loisfoeribari like a double-U; lowsforeewary. Losforiwary. Lowisferiwerry. The way the words in English pronounce the letter R like a murmured roar, instead of trilling the tongue on the mouth roof behind the front teeth, lowisforeew'ree.

In that poem she talked about the long word, Loisfoeribari, the one written

in the letter that (suppose she was) her student, Estefani, sent her. She read the letter in June (I suppose she lives in America) when summer had just arrived. Figures of hibiscus, Pittsburgh, and a tall glass of drink were captured in her poem – several things she tried to fit in a sentence, attempting to make sense of the word Loisfoeribari;

A scientific, Latin name for Hibiscus.

A hot rainy day, open windows draped by music,
a (Loisfoeribari) in a Collins glass.

A way to get to Pittsburgh, we take the (Loisfoeribari).

But as far as sentences go, Loisfoeribari can always be a container to bear every meaning thrown into it. Loisfoeribari is (or was) still cryptic in the four minutes of Girmay's sitting with the word. A direction? A forgotten thing? Loisfoeribari?

Perplexed, she thought of sending Estefani a letter regarding the word Loisfoeribari. At the end of the year, she composed a letter that began with,

To the brilliant Estefani.

And ended with,

What does the word Loisfoeribari mean?

My tongue followed as Girmay uttered the word over and over and over, Loisfoeribari. In the mouth that was taught to speak Indonesian for the first decade of its existence, spelling Loisfoeribari feels very much like wiggling something out of your gum. I crinkle my inner lips to gesture owee-foe-wee-

awe-ee. Spring your tongue from the outer tip of your upper front teeth, *louwee*, then sustain it in the center of the room behind your teeth as you bite the wet flesh behind your lower lip ever so slightly, *fouriwary*. *Lois*, *foeribari*.

Girmay experimented with emphasizing different sections of the word; *LoisFOERibari*, *LoISfoeribari*, *LoisfoeriBAri*. She jumped on each syllable, trying to feel some kind of loose thread in the word so she can pull it out and unravel a meaning, if there is any. She then tried to read out the word in Spanish. The consonants shifted from being a restrained wind to a freed breath, sharp sound. The R was feeble, a combination of D and L, the thump that you hear when you push some air to the tip of your curved-up tongue to uncurl it. *Loisfoedibadi*.

The vowels showed their color that, in the comforting voice of Girmay's, sounded much like a tangerine red. A hibiscus. I could hear her stretching her cheeks, opening her mouth letting the vowels come out clear and vibrant. *LOisFO'EdiBAdi*.

As if sensing that she was close to decoding this long foreign word (suppose it is), Girmay slowed her recitation of the word that had sit in her palate for more than days now.

LO is FO E di BA di

Lo is Fo E di Badi

Lo is fo Edi Badi

Love is for every body

Love is for everybody.

The next thing I knew, this sentence ricocheted in every direction imaginable. Yes, *loisfoeribari* is a sentence. It leaped and rose in all possible arrangements. A firework of syntaxes neatly resounds within Girmay's reading of the word – or sentence, but I think it would be unjust to assume it cannot embody both states at once.

*“love is for every every body love
love love everybody love
everybody love love
is love everybody
everybody is love
love love for love for everybody”*

Loisfoeribari means love is for everybody. Or that everybody is love. Or everybody is love. Or everybody loves. Love body. Love, for love is for everybody, everybody. It is a sentence everybody needs to remember. And *loisfoeribari* stowed the sentence in itself as whole, never less.

My Victims

Jihan Angrila

Department of BioMedical Engineering

Faculty of Engineering

International University Liasion Indonesia (IULI)

Email: jihan.angrila@gmail.com

Chapter 1: Meet Layla, Rio, and Me.

I don't think it's normal for people to have supernatural powers. I have always believed in things that I see, which is not much. Humans are just... well, humans. Intelligent, yes. Charismatic, can be. Personality? Animals can have that too. But supernatural powers on any kinds? Highly unlikely. That's why psychics are made fun of so much; with their 'energy-sensing' abilities, 'talking to the dead', and other kind of non-sense. I'm sure many others, no, the majority of the people with a logical brain would just laugh and say "you're just faking it" when someone shows them something out of the ordinary. And they'll probably think you're weird too. Definitely weird.

That's why I'm one of the weird ones. I'm not normal.

Why?

It's easy. Whenever, I kill someone, I absorb their memories and abilities. Their entire life (sometimes), their fears, ambitions, dreams, and much more. Clearly, no one knows about my 'special ability' since I'm still here talking to you, and not in jail. But being honest, maybe soon. Things haven't been working out in terms of my killing spree lately. You might be curious as

to why I would say ‘killing spree’ instead of something that would just mean one murder. Sorry to disappoint, but I just can’t help it. Whenever their memories flood into my head, all their emotions, especially in their final moments, is just so thrilling. It’s addictive. It’s enslaving. I’m just obsessed with it.

The best part is obtaining new abilities and skills without the need to practice them at all.

Who wouldn’t want to have that?

One day you kill someone and then, the next thing you know, you’re a vet with ten years’ experience in horse surgery. How cool is that?

Documents for job interview or application can be faked but skills can’t. Right now, I hold the position of a senior banker with forty years of experience and earning a fat salary every month.

And I’m only thirty!

Life is definitely good right now. Who knows, maybe the next month I’ll change my job to something more interesting. Don’t get me wrong, I kill not for practicality. As I have said, it just feels really good when the memories come flooding in. If I could live different lives before I truly die, why not take the chance and become more knowledgeable? Life is what you make most of it, right? So, it’s justifiable to enrich my own life by living through others’

lives. That's how I'm making the most of my life at least.

I have already planned who to kill next. There's this detective that has caught my eye. She's just too good! If I could kill her, I'll be invincible with my power. All her skills in criminology and whatever would surely help me avoid the trouble of evidence and stuff like that. I did kill a policeman before, but he was a rookie so that didn't really help. But it was nice knowing 5 years of aikido without actually doing any of the training.

Life's just too perfect right now.

I should clarify that just because I said 'killing spree', does not mean I'm on the same level as Luis Garavito. That would be too much. That would make me god with all that skills. In all honesty, I fear one day all the abilities will make me go mad. By 'killing spree', I mean I've only killed 10 people so far. If I remember correctly. There was a period in my life where I just blacked out due to someone's passing. Sometimes their memories get jumbled together and it becomes hard to differentiate who's who. Too many voices in my head. That's the drawback of my special ability but hey, it's worth it.

To me, it's like a drug that I just can't stop injecting into my veins.

I started at the fresh, young age of 18. It was accidental of course. I didn't realize that when I take another person's life, I literary take their life as my own. My first was a classmate of mine. We were young and stupid, drunk, driving late at night through the town. I technically didn't kill her but I was

the one driving and the one more drunk. She kept asking me to stop but there was just something thrilling about her worried face and driving at illegal speed while being out of your mind. The next thing I knew, we crashed and just as she was hanging on to me, her life drained and transferred into mine. All her memories, skills, assets, everything, I felt them. I was convulsing with pleasure and it was both disgusting and fantastic.

It was euphoric.

Obviously, I survived and she didn't.

I managed to get myself together and fled the scene. For some reason, no one knew it was me who 'killed' her. It was a small town and I guess they didn't really look into that kind of stuff as much. Teens were looked down upon in that town. What a shame. They could've stopped a future serial killer if they had tried to catch me. I'm not complaining; the opposite actually. That night made me realize the capabilities I was able to achieve today and it awakened my love of being so multifunctional.

As I was writing this, I didn't actually know why I was writing it. But now I do. I'm writing this to commemorate, to *celebrate* those who were unwillingly giving up their life just so they could be of use to mine. I won't disclose specifications of the places and such information, but rather give a vague sequence of what happened. Call it your privilege of letting your imagination decide. So here are the 'chapters' of this book that will describe people in each that I have... obtained my wide array of skills from.

This is a terrible idea, in all honesty.

Imagine all the horrible crimes I have committed! And to record them too? It's basically suicide. But I can't keep up with the voices and memories in my head anymore. At least I don't think I can much longer. The abilities I have obtained are beautiful but the memories that come with it sometimes are just too much. So maybe, if I write them down, I can differentiate who's who again. Besides, that's why my next target is that detective, right? No more worrying about having loose ends. That ends here.

Enough rambling. That's enough explanation for now. As I write this, I will continue with my plans for the detective but they won't be written here of course. That's a surprise. Anyways, let's introduce our first victim.

Layla Chase.

Sweet girl that got her life robbed just at the age of eighteen due to a car crash. Courtesy of me, of course. Her life was filled with happiness most of the time. A couple of depressions, heartache and heartbreak now and then but nothing really outstanding. What she offered me was good homely feelings through her memories which I really appreciated. I personally never had such a thing with my own parents but it's good to know what that felt like. Not only that, she was exceptional in understanding others. As in emotionally. That was another plus for me as you can guess I don't really understand much of that stuff.

Typical psychopathic behavior perhaps? Lack of empathy and such.

But now, it's so easy for me to understand people still and use it to my advantages even though that skill was obtained twelve years ago. Call it a plus in my manipulation skills.

Layla was also very good in the STEM field. Which was great since that helped me get into the college of my choice to study biomedical engineering. But that wasn't the most messed up thing I have done to her. Even for me, the time when I used her own memories to sympathize with her family during her funeral was the worst thing I have done to her. I had to take a bath after that because of how filthy I felt. Pretending I actually cared about how her parents felt was pretty gross.

What else is there with Layla? I guess the caring and warm relationship she shared with her sister always helps me through my dark times. Whenever I pull that memory from my head, I feel warm and fuzzy on the inside. Although only temporary, it always brings a smile to my face when I adopt Layla's point of view whenever she spent her time with her sister. I don't know what happened to that sister. Something that confuses me is that, despite the fact that I have Layla's memories, I can never remember her sister's name. Oh well. It's not that important anyways.

To conclude Layla's life, all I can say that if she had lived on, she would be one happy person. Good opportunities were ahead of her but alas, she

crossed my path and that's how she ended. Good for me though. She 'helped' me discover my love of re-living someone's life and for that, I'll be forever grateful to her. Even though she didn't give me many abilities.

Moving on, then.

Rio Tonsia.

Rio was my upper classmate in college. He was in his third year and I had just started. We all have to agree that college is the time of self-discovery. The time to discover your skills, limits, and expand your knowledge. He was a fairly exceptional student with good scores and had a great passion for what he was studying about. The only thing in college that I first wanted to explore more was my memory and ability absorbing skills. So why not start now? The perfect time to grow and bloom as an individual. Rio had no idea who I was. But good killers know how to study their victims first before striking and even an amateur like me understood that. I studied his schedule, his habits, his everything before striking. A quick slash to the neck in a secluded place was all it took. The moment his grip on my arms loosened, I felt the same euphoric feeling I felt the night Layla died. I could see his life at first; from his childhood up until I cut his neck open from his perspective. The last part was thrilling but I knew the memories that will stay with me were even more worth it. Just like Layla, he lived a relatively normal and happy life. The only difference was an ex that he couldn't move on from. They broke up just before he graduated high school. In my opinion, it was pretty pathetic not to move on from a person like her. He made friends with

such interesting people in college, he could've been with someone better than his ex. But I guess he liked to wallow in self pity and sorrow. If I use Layla's high empathy skill, I felt bad for him. But I won't waste my skills on that.

I think it's obvious why I choose Rio. I gave you hints before already. He was good at what he was studying and had great passion for it too. He and I studied the same thing. Of course I wanted what he had. Who doesn't? Rio wasn't that high in emotional skills but his practicality was just something I couldn't resist. All of those A+ grades, sophisticated reports, and knowledge in the field? Yes please.

This time, I murdered not to discover someone's life. This time it was more about practicality and the abilities I needed to excel in college. In a way, it was an experiment too on how far his skills could take me. And to be fair, it took me far. First year student with the mind of a third year student? It's incredible.

Took me far enough to graduate first in my class.

Life was easy during college.

But then comes adulthood and that's for the next chapter of whatever this is.

My writing might give you the impression that I care about no one but

myself. And you're absolutely right. My whole life I've used others for my own benefits, literally. I've lied constantly, every time actually, and never shown others how I truly felt about them. They think I'm just another person with functioning feelings but they're dead wrong. This book will show you how I have truly felt my whole life, at least through the experiences that I experienced through my victims. Call it a documentary? Call it whatever you want. Keeping it all to myself would be wise. It would be safer. But everyone, even a serial killer with supernatural ability, needs to vent sometimes.

Chapter 2: Emily and Anne.

When I was younger, I made dumb mistakes too. Although, it's not what you think. What counts as a dumb mistake for me would be killing someone that's entirely useless. Well, you can't say that someone is entirely useless, but you have to agree that some people are just not as useful as others. Previously, I talked about how killing someone would benefit me. I recall that my tone suggests it was a tremendously good thing for me to kill someone for the ability and memories. That is true; it does bring me tremendous joy and ecstasy to have those memories fill me where I have none. But every positive has its negative. And that is what this next chapter is about.

Emily Strangewood.

Strange girl, indeed.

To fit with her name, I had her executed in the woods. I find it funny to match my victims' names to how they died or where they died. Just a small detail that serves as my signature to the police. Speaking of the police, they still hadn't caught up to me. Despite my three body counts, no one could figure it out. With Layla and Joe I was sloppy but still the authorities had no idea who was behind the murders. Now, with Emily, they still had no idea.

What are the odds!

But then again, with Emily, I had taken special ways to ensure that nothing could be traced to me. Thank god for technology and the concept of catfishing. Emily was special. With Emily, I had posed as someone else and connected her to Faces, a website which lets you meet new people and stay in contact with them. Luckily I had found Emily during a dark moment in her life and it was easy to infiltrate her wall. With Layla's help, I had charmed her enough for her to start spilling all of her life's problems to me. Again, with Layla's help, thank god, I endured the sad excuse of a person Emily is. If it wasn't for Layla, I wouldn't have the patience to deal with the woman.

Emily had told me she had depression and was suicidal during the last months of her life. Her job was awful, her friends were awful, her living condition was awful, everything was awful. When I had coaxed her out to come and meet me, as expected, she went down with no resistance. She actually let me kill her, which I thought was pretty sweet and nice of her.

But oh boy, the memories that filled my head were filled with misery. It wasn't the same feeling as Layla and Rio. It was intensely depressing.

Right from her childhood up till she died. Abandoned as a baby, left in an orphanage, kicked out at the age of 13, grew up on the street, and so on. How in the world did this woman made it so far? I would've expected her to take her own life whenever she had the chance but wow, what a fighter. At least until the last few months of her life. When I took it, she wasn't scared.

She didn't beg for me to let her go or to spare her but instead, she submitted to me. In a way, I was her savior. I saved her by ending her misery permanently.

I could relate to Emily slightly. We both had a rough start in our own way but the difference is I felt nothing until Layla came along while Emily could feel everything from the start. Also, she didn't have my amazing gift, of course.

I felt the relief that she felt when I took her life. I believe people call it mercy killing?

All mercy and such aside, she had nothing in terms of skills. She was the definition of an average person. Nothing special, nothing 'non-special'. Nothing at all. Unless you count her extreme depression as a special skill.

What a waste of time.

All those weeks grooming her for murder and that was what I got? I have to admit it was my mistake to be hopeful about her. I should've seen that all she could offer me was a serious case of depression. It took me weeks to get that fixed! Not only that, I had to see a therapist which took most of my paycheck!

Going to the therapist as someone who has so many secrets was NOT easy at all.

At one point, I thought my cover was going to be blown. But luckily, it did not because I stopped the sessions halfway and fixed the depression myself. By ignoring it through planning for my next victim.

Who was just as unlucky as Emily.

Anne Parker.

I met Anne in a coffee shop. She looked professional with her black blazer and pencil skirt. She looked like the kind of woman who had her life figured out and could offer you something insightful. She smiled at me and, honestly, I found it captivating. There was just something mysterious about that smile of hers that I wanted to know more about. The next day I saw her again and using Layla's skills, I charmed her and made her sympathetic to my 'lonely, single' life. I wouldn't say we were attracted to each other romantically; it was more of 'friendship' or 'companionship'. At least for me. I wasn't too sure about her though.

We met up here and there in different places to talk about stuff. More like for me to tell her what she wanted to hear just to lure her in. The more time I spent with her, the more there was something off about her. She couldn't keep eye contact for long, twitched more than a normal person, just generally an odd aura came off her. After I had invested enough time and 'emotion' into the woman, I finally managed to lure her into the part of the local park that no one ever goes to. Why a park? Well, it's obvious. Her last name is Parker!

This time, after the horrible time I had with Emily, I actually tried to enjoy my time slaughtering Anne. Like any other person, she begged me not to kill her. But there was something different. Something felt disturbing, even for me. Yes, she was begging me to spare her life but at the same time... it felt like she was enjoying the intimate moment we were having. As if she actually wanted me to kill her. Willingly and excited for the chance to die.

Definitely a messed-up lady.

The moment I pierced her abdomen with my knife, I slowly felt her emotion. It was slow since how she died was by blood loss but my god, the feeling was so tense. Excitement, happiness, things you would expect the opposite of what you would expect when you're being murdered. As she was truly slipping away from consciousness, the memories started to flood into my mind. An overachiever child overshadowed by the birth of her sister who turned out better than her. Years of jealousy and insecurity haunted her. At 17, 'accidentally' pushing her sister into the docks and letting the poor kid drown. Blamed it on the mossy, slippery wooden dock. Unable to cope with what she had done, she developed some sort of OCD or things that helped her cope.

She felt guilty, but at the same time, so happy when her sister died. Out of this world joyful.

Oh my god, she's insane.

She was so filled with both guilt and joy it drove her slowly to insanity. She tried to distract herself with work and thus regained her overachiever status. But of course, at the cost of her sanity. All those distractions were good for nothing since she never really worked out her problem.

But what she had to offer was not worth the murder.

I obtained her efficiency, strict work ethic, and overachiever mentality.

At the same time, even though so far there was a four-body count under my name, my hands felt so filthy. It was never like this. Not even when I had killed Emily, poor, poor Emily. My hands always felt good after each murder but after Anne, I felt like I needed a break from murdering. That feeling of being so guilty was so intense that I had to go back to therapy.

Different therapist, of course. I wouldn't like it if someone actually figured me out.

After a lot of money wasted, someone nearly figuring me out, and having to solve my own problem of insanity, I finally could cope with the feeling of guilt. Murdering both Emily and Anne was a terrible choice. Both were traumatizing for my mind in their own ways.

I'd like to compare the things I get from these women as something bad you'd catch during sex with strangers. You expect to have a good time but

actually, in the end, you need to go see a doctor. In my case, therapists. However, something I learnt from these two was for the next murder, people with good mental health were preferred.

Something I should perhaps record is how my plans are going for my next victim. So far, I have procrastinated. No new important information found so far. Besides, this detective is tougher than I expected. She changes her habits every day, have no social media and, what's worse, she behaves too professionally. No close friends or confidants. I don't think my usual charm and social skill would cut it with this one. It'll take time for me to even get close to her. It's so bad, I don't even know what case she's working on!

However, something that I have started to notice is how familiar she looks. It is as if I know her from before already, like someone from the past.

Like someone from my memory.

Chapter 3: The Time I Was "Normal"

The last chapter was a bit more depressing than I had hoped for. Although only two victims, now you see how everyone I kill contributes something, big or small, negative or positive. I'd prefer a positive contribution of course, but you can't always get what you ask for.

It seems confusing but I should clarify that, when I murder someone, it is only sometimes that I get their whole life story and honestly, I don't mind. If they're an interesting person of course but if not, then I'd rather not waste my time. In real time it only takes minutes for someone's whole life to be replayed in my mind but when you're committing a murder, every millisecond count. With that said, it still is a bummer when I do want to know someone's life story and my 'special skills' won't let me. You might think that I have this ability figured out at the age of 30 but you're wrong. Sometimes, when I'm really unsure, I have no idea what will happen during a murder. Nowadays, I just hope for something new to happen just to see how far my skills can actually take me. I guess all I can do right now is be content with it. Like they say, practice makes perfect.

As usual, I'll tell the tale of my victim and then discuss what I've found out or what my plan is for my next victim: the precious detective. Since we have already spent so much time previously on the negative, let's talk about something positive. Let's talk about the time I finally felt like to love someone and have it so brutally taken away from me. So let's start with our contributor.

Joe

Just Joe, no last name, nothing.

Joe was someone I met just before quitting the hospital. He was actually one of the patients of the doctor I was working with. I should probably tell you what my job was in the hospital but that's too boring so, in summary, I take care of the machines that take care of the patients. Not my dream job, but my qualifications made it easy to earn money. Usually, patients can be divided into different personality types but Joe was... different. He didn't have any life-threatening illness but at the same time, he wasn't healthy enough to not visit the hospital at least 3 to 5 times a week. I hope he has insurance to cover his bills because I know the machines he used weren't cheap. I would feel *a little* bad if he had to pay for that using his private reserve.

Joe was a good guy. Very, very good guy indeed.

Even though he was a patient himself, he liked to help and volunteer around the hospital. Especially around the children's ward. We actually had met because the guy in charge of the dialysis machine for a child was out that day and Joe happened to be there, keeping the children company. I walked into the child's room to see him sitting next to a boy with animal hand puppets. He greeted me with a warm smile but the child did not. I always believed children always know something more than adults do from time to

time and maybe this kid could feel what I'm really like. Or maybe it was just the hospital uniform that makes it scary for children. I don't know, children are weird. Anyways, I actually didn't plan to have Joe as my victim but, at the time, I had nothing better to do so I thought why not meet some new people and try not to kill them. I felt like that's a challenge that was fun to try. After chatting while I did maintenance on the machine, Joe and I exchanged numbers to keep in contact. At first I was reluctant but he had told me that he wouldn't be staying in the hospital for much longer. I didn't ask why at the time he told me that as I felt it was rude since it was my first time meeting the guy but, after just a few texts, he told me that he had to stop treatment his treatment and seek help from somewhere more affordable. I felt bad for the guy and so with some minor convincing, I helped him set up some basic personal medical home equipment. Which I helped him purchase with my money, of course. Spending time with Joe was so... surreal. After what had happened with Emily and Anne, Joe made me feel normal. Even without Layla helping me, I felt the serenity and calmness that Joe radiates. He was such a happy and peaceful guy. Not those hipsters kind of peaceful, but actually accepting of everything; negative and positive.

For once in my monstrous life, I actually genuinely wanted to be with someone.

Not because of what he could offer me or how he could be of use to me. But because of how he managed to so easily calm the vile urges within me. The horrible urge to experiment, to push past my boundaries, the urge to be selfish. We weren't lovers but a very close pair of friends. I would usually

stay in his home most of the time, either keeping track of his machines and health or just hanging out with him. He grew to trust me very much and although not fully, in a way, he became the person I trusted the most. Out of everyone I've interacted with of course. I didn't tell him about the things that I did not did I tell him about my abilities but I did tell him about Layla, which I have never told anyone who didn't know about the "accident". He believed that it was just an accident, which relieved me since honestly, a part of me doesn't want him to leave.

Everything was going fine until his health started declining.

I actually considered stopping all my criminal activities if everything went well with Joe but sadly, it did not. One night, after I brought him to bed, he asked me to sit by his side until he fell asleep. I placed my hand on top of his and unknowingly slipped into slumber myself. I had a very strange dream; it was as if one of my memory or ability absorbing skills was in motion. I didn't think of it much since I thought it was a dream. And then I started to realize the person I was... was Joe.

I have never felt so disgusted at myself for probing into someone's memory. I wanted to wake up, shake myself awake or anything but it didn't work. I have never panicked so much in my life. After a while, I finally managed to wake up and the first thing that was on my mind was to check on Joe. As much as I didn't want it to be true, it happened. Joe had passed away in his sleep and just by placing my hand on him, I had absorbed his memories.

I won't tell you what had happened to him throughout his life, but I can only say the things he went through and how he had dealt with them definitely made him into somebody who even a serial killer could love. It sounds stupid since the reason for me writing this mini "autobiographies" was to honour my victims, but Joe was special. He doesn't need the world to know what he did or what he was like. The whole duration of time I had known Joe was less than a year and it's funny to think that in this chapter, instead of telling you how he was as a person, I have talked more about how I felt and such. In a way, am I the victim?

After Joe passed away, I was lost. I quit my job, mostly stayed at home and did nothing. It was a very dark time. I relied on what Layla gave me to interact with the world and other people when I had to but, deep down, I was empty. No goal, no emotion, nothing. It made me feel like an unstuffed animal doll. I couldn't deal with it very well and so I tried to "cheer" myself up by preying on and striking random people that I targeted from my living room window. I didn't know how to bring myself back to how I was before, before Joe, and so the period in my life where I would kill somebody just because they caught my eye started. It was blurry. I didn't know who I killed first or where or why. I just did.

The rest of the five people from the ten that I mentioned in the beginning were killed here. In the blurry, confusing part of my life where I tried to regain my sense of self. When Joe died, he took what I hoped to be a better future with him. I think I would've stopped my killing if he was still here. Isn't that weird? He was just a friend after all. I really don't know why I care so

much about him.

The reason why I started writing this was because I wanted to write down who's who that lives in my head. Their memories combining and mixing give me terrible headache and I had hoped to relief if I wrote it down. Even that is hard to do. After Joe, it was hard to differentiate who's who. After a long time reflecting and sorting, I managed to completely sort whose ability was whose. But the memories were still blurry to me. Very blurry.

It was a very dark and low point of my life. For once, I felt ashamed of my killings.

Maybe it was a bad idea to talk about Joe. I thought I have moved on from his death but now it just makes me depressed again.

Let's talk about what has happened with me and the detective.

So far, I think she has found me. I've seen her roam my street where I live and even saw her parking all night just around the corner from my home. She was with another person in the car, an older man. I assume her work partner or something. Something that I found out was her name is Ray Chase.

Ray Chase.

Layla's last name was Chase and she had a younger sister called Ray. I

suspect this is no coincidence. I think Ray didn't believe what I pleaded to the judge all those years ago and instead of moving on from her sister's death, she decided to take things in her own hands. What an obsessive person. From what I could remember, from Layla's memories, Ray was a relatively cheery kid. Kid, not adult. Looking at her now, she looks depressed and angry most of the time. Maybe that was because of me? Even then, how will she ever prove that I killed her sister? The case was cleared up years ago and there's no real reason to open it again. Unless the reason was revenge, of course.

But I doubt she has anything evidential against me.

Chapter 4: Enough Stalking

Ray had enough evidence to arrest the man she has been hunting down and ensure that he will stay in jail until he rots. Years of anger, pain, hurt, unfairness, and all those negative emotions that filled her the day the court decided to let the man walk free had given her the determination to pursue and carry out justice with her own hands. If someone were to tell her when she was younger that she would be a detective just to pursue one man, she would've called them crazy. The death of her sister, Layla, changed everything and the fact that her murderer walked free made everything even worse. Through bitter determination, she graduated the police academy top of her class and jumped straight into the homicide squad. All in an effort to send one man to where he belongs.

A man called Adam Mercia.

The man who started his murder spree with her innocent sister and never stopped for some reason. When her sister's "accident" happened, she knew something was wrong. The more Ray delved into her sister's death, the more she knew it was not just an accident. Of course, she didn't have all the information and such since she was not a police woman back then. This made her even more determined in the job and so, once she started with the homicide squad, she had all the information at her fingertips. And what she found was more than she had expected. Somehow, for some odd reason, Adam had appeared in most of the cases that she dealt with. From a university student, to an office woman, to a lawyer, and so on. There's no

clear connection between all of these murder victims except the fact that Adam was there; either directly or indirectly. Even though she could see him as the link to all these murders, she didn't understand the intention behind it.

To her, Adam has lived a relatively easy life. Good in school, landed a high paying job, made a risky change in his career and was tremendously successful with it, and so on.

Until she started realizing the man's path in life seems to go where his victims were. It seemed like he became whatever his victim was. It wasn't so clear when the university student died but then when he killed those two slightly-out-of-their-mind ladies, and the lawyer, Ray started to realize the pattern. It was also very odd that a biomedical technician would switch to a lawyer occupation and be so very good at it.

Ray worked in silence, making sure not a lot of people know what she was doing or what her plan was. Only those who were involved were aware but then again, they didn't know much either. After gathering enough evidence to bring Adam to justice, she finally executed her plan. She had been watching him and his actions recently and for a murderer, he seems to be not very odd. But then again, the whole situation was odd. With every second that she sat in her car and watched Adam, the more something felt out of place and so she decided to arrest the man the next day.

It was a dark and wet afternoon with occasional showers. Ray had waited

just a couple of buildings down from where Adam worked. She had a raincoat on just like any other person with hopes of keeping her presence unnoticed. The man she was after left his office on schedule as she predicted. She followed him down the street, making sure to keep him in her sight yet her out of his. It was a Friday so, if she was correct, Adam would head to the slightly shadier part of the city to unwind and have a couple of beers. Everything was going well, her plan was being executed perfectly step by step.

Until it was not.

Adam had walked straight past the bar he would usually go to and down towards the even shadier part of the already shady region of the city. Ray remained calm and kept her distance from him. She was prepared, she had to be. Years of grudge all led up to this. She had the warrant for arrest, her gun, cuffs, radio, and, if the situation gets out of hand, her hidden pocketknife. But even with all that preparedness, she still didn't know what Adam had on him.

Adam made a sharp turn and into an isolated alley, away from the main road. She had no choice but to follow him. For a moment she thought she had lost him but, from the corner of her eye, she could see a door slowly closing. Ray quickly approached the door and went inside, only to be greeted with the sight of Adam sitting on one of the benches. The place looked like a church that was left to rot with rotting wood and faded colours. Adam was just simply looking at the altar in front of them. It was dim and dusty inside.

“You know... I thought they would teach you better not to follow strangers to places like this.” Ray could hear the taunt in his voice.

“We both know you’re no stranger, Adam. I’m sure you remembered Layla.”

“Layla... oh yeah, Layla was very helpful,” the way he said the word “helpful” made her uneasy, “but I needed her more than you, sweetheart.”

“Cut the crap, Adam. I’m here to drag your ass to jail, something that should’ve been done decades ago!”

Ray was slowly losing her temper and that wasn’t good. She needs to get this done quick.

“Um... yeah, how about no? I won’t even ask you what I’ve because you clearly know. Well, not clearly but I guess more than others. But let’s make a deal.” Adam stood up and turned around to face her.

“Not interested, you frigging psycho.”

“Well, you don’t really get to decide. You know, after spending a bit of time reflecting, I realize I’m getting sick of this. Of my situation. Let’s bet if you can beat me, I’ll let you bring me to justice. Doesn’t matter-by your own hand or whatever.” He shrugged, slowly walking towards her.

“And if you win?” Ray’s hand was in her gun.

“You die.”

The next thing she knew Adam had run up to her with a switchblade in his hand. She staggered back and pulled out her weapon, but Adam had beaten her to it. He had struck her across her torso which she narrowly dodged but the blade still had slashed her across her arm. The gun fell to the floor with a loud thud and, before Adam could get another slash at her, Ray ducked under his arms and ran forward towards the altar to gain some distance. She took out her pocketknife with her uninjured arm and now was on the offensive. Blood trickled and seeped down her coat but she didn’t care. She ran forward just as Adam did and ducked to cut his upper thigh deep enough that blood started to pour. He retaliated by upper cutting her just as she was about to strike again. The two staggered back. Her arm was injured but he couldn’t walk anymore, which was better. She remembered her gun that was still of a behind him and judging by his enraged face, he had forgotten about it. Ray wanted to make this quick as she was not one to lose in anything; temper or a battle. Looking at this pathetic excuse monster was already enough for her.

Ray once again ran up to Adam but, instead of aiming for another hit, she fell to her knees and slid past him just as he was about to enclose her in his arms. She quickly got up and kicked his back, making him fall a few feet forward. With the extra time, she ran up to her gun and now was actually the one in power. She aimed the gun at the man and shouted,

“Adam Mercia, you are under arrest for several homicides, including that of Layla Chase. You have the right to remain silent!”

Adam only laughed, a laugh, ugh, that disturbed even Ray, the most composed person in the police force. He got up slowly and started staggering towards her still with that unsettling laugh.

“Don’t move or I will shoot, Mercia!”

Adam only did the opposite. He ran up to her even with the searing pain on her leg. With every step that he took, a bullet enters his torso. Loud echoes of gunshots filled the dim temple and Ray honestly thought the gun wouldn’t stop the monster. His pace slowed but he eventually collapsed at her feet. After kicking the knife away from his hand, she radioed for back up and bent down to check if the man is dead.

She could see he was still breathing but knew that he wouldn’t make it.

“For someone with the name ‘Mercia’... you’re the devil.” She whispered. Adam mumbled something in return, having no more energy or strength to reply. However, he did chuckle and grabbed her wrist with his bloody hand. And as he did, Ray slowly felt overwhelmed. Her head was filling up with memories that weren’t hers and all the emotions that came with it. She saw Layla, some of her victim cases, and others she didn’t recognize. She fell to the floor as it all became too much and started convulsing in shock. Her brain

couldn't process what was happening or where all these memories were coming from. It felt like an eternity before all the memories passed and she could see... Adam's memories. She saw his thoughts, his feeling, everything. She started feeling the way he felt; about life, his victims, his abilities, everything. She saw how he "used" Layla. She saw how Joe was to him. She didn't want this; she didn't want to know all these foreign memories.

But it was too late.

As Adam loosened his grip on her and as he slipped to eternal slumber, he slipped into Ray's life. His characteristics, goals, dreams, and all the things associated with him. He didn't realize his abilities would be passed on if he died but that was something Ray would have to learn about eventually. The two of them laid on the dirty church floor; one dead and one alive. But it was obvious both were still alive; one of them doing the living while the other lived within the one still alive.

Adam had given Ray the possibility of becoming the greatest murderer alive just by infecting her with his vile thoughts and memories.

If she couldn't fight it, the urge to continue what Adam did, she would basically be dead, and Adam would live.

Secrets of the Empyream

Qurratayun Fitrah Iman

Department of Mechatronics, Faculty of Engineering

International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI)

Email: qurratayun.f.iman@gmail.com

I chose this genre because I have a lot of ideas swimming in my head, and a fictional story is the best way to organize and express them.

Like all stories, the biggest problem I faced was writer's block, or moments when I was sitting in front my laptop and I was not happy or satisfied with the story so far. I also found problems with managing my time writing stories, times where I had free time to continue my story, I procrastinated and did other things instead. Or times where I have lots of idea for my story but was not near my laptop to write them down.

Of these problems I only got to resolve some of them, mainly the issues with not having ideas, as I just put a place holder there and moved on to the next part (or scene). And when I did get an idea, I returned to that part. Sadly, for the other issues I haven't resolved them yet.

Overall Feelings

Overall, I enjoyed writing the story, but as of this moment, the story is not finished, or even nowhere near the halfway point. So I'm very reluctant to

publish it right now. Nonetheless, perhaps I will continue the story on my own time as a side, side, side project; perhaps not, we shall see.

Chapter 1: "ALEXANDER FAYE! Wake up! You're Going to Make us Late!"

I groaned in response to my twin sister's shrill voice. For such a soft-spoken person in public, I truly am blessed to be able to hear the other side of Alyxia Faye. Stumbling into the kitchen I was greeted with a heavenly aroma. If I must suffer through my sister's shrill voice every morning to wake up to this, it might just be worth it. Breakfast was a simple affair in the Faye household, at least when our parents are around. Alas, with our parents gone, my ears are suffering from the violent awakening.

"What'd you cook to compensate for my ears this time, Lyx?" I mutter, sleep still clearly written all over my face.

"And good morning to you Al," My twin replied with blinding positivity. Her noirette locks had blue tips today. "And to answer your question, I made food."

"UGH, what kind of food?"

"Just simple bread and toast, dear brother o' mine"

"I hate you."

Sighing inwardly, I grabbed Alyx's plate and dug in, clearing it in record time.

With good food in my belly I finally have enough energy to start the day. I placed the plate in the sink, rushing upstairs before Alyx realized what I had done. Covering my ears just in time.

“ALEX!!! You finished my food!!”

“Yes, that’s the point of food, dearest sister. To be eaten”, I called down the stairs with mirth. “Now, will you excuse me while I finish all the warm water this fine Saturday morning.”

“NOOO!!! Don’t you dare!” Alyx yelled as she ran up the stairs.

Because of my head start, I swiftly grabbed my towel and locked the bathroom door. Laughing all the while. Since I’m not evil I didn’t take an extra-long shower, just a long one. Just enough to leave Alyx with enough warm water to last 5 minutes. Which, hilariously, isn’t enough for my dear sister. I can already imagine her cries when the water abruptly turns cold. Close to an hour later we were in my car, pulling away from our humble abode. Summer holidays may have just begun for the rest of the city. But we had work to do. Thanks to our parents, who are basically paid history nerds, we got a job at the public library. Me as a helping hand organizing books, while Alyx helps around in the library café. The library was in the centre of the city, right across from the local park. The good news is we get a great view. The bad news, we get to see everyone else having fun. The library used to be the old town house. When the governor decided to move, he repurposed the building into the public library we know today. Parking my

car across the street, we made our way into the ancient building.

“You’re LATE!” screamed the head librarian, Ana, as soon as we stepped in.

Quickly checking my watch and the huge grandfather clock over the library entrance, I sighed, “Madame Ana, we’re only 5 seconds late.”

“Bah! Those 5 seconds could be used organizing books!”

Deciding not to argue with the elderly custodian, I quickly agreed to her and I and my sister went our separate ways. Before I knew it, lunch came rolling around, so I headed to the library café. On my way there I passed by a mysterious man. He looked like someone right out of a spy movie, grey trench coat, fedora, and everything. He also had a very unusual smell around him; he smelled like an exotic herb, one that is not common in the library, or even in America as a whole. Ignoring the man and following my stomach instead I entered the café. Immediately I was greeted by the same aroma from this morning, a sure sign that Alyx was cooking. Even though there are many other chefs cooking in the café, Alyx’s cooking always has a heavenly smell around it. It’s almost like she has a special ingredient she brings with her everywhere.

“Hey, Lex!” I spun round to see Alyx’s best friend, Laila Khouri, standing behind me in line. “I see you’re distracted by the lovely smells Alyx has cooked up today”

“Of course, she always makes good food. I swear it’s her only talent, making food smell nice.”

“How nice of you, dearest brother of mine, and here I brought some food for the three of us, but since you were so kind to me, maybe I should just give this nice meal to someone else.”

“Damn!” I turned to see an innocently smiling Alyx carrying a tray of food. Quick as a flash, I took the tray off her hands, handing it to Laila before smiling just as innocently at her.

“There, I helped you out, Laila counts as another person, no? And thus we can enjoy the meal you prepared for us, right?”

We entered a brief staring contest with Laila standing awkwardly beside us, her amber eyes rocking back and forth like watching an intense tennis match. We soon broke apart, innocent smiles now full-blown grins. I grabbed the tray from Laila before the three of us scampered to the nearest table. On the way, I caught a whiff of the same exotic smell around a table near the door. It was faint. Which did make sense, as I saw the man browsing the library shelves. A nearby voice brought me out of my musings.

“What’s on your mind, Lex?” Laila asked curiously. “You look lost in thought.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” I replied, quickly.

Lunch is a short affair when I and my sister aren't busy bothering each other. The food was delicious, as usual, but I couldn't get the exotic smell out of my head. My gut keeps telling me to be aware. It had never steered me wrong before, so I was.

"Hey sis, did you see a guy in here earlier? Wearing a trench coat and fedora?"
"Hmm, yeah, I did. He smelt weird. I only partly recognise the smell."

"Oh! I've seen that guy too! I saw him walk into the library as I got off the bus. I didn't smell him though."

"Well, the table where he sat earlier is over there, maybe we can catch a whiff of him while we pass later."

"Good idea, sis! That way, we won't look too suspicious."

We packed up our things and headed out, Alyx, still on her break, followed. Passing by the man's table there was that exotic smell, fainter than before, but still strong enough to make out.

"I'm going to have to make this quick. My break's almost over," I started.

"Same here. Now, I'm sure I've smelled that before, but I'm not sure when or where," Alyx continued.

"I got it!" Laila all but shouted, "It smells like an Egyptian blue lotus!"

“A blue lotus?” I muttered, “But why?”

“I’m sure we’d all love to continue this conversation. But my dear brother and I have work to do. How about we meet up in the park later at 4? We both get out at that time.”

“Good idea sis, in the meantime, maybe Laila can do some snooping around?”

“Sure thing!”

Heading back to my station, I bumped into Madam Ana.

“Ah, Alexander, I was looking for you.”

“Yes madam? How can I help you?” I politely asked her.

“There’s a man here; he’s looking for a book, can you be so kind and help him out?”

“Of course, madam, where is he? If he’s by the front desk, I’ll make my way over there.”

“Yes, yes, now get going, he looks like he’s very busy.”

Walking quickly, I arrived at the main desk and I saw the mysterious man, standing awkwardly by the table.

“Excuse me sir? Can I help you?”

“Ah” he spoke in a very heavily accented voice, like he hadn’t spoken English in a while. “You must be the help dear Ana sent.”

Filing away the way he spoke of the custodian for another time. I smiled. “Yes sir, Madam Ana said you were looking for a book?”

“Indeed, I am young man, although I’m not sure this library has the book I’m looking for.”

“Our library is one of the biggest in the country. If it’s not here, then perhaps I can give you the numbers of some libraries that might, Mr...” I trailed off.

“Ah yes, call me Ned.” holding out his hand.

I shook it, wincing at the amount of pressure he applied. It was so strong; I did not notice that his smile widened by a fraction. But I did notice his eyes; his dark blue almost purple iris stared back at me, but the most striking part of his eyes wasn’t the deep blue, but the radiant yellow surrounding his pupils. It almost looked like a flower. Then it hit me, the strange fragrance around him, that I knew now was related to the blue lotus. And his blue eyes that resembled flowers. This man was not normal.

“Anyways Mr Ned. What is this book you’re looking for?” I inquired.

“Oh, I’m looking for many books, young Alexander.”

I flinched, I never told him my name. How did he know it? I looked down but I didn’t even have my nametag on.

He continued, completely ignoring my inner dialogue. “The ancient tome of Merlin for one, but the chances that you have it in this building are slim. For now, can you direct me to the gardening books please?”

I absentmindedly showed him to the correct bookshelf. He thanked me without saying my name, and I left him there, the smell of blue lotus clouding my senses as I walked round and round the library. An eternity passed while I drifted around the worn bookshelves, although, in reality, it was probably just a couple of minutes. My feet were on autopilot. I wandered around the library, helping patrons and little children. Eventually I came back by the entrance of the library where I collided with Laila.

“Lex! Watch where you’re going!”

I snapped back to reality. “Ah, sorry Laila, my thoughts were elsewhere.” I helped her back to her feet.

“Its fine, I was looking for you too. Did you find out anything about the

mysterious man yet?”

“Yeah, I did, I was helping him finding a book earlier. His name is Ned, or at least he goes by that name.”

“Ned? Such a simple name for someone dressed in a trench coat in the middle of the day.”

I was going to reply, before the smell of lotuses permeated the air, “Hey, do you smell that?”

Laila sniffed the air. “Yeah, that flowery smell is suddenly so strong, and there’s a hint of another smell too. It smells like fungi?”

I carefully sniffed the air as well. True to her word, under the smell of lotus, there was an underlying smell that reminded me of the smell of mushrooms. But not good, delicious mushrooms. These mushrooms smell like rotting plants and moss. I felt my stomach plummet. Two weird smells in an otherwise normal library, adding to the fact that a stranger knows my name? Time to trust my gut and go.

“Listen Laila, I have a bad feeling about this. How about we head to the café and meet up with Alyx?”

She looked at me weirdly, before shrugging and turning to head to the café. I took one last look at the books lining the shelves before following Laila.

The weird feeling in my gut not letting up even a bit. As we neared the café doors my instincts screamed at me to hide and I did, pulling Laila behind me as we hid behind a bookshelf before the café doors slammed open and yet another smell entered my nose, this time smelling like saffron. I saw an attractive woman step out of the café, her hair as red as her dress and the smell of saffron unbelievably strong around her. I swear I saw a faint red glow around her as she walked pass. I heard Laila whisper in my ear, but I didn't hear what she said. Grabbing her hand, I quickly dashed into the café, slamming the door behind me. My sister looked up from her station wide eyed. I sighed in relief.

Then the library exploded behind me.

Chapter 2: Alyxia Earlier

After parting ways with Laila and Alex, I returned to the café, Jeff, the owner of the café, greeted me warmly.

“Ah, my best chef has returned! Come, the customers are craving your famous blueberry smoothies!”

That sentence warmed my heart, momentarily forgetting about the mysterious man my brother was so suspicious about.

“Right away, boss!” I said as I skipped behind the counter.

Time flew by as the number of empty smoothie glasses piled up in the sink. My body was on autopilot. Somewhere in between I also started making my second speciality dish, blueberry scones. If it wasn't obvious by now, I love blueberries. These British baked goods are usually eaten for breakfast, but my own version is to be eaten as a snack. Filled to the brim with a delicious blueberry jam and glazed with a homemade honey egg wash, customers always come back for more. I did see a flash of red out of the corner of my mind but being surrounded by so much blue makes me notice other colours more. My station in the café is different than the others, as I attract so many customers alone. I have my own section of the kitchen, there is no wall separating the café from my station and the kitchen-only a small counter where I place my food and drinks for the cashier on duty to hand out to customers.

“Excuse me?” said the most melodious voice I ever heard.

“Yes? How may I help you miss?” I said as I turned around, grabbing a kitchen towel to wipe my hands as I did.

“Oh, I was wondering if you could make me some more of these impressive pastries, but could you shape them? Or at least put a pattern on them?”

“Of course, I can, as long as the design isn’t that hard.”

I quickly took some flour and butter, placing them on the counter between us. I finally got a good look at the lady, and she was breath-taking. Not only was she beautiful, she was wearing the reddest dress I had ever seen. Her lips were the same shade as her dress and her simple black eyes further augmented her beauty. I saw her lips moving as she handed me a slip of paper with a simple rosette pattern on it. But I was so enthralled by her beauty that I merely nodded and got to work on the scones. She left not long after that, and on the slip of paper she gave me, in the bottom corner, there was a name, “Anna”.

I stared blankly at the name, then at the pattern, committing it to memory. I went into a trance afterwards, kneading dough, making it an inch thick then cutting it into neat circles. Then, from the circles, I made it into crudely shaped flowers, then with a sharp knife and fork, I further made it into flowers. The excess I circled around the flowers before dropping them into

the oven. Out of habit, I started cleaning up my station, when the timer rang. I instantly pulled the tray out of the oven. I sighed with relief. The scones looked decent. The scones looked like an eight-petal flower placed onto a small circle. I placed them into a small plate before drizzling a bit of honey over them and placing a wad of blueberry jam on the side before letting them cool. After washing my hands, I grabbed the plate of scones and looked for the red lady. ‘Anna’ my brain supplied.

I found her sitting by herself by the library entrance. Because the café has become quite famous lately, Jeff decided to make two entrances to the café, the main entrance, which leads to the street, and the smaller side entrance that connects to the library.

“Miss Anna?” my voice softer than usual. “Here are your scones.” “Ah yes, thank you dear,” she smiled, and I lost focus of the world around me. She handed me a small pouch. With almost robotic movements, I walked back to my station, her smile still lingering in my mind. When I got back, I opened the pouch to find the exact amount of bills and coins that she owed me for the scones. I emptied the pouch and keyed in her order. I was so distracted that I didn’t notice the pouch fizzle out of existence.

The rest of my shift was boring. I baked more scones, served milkshakes, and cleaned tables. Normal waitress work. I made small talk with my regulars and co-workers. I noticed Anna leave her seat and walked into the library, and my mind cleared as soon as she was out of my sight. Barely 5 minutes later my brother rushed into the café, looking like he had seen a ghost. I

raised my eyebrows as he leaned against the door. Laila, beside him, looked just as confused as I was. If I said Alex quickly collected himself and explained the situation to me and Laila, then I would be lying, probably because the explosion that threw books and wooden scraps into the café caused instant panic.

With almost inhuman speed I crouched behind the counter, confident the marble and metal would protect me. I didn't hear any explosions or feel any heat at all, just wind blowing into the café, throwing books and plates over my makeshift barricade. After the explosion, I peeked over the countertop, my eyes drifting over the wreckage. I saw customers hiding behind overturned tables and behind booths. Laila was crouched behind a table, protecting a couple of kids barely eight years old. As I looked around, I saw many of the customers almost completely unharmed, just wooden chips and food scraps on them. Nothing that would indicate that there had been a huge explosion. It was almost like the explosion itself contained only wind. No heat or anything. I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding when I saw my brother hiding behind a table not far from me. We all started to collect ourselves when a harsh wind blew in from the library. Instinctively, we all took cover, my hand finding my brother's. He must've dashed here when the wind blew in. He smiled, and we braced ourselves. The second wave was just as confusing as the beginning. Instead of wind this time, it was a wave of flames. But the most confusing part was not the heat. It was the fact that nothing was burned after the flames disappeared. In an state of almost panic, all the customers started running out the door. Jeff, in a moment of leadership, commanded his customers to stay together, letting

women and children leave first. In the clamour, I met Laila's eyes, my hand still gripping my brother's. They both understood what I wanted to do. Laila nodded and ushered the children towards the exit before slipping into the library. Alex grabbed his things that were scattered in the panic before joining Laila. I merely checked my pockets for my phone and wallet before walking into the kitchen, grabbing the two baseball bats that was hidden there as well as a couple of drinks, stashing them in my bag before sneaking into the library.

"So, brother dear, care to explain?" I stared into his eyes. Laila was looking at him with sharp eyes. Under the intense gaze from the two of us, he visibly deflated and took a breath before opening his mouth.

"Well, it all started when I saw the mysterious man earlier. Remember him? The one that smelled like flowers?" We nodded. After our lunch break, Madam Ana asked me to help someone find a book, imagine my surprise when he turned the corner. He introduced himself as Ned." I raised an eyebrow," It's a bit weird, I know. But he went on and on about books he was looking for. I think I heard him mention an ancient tome or something, but my mind was in a trance, so I barely remember whose tome. In the end I gave him a book on flower gardening. Afterwards my mind went almost blank, I wandered around the library till I bumped into Laila here. We made a beeline for the library, but I ducked behind a bookshelf because this lady came out."

"A lady in a full red dress?" I inquired. "Smelled like Saffron?"

“Hm? Yeah. Why? Did you meet her too?”

“Meet her? I made her scones! And like you, my mind went into a trance when I was near her, it was toxifying. Do you think they’re related or something?”

“Perhaps, plus the weird explosion happened because these two people were in the library, Ned even called me by my full name! I didn’t have my nametag on either!”

Laila cut in, “Since we’re here, and you brought the bats, let’s get to the bottom of this.” She pulled out her army grade Swiss army knife and trudged forward.

I looked at my brother and he shrugged. I tossed him a bat and we followed Laila into the ruins of the library.

Chapter 3: The Library

Whatever that explosion was, it totally wrecked the library. The fierce wind toppled bookcases and scattered the books I worked all day to organize. The flames melted the metal railings and covered the area in a layer of white ash. But there were no embers or any smouldering flames. The weirdest thing about the aftermath is that the books, carpets, and the bookshelves are almost completely undamaged by the flames. But the metal railings, chairs, and book carts are melted pools of metal. We walked further into the library. I led Laila and Alyx towards the library office, assuming that the explosion's epicentre was there. We passed more and more pools of molten metal and ash covered books. Strangely enough, we didn't find any casualties. The library is usually packed to the brim at this time. The fact that it seemed abandoned both consoled and worried me. I assumed that the initial burst of wind pushed everyone away from the office, and in their panic, they evacuated the library. We passed a window and I stopped in my tracks.

"Alex? What's wrong?" my sister said as she tried to look outside. "Oh..."

"Please tell me you both can see that outside, right?" I tentatively asked them.

Alyx opened her mouth, but Laila beat her to it. "Yeah, it's dark out, but that doesn't make sense. When we left the café, it was still the afternoon." Laila scratched the back of her head. "There is no way a couple hours passed by while were walking. This makes no sense!!" she wailed.

Alyx pulled her best friend close, “I’m sure there’s a reasonable answer to this question, let’s just get to the office and we can figure this all-out.”

Ah yes, my sister, the voice of reason. I pushed a bookshelf out of the way and used my baseball bat to safely move some partially melted book carts out of the way. As we passed more and more windows on the way, our mood gradually turned as dark as the inky blackness outside. Soon we neared the dimly lit office, located near the back wall of the library. I saw more and more pools of metal instead of the melted carts we saw earlier. Turning a corner, I quickly raised a balled fist, an act both my sister and Laila understood as we crouched behind a fallen bookshelf. Alyx peeked over the shelf before quickly crouching down.

“What do you see?” I whispered.

“I see the library curator, the man in the fedora, the Lady in red, and another mysterious man,” she whispered, loud enough to be heard by the both of us, “The fourth person is dressed pretty plainly compared to the others if you ask me, wearing a simple white T-Shirt and jeans. He’s facing away from us, so I can’t see his face. But I think he has sunglasses on.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Did you see what they’re doing?”

“No, sorry, but I can check really quickly again.”

“No, its fine,” Laila interjected. “I’ll do it this time.”

Rolling her shoulders before leaping to a neighbouring bookshelf, Laila surprised us both. She peeked over to look at the four weird people standing in front of the office, amongst the wreckage. She was about to make her way back to us before a voice chilled us to the bone.

“Goodness children, don’t you know it’s impolite to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations?”

We turned around, readying our baseball bats, before stopping. The mysterious man was behind us. I stood protectively in front of my sister, weapon at the ready. Laila crouched behind me, knife held in a reverse grip in front of her. “What do you want? What happened to the library?”

The man smiled. “The better question is why a trio of rug rats are in this library to begin with, hmm?”

“What do you mean, ‘why are we in the library?’ I work here!” I snarled. “And where is everyone else? Did you do something?”

Chuckles were the only response as the man walked away. “Poor children, you have sacred blood flowing in you, and you don’t know it? Perhaps my acquaintances can be of service.” Running his hand over a bookshelf, it crumbled into dust. Revealing the other three people standing behind it. Madam Ana looked murderous.

“Can you three explain what you are doing here!?”

I started to explain, but Alyx cut me off. “You see madam, this all started with the explosion of wind and fire...” she started. I looked at our audience. Mr. Ned looked bored but attentive, his blue eyes watching Laila carefully for some reason. The lady in red was hanging off the mysterious man’s arm, and the man himself looked unbothered by her. Studying the man, I saw that his plain T-shirt has a symbol in the centre. It looked like a four-pointed star, each point facing a cardinal direction, with a set of squiggly diagonal lines going from the centre outwards. This whole symbol was contained in a circle. As Alyx finished her explanation, Madam Ana sighed in response.

“Sadly, Sam is right, you three have what you mortals call magic in your blood.” She rubbed her temples. “How I never noticed is an anomaly, since I’ve been working with you two for a couple of months now.”

“Wait,” Laila cut in. “What do you mean by mortals. Are you saying you’re not mortals?”

“A very astute observation young Laila,” Ned praised her. “Since you three are already here, there is no use hiding, but yes, we are not mortals like the ones that have been exiled out of this library, nor are we like you three. While we can manipulate the elements, we do not have the same magic that flows within you. We have a different, more concentrated blend, you might say.”

“Fine, you’re not mortals, but not also like us, whatever wear,” I huffed, my guard still not dropping under the polite gazes of these four mysterious people. “Then, what are you?”

Mr Ned opened his mouth to explain further but the lady in red put a hand over his mouth. “Please don’t, you’ll make them even more confused.” Turning to us, she said, “I believe you all know of the ancient myths with gods and goddesses.” Seeing our nods, she continued, “Well, we aren’t myths, but we are also not deities. A correct term to call us would be Elders, as we came to be long before humanity. Some of our fellow Elders are actually responsible for shaping humanity. And before you ask, please do not ask how Elders came to be. None of us here knows how.”

The silence after the lady in red finished was deafening. Alyx’s eyes were open so wide, I swear they might pop out of her face. Laila had sunk down onto the floor sometime while the red lady was explaining, a look of shock and confusion written clearly on her face. I probably had a look of equal shock and awe as my sister. The Elders watched us with calculating eyes as the three of us slowly got back up on our feet.

“So, what are you doing here?” Alyx asked with a shaky voice, “and why today of all days?”

“Magic is everywhere, from the smallest of pebbles to the biggest mountains, and in all things in between. For living beings without practice, it

is easiest to channel magic on certain days. Even practiced practitioners such as ourselves, find the burden of casting magic less taxing on our bodies on days like today,” Madam Ana said in a tone unlike those found used by lectures.

“What’s so special about today of all days?” I inquired.

“Today is the first day of Dàshǔ, a traditional East Asian special day. The location of the sun and moon are very important to channel magic as I said earlier. Different Elders will have an easier time depending on the days. For example, the Elder Nyx has an easier time channelling magic at night, compared to her daughter Hemera, who finds it easier to do the same job under the sun. Nonetheless, all Elders can channel magic easier on special days.”

Stepping forward, Laila levelled her knife at the Elders. “Okay, next question, who are you all really? I know you claim to be gods and goddesses, but which ones?”

The Elders looked between themselves, unfazed by the teen waving a knife at them, probably having some sort of telepathic conversation by the looks of it. Madam Ana turned back to us, “Very well, if you all must know, I am known as Aredvi Sura Anahita, ancient Persian goddess of wisdom, healing, and fertility. Ned, as you know, is actually Neferthem, lord of Sunrise.” His blue eyes twinkled as he was introduced, taking an elegant bow, his blue eyes, never leaving us. “While the lady in red, you may know her as Inanna,

and her twin brother, Shamash.” Unlike Neferthem, the twin deities did not make any dramatic movements, smiling simply at us.

“Before dear Ana bores you with details, I will answer your unspoken question about why we are here,” Ned said simply. “I have heard rumours that the tome of Merlin has resurfaced on earth, and the four of us have come together to discuss the best way to keep it out of mortal hands. And of course, before you ask, the Tome of Merlin is just a simple collection of spells. But recited correctly it can rewrite reality itself. But the book is protected by spells so that tossing it into the nearest fire won’t destroy it. It will burn like any other book, but in a couple of decades, it will magically appear in the world again. But enough of that, you mortals must have a lot on your minds, especially with the revelations you have heard today. Time flows differently when Elders are around. Sunrise is upon us; pleasure meeting you all.” And without waiting for our response, Neferthem waved his wand and the world went black.

Chapter 4: The Library...Again...

When we came to, we were sprawled on the grass in the park across from the library, and true to blue eyed god's word, the sun was just rising, bathing the area with warm colours. I jumped to my feet. "Alex? Laila? Get up!" Laila, as alert as ever materialised next to me, knife out, eyes searching for a target. While Alex got up slowly but just as warily as Laila.

"Where are we? Is this the park?" My brother asked, hands patting his pockets to check if everything was still there and intact. Looking around, he also noticed the morning dew on the grass around him. "Hmm, looks like he was right, the sun is rising. Wait! Laila, are your parents alright with you spending the night out? I know you occasionally spend a night or two with us, but you usually tell them first."

"It's fine, I told them before I went to the library. I knew your parents were out on another dig, so I told them if I didn't come home, I'll be spending the night with you guys, plus they trust me enough with a pocketknife. Surely they trust me to be with my two best friends.

"Alrighty then, what should we do now?" I asked them. "I know Alex's car isn't parked too far away, so we could go home and sort ourselves out." I shrugged. "Or we could head back to the library to..."

I was cut short. the morning sun was suddenly blocked by a huge shadow, a shadow that was gradually getting bigger and bigger. It looked like it was

heading straight for the library. I looked at Laila and Alex. They both nodded, determination in their eyes, and we rushed to the library, looking just as pristine as the day before. Reaching the door, our first obstacle awaited. The door, unsurprisingly, was locked, even though we knew the Elders were still inside, the faint office lights as bright as beacons in the dark library.

“Let’s try the café door, if it’s locked, I know where Jeff keeps the spare keys. Quickly, that shadow is getting bigger by the second.” We rushed there as quick as possible, the exhaustion in our bodies from the day before seemed to disappear for a moment. But before we reached there, disaster struck. The shadow had released a strange beam of energy, Alex, tackled both of us down just as the library exploded for real this time. Scraps of paper and ash drifted in the wind while wood chips rained down around us. Laila took the initiative this time, dragging both of us away and toward Alex’s car, seemingly undamaged by the wood. Understanding what Laila meant, Alex unlocked the car and jumped into the driver seat, starting up the engine while we piled in the back. We drove away as smoke started to rise from the ashes of the old town house. Sirens blared in the distance.

The drive home was silent. We were all visibly shaken and overwhelmed by what had happened in the past 24 hours. Alex had his eyes on the road, hands gripping the steering wheel, knuckles white. Laila was in the backseat, her knife still in her grasp. She wasn’t holding it as tightly as earlier, but she held on to it as if her life depended on it. Before we knew it, Alex had parked the car in our humble home, undisturbed by the rising plume of smoke just miles away. We tumbled to the front door. I tried to open the door, but my

hands were trembling, the heat from the library exploding still fresh on my mind. The four Elders would have probably survived it, but what would the public think? What about Jeff? His life's work, vaporised. When I finally opened the door, I slowly slinked up the stairs. My bed called me and my body acted on its own. I had half a mind to pull my clothes off before collapsing on the bed. From downstairs I heard Laila turn on the TV before crashing on the couch, almost instantly falling asleep, Alex had made his way into the bathroom. 'At least he has enough energy to clean himself up,' I thought as I drifted off to sleep.

I woke up several hours later, fully rested. I figured it was almost noon, by the sheer intensity with which the summer sun was beaming into my room, so I walked downstairs and into the kitchen. Passing by the living room, I saw Laila still sprawled out on the couch, a healthy amount of drool trailing down her chin. I stifled a laugh as I walked past her. The pillow sheets needed a wash anyway. To my surprise my brother was in the kitchen, toast in hand, and a pencil behind his ear. Numerous papers, books, and plates littered the table. He looked up as I entered and smiled warmly at me.

"Morning, sis, or should I say noon?" He grinned as I walked into the kitchen. I swatted him lightly before grabbing the toast right out of his hand.

"What's all this?" I asked. "I see maps, figures, and oh, even a painting!"

He sighed. "All this is my own research on these 'Elders', I can't get it out of my head, all these supernatural beings living among us. If they're not

actually myths and stories, then why doesn't the whole world know? I'm sure some proud Elders like Zeus would flaunt their superiority over us mortals."

"You clearly have been doing this for too long dear brother." I laughed as I messed his hair up even more. "How about you go wake Laila up while I prepare lunch?"

The prospect of food seemed to lighten his mood. "Alright, but you go wake up Laila, you remember what happened last time I tried to wake her up."

"Oh, you're right, don't want to get a black eye this early in the holidays," I said, bracing myself for the precarious job of waking the one and only Laila Khouri.

"Oh, calm down you two," Laila said, walking into the kitchen. "It's not that dangerous trying to wake me up."

"Yes, it is," we answered in tandem, shivers running down our backs.

"Anyway, you two need to come see this," she said, turning on her heel and marching off, "It's about the library."

The reporter on TV said, "That's right Tim, the old library seems to have burned down, luckily no one was hurt. You can still see the debris all around me, the police believe that a gas leak is responsible. The local firemen on site

supports this theory, as the ancient building has an equally ancient gas line running right below it. What could've caused the reliable pipeline to suddenly burst is still a mystery. This is Justin Williams, reporting live.”

“No one else saw the weird shadow this morning, even the early joggers. I also called my parents this morning, they didn't see anything either, and you know how early they get up. We need to get to the bottom of this, which means finding more Elders.”

Alex nodded. “You're right Laila, but if the Library's destroyed, we're walking in blind, Madam Ana and the rest of the Elders from yesterday must have teleported away or something if there are no casualties.”

“Yes, Yes, finding out why this is all happening is important, but what's more important is the sound of your stomachs growling. All these theories are making me hungry, and I know you're hungry as well, Alex. If I'm hungry, you must be famished,” I said, pushing them into the kitchen. As I said this, a deep growl could be heard from Laila, making her blush crimson as a response.

“You're right Lyx, as always. Thank god you have your head screwed firmly on; what would we be without you?”

“For starters, very, very hungry.” I laughed, as I prepared lunch, I heard my phone ring. “Hey Lex, I think that's my phone ringing, be a dear and pick it up. It's probably upstairs near my nightstand.”

“Fine, but it better not be another one of those hopeless romantics from school. I’m tired of scaring them off,” Alex chuckled as he climbed the stairs. Not a minute later, he came back down, phone in his ear. “Yes mum, we’re fine here. We haven’t even left home yet, you know our shifts start later in the afternoon on the weekdays, summer holidays or not. Love you too mum. Tell dad as well. Hey, Alyx, tell mum you love her.”

“Love you mum, you too dad!” I shouted from the kitchen. “Have fun digging up more weird trinkets, remember to bring some back for us too.”

Ah yes, our mother, always checking in with her twins. Before long, a delicious smell permeated the house. Almost instinctively, Laila set the table, bringing out spoons and forks, while Alex grabbed the plates, setting them with practiced ease. Just as we were about to dig in, the doorbell rang, and we froze, a million thoughts running through our heads. Laila, closest to the door, went and opened it, pulling it wide open so we could see outside.

“Hello there, youngsters,” greeted the library curator. “I see you all are preparing to have lunch. May I come in?”

Stunned by our luck, we allowed her entry to our humble home. Alex pulled out an extra set of plates and utensils, and the four of us sat on the table. The tension so thick you could almost cut it.

“Please eat. I know you have more questions regarding this morning’s

incident. I am here to clarify that the library exploding was not our doing,” Anahita started.

Halfway through lunch, I broke the silence. “If the library exploding was not your doing, then what caused it?”

Anahita sighed. “The tome of Merlin is sought by many people, Immortals, and Elders alike. While some seek to use the knowledge to protect, others seek to bring the world to its knees. What you saw this morning was the work of Angra Mainyu. He exists only to cause chaos in life. That is all he knows. Someone, or something powerful, must have succeeded in luring him to the library.”

I rubbed my head. “First we find out that the myths are actually not myths and are still alive in the modern world; then an all-powerful book has come back into existence, and now the classic clash of good versus evil?”

Alex sighed and sank into his chair. “We’re probably now a part of this because we were there at the right place at the wrong time, right?”

“You both are right, but not entirely so, Alyx. There is no such thing as good or evil in this world, only power and intentions. Even the purest of intentions, if executed wrongly will make you look like a villain. And Alex, you three have always been a part of this bigger world because of the magic running through your veins. You had the unfortunate luck to meet us early on in your life.”

Slamming her hands on the table, Laila shouted, “That means our parents know of this world then? Why didn’t they tell us sooner?”

“A person’s sensitivity to magic increases as they grow older, and modern cities usually have a smaller concentration of magic. Which is why some people don’t know they have magic until they’re older, usually around 30 or 40 human years old. Also, the reason why you don’t see magic very often is that magic is strengthened by your aura.”

“Aura?” I asked. “The human energy field? It is said to enclose all living beings and come in various colours.”

“Correct Alyx,” Anahita praised her. “All humans have aura, and this aura has colours. Like your fingerprints, it varies between people. The first step for mortals to control the elements is to activate their aura. When this happens their aura will flare up and be visible to the naked eye. Furthermore, when this person makes magic, the aura reacts with the air and produces a smell unique to the person.”

“Like Neferthem’s blue lily smell, or Inanna’s saffron fragrance,” Alex asked.

“Yes, I’ve come here today to activate your auras. You can no longer hide from our world. Being subjected to magic causes your own auras to flare in response. Not all Elders can awaken mortals, as the goddess of wisdom I know of the process of awakening, and with my domain of healing, I can

stabilize any side effects.”

Sharing a look with Alex, we had a silent debate. Laila seemed to have made up her mind already. “Very well, Elder Anahita, allow me to be the first among us three to be awoken,” Laila announced.

Beckoning her forward, Anahita raised her arms, “I require your full name child.”

Kneeling in front of the Elder, my best friend whispered her full name. The Ancient Goddess started waving her arms; her aura flared. “I, Goddess of all the waters upon the earth! Aredvi Sura Anahita, bestow upon this mortal, Laila Qiturah Khouri the blessing of Danu Talis!” Anahita then began chanting in another language, and I took a couple of steps back, the pressure around the Elder and Laila getting too strong for me. Without warning Laila’s aura flared up as well. A vibrant violet colour bathed the living room. The smell of lavender surrounded us. But just as suddenly, it shut off. Anahita finished her incantation, and Laila collapsed. The smell of lavender suddenly evaporated. Alex rushed forward and caught Laila before she hit the ground and laid on the sofa before turning to Anahita.

“Is that it? Laila can now do magic like you?”

“She now has the potential to do so, but as of right now, she is no different than she was this morning, only she is more sensitive. In case you were wondering, Laila is fine. The backlash of senses and magic overloaded her

body, so it shut itself down in order to sort itself out. She should awaken any moment now.”

Right on time, Laila started to groan and get up, one hand shielding her eyes and the other rubbing her head. “Why is the world so bright? And so loud.” I tiptoed to the curtain and carefully pulled the curtains closed; the screeching of the rings made Laila flinch. “Sorry” I whispered.

After a few minutes, Laila got to her feet. “Whoa, who knew the world had so many colours.”

Anahita chuckled, “Indeed, you mortals have been disconnected from the world for too long. It has numbed your senses.” Sitting down, she continued, “Now that your aura has been awoken, your next step should be to find teachers for the elements. There are four elements that govern the world, Water, Fire, Air, and Earth.”

“Is it our turn for our aura to be awoken Anahita?” Alex asked. I nodded beside him.

“Yes, as tradition goes, I will start with the eldest,” but before she could continue, a loud screeching came from outside, accompanied by thumps and roars.

I slapped my forehead. “Again with the interruptions!” The four of us ran outside, only to be greeted by a sharply dressed man in a suit, flanked by

huge moving rocks with eyes.

“Good afternoon Ana, I must thank you for the display of power, I wouldn’t have found you without that beacon.”

“Cain,” Anahita growled, her voice dripping with venom. “Still bringing Golems I see. Afraid to face me alone?”

Cain chuckled, “The golems are not for you, young one. They are for the three whelps behind you.” Gesturing to us, she said, “Feast.”

One would think animated rocks would move like rocks. Slow, sluggish, or even static. We forgot magic existed. With surprising grace and speed, the golems charged at us. We braced for impact. Alex stood in front of us, pushing Laila behind him. I stood by my brother, and we stoically faced the incoming Golems. Luckily, the mistress of water saved us. A wave of water swept the golems back, sending the earthen behemoths back to their creator. “You must go,” Anahita said. “Your parents are lucky to have built their house on a ley-line.”

Her Aura flared, bringing the aroma of soothing waters into the neighbourhood. Before we could react, we were whisked away. The last thing I saw was the Golems charging at the Goddess, Cain smirking devilishly behind them.

Chapter 5: The Elders

We landed in a pile, I was lucky enough to be on the top of the twins, but the impact dazed me, nonetheless. I rolled off Alex onto soft sand, the feeling normally soothing to me, but with my new senses, it felt like rough sandpaper instead. As I laid there, Alyx got to her feet, pulling Alex up as she did.

“Laila, are you alright?” She spoke normally, but to me it was as if she shouted at me.

“Yeah, I’m fine, it’s just everything is so loud and bright.” I covered my ears.

“Where are we?”

Alex piped up behind me, his voice just barely above a whisper, “It looks like we’re somewhere in the desert. Which desert, I’m not entirely sure, but I think we should stick together and look around. It should be some time in the early morning, judging by the lack of heat.”

“You’re right, no use standing around here while the sun gets higher and higher, and my sensory overload’s getting better, I should be able to follow you two around.” I lied to them, of course. They didn’t need to worry about me right now. We were in the middle of a freaking desert for god’s sake. I just forced myself to bear the intense feelings.

We set off, Alex taking the lead, his sense of direction being second to none. I followed behind him, a hand over my face and the other gripping Alex's shirt. Alyx took up the rear, making sure we stayed as a group. We walked for what felt like hours, but it could also have been for a couple of minutes. Every step was deafening. I felt every bead of sweat roll down my back, every grain of sand stuck to my hair. The only good thing to come out of our midday trek was that I got more and more used to the influx of information.

"Look! There's a hut over there!" I said, pointing to a small dot in the horizon.

"Wow, your eyesight's become really good after whatever Anahita did to you," Alyx remarked, the awe evident in her tone.

Hope flowed into our veins as we walked to the small building, and within minutes we were at the door. Alex knocked on the door with no hesitation. Almost instantly the door swung open to reveal a wall of muscle. Standing bare-chested and almost covering the door was a mountain of a man, his thick beard, flowing down almost like a river, covered his neck entirely, and his broad shoulders were wide enough for me to sit on comfortably. He took the saying 'chiselled out of stone' almost too literally. He was wearing a shendyt, which surprised me as the word popped into my head as I saw the kilt he was wearing. He also wore Egyptian sandals. Again, the word popped into my head. It was as if ancient knowledge was inserted into my head. I suspect Anahita gave that to me as well. I would've kept staring at his well-built chest unabashedly, but his rough voice shook me out of my trance.

“Ah... you must be the yearlings Ana sent my way. I must admit you arrived faster than I expected.” He herded us inside, and the door swung shut behind him, almost by magic. “Come sit, I shall prepare tea.”

The three of us huddled on the huge carpet that spanned the hut. The god, I assume, went to prepare tea for us. Soon, the hut was bathed in the smell of Arabian tea. I took the time to look around the hut. I noticed that the hut, which, while small, seemed quite spacious. The rug we sat on seemed to be in the living room, and scattered around the hut were antique weapons. I noticed arrows packed in groups of 5, littering the walls. Above each bundle a bow hung. Also there were as many saddles as there were bows, and above the front door, hung a beautiful lance. It was simple, without any exquisite markings, but there was beauty in its simplicity. The wood was dark and it was almost hidden in shadow. But I noticed the wood was well cared for; barely any splinters could be seen. The metal point of the last contrasted greatly with the wood, and, while the wood was dull and easy to miss, the blade of the lance was eye-catching and very reflective. I could see the hut reflected in the small but sharp blade.

“Laila, are you there?” Alyx nudged me, her hand waving in front of my face.

“You’re spacing out again...”

“Hmm? Sorry, I was taking a look at the lance over by the door.” I shrugged. It was a piece of art.

“Indeed, my lance has served me well,” He said as he set down a small tray with four cups of steaming tea, the heavenly smell of which brought me out of my musings. “I am Abgal, tutelary deity of Palmyra, where you are now. Please drink and relax, I will answer any questions you may have. I owe it to Anahita.”

“First question,” Alex piped up. “What’s a tutelary deity supposed to mean?”

“Ah yes, that means that I am a patron of a certain area, persons, lineage, or nation. In my case, I am the guardian of Palmyra, as well as a god of nomads.” Abigal smiled, the pride evident in his voice. “Next question?”

We continued for hours, asking questions. The twins seemed to be bursting with questions. Alex asked about the Elders,” Why do we humans assume them as gods, where are they now, what do they have to do with mythology?”. Alyx followed that with questions of religion, ‘Which one is the correct one, if any? If the Elders are immortal, can they be killed? How about humans, can they become immortal too?’ I didn’t ask any questions, trusting that the twins would ask the questions for me. Sometime after the sun set, I drifted out from the conversation, my head spinning from the awakening. I must’ve dozed off because when I came too, I was sprawled on the couch, and the twins were helping themselves to some food. I couldn’t see them, but I could hear the spoons clinking and their mouths chewing. The boost to my senses is a blessing and a curse sometimes. Hearing the twins in the next room as if they were next to me needed some getting used too. After a while

I got up and followed my nose to the kitchen.

“Hey everyone, I smell food,” I called as I entered the kitchen.

Laughter reached my ears almost instantly, “Ah! Sleeping beauty is awake at last,” Alyx said with a grin. “You’ve been sleeping for almost the entire day.”

True to her word, I sneaked a glance outside, and to my surprise the moon shone brightly back at me. “Whoops.” I smiled sheepishly while sliding next to Alex.

“It seems that the Awakening took more of a toll on you than usual.” Abgal said, handing me a bowl of soup.

“I agree. She looks better than earlier.” Alex piped up behind him, I stifled a giggle. He looked so small compared to Abgal.

“So, were all your questions answered?” I asked. Curious about the outcome from the amount of questions I heard from the twins earlier. “Any mind-blowing ones?”

Almost instantly I regretted asking that question. The twin grins that answered me should’ve been the first indication that I shouldn’t have phrased it like that. Sandwiching me between them, the twins started talking at a pace only possible with twins. Their voices blended together.

When one paused to take a breath, the other followed through almost instantly. They also kept adding details that the other forgot. From the corner of my eye, I saw Abgal beaming. Every couple of minutes or so, he would come over and refill my bowl with soup. Not that I minded. My hands worked automatically, scooping up soup while I listened to the twins. According to them, the main reason why Elders and their children were considered gods was because of their ego, coupled with the fact that they were superior to us humans. These Elders, when not on earth, live in special tears in space and time, dubbed shadow-realms by Abgal. All these Shadow-realms exist in a 'twilight zone' of sorts, out of touch with conventional time and space, but still anchored to Earth in some way. From Norse mythology, Yggdrasil, an immense tree that connects the nine realms together, is an example on how to get to and from shadow-realms. With Earth, or Midgard, as the centre, the other 8 realms are just bigger Shadow-realms. There are other examples of Shadow-realms existing in other mythologies, in Greco-Roman mythology, mount Olympus where the gods reside is a Shadow-realm, as is the underworld, and other places. There are so many examples of Shadow-realms in myths I got a headache thinking of it. Apparently, Heaven and Hell also fall into the category of Shadow-realms, but they could only be entered by specific Elders. Furthermore, some Elders have responsibilities, like Abgal, being a patron god of a city. When humans die, their souls are gathered by the Elder's responsible for death, Thanatos, Yama, Anubis, Yan Luo, to name some. At this point, my mind was reeling. This means that, in short, no religion is the right one, but all are correct. The twins paused in their stories, concern clearly written on their faces.

“Are you alright Laila?” Alex asked, his brows scrunched cutely. “You’re looking pale again.”

“Yeah, maybe we should take a break for now.” Alyx suggested with an equally cute frown.

I shook my head. “Yeah, maybe a break will be alright. I’m also still worried about my parents, and yours for that matter.” I turned to Abgal. “I think it’s better if all three of us got some more rest. It has been quite a long day.” As if on cue, the twins yawned in sync.

He nodded, and ushered us back to the living room, where pillows had been set aside for us. “You may rest here for now. If you have any more questions, I will answer them in the morning.” Then he walked away, I assume back to kitchen to tidy up.

Curling up on the sofa, I saw the twins huddle together on the carpet below me, and instantly they both fell asleep. It seemed like the good food and the long day had finally caught up to them. I laughed silently, before closing my own eyes and drifting back to sleep.

...to be continued...

Back to the Middle Ages

Indra Naputra

Department of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering
International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI)
Email: indranaputra.id@gmail.com

Concept: 19-year-old University Student, Izaac Foster, was watching snow falling through a window when he suddenly felt an uncanny shockwave. Suddenly the world around him started to distort and shift and he was sent back to the Middle Ages.

Prologue

Izaac Foster was a true genius. Izaac has excelled at math and physics from a very young age. He would often discover theories like Pythagoras, which a 7-year-old should not be able to grasp the concept of, let alone derive the equation. After just 19 years of setting foot in this world, he had managed to rival the inquisitive mind of Albert Einstein and had published 100 scientific papers of his own theories of the world. Only 5 of those papers were actually recognized and accepted as the others were written when he was still in high school and had bizarre and unrealistic concepts that would definitely break all laws of science. However, that is the unique character of Izaac; unafraid and curious about the unknown, he is not bound by this world's laws.

Despite all the praise, respect and privileges Izaac had, his past truly contrasts with the way the world views him now. Izaac's father, Foster Rees, is a NASA astronaut working specifically in the ISS as an electrical engineer and operator. However, Izaac did not even get a chance to get to know his mother, or rather he did not even get to see her. His mother died giving birth to him due to eclampsia and anemia. Because of this, Izaac was born prematurely and was put in an incubator immediately, so there was no chance he could have seen his mother. All of Izaac's childhood was spent with his father. Foster, who had a ridiculously busy schedule to prepare for another launch of the ISS for a secret project. He decided to hire a house maid to lighten the heavy load he had on his shoulders. However, Foster didn't even need to hire that maid for long, as Izaac was special. By the age of 3, Izaac was able to fully comprehend sentences, read, talk articulately and take care of himself. Izaac could even do complex arithmetic in his head which should not be possible for a 3-year-old. Seeing this incredible superhuman intelligence, Foster taught Izaac about science and how the world works, and by the age of 4 his mind was already at a high schooler level of thinking. Foster sent Izaac to school even though he knew it was unnecessary because he wanted Izaac to have some friends and experience a normal life. So, he left Izaac alone to go to school and take care of himself while coming back every month to check up on him. Foster did not realize his mistake and shallow thinking; life doesn't just go on as normal, especially if you are an anomaly. During Izaac's 4th year of school when his intelligence really started to bloom, he would get bullied a lot by his so called "friends" and, although he has superhuman intelligence, his physical strength was that of a baby; that is to say, he was weak. Izaac would often come home

beaten up, but one day he decided to retaliate. He started to fight back with science. He made an array of weapons such as an air gun (mainly powered by compressed hydrogen) that shot rubber bullets to attack back. As time passed the tables turned and it was not Izaac who came home looking beaten up; it was the bullies that came home looking battered. However, the bully's parents would not let this pass and started to complain to the school's headmaster due to which Izaac got into a lot of trouble with the authorities and was looked down upon and labelled as a troublemaker by everyone around him. All of the parents were wary of him and told their kids and, sometimes, others to stay away from him; this led to Izaac being isolated from society.

Unfortunately, this was at the time when Foster was very occupied with work and could not return immediately. However, Izaac did not really care and, in fact, this was what he wanted. With no distractions and interference from his surroundings, he could focus on doing more experiments. This was, of course, not what Foster wanted, so as soon as Foster came back to check up on Izaac he talked to Izaac about this world's judgmental society. After giving it a lot of thought, Foster decided to transfer Izaac to a special school funded by NASA and he was advanced to high school secondary level where his talent or rather his whole character was more widely accepted. Izaac was able to experiment to his heart's content in the new environment and had a lot of friends who would help him. With a more positive outlook on life and society, Izaac wanted to contribute some of his intelligence to the world. He decided to write his own academic papers, some of which got the attention of world class astrophysicists. It was at this point that Izaac's abnormal

intelligence became known to the world and became more widely accepted; this was not just the turning point in Izaak's life but for science as well.

Chapter 1: The Preamble

Earth is one special planet. With ideal conditions such as liquid water, a metal core and an atmosphere that shelters it from the scorching sunlight, of course it will host some sort of life form. However, what makes Earth special and unique is that it does not just host life, but the intelligent life that is humanity. Throughout history, humanity has made many discoveries and scientific advancements; but the most predominant of them all are the cosmological discoveries, such as launching probes to other planets and finding galaxies similar to the Milky Way in hopes of finding other possible life forms and the origin of the universe. However, to this day, not a single hint of extra-terrestrial life has been found. Many theories exist; some trying to prove that humans are the only intelligent existence and some speculating that we are in a simulated universe made by a more intelligent lifeform trying to experiment. Nevertheless, sooner or later the universe will reveal the truth...

The Story

One cold winter night the sound of coffee being sipped could be heard within a room in an isolated building. A man wearing a lab coat, in his late forties with a receding hairline and noticeable white hairs, and holding on to a flask filled with a yellow-orange liquid entered, looking satisfied. Another man in lab coat sat reclined, sipping a cup of coffee. This man however, looked quite young, with weird hair that stuck out in gravity-defying ways.

“Professor! I made the chemical you wanted,” the man who entered declared, showing the flask in his hand.

“Oh? Let me take a look.”

The young man put down his mug on the table, ignoring the mess of papers and utilities on it, and stood up to take a look at the flask being presented to him.

“Hmmm... the colour certainly matches up, but let’s see if you got the ratio and concentration correct.”

“I have prepared the necessary test already in the ‘cool tests 1’ room.”

“Well, let’s get going, then.” The young man carefully took the flask and led the way.

“I will be right behind you Mr. Izaac.”

“You can drop the formalities. Just Izaac is fine, really. We’ve known each other for quite a while now. Besides, I am two decades younger than you and I don’t have any form of a degree that would allow me to earn that title,” Izaac replied awkwardly as he opened the door.

“Unfortunately, I cannot do that. It would be disrespectful to not properly address someone who has been approved and recognized by world class

scientists all over the world regardless of age or experience, especially since you have an honorary degree.”

“Am I really that significant? Oh well it doesn’t matter. Let’s hurry.” The young man shrugged and walked away.

This man who looked almost too young to be in a place like this was none other than Izaac Foster. The other man following behind him was his “assistant”, Prof. Deire Gray, who had a PhD in chemical engineering. On paper, Prof. Deire Gray was Izaac’s assistant, but Izaac thought of him as a friend. In fact, all of Izaac’s friends were technically his assistants. That was because this modern and clean hallway made up of marble flooring and a wall that looked to be reinforced with fiberglass, which they were walking through, was part of a laboratory. In fact, the building they were currently in was a research laboratory, but it was a special lab almost as big as MIT’s research labs, gifted to Izaac by NASA where Izaac was given the privilege to freely experiment. He does not even need to worry about workload as a lot of PhD holders come to the lab to assist Izaac in his projects, and, if needed, Izaac has also been offered financial help by a few world class physicists.

Walking down the quiet and empty hallway, Izaac and Prof. Deire made it to the ‘cool tests 1’ room.

“You know Mr. Izaac, with all due respect, you could have at least have named the rooms better,” said Prof. Deire, staring blankly at the sign.

“I was told to name the rooms on the spot, and you know me Deire... I am bad at coming up with names and even worse at being put under the spotlight. It was basically a formula for disaster, and this room is proof.”

Izaac opened the door to ‘cool tests 1’, recalling the immense pressure of being told to name the room on the spot. As soon as they both entered the room, they were greeted with a smart and dignified looking woman.

“Apologies for troubling you this late in the night, Mr. Izaac.”

“Hm? Rie? Apart from Deire, I thought I had already sent everyone home. So why are you here?”

“Well, I had an epiphany and had to test it out immediately. So here I am. It will be quick, so hopefully I will not trouble you too much.”

Rie Takahashi was the only assistant with a master’s degree. Though her qualifications might be lower than the others, her mind was a strange one. Science was second nature to her; she could analyze and deduce certain phenomena by logic alone without prior knowledge of that phenomena. However, she was unable to express emotions as effectively as others, which really troubled her.

“Prof. Deire, you are here as well. Hope you are having a good evening,” Rie greeted him with a dry smile and immediately returned to her workstation.

“Such diligence! Are you sure you are not overworking yourself Rie?” Prof. Deire replied, while looking around her workstation.

“I know my own limits, and I do not think that I am particularly overexerting myself,” she answered, a focused look on her face.

“Very well. Sorry for disturbing you.” Prof. Deire, noticing that he was distracting her, decided go to his workstation where Izaac was waiting for him.

“Deire... isn’t this a little overkill?” Izaac asked nervously.

“If it’s for science, I’d even give up my life,” Prof. Deire replied proudly.

“But I still think that a 50-carat diamond used as a benchmark test is a bit overboard...” Izaac sighed, staring at the shining diamond that was sat on Prof. Deire workstation.

“Though I suppose this will be better actually. Let’s start dissolving the different metals.” Izaac shrugged, trying to forget about the price of the diamond.

Prof. Deire started to organize the different 2x2x2 centimeter materials: Iron, Steel, Gold, Platinum and Diamond. Izaac, meanwhile, lined up the chemical in the flask with a makeshift contraption that would drop the

metals into different flasks containing the chemical. Once everything was set up, they both proceeded to put on their safety goggles and stood a safe distance away from the workstation.

“Now behold! My improvised version of a ‘multi-corrosion benchmark test of acids that does not require any electronic measuring equipment. This is a ground-breaking invention right here!” Izaac boasted with a huge grin on his face.

“Isn’t this just observation... this method would barely yield any information,” Prof. Deire muttered to himself, trying to not offend Izaac.

“Mr. Izaac, I believe using the human eyes as measuring equipment is not really ground-breaking. In addition, I think that it will not produce sufficient information for analysis, so it would be better if a corrosion rate device was hooked up,” Rie, walking up from behind them, said in a flat tone.

Prof. Deire broke out in a cold sweat and turned around to face her.

“Rie. I don’t think right now would be a good time to say that!” Prof. Deire shouted.

“You are underestimating the power of human observation, Rie,” Izaac countered with a smug look on his face.

“Now let us observe!” Izaac proclaimed and proceeded to start the

contraption.

The different valves opened, allowing the materials to slowly drop into the flasks containing the chemical. Immediately a sizzling sound could be heard, the sound of the metals dissolving. This went on for 10 seconds, as the three scientists in the room concentrated and tried to absorb what they were seeing.

“Successfully dissolving the metals in a mere 10 seconds... that is definitely Aqua Regia. Though the diamond still stands without a scratch as expected,” Rie said, getting closer to the flask with the diamond in it and using a crucible tong to take it out.

“A chemical that is able to dissolve noble metals such as gold and platinum. Furthermore, the diamond here proving that it is indeed Aqua Regia,” Izaac replied.

“But, I still do not understand why you did not set up a corrosion rate monitor. You could have collected a whole lot of information and quite possibly procured a more potent chemical.”

“As tempting as it sounds, I am not doing this to discover a more potent chemical. Deire, care to explain it to her?” Izaac replied and took the diamond away from Rie.

“Mr. Izaac gave me the task of not just creating Aqua Regia in a normal way,

but also in a mass production way which I have succeeded in doing thanks to the schematic Mr. Izaac made. I have already stocked quite a few liters of this chemical; that is why we can waste the one in the flask right now,” Prof. Deire explained to Rie.

“I see... so Mr. Izaac is trying to make some sort of tool that will allow this chemical to be used in a more convenient way, and the test was just used to validate that it is Aqua Regia.”

“Indeed Rie... you are so quick on the uptake that it’s scary more than anything, though you are wrong about one thing. That is actually not Aqua Regia. It is a derivative of Aqua Regia that Mr. Izaac formulated with the purpose of it being mass produced without losing its original potency. That is why we wanted to test it and see if it had more or less the same potency as the original Aqua Regia,” Prof. Deire explained to Rie.

“I see,” Rie said and walked towards Izaac to ask more questions.

Prof. Deire looked at the two youths in front of him who had surpassed his own intelligence at such a young age, and he began to wonder... what sort of world would those two leads and make, or rather, how far would civilization have advanced if those two were born way earlier.

“Dear me... would you look at the time. I am going to get in trouble if I don’t take my leave now,” Prof. Deire said, in a frightened voice.

It was approaching the middle of the night. Prof. Deire was still in the lab trying to help Rie with her sudden project. Izaac went back to his room to write a report on the status of his project.

“Thank you so much Prof. Deire for your help, I think I will call it a day, as well,” Rie thanked Prof. Deire and looked at the time as well.

“Okay. Let’s clean up and tell Mr. Izaac we will be leaving.”

“Oh no, Prof! I will clean up here. It would be bad if I imposed more work upon you considering the time.”

“Well, I don’t really feel imposed upon but I am a bit tired so you are right. I will take my leave. Have a nice night, Rie,” Prof. Deire said farewell to Rie and headed off to Izaac’s room.

Izaac, in his room, had just finished writing a report on the status of his project.

“That should do it,” Izaac said stretching his arms and leaning back on his chair.

He glanced outside the window and noticed that the snow was now falling slowly. Izaac had started to like snow lately. It calmed and relaxed his mind, which rarely happened those days. After Izaac’s father died due to him overexerting himself at work whilst he was sick, Izaac realized the

importance of pace. But of course, there are times where being slow isn't so great and will lead to a great loss in which case people should try to make that last push. Though, most of the time, Izaac just got carried away and his curiosity took over, causing him to overwork. So, the snow was a good way for Izaac to relax and be reminded to pace himself.

“That stupid old man...” Izaac said and put down his coffee on the table.

“I better check if Rie and Deire are doing alright-”

RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE

Just as Izaac was about to check on his assistants the ground suddenly began to shake.

“Earthquake-.”

A loud electrical explosion could be heard in the distance that sounded like some sort of shockwave. Izaac looked out the window and was dumbfounded by what he saw.

“W-what in the-”

It was the aftershock approaching Izaac at a tremendous speed, which then hit his room. Izaac was knocked down to the ground and suddenly everything in the room started to distort and create a glitch effect. When

Izaac tried to stand up a distorted voice echoed in his ears.

“FOUND YOU!” And everything turned white and silent.

Chapter 2: Izaac

Izaac has never experienced such a sensation. It felt like he was travelling through space and time, a very discomforting feeling, but it was also quite peaceful and silent, and Izaac had not had that in quite a while so he did not really mind. As Izaac was about to indulge himself in this blissful atmosphere, a ringing sound caused by tinnitus shook Izaac back to reality and he awoke to find himself in a foreign environment.

“Damn, my head...,” Izaac said, whilst putting pressure on his head with his right hand in an attempt to suppress the headache.

Izaac looked around the room to find out that it did not contain any hint of modern styling. The room was mainly made out of wood and the bed he awoke on was not necessarily the greatest bed. It felt like sleeping on the floor but with a pillow.

“Candles... paintings... books... oh there is a mirror.

Izaac stood up and went to the mirror to check himself out. His appearance had not changed nor had his clothes, though all the things he had in his pocket such as his cellphone had disappeared.

“I see... So, anything that had not been discovered yet has disappeared. My lab coat is made out of cotton, my clothes are made out of fabric, which I am guessing have been discovered but are very limited.”

Izaac looked inside a wooden wardrobe in the corner of the room and it only contained one set of clothing and a sack. They were made of linen, not fabric, so Izaac concluded he was in the commoner's area.

“Seems like I am in the medieval time period.”

Izaac changed into the clothes that were in the wardrobe to not stand out when he would go out in public. He saw a knife and proceeded to cut his lab coat and old clothes into square pieces and put them in the sack.

“That should do for money, now where am I...”

Izaac walked to the wooden desk that had a stack of books and a lot of writing utensils and was shocked to see that he could read the cover of the book stacked on top.

“Chaucer, Geoffrey... The house of fame...”

Izaac took a further look at the book and started to read it. It was in old English but Izaac had learnt it on days he was bored. “I can't believe something I did out of boredom would actually be useful...” Izaac chuckled to himself. “There is one more thing to confirm.”

Izaac put the book down and headed out the door to immediately be showered with the rays of the sun. It was right in the middle of the day and the streets were crowded, and as expected, everyone was wearing medieval

styled clothing, as Izaac could remember from the history books that portrayed these people. There were way too many people for the time of the day, so Izaac tried to strike up a conversation with a random passer-by.

“Um... excuse me? Can I ask a few questions if you don’t mind?” Izaac asked a bearded man that looked like he knew his stuff.

“As long as it’s nothing too hard, scholar,” the bearded man replied and chuckled. Izaac noted the fact that he asked the question in normal English and got a reply in normal English as well. And scholar? Izaac noted that as well. It would seem he was some sort of scholar.

“I apologize for not knowing but I have not been up-to-date lately on the current situation of this country. What exactly is going on right now?”

“Too busy writing the manuscripts, eh?”

“Yes, I do apologize,” Izaac awkwardly said.

“Right now, there is supposed to be a celebration of King Henry IV becoming the new King of England. It has been a year and everything has gone pretty well for this country,” the man proudly declared.

“Is it obligatory to attend the celebration?”

“Yes, it is unless you are working at places like the bank. You have to go. Merchants take a lot of advantages from this situation.”

“I believe so. I am also guessing robberies occur frequently during this event as well?”

“Robberies happen all the time, though, yes, it is more frequent during this time,” the man frowned as he replied.

“Well thank you for your time. I do not have money on me right now, but I can give you this piece of fabric,” Izaac said and took out a piece of his lab coat and handed it to the man.

“Woah. Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am sure.”

The man took the fabric, thanked Izaac and left, looking like he had just hit the jackpot.

“I see... So, fabric is worth a lot... And I can now confirm that I am in the Kingdom of England.”

Izaac took off with the objective of exploring around him and gathering even more information, as he was not sure whether or not this was a parallel universe or not. The first thing he noticed was there was a bank. Izaac entered the bank, which was heavily guarded, and asked a few questions to the beautiful looking lady sitting at the front desk.

“Does this bank do credit, deposit and transfer?”

“Yes, we also do money exchange and the conversion of coins,” the lady replied with a smile.

“I see... am I able to quickly check my account right here or do I have to go through and wait in that long line?” Izaac asked and took out another piece of his lab coat and showed it to the lady.

“It is Izaac Foster.” Seeing how shocked the lady looked Izaac decided to snap her back to reality by saying his name.

“Y-yes of course. One moment.” The lady hurriedly left the desk and in just a few minutes returned.

“There are no records of Izaac Foster being registered in this bank. Are you perhaps looking to register, Sir Izaac?”

“Yes, if you could set up an account for me that would be great. I will come back after the ceremony is over.” Izaac smiled and gave the lady a piece of lab coat before leaving.

The next building to find was a clothing retailer, though this area seemed to be where scholars lived, so it might be hard to find one, considering they usually didn’t have the time or money to spend on fashion.

“I guess I will go further up the street and, by logic anyway, cosmetics shops should be near the capital rather than down here,” Izaac said to himself and proceeded to walk through the crowded streets of wherever he was in England.

After around about an hour of walking, Izaac finally made it to the capital.

“That was hell... I think the ceremony is about to start soon as well,” Izaac sighed.

The last time Izaac was this exhausted was when he was running a marathon for a charity event. It was for a good cause, so Izaac did not mind. Izaac shook off his exhaustion and started to look around for the fanciest clothing retailer he could see. There weren't that many; in fact there were only two... but one of them was closed due to the ceremony. So Izaac went into the one that was still open.

“Excuse me but are you guys still open?”

“Oh, we are just about to close to go to the ceremony.”

A fat man with fancy Tudor style clothing. There was no doubt this was the owner of the shop.

“Ah I won't be buying any clothes; I am here for a little trade.” Izaac grinned

and showed the man the sack full of ‘fabric’.

“Impossible... this many fabrics is just-.”

“Well this is all I really have, so it is kind of a one-time deal only.” Izaac looked the man in the eye.

“Name your price.”

“Just a 40% return on the sales you make using my fabric.”

“Deal. The name is Miller Fletcher.”

“Izaac Foster.”

The men shook hands and agreed on the deal. Miller went and wrote the contract details on a parchment and gave it to Izaac to sign and seal the deal. Izaac signed and left for the ceremony.

“Ah please wait, Izaac. If you come with me to the ceremony, you will not have to stand in the crowds. You looked exhausted when you entered, so I thought you might not like crowds.”

“Oh really? Well then, I will be in your care, Miller,” Izaac said happily accepting the offer.

Izaac helped close the shop up and both men were soon at the special area designated for the rich. Along the way Izaac saw a library and asked Miller about it.

“Does the library have an archive section?”

“Yes, it does, but even I am not allowed to access it. So, I do not know what is there.”

“Hmm, who is able to access it?”

“Only people from the Royal family, and most banks have access to it for looking up data on people.”

“I see...” Izaac noted this down in his head and watched the ceremony, which he did not care about.

When the ceremony was over, Izaac returned to the bank and was immediately greeted by the lady he had talked to during the day.

“Your account has been taken care of Sir Izaac. Here is a parchment with the details of your account,” the lady said, handing Izaac a parchment.

“Thanks. I want to ask for one more favor. I am not going to impose it on you. You can decline if you wan-”

“You want full access to the library including its archive, right?”

“H-how did you know...?” Izaac asked, shocked.

“A lot of scholars ask for the same thing, but we always decline. However, you are a special case.” The lady winked at Izaac.

“Alright, I’ll give 5% of what I receive from the fabric sales.”

“You should be able to access the library tomorrow.” The lady smiled and returned to the front desk.

Izaac returned to the small home he was spawned into and tried to gather his thoughts. So far, Izaac has secured finance and knowledge. All he needed to do now was to find out more about why he was sent back in time, and find out how to travel back to the present.

“I sure hope everything is alright back there...” Izaac said and prepared for the busy long days ahead of him in this new setting.

Chapter 3: The Age of Exploration

The Age of Exploration lasted from the early 15th century through the 17th century and was central to transforming the world into the globalization of economies and knowledge, which, in turn, created what is essentially modern science. Though, of course only Izaac knew this and it is one of the main reasons why right then he had an unsettled face. The current year was 1405 CE and, in the span of 5 years, Izaac had sped up the rate of technological advancement so much that it was now possible to set sail to other lands.

“From the information I have gathered so far in the past 5 years, this is definitely the past of the same timeline I came from...,” Izaac muttered to himself and sighed as he looked down at the hallway window of the University of Oxford.

After publishing a few scientific papers, Izaac had made a name for himself and had even been greeted by King Henry IV, who commended Izaac for his world changing scientific discoveries. Izaac however, was not really proud of his achievements as all he did was reproduce already established theory from the modern era; this was what has caused all the uneasiness Izaac has felt so far.

“If this really is the past... then how many time paradoxes have I already caused by publishing all these theories...?” Izaac thought to himself. He also thought of all his assistants, especially Prof. Deire and Rie.

According to the people of the era, they had recently just recovered from the Black Death. Added to the fact that the current king of England was Henry IV and that there was a conflict with the Kingdom of France, there was no doubt that that was the past of the time Izaac had come from. However, Izaac could not shake off a feeling of nostalgia when looking around his surroundings, even though it was all completely foreign to him; it was as if Izaac had been here before.

“Salutations Captain!” a voice rang in Izaac’s ears causing him to snap out of his deep-thinking state. Turning to the source, Izaac could see a man who looked to be in his early thirties, wearing a shirt with a doublet that had sleeves that were pulled through them and a robe over the clothing. It was the same fashion style that history books in Izaac’s time portrayed what the people of the Middle Ages wore.

“Oh, Kristof, what do you need?” Izaac replied in a tired manner.

“Just wanted to let you know the crew is ready to set sail tomorrow, but looking at your current state it seems we might have to delay departure...” Kristof worriedly said whilst examining Izaac’s physique.

Izaac had been hard at work advancing the scientific knowledge of the current era to the modern era as fast as possible. He had even successfully generated electricity using a Tesla coil built on a tall tower on a mountain top so that it could harness the power of lightning and supply enough

electricity for the whole kingdom. This kick started the industrial revolution with excavations being dug and factories being built to acquire and process underground resources needed to further advance the technology of the era. Once Izaac had obtained a surplus amount of resources, he started making vehicles not just for the transportation of resources, but also to allow the people of the kingdom to go from one place to another in a short time. In fact, the big project Izaac has just completed was the building of a ship which he planned on using to sail and establish trade with other countries. During this time no human has been able to set sail and explore the world. Izaac thought it would be a good opportunity to be the first. This was to balance the development in technology and economy and, of course, Izaac had also made a variety of weapons to increase the development on the military side of things in case things went haywire. Though all of this had happened in only 5 years, Izaac has had little to no rest or any form of relaxation, which explained the black circles under his eyes and his apathetic manner of doing anything.

“It would seem the fatigue has caught up with me...” Izaac wearily replied.

“There is no need to rush Captain, it would be better for all of us if we had a healthy captain on board. We can delay it by a week if need-”

“No. We leave tomorrow,” Izaac said in a determined voice though he looked a bit dazed.

“B-b-bu-t”

“I will rest up early tonight and I should feel better tomorrow,” Izaac said and proceeded to walk past Kristof to go pack his stuff from the lab.

“W-with all due respect captain, no. You will not be able to recover from the state you are in with just a days’ rest, I am advising you as a friend. Please take a longer rest. Establishing trade routes can wait; I would like it if you did not push yourself beyond your limits any further,” Kristof said whilst putting his hand on Izaac’s shoulder to stop him from walking.

“You are right, establishing trade routes can wait. However, I actually have another reason for wanting to sail as soon as possible...” Izaac said, looking particularly perturbed. Kristof took note of this and let Izaac go.

“I guess that reason cannot be disclosed, even to your closest aide?”

“Unfortunately, no, because right now I am still unable to confirm something, so I would rather avoid complicating things even further,” Izaac replied and continued to walk down the hallway back to the lab, looking quite disturbed.

After Izaac had cleaned the lab and packed his things and put them in a bag, he headed off back to his house, which had been gifted to him by the King. It was a fairly standard, medieval style house with two floors and made out of brick. It was not half-timbered, so it was more expensive than the normal Tudor houses. The roof was tiled and the house also had a chimney, with, of

course, a fireplace. As common as it was to have servants during this time, Izaac did not like the idea of having them, so he declined the offer and only accepted the house from the King.

“I really need to establish an efficient method of making concrete and reinforced steel...” Izaac thought to himself whilst examining his house. It was lacking in terms of defense and structural integrity; anyone could easily break into the house and steal items of high value. Hence, Izaac had not really stored anything in his house and had not transformed his house into a private lab.

“In any case, as long as I am able to sleep feeling comfortable, then it is fine for now,” Izaac said to himself and entered his house and went straight to his bedroom. It was a fairly plain bedroom with only a king size bed and a wooden desk and chair, where Izaac did most of his theory drafting. Izaac put down his bag and relaxed on his bed trying to gather his thoughts.

“What a weird feeling I’ve been experiencing lately...” Izaac sighed.

Added to the nostalgia and unease with possibly creating a huge time paradox, there was one other lingering feeling Izaac has been experiencing: fear. This was an emotion Izaac has not felt in a while. He was usually curious about and fearless of the unknown, but this time it felt different. It was not possible to describe it but, earlier on, when Kristof said to delay the departure by a week, Izaac received a sudden shock and saw a vision of the boat being engulfed by a huge wave. But what sent chills down Izaac’s spine

was when he saw a figure before the boat was eaten by the wave. That figure looked like Kristof and seemed to have a malicious smirk. Izaac recalled from a history book that during this time, the British sent a small fleet to explore the Atlantic Ocean in search of new land, but the fleet never returned. A second fleet consisting of five ships was sent to find out what had happened, but those five ships vanished as well. Though, the timing did not add up, since Christopher Columbus and John Cabot were not born yet at that time, Izaac was determined to depart tomorrow. He was really curious now.

“I guess I will find out tomorrow...” Izaac said and drifted off to sleep.

“Everyone please quickly get into your positions and make sure to check that all containers with the food rations are on the ship!” Izaac announced on a PA system that he made for the ship.

“You seem to be in a hurry Captain,” Kristof said to Izaac whilst entering the PA room.

“I am just excited to explore the world, Kristof.”

Izaac had awoken that morning feeling much better and immediately sprang into action and prepared for the departure. Now, he was on a modern looking steel ship that housed 30 crew members with enough space to carry at least 25,000 tonnes of containers. This was a very expensive, and Izaac was very thankful to the King providing a lot of assistance in making this ship

though there were some things Izaac could not implement such as radar. But, in any case, the ship was able to sail for at least a month due to it being diesel powered, which as a limited resource had to be used wisely.

Now that everything was in place, it was time for the crew to say their goodbyes to their families and loved ones. There was a huge crowd of people gathering at the dock that were all waving and shouting good luck and their farewells, but there was one particular spot that was not crowded and was heavily guarded. It was the King's spot and Izaac could see him waving and wishing Izaac good fortune, to which Izaac responded with a smile.

With all that out of the way, Izaac started the engines and signaled the anchor team to slowly lift the anchors.

"The anchor has been completely lifted Captain!" Kristof shouted, receiving a confirmation from the anchor team.

"Alright, full throttle!" Izaac enthusiastically shouted whilst shifting the gear that controlled the power transmission of the engines at full power.

The engines roared and the ship slowly started to accelerate away from the dock, leaving the Kingdom of England. Izaac looked ahead and at the rough map of the world he had drawn.

"New land here I come!" Izaac said, pointing to the route he was planning

on taking on the map.

It was just a sketch of the world map so it was not really accurate and in addition to the fact that he had no radar, there really was no way to detect obstacles. Though there was a compass and Izaac would utilize it, even with that, there were still insufficient navigation instruments for Izaac to feel completely safe.

“Guess I’ll go with my feeling.” Izaac shrugged and directed the ship so that it was facing north.

The ship disappeared into the horizon, Sooner or later they would cross the Atlantic Ocean and that was when the truth should be revealed.

Two long weeks passed. They were now roughly in the Atlantic Ocean according to Izaac’s calculations though there really was no indicator to back that up. Izaac also could not compare the speed with the voyagers in the past since there was barely any information on them but, based on the technology back then, Izaac assumed it took at least a month for them to arrive in the Atlantic Ocean. With that and the speed of the current ship, Izaac calculated that they were roughly entering the Atlantic Ocean.

“I think we are still on route even though there have been some unforeseen circumstances,” Izaac said looking at the map.

On the way, they had encountered a storm. Though Izaac had anticipated

this and made a lot of countermeasures for such a situation, he had not realized how bad his sense of direction was and did not know whether he was going towards the Atlantic Ocean or away from it and back to the kingdom. But Izaac was sure the ship had not done a complete 180 degrees turn, and so he was certain they were on the right track.

Izaac was about to put the ship on a little auto-pilot feature he had managed to make when suddenly a crew member on the deck shouted.

“I think another storm is coming!”

Izaac hurriedly looked outside the window of the control room and saw that the sky was getting darker.

“Weird. I should have noticed the cumulonimbus clouds beforehand-” Izaac thought but was interrupted by a weird change in the atmosphere.

“W-what. Why is mist forming and what is this unearthly and eerie atmosphere?” Izaac scratched his head.

The ship was now in some sort of heavy mist with barely any visibility. Izaac decided to completely stop the ship.

“Attention all crew members! Please stay alert. This does not look like a storm. I will try to figure out what is happening but make sure to keep an eye out for anything out of place!” Izaac announced on the PA system.

Izaac wracked his brain trying to come up with a possible explanation as to what was happening and remembered that he had secretly made a radio and a black box system for these situations. This meant that if they sank, there was a chance some other voyager could find the black box and find out what had happened. Izaac quickly set up the radio and black box system in the control room and waited for any sort of signal.

The atmosphere was scarily silent. It felt as if time had stopped, but Izaac did not lose track of time and, after a minute of silence, the radio finally received some sort of signal.

DOT DIT DIT DOT DOT DOT DOT DIT DOT DIT DIT.

“What... Morse code... impossible.” Izaac suddenly started to sweat.

DOT DIT DIT DOT DOT DOT DOT DIT DOT DIT DIT.

“W... H... Y... hm? Why does it keeps repeating it?” Izaac managed to decipher the Morse code but was still confused.

WHY WHY WHY WHY WHY WHY WHY WHY. That was what the Morse code on the radio was saying. Izaac was about to announce what he had found out on the PA system when suddenly lightning struck the hull of the ship. Izaac went to look out the window of the control room that gave a view of the hull and found Kristof standing there with an evil smirk.

“Izaac Foster. You have gone too far, go further and we will definitely be exposed,” Kristof’s voice echoed through the whole ship.

“W-w-what are you talking about, Kristof?” Izaac replied in a frightened tone on the PA system.

“This time we will definitely erase you even with the lack of preparation!” Kristof said in a distorted voice.

As soon as Kristof said that, the surroundings decided to start shifting and become distorted. Izaac went down on his knees and suddenly remembered everything and the truth. He knew why he had been feeling nostalgic. It was because he lived through this timeline once already. Izaac knew his purpose now.

“I will be back Kristof no... If I were to go by what I called you guys when we first met. Aliens.”

The space around Izaac started to crumble and twist. Soon, Izaac and the whole ship were swallowed up along with the mist, leaving no trace.

Deo Confidimus

Jihan Angrila

Department of BioMedical Engineering

Faculty of Life Sciences

International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI)

Email: jihan.angrila@gmail.com

Introduction

It only seemed like yesterday when everyone was living relatively peacefully with each other. All the differences that made us unique and all the ethics that made humans *human* were still accepted. Different countries with their different religions still kept to themselves and that was fine but when a group of scientists decided to pursue one of the most asked questions of all time within the history of humanity itself, ‘**Does God exist?**’, they did not expect the answer they got. They hoped that their hypothesis would be right, they hoped that the concept of god was something the human mind merely made up to explain the unexplainable; to put the blame of human cruelty and selfishness on something, *someone* else rather than owning up to the blame themselves.

These scientists came knocking at God's door expecting no one to answer and yet the door creaked slightly open, letting humanity finally peek at what lies ahead in the afterlife.

This caused panic and frenzy throughout the globe for both believers and

non-believers. The believers were just as shocked as the non-believers as they had never witnessed firsthand the evidence of God, whom they call **Deus** now, as they were merely following and having faith in their own religion in the hope of securing a place in heaven. The non-believers were stunned while the believers were taken aback.

The proven fact that an afterlife exists and you will be judged once you die *does not mean what decides whether you go to heaven or hell has been found.* Only the evidence of God and afterlife was proven. And this caused a massive change in how the world runs, especially in the ethics department. The world became more one and the religions which doubt or have different rules that don't correspond with this proven one were dismissed as myths, just as the ancient religions of the world had been. This one religion, **INDIVIDUAE**, took over most countries like a virus. Those who opposed the shift in religious faith, unbelievers, were put into "conversion" facilities. And sinners were tracked down by **Venator Interitum**, otherwise known as "Afterlife Hunters", to be dealt with. Countries with a heavy influence of Individuae became radical and suffocating. People were so fearful of whether they would secure a position in heaven that their countries' leaders became even more corrupt. The most powerful people in the world, **Repraesentativas**, the delegates of Deus, were appointed by the **Concilio**, the group of scientists who founded Deus. And their words became religious laws.

Whether proven or not, it was still human's nature to seek for freedom and entitlement and not everyone believed in Individuae, as provable as it was.

Those who "saw differently" had their own reasons; be it the faith that they once had in the old gods, the unwillingness to give up their mortal freedom that they have been living for so long for, or something more sinister. But as said before, these people were dealt with accordingly, whether their faith and values were wrong or right, since it didn't align with what Individuae stood for.

Nobody knew what happened to the sinners especially.

Only themselves and the Venator Interitum knew.

This is the story of two "sinners", each with a different belief that did not align with Individuae, who were prosecuted for their own choice to be sinners. At least in the eyes of Individuae.

This is the story of how a world filled with **saints** became an even crueler one in order to prepare for the life not lived now.

Chapter 1: Occidendum

Blood.

There was blood and white paint splattered all over the walls and it seeped into the cracks on the floorboard. The room was quiet, unmoving, all the tension from before gone and what was left was nothing except the sound of breathing from the murderer. Shaky breaths, unsure and filled with fear came out of the culprit as she clenched the fabric of her bloodied shirt, staying shaken and huddled in the corner, a million thoughts going through her mind; all too fast for her to comprehend. With every second that passed, the feeling of guilt and distress amplified tenfold within her. Slowly, the feelings became too much and she broke down. The most unsettling breakdown one would witness someone goes through; she stayed unmoving except for the shaking of her shoulders and the tears that streamed down her cheek. Loud wails eventually escaped from her. And soon, the banging coming from somewhere matched the loudness of her wails.

This world was already messed up. Humans were so delusional about how terrible they are that they decided a "mythical" figure is enough to be the reason for their terrible moral compass. They made such a big fuss over whose "mythical" figure was true and no fuss that war and unrest rose out of the squabble.

If anyone, this one particular woman would know best. Mika Myers lived her

whole life feeling the downs more than the ups. A relatively happy childhood, yet an unguided and aimless upbringing, left her in a constant state of depression and self-doubt. Now living with her abusive uncle after her parents were unable to take care of her anymore, she fell deeper into her depressive state. Every day she woke up with a headache and a bad feeling of what the day had in store for her. From deep within her she wanted to break free, just to let all the negative thoughts and feelings out. Every day the feeling of lashing out and exterminating the root of her suffering grew and every day she struggled to keep herself contained. Mika had no one on her side and she failed to see how anyone would want to be with how she was.

Well, there was one person.

"MIKA WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?!"

Mika could hear her tormentor all the way from the basement, her 'bedroom'. She groaned, unwillingly got up from her rickety bed and up the stairs she went. Her bedroom seemed like a different world compared to other parts of the house; cold, unwelcoming, dark, dead, and filled with dread. The other parts of the house were lit up nicely, painted perfectly, and as homely as a house could be. But not to her. No matter how comforting the house seemed to outsiders, to her it was just as dreadful as her dead bedroom. All of it seemed to be just a façade to make up for how horrible her uncle was. Although he had no family of his own, her uncle's house was not designed for a single person to live in. It was a well-sized house with

different rooms for different purposes. In a world where everything seems so restricted, even Mika didn't know where her uncle got the money to obtain the house. Maybe it was given, maybe he bought it before **Deus** was found, who knows. And honestly, Mika's curiosity was beaten emotionally out of her.

Well, physically too. And not just curiosity, but nearly all of her positive feelings. Behind closed doors of course.

Mika went to her uncle, who was sitting on the sofa reading his newspaper with the TV on. He was a tall, lanky man with a receding hairline. He wore thick glasses and an expensive-looking white buttoned-up shirt with black pants. Type of things that wouldn't even cross his mind when thinking about Mika. The woman slowly placed herself behind the man.

"What time is it?" he said without even acknowledging her.

"It's half-past nine, Sir... "

"And?"

Mika didn't know how to answer. There were so many things she had to do today that it seemed like her brain would erase her subconscious 'to-do' list just to make space for some basic living function.

"Upstairs, Mika." Her uncle sighed in annoyance. "Upstairs...?" she repeated

with genuine confusion.

"Upstairs, you stupid girl! I told you to continue painting the guest room upstairs eight hours ago! I told you we would have guests tomorrow and this house needed to be spotless but instead you've been holed up in your room for hours doing nothing! Now go upstairs and finish your god damn job, idiot!"

All the years spent under her abusive uncle's roof did not help her get used to his degrading words, in fact, it did the opposite. Mika was already an anxious person and full of self-doubt from the start and what her uncle did merely amplified those negative traits every day. Today, she felt exhausted and tired of keeping her thoughts sane. Today, she felt as if something would happen. Whether it would be in her control or not. And at this point, she couldn't care less about what would happen.

Mika merely nodded and went upstairs to paint, just as her uncle commanded her to.

The guest room seemed hollow. Plastic covered the furniture within the room and only one side of the room was newly painted. Mika grabbed the can of paint from the door frame along with an odd brush and walked towards an unpainted wall. She pried the lid of the paint can open and proceeded to paint. Now, Mika was nowhere near a professional wall painter but she tried hard for the paint to be applied correctly just to avoid her uncle's abusive words. The color seemed alright but that was what Mika

thought. She knew her uncle would always have something to degrade her over, whether it was something major or something as silly as a spot on the wall. She pushed from her mind the words her uncle called her and continued to paint some more.

Mika had lost track of time and, with a sore arm, she wiped the sweat off her forehead. The paint can was just less than half full and she was now sitting on a metal, foldable ladder. Just as she was about to continue her job, she could hear her uncle stomping his way up the stairs. In an instant, panic washed over her.

"Are you kidding me? You call this painting? Look at the spots on the wall!" he shouted as he walked into the room.

The spots were not all that bad. Nothing a small cover-up couldn't fix.

She gripped the ladder to prevent her shaky self from falling off the ladder. "I'm sorry, Uncle, I tried my best really. Sometimes the brush isn't long enough to reach some spots... I didn't--"

"EXCUSES! The brushes I bought are just fine! It's just an idiot like you can never seem to figure out how to do the simplest thing!" He came closer.

Mika was scared and tired. Tired of everything, tired of herself. Her anxiety was skyrocketing.

"I really did my best... These brushes are really not for painting walls." Her words were supposed to sound strong but the opposite happened. Her uncle, furious with her 'backchat', had enough and kicked the ladder from underneath her. Mika fell and landed on the floor with a painful thud, her left leg hitting a part of the metal ladder. She let out a painful cry and curled into a ball, writhing on the ground as the paint can splashed white paint on her. Mika stayed still on the ground as her uncle continued to shout at her. She knew he was there, cursing her and stabbing her traumatized brain with horrible words but she was tired of it all. She was so tired of feeling like a useless sack of waste every day and it was all because no matter what she does, her uncle never seems to find it enough. To her, today was the final day she felt like she was 'not enough'.

Mika stopped withering on the ground and as the man who abused he taunted her to get up, she grabbed the fallen paint can, throwing it at her uncle with all her might. The can landed straight in his face and he fell backwards. Before anything could happen, Mika rose up and crawled towards the fallen man who was covering his face in pain. She grabbed one of the full cans from the doorway before climbing on top of him and repeatedly bashing his skull in.

With every hit, her savagery increased exponentially; her anger, frustration, resentment towards the man seeped out with every hit until his screams turned to squeaks from mashed brain matter and skull fragments. His hands which tried to claw her off, were no match for her wrath, had finally stopped and fallen limp on his sides. Blood was everywhere. Paint was everywhere.

The two liquids mixed around them in a sadistic harmony as Mika stayed on top of her 'victim', trying to make sense of what she has done.

Then she realized what she has done.

Her brain kicked into full panic mode and everything seemed to fade after that, except for loud banging coming from somewhere.

Chapter 2: Currit Satus

In a world where fear of the known unknown governed people's actions, one would think they would try to limit their selfish qualities. Self-indulgence, self-centeredness, and all the 'self' qualities would be the first thing people tried to get rid of to ensure a place in heaven. To be pure, clean, and without worldly temptations was what most people, if not almost all, would want. However, for those who do not want this, their current life was a playground. Not their past or afterlife, but the current one. People who adopted a "live day by day" philosophy were looked down on in this society where a sound afterlife was the end goal. After Concilio found Deus, most schools of thought disappeared and people were left with a limited way of living.

James Anderson was a man who cares not for his afterlife. He was a person all about self-indulgence in his mortal life. The fact that Deus existed meant nothing to him and that was how he would always be. He wasn't scared, worried, or expected heaven to accept him. And, in all honesty, he didn't care what would await him in hell. All that he cared about was the 'present' in which he lived. Aside from that, he didn't care about a lot of things. In fact, life has started to become dull for him. Boring day-to-day job with a sprinkle of bad influence on the street just wasn't cutting it for him anymore. He wanted more, and he wanted it in a bad way.

Although he cared for nothing, there was one thing he cared about.

Well, more of a person.

James met Mika when they were in middle school; before these Deus "nonsense", as James would say, happened. Mika was attracted to James because of how comforting being with him was and James became close to Mika because of how much innocence he saw in her that he needed to protect. He was not a "knight" type, nothing close to that, but he saw something in Mika that made him feel like he needed to be there for her no matter what. Whenever she would cry from being overwhelmed by work or her own emotions, he would be there comforting her and calming her down. He was the one person people would call whenever they couldn't handle Mika and, honestly, for a guy who didn't care for anything, he would always respond if it was about his friend.

James needed Mika just as much as she needed him. Whenever he needed some peace of mind, he would go to her and just talk. Mika's simple and straightforward thinking back then would always help him through the storm that was in his head. However, those moments rarely happened now as he got a better hold of his own mind compared to when he was in his teens and Mika seemed to be more and more out of it lately. Ever since she had to go and live with her uncle, whom James despised, half way through high school.

James saw less and less of Mika after they graduated high school. From when he had been a university student until now, the only way he could see

his beloved friend was if he sneaked into her house without her uncle knowing. It would always scare Mika; the thought of her uncle finding out she was sneaking a male into his house, but James didn't care. In fact, he found her worried state amusing sometimes.

Speaking of sneaking in, tonight was one of the nights he would go and visit his beloved friend.

It was one in the morning and the night was oddly darker than usual. The cloud hid the moon, which usually shone so brightly, and, as James strolled down the neighbourhood Mika lived in, a strange feeling rose within him with every step. Mika had not sent him any messages, which she would usually do before he would visit and coupled with the fact that she seemed to be falling deeper into depression, he was worried something might have happened to her. He knew, as grotesque as it sounds, even if Mika were to kill herself, she would leave him something. He was sure the trust and closeness the two shared would ensure that. He doubted the reason she had not contacted him had anything to do with self-harm, but it still bothered him nonetheless. As he walked closer and closer towards her residence, the strange feeling grew more and more within him. He saw that the house looked...different.

The lights were still on, unusual as at this hour as her uncle would be asleep by now, and some of the rooms still had their windows uncovered by the curtains. Very odd, as they would always close the curtains before going to bed. Although the feeling was different, the fact that he had an idea it had

something to do with Mika made him worried. He briskly walked towards the house and went around the back, where he would usually enter as Mika would be waiting at the backdoor. He knocked on the door.

There was a loud crash coming from inside. Even that made him jump.

He waited a while before knocking again.

No answer.

The night was still.

Then he heard wails, feminine wails. James realized it was Mika.

He started banging on the door and when no one answered, he proceeded to kick the door repeatedly until the hinges broke. He rushed in and up the stairs he went, following the sound of his friend.

What he saw was something he would never comprehend.

He knew Mika was a gentle person and he knew she would never hurt anything within her power. However, the corpse on the floor with its skull bashed in said otherwise. Maybe James was a psychopath for not feeling anything for the corpse, but, instead, the sight surprised him. White paint mixed with the blood around the corpse, whose head was mangled beyond recognition. James stood in front of the doorway, transfixed at the scene

before he was snapped out of it by the sound that pulled him in: Mika's wails. He walked into the room and saw Mika huddled in the corner, clothes covered in blood and paint and hands red with blood. She had not realized her friend was there, as she was drowning in her own breakdown.

"Mika!" he called out gently, yet worriedly, before crossing over the room to her. She yelped at the sound of his voice and slowly looked up.

What he saw in her eyes was something he thought he would never see. James had seen Mika helpless, perhaps one too many times, but this time it was more than that. Her eyes were filled with fear, terror, anxiety, guilt, and all the things that would disintegrate a person emotionally. He saw her lips moving but no sound was coming out of it. She was overwhelmed beyond her limit.

"Can I approach you?"

When he saw that she only looked at him with the same expression on her face, he slowly crouched down and hugged her. She merely shook even more. James knew he would do anything for his friend and, tonight, after what had happened, he knew he would choose her over his own life.

He scooped her into his arms and lifted her up. Out of the room he walked and down into the basement, where he gently put her on the bed. He held her tear-stained cheeks and said,

"Listen to me, I know it's hard but we need to leave. Now. Change your clothes, wipe your face, and pack up. I'll come back for you. Got it?"

Mika said nothing.

"Mika, blink if you understand me."

She blinked the tears away.

"We need to hurry, got it? Come on, let's get moving" And with that, he left her to go back to the crime scene.

James knew this would mean the death penalty for Mika. He worked with enough criminals to know what they did to murderers, be it a justified murder or not. Having the life of his closest friend taken by the very system he was against was something he would not allow to happen. Not if he could help it. In the murder room, he coated his hand with blood and left prints on the corpse and around the room. Making it look as if he was involved in the murder, trying to make it seem as if he was the main culprit. He left shoeprints too, just to be safe. After getting his part done, he went downstairs to Mika and saw that she had only cleaned up and changed her clothes.

"Why didn't you pack?"

"James, my leg..."

Now that was something he didn't see. There was an awful looking bruise forming on the left side of Mika's leg. He doubted she would be able to walk properly with that. With no hesitation, he went to her closet and took a bag, filling it with some clothes and necessities. Mika could only watch her friend; her mind still hasn't fully caught up with what had and was happening. Once finished, he held the backpack against his chest and went back to her. He crouched in front of her, gave a comforting smile, and said, "Come on, let's get out of here."

Mika was confused but right now, she could not trust her mind so James was the only one who could guide her. She climbed onto him and out of the house they went; with Mika on James' back, both never looked back at the event that would change their lives forever.

However short or long that life might be.

Chapter 3: Auctoritatis

How did it come to this?

Becoming a part of the homicide squad was what Petra had always wanted and she lived day to day, loving every aspect of her job. Every challenge, case, and mystery were a part of her job and she loved every bit of it. But that was before. That was years ago. That was before Deus was proven to exist, and before she got moved into a different branch of the homicide squad.

She still loved the concept of what she was skilled at, solving crime, but she despised how it was now being applied.

Petra was just a normal detective, but she became one of those selected few who were chosen to be a Venator Interitum once humanity found 'God'. Her usual cases became tightly associated with religious affairs. She had to deal with 'sinners' and all such. Now, Petra Hoag was a woman with a strong sense of justice and sharp observational skills. However, something she would always see herself question was the whole issue regarding 'human rights' and how the justice system had changed with the fact that Deus exists. The very foundation of her current profession. Everything regarding ethics and human rights were now centered around how someone would secure a place in heaven. She could never fully understand and side with the current justice system; how authority now forced people to be 'good'.

Whenever she thought about her job, her whole profession sector, she would always ask herself, unconsciously,

Why not let people decide if they want to go to heaven or not?

Of course, being a Venator Interitum with a relatively high ranking, she was under no circumstances allowed to utter this question out loud. That would be the end of her. Just like a normal detective, she had a partner but she couldn't fully trust him. No one could be fully trusted in this society, not anymore. Petra's curious mind made her higher-ups assign her more 'ethically challenging' cases. Not that she complained, it filled her time and honed her problem-solving skills even more, but sometimes it could get repetitive. The core of her job was to find all the evidence and discover the truth.

So when her higher-ups approached her with a case involving a local murder, she thought it would be just like any other. Until she actually went down to the crime scene itself and started noticing things others had not noticed.

In a reformed society, where people's motivation, be it good or bad, were driven by the selfish thought of having a position in heaven, Petra knew it was every man for himself. This logic did not apply to the nature of the crime scene. The victim, his head bashed beyond recognition with the blood-stained paint can just nearby it, two prints, odd blood patterns within the room itself. Incomplete information filled the room and yet everything was there. Bloody shoe prints were going up and down from the murder room

into the basement, which seemed to be a bedroom, and out to the backdoor. There was bloodied clothes on the side of the bed in the basement. Petra could not put the picture of what happened together yet. The prints in the murder room were odd to her.

Why was there only one shoe print?

Why was the backdoor damaged?

What happened between the two suspects?

What were their motives?

"It's weird, isn't it?" the voice of her partner, Allan, pulled her out of the thoughts.

"Yeah, really weird. What do you think about the blood pattern?" Her gaze trailed from the corpse to the small dried up, and weirdly shaped, blood in one corner of the room. "We know there are two different sized prints, so two different suspects. I'd say male and female, based on the size difference. The splatter pattern seems to be matching with the cause of death. But if you're talking about that pattern over there by the corner, I have no clue."

"The man is Colt Myers, right? And he lived with his niece?"

"Yep. Are you thinking she's a suspect?"

"For sure. She's nowhere to be found. But I want more concrete evidence first. This seems really odd." Petra was sure this niece of Colt was a suspect but she still couldn't figure out the motive for this murder. More interviews with the neighbours were clearly needed. Something odd to her was why the paint seemed to be recently used. As in why did they determined the time of death to be around the same time the walls were being painted? Was Colt painting the walls when his niece crept up to him and struck? But then why was he wearing an expensive shirt? And what about the clothes in the bedroom basement? The niece was the one painting based on the paint marks—

"What about the male prints?" Allan interrupted her thoughts.

The male prints. Petra forgot about that.

"The male prints... Since the backdoor was damaged, I'd say he broke in. But then, why would he? If he was an accomplice, why wouldn't the niece leave the backdoor unlocked for him to come in?" She turned to Allan. Her partner looked surprised as if the thought hadn't occurred to him yet.

"Good point... We should go interview the people living here. Find out more about Colt and his niece's relationship," Allan said as he started to walk out of the bloodied room.

"Yeah, good idea. Let's start now then."

Petra knew, with the neighbor's testimonies, she might be able to piece the puzzle back together to complete the whole picture. Something told her the two painters who painted this grotesque painting had different motives. Two very different types of people who somehow complement each other's 'sin'.

Now that the clock had started, the afterlife huntress needed to complete her task without being influenced by the question that had been plaguing her from the start.

Why not let people decide if they want to go to heaven or not?

Chapter 4: Relicta

Mika never realized how much her friend had meddled in the world of crime. During the times she spent with him, he never really talked about the people he worked with. Well, at least those involved with illegal matters. She knew James worked in some sort computer science research company and she knew his job was something she would never understand. She always knew he cared not much for the laws, be it religious or state, but never really had the desire to break them. In all honesty, she wasn't sure if she wanted to know more about how he knew the "darker side" of society but now that she had become one of them, she felt as if she needed to ask and know more.

They both were sinners now, but one of them probably saw that as a personal achievement rather than a 'failure'.

After what happened that night, the two of them laid low in James' apartment for a few days. Some of Mika's neighbor had definitely seen them leave the house, she was sure of that, but she was also sure that they wouldn't figure out who James was. Which was a good thing. Mika actually wanted to leave town the moment James started running out of her uncle's house but he told her that the police and Venator Interitum would be everywhere looking for them. In Mika's head, when her friend said 'them', it only registered as 'her' and that brought massive anxiety to her mind. James seemed to be able to sense what she felt and comforted her right away,

telling her what she did was justified and in self-defense. He tried to convince her that they won't get her but she knew it was only a matter of time. Mika was molded to fear authority and knew she would always have to deal with the consequence of her actions. That authority figure used to be her uncle but now it was worse. It was actual authority. James seemed to be just fine within himself and how he voluntarily involved himself with her crime. That was something Mika didn't really understand. James was always odd to her, even before, maybe even sociopathic, but never in her life she would thought he would go this far for her.

Once the situation had 'cooled off' slightly, the two started planning. Actually, more like James started planning. Just before they left his apartment for good, they talked about what had happened and what would happen.

"We'll be fugitives," Mika spoke to him, who was going through his cabinets to look for final things to bring.

"I know, sweet." That tone confused and worried her. It sounded so carefree.

"I don't get it. Why are you so okay with this? Why did you involve yourself with what I did? You could've just run."

"I wanted to help, of course. When I saw you in that corner all huddled and scared like that... I just couldn't leave you. You're important to me and

knowing they would get you is something I wouldn't allow them to do if I could help it."

"But... Heaven..." Mika could only whisper. She could feel the anxiety slowly build up inside her. James laughed and approached her, finished his packing.

"I couldn't give a toss about my place in heaven, love. Seriously. What kind of messed up god would let you go to hell when your crime is justified? I'm not a coward. I'm not scared of whatever afterlife has for me. And honestly, who knows, maybe Satan or whatever rules hell might find my company pleasing." He gave her a wink. That sounded like what he would usually say but this time, with the reality of the situation, it disturbed her.

"You're sick, James."

"And you just killed someone, haha. So, we need to go. You understand what I explained to you before right?"

"Leave your apartment, go visit a few... friends... of yours to help us out, and then get groceries, I mean supplies, before disappearing."

"I swear it sounded cooler in my head. But anyway, yeah that's it. So shall we?" He held his hand out to her. Mika stared at the hand for a while, as if deciding if this was what she was willing to let her life become. She didn't had much choice; either go with James and have a chance of surviving or get caught and be sent to *Re-Education* where who knows what would happen

to her. The reality of her crime started to catch up to her and if she was to spend her afterlife in hell, of course she would want a chance to live her current life with her own form of happiness.

Besides, James would be there waiting for her in the potential torment of so called afterlife.

So of course, she took her friend's hand. Mika closed this chapter of her life and started a new one, with James fully in it.

"Wait, how's your leg?" James caught her as she wobbled slightly while standing up.

"Still hurts a lot.... Do you think it might be fractured?" She had her trousers' cloth rolled up, exposing the big angry looking bruise that was on her left leg. It didn't match Mika's fragile skin at all.

"With how it looks? Maybe. Could be hairline fracture too. Look at that. Damn. Looks horrible," James said with a tone that was too amusing for Mika's liking.

"Okay, enough, sociopath. Can you just help me?"

"Always. Okay, let's go, for real." He placed an arm around her waist to support her.

"Wait, before we go, are you really, really sure about leaving all of this behind? James, you live such a comfortable life. Come on, really think about this."

"Mikaaaaaaa," he wailed. "Yes! Deus, how many times do I have to tell you? I'll choose you over anything. Seriously. Besides, I can't go back and remove my prints now, can I? And honestly, this lifestyle I'm living in is starting to get boring. Maybe it's time for a change, you know?"

"You're crazy." Mika shook her head.

"And you're a murderer. Shall we go, sweetheart? Seriously though, we don't have much time."

"Fine, let's go."

And with that, off they went to leave everything behind just for a chance of a second mortal life.

Chapter 5: Persequer

Several days had passed since Petra had gone through the crime scene. All the evidence matched with what she thought to be the flow of the story and yet, a few variables, strong variables, threw her narrative out of the window. She still couldn't understand why the backdoor was damaged, as if broken into, if the male suspect was really involved with the crime. She had deduced that Colt was killed by his niece, Mika, in a fit of rage. A crime of passion. The heavy hits he took to his head to the point of being beyond recognition made Petra sure Mika took her anger or whatever negative emotion she had within her out on the man. If this male suspect wasn't in the picture at all, this case would be easy to solve and yet there he was, putting more questions on the table rather than answers which could be connected by dots between the evidence present. What Petra wanted to know most was how this male suspect was related to Mika and what he did to the female suspect; after seemingly making Mika 'disappear' from the equation of this murder mystery.

A few more connections were made in her mind after talking to some of the neighbors. Petra found that even though Colt was a good citizen, he was not the best individual. At least not towards his niece. The gaze of his neighbors from behind their curtains painted him as not the man he would probably like to be remembered as. They witnessed Colt regularly pushing Mika around. Might not be full-on abuse and assault, but they were sure that she was being treated like a slave rather than family. Whenever they visited the

house, they could feel the nervousness and spiritless aura coming from Mika. She would often look tired, dazed, and be the one serving food and drinks. They mentioned that, although Colt would talk to Mika as if he tolerated her, it was still obvious he did not respect her nor treated her right.

Two ideas rose from the interviews with the neighbors. First was how the abusive relationship between Colt and Mika could be the reason she killed her own uncle. She might have just snapped, just as Petra deduced based on the evidence, and decided that she had enough. The second was the fact that no one was willing to help the woman get out of her abusive relationship. They knew that the situation was not in favor for Mika and yet they did nothing but watch. This, Petra did not understand. Maybe people were too focused on themselves, to try to better themselves personally, ever since Deus was found. A bit hypocritical in her opinion, as people tried to be better to get to heaven and yet when they could actually help a person out of the goodness of their hearts, they chose not to. Very odd to her.

When asked about the second suspect, only those who were still awake, which were only a few, could confirm there was a man seen leaving with Mika. Rather than leaving with, they said that Mika seemed to be carried on the man's back. He was running, instead of walking. When asked for more information, the neighbors who saw Mika and the man leave could not provide more. The man existed, but his identity was still a mystery. As much as his identity was not known, threads could be made to find out who he was. With that, Petra started digging deeper. Mika's direct family was notified about what had happened and within a couple of hours, her parents

arrived at the station.

Petra took them in to get their testimonies and she was not one who would waste time. After brief formalities, she went ahead and asked whether they knew about any man who might be close to Mika. The parents knew of none, of course; they hadn't seen their daughter since they sent her away to live with her uncle. They weren't sure about what kind of crowds Mika was with. Petra doubted the parents knew what kind of life their daughter had to endure but she wasn't from the domestic abuse department, she was a Venator Interitum detective. Abused or not, Mika was guilty of murder and Petra was in charge to bring her in.

"But you know, there was one person Mika would always be around when she was still in school. We never really liked him, but he was kind to her, so we let it be," her mother mentioned when she and her husband was still at the station.

"Do you remember anything about him?"

"I think his name was James Anderson. Last I heard, he still lives here."

Now that was a new lead.

"Here. As in this town?"

"Yes, I think so."

And that was all it took for Petra to start unraveling this messy murder mystery.

It didn't take her long to find out who James was. A data analyst with clean records. Good salary seemed to be healthy in the mind, nothing out of the ordinary. He and Mika were close friends until university, where they didn't see each other anymore.

Petra had a feeling Mika was meeting James in secret. Maybe she was letting him into her uncle's house after dark. Maybe her uncle found out and that made Mika lost control.

So many maybes, so little time.

After finding out where James lived from his employer, Petra and Allan gave his apartment a visit. And when no one answered, just as Petra thought, they came back with a warrant. This time, it wasn't just as Petra thought. There was evidence of someone else living with him before he left. Before they left. The clothes James tried to dispose of had specks of blood which was identified as Colt's. With that, James became the male suspect. Maybe James wasn't as normal as Petra had thought. Based on this new impression of James, she decided to dig a little deeper.

She and Allan went to investigate James' connection with the local criminal environment. Disappearing just like that would require at least some law-

breaking help and her guts told her that she would find more than just enough by talking to the local thugs. The two walked deeper into the rundown part of downtown and knew they were at the right place when people started giving them unwanted stares. For two cops, not to mention Venator Interitum, to be in a place like this usually meant there was big trouble brewing. That wasn't in Petra's to-do list today. She just wanted information and that was all. However, that didn't mean she would limit herself as to how the information was taken. Petra looked across the street and saw a familiar face. She looked at Allan and gave him a signal to cross the street, just in case the man with a familiar face decided to run off. She walked a bit further before crossing the street herself, walking towards the man.

"Hey, Trev, what's up man!" she called out.

The man, Trev, looked up from his phone, and once realizing that it was Petra, he cursed, turned around, and ran. Ran straight to Allan.

"What's the rush, buddy? Appointment somewhere?" Allan smirked.

"Hey man, I haven't caused any trouble."

Petra briskly walked towards them with a satisfactory smile and said, "Then why'd you run? Got something to hide?"

"That's none of your business anymore. What do you want?" Trev's tone was nervous. He seemed agitated.

"Have you heard of the local murder? A few days ago?"

"I didn't hear anything," Trev said. This man was easier to read than a children's book.

"Allan, care to enlighten the man?"

"Basically, a man was murdered in his home at night by his niece. We believe you might know something about one of the suspects."

"I don't know him, I swear." Petra nearly laughed as Trev finished his sentence. The man was basically confessing from pure nervousness.

"Trevy, we never mentioned the sex of the other suspect. Now, we know what you've gotten yourself into lately. n't waDont to go back to school, do we?" Petra smirked, her tone emphasizing the word school. At this, Trev froze on the spot with fear in his eyes.

"No, no, please, no. I don't need any more education, I learnt my lesson. What do you guys want?"

"Spill the beans about James Anderson." Allan's tone was serious now. He took out a small voice recorder device and handed it to Petra, who activated it.

Trev hesitated for a moment before realizing that avoiding the two police would be futile. He gave them what he knew about James; a person who dabbled in low-level crime. He remembered when he asked why James would do such a thing while being well off. James merely answered because why not. He was bored and he found crime a boredom-killing activity. James had a sociopathic energy radiating off him and Trev didn't try to get to close to the man. He told Petra and Allan that James seemed to be the kind of man who wouldn't care whether he had lost everything; as long as he had the last laugh. He wasn't attached to anything or anyone. Except one, a person James would mention sometimes whenever Trev and his gang worked with him. He never gave any details but the way he talked about them made it seem that this person was crucial to James.

"You can stop there. We have what we want. Except..." Petra stopped the voice recorder.

"Uh... except?"

"Except where he is. Tell me Trev, do you know where James is?"

Trev seemed to be confused for a moment. "Yeah, that, I don't know."

"Now, Trev, don't you remember what happens when you lie to Venator Interitum?" Allan gave him a warning tone.

"I swear on Deus, I don't know! And I don't take my swearing on Deus lightly

now, you know that."

Petra would push Trev even more if he hadn't said the last sentence. She knew what Trev went through in Re-Education so she knew he wasn't lying about not knowing where James was.

"But you know... If I were you, I would check out the abandoned warehouse complex just outside of town. Before the forest, you get me?"

Petra hesitated for a moment.

"Why would we check there? Seems far."

"My guys tell me people go there before skipping town."

"Are you ratting out your own mate, Trevy?" Allan smirked. Petra noted down the information mentally.

Trev walked away, but not before saying, "Nah, whatever gets me to heaven. I wanna be a saint too, you know."

Chapter 6: Captum

Mika's leg had gotten better. That was James' priority; for Mika to get physically better first. This cost them a few more days spent at one of the abandoned warehouses just on the outskirts of town, near the forest. Once Mika got better, which would most likely be soon, they would cross the forest and be free. Free from the mess that they made in town. Free from the Venator Interitum who James knew, for a fact, were after them. Once free, he would be able to have Mika all to himself, and him to her.

While Mika was recovering, James would stay hidden outside the warehouse; watching and observing. Watching for any sign of police because it was only a matter of time until they figured out where he and his beloved were. This went on the whole duration they were there, with James constant surveillance on the area and taking care of Mika whenever he was back inside. Mika needed him more than anything and he was willing to do anything for her if it meant them being free. One evening, the night before they decided it was time to leave and start a new life, James decided the coast was clear for now and headed inside. He packed up their belongings before joining Mika by the small fire she had made. She was eating one of the canned foods they had bought. Supplies were low, they had to share one can per meal.

She stopped eating as he sat next to her.

"Here, your ration." She handed him the can. He stared at it for a moment, shook his head, and then smiled.

"You need to eat more than me. Look at you, so skinny. I'm not hungry, don't worry."

Mika frowned at the response but continued eating, her eyes stared the warm flame ahead of her. James noticed the thoughtful look on his friend's face.

"Ready for freedom?"

"I want to be. But I'm so scared, James."

"Scared of what?" James never knew why someone would be scared.

"What if we will never become free? We might be able to enjoy the rest of our mortal life, away from police and stuff, you know, but what about afterlife?"

"What about afterlife?"

"James, I'm scared of going to hell."

The sound of crackling fire filled the warehouse.

"I still think you won't be. You're a saint, Mika. You're so nice to people, hold

no grudges, you know, just a saint in general. What you did to your uncle was justified. No one deserved to be treated like that for years and, honestly, if Deus puts you in hell because you decided you had enough of his abuse, then it doesn't sound that bad. I mean, Deus sounds messed up for doing that, if he does, honestly."

"You're right, I did have enough of it. But hell is eternal abuse. That's way worse."

James could see that the fear was getting into her head and he didn't want any of that; at least not for tonight. He scooted closer to her, placed an arm around her, and said with a smile,

"We both know I'll be going to hell. I'll find you if you're really there, and make sure no one can touch you. That, I promise. And you know I don't make promises without meaning them."

Mika seemed uncertain but looked more relieved. She gave a small laugh and said, "But I don't want you to go to hell too, stupid."

"Something tells me hell needs to keep me out for its own safety. So hey, who knows, maybe they'll kick me out and send me to heaven, haha! Then you'd have to be the one to find me." He laughed.

Mika merely smiled and leaned closer to him. Two different people with different ways of thinking about the afterlife, yet so connected. The two

stayed like that, huddled together in front of the warm flame, until it was dark out. James looked at the flaky ceiling high above them and then back at Mika. Her eyes were droopy from tiredness. James gave her cheek a peck before getting up and grabbing a blanket and small mat from their supply stash. He set up the makeshift bed and guided the woman to rest.

"I'm gonna stay out to watch. Will you be okay?"

"With you around, definitely." She gave him a smile. A smile she used to give him all those years ago, when happiness seemed to still be real. He smiled back and caressed her head.

"I'd always be here for you. See you in the morning. Goodnight, sweet dreams, love."

"Sweet dreams, goodnight."

He got up and went out to one of his hidden posts. Mika soon fell asleep after hearing his footsteps leaving.

It only seemed like a few minutes before loud, heavy footsteps woke Mika up with a startle. The fire was snuffed out and in a moment of panic and confusion, the figure running towards her was frightening. She was about to scream before hearing the figure spoke out.

"Mika, Mika it's me. No time, we need to go. You need to go. Damn, I didn't

see them at all." James grabbed one of the backpacks and helped Mika up hurriedly. She was still a bit dazed from her deep sleep and James noticed this. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her awake.

"Mika listen to me, I can stall them but not for long. You need to go, now!" He shoved the backpack to her and rushed her out the back door of the warehouse.

"Wait, James, I—"

"We have no time, Mika!" he shout-whispered. The sound of several heavy footsteps was coming from the other side of the dark warehouse and flashlight shone at different timings. The two made it towards the back exit. James pushed Mika out and just before he could turn around and ran back inside, Mika grabbed his wrist. "Why can't you—" she felt him peel her grip off easily.

"Cause they're too close for us to escape them. Mika, you can still run while I delay them. Now don't waste time, run! Just keep running, into the forest like we planned, understood?!"

"James, please, no—" tears were now pouring down her face, from stress, sadness, anxiety, and emotions she couldn't even understand.

"We don't have time for this!" the heavy footsteps were getting closer and closer with every second. James gave her one last hug and before shoving

her out, he whispered how much he loved her. Mika could only stumble back and echo his words before turning and dashing straight towards the dense trees. The pain on her leg seared her system but she swallowed it up. She could hear men shouting from the warehouse. A few shots were fired, something she feared she would hear. The sounds of gunshots made her feel conflicted; one side of her wanted to run faster and faster with each shot while the other side wanted to turn around and run straight back into the warehouse just to make sure they hadn't killed James. She didn't trust her own judgment, so she did what James told her to do; run.

She ran and ran until the flashes of light seemed far away. The sound of men shouting was now faded and, to catch her breath, she stopped for a while, immense pain consuming her leg. Not even a moment after resting, she could hear rapid footsteps not far from where she was. Adrenaline kicked in and off she went again, at this point not caring about her injured leg. Streams of flashlight's light cut through the vegetation like a knife and not long; she was found. Mika heard the men alert each other and soon; she felt bullets whizzing past her. All she could think about was James and how much he tried to give her a chance of freedom and yet she wasn't strong enough to keep it within her fist. Mika felt a bullet struck her uninjured leg, causing her to fall and hit her head on a thick root up on the ground.

The last thing she saw was the field of white lilies of the valley, James' favourite flowers, and how ethereal they looked under the moonlight.

Chapter 7: Finis

Coldness was seeping into Mika's subconscious and it woke her up with the shiver. The last thing she remembered was feeling her leg getting shot, falling on to the dirt ground, and seeing a strangely comforting field of lilies of the valley within her sight, but out of her reach. She blinked and let her eyes adjusted to the sharp white light that illuminates the room. She lay on a thin mattress which was on the cold floor. The other corner of the room had a toilet attached to the wall and a small sink just nearby it. The room was gray and the door seemed to be heavy with a small glass window on its upper center side. The room screamed hopelessness; something Mika was awfully familiar with. She slowly sat up and leaned against the cold wall. It took her a moment but the memories soon came flooding back.

The white paint, James, his apartment, the warehouse, the forest, the men who chased her, lilies of the valley, everything.

It all became too much and she didn't realize she had started crying. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks and on to the cold bed. Something so warm and human contrasting the room she was in. Mika had no more energy left within her so all she could do was whimper and sob, curl herself into a ball and break down for what seemed to be eternal pain and despair. She had nothing, she had no one. She had lost James and all she wished for was for him to at least still be alive. Something as simple as knowing the fate of her beloved friend was something she couldn't even know. The thought of

James laying lifeless on the warehouse's filthy floor killed her internally. As much as she wished it wasn't true, it could be a very possible reality.

She cried, and cried, and cried; the only thing that she could do was the very thing she hated doing.

After what seemed to be hours of constant crying, she heard the heavy door unlock and slid open. Her tears were gone an hour ago but her pain was still pouring out of her in forms of hiccups and choking noises. She felt a pair of arms hoist her up and carry her out of her room. Her eyes hurt too much for her to keep them open and the harsh lighting didn't help at all. She could tell they were passing by other cells and she tried her very best to see, as much as she could, whether James was in one of them.

Her attempts were futile.

They took her to a room with a big mirror on one side of the wall. They put her in a chair and strapped her hands to the table. Tired, she slumped onto it and waited for fate.

Moments later, she heard the door open and someone sat across from her. She was too tired to even look up, too emotionally exhausted to even care what this person wanted.

"I'm glad I could finally meet you." She heard the voice say. It was a woman, her tone calm yet strong. She glanced up and saw a woman with black wavy

hair and sharp green eyes. Those eyes looked straight at her, unmoving and unquestioning.

"Want some water? Anything?"

Mika merely shook her head and pushed herself to sit up, leaning back on the metal chair.

"As you wish. My name's Petra, your Venator Interitum. You know why you're here, yes?" Mika didn't seem to notice the folder that was on the table.

"Yes."

"Tell me about your relationship with your uncle." The statement took her back a bit but she decided she had no reason to lie.

"He abused me. Not physically, at least not all the time, but he broke me down emotionally. Every day, I felt like nothing could save me. I felt like I was a ball of... disappointment because of him, no matter what I did."

"That doesn't sound like you would murder him though." Petra scribbled down on the opened folder. Mika stayed quiet. "Tell me, what do you think about Deus?" she continued.

"I want to go to heaven."

"By killing someone who was publicly a saint? That's odd."

"A saint only in public, yeah."

Mika saw Petra frowning at something, before settling her pen down.

"You said nothing could save you. Could someone, instead, save you?" Mika stayed quiet at this. "Could a man called James, save you? Or did he attempt to already?" Petra was now leaning forward, her sharp green eyes now on Mika.

The mention of James made Mika start to feel vulnerable; a feeling as if she was in no position to negotiate about anything unless she revealed everything. Her shoulder shook and tears threatened to spill from her eyes.

"Mika, we know who James is. We know he was there the night of the murder."

"What happened to James?" she quietly whispered.

"We know either one of you did it or both of you did."

"What happened to James?" she again said, slightly lighter this time.

"It was only a matter of time before we cut him down."

"WHAT HAPPENED TO JAMES?!" Mika banged on the table and screamed at the other woman. Petra seemed to not be shocked or surprised at all at the sudden burst of emotion. It seemed like she was expecting it.

"Tell me who did it first."

"He did it." Mika quietly said. That was something Petra wasn't expecting at all. She had a strong feeling Mika did it, not James.

"James? James did it?"

"No, my uncle. He did it to himself."

"Mika, Colt can't just beat himself to death like that."

"No, but he did it to himself. He deserved it, for what he did to me. Why would it matter whether if he's dead or not if he's going to heaven anyways? Like what you people would say."

"Because he was a man who was helping others be better. He helped so many find the right path."

"Then why didn't he help me?! Why did he instead take out everything on me?! I did nothing wrong, I followed everything he said and never fought back. His death is all on him."

Petra knew this interview would go nowhere with someone as broken as Mika. She was far too gone to even think rationally. Petra sat there for a while, staring at the broken woman in front of her, her feelings starting to question her reasoning. She kept her doubts aside and kept things professional. Preparing to leave, she closed the folder and stood up.

"James is...fine. He fought, even till now. Badly broken, like you, but physically. Since you won't tell me who did it, let's see what he'll have to say. Only after that, then your fate will be decided."

"You people have no right deciding who gets on heaven's list and who's not. Your system is so flawed." Mika said, this time, with more confidence and certainty. Unusual, coming from a broken woman like her. Petra stayed quiet and turned around.

"Why do you get to decide how people should live their life? Why don't you let them choose whether they want to go to heaven out of the goodness of their heart? Even you, yourself, know that those who want to go to hell WILL go to hell. All of these rules and stuff won't work and sooner or later, even Concilio will get more evidence that YOUR GOD has left you. And then where will you run to?"

For someone who wanted to go to heaven, Mika sounded more like a sinner in Petra's mind. She stopped just before the door, turned her head, and said, "I don't get to put anyone on any list. I'm merely a small cog in this system."

You say you want to go to heaven but, on our list, based on what you did, you'll be going to hell."

Even though Petra's words were solid, her tone was full of uncertainty. Anyone who heard it would hear the doubts in the way she replied.

Walking out, she didn't look back at the broken woman who now seemed to be slightly less broken.

A few moments later, Mika was dragged back into her cell but this time, she managed to hold her head up the whole way back. She stayed in her cell for hours, the concept of time mattering not to her anymore. She just sat still, unmoving. Not crying, not fuming with anger, not anxious, nothing. She was a blank canvas, ready to be filled. But instead of starting with white, her canvas was black. Ready to be filled but would always come back to a negative realization. Eventually, she decided to fill it, with however much time she had and whatever fate was for her, she was going to paint her canvas how she wanted it to be. All the colors on it would be there all because of her.

She decided to start with the color of James' favorite flowers and the paint that started all this.

Chapter 8: Ultima Cogitationes

The window showed her that it was now just past afternoon. The sunlight shone through and illuminated a small patch of the floor on the other side of the room. Mika thought about climbing onto the toilet and watching the scenery out of her window from her prison but before she could even get up, the metal door opened, and a man stood in the doorway.

"Your family's here to see you." He said as he took out a pair of handcuffs.

Mika forgot her direct family existed. She had lost contact with them along the way while still living with her uncle. Her uncle oversaw her communication between them and after a while, he told her they just stopped responding to her messages. She lost hope from them and stopped believing they would come back for her. Now, after everything had happened and after deciding for sure that she wasn't going to make it, the fact that her family was visiting her meant nothing. She had lost the one real person who was always there for her. What was the point of confiding in her family anymore? Mika saw an end in her life, and it was coming soon. She would rather spend whatever moment she has left in peaceful solitude, reminiscing about the good memories she shared with someone who actually cared for her. The black canvas was slowly being painted but instead of with what others told her to put on it, she was in charge of painting it herself.

She saw nothing bad about that, in a good honest way.

A man led her to the visiting room. She sat in one of the cubicles that were designated for her. Behind the thick clear glass, her parents sat with a look of worry, disappointment, and sadness. It took Mika a second to recognize the couple as her parents; the last time she saw them was years ago when she was still a teen. It could be said that Mika was now a young adult, but after what she had experienced, the word young seemed unsuitable to her. Mika picked up the phone and her parents mirrored her actions.

"Mika..." her father had worry in his voice. A strange ratio of sadness and worry. Her mother merely sat next to him, her face frowning.

"Hi, Dad. Mom. Wish I couldn't see you guys... not in this situation." Mika tried to hide the tiredness in her voice.

"Mika, what happened to you...? You stopped replying to us all those years ago. Why?"

"I didn't. Uncle Colt said you stopped, and he discouraged me from trying ever since. I thought you guys weren't coming back for me..." the memory of feeling despair because of the thought of being abandoned by her parents still made her voice crack. She was different now, but the pain from the past was still there to hurt her.

"He manipulated both of us into thinking you stopped caring. I'm so sorry, child... We should've been better." Her father placed his palm against the

glass. Mika thought of doing the same, but she had no motivation to reply to the gesture.

"Well, what's done is done. I wasn't entirely alone, I had James with me. Always. We'll be okay eventually."

Her mother grabbed the phone from her father and said, "Mika, they're going to kill James. He's been scheduled for the injection next week."

With that, Mika's tired smile fell from her face and was replaced by a blank expression. The three of them stayed like that for a good minute, before Mika moved her arm up to wipe the tears that were on her lower lash line.

"If they're taking James, I'm going with him too." Her parents stayed quiet to this. And then, even though Mika was expecting the fact, her mother replied, "They're taking you too. A day after his."

The fact that it was her mother who said this with sadness in her tone affected her more than it did if an officer was the one telling her. Mika merely smiled at the parents.

"Good."

The three of them knew the end was inevitable. All her parents could hope for was for Mika to end up in a good place in afterlife. For them, that would be heaven but for Mika, that would be wherever James would be. She knew

the promise he made for her was true.

"We came here to say our goodbyes. We don't know if we'll see you again before your date."

"Thank you."

No more words could be spoken between them. There was no need. No amount of years could repair what had happened, and that was how Mika saw the situation.

"We love you. We always have."

But you never will again, Mika thought.

"Me too, Mom. Dad."

And that was all there was to be said.

Mika returned back to her confinement afterwards, now seeing her situation differently from before she spoke to her parents. She had shifted her feelings from hopelessness, despair, and helplessness into something that she liked better. Positive resignation. She chose to focus on the positive outcome from her depressing story rather than the negative. She chose to remember James fondly and how he had stayed with her till the very end, leaving behind everything just for her. Leaving behind his mortal life just for

her. Despite being in confinement and having limited actions, she felt strangely free. She had no more worries. Her thoughts were free. She was satisfied with herself for being able to free her mind. In a way, she fulfilled James' words; freedom for her. She was ready and had succeeded in keeping freedom in her grasp. Just a different kind of freedom; internal freedom.

Just as the orange sky illuminated that small patch on the floor in her cell, she decided to climb up on the toilet. She climbed on tiptoe on the top on the toilet and pulled herself slightly up so she could see the outside world. So she could see the outside world in a different light. Seeing James' definition of freedom just within her reach did not bother her at all. She was free, in her own way. And all she could feel now was sweet, bittersweet melancholy and serenity.

Mika's blank black canvas was now filled with all shades of her favorite colors, all hers.

Bends & Wilts

Wulan Tsabita Anandisa

Department of BioMedical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering
International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI)
Email: lanabit26@gmail.com

This work is a compilation of darlings I refused to kill, now lying helplessly on their deathbed with rotting limbs. In the dusk of their time, their only wish is to be seen.

Butterflies on my stomach

In my dream, I was laying under a willow tree in the middle of a meadow. The sky was cerulean with thin shreds of white. The dress I was wearing was the very same dress I wore on my nineteenth birthday -- muted white linen, shin-length, the sleeves' edges and neckline were decorated with delicate embroidery of daisies. I could only hear the sound of grass brushed by the wind. It was such a peaceful quiet. I just laid there, as if I was waiting for something until I felt wetness on the back of my hand. It was blood. I abruptly got up, only to find that my insides were open like they were hit by brutal gunshots. From the size of the wound, it looked like more than a hundred bullets has crashed onto my stomach and mangled the skin off completely, the way meteorites dented earth's surface into a big sunken dome. Even with that sight of gore, everything around me stayed still. My heart pounded fast. Probably the loudest thing in that meadow, second to the sheer sound of grass brushing each other. I could see some butterflies

coming my way from afar. They looked like feathers, a good omen. I closed my eyes, trying to assure myself that everything would be okay. One, two, three. I can hear what sounded like grasshoppers chirping. Four, five. Something stung my stomach. I opened my eyes in my dream, looking at butterflies feeding off my open insides.

Room 11

She lay on her side on the cool hotel bed. Perfectly smooth surface, lined with white bedsheet. It was unlike the kind of bed setting she was used to – the bed in her apartment – wrinkled, smudged, tugged and pulled to every direction, the way she left it 20 hours ago. Though it's important to note that it had been that way for two months now. The only cleaning she did before flying to another city on the other side of the globe was putting her bed sheets and blankets into her laundry bag. A big mound of beddings and clothes overflowed the container, all jumbled up like a stuffed mouth. She sighed over the thought. Behind her, the afternoon sky was radiating through the window. Bali's sun was friendly in the way the merchants on the side of the streets speak in such overbearing excitement to make you check their stalls out, "Come and look, Miss! Beautiful clothes! Fits you perfectly!" Thank you for the warm invitation, but not today, Sir. Just as she would abashedly avoid the joyful eyes of those merchants, she gazed away from the window.

She thought she had slept for too long when the hotel room turned a soft indigo hue. Abruptly, she pulled herself from the bed and reached for her phone on the side table. Five-forty-nine. She paused to make sure she had read it right. It took a long second before her shoulders loosened up, relieved. The window was still open, filled with pink and purple, almost like a painting. Evening fell earlier here in Bali, not the time to rush. There was still two hours to kill before a friend took her out for dinner. Not the time to

rush. She walked to the window, unhitched the handle, and let a small opening make way for outside air to come in. She stood there, looking down at the street lights and other scattered, far-away light sources. Small lights. The same smallness as all the Los Angeles' lights her apartment window could gather, yet the light from this hotel window possessed a foreign comfort. Maybe it was the way the wind touched her eyelashes, or how the room was so her own, or how outside noises echoed softly in a language she does not speak. The foreignness – the familiar newness of this air poked a tender place in her chest. As it crept around her toes, she quickly shut the blind and moved away from the window – now looking more violet. Two hours maybe would be better spent scrolling through endless posts online, watching a subpar coming of age movie, doing her hair – anything that diminishes the reality of solitude. She turned all the lamps on, and went straight to the bathroom.

Time in the bathroom was a big indulgence of hers. She loved spending hours upon hours sitting down, having her body submerged in well-scented soap mixture as her hands flicked through her phone or the pages of a book. Tonight, deciding that she needed something soothing, she poured lavender soak into the bathtub. Her hands wavered in the water to help it bubble a bit. She slowly placed her body into the pale amethyst bath. No disturbances, complete bliss. Extending her legs over the water, she let the lavender do its thing – easing her muscles and joints, those that had been strained from being sleepless and jetlagged. She swept some water to her shoulder blades and her thighs.

As she bathed herself, an image came to her head – a man, a face that would come between her thighs, down on her. (She remembered the brown in his iris so dense, the same shade as some semblance of amber as the night light that gleamed from the left of his sweaty back.) The same face that would sit on her lap, under the spring sky in Venice Beach, falling asleep just after he kissed her thighs. (She remembered caressing his long hair – that stumbled gently on his forehead – to the back of his ears.) Her thighs had faded scratches from a dark time before his coming to her life and the memory of a man’s lip, both she can see with the same visibility. She let the fist in her throat – the one she had been holding all afternoon – sob its way out through her eyes. I wish it was just a man’s lip.

Time in the bathroom was a big indulgence of hers, partly because it was the last place she allowed herself to weep in. Once she felt clean and satiated, she wrapped herself in a cold, white cotton towel as the lavender water seeped into the drain and away.

Clean Water

Seventy percent of your body is water. You clean stuff using water. You cook stuff using water. There are so many cool things water can do. Clean water to be exact. Even a primary schooler can tell the importance of having clean water to live. This topic reminds me of a conversation in my old house's bathroom fifteen years ago, if I remember correctly. My mom was bathing me, I was around 8, and a little stupid. I wanted to brush my teeth, so my mom took my toothbrush and put a glob of Colgate on it. She gave the toothbrush to me, told me to brush my teeth myself while she slathered bubbled soap on my body. I was the kind of kid that wets their brush before brushing their teeth, so I dunked it in the water container. If you are unfamiliar, some households--in my country at least -- have a water container around the size of a washing machine in their bathroom. It is often cemented to the wall with a faucet attached, so you can just turn the faucet to fill it up. You take the water using some sort of a hand water bailer. One full container can last you five showers. That day I dunked my brush in an almost-full water container and my mom was close to flipping out when she saw me doing that. In a high-pitched voice, she explained to me everything that is wrong about dunking my brush in it. "Everybody will use that water, you should keep it clean for everybody." Something along those lines. I kept quiet as I brushed my teeth. "Save water, don't waste it with such a thoughtless act!" I thought about the water cycle my teacher explained to my class a couple weeks ago. Why do we need to save something that

ultimately will come back to the ground we take it out of? It was not so intuitive to me why we needed to save water, but after that point I always remember how everybody will use the water, and not to dunk the brush in the water container.

This afternoon, during the office lunch break, I watched a BBC Instagram news post on my phone. They reported about the water crisis in a city just an hour away from where I live. It is quite a big city, never heard of any cases like it before. Poorer neighbourhoods are having a hard time getting access to clean water, so what they do is they collect it from a muddy cave-like place I didn't even know existed. I often cross the roads where poor people live, they usually still have clean water from an actual faucet which they'd carry using a water basin. I guess that's no longer the case. According to the news, the water crisis was due to the big buildings and hotels overexploiting water reserves of nearby areas. Thank you, capitalism. I showed it to one of my colleagues and he chuckled, "we're so frigging doomed, man." I don't know if he was so nervous, he laughed but I agree with him. We're so frigging doomed.

That post lingers in my headspace for the rest of the day. I wonder, how long does it take for water scarcity to reach me. I thought the government took into account this possibility already, therefore making some sort of policy about groundwater rationing for businesses. After all, if they really couldn't take care of these poor people, they at least should make sure these people wouldn't run out of water. Frigging water. Simple as water. Could it be that they don't think we need to save something that ultimately

will come back to the ground we take it out of? That night I fell asleep next to a quiet anger and unacknowledged frustration.

Ugly

You come back home late again, the third time this week. It is so late, I wouldn't wake up if Mora hadn't bitten my feet. And as always, you smell like wine after the party. I don't know why your friends throw so many parties, I don't know why you keep coming despite hating how loud and rude your friends are. Every time I open the door, you wouldn't even look me in the eye as if you're ashamed of the paradox of your action. Every time I open the door, your feet waddle towards the fridge, then the dining table, then your fashion magazine filled bookshelf, and then to the bed. The furniture in our apartment becomes your very own breadcrumbs to trace along when your eyes are too clouded from too much noise and alcohol. Every time I open the door, I know you will toss your patent leather bag and stringy heels on my side of the bed as if you're living here alone. Yet I'd still excuse your lack of concern, move your bag and heels to the floor, and slip under our shabby blanket. You always turn your head away. I wish I could do the same but I couldn't help resting my hand over your waist.

"I'm quite a mess, y'know?" Your hoarse voice sounds a little like whispers. I would reply something along the lines of how I thought you were asleep or that I don't agree with you, but I decide to move closer instead. I breathe in the worn off Chanel perfume behind your ears, circling my arms around you.

"I love my armful of mess." And that's how we sleep whenever you come home late, smelling too much like wine. Unfinished. Too tired to have a

conversation about those high-heels you throw on the bed or why you always look away. Is it regret?

My alarm rings at 8 AM sharp. I grope for the alarm button with my eyes shut. The light from the open window hurts. And with that, I can tell that you're no longer in bed. The coldness on the sheets which you're supposed to lie on is expected. You almost always wake up earlier than me. I can count the number of days when I don't wake up to the sound of drizzle from the bathroom and the small little melodies you hum as you shower. I open my eyes slowly a few minutes later and find a toasted bread topped with slightly burnt butter on my bedside table. A small sticky note attached to the of the plate says 'good morning :)'. It seems to bloom something on my chest and cheeks.

You come back home late again, I don't remember how many times and it's only the second week of November. Last time you told me you smoked pot because Jevanna does it. You told me you only took a blow or two but tonight you smell like those unemployed guys from room 28. With that being said, I honestly don't think this Jevanna girl you raved about is that cool. You can't manage to look me in the eye when I open the door. Just like every night when your gaze is weighed down by being high and guilt, your feet waddle along the bread crumbs we've arranged neatly during summer a few years back before you let yourself fall on the bed, head first. Your shoes are still on, your bag is pressed under your chest, where the crystal-beaded embellishment on your little slip dress gathers. You pull everything you brought from the club to yourself. I can see your jaw clenching hard and

tears start to furrow its stream on your cheek. I don't know what it is that you're trying to engulf with your back turned to me like a barricade, your whole body looking like a fortress. But this is not the first time this has happened. I'd come to you with a hushed "what's wrong," brushing the wisp that covers your eyes. And in that gentle stroke to your hair, your cries crack out as gently too. Your naked crying washes off the black on your lashes onto my chest. The walls in our room watch your uneasy breathing with solemnity. Our room is blanketed with your subdued sob. we fall asleep the way we do every night when you come home drunk. Too emotional, unfinished.

I am half-awakened by you trying to untangle yourself from my arms. Our sleeping position was messy – my forearms hurt, your back must hurt too. In that short-lived awareness, I catch a glimpse of you unzipping the side of the dress, letting the thin strap fall on your skin. Your bony back is as beautiful as ever. "Damn, girl." I murmured with the ugliest morning voice. You turned to me with confused eyes, with a smile. The last thing I remember before falling asleep again is you pressing your lips on my forehead, whispering "I love you".

In the dining table, we sit facing each other, your face to the plate. You have been impatiently quiet, I think it's best to open up the lid for the appetizer; Mushy, watery pouches of prawn. They look youthful. Delicately, you scooped it onto the small bath of your soup spoon, you always do it well. Eventually, you suck the pink, pale flesh in such a way that your tongue sticks out a little.

I see desire in the way you move your mouth, It was almost vulgar. I may need to teach myself to sit back a little. You take a chug of clean water, clean mouth, Ready for the next meal. Spaghetti Aglio e Olio, with a lot of chilli flakes, the way you like to have it.

I almost burst when I see your eyes light up a little, it is your favourite dish after all. Hot, inviting, Italian. Your bottom lips are moist from uncontained appetite, so spin your fork through the blonded hairs (meaning: the spaghetti, but also a figurative for a woman's hair), no waiting for me. The look on your red and sweaty face makes me feel as if I wasn't supposed to be here.

The last meal, dessert. A caramel custard pudding. It jiggles slightly when I place the plate in front on the table, You're excited. On your spoon, a heaping mound of something plump and smooth, jolting with so much to offer like Pleasure and vigour.

You savour every bit of it with gusto that for a quiet second looks like lust, It brings me back to the room we once shared. The room where you used to yearn for my body, begging, the way your tongue cleans a plate of bologna, I have long forgotten how it feels to be craved that way.

Untitled

I love English, I love how a word can be both gentle and lethal. I thought it was my first bed they were talking about arms. I remember them as soft and warm, at least my mother's were. I were bread-kneading, roof-mending, merrymaking machines. That, if I had to parallel the bony, veiny hands of my family to your Black-steel, bullet-propelling devices. I am afraid if I were to talk about the arms that I know of in other syntaxes that is not Adjective + noun, it would come off too breathing.

Unrequited

Longing always finds a way to slip in between the hours of day. Sometimes it comes assigned to your name and before I knew it my hands are searching for your shoulders. You are not always there, and when you are, I will have to teach myself how to fold my arms back to myself.

Panic Attack

All the heart dropping to the floor I thought had long died as high-school came to end (refers to the time of adolescence, where emotion is at its most turbulent. Every experience is so dramatic and holds such a weight, a lot of time it felt as if my heart is dropping to the floor), returned like five fingers and a palm on my neck (the “heart-dropping-to-the-floor” signifies heavy emotion. This heaviness returned like a hand that creeps and pushes on my neck, it feels a lot like being choked). Ghosts of buried stories and past lovers drifted back to my sternum, a weight of stacked coffins reminds me of a funeral. Welcome to the establishment of Panic Attack.

The air around me kept on escaping as I tried to draw a deep breath in. As I tried to pull on to the last morsel of air around my face, I quietly cursed myself for the last cigarette I took. But what has been done was done. Naturally, I thought my time was about to come. Funnily enough, the time when life felt like dwindling down was the time – I think the first, since forever – I gripped on to life so tightly.

Death was something I only had in my daydream once upon a big storm in my bathroom, while splitting my skin into five parts many summers ago – yet there he was. A vision of a cold, still heart – blue lips and white hands. He stood before me too tangibly, I might as well jot down a love letter to whom it may concern, in case farewell comes a little soon.

Hello, I love you.

Hey, it's been awhile.

This may be the first time you hear it from me

I love you.

Hey there, Have I told you that I....

Mother, Father, Brother, and Meu querido,

I don't know how to start this letter but I've been trying to put the right words in the past couple of minutes now. I hope....

While I was writing these letters in my head, Angel of Common Sense and Imaginary Nebulizer came into my vision. She slapped me into silencing my thoughts and there I was. Back to the real world.

Authors, Facilitators & Editors

Wulan Tsabita Anandisa is a student in Biomedical Engineering batch 2018 at International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI). She is actively involved in IULI English Club and led the 2020-2021 administration as the head of the club. While she was not an active member in the university's student council (BEM), she has helped with visual design-related works in numerous events hosted by BEM. She draws and writes and reads tarot for her cat in her spare time. You can contact her through her email that is lanabit26@gmail.com



Jihan Angrila is a Biomedical Engineering student in the Faculty of Life Sciences at International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI), batch 2018. Jihan is actively involved in non-academic activities such as the Debate Club (a part of IULI English Club) and BCt Podcast (a part of Creative Media Club); eventually becoming the head of respective clubs for a year. She has also participated in cross-university debate competition such as IRON debate at Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (UIN) and as a swing team in National University Debating Championship (NUDC) in Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN). Jihan can be contacted via email: jihan.angrila@gmail.com



Qurratayun Fitrah Iman is currently attending International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI) as a bachelor student majoring in Mechatronics Engineering since 2018. Since his enrolment in IULI he has been involved in many activities, including being a member of committee for makrab, an event to promote closeness between mechatronics students, as well as an internship at Politeknik ATMI, Cikarang. Qurrata also is actively involved in extracurricular activities, being a member of both IULI's English club and Robotics club, as well as one of the founders of IULI's podcast, Breaking Controversies. Qurrata can be contacted via his email: qurratayun.f.iman@gmail.com



Indra Naputra is currently on his 6th semester of a bachelor-degree in IULI since 2018 majoring in Mechanical Engineering in the Faculty of Engineering at the International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI). Indra has completed an internship program at Politeknik Industri ATMI Cikarang and he is also actively involved in non-academic activities such as; being the main editor for BCT podcast of the Creative Media Club. Indra can be contacted via email: indranaputra.id@gmail.com



Michael AF Earley, MA has been engaged in teaching in England and Indonesia. One of the joys of teaching is that he is never bored. Students change from day to day and there is a wide, and fascinating, variety of characters. While teaching is at times tiring and demanding, the benefits far outweigh the occasional downsides. One happy (and frequent event) is when past pupils come up to him and say, "Hello, Michael, remember me?" So far, he does, but often not the names! Previously he worked in London schools for years as a teacher, a head of department, a senior teacher, a deputy head and an acting head. His first degree was a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in History and the Master of Arts in Education from King's College, London, UK. He can be contacted via email: earley_michael@yahoo.com



Dr. Samuel PD Anantadjaya is currently serving as the Dean of the Faculty of Business & Social Sciences at the International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI) since August 2015. He holds a Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Finance & Economics from the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, USA, a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Finance from Edgewood College in Madison, Wisconsin, USA, a Magister Manajemen (MM) in Strategic Management from Universitas Telkom in Bandung, Indonesia, and a doctoral degree (Dr) in Strategic Management with a concentration in Organizational Performance Management and Control Systems from Universitas Katolik Parahyangan in Bandung, Indonesia. In addition, he also holds professional certifications in Financial Planner (CFP), Financial Consultant (CFC), Business



Administrators (CBA), and Fundamental Hand-writing Analyst (CFHA). Research interests include; intangible assets, valuation, human capital, intellectual capital, corporate restructuring, corporate recovery, value creation, value based management, performance management, and control systems. He can be contacted via email: spdanantadjaya@gmail.com

Dr (cand) Irma M Nawangwulan, BSc, MBA, CPM (Asia) was the Department Head of Management Studies in Universitas Pembangunan Jaya, Bintaro, Tangerang, since the initial formulation and preparation of the university, before providing further assistance into the Department of Hotel & Tourism Management in International University Liaison Indonesia (IULI), in BSD City, Serpong, Tangerang, Indonesia. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Management, and a Master of Business Administration. Currently, she is pursuing a doctoral degree program in Bandung, Indonesia. She has been appointed for engagements in USA & Indonesia, such as; University of Wisconsin Systems, Boston Store, Mincom Services, Carrefour, Ace Hardware, and ETC & Foundation. Aside from several books that she has authored, she has also published articles for academic journals in Malaysia, Brazil, Serbia, Hong Kong, Indonesia and India. Research interests are in the fields of consumer behavior, customer intimacy, experiential marketing, service delivery, customer relationship management, customer value and trust. She can be contacted via email: mnwulan@gmail.com



Didi Kurniadinata, MA is one of the lecturers in the Department of Management, Faculty of Business & Social Sciences at the International University Liaison Indonesia. He is actively handling English courses that focus on Academic English. He does not think he teaches students, but facilitates them to learn. He likes to enable the learners in learning by providing many practices and little theories. He convinces the students that making mistakes in using a language is normal as a way to be proficient. Besides Academic English, Didi likes conducting behavioural assessments and training. He uses Team-Role Audit of Meredith Belbin, Basic Characteristics of Charles Handy and DISC of William M Marston to portrait individuals and groups with their capacities to perform in personal



King Gnu
Germany



life, career and business. He loves Organizational Behaviour in his life, social life and career. He can be reached at didi.cbs@gmail.com.