

3. CREATIVE WORK

I

Ebb and Flow

Indonesia may only have two seasons instead of four, with barely any differences felt between the two for the majority of the citizens, but Sophia still feels the coldness of winter seep into her bones. Wisps of cold smoke and tendrils of rain touched her palm, the only visible skin left under the heavy jacket she is wearing, her teeth chattering as she walks, which makes it seem like she is walking towards the Aurora Borealis and not towards her workplace in North Jakarta, where the area still feels warm despite the dark clouds with light drizzle coming from the sky.

Sophia is not sure whether the cold was due to her thin, boney stature, or whether it is because she is currently walking to her office at 6 AM in the morning. *Maybe a combination of both*, she thinks to herself as she taps her ID card on the scanner in front of the building, before the double doors slide open for her as the scanner's light goes green and a light 'beep' sound is heard.

She exhales a breath as she enters the building, the temperature thankfully much more comfortable compared to the outside world, with the air conditioners all turned off before work hour officially starts at 8 AM. The building is mostly empty with only some employees running around. Her gaze involuntarily shifts down as she notices some familiar faces, wanting to avoid any social interaction when possible. Becky, her best friend and childhood friend since they were but toddlers, have tried many times to 'bring her out of her shell'. Becky had tried introducing Sophia to her friends and even brought her to some parties and clubs that Becky had frequented, to no avail. While Sophia understands that Becky's intent is good and that her best friend only wants to help her, Sophia can't help but loathe herself even more as she continues to make a fool of herself in front of Becky's friends. She would either stammer and stutter, trip over nothing, tip her glass clumsily and spill the content all over the place, and many more. Eventually, Sophia just starts to make excuses to reject Becky's invitations to expand her social circle.

The quiet ding of the elevator doors' opening snaps Sophia out of her thoughts, her feet had unknowingly relied on her muscle memory by bringing her directly to the usual path she

takes every morning even when she is deep in thought and distracted. Between the early morning hours and her lithe body, it was quite easy for Sophia to slip in and press the number '12' before she quietly took a corner of the wide elevator space. Sophia looks at her own reflection in the mirrored walls of the elevator and brushed her messy fringes with her fingers in an attempt to tame her unruly hair, but when she caught sight of her acne-filled forehead, she quickly covers it with her fringes again to hide it from prying eyes. Her eyes flicker towards the entrance of the elevator as a young man rushes in right before the elevator's door closes down on him, and Sophia inches herself closer to her corner of the elevator as the man's large luggage almost bumped onto her arm.

Sophia notices the man smiling sheepishly at her when he notices her antics, making her face burn slightly in response. She realizes that she might have been a bit too unseemly and rude with her reactions, inching and flinching away from the newcomer like he is a pest. Despite this and the tug of guilt on her heart, she does not apologize but instead casts her eyes downwards once more.

An awkward silence settles between the two, but Sophia does not seem surprised in the least. Almost every if not all of her new interactions with people, especially strangers, will always have the same outcome similar to this one.

She doesn't give him another glance even when the elevator's soft ding and the sudden halt of movement indicates that he's arrived on his floor. She heaves another sigh as she hears him step out of the elevator along with his heavy luggage, questioning briefly about why he's in the office so early before discarding the thought not long after. *Maybe he's just like me*, Sophia thinks. *Another office worker who's stuck at slaving away for a mega corporation to help them make even more money.*

The elevator moves again before it finally stops at her floor, and she exits the elevator to an empty floor. She turns on the lamps to light up the dark space and then places her bag down on a desk which hosts a wide computer, her hand nimbly pressing the CPU button to turn it on. Her movements are quick and fluid, relying completely on her muscle memory. Sophia licks her dry lips as she sits down on the chair before typing in her password.

The hours pass by as Sophia starts working on her deadlines, replying to emails, drafting new contracts, writing business letters and proposals, and anything and everything that a secretary like her is obligated to do in her office. She eats her lunch alone in her cubicle like usual, the cheap takeout food tastes bland on her tongue. And before she knows it, it is already 5 PM, and she sorts her documents before shutting down the computer for the day.

It's just another day. The days seem all the same, gray and unfeeling, to Sophia. Her dim eyes, however, finally lights up for the first time on the day when her eyes catch sight of a beautiful woman clad in a leather jacket and pants waving at her from her bus stop.

"Becky!" Sophia calls with a loud voice, ignoring the slight burn on her cheeks when some people's heads turn towards her.

Becky grins at her as Sophia catches her in a hug, Sophia's face just as bright as her long-time friend.

"Why are you here? Why didn't you tell me before coming here? I would've tried leaving work early if I had known!" Sophia complains, a rare pout appearing on her face as she talks. Becky is always one of the few rare persons that can bring a bout of emotions on her person, and she is forever grateful for her friend for allowing her to still *feel*, in this unfeeling world.

Sophia has known Becky since they were still in their diapers, becoming each other's first friend. Sophia always wonders why Becky still wants to stay by her side despite becoming more beautiful and more popular as they grow up, when Sophia has only become more and more silent and closed off. No matter how many new friends Becky has made along the years, Sophia is well aware that Becky still prioritizes her first and foremost compared to all her other friends. Becky always makes time for her no matter what, and she is completely willing to say no to some events if she already has plans with Sophia, no matter how unimportant their meeting is.

If Sophia has to be honest with herself, she still doesn't know what makes her and Becky so close even until now, aside from the one fact that they are childhood friends. Becky, in short, is the complete opposite of herself. Putting aside Sophia's introvertness and Becky's extrovert social tendencies, Sophia always tends to be more pessimistic while Becky is the optimistic person, always thinking positively and seeing the good in everyone. Not to mention, they also have some different values of life in some ways. Becky is an avid Christian, who religiously attends sermons every Sunday with her parents and gives ten percent of her income to her church every month. Meanwhile, Sophia is an atheist, who never believes in the existence of god. Because if god does exist, why does he not help her all those years ago when her father took in a new "mother" for her? Why does he not appear when he passed away and Sophia has to fend for herself with a step-mother who does not care one bit about her well-being?

Sophia shakes her head to wave off the bad thoughts coming inside her head without warning. Here she goes again, thinking of dark and gloomy thoughts without even trying. Another big difference from her beloved friend.

“How are you doing these days, Sophia?” Becky asks her as both of them board the bus that has just arrived at their bus stop, along with some other people waiting in the same place, all of them wearing tired faces and crumpled clothes, evidence that most of them are also workers and employees who have just finished their long work day like Sophia. Thankfully, they manage to squeeze in pretty quickly, landing themselves a seat next to each other. While the seats are not the best, the bus being barely-cared for public transportation as is, it is still much better than having to stand on the journey for an hour or two.

Sophia looks down on her hand as the bus’ engine starts roaring once everyone enters the bus and seats themselves or holds onto something to keep their body steady during the ride. She is contemplating on how to answer the question. While she likes nothing more than to smile and says that everything is okay, as to not worry her one close friend, Sophia also knows that Becky isn’t easy to lie to. She is perceptive, not only to Sophia, but also to other people in general. She is the type of person that can easily see how one is feeling or thinking just from seeing their expression or hearing their tone when talking. Sophia is unsure whether it is because Becky is a social butterfly, or maybe because Becky is just a smart and skillful person when reading other people. Either way, even though Sophia considers herself to be a good liar, the skill being needed to survive her horrid childhood life after her father passed away, still cannot lie easily to Becky.

Or maybe... I’m not a good liar after all. It’s just that my step-mother and step-sister never cares enough about me to wonder whether I’m lying or speaking the truth. Sophia wonders, her eyelids fluttering at the thought. It certainly is a possible outcome, knowing the two’s personalities.

“Sophia?” Becky’s concerned voice snaps Sophia out of her thoughts.

Sophia gives Becky a wry smile. Her getting lost in her thoughts is already an answer more than whatever her reply will be after this. She decides to tell the truth instead, knowing there is no point in lying anymore.

“Yeah, not really. My work has been getting busier and busier, and I don’t have enough time for myself anymore, but, maybe that’s... actually for the best.” Sophia replies.

“What do you mean, for the best?” Becky replies as a frown appears on her otherwise flawless face. Her tanned skin is smooth and free of blemish even without the light makeup covering her face, unlike Sophia’s own face that is full of acne and freckles. “Everyone needs some me time, Soph. We both know that. Working too hard is definitely not good for you.”

“Maybe so,” Sophia admits, her face hanging low once more. “But being tired allows me to sleep deeply and shortly, and sometimes the nightmares won’t come to me if I go to sleep in this way.”

“Oh, Sophia...” Becky’s voice is full of worry and pity.

Sophia’s brows furrowed at that. She doesn’t want her friend to worry her, or worse, pity her. While she knows that her nightmare problem is serious, it does not warrant any pity from her friend. After all, there are still so many more people out there with worse problems than hers.

“It’s... It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

“Your eyebags says otherwise, Soph,” Becky’s smile is wry when Sophia lifts her head to look up at her once more. “Have you thought about it once more? About meeting a psychiatrist for all these problems?”

Sophia purses her lips at this. Becky has mentioned several times about meeting a psychiatrist to consult about her nightmare problems as well as her past trauma, but...

“Maybe not, Becky. You know what they say about all the psychologists and psychiatrists out there on the internet. Not to mention, the fee to go to one is a bit ridiculous.”

Sophia is not just merely finding an excuse not to go. It is a valid worry, especially in Indonesia, a religious country where people are extremely judgemental and still have a bad stereotype around mental health issues in general. Sophia is not really willing to spend so much money to meet a psychiatrist only for her worries to get waved off by an incompetent doctor.

“Well, I found a spreadsheet documenting all trusted doctors who are open-minded and do not judge the patients based on their religion or gender the other day. Can you please at least take a look at it? You don’t have to book one right away, just... look at the list first,” Becky replies quickly, her tone coming to that of a begging note.

Guilt courses through Sophia as she hears her friend’s tone. She knows that Becky is worried sick about her, and that is why her friend is so insistent on trying to make Sophia meet a psychiatrist. Sophia lets out a heavy sigh before she nods, making Becky squeal in delight as her friend wraps both slender arms around Sophia’s neck in excitement.

“Beck, I... I can’t breathe,” Sophia whines.

Becky releases her hold on Sophia at her words, but a big smile is still apparent on her lips. Sophia lowers her eyes at that. While she does promise to look at the list of the trusted doctors, she still won’t be able to promise to contact one of them eventually. The premise of

meeting a doctor to discuss her most hidden, darkest parts of her only to be judged relentlessly strikes her with fear that is enough to freeze her bones.

Sophia's attention is taken away when she notices a flicker of blue light on one of the passenger's heads, the blue light that is blindingly bright, moving around in the air before it forms into the shape of a bat. Its shape is similar to that of a crystal, with some patterns on the body that look unreal.

"Do... Do you see that, Becky?" She asks and points a finger towards the spectacle, uncertain. The light is flickering, the blue light, crystallized bat settling on the passenger's head.

"Huh? See what?" Becky lifts her head towards the passenger that Sophia is pointing towards.

Sophia frowns at her answer, noticing that Becky definitely is not seeing what she is currently seeing. She shakes her head and eyes rapidly, but when she tries to look at the passenger's head again after that, the light blue bat is already gone.

"Are you sure you're okay today, Sophia? Make sure that you get enough sleep tonight, okay?" Becky's concerned voice snaps Sophia once more out of her wild thoughts, nodding absentmindedly towards her question.

What was that? Was it truly just a fragment of my imagination or a cause from my lack of sleep? But it seems so real... Sophia murmurs to herself, still remembering the little blue bat that sits comfortably on top of the passenger's head.

Maybe... Maybe it truly is just her sleep deprivation getting the better of her. There is no other plausible explanation other than that. Sophia clenches her fist and unclenches them, before giving Becky an uncertain smile.

She will just have to figure it out later.

II

The Void

Her arm is shaking as Sophia tries to shield her head, her body curled up in a ball position.

“Please, stop,” she cries as the whip of the belt falls onto her bruised thigh again. Her cries are ignored as the tall woman strikes her once more.

Her face is filled with anger and righteous indignation, her eyes glaring wide enough it seems like her eyes are going to pop out of its sockets. She looks menacing and almost monstrous as her position towers over Sophia.

“Useless thing, how dare you say that your sister won’t be able to get the championship?!” Wanda, her step-mother, yells as the belt strikes down once more, Sophia wincing as the impact sends another burst of pain, her eyes stinging with unshed tears.

Sophia stays mum, knowing that whatever she says will only fall on deaf ears. When Wanda loses her temper, only Sophia’s pain and cries will be able to sate it. She has never said that Maria, her step-sister, will not be able to get the championship. All she said was that she will cheer for Becky to get the championship cup once more, and Maria happened to be eavesdropping. Maria obviously took it the wrong way, accusing Sophia of slandering her and how Maria is not good enough to win the dance competition.

But Wanda will never understand that. All she knows is that her beloved daughter has been insulted by her step-daughter, and she will not be able to make peace with that until she beats enough sense into Sophia. Sophia’s lip curls in bitterness at that thought, but with her ball position, it is enough to not let Wanda see her expression at all.

Sophia misses her mother. Why did she have to leave so early and leave her all alone?

Wanda’s hand strikes down again, but this time, the belt has become a whip, and Sophia screams, again and again and again...

Sophia abruptly wakes up from her dream as the searing pain slowly just becomes a phantom of the mind as the second passes. Shivering, Sophia reaches for her phone on her bedside table with a trembling hand.

02:30 AM. She has only been asleep for four hours. Definitely not enough sleep for another full work hour for tomorrow. *Today*, Sophia corrects herself as she slowly rises up from the bed, her body and head feeling lethargic and heavy as she does. But Sophia also knows her body really well. She will not be able to go back to sleep once she got woken up during her sleep by a nightmare.

Speaking of a nightmare... Sophia shudders as the image of tonight's nightmare flashes through her mind once more. Try as hard as she does, she is not able to erase the impact of her step-mother's abuse out of her mind.

People are out there fighting literal wars with guns and explosions and have nightmares about them, and here you are, not being able to sleep just because of some beating, she harshly reprimands herself, feeling the hate towards her own self blooms more as she does so. She hates the fact that her step-mother still haunts her even after she has moved away from that godforsaken prison they call a home, as though her soul are still shackled down to that place even after her body has broken free.

After all, without the soul, a body will just rot away into nothingness.

Sophia purses her lips as she walks to her small bathroom to wipe her face several times with frigid cold water, forcing herself to sober up, ignoring her chattering teeth and her ice cold skin as the result of her harsh actions. She has found out over the years that it is the fastest way to snap her out of the afterimage of her nightmares.

After making sure that her face is washed thoroughly and her hands are squeaky clean, she opens the first aid cabinet in the bathroom and takes out some gauze, tape, as well as some cleansing wipes and places them on top of a small headboard for easy reach.

She starts undressing herself before hissing as the fabric of her pajamas grazed against the new scratch wound on her left arm. She inspects them once she manages to fully take off her pajamas in its entirety. It's full of scratch marks, with some blood red color dying some part of it red. The skin itself looks rough and full of faint scars, an obvious leftover from old scratch marks.

She knows that she always has the habit of scratching herself when she has a nightmare, as if her body instinctively tries to wake her up by inflicting pain on her being. She ignores the slight mist on her eyes accompanied by a small sniff as she wipes the wound clean with the cleaning wipes she has taken out, before covering them gently with the gauze and fixing them in place with the tape.

Her methodical approach to cleaning her wound and dressing it has clearly shown how many times she has done this exact routine. Even though her hands are still shaking and hot tears dripping down her recently washed skin, her gauze is still neat and tidy, covering her wound without looking too messy.

She returns back to her bedroom after returning the remaining gauze and tape back to the first aid kit and quickly finds herself busy on her smartphone on her armchair in the corner

of a room, trying to distract herself with whatever random content that the internet and browsing can offer her. Decisively ignoring how she can barely hold the smartphone upright, the light from the lamp stands beside the armchair shining down upon the brightly-lit screen that is trembling continuously.

Her scrolling pauses when she catches sight of Becky's message on LINE, before opening them up to a cheerful sticker of a bear holding a red heart, along with her message.

'You promised me that you will look into the spreadsheet, so here you are! You can also find further information about a lot of doctors in the spreadsheet on the internet!'

A brief smile appears on her red face as she reads the message from her true best friend. Along with the message and the sticker is a link, which Sophia can easily guess will lead her towards the spreadsheet of the doctor.

Her finger hesitates on top of the link, the fear of being judged relentlessly as she's on her lowest and trying to seek help crawling up her skin.

No, no. I can't do this. I'm sorry, Becky. But this is too hard for me.

Tears stinging her eyes, she turns off the phone on her hand with an almost silent *beep* as she faceplants herself on the bed once more.

You're a fucking coward, Sophia. She curses herself inside her mind repeatedly, hating the fact that she doesn't even have the guts to open the spreadsheet, let alone meet a psychiatrist in real life, despite knowing that she has problems with her sleep because of her trauma from the past.

Of course, being a woman with a huge load of anxiety on her chest as well as constant nightmares during her sleep, it's not as if Sophia never has the thought to visit a psychiatrist or psychologist to get diagnosed by a professional doctor and hopefully, get treated or medicated. However, the one time she has tried mentioning it to her step-mother has gotten her beaten so bad she has been black and blue for *weeks*, and has to skip school until all her bruises starts to disappear, leaving her scrambling to catch up to loads after loads of school work that left her even more stressed out than before.

Since then, the thought of going to a psychiatrist has long since shoved back into the back of her brain. Not to mention, after she has read some personal blogs and even some articles that Wanda, her step-mother, has shoved into her hands about people going to a psychiatrist or a psychologist only to be met with ridicule and derision has scared that prospect even more.

What if they judge her? What if they try to shove her into some torture chambers or something? Sophia knows that her thoughts are mostly just that—negative thoughts,

unreasonable ones, even. But that knowledge doesn't really help alleviate her fear in the slightest.

Those horror stories are true, in the end. Sure, like Becky has said long ago, that even though there is a chance that she might get unlucky and meet a psychiatrist that is not compatible for her, there is also a chance that she might actually meet a good psychiatrist who won't judge her and is willing to help her with her problems.

But Sophia doesn't think that she can take the risk.

In any case, Sophia still believes that she can solve this herself. Not only will she save herself the money from having to go to the psychiatrist, but also the mental burden of having to face a potential psychiatrist that might judge her and make things even worse for herself.

Of course, she's not entirely confident that she will be able to fix everything, let alone in a short period of time, but... it's not as if going to a psychiatrist would magically solve all of her problems, right?

Sophia lets out a shaky breath, trying to calm herself down to no avail. Her fingers are still trembling, grazing upon the satin sheets, the contrast between the soft bed sheets and her uneven, rough fingernails more apparent than ever. Her fingers are definitely far from what her peers at work call as 'manicured'. They are callous and rough to the touch, and one can even see specks of blood here and there, along with uneven patches of skin that almost looks like it has been peeled away, a product of her bad habit of biting her nail and the skin around it when she is nervous or stressed out.

She slowly gets up from her awkward position on the bed, climbing towards the sheets before planting her butt back on a pillow that is strewn wildly all over the place. Her fingers slowly unclasp its iron grip from the lit-up phone before she starts opening the internet browser and typing out the words 'how to get better with nightmares'.

Ignoring all grammatical errors and typos she has just made in her typing of words, she scrolls through countless articles about how one can get better after suffering through a nightmare, or how to prevent nightmares from spawning at night altogether. Some of the pages are even colored purple instead of the usual blue, marking the history that Sophia has opened the page and read the contents before.

Sophia is, in fact, well aware that her troubles with nightmares need to get better soon, or it will start to twist not only her sleeping schedule, but also her daily routine when the sun is once again embracing the skies with its warmth.

While that knowledge is not enough to spur her into action by finding a psychiatrist so that she can get a professional treatment, it is enough to drive her forward to start finding information that she can use on her own. In other words, trying to get it better by doing it herself, instead of going to a professional mental health doctor.

For now, at least, Sophia has enough hope in her heart that she may be able to solve this by herself. The idea alone that she has to go to a psychiatrist to solve this issue and can potentially get judged, or worse, get thrown away, is enough to freeze her bones until she barely can move her limbs.

No. The concept of having to face that reality is way scarier than having to suffer her endless nightmares every night.

Sophia clicks on a page that she has never opened yet and scrolls through the content, reading some of the ways that the article is recommending her to do to help with her nightmares. She decisively ignores all the recommendations about having her seek medical treatment or professional help, pretending to not notice them at all, lest her guilt and self-hatred will consume her from the inside.

You're a coward, Sophia.

Trying to ignore all the voices inside her mind, she exits the current article page before trying to hop forward to the next, hoping that something out there will be able to aid her.

Sophia starts biting her lip when she reads more and more recommendations in the internet suggesting patients with severe nightmare disorder to go to a psychiatrist if the victim thinks that their nightmare disorder has a high chance of being triggered or caused by mental health issues. In other words, herself.

She goes back to the search bar before adding 'by yourself' to the sentence in the box of the search bar, making the search bar say 'how to get better with nightmares by yourself.'

"Make your bed a comfortable place that you will associate with tranquility and is not related to any stress. Don't work or do anything else in bed that may worsen how your body associates with bed," Sophia mumbles as she reads the content of some articles to herself.

After reading the sentence, she takes a glance towards her bed, which she can say with confidence. There are multiple pillows with satin covers strewn around, along with more bolsters around the bed. One can even say her large bed is a pillow fortress with how many fluffy pillows and bolsters she has on the bed.

While it is completely devoid of any fluffy toys or plushies, Sophia still has pride on her bed with how many pillows she has as well as the money sink she has on the soft satin sheets

she has. She just can't sleep without them. All three sets of her sheets are all made from satin, just in different colors of pink, light blue, and lavender. She currently has the lavender on, and while the smell of fresh laundry has long been gone, it still smells quite nice thanks to the diffuser she has lying on the corner of the room, turned on whenever she goes home to spread her favorite scent of lavender.

With the soft, almost silky sheets under her skin and the sweet smell of the flowers permeating the room, Sophia concludes that her bedroom is already tranquil enough, and she never does any work in her bed, anyway. If she ever gets called in for an emergency, she will always do it in front of the bedroom in her small apartment space, where her dining room also serves as the place where she works, as her apartment definitely does not have enough space to accommodate adding a room specifically for working.

Aside from sleeping on her bed, the only thing Sophia will do in her bedroom is basically well... nothing, probably aside from playing some video games on her phone to try to distract herself after another bad night full of nightmares.

"Don't drink caffeine or alcohol a few hours before you sleep... hmm, maybe I can try to drink less coffee in the morning and see if that will help. And I don't even drink alcohol in the first place," Sophia continues to ramble to herself.

Sophia skims through the article when she reads that, again, nightmares can be triggered through either anxiety, depression, or PTSD. Reading them may force Sophia to acknowledge the fact that she might need more than herself to solve this problem, and she is not ready to face that yet. She will try to do this alone first, no matter what. Why would she have to go to a doctor if she miraculously can make her nightmares better, or, maybe, even make it disappear completely? What if she can have a good night's sleep once again? Without having to go to the doctor, at that?

That'll be the best scenario possible.

Sophia is almost startled out of her skin when her phone's alarm suddenly blares loudly, vibrating madly like an infant that can't wait to get out of their shells in her hands. She hurriedly turns it off with a swipe of her finger, before gasping as she realizes what time it is when she looks at the clock of her phone.

It's five in the morning already! She has been browsing for articles about how to get better from nightmares for hours without even realizing it.

"Might as well prepare for work now," Sophia sighs to herself before slowly getting up once more from the comfortable, soft bed, and heading back towards the bathroom.

As she disrobe herself and starts to step into the warm showerhead, her mind slowly starts to race, making plans and things that she would do so that she can help improve her own condition.

I might have turned down Becky's request to look at the spreadsheet, but I can try this and maybe show it to her later that I have gotten better, so that she will stop worrying about me even though I do not end up doing what she requested of me.

First of all, the simplest and probably also the hardest thing she can do is lower her intake of caffeine. She has grown almost addicted to caffeine just because of how often nightmares plague her sleep, causing her to have less rest at night and needing the boost from the bitter liquid to be able to work through the day. It will be hard, for sure, to adjust herself back to having to live without her favorite Caramel Macchiato, but it will have to do. She's still not sure what to do if she turns up to be sleepy and tired at work, though. Her boss will surely not like it if she dozes off on her seat.

Maybe she can try doing something else while working to wake herself up? Listen to music on Spotify, maybe? Hmm, or she can try one of those mobile idle games that she has overheard some of her coworkers has been gushing endlessly about. Small things that might be enough to wake her up from slumber, but also not distracting enough that she will stop working for too long of a time.

Regardless, all she can do now is try. Try her best so that she can help improve her own condition and be able to smile at Becky and say that everything is okay now. So that she will not have to face her own weakness in the eye and go to the place where she fears the most—the hospital.

With that thought in mind, Sophia finally finishes her long shower and prepares to finally head to work and test her new theory.

III

Creeping Despair

"Sophia, can you come into my office after your work is done?" Aaron, Sophia's supervisor, suddenly exits from his personal office space to call on her.

Aaron, a large man of over 40 years old, towers over almost everyone in the office, especially with his muscly body encased in a suit of black that barely fits him, as evidenced by the muscles prominently bulging out from certain parts of the suit.

Startled, Sophia stops typing sluggishly for a while, before turning to look at Aaron. She's aware that her eyebags are on full display currently, with her face probably not in a much better state as well.

"Ah, yes. Of course, Sir," she stammers her answer, realizing far too late that Aaron is still waiting for her response when she sees his frown starting to appear on his face.

What was that about? Biting on her lower lip nervously, Sophia can feel her heartbeat fasten. She's scared. Really scared. Aaron never calls on anyone for no good reason. During the three years that Sophia has worked here, she has seen people going out of Aaron's room sobbing after they've been called to meet with him.

And that same exact scenario might happen right now to her.

Harmonic giggles and small laughter fills the room, and Sophia has to fight back the tears that are threatening to spill when she realizes that most of her coworkers are looking at her with eyes crinkled and their hands in front of their mouth, but even with their hand placed there, it's obvious that their lips are stretched wide to a laughter that cannot be contained.

They are laughing at *her*. At her misfortune. Just like Sophia, everyone else knows what being called to Aaron's room means. But instead of feeling sympathy or sorry, they're instead overwhelmed with laughter.

"Heh. Serves her right. Just because she's the biological daughter to the previous head manager, she thinks she's above everyone else here and doesn't want to communicate. Who does she think she is? Her dad's not even the freaking CEO!" Someone says loudly, making no effort to conceal her voice, clearly being apparent that she does not care whether Sophia will even hear or not.

Maybe she even wants Sophia to hear clearly what she has to say about her.

Sophia clenches her fists tightly at the mention of her father. Sure, she may have gotten in quite easily because her dad was friends with the CEO years and years ago, when the company

was still small and barely surviving. The CEO deemed it acceptable to hire Sophia into her company on behalf of her old, deceased friend.

But, Sophia also has to work from the bottom up, doesn't she? She has to struggle with minimum wage and fight her way to her current position as a secretary. She works extremely hard every day, coming in early before everyone else and going home late until the cleaning service has to shoo her away so that she can do all her job perfectly and without any mistake. She doesn't even have to use her dad's name to earn her way and promotion in the company.

So, why? Why the scorn? Why the hate towards her? Just because she landed the job thanks to her dad's name, ignoring the fact that she will be fired years ago if she is not capable at all? It's just not fair!

Sleepiness long gone thanks to Aaron's call towards his office and her coworkers' ringing laughter deafening her ears, Sophia finally turns off the computer after the clock hits five pm, the usual time where all employees will end their work day. Usually, Sophia will not end her work right away when it hits 17:00, but Aaron has called her today, after all, and Sophia doesn't want to give him more ammunition to scold her.

Which, speaking of scolding her... did she even do something wrong today? Sure, she might have dozed off a bit in her sleep for a few minutes this past week, after that fateful night where she has researched ways to make her nightmares get better, particularly by lowering her intake of caffeine, but it isn't that bad, is it? Especially when she also makes up for it by staying late in the office like usual. Surely her work time has already surpassed the few minutes she has dozed off at her desk?

Especially now that she has finally seen the light at the end of the tunnel. Truly, drinking less caffeine has slowly started bringing in the positive effects at night. The more tired she is during the day, the faster she goes to sleep at night, and because of how tired she is, during the past week, nightmares have only visited her bedroom twice instead of the usual more than five times a week.

While Sophia is still not sure yet whether the improvement is because she has taken less caffeine or maybe because she's motivated to get better, all she can say is that progress is progress, especially a good one, and Sophia is not a person that will look a gift's horse in the mouth.

Sophia slings the red, large tote bag over her shoulder after she finishes wrapping up her work and tidying up her desk, putting her notebook and pens back in the place where they belong. She can still hear some of her colleagues giggling and laughing at her as she slowly stands

up from her seat, her chair creaking behind her as she does. Trying to ignore her with all her might, she walks towards Aaron's pace slowly, her pace unsure and not confident in the slightest.

She knocks lightly at the great mahogany door that separates Aaron's office with the large room that houses five employees under him, including Sophia and the group of girls that are laughing at her currently. Sophia can feel the burn of their gazes on her back, but before she can stress about it any further, she hears Aaron's deep, bass voice from behind the door.

"Come in."

Gulping her saliva, she straightens her back in the hopes that it will give her confidence to face what's coming to no avail. How can she be, when she has no idea whatsoever why Aaron even calls her in the first place?

The first thing Sophia notices when she enters the room is Aaron's muscular body propped up against a desk with material similar to the door, sturdy and hard. Numerous papers and books are piled up on the front of the desk, all of them look tidy and organized. Not a single sheet out of place, or a crinkled paper to be seen. Aaron also has a dedicated area where he organizes all his colored pens near his computer, which is slanted a bit to the right so that visitors who come into the room will still be able to see his face.

The walls themselves are also different compared to the ones outside. In his own office, Aaron has red-and-gold wallpaper all across, with some abstract paintings decorating them. Sophia can also see some photographs of Aaron with the CEO, as well as some certificates that Aaron has earned throughout the years. Most of them come from him giving out presentations in some seminars, or just attending them in general. She doesn't go to Aaron's office often, or even at all, during the three years she has been working here, so everything in his office seems new and maybe even interesting to her.

"Sophia, right? Do you know why I've called you in today?" Aaron's voice snaps Sophia out from ogling the things around her.

"Um... No, Sir. Not really," Sophia admits, her straightened back has long become hunched once more.

"Well, here's the thing," Aaron takes out three neat envelopes from the stack of papers in front of him, before placing them on an empty place, right in front of Sophia.

Sophia looks down at them in confusion, not really understanding the situation. What does Aaron want her to do? Read them?

But before she can contemplate further what she should do with the envelopes, Aaron's hands have moved towards them and taken out the paper from inside, one in each envelope. Sophia can see some semblance of handwriting on the paper, each with a different style and even pen. Sophia can see that the letters are definitely not written by the same person from the typography style of each letter, but she is definitely not close enough to be able to read what it says. Aaron brings the three papers with his left hand near himself and propping his right elbow to the desk before beginning to speak out loud once more.

"Dear Mr. Aaron, I have come to report something disturbing that I have seen. For the last three days, I have seen Sophia often dozing off at her desk, as well as playing some games on the side while working when she isn't. Isn't this unacceptable for an employee at PT Transway? Our company will decline if this is left alone without any repercussions whatsoever. What if the other new coworkers start to mirror her behavior and start acting whatever they want, without thinking about the good of the company? I hope that you may be able to do something about her. Thank you."

Sophia, stunned at hearing the words, looks at Aaron blankly, her mind devoid of any thoughts left except of the feeling of muted panic that has frozen her to her core, debilitating her from doing anything else but standing there, lips dry. But Aaron doesn't give her any time to recover, and instead he flips over the first letter to the back, before beginning to read the content of the second letter.

"Dear Mr. Aaron, I cannot help but have to report this to you, even though this letter might have been an inconvenience for you to read even amongst your already busy schedule. This is what I have to say. I have seen one of my coworkers on floor 12, who is named Sophia Indrawati, has been slacking in her work for the past five days. This is, quite frankly, very disturbing to me and my other colleagues working on the same floor as her. It has disturbed our work conduct, distracted us, and made us unfocused at work. Not to mention, we also fear that she might not be able to finish all her work and responsibilities due to this issue and that we have to cover up for her because of this. I look forward to your impartial judgment upon this matter. Warm regards."

Sophia can barely feel herself trembling all over, her bones and skin numb from the fear cascading across her being. What does this mean? What does *any* of this mean? Why does it sound so bad—she only dozes off for five or ten minutes maximum! Why does the letters make it seem like she had made some sort of an unforgivable mistake? She even does more overtime

to compensate for her sleepiness at work, and even made sure to finish all her responsibility too!

Do her coworkers really hate her to that extent that they would do this to her? Do they see this as an opportunity to drive her away and exaggerate their remarks to anger Aaron? What has she ever even done to them that they will loathe her this much?!

"Mr. Aaron... What is all this about...?" Sophia braces herself to ask, despite the croakiness in her voice and how quiet she sounds.

"No. *You* tell me what this is all about, Sophia. Three different letters from three different people, all working with you on a daily basis, have reported you to me for basically the same thing. You've been dozing off at work, and not only once or twice, but almost every single day throughout the week, is this correct?" Aaron's voice turns stern as he lowers down the three letters back down to the mahogany table to cast his gaze on Sophia.

"Well, yes, but—" Sophia stammers out a response.

"No buts, Sophia. I have also waited a few days after receiving the report to watch you myself to make sure that what I receive is not just a faulty report. And lo and behold, they were not lying! I have seen you, with my own eyes, sleeping away at your desk like it's in your own bedroom! What's wrong with you, Sophia?" Aaron's voice starts to pitch higher and higher as he speaks.

Sophia stays frozen on her spot, her body trembling even harder as the deafening silence stretches the second further.

"So? What have you got to say for yourself, Sophia?" Aaron's impatient voice rises again when Sophia doesn't respond any further.

"It might be true that I have fallen asleep here and there at work, but... I finished all the work given to me, didn't I? And when I didn't, I made sure to stay late in the office so that I could finish all the work that was delegated to me. I have never missed a document or made an error in my work despite that!" Sophia finally replies, finding her courage. After all, everything she said is true.

"This is not about whether you finish your job or not, Sophia," Aaron's voice softens a bit. "I understand how you still do your job correctly and do not miss anything. But the issue lies in the fact that your colleagues will see that this behavior is okay within the company, and they will start to do the same. After all, if you can do it, why can't they? And everyone might start thinking that being able to sleep when you're tired in the office is the norm, while it is anything

but. I know that you've come here at the recommendation of basically our CEO himself, but as your direct supervisor, I cannot overlook something this fatal.”

Sophia can feel hot tears start to sting her eyes. The worst part is, she understands where Aaron comes from. It is true that if her coworkers see that she goes unpunished after this, that they may think that her conduct is okay to do and they might start doing the same, which will look bad for the company.

But... All of this would not even happen if her coworkers did not go out of their way to write a letter to Aaron, won't it? But how can she ever say that to Aaron? That will lower her credibility even more, will it not? Aaron will dislike her even more, especially now that her supervisor has even brought up the fact that she is accepted in the company only thanks to her late father's connection to the CEO.

What should she do? What *can* she do? Sophia feels so helpless, trapped in this room that now feels more like a cage with Aaron, the predator, keeping his gaze solely on her and her alone.

“It's just...” Sophia starts speaking again, trying to salvage the situation in any way she can.

Her stomach is twisting in anxiety and she can feel her breathing start to constrict, but she must go on. If she doesn't try to defend herself in the current situation, who will? Her coworkers are the ones who put her in this situation, and her supervisor does not seem to understand that, or maybe he just simply doesn't care.

“It's just... I have had sleeping problems recently regarding frequent nightmares that always wake me up at night, and I'm trying to cut down on my issues by drinking less coffee . and that's why I have been having these problems. Because it will be getting worse if I continue drinking coffee, and—”

“I'm sorry to say this, Sophia, but none of that can help you here,” Aaron cuts Sophia's rambling off with another harsh tone that makes her flinch. “I understand that you might have your own personal problems at home, be it because of your conflicts or whatever, but we must remain professional when we are out to work. It is the least I expect from my employees. Do you understand that?”

Sophia nods mutely as an answer. Of course. It will be bad if everyone brings in their personal problems when at work. The office will fall into chaos then.

“Sophia. I need you to understand that your job during work is to, well, work! Not sleeping. If you truly have sleeping problems, or nightmare problems, then go to the doctor,

drink some pills, to solve your problem! Sleeping at work cannot be the solution to your problem. This is unacceptable, even if you might have finished all your work on time, Sophia. It's just not good work conduct and does not create a good work environment for the rest of your coworkers!" Aaron continues.

Sophia takes a sharp breath upon hearing that. Even Aaron, who knows absolutely nothing of her struggles aside that she has nightmare problems at night, is even suggesting that she should go to the doctor instead? Is that truly what she has to do, in order to save herself from this endless nightmare that she is currently living in?

But maybe that's just how normal logic works, does it not? If you are sick, then you must go to the doctor and try to solve the problem and let the professional handle it, instead of trying to fix it on your own without the required knowledge and information on hand. A wry smile stretches Sophia's lips at the irony of it.

Is it truly the only way?

"In any case, Sophia. I want you to be able to solve this problem as soon as possible. I don't know how nor do I really care how you solve it, it is up to your own discretion. But I don't want to hear any more rumors about how employees on floor 12 are allowed to sleep and nap on their own desk," Aaron says sternly, his brown eyes piercing into Sophia's own.

"Yes, sir," Sophia whispers under her breath, casting her eyes downward.

"I'm serious, Sophia. If I see you sleeping on your desk again, I will have no other choice but to fire you. This is because if I don't, people will really start thinking that you either get special treatments, or sleeping is a work conduct that is all good and okay. And I cannot allow that to happen."

Aaron's next sentence shocks Sophia to the core, she feels as if she has been electrocuted by a powerful lightning bolt that is sent straight from the heavens. She knows that this problem is indeed serious and reflects poorly on the company, but... fired? After three years of working her sweat and blood for the company, she is being threatened of being fired over this problem?

What will she do if she gets fired? How will she even survive? She needs a job so that she can continue living. She still needs to pay for electricity and water, not to mention food... How will she be able to get a new job so easily, especially if she gets fired from her last and only job? She will not be able to get any references to commend her so that she can get a new job easier. Will the government take her apartment away if she cannot pay for water and electricity?

Will she be homeless? If she gets fired, her list of problems will not only be that she can not sleep due to nightmares.

“P-please Sir, anything but that. Please don’t fire me,” Sophia sobs out, her tears already flowing down her cheeks without her noticing. “I will do my utter best–no, I will make sure that this won’t happen again, so please don’t fire me.”

“I also will prefer that I don’t have to fire you, Sophia,” Aaron sighs, suddenly looking a lot older. “But I have no other choice but to have to say this. Otherwise, not only you, but also me, and the rest of the floor 12, are in danger too, if outsiders ever find out about this. Because if the issue that employees are allowed to sleep at work is to be spread apart, it will not end with just this. The company values their face more than anything, and I have to do everything in my power to protect it.”

Sophia nods frantically as an answer to Aaron’s statement. She has to do it, no matter what. She has to solve this problem. She cannot afford to get fired. It will literally kill her, as she will not be able to support herself anymore in this life. And without anyone to be able to back her financially anymore, she will be doomed.

Sophia doesn’t really remember how it happens, but she finally leaves Aaron’s room after a while, and she only realizes that she’s back to her own desk when she can hear the giggles from before has turned into a full-blown laughter, the sound itself grating on her ears.

‘I just came out with a face full of tears and snot...’ At that realization, Sophia hurriedly pulls out sachets of tissue from a box on her desk, but because of her blurred vision as well as her shaky limbs, she ends up pushing the tissue box down on the floor, the sound of the box hitting the marble floor clanging loudly, and make the laughter ring out even louder. It is a cacophony of noises that Sophia can’t handle, and the only thing she can do left is run to the bathroom, not only to wipe her own tears and snot out of her face, but also to cry some more.

IV

Elpis

Her hands trembling, Sophia finally clicks on the link that Becky has given her. A large, extensive spreadsheet soon loads itself into her phone's screen and shows her a long and wide list filled with nothing but text. Used to this sight from hours upon hours of looking at complex data on her computer screen at work, Sophia can quickly conclude that there's lots of people contributing to the spreadsheet, adding data by list of the doctors' names, what they specialize in, where they work or perform in, as well as the reason why the contributor has added said doctor onto the list.

Sophia easily categorizes the data so that she will only see the list of doctors who are specializing in psychology or psychiatry, and is pleasantly surprised but also mildly overwhelmed at the *still* long list of names listed on the screen. A frown appears on her face as she scrolls through doctor after doctor. It's not that she doesn't want to bother trying to research more about some of these doctors, but it's her gut instinct that screams at her that the "reasons" that the contributors have written beside the doctor's name sounds... incredibly strange. It seems like it is staged, somehow, which is a new possibility that she hasn't considered before this thought.

What if the contributors are the doctors themselves and not patients who have visited them beforehand and have found their experiences pleasant enough that they want to share it with the world? What if some doctors have found this spreadsheet that is supposed to be a "safe space" for patients looking for an open-minded doctor and only see it as a chance to promote their name and bring in more money? After all, the so-called contributors of the spreadsheet are open to any patients in Indonesia, meaning that they do not need to show any identity or prove that they have visited these doctors.

The possibility is certainly there, and it certainly is scary enough that she stops scrolling, her thumb sitting on top of the name "Dr. Lestari". She briefly looks through her information before she gets surprised at what is written on the reasons why the contributors have added her name into the list. Instead of only a generic reason about how the doctor is nice and caring and so on, it is a plethora of messages left behind by her previous patients in added comments and highlights with different colors, each showing their own google account linked with their comments, as if to show Sophia alone that these accounts are definitely legitimate, with each comment saying nice things about Dr. Lestari in all sorts of writing styles, from a simple "*I <3 Ms.*

Lestari,” to a full-on essay and analysis about why she is a good psychiatrist. It makes the spreadsheet look more like a mindmap of a group of people gathering together to share their experiences and ideas rather than a bucket of information for sick patients looking for help from a trusted and capable doctor.

Immersed, Sophia reads each and every comment the patient has left for Dr. Lestari. Before she even realizes it herself, her intrusive thoughts that continuously provokes her to be negative and pessimistic have been buried under the curiosity for the one doctor who has received so much love from a lot of people. The hands holding the smartphone also gradually stabilize, and before she knows it, she is scrolling through comments while lying once more on her back on top of her soft mattress, her seat on the armchair long forgotten. While it is undeniable that the afterimages of her nightmare still lingers on the back of her mind, reading all the nice and encouraging comments left behind by Dr. Lestari’s patients have successfully managed to distract her enough.

One thing that is very interesting to Sophia and why this particular doctor stands out to her after accidentally landing on top of her name is that the comments themselves are not always about the good deeds that Dr. Lestari has done for her patients. While those are still very common and scattered around the spreadsheet, with some even reaching too near towards other doctors’ names, there are also encouraging comments and messages from previous patients for “future patients”.

One comment from a user named Vallerian_Saga says, “I know it’s very tough right now, but a spark of hope will surely be able to enter your world full of despair and sadness. Please don’t give up!”.

Michelle9899 says, ‘Please know that seeking help is not a weakness, and being mentally sick is as bad as being physically sick, and never let anyone tell you otherwise! If you have recently survived a suicide attempt, then I would like to say congratulations! You are as much of a survivor from that attempt as much as a patient surviving from cancer is. Both of them are illnesses that need serious, professional help and treatment.’

A pink message from the user Gloogy’s goggles says, ‘Congratulations on making it this far! I’m proud of you that you’re brave enough to take the first step in trying to seek professional help for your mental illnesses, whatever that might be. I do recommend meeting Dr. Lestari if you do happen to have anxiety issues and trouble sleeping like me, she’s a really great doctor that is willing to listen to you and brainstorm with you to find the best way to help solve your issues!’

Her eyes burn as tears sting them, blurring her view temporarily before she wipes them away with her hand. She knows it might be stupid to feel touched just from some kind words from a random stranger, but those same kind words from a random stranger can be the difference between the bed or the rope.

She quickly types a short 'thank you' under some comments that has warmed her heart, including the previous three comments from Gloogy's goggles, Michelle9899, and Vallerian_Saga.

After the immense pain that she has experienced just yesterday after the utter humiliation and panic she has to feel because of Aaron's threats and her coworkers' evil laughter following behind, this is the most kindness that Sophia has ever felt directed towards herself in a very long time.

It is gratifying, to know that somewhere in the vast, vast world, there still exist people kind enough to make others feel better, even if they are complete strangers, and even if they may never receive compensation for their kindness.

It is not exactly Dr. Lestari's stellar commendations herself that makes her feel a slight at the end of the tunnel. Rather, it is the realization that somewhere out there, someone who doesn't even know her cares enough about people like her who are struggling, and cares enough to go out of their way to help by leaving comments that hopefully may make their day better and prevent them from spiraling even deeper into the abyss.

Continuing to read the other comments, Sophia learns that Dr. Lestari only has five years of experience underneath her belt, a meager amount when compared to some senior doctors that has also been included inside the spreadsheet. It is indeed surprising that the young doctor already has a lot of dedicated and faithful patients underneath her belt when she has not been in the field for too long.

Although perhaps, those become a plus point for some of the patients. Sophia herself will prefer to talk to someone younger about her issues and problems if it comes down to it. Based on her experiences, after all, a lot of older doctors tend to be more judgmental and stick true to their beliefs about their religion.

It isn't that Sophia doesn't respect the idea of religion or doesn't like people who are religious. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Becky herself is a devout Christian that dedicates her life to her church and serves there every Sunday, and in some weeks even on other days. She has been serving as a worship leader as well as an occasional usher for years, and it is apparent that the activity and habitual Sunday worship that she always goes to are doing wonders to her.

Even Sophia can see that, from their childhood days and even until now, Becky is always the unusually chirpy person on a Monday morning, and always says that God's blessing on her from the Sunday worship the day before is enough to keep her moving forward with a smile on her face, even when everyone else is being grumpy.

But she does not come to a doctor and pay a huge sum of money only to be told that she only needs to have faith and pray to their god. She can get those lectures and preaching for free in her old university or even sometimes, at her workplace. She wants to get professional help, and no matter what some people might say to her, in her eyes, religious preaching is not professional medical help.

And Sophia has found out, pleasantly enough, that from all the comments that Dr. Lestari's patient has left for her in the spreadsheet, that she is not one such example. Rather, she seems more open-minded.

Gnawing on her lips, she starts to type Dr. Lestari's name on her browser, as well as the name of the hospital where she works in, the Trust Hospital, located around 7 kilometers away from her home. She types it out every letter one by one, slowly. It is not as if Sophia can't type quickly, with her job requiring her to type a lot on the computer. Nor is it because she wants to make sure she will not make any typos and mistakes. Typing correctly and quickly on a keyboard is actually one of Sophia's rare skills that she completely has confidence in.

No, rather, it was the anxiety burning in her heart which seems like it is actually spreading through her veins. Because researching Dr. Lestari on her own accord is different from just checking out the information that Becky has given her. No, rather, this time, it is *her* that decides to research it on her own.

And that thought makes her nervous.

Suffice to say, this is the first time in years that she has considered going to a psychiatrist once more, for either better or worse.

She grips the phone tightly on her hands as she finally presses enter and the page starts to load, her breath catching in her throat out of utter nervousness as she clicks on Trust Hospital's page for Dr. Lestari.

A smiling woman with pearl-white teeth and long-black hair is the first thing that greets her. The woman, which she assumes to be Dr. Lestari, looks young enough that Sophia may have mistaken her to be the same age as herself if she hasn't looked at her age, which says 31, under her portrait. Her dimples make her look even younger, and although she is donned in the

professional coat that most doctors always wear, she looks extremely friendly and kind, her eyes forming to that of a crescent moon as she smiles at the camera.

‘She’s beautiful’, is the first thought that comes to mind when Sophia observes the picture.

Maria, her step-sister, can be considered as extremely attractive with her shapely figure and her wide, brown doe eyes with fluttering eyelashes, especially when combined with her pearly pink cheeks and her exquisite clothing. However, her beauty fades away when she reveals her malicious expression or when she starts to shed her crocodile tears in front of Wanda, making her look extremely tacky and fake in Sophia’s eyes.

Dr. Lestari, in contrast, may not be as beautiful as Maria, but she certainly has a charm that can lure people in only with a smile. She looks like the type of person that anyone can go to when they need a warm hug, a gentle pat on the head, and in need for someone to tell them that everything is going to be just fine.

Which sounds exactly like what Sophia needs right now.

A hug... won’t that feel extremely nice and comfortable? After all the pain she has experienced this week... the fear of being fired from her stable job and thrown even deeper into the depression inside her mind... a warm hug may just make her feel better, even only by a bit.

Sophia reads on further about Dr. Lestari’s awards, achievements, and experiences, which can be described as barebones when compared to some senior doctors that Sophia has looked into in the past. However, she cares not for those so-called trophies that all doctors seem to pride themselves on. For her, trophies and awards can be staged, and a long list of achievements does not always mean that the doctor will care, nor experiences may ensure that the doctor will be capable of handling her needs. Maybe she will care about these things more if she is looking for, say, a cardiovascular surgeon, but for a psychiatrist? Probably the doctor’s willingness to listen before they make a decision or a judgment is what’s most important for her. After all, no one wants to be wrongly diagnosed, not even by a psychiatrist.

However, Dr. Lestari’s page brightens up when it comes down to reviews written by her past and even regular patients. Flying colors of praises and adulations not dissimilar from the one she has read before in the spreadsheet page fills the entirety of the reviews section, with only one or two negative comments here and there, with them saying that they have to wait for too long for Dr. Lestari to finish talking with the previous patient. While that might be a huge negative point for a lot of people, in Sophia’s eyes right now, she can only see that Dr. Lestari is willing to listen to her patients for an extended period of time.

She cannot fall even lower now... and she did promise Aaron that she will definitely solve this problem and he will not see her sleeping on her desk again. If she wants to keep her job... she has to get better. And Sophia knows that maybe, this time, it is not enough to fight by herself anymore. She needs some professional help, not only to help with her nightmare problems, but also to keep everything intact, and keep her life stable.

Bracing herself and throwing all caution to the wind, Sophia presses on the 'book appointment' under the description of Dr. Lestari's achievements and reviews quickly fills in her information and data, and turns her phone off before she could chicken off and cancel the whole thing once more.

She ignores her rapid heartbeat as she rolls over until she faceplants herself into the bed. A small smile starts to bloom on her face, unbeknownst even to herself, that it is the first night in a long while that she is able to produce another emotion aside from anxiety, distress, and terror after a night full of nightmares, fear of being fired, as well as the bitter resentment towards her coworkers.

Sophia shivers for a second when she feels something brushing against her cheek, tickling it. She almost pays it no heed, thinking it's just a stray dust or something, but then her eyes catch the glitter of a bright blue color, causing her eyes to look towards the source of the sudden splash of color to her right.

Her eyes widen as she sees the blue little bat, the same blue bat that she has seen before in the bus when Becky was with her. The same blue bat that only she can apparently see, as it is obvious that Becky nor the other passengers inside the bus can. The main reason why she is so sure that they can't see the bat is because the bat itself is way too eye-catching not to be noticed. Its body is glowing in the sapphire blue color of its skin, and the body looks like a crystallized diamond of some sort, glittering and reflecting its own color around it. As the bat flies and flutters its wings, Sophia can even see some glitter dust flying about, as if being propelled by the movement of the little bat.

Sophia takes a shaky breath and outstretches a finger to touch the little bat, and to her surprise, it doesn't fly away, and instead starts to land on her point finger and hiding its wings behind its back. It's cute, but also majestic and beautiful at the same time. It definitely also looks like something out of this world. For once, Sophia is pretty sure that a bat isn't supposed to be this small, but the shape of its wings make her sure that it is a bat and not, say, a bird.

"Ah..." Sophia exclaims softly as the bat suddenly departs, not from flying outside, no, but disappears slowly, as if it suddenly becomes transparent, blending back into the earth. It leaves a trail of blue glitter and crystallized dust on its wake, and when Sophia opens her palm, she can see two words written in the same color of the bat's skin.

'Good job.'

This time, another flower starts to bloom in her heart, and with it comes the feeling of *hope*.

V

Baby Steps

The first thing that Sophia notices when she enters the hallways of the hospital is that it's skull-numbing, bone-freezingly cold. Her teeth are chattering as she rubs at her thin arms in a vain attempt to warm herself up, her own fingers and palms feeling frigid from the strong, cold air of the hospital's central air conditioner.

The hallways by itself are surprisingly large, spanning widely across the room, and even house a large grand piano that is protected with some velvet ropes so that outsiders won't try to press on some ivories. There's also soft classical music running in the background, not too loud so that it may deafen some visitors, but also not too soft that people won't notice it's there.

Rhythmic sounds of typing and clicking also completes the atmosphere, and Sophia's heart thrums in nervousness as she walks towards the counter where a woman is currently sitting guard while writing on a note with a red pen in her hand.

"Ex.. excuse me," Sophia calls out, her voice is soft enough to get drowned out by the background music, but the woman lifts her head away from the note.

"Yes, Miss?" The woman, whose name is "Emily", as Sophia can now see her nametag, replies with a warm smile on her face.

Even though Emily is fully clad in a nurse's gown and her head wrapped up in some sort of a shower-cap like wrap, she still somehow manage to exude a gentle and friendly aura befitting of that of a receptionist at a hospital, where a lot of patients go to when they are sick and in need of help and warmth.

Sophia finds that she can breathe easier after realizing that, and although her hands are still fumbling together, she can grace up an awkward smile as she walks towards Emily. She hands in her phone that shows that she has already booked an appointment with Dr. Lestari, allowing Emily to take the phone away from her to examine it further.

"May I ask whether you have visited the Trust Hospital before, Miss?" Emily asks as she returns the phone back to Sophia.

"Um... No, actually. Will that be a problem?" Sophia asks worriedly, her brows scrunching up.

"Not at all, Miss. We just need you to fill out some additional information for us to store for easier access in the future should you ever visit our hospital again," Emily reassures her with

a kind smile while offering a long piece of paper with a lot of blank spaces in between thick lines of text, which presumably are the so-called information Sophia needs to fill out. .

Sophia accepts the offered paper as she reads through it, before quickly filling in some of the basic information like her name, birth of date, age, and so on. She does need to fish out her ID card for some of the information that she can't remember, like her ID card number, as well as some of the details for her home address.

She is always a bit bad with directions, after all.

Sophia returns the filled out paper towards Emily and waits a bit as Emily types in her data in her computer. Before long, Emily hands a big, blue map that contains a bunch of papers towards Sophia. Sophia takes it curiously before fishing out a couple of said papers away from the map and reading it briefly to find out there are some papers that contain her basic information as well as some allergies, medical constraints, and other information that she has written down on the paper that Emily has given her beforehand.

"Here you go. You can find Dr. Lestari's room if you go down the hallway and go to the right side there, then take the left when you find that the hallway has split into three. A nurse will help you once you find yourself there to take your weight as well as pulse and will tell you your queue number before you can visit Dr. Lestari. Since you arrive here in the evening after work hours, I think there might be some queue numbers above you," Emily explains patiently as she lets Sophia examine the papers in the map further.

Sophia thanks Emily for her help before she goes on towards the area that Emily has pointed out to her, her steps light and cautious. Despite her preparations both mentally and physically, Sophia still finds her heart beat wildly as she gets closer and closer.

She gulps down her saliva as if that will give her more bravery that she desperately needs right now. She rubs her free clammy hand on her own pants and takes a deep, long breath before she continues her walk, quickly finding herself in front of the nurse's table that Emily has mentioned.

She takes a deep breath before she braves a small smile as she walks towards the nurse's table. She hands the map that Emily has given her towards the nurse standing guard on the table. The nurse glances at her briefly before taking the map away from her with a swish. Sophia fidgets on her spot as the nurse stays silent as she reads through the information that Emily has printed out about Sophia. The nurse gestures towards her right with her right arm out, but Sophia only looks at her blankly, confused.

"Weight, please," the nurse orders, her voice a bit impatient and annoyed. Sophia flinches at that.

"Oh, r-right," Sophia answers meekly before she goes on to stand on the scales, the number moving quickly before slowing down and stopping at 45.

The nurse tsk'ed as she observed that before writing down the information down on the same paper that Emily had printed out. Sophia bites on her lower lip as she observes the nurse's actions.

"Height?"

"Um. 160cm?" Sophia replies, a bit unsure. The last time she has checked her exact height is when she is still in university, and has to do so to be able to get vaccinated or something.

"A bit underweight, aren't you?" The nurse mumbles, probably to herself, but Sophia can hear it nonetheless. She can feel her lower lip bleeding a bit as she gnaws on it even harder, feeling the cold feeling from before returns tenfold, her spines getting stiff and clunky.

"Alright, go sit down so I can take your blood pressure," the nurse continues as she finishes writing Sophia's information down on the paper.

"Alright," Sophia replies back, her voice soft enough for it to be a whisper.

She sits down on the empty chair next to the nurse and watches as she quickly unfastens the cuffs from the blood pressure machine before wrapping it on Sophia's left arm. She pressed some buttons down on the machine before it started going alive.

Sophia winces as the wrap starts to get tighter and tighter around her arm. She can never get used to the feeling of the blood pressure machine clamping down on her skin like it's going to take it off any second.

Thankfully, the pressure slowly starts to relent before it gets too much, and before Sophia realizes it, the nurse has already taken off the wrap from her arm and put it back neatly on the machine with her deft fingers, way gentler than when she's putting it back then on Sophia.

Sophia is starting to think that the machine is worth more than herself in the nurse's eyes.

"Alright, done. Dr. Lestari's nurse will call for your name once it's time for you to come in. Just wait in front of her office, you can sit down on one of the rows of chairs near there," the nurse briefly explains before she hands the map back towards Sophia, which she takes gingerly onto her arms.

“Um... May I know whether there’s a lot of people above my queue?” Sophia asks, a bit tentative. She has the general feeling that the nurse doesn’t like her much, though for what reason, she is still a bit unsure.

“Around one or two, if I remember correctly. Not too much, so you won’t have to wait for too long, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Alright, thanks,” Sophia nods before she goes to sit on one of the metal chairs in front of the office that houses a large sign that contains the same picture of Dr. Lestari that the hospital also uses on their website, as well as a nameplate of her name carved in wood.

There are a couple other visitors sitting at random places around the hallway, but Sophia guesses that not all of them are coming here for Dr. Lestari, since the nurse from before has stated that she is currently only one or two patients behind the queue line. Not only that, there are also other rooms for other doctors in the hallway as well, one for a psychiatrist named Dr. Mayaka, another psychiatrist named Dr. Lian, and finally, a weird and out-of-place brain specialist for Dr. Bernard. There is definitely a big chance that some of the patients sitting around waiting for their turn is visiting another doctor.

At least, Sophia hopes that is the case. The longer she is asked to wait for her turn to come in, the more jumpy she will become. She does not want to lose her nerves that she has been carefully crafting before the due date with Dr. Lestari.

She opens her smartphone in an attempt to distract herself, and smiles as she sees the message from Becky that was just sent a few minutes before.

‘Good luck!’

She replies with a quick thanks, her heart filled with warmth at the care that her one true friend has shown her. No matter whether the visit today with Dr. Lestari is successful or not, the main reason why she even has the chance to go here in the hospital in the first place is because Becky cares enough about her.

Her thoughts wander more and before she knows it, the nurse has come out from Dr. Lestari’s office to call for her name. Nervously, Sophia stands up, before handing the blue map towards the nurse.

The nurse accepts it before beckoning her to come into the room. Sophia does so, stepping gingerly into the room that is thankfully warmer compared to the hallways of the hospital. The central air conditioner doesn’t reach much here and it seems that Dr. Lestari does not turn on their room’s air conditioner in full force.

Warmth finally seeping back into her skin and bones, Sophia sits down on the indicated seat in front of the beautiful woman which she knows to be Dr. Lestari, simply because it's uncannily similar to the portraits that are shown in front of her office as well as in the hospital's website.

Dr. Lestari, with her black hair hanging down and the white coat wrapped around her frame, has even a warmer smile in real life compared to the portrait. She takes the blue map away from the nurse and reads the information about Sophia contained in it.

"So, Sophia, is it? How's your day so far?" She asks with the warm smile still plastered on her face.

"Oh, good, I suppose?" Sophia replies, unsure. She definitely does not expect that the first question that Dr. Lestari will ask about how her day is. Aren't psychiatrists supposed to be interrogative right from the get go?

She's not really sure herself.

"Have you been to another psychologist or psychiatrist before, Sophia?" Dr. Lestari asks another question.

"Um. No, honestly. I mean, I have considered going to one in the past, but... this is actually the very first time I've ever been to one, if that makes sense?" Sophia replies, feeling a bit nervous and intimidated. Will the fact that she never goes to a psychiatrist be a bad thing?

"So this is your first time here? Then allow me to congratulate you for your bravery to go to one. I know it must be scary," Dr. Lestari's smile softens.

Sophia is stunned at that. While she does read a lot of the things that are quite similar to Dr. Lestari's words in the spreadsheet, hearing it in real life, and those same words being aimed at her specifically feels completely different.

"Thank-thank you," Sophia chokes out, feeling like her voice is being caught in her throat. She can even feel her eyes going somewhat wet, and scolds herself for it. They haven't even talked about anything special, and she's already almost this close to outright sobbing? What will happen to her once they start talking about her issues then?

"Now, I won't push you too hard for our first meeting, especially since it's also your first time going to a psychiatrist in the first place. I do want to ask, though, what is the reason you go to one in the first place? Is there any specific main reason that has been bothering you, or maybe has been affecting your life negatively, things that you want to solve?" Dr. Lestari continues.

"There is... a main reason, yeah. Though I myself am still not sure yet which one it is. Maybe a mixture of everything? Mainly nightmare and anxious thoughts that keep me away

from sleeping at night,” Sophia admits truthfully. She finds herself opening up and spilling out her beans very easily to Dr. Lestari. Sophia is not sure whether it is because of all the positive comments that the patients has been showering Dr. Lestari within the spreadsheet she has seen, whether it is because Dr. Lestari herself has proven to be a great and caring doctor that shows great consideration towards her, or whether she is tired of keeping all these things to herself, buried deep within her and never to come out. Sophia deduces that it is just a mixture of the three, with Dr. Lestari’s stellar reviews and warm attitude helped her to unload all the things that she has been keeping shut tight inside her heart.

Dr. Lestari nods and writes something down on a piece of paper, which Sophia is unsure whether the note is for Dr. Lestari’s own safekeeping to remember what kind of patients she is dealing with, or is it some sort of prescription for Sophia? But isn’t it a bit too fast to be giving out prescriptions already?

“Do you want to tell me a bit about yourself? Specifically, do you know any reason why you are getting all these anxious thoughts and nightmares?”

“Um...” Sophia hesitates for a while before, once again, decides to throw caution into the wind. “It is most probably caused by my step-mother and sister. I do admit that I was a quiet kid ever since I can remember, but I also don’t have any issues like I do now before they come into my life. After my mom passed away when I was eight, I’ve been a bit lonely since my dad is always grieving, but he still cares for me a lot. It all changes though when he brings back Wanda, my step-mother, along with Maria, my step-sister, into our house. They are your typical villains in a book, if you would like a nice and easy comparison. Docile and nice when my father is present, and reveals their fangs after he’s gone.”

Sophia licks her lips as she pauses a bit, and finds herself staring at Dr. Lestari, who is also watching her attentively.

“So uh. Continuing. Their actions have just gotten worse and worse after that. They forbid me to do some simple things like showering early before Maria, eating better food than Maria, and so on. Later on, she will also start beating me when I anger Maria for whatever reason. They will never listen to my explanation or anything. For Wanda, her biological daughter can do no wrong while her step-daughter is only a pebble on the road,” Sophia’s voice turns bitter as she finishes the story.

She hasn’t realized until now how much bitterness has accumulated in her heart thanks to the duo’s ministrations towards her. They have been sowing a seed of not only fear and anxiety but also hatred and spite. How dare they, the two women who have been receiving a lot

of help from his father, turn their back on her and even abuse his only biological child left behind by his late wife?

It doesn't make any sense to Sophia. But not a lot of things in this world are supposed to make sense. People can just be utterly cruel and unforgiving even to those who have treated them the best.

Her heart clenches as she thinks about her mother's final moments, and her inability to save her from despair. She knows very well that her mother's cancer has tormented her until even the last moment she breathes into this world, but Sophia, as just a little child, has no ability to help her at all, and can only see her parents mourn over each other at the almost guaranteed death date of her mother.

"-iss? Miss Sophia?"

Dr. Lestari's voice snaps Sophia out of her momentary daydream as she feels her cheeks burn as she realizes that she has, once again, drifted out mid-conversation. Like usual. Being a woman with no social skills and being rude to people without meaning it.

Her hands tremble violently on her laps as her heart burns from anxiety. What if Dr. Lestari hates her for this? What if she thinks that she's a pathetic woman who breaks down just on their first meeting and refuses to help her after she finds out how weak Sophia is? What if Dr. Lestari starts to mock her inside of her heart? What if—

"Miss Sophia? It's okay," Dr. Lestari's voice once again distracts her wandering mind.

Sophia startles not at the voice, but when a few warm droplets hit her palm. Unbeknownst even to herself, she has shed some tears.

"Miss Sophia? May I touch you?" Dr. Lestari asks her, her voice expressing concern.

Sophia nods as an answer, not trusting herself to speak, in case that her voice will crack due to the tears currently still running down her cheeks.

Dr. Lestari's warm hand gently caresses her skin as Sophia hiccups lightly. It almost feels as if her tears are trying to run down faster now that the body realizes that it is currently crying, as if the dam has been broken and the waters are begging to be let through.

"Can you do something for me?" Dr. Lestari's voice drifts back into her ears once again after a small pause.

Sophia nods again in reply, but this time it is accompanied by a tilt of her head, curious about what the doctor will ask of her.

She has heard horror stories about how psychiatrists and even psychologists giving a lot of prescriptions at the first meeting without hesitation, not even confirming first or diagnosing

whether the patient has a certain condition, and even giving a lot of tablets at once instead of only a couple to be consumed over a short period of time to test its effects.

She cannot lie to herself, Sophia is also still terrified about what Dr. Lestari might ask of her. No matter how stellar her reputation and reviews on the spreadsheet, she is still, in the end, a psychiatrist just like the rest of them, which also has the power to give her strong prescriptions just like all the stories that Sophia has heard of before.

Maybe if Dr. Lestari does that, Sophia won't buy the medicines immediately but instead she will try to google what they do first? But is that effective? Will google even know more about the medicines than a certified doctor does?

But will consuming heavy medicines immediately after their first meeting even be a good choice? What if it backlashes on her? But then again, if she never tries, then she will never know, will she not? There are no medicines without potential side effects, after all, and if she is afraid of everything, then how will she even expect to get better?

"What will you have me do, Doc?" Braving herself, Sophia finally throws the quest that has been haunting her ever since Dr. Lestari asks her if she can do something.

"It's simple, really. I want you to not push yourself and take it one step at a time. We don't have to unload everything in one day. I can see that you are getting a bit overwhelmed, so how about a cup of tea for now?" Dr. Lestari asks gently.

Sophia blinks, then blinks again, utterly confused. What is that even supposed to mean? Dr. Lestari wants her to drink some... tea? Right here? Right now? But why? Isn't she supposed to give her some sort of prescription?

As if on cue, the tall nurse that has been accompanying Dr. Lestari, who is also the same nurse that has called her name to let her in before, puts down a glass of steaming hot tea on top of the table, right in front of Sophia.

"Or are you more of a coffee person? We also have some water, if you'd like. Feel free to also add some sugar and creamer to your tea, by the way," Dr. Lestari continues as Sophia blinks down onto her cup, confused.

"No, no. Tea is... Tea is fine," Sophia stammers, before slowly adding two teaspoons of sugar from the jar of sugar that Dr. Lestari apparently has been sitting on her desk all this time. It's... very jarring. Out of all the requests that Dr. Lestari will ask of her, asking her to drink a cup of tea and adding her preference of sugar and milk on top of that is the least of her expectations. She does not equalize this option at all.

Sophia's body warms up as she sips at the tea, the fragrance of black tea permeating into her nostrils, and allowing her to recognize that it is the Earl Grey tea, one of her favorites. She happily sips down more gulps down her throat, both for its taste as well as the effect of the warming it has on her body, making her feel a lot more comfortable.

"How is it? Is it good?" Dr. Lestari asks after a while.

"Yes, yes, it is," Sophia nods. "But, why tea? I really thought that you would give me some sort of assignment for me to do at home or something. Maybe some sort of prescription?"

"I am planning to give you some sort of exercise to help calm your mind, yes, but no prescriptions as of yet. I want to know you better first and know all your symptoms and do some tests since I want to avoid triggering some heavy side effects if possible. But I can also write a prescription for light sleep pills that can let you sleep heavily or some pills that can prevent your emotions from going out of control if you want?"

"Oh, no, no, that's completely fine," Sophia shakes her head. "I am actually a bit worried that you will give me a lot of medicines right from the get go, actually. So this is much more relieving to me."

"Is that so? I'm glad to hear it, then. Would you like to continue with your story first or do you want me to explain first what I want you to do at home before we meet again next week or in two weeks' time?" Dr. Lestari asks once more.

"Um..." Sophia pauses, contemplating. "The homework first, please."

Better get the hard part out of the way first. She has no idea what Dr. Lestari will ask of her. So far, the expectations she has of Dr. Lestari have all been completely wrong and have been out of her imagination. She now cannot easily predict what Dr. Lestari may ask of her.

"So, I want to try something for you, and it is commonly known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Have you ever heard of it?" Dr. Lestari asks again, her tone still gentle and caring.

In a way, Dr. Lestari actually reminds her a bit of her biological mother, who is always so gentle with her words and has such a warm tone that can soothe even the darkest of souls. Sophia misses her dearly.

"I have never heard of it, no," Sophia admits, shaking her head.

"It is a psychological treatment that is deemed as effective in treating a lot of issues like anxiety, depression, and even some specific problems like broken family or marital problems. What is different about the method itself is that the method and how it works can change and differ from person to person, depending on their capability as well as the extent of their problems," Dr. Lestari starts explaining.

“Of course, it still has some of its core values that all the methods it uses are all based on. Basically, it aims to help you think that there is always a way out for your problems, no matter how big or daunting it seems to be at the moment right now. It also wants you, as the patient, to believe that psychological problems can also stem, at least in part, from unhelpful ways of thinking or behavior, so we are aiming to steer it in a better direction.”

“For this specific method, I want you to do something simple but it can also be extremely hard for me this week. It is mainly about learning how to calm your mind and relax your body. Believe me, a healthy mind and body can do wonders to your physical and psychological well-being,” She ends her explanation with a warm smile.

“I do realize that a healthy mind and body contributes a lot to a person’s well-being, yes, but... I must admit that I have no idea on how to achieve that. Whenever I wake up from my nightmare, for example, almost no method works to calm me down and relax my body at all,” Sophia shakes her head slowly.

Indeed, calming one’s mind and relaxing one’s body may sound easy and simple, but it can be extremely difficult for some people, including her. While a lot of the times her brutal washing her face method works to distract her mind, it does not completely negate the aftereffects and leave her still trembling and even crying after a heavy nightmare. It is not easy to just dispel her negative thoughts and be able to stop all the negative impacts it has on her body.

“The first method I want you to try is by keeping a diary, or a journal, if you will. There will be two different ones. The first one includes you writing down all your negative thoughts down, and making a column next to them. The column, in turn, will say these things,” Dr. Lestari begins to explain as she hands Sophia a piece of paper.

The paper is like a spreadsheet-like table with the ‘negative thoughts’ in bold red on the top left part of the table, with empty boxes underneath the text. To the right of the negative thoughts box is written ‘reality’ and ‘rationalizing’.

“Reality means what you have experienced in real life. Have you actually experienced this beforehand? If so, when was the last time it happened, and how often does it happen, if it is somewhat near to the present time? Rationalizing means you will think about the bad thoughts and link it with your current reality, and write down whether those negative thoughts can actually happen at all,” Dr. Lestari explains even further, before taking a deep breath.

“Of course, this will not completely eliminate all the bad thoughts from your mind, especially if there is a real possibility that some of your bad thoughts and anxieties might actually

happen based on the rationalizing part. But it may help reduce some of the negative thoughts that have a lesser chance or even nihil chance to happen in real life.”

Sophia’s eyes glitters as she looks down on the table presented by Dr. Lestari. While it may seem a bit too close to the work she often does in her workplace, this is actually extremely interesting to her. When Sophia was just a little kid, she liked watching all those random facts shows and videos and deducting her own logic and thoughts by combining all the little facts and trivia that she has watched across multitudes of videos. Doing this for her thoughts seems a bit similar, although a tad different, to that exact experience she has had in the past, making her excited over the thought for once and is actually quite looking forward to it.

Of course, she is also not a fool. She knows very well that some of her bad thoughts that often cloud her mind and manage to seep into her unconscious and manifest itself into the form of a nightmare in her sleep is not always far-fetched and may actually happen, since some of the scenarios in the nightmare are less fiction and more hyperbolized bad experiences she has had in the past, especially circling around Wanda and Maria.

However, like Dr. Lestari has also said, while it may not completely eliminate her thoughts about those two, it can help reduce the extremity of those thoughts by rationalizing it, on top of eliminating some thoughts that may not happen at all in her lifetime. The thought that she may actually make some progress regarding her nightmares and bad thoughts make her incredibly giddy and excited that she is almost jumping on her own seat.

“I know you are excited to do this, based on the smile on your face,” Dr. Lestari smiles warmly at her, visibly happy that Sophia’s facial features have changed for the better, as if the teardrops flowing down her cheeks from before had happened ages ago and not just a few minutes before.

“But, I do have to remind you that consistency is the key here. It is important for you to try and keep your motivation in the week and even better, weeks, going forward. After all, progress can’t be instantaneous and it can only be achieved when you try to do it in a consistent way and keep up the progress little by little,” Dr. Lestari’s tone firms up a bit at that.

Sophia nods in understanding. It is extremely common, even to herself, that she will be excited for something brand new and completely forget all about it in only just a day or two, thus forgetting to do her homework entirely. She will try her very best to keep her motivation, at least through the week, so she can at least see a tad bit of improvement on her nightmares so that she can finally sleep and rest easy at night.

“Now, regarding the second journal or diary that I have mentioned before, it differs a bit from the previous one. Instead of writing down your bad thoughts and anxieties and trying to rationalize it with the fact that you have throughout what has happened in your life, I want you to write about the good things that have happened to you throughout the week in the second journal,” Dr. Lestari starts explaining once more.

“It can be anything trivial to something significant. Maybe you see a cute dog in the park and you are allowed to pet it. Maybe you get a raise at work. Or maybe your favorite show or anime has updated the new episode and you are extremely excited for it” Dr. Lestari continues.

Sophia nods as she listens intently to the doctor. The new journal is, surprisingly, even more unexpected than the last one, although Sophia does not know why she doesn’t expect it at all.

It may also be harder than she thinks it will be to accomplish it successfully. With her often negative mood and feelings, it is easy for her to spiral down into thoughts of anxiety which can turn into nightmares later when she sleeps. Therefore, she often does not think much about the little things that make her happy, or the little moments that have happened throughout her day that may have put a smile on her face.

When was the last time she was just grateful and completely happy when someone served her coffee the right way at Starbucks? Or when the barista actually gets her name right and does not write it with a typo, or worse, call her Sophie?

Sophia slowly starts to ponder about this and find even more things that have happened throughout her week that may have helped brighten her day before. That cat near the office that slides up her leg and purrs when she starts to rub behind her ears. When her air conditioner in her bedroom hits just right and does not make her freeze to death nor cause her to sweat in the sweltering heat.

Or even today, the warmth of the tea that Dr. Lestari has given her, sliding down her throat and giving her a sense of security. The sugar rush that she has felt when she drinks her boba tea yesterday with Becky.

“I’m sure you have started to think about all the good moments that have happened just a few days ago, or maybe even as near as today. That is very good indeed. You can write it down even in short notes if you would like,” Dr. Lestari smiles again.

Ah, yes. Dr. Lestari’s smile is also one of the good things that has happened to her. The smile that warms the soul just like her mother’s. The smile that reassures her that hope is within

reach and that anything is possible if she is just brave enough to try. The smile that makes sure she is alright and will continue to move forward and get better.

“The aim for this specific journal is to keep track of your positive thoughts and to help equalize the bad thoughts in your mind. It can also help rationalize whether your bad thoughts can come true at all. Additionally, these positive thoughts can help calm your mind that while bad things may still happen, there are still good things you can look forward to in the future, just like what has happened to you.”

Sophia nods. It does make sense. Just like how negative thoughts may bring her nightmares and anxiety, maybe positive thoughts can also bring some hope and brightness into her life once more. It may not be much, but it is certainly worth a try.

Of course, Sophia does not know exactly how effective the two journals will be in progressing for a better sleep at night with less nightmares, but again, can she even fall lower than she is currently now? And also, when will she ever be able to get better if she does not have the willpower or bravery to try and get better first?

“Okay, I will do as Dr. Lestari has said today,” Sophia nods and finds her voice once more, grateful that it does not crack after she has cried. It is a bit hoarse, sure, but nothing as bad as when she has just woken up from a nightmare.

“That is good. I am looking forward to seeing progress next week, Miss Sophia. But also do not pressure yourself to see good progress right away. It may take time and of course, a lot of effort. Do remember that no matter how small your progress might be, it will still be progress.”

Sophia nods once more before thanking the doctor, and she finally leaves.

But now, with a good goal and progress in tow.

VI

A Journal a Day Keeps the Doctor Away

Sophia stares at the two journals in front of her, laid down on top of her mahogany desk. Both of them are filled with the homework that Dr. Lestari has given her.

While her nightmare might have gotten better when she stops her caffeine intake, it is still there every so often, which is why it leads to her sleeping on her desk in the office and almost getting fired over it.

Of course, after Aaron calls her into his office, Sophia has resumes her caffeine intake once more to make sure that she won't make the same mistake, but even if she doesn't sleep at her desk anymore now, her nightmares has come back at full force, or maybe even in a worse frequency than before.

Sophia recognizes that part of the biggest reason why her nightmares are worsening is the simple fact that she is scared of losing her stable life over getting fired, creating even more anxiety and worries in her mind that she needs to take care of. It is especially so because now she also has new dreams visiting her instead of only dreams about her step-mother. Those are dreams about her getting fired and being homeless afterward.

The worst one is when the nightmares happen to combine both her newest fear and her old ones. When she gets fired from her job and has to beg her step-mother for help when she is at her lowest.

Sophia wants to make sure that none of that will ever happen.

Sophia starts writing down her bad thoughts and the source of most of her nightmares in the first journal. To her surprise, it comes really easily to her. It feels like pouring her heart out without the fear of being judged.

She writes all about her traumatic experiences with her step-parent and how she has abused her along with her biological daughter, Maria. She writes about the bad experiences she has with Aaron that might have made her nightmares worse, and how she fears that she will not only lose her job but also the only stability she has left in her life.

She pauses for a moment after writing everything that has happened.

And then she starts to continue again. This time, instead of writing of past events that have happened, she writes about the fear that she has, fear about things that may come, anxiety about her own bad thoughts as well as the uncertain future that holds a lot of bad possibilities that she may not be able to endure.

She writes about the slight resentment she has for her coworkers, of the people who do not really know her but assume that they do. People who look down on her simply because of the fact that she got into her job thanks to her dad's connection with the company's CEO, but completely disregard her years of hard work and dedication that she has invested for the company.

She writes about how she hates herself terribly, about her inability to talk to others without being nervous or being a stuttering mess, or saying things she doesn't mean, or zone out entirely like she has done with Dr. Lestari. She writes about how she hates how weak she is, unable to utter a word under Aaron's accusations and cannot even make a comeback and try to defend herself more. How, in the darkest part of her mind, she wishes that she is more like her step-mother's beloved biological daughter, Maria, who is always cheerful and liked by everyone no matter where she goes. The type of person that can make others smile just through your presence alone. The type of woman who is confident in her skills and can lift her head up high and act confidently, even among a crowd of strangers.

Sophia tries to ignore the droplets of tears that has successfully escapes her eyes without her consent, making itself known by marking themselves into some random spots into the paper that Sophia is writing on, with some of the tears also thick enough to seep through several wads of paper in the book, creating a pattern that is not unlike raindrops.

Sophia writes about how she is afraid that Becky might leave her someday, fed up with her fear over going to the psychiatrist. She writes about how afraid she is that going to a psychiatrist will still not be able to solve her problem, or in the worst case scenario, make it even worse.

Before she realizes it, Sophia has filled out almost five pages worth of writing. She licks her dry lips and stretches both of her hands together to make a satisfying, popping sound, before closing the first journal and opening the next one.

Now... while thinking about what makes her sad and anxious is quite easy, as there are a lot of them, thinking about experiences that have made her happy, or trying to rationalize things... are not exactly Sophia's biggest forte. Rather, she has the tendency to think of all the worst possible scenarios instead of the best or even good ones.

First, she starts writing about the fact that she is grateful for Becky's presence, and how her one and only loyal friend is always there for her to support her through thick and thin. Sophia continues to write about how she is very appreciative of the fact that Becky still continuously

keeps contact with her despite the fact that Sophia is a loser in and of itself, who does not really interact with other people around her.

She writes that although she is still resentful of the fact that her coworkers have gone all of the way to report her to Aaron, that she is still grateful of the fact that she still gets a chance to fix her behavior instead of getting fired immediately. That she still got a chance to try and fix her mistakes.

Lastly, she also writes about how she is grateful for meeting Dr. Lestari. She is fully aware that she gets very lucky that she has found Dr. Lestari's name on the list of spreadsheets that Becky has given her. Because if she is forced to search for a doctor on her own due to her desperation of getting fired, it might have turned out horribly, as she will not know where and how to start looking for a psychiatrist that might match her needs.

After all, as someone who has tried to avoid looking into going to a psychiatrist for years after Wanda's threats and taunts, she has never delved into anything related to mental health issues anymore, too afraid of the implications of what might happen to her, as well as the off-chance that Wanda might find out what she is doing and beat her up again.

Another list of why Sophia is endlessly grateful for Becky. Her willingness to try and help Sophia, even if Sophia might reject her.

Sure, her list about things that she is anxious about might far outweigh her newest list about things that she is grateful for, but at least it is a start.

"Ah!"

A searing pain on her head causes Sophia to suddenly drop her pen before clutching her head with both hands in reaction to the overwhelming pain. It feels as if something is trying to burn her brain out all of a sudden, without any warning whatsoever.

Thankfully, the pain stops entirely a few seconds after, causing Sophia to breathe out slowly and try to control her bearings once more. She can still feel some of the aftereffects of the sudden pain through the ringing pulse on her head, causing her to have a heavy headache, almost similar to vertigo.

"What was that?" Sophia whispers to herself, fear and confusion filling her.

Her eyes flickers slowly back towards the two books she has just been writing on, and almost flinch backward from her chair and probably send her sprawling towards the floor when she sees a blue, crystalized bat that is sitting leisurely on the paper that now has a large, glaring thick line across the paper, a result of Sophia recoiling back from the shock and accidentally scraping the pen on the paper when she is writing about things that she is grateful for.

That bat...

The same bat that she has seen when she was with Becky on the bus, as well as the same bat that has visited her the night she decides to book an appointment to meet Dr. Lestari.

Slowly and carefully, she extends a finger towards the bat once more, as if trying to lure a cat away by slow, methodical steps to not spook the feline away into running out of their instinct to flee from foreign objects and beings. She really hopes that the bat will return back to her finger just like it did just a few days ago.

As she hopes, the bat doesn't fly away, even when Sophia's index finger finally touches it. It flies to her finger just like it did last time, and Sophia beams at the bat. She doesn't know why this simple act makes her extremely happy, but she is definitely not complaining about it. The feeling of the bat's flutters tickles her fingers slightly, making her giggle.

But then, her giggle gets cut short when Sophia also starts hearing some voices inside her head the moment her skin makes contact with the bat's wings, that is outstretched to her other fingers. Voices that definitely do not sound like her, nor belong to her. Voices that she never heard before.

But she can't really comprehend exactly what the voices are saying. Because those voices are talking all together, overlapping each other and creating a cacophony of noises that Sophia just can't begin to understand.

All she knows is that they seem to be crying for help, but that is as far as she can try to understand.

"Ah!"

Before she can try to comprehend what is going on, everything suddenly ends abruptly. In one moment, Sophia's teeth are chattering and her head is full of strange voices, and in the next second, she's back to her warm confines of her room, with the usual, comfortable emptiness inside of her mind.

Sophia looks down towards the books, and, sure enough, the bat is also gone.

"Am I dreaming again?" Sophia murmurs. "This seems to be one hell of a weird nightmare if it is, though. And I feel strangely conscious if it is indeed a dream."

While Sophia might have some dreams where she realizes that she is indeed dreaming, it is rare, few and far in between. Not to mention, she usually already forgets all about it when she wakes up, and even during the dream itself, she is pretty sure that it has never been this clear, with all her senses working almost perfectly.

Or maybe it's just her consciousness being tired and starts conjuring unreal images just because of how tired she is, especially with how poor her sleep is, with nightmares constantly harassing her almost every single night. Her eyebags are clear evidence of that alone.

She can even feel herself getting even skinnier than she is, and suddenly, she can imagine her late mother scolding her,

You've been skipping meals again, darling? Come on, who else is gonna eat momma's favorite nasi goreng if not for her beloved daughter, hmm? Entertain your momma and eat some of them while they're warm, why don't you?

That's right. Her mom's warm embrace is one of the things that she is eternally grateful for, even though it has been so, so long since she has enjoyed the luxury of one. However, those memories of the past is also one of the biggest reasons why she can still continue to go on, even until now, in the off chance that maybe, someday, she can feel that amazing feeling once more, of being embraced in a warm hug that feels as if it can protect her from the world, protect her and keep her safe.

"Hm? What's this?"

Sophia suddenly notices a highlight colored in blue on her book, which bewildered her, as she is sure that she has only used a black pen all this hour writing on both books, without the use of any other colored pen, let alone a highlighter. While she might like using those at work and in the office, she has foregone them today when writing in her newfound diary. It is simply because it is easier to write in one pen as most of what she writes today is just a stream of consciousness instead of an organized list of data. Switching pens every so often and trying to make her diary to be neat will only break the flow of the words and line of thought and send her to have to start from the beginning once more.

"Wait a minute... that's..."

She only notices it belatedly, but upon closer inspection, she can see that the blue tint that she thought was a highlighter looks like a thin strip of blue crystal, not unlike the color and texture of the bat that she has just met for the second time today.

Sophia rubs her finger on the spot on where the strip of blue crystal is lying. It is currently highlighting the word 'nightmare' that she has written down in the book that contains all her anxieties and worries. She will believe that it is a total coincidence, if not for the fact that the shape of the strip of the blue crystal is exactly the same length and width as her writing for that exact word only, no more, no less. The blue crystal strip doesn't even touch any other letter beside the word nightmare. Especially so when she also has received a message of some sort

from the same bat just recently. However, this time, it feels like the message is more pronounced, with the bat leaving what looks like a strip of its skin instead of just glitter shaped into letters.

She tries to lift the strip of blue crystal away from the word nightmare, but it is like the word is stuck there, unyielding and immovable. Sophia frowns, even more confused. Is it glued down to the paper? She can feel the slight texture of it too, which is way harder than she would have expected for such a thin strip, especially if it is thin enough to be transparent and allow her to still see the word 'nightmare' underneath it.

"Feels just like a jewel... but I guess it is a crystal in some ways," Sophia mumbles to herself, before closing both books shut carefully, making sure not to damage the strip while closing the cover down.

"Ah, well. I'll think about it more if I ever encounter it again. No use stressing about it now when I can just be imagining everything," Sophia sighs, before preparing herself to go to sleep. It is way too late into the night, after all, or rather, too early in the morning, if the clock on top of her desk is being honest when it shows the hour of 02:25. Sophia has spent more time writing on her new diary than she originally thought.

Hopefully, her sleep will be a dreamless night.

VII

Black Hole

It is not a dreamless night.

Sophia can feel sweat drenching her back completely, her clothes soaked until it sticks itself uncomfortably onto her skin.

But she barely pays them any notice, especially with her labored breathing and rapid heartbeat, clutching her chest tightly with both hands as if it will stop the pounding and sharp pain that has settled themselves inside of her.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

The same thought rings over and over again in her mind, and she can feel the coldness of her palms when it touches a sliver of her skin, despite the sweat still running down her body like a cascading waterfall unable to stop their powerful waves.

The image that has appeared in her nightmares is still clear and vivid in her mind, as much as she hates it. She always loathes the fact that she can barely recall the images of her dreams when she has a sweet, nice one, but always remembers almost every single detail if she happens to have a nightmare, which is to say, most of her nights.

The nightmare is almost similar to the one that she had last night, but it is still as painful as yesterday nonetheless. The towering figure of Wanda, her stepmother, is the prominent figure in her nightmares, like usual. But this time, Aaron also features there, making everything ten times worse. She still remembers the hurtful words they utter to her in her nightmares. The worst thing is the fact that Sophia can also imagine them saying it in real life, right towards her face, which just makes it even more difficult to recover from.

“How foolish. What do you think you are trying to do, my idiot step-daughter? Do you really think that you will get better by going to a therapist?” Wanda’s sneer splits her otherwise flawless face wide open, making her look like a monster straight from the childrens’ book Sophia often read when she was a kid.

Sophia embraces her head underneath her arms and curls up in a ball position, trying to protect her head in case Wanda decides to hit her again. However, what comes next is not what she is expecting. Instead of the pain that she has come to be familiar with, she instead hears a masculine voice that should not exist together in the same space with her mom.

"Oh, Sophia, my one special employee who likes to sleep on her job. So this is your mom? She looks much, much more dignified than you are." Aaron's bass voice rings out through the empty, dark space.

The dark space that also seems like it's encroaching tighter and tighter, just like Sophia's lungs right now, having to witness both her newest and oldest nightmare in the same place, both towering over her and putting her in her place.

"I have to wonder though..." Aaron continues his musing even as Sophia sits frozen still in her place. "How can such a woman give birth to someone so... unruly like you? No manners whatsoever, being able to sleep in her office without the slightest feeling of guilt! No! Rather, she even feels like she has been wronged!"

That's right. That's exactly how she feels when Aaron brings out those letters and starts reading them, isn't it? Rather than trying to reflect on her mistakes and fix it, she lashes out on Aaron and puts all the blame on her coworkers. While it is true that her coworkers are not the nicest people and is still the main reason why she even gets called in to Aaron's office in the first place, they are not the ones who forcefully make Sophia fall asleep on her own desk to sabotage her or anything. They just saw a chance, and took it. If Sophia doesn't have nightmares in the first place and is able to fix it on her own, there will be no chance for them to do it, as Sophia will not even fall asleep on her desk.

She's pathetic, that's what she is.

"Oh, no, no. You see, she is not my biological daughter. If she is, then I will never allow her to behave in such a... disgusting way," Wanda's honeyed voice rings out once more accompanied by a sweet chuckle.

Sophia hears the duo move closer to her, Wanda's heels in particular clicking loudly against the dark void of the empty space. It's cold. It's so, so cold. Sophia feels as if her heart is being gripped tightly by a mighty fist, her breathing labored as if she can feel her impending doom, when her vital organs finally give out on her and burst out of her chest.

"No, no, Aaron. The only one I would deem to be worthy to be called my daughter is the girl to her right instead. My darling Maria, come here and greet Mr. Aaron and... your pitiful big sister, will you?"

A chill goes down Sophia's spine as she hears the cruel words. Maria, here?

Why? Why?! Why is she here too? Is the presence of these two monsters not enough to torment her as it is?

This world truly does not have any mercy for the weak, because the next moment, she can see Maria, her step-sister's, figure walking towards Wanda and Aaron. Like usual, Maria is draped in a long velvet red dress and high heels, a style not dissimilar to what Wanda is currently wearing right now. However, as opposed to Wanda's dress that has long sleeves and no cuts, Maria's dress has cuts on both sides that shows her thighs, sleeveless, and cuts down low on her V-neck.

It honestly weirds Sophia out, seeing Maria in this kind of attire, since she knows best how Maria likes using crop tops and mini skirts or hot pants so that she can show off more of her smooth skin and looks taller and intimidating. But, in a way, maybe this dress does also show off a lot of skin. Perfect, unblemished skin, unlike Sophia's own, which is riddled with scars and bruises.

Mercifully, the nightmare is ended by the alarm clock ringing loudly next to her ear, making her jump up in surprise from the sudden change of environment around her. She blinks and shakes her head multiple times to dispel herself from the sudden wave of dizziness that overcomes her from jumping up too quickly and the sudden awakening.

"Fuck," Sophia curses as she can feel herself breaking down from the image that has been shown in her newest nightmare.

Sophia finds herself grateful for sleeping in late for once. It does mean that the nightmare gets cut short before it goes to the truly horrifying parts, after all. It is truly merciful to cut it short and not force her to experience it even further.

However, it doesn't truly mean that the nightmare doesn't have any effect on her whatsoever. Just having to face one of the people in her nightmare is enough to make her run in the other direction, let alone all three at the same time.

Bile rises up her throat as Sophia races towards the bathroom, throwing up nothing but water, and Sophia remembers in the back of her mind that she never got around to eating dinner yesterday.

Her throat burns and her eyes sting with hot tears, and her heart feels scorching hot, like an eternal undying flame is setting it aflame, along with the rest of her body. Once again, her body is soaked in sweat, and a part of Sophia's mind grumbles about how much laundry she needs to do in a week.

"Why..." Sophia sobs, towards no one in particular.

Life is unfair, indeed. It tramples on the weak and enhances the strong even further. What a joke. If God really exists, why does He let her parents die and try to replace them with

such a vicious woman like Wanda? Why does He let her still have nightmares about them, as if to remind her every day what a pathetic loser she is? Is it not enough that she has to deal with them for years? Why does she have to live in it over and over again each and every day?

She sobs and cries out, with no one to hear her, ignoring the fact that she can still have the foul taste from her previous escapade to the bathroom and that she has snot and tears all over her face. She knows that if she tries to look in the mirror right now, all she sees will just be a sad excuse of a human being.

Sophia hates the fact that she is weak. So, so weak. She has gone to the doctor, even though she is very afraid to do so, but why does she not see any improvement to her nightmares? Is she just beyond saving?

If so, then what's the point?

Today is the schedule when she has to meet with Dr. Lestari again after her work hour ends, the prospect filling her with a mix of emotions that she is not sure how or what to feel. It has been a total week after the first time she met Dr. Lestari.

Unlike the past few days where Sophia tried skipping her usual morning coffee, for the next few days, every time she exits her apartment, the first stop she goes to is the Starbucks coffee shop near her office. She can't afford to risk sleeping in her job again, after all. The consequences will be a literal living nightmare.

As she walks through the street, Sophia thinks about why she still has nightmares despite already trying to do what Dr. Lestari says. True, she shouldn't demand progress right away, but why does the nightmare tend to get even worse the night after she meets Dr. Lestari? She knows for sure that her nightmare at that night will be very gory and terrifying had it not been for her alarm clock waking her up after she sleeps in way too late in the morning.

Not to mention, even the nights after that... the nightmares doesn't get any better either, despite the fact that Sophia sticks to doing what Dr. Lestari has said the last time, writing in both diaries diligently and trying to think logically, trying to rationalize with herself that her worries and anxieties are most likely not going to happen, or won't be as bad as it will be in her mind or her nightmares.

However, all her efforts are for naught. It certainly is not as easy as she has hoped for it to be. Don't get her wrong, she does know that it won't be easy, nor instant, but she doesn't expect it to be *this* hard. For once, she doesn't expect that her nightmares will get even *worse*

after meeting Dr. Lestari. Sophia can accept if it takes long and if the improvement is very slow, or even not at all, but getting worse?

That one isn't within her list of predictions, and she is not sure yet how to handle it, both physically and mentally. She knows that she shouldn't give up now. Especially with Aaron's threat hanging over her head, she knows that she *can't*. She will just have to keep trying and see how it goes.

But.. Keep trying until she will get a result eventually... How long will that take? And at what cost?

When work time is finally over, she finds herself surprised when she realizes that she has wished that her work time will last longer than usual, despite the fact that she is still very much afraid of Aaron and the prospect of getting fired over her mistake of sleeping on her desk. In the first place, thankfully, she almost never sees much of her supervisor to begin with aside from some few and far in between meetings that Aaron has with the people on floor 12. Of course, she never cared much about this particular fact before, but she now finds herself endlessly grateful for it. She doesn't know how she will react if she's forced to meet with Aaron again before she's mentally prepared herself for it.

But the main reason why she wishes her work time will be longer than usual is because her emotions are still in turmoil, still undecided about how she feels about having to meet Dr. Lestari again. On one hand, she is pretty excited about meeting the nice and kind doctor again who doesn't judge her because of her issues, but rather embraces and listens to her patiently. However, on the other hand...

She's scared. She's very afraid at the idea that meeting Dr. Lestari is useless, just like what Wanda has said to her in her nightmare the other night. What if she was right all along? What if going to a psychiatrist will not help her with her issues? Or worse... What if the issue doesn't lie with the fact that a psychiatrist cannot help her, but it is just that Sophia herself is already beyond saving?

Sophia has to wash her face multiple times to make sure that she will not fall asleep again on her desk, her nightmares haunting her sleep every night definitely does not allow her to sleep soundly after she hits her bed. On top of that, Sophia also wants to wash away any stray tears away from her cheeks, as well as trying to calm herself down with the feeling of freezing water hitting her skin.

While the cold water certainly also makes her teeth chatter and her skin to be ice cold, it does help snap her away from her bad thoughts, no matter how temporary it might be. A few

minutes or even seconds of not having to deal with a horde of anxieties inside her mind is a reprieve that she is grateful for all the same.

In all honesty, Sophia doesn't know how she makes it to the hospital with a lot weighing on her mind and her heart flaring with fear and anticipation of being able to meet with the kind doctor once more.

The smell of antiseptic and clean air diffuser greets her as she steps inside the large hospital through the double glass-door that opens up when she gets near them. The familiar coldness seeps itself into her bones as she steps inside the hallway that is dominated by the white color.

It is undeniable that Sophia is still very much anxious and nervous, but she notices that while she might not have gotten better after last week, or even gotten worse instead in regards to her nightmares, she is not as nervous anymore in regards to meeting Dr. Lestari. Of course, there is still a lot of doubt in the back of her mind, especially regarding how much this can help her, if at all, or if going out of her way to spend her time, money, and mental health to meet a psychiatrist, a doctor that she has been avoiding meeting for such a long time, is only all for naught.

But... She already knows now what kind of a person Dr. Lestari is. She now knows that Dr. Lestari is not a mean, ignorant, and bigoted kind of person that she always fears a psychiatrist might be. It has been proven by their first meeting that Dr. Lestari is a psychiatrist who does not judge her because of Sophia's issues, nor does she try to belittle Sophia's issues, which to a lot of people may seem trivial. She also genuinely listens to Sophia's story and doesn't even try to interrupt her or try to give her a lot of medicines just through their first conversation.

Sure, Sophia might not have seen any improvements yet after meeting Dr. Lestari, and it can even be said that she might have gotten worse instead in terms of her nightmares that visit her every time she sleeps. But... Dr. Lestari as a psychiatrist... still stays as a hope that lifts up Sophia's heart.

Because while Wanda might be correct that Sophia is beyond saving, she is wrong in that all psychiatrists are evil and will judge their patients. That some doctors are definitely kind, will listen to their patients, and is anything but what Wanda has in mind for psychiatrists. And that one simple fact has the ability to strengthen Sophia's mental state, because it has been proven that her step-mother is wrong. That Wanda isn't always right. And maybe, further down the line, she can use this same thought to reinforce her mind that what Wanda says and does in her nightmares doesn't always mean that Wanda is in the right to do so, and that she can also

be wrong. Maybe in this way, she can help rationalize her nightmares more and make it less scary and less daunting to go to sleep at night.

Maybe... Just maybe... Can this also be considered as an improvement? That... that not everything is for naught?

Improvement or not, Sophia at least finds herself more at ease when walking inside the hospital now, less nervous and less jittery, despite the coil still stuck in her heart. At least she now knows what she is getting into, that she is not in danger of being judged or persecuted by a mean doctor that can put her down even more.

Because of this, Sophia also allows herself to take in more about the hospital than the first time she comes here before, as she is way less nauseous and jittery. She can now see that the large entrance hall of the hospital has a large painting of Mother Mary sitting below the cross of Christ behind the counters that houses the hospital's five receptionists. It is undoubtedly quite an old and vintage painting, and while Sophia is not exactly a person that can see whether or not an art is expensive or not, the gold trims of the painting's frame as well as the prismatic glass protecting its front screams extravagant and lavish to her.

After registering her name and getting the map file, she walks deeper into the hallway of the hospital towards where the psychiatrist section lies. The hallways separating each medical section are quite large, with a lot of metal doors leading to even more hallways that Sophia doesn't bother trying to check where it goes to. The hallways are also decorated with a lot of plants and windows overlooking the miniature garden outside, creating an atmosphere that feels natural and fresh with the sunlight coming in through, something that Sophia can now appreciate.

"Oh... You're here again. Miss Sophia, is it?" The nurse asks as Sophia hands her the map after arriving in the psychiatric section's hallway that opens up into the desk of the same nurse that had taken her body information when she first came here last week.

Sophia raises her eyebrows and stares at the nurse with her eyes open wide, looking almost comical.

"Don't look at me like that. There's not a lot of people going into this section of the hospital, y'know? This here being a mental health section and all. People out there still think that this medical field is just full of magical honky-ponky and bullshittery, tending to avoid going here altogether," the nurse shrugs nonchalantly.

Sophia nods, but is more surprised at the nurse's foul and casual language. She should probably expect it already, judging by how... blasé she was with her language and actions

towards Sophia last week, but it still bewilders her nonetheless. After all, this particular nurse seems completely different and in contrast with the other nurses and even doctors that she has met in this hospital.

“So, yes. Aside from the repeat patients, which I can just call customers at this point, honestly, not a lot of new people going here. It’s just extremely easy to remember when a new face goes in here, as it will immediately scream an odd one out to me. Although, maybe now you’re not a new face after all, ey?”

Sophia disagrees, but she keeps mum. After all, while she is great with data and writing, remembering people’s faces is not... exactly her forte. She even forgets the faces and names of her distant relatives, let alone some strangers she meets at her office once in a while. It is quite impressive that the nurse manages to remember her name *and* face so quickly, not hesitating in the slightest of calling her name out when Sophia just arrives here.

After thanking the nurse for all her help, Sophia walks onward further inside the psychiatric section and finds the familiar tag for Dr. Lestari’s room. Sophia sits down on a metal chair near Dr. Lestari’s room, settling her bag on top of her hips and hugging it with both of her arms.

Sophia notices that unlike last week, there are not a lot of other visitors waiting with her this time. In fact, there is only one other patient sitting on a metal chair in front of a room with the tag ‘Dr. Mayaka’ on it, and no one else. Sophia finds it a bit weird that there are quite a lot of patients that were sitting with her last week, but very few of them today, but doesn’t think too much of it.

She gulps nervously, her earlier bravado all gone in the face of the impending doom. What will she say to Dr. Lestari once she goes in? Will she be disappointed when she learns that Sophia hasn’t met with a lot of improvements? No matter how nice Dr. Lestari is, she definitely also has her own limits of what is okay and what is not okay, right? How can she explain it to Dr. Lestari that she has tried her best and follows every single one of the homework the doctor has given her to the letter, but is met with no improvements, and rather, makes her nightmare seem a bit worse instead?

“Miss Sophia Indrawati?”

Sophia’s thought is broken when Dr. Lestari’s nurse calls for her name, meaning that it’s finally her turn to go inside. She rises from her metal chair and smiles awkwardly at the nurse before walking inside the room, her steps all stiff and feels and probably looks wrong, too.

You got this, Sophia. It’s all right.

Dr. Lestari's room, like last week, is much warmer than the rest of the hospital, something that Sophia is very grateful for. She just realizes that Dr. Lestari's room is full of portraits, with each portrait having Dr. Lestari frame herself. Each portrait is usually a picture of Dr. Lestari with one other person, and they all are very different, making Sophia confused in who exactly they are. They don't look like people who are working in the hospital, at least. Especially since one of them is a guy in a pilot uniform.

"Ah. Curious about those portraits?" Dr. Lestari asks with a smile.

"Eh... Ah, sorry," Sophia's face burns when she realizes that she got caught staring. "They just look so unique and happy, and I have never seen like... um, a lot of portraits, I suppose, in a doctor's room? Usually only, like, medical diagrams or such," Sophia continues.

"Don't worry about it," Dr. Lestari chuckles as she waves her hand. "They're basically portraits of me with my patients. Some sort of memento, you can say."

Sophia's eyes widen as she observes the portraits more carefully. Almost all of them have a big grin that splits their face wide, as well as crinkled eyes that create an enchanting and beautiful, practically radiating joy. Their cheeks are pink from delight, and Sophia can't even spot any eyebags whatsoever in almost all the people in the portraits. Everyone in the portrait that is taking a picture with Dr. Lestari seems so... happy, carefree.

They look like they have no ounce of worry in the world. Is this real? How can someone who spends so much time and money to go to a psychiatrist look this happy? Doesn't someone go to one because they feel like they have a mental health problem they need to solve?

Sophia can't imagine being able to ever look that happy, even if by some miraculous event she has successfully solved her nightmare issues. After all, how can a human being live without being haunted by any problem whatsoever? Isn't that just asking for the impossible? As far as she knows, everyone will have their own issues to deal with, no matter how small, especially if they are people like her, who even need to go to a psychiatrist to begin with. How can someone that is similar to her, that has reached such a low point in life to need to go to a psychiatrist, be able to look that happy and carefree?

Or is she wrong, and people might still go to a psychiatrist even though they don't have any mental health problems? Sophia can't understand this.

"Well, Sophia, how is your week since we last met?" Dr. Lestari asks with a warm smile on her face, as per usual.

'She is always so kind and warm. I'm glad it's not just a one-time thing she does for her new patients.'

“Well, um...” Sophia doesn’t know where to start. “I did everything that you’ve told me to do last week, doctor. This is my diary, ...”

Sophia pauses for a moment as she opens her bag and hands Dr. Lestari two of the diaries that she has written on diligently over the past week. A big part of Sophia urges her to yank the book away from Dr. Lestari’s hands, feeling as if she just handed the doctor the biggest secrets she has had in the bottom of her heart. After all, she did write a lot of things that she has been worried about in the book. There are also a lot of things that she can even consider as borderline shameful, but she knows that it’s for the best if Dr. Lestari knows exactly what she is dealing with. In addition, it will be better for Dr. Lestari to read it through the books instead of Sophia telling it to her by herself, right now. It will be much harder to speak about all of her worries no matter how much she knows that Dr. Lestari may not judge her.

“But...” Sophia finds herself still struggling to utter the truth.

“Go on. It’s okay, Sophia,” Dr. Lestari flashes her another warm smile, as if she already knows exactly what Sophia is struggling about.

“It’s just.. I did everything you told me, doctor, but it feels like I haven’t seen any progress at all. I feel like my nightmares even got worse? Which is, not, not good,” Sophia starts speaking once more. “It’s not good because I really need this to succeed? Or at least not get worse? Because my job is at stake and I can’t really afford to be accidentally sleeping in my office again because of this.”

“I see, thank you for telling me, Sophia. May I read your books for a moment?” Dr. Lestari asks.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Sophia says as she nods.

Minutes pass as Sophia watches Dr. Lestari flipping page through page of the two books that she has written on. She fidgets continuously on her seat, unable to stay still. Her bad habit kicks in and she finds herself biting on her nails on more than one occasion, even accidentally drawing blood at some point.

“Alright. Thank you for waiting, Sophia. Here’s the thing. In all honesty, I do know of a doctor who can handle problems with nightmares much better than I do, simply because his speciality lies in the studies of the brain and the application of lucid dreaming,” Dr. Lestari closes both books and returns it back to Sophia.

Sophia, however, only stares blankly at Dr. Lestari, not registering that the doctor is currently outstretching her hand out, clearly indicating that Sophia should have retrieved her books back at some point. But her mind is full of one single, resounding thought.

Does Dr. Lestari just abandon her? Does she just give up on her?

“Wait, Sophia, please listen to me first.”

Sophia’s unfocused eyes regain its light slowly when she hears that, although it’s obvious that her mind is still in turmoil. She doesn’t respond back to Dr. Lestari’s probing, only staring straight at the doctor with empty eyes.

“I’m not giving up on you, if that’s currently what’s on your mind. Rather, it’s quite the opposite. I will still be supervising you and recording your progress as we go on, and I will still be the main person who will be in charge of your mental health. What I want to propose is just a new method of how we can help treat your nightmare issues, not switch you to a different doctor entirely,” Dr. Lestari speaks again patiently, her tone not frantic or upset. Rather, she still sounds like usual, patient and kind, pronouncing each word clearly so that Sophia will be able to hear her even in her muddled state of mind.

“You’re—you’re not giving up on me?” Sophia asks, her broken hope slowly mending itself back.

“Of course not. You’re my patient first and foremost, after all. You can also say no if you’re too afraid of meeting another doctor. But in my opinion, his help in our session will be very helpful since it’ll be delving and trying directly to solve your nightmare problems,” Dr. Lestari says gently.

“Um...” Sophia hesitates. While she now knows that not a lot of doctors, or psychiatrists, in that matter, are scary and judging, she still doesn’t know if she’s ready yet to have to meet another doctor so soon. “Why do you think the new doctor can help me, Dr. Lestari?”

“Well, for starters, the doctor is Dr. Bernard, and he is a specialist in the subject of brain and sleep, particularly about dreams. He is probably one of the only doctors who has that kind of specialization in Indonesia, honestly, but he is really good at his job. The reason why I recommend him is because I’ve seen firsthand what he can do for patients that have nightmare problems previously, including some of my own patients, just like you,” Dr. Lestari replies.

“Brain specialist...” Sophia mumbles under her breath, but it basically means almost nothing to her, someone who knows absolutely nothing about doctors or medical knowledge, or anything scientific at all, really. She was not exactly the best student at biology and physics when she was at high school.

“Wait a minute, did you just say Dr. Bernard?” Sophia suddenly snaps out of her thought to ask the question.

She suddenly realizes why the name sounds so incredibly familiar to her despite sounding foreign at the same time. Isn't that the name of the exact same doctor that she sees when she first comes in here? The one brain specialist doctor that she thinks is out of place because it is situated together with the psychiatric section?

"Yes. I suppose you remember his name by looking at his plaque in front of his door? He is indeed situated here with us psychiatrists since his main job practically requires him to be around us and our patients all the time. It's not only me that also asks for his help regarding his expertise with our patients, but other psychiatrists here as well, like Dr. Maya and Dr. Lian next door," Dr. Lestari laughs. Sophia reckons it's because the doctor can see that Sophia has recognized the name. Maybe other patients have also done the same before?

"Wait... when you mention other patients by other doctors as well, does that mean that there are actually a lot of people that have similar problems like mine?" Sophia asks, curious.

After all, she has always thought of herself as... lower, or worth less, because of her issues with sleeping and nightmares that haunt her almost every time she goes to bed. Just like what Wanda has drilled into her head so many times, people who have trouble that they can't solve themselves are pathetic. And she, who can't even solve something as trivial as going to sleep without any troubles, just belongs to the bottom of the barrel. Because if she can't even do something about an issue that doesn't seem like it even should be one at all, how can she survive in life when life eventually throws something much more sinister and problematic at her? Like Wanda has also said, won't she just keel over and die?

But... But now, Sophia realizes that there are actually people that have similar problems like her in this world? People who have a problem so trivial in other people's eyes, but they who suffer from it actually have to go out of their way to meet a psychiatrist and even a brain specialist to get help and to solve it?

That means... If there are more people like her in the world...

No. If there are more people like her in *this country*, in Indonesia, then doesn't that make Sophia a person that is not completely hopeless and that she is not a waste of space? Because there are also other people out there, living in this same land as hers, in the same country, heck, even in the same *city*, if they also go to the same hospital as she does, that also struggles with this condition. That they also have this issue hindering their life to the point that they have to seek a psychiatrist for professional help, *just like she does now*.

Then all that... Doesn't all that lead to the one immutable fact that she is a perfectly, completely, *normal* person?

It may seem trivial to other people, even borderline insulting, that all of their hard work, money, time, mental and physical health, is only being paid by the form of acknowledgment that they're a normal human being. It might be something obvious to other people, something that all human beings should have known already. Something that doesn't even need to be told, or to be a realization.

But to Sophia, it seems like she has been granted one of the greatest gifts at this moment. It feels like all the struggles that she has had with trying to open that spreadsheet Becky has given her, trying to muster all the courage to go to a psychiatrist, all the tears she has shed for all of the things that she has had problems and issue with, they seem to have all been paid at last.

She is *normal*. She is perfectly, beautifully normal.

She is not a failure of a human being. She is not lower than anybody else because she has an issue so trivial, which is that she cannot have a sound sleep without being disturbed by nightmares, and how much her nightmares have impacted her life, and even her daily work and routine, to the point where she almost gets fired over it. But there are people out there near her who have the same exact people like her, and that means that her problems are not trivial anymore. That her problems are normal, and that it is normal and is okay to seek professional, medical help for it.

She has only realized that she is crying when Dr. Lestari offers her a box of tissues with a smile without saying any further words, as if she knows what exactly is going on through Sophia's mind right now. Maybe she does, who knows. Sophia never brags herself as someone who can hide her emotions, after all. In fact, it is more like she is an open book, so she won't even be surprised if Dr. Lestari knows what she is thinking right now.

But she is not ashamed of it. Not anymore. After all, there are people out there just like her, so if she gets ashamed because of her issues now, won't that also be putting down all the other people like her who have the same problems?

Sure, it might be true that she hasn't really seen any real progress yet. That she still struggles with nightmares almost every single night, and that the threat of being fired if that doesn't get fixed soon is still looming over her head, but she will never realize that there are other people like her out there that is similar to her, and that she is a completely normal human being with a completely normal problem.

And that... that is beautiful.

VIII

Reverie

Dr. Bernard is scary.

Or at least, that is the first impression that Sophia has over the doctor that has a practice room completely different from Dr. Lestari's. Firstly, it has the medical diagrams that Sophia expects a doctor's room would usually have. But what caught Sophia off-guard is the sheer amount of it. They are basically everywhere, covering almost every single inch of the walls in the room. They are basically side to side, diagrams of the brain and the human's head as well as the x-rays and many other things that Sophia can't even begin to understand.

In fact, some of the medical diagrams are even stacked on top of each other, reminding Sophia of Becky's room when she comes to visit years ago. Becky's room is full of K-pop idol posters, just stacked on top of each other in order to be able to stick as many posters on her walls as possible.

Aside from the medical diagrams, in the middle of the room also sits a very big tube-like machine that probably can fit two whole bodies inside of it. It might serve as a scanner of the body of some sort? Sophia is not exactly sure herself. The walls and floors are painted in a muted dark gray color, creating some sort of a neutral, gloomy ambience. There is also a lot of paper lying around on the desk which houses none other than Dr. Bernard himself.

Dr. Bernard looks exactly the opposite to what Dr. Lestari does. He is stern, looks serious, and there is no smile to be seen on his face. Sophia reckons he is probably around early 40 years old, although the round glasses he has on his face does make him quite a bit older than he currently is, simply because it just makes his stern look that much more accentuated and amplified.

"Yes, Lestari? What is it?" Dr. Bernard asks without even once looking in their way, his eyes still focused on the documents on his hands.

"Hello, Dr. Bernard. This is a patient of mine that might be able to use your help a lot. I will really appreciate it if you can take on her case," Dr. Lestari says with a smile, although it is obvious that her tone is much more polite and composed as compared to the usual, when she is talking with her nurses, or with Sophia herself.

Sophia finds herself surprised by this fact. Does that mean that Dr. Bernard has a higher position than Dr. Lestari? Or at least that Dr. Lestari respects Dr. Bernard alone? It seems a bit odd to her, as in her point of view, Dr. Bernard is the one odd doctor in this psychiatric section,

with a specialization different from the other three doctors. Sophia will think that Dr. Bernard will be the one to be more polite to Dr. Lestari and the others, not the other way around. After all, won't Dr. Bernard not have any patients if it is not for the psychiatrists recommending him themselves?

Sophia chooses to not voice any of her inner thoughts and questions, knowing better than to piss off a doctor that might have a role to do in her journey to be able to get better with her nightmare problems. She will just have to wait and see for herself.

"My help, eh?" Dr. Bernard seems to perk up noticeably at that, and cast his gaze on Sophia.

Sophia squirms at that, feeling weirded out. Somehow, that scrutinizing gaze makes her feel like she is a frog ready to be butchered under the operating table, to be examined thoroughly for her parts.

"Hmm. How well do you know about lucid dreaming, Miss?" Dr. Bernard asks.

"Eh? Um..." Sophia finds herself caught off guard by the sudden, weird question. "Not much. But, why the sudden question?"

Sophia can't help but be curious. Of course, why lucid dreaming specifically? Does Dr. Bernard even know what she is struggling with? Dr. Lestari hasn't said anything further other than the fact that Sophia might need his specialty.

"Well, you are struggling with sleeping problems, or nightmare problems, or a mix of both, correct? And these are probably caused by your mental health issues, whatever they may be, yes? Might be anxiety, depression, PTSD, blah blah, you got my point."

Sophia stares blankly at the rapid fire explanation that Dr. Bernard is almost spitting out at her face, both at the fact that she barely understands a single word he's saying with how fast he's speaking, and another fact is that when she finally piece together the words thrown her way, she realizes that Dr. Bernard is completely correct and on the marks.

Sophia can see Dr. Bernard rolling his eyes when Sophia stays mum, staring at him.

"How do I know, you ask? Another easy question to answer. If it's Lestari's patient, then they will suffer from some sort of mental health, yes? Why else would you go to a psychiatrist otherwise?" Dr. Bernard continues his train of words and ends it with a weary sigh, like he's tired of answering similar questions over and over again.

"Secondly, you come here to seek my help, yes? Seeing as I am a specialist on the brain and specifically, the subject of dreams and lucid dreaming, then you must have one of the two

problems, or a combination of both, which are nightmares, or sleeping problems,” Dr. Bernard finishes his speech with a thin smile.

“Ah,” Sophia can’t reply much to that.

After all, everything that Dr. Bernard has said is completely true. She truly has nightmare problems, and those problems do stem from her mental health issues.

“Well, now that that issue is settled, back to my original question. The reason why I ask about how much do you know about lucid dreaming? It is simply because the method I will use to treat your nightmares is related to it,” Dr. Bernard continues his speech after Sophia doesn’t speak up after a while.

“Ah, related to lucid dreaming?” Sophia asks, unsure about where the conversation is leading.

How can lucid dreaming be used to treat nightmares at all? The little things she has heard about that particular dream is that dreamers are aware that they are dreaming when they dream.

“Before we go any further, take a seat first, will you? Feels a bit weird speaking when I have to look up to someone,” Dr. Bernard replies with a loud ‘tsk sound.

Sophia gets startled at that, just realizing that she, indeed, is currently still standing up, with two perfectly good chairs right in front of her, with one of them occupying Dr. Lestari herself. Cheeks blushing from embarrassment, Sophia finally settles down on one of the metal chairs with a soft cushion on it.

“Now then. I guess a bit of explanation is needed so we are all in one page. I still think introductions are unnecessary, though. You know my name, and I will... remember yours sooner or later. Probably,” Dr. Bernard thumbs his glasses as he starts explaining, while opening up some loose papers lying on his desk.

Sophia fidgets nervously on her seat, her confidence dwindling as the second pass. The more she listens to him, the more... dubious Sophia has come to be, more or less. Is this really the doctor that can help her? He sounds so... uncaring, completely different from Dr. Lestari’s personal, understanding tone. By the sound of it, he doesn’t even want to bother remembering the name of his patients. How can someone like him have an ounce of understanding about mental health issues?

If Dr. Lestari is not right beside her, Sophia would have made some sort of a poor excuse and fled this room long ago, back to her comfort zone, away from the doctor that looks at her as if she is a lab rat test.

But she doesn't want to do that to Dr. Lestari, especially without trying first, or even listening to the new doctor. Even if she doesn't know much about the personal life of these two doctors, Sophia can see that Dr. Lestari respects Dr. Bernard greatly, whether it be genuine or out of seniority or whatever. But the case is, Dr. Lestari is the one who has brought her to Dr. Bernard, and if she leaves just like that, then she would probably embarrass Dr. Lestari and make her feel flustered and awkward in front of Dr. Bernard.

Sophia is someone who is well-acquainted with those kinds of feelings, and the last thing she wants to do is to be the cause for someone who has been so kind towards her to feel the same kind of emotions. It would be just like repaying kindness with malice.

"First things first. Lucid dreaming. It's the subject that I've been studying for many, many years, and a subject that many believe to not exist at all. A myth, if you will. Pah," Dr. Bernard sneers as he utters the last word of his sentence. "Anyway. You tell me first. What do you know about lucid dreaming, if at all?"

Sophia squirms as she's suddenly put on the spot. "Um. Well, again, not much, really. I don't even know if what I know is factual or not, per se."

"It's fine. Go ahead and tell me all your theories. I've heard and seen all sorts of ridiculous bullshit people spew about lucid dreaming over the course of years, I doubt anything you say will be of any surprise to me," Dr. Bernard waves his left hand, as if trying to wave Sophia's worries about saying the wrong thing away.

"Um... I guess in my mind, lucid dreaming is what happens when someone is dreaming, but they are quite aware that they are dreaming? And that it happens very rarely?" Sophia starts to speak, her voice getting softer and softer the more she speaks.

"Correct on some parts, actually. Color me surprised," Dr. Bernard chuckles.

It is probably the first time Sophia's seen the stoic doctor smiles.

"You're correct in that someone who lucid dreams is aware that they are dreaming. It's an interesting concept, isn't it? How can you dream, but be aware that you are dreaming at the same time? And how can you use this to help solve your issues if you, say, have a nightmare disorder?"

"So it brings us to your second statement, which is slightly incorrect. I say slightly because although it is true that it doesn't happen very often, especially when compared to normal dreams. However, what many people don't know is that lucid dreaming can actually be learned. And that is the reason why I'm here," Dr. Bernard finishes his small speech with a proud grin.

"And may I ask how will this lucid dreaming help me so that I can get better with my nightmare problems, Dr. Bernard?" Sophia asks tentatively.

"And may I ask how will this lucid dreaming help me so that I can get better with my nightmare problems, Dr. Bernard?" Sophia asks tentatively.

"That's easy enough to answer. But honestly? It is something that you can only believe after you've tried it out yourself, so I will only give the very basic explanation. As you already know yourself, lucid dreaming is a state when someone who is dreaming, is fully aware that they are currently dreaming. With this knowledge, or realization, I suppose, also comes the power to *control* their own dreams. You following me so far?" Dr. Bernard starts explaining again in his usual rapid fire way.

Sophia nods, but is still unsure herself where this conversation is going. A part of it is because the doctor is speaking very fast, almost hurriedly, causing Sophia to need several seconds to process what the words even mean after the doctor has stopped talking. Another big part of it is because, well, she is truly not an expert at all this stuff about dreams and such, making her feel somewhat lost and confused. But at the same time, can she find herself understanding parts of it? It feels very strange, like being able to understand and not comprehend the same thing at the same time.

"Good. Now, then. Imagine if you, in this case, a sufferer of frequent nightmare disorders and whatever, is able to lucid dreaming yourself, and able to know that you are in fact dreaming, and are not experiencing a horrifying reality. And of course, if you know this fact, then you will also be able to do something else very important here. The key factor to how you can get better. Can you guess what it is?" Dr. Bernard continues.

Sophia considers the question for a moment, imagining herself as a person capable of lucid dreaming at will, just like what Dr. Bernard asks her to do. If she's dreaming about Wanda, or Maria, or Aaron... but able to know that she is only in a nightmare, a dream, something that is not real. A reality that only she herself conjures and experiences in. If she's fully aware of that fact when she's being tormented by her nightmare, then...

"Maybe... Wake up entirely? So that I can escape from the nightmare?" Sophia comes to this single conclusion, although she sounds a bit unsure herself.

If she wakes up entirely by having a lucid dream, then... won't that defeat the purpose entirely? Sure, she will be able to escape unscathed from her terrible nightmares that way, but it won't solve the root of the problem, will it not? The main reason why she needs to solve her nightmare problems stems from the fact that she can't sleep soundly at night, leaving her to feel

extremely tired and lethargic later on during her work day, which causes her to sleep in her office. Sophia not being able to get the minimum required hours of sleep is the main reason why she always feels sleepy at work and ends up falling asleep at her desk, which is also why she even gets called to Aaron's office, with the threat of being fired still nagging her in the back of her mind.

Who is to say that she can fall asleep easily after waking up from a lucid dream, even though it is she herself that forces herself to wake up to escape from that hellish nightmare? After all, no matter what, she is sure that the nightmare will still have its impact on her, even if she later will realize that all of the horrifying scenes are a dream and not the current reality. What then, if she can't fall back asleep after waking up from her nightmare, or from her lucid dream? She will just go back to square one.

"I'm sure you can already imagine the consequences yourself with your answer. It will not truly solve your problem, yes?" Dr. Bernard's voice snaps Sophia out of her line of thoughts.

Sophia nods, feeling defeated, but Dr. Bernard is quick to speak up again.

"Hey now, don't show that face just yet. I didn't say that your answer is correct," Dr. Bernard gives Sophia a smirk.

"So, there is another way, doctor?" Sophia asks again, feeling as if she is once again thrown into a loop.

Today does feel like a ride on a roller coaster. Dr. Bernard is completely unpredictable, and Sophia can never really tell what the doctor is thinking, if at all. He also seems to really like firing off questions at Sophia, as well as long-winded explanations that Sophia's brain can't really comprehend.

Geniuses are always on another level entirely.

"Dr. Bernard, try not to pick on Sophia too much, won't you?" Dr. Lestari chides, finally stepping in after a long while.

Sophia is grateful for that, and shows Dr. Lestari a smile that she hopes can convey how she feels. Dr. Lestari hasn't said a lot of words after they have stepped into Dr. Bernard's office. Sophia is not entirely sure why. Maybe she feels like she has to respect the doctor who is the master or the owner of this office, therefore giving the mic to him so that she will not interrupt and feel like she is trying to intrude on his expertise? Or maybe she also doesn't understand much of the topic about lucid dreaming, just like Sophia is? Whatever the reason might be, Sophia finds herself extremely grateful when Dr. Lestari chooses to speak up now. While Sophia doesn't feel like she is being bullied or anything, far from it, actually, she knows firsthand how

being bullied is like, after all, she does feel extremely confused and lost, and feel like her emotions are being swung back and forth by this new doctor. Maybe it's the eccentric way on how he brings himself, but Sophia notices that Dr. Bernard is not a person who truly cares about how she feels, unlike Dr. Lestari.

Of course, it doesn't mean that Dr. Bernard is mean or anything. If he is, then Sophia doubts that Dr. Lestari will even bring her to his office at all. Sophia might not trust this new doctor, but she at least trusts that Dr. Lestari won't deliberately try to hurt her.

"C'mon, Lestari, stop exaggerating. I'm just trying to get the girl to start working with her brain on her own. She won't improve if I have to explain every single little detail to her, will she? If she comes to the correct conclusion on her own, she will be much more motivated to work on her goal and believes more in it, rather than some unknown doctor with some certificates and degrees under his belt telling her that this is right and that is what she should do, won't you agree?" Dr. Bernard replies with a huff.

Even Sophia can *feel* the eyeroll behind those sentences. But... what he says does indeed make sense. Sophia can definitely see that she will be more fired up if she can land on the right conclusion by herself instead of being told about it by others. It will be much easier to work towards a goal that she has made herself, instead of fighting towards something that she hasn't fully understood just yet.

Sophia can hear Dr. Lestari sigh in exasperation, but she does fall back to her silence once more. Sophia believes that she can take her silence as an agreement to what Dr. Bernard has just said.

"Well, I'll give you a little hint, at least. By lucid dreaming, you are able to have the realization that you are dreaming, which will also grant you the sense of *power*, the ability to *control* your own dreams. You see where I'm going with this?" Dr. Bernard continues once more.

Sophia blinks and ponders the question, before realization suddenly hits her. It feels like an eureka, where she suddenly sees the light behind the dark tunnel, like a hidden door is finally exposed before her eyes. That might actually be possible. True, she doesn't know much about lucid dreaming, let alone experience it at all, but if you are capable of realizing that you are only in a dream, then maybe you can also change the contents of the dream? Just like how a person in reality is able to change what happens near them. A human being can easily change their environment, after all. Cleaning their room, moving stuff away, leaving a toxic partner or friend behind, going to a spa to unwind, and many other things that she herself has done. If she can change her dreams just like she can change the reality around her by realizing that she is

currently only dreaming and is not experiencing a brutal reality, won't that mean that, with lucid dreaming, she is able to make her nightmares better, or erase it entirely?

Sophia becomes more and more focused in her line of thought, her current environment blurring into an unrecognizable mess that she doesn't pay any attention to, and she can barely hear Dr. Bernard and Dr. Lestari conversing as the minutes pass, her imaginations and thoughts running wild.

What if... What if she can change the contents of her nightmare into something that will not be as scary? What if she changes her nightmare into a scene that she has imagined so many times, a scene that she desperately wishes can happen someday, but can only stay in the deepest part of her mind for now? What if she can finally implement the scene of her fighting back Wanda's and Maria's brutal verbal and physical abuse, and finally fighting for her own independence and rights for once? What if she can finally talk back to them and scream at her that they don't deserve to trample all over her, especially after they've taken all of her father's kindness towards them and that everything that they have now is all thanks to him? What if she can point at Maria and finally says that she is not better than Sophia just because she always shows off her boobs and thighs to everyone that cares to see?

It will be so, so satisfying. To be able to change her nightmares into something that she can only dream about when no one else is around, a faint and pointless dream that she knows has almost no chance to ever come to fruition at all.

"So how can I start learning about this... lucid dreaming?" Sophia asks, a glitter of new-found hope in her eyes.

"Well, I have to warn you right away beforehand. It will not be easy. It will take a lot of trial and error. A lot of my patients have given up simply because they don't want to go through the difficult process, but nothing is instant, and I'm not here to give you some false hope that you will be able to do this instantly," Dr. Bernard says with a sharp tone in his words.

Sophia bites her lower lip at that. Despite already having this intuition herself, hearing it straight from the doctor certainly doesn't help in making her feel any better.

Then Dr. Bernard starts his speech. If Sophia thinks that he's speaking fast before, then the brain specialist doctor is borderline rapping now that he starts explaining about lucid dreaming and how it works. Sophia is pretty sure that the next hour of what happens consist only of non-stop talking from Dr. Bernard himself, which, how does he even do that without even taking a toilet break or, god forbid, a drink break? Sophia is pretty sure at this point that

Dr. Bernard doesn't even need to breathe by how fast he is talking, and how he seems to not even need to pause between sentences.

Sophia is half convinced this is a superpower only Dr. Bernard has. Even all those kids at her school back then didn't even have the speed and stability that Dr. Bernard has over his mastery of words and explaining things.

From the long-winded explanation, Sophia can conclude basically two things, that while lucid dreaming is a learned skill, it is not necessarily an easy one to learn. And the second one is that failure is almost certainly a guarantee, especially for the first few tries. Dr. Bernard also gives her hastily scribbled notes to keep to herself, on basically steps on how to induce lucid dreams into her sleep.

In theory, it sounds... easy enough. Pretty simple. The first one is to keep a dream journal, which will add the journal that she needs to write on to a whopping amount of three. She is basically required to keep note of every dream that she has experienced right away after she has just woken up. Dr. Bernard even asks her to try to record her voice speaking and describing about her most recent dream, be it a nightmare or a normal, non-nightmare one, if she is too tired to write down in her journal right after waking up. This method is basically to ensure that Sophia will be able to recognize dream patterns and situations much more easily, which can help in triggering her lucid dreams.

Secondly, she is also asked to do what Dr. Bernard dubs as 'reality checks'. This is basically asking Sophia to converse with herself, which does seem easy for her simply because she has done it for as long as she is alive. She is asked to ask herself whether she is awake or sleeping, and since lucidity is not possible in a dream that is not a lucid dream, being able to answer this question every time she asks it to herself will be able to prove that they are aware of their surroundings. This is done in the hopes that she will be able to achieve lucidity even in her sleep sooner or later.

Lastly is basically to convince and talk to herself that she will be able to do lucid dreaming, and that the next time she sleeps, she will be able to induce lucid dreaming. The last step sounds the most absurd to her. If she can make anything come true just from speaking it to herself, then won't she wish to be rich by saying it out loud years ago and it will happen immediately? But Dr. Bernard insists that in the world of the humans' brains, dreams, and consciousness, the power of suggestion is extremely strong and has a big potential to be able to make things come true. With this, Sophia finally relents and promises to do these three things every so often.

Dr. Bernard also has given Sophia his phone number and tells her to call him anytime when she sees progress, no matter how tiny it might be. Being able to track and control her progress with lucid dreams will help her immensely to induce a successful one, he says. Sophia also promises to do this.

What scares her the most, however, is not the idea that she might not be able to induce a lucid dream. If that is the case, then she can just keep trying over and over again until she is able to induce it one day. No, what scares her is what comes after she has successfully lucid dreams. The idea that she has to be able to change the content of her lucid dreams, that's what scares her the most. Dream or not, the main reason why she even has those nightmares haunting her sleep almost every single night is because she has experienced those scenes first hand in real life. She has known exactly how it feels, and despite having the wish to be able to fight back some day.

She wants to. Of course she wants to. She wants to make the scene of her being able to fight back at least possible, even if it is only in her dreams. Because if she's not able to do that much, then how can she ever fight them back if they, god forbid, show up once more in her life in the future? It doesn't need to be said that she wishes that those days will never happen again, but she can never be sure, especially if they still haunt her nightmare every single night.

Sophia supposes that she should just wait and see, or try it first. It's scary. Of course it is. The idea of being able to fight back the monsters that have been a stain in her life is an idea that she would love to see come true, even if it will only happen in her dreams, but the scene that might come after also scares her enough that it sends a chill down her bones. She can already imagine Wanda's furious face at being talked back to, her hand going up, getting ready to give her a fatal blow that might just end her life this one time.

IX

The Dreamer Glittered in Stardust

Three weeks have passed. Sophia thinks her ears are ringing from Dr. Bernard's loud voice that seems to have a never-ending curse to talk forever, basically calling Sophia first before she can even call him, and asking her how her progress goes. It feels like it happens almost every minute or so.

It is almost maddening, if not for the simple fact that Dr. Bernard's incessant questions are also helping her and distracting her from the horrors of her nightmares. His questions, remarks, and probing almost annoy Sophia to no end, enough for her to be completely focusing her efforts on trying not to hang up on the senior doctor and unconsciously forgetting about the aftereffects of her nightmares that still happen every so often.

Maybe this is what she needs all along. Someone to bother her day and night, Sophia thinks ruefully. She wonders how the doctor can even keep his job as a respectable doctor if what he's doing all week is just call her and message her again and again. It is almost impressive.

Sophia sighs and puts down her last journal of the day down to her desk, finished from writing in all three of them. It is tiring for sure, having to work on three journals daily, especially the newest journal that Dr. Bernard has asked her to do. Writing down her nightmares every day, right away after she has just woken up from them, especially, is far from easy. As usual, she is often left trembling and shaking after waking up from her nightmare. In the worst cases, she even has to run to the bathroom to vomit. More often than not, she ends up recording her own trembling voice to be able to record down what her nightmare is, but recording them also doesn't make things any less harder for her.

Verbally stating what she has just experienced is hellish. It is as if she is forced to experience the nightmare all over again, and saying it in words, saying it herself what has just happened, feels almost as if she is acknowledging that those things just happened in real life, instead of only in a nightmare, a dream.

However, she can actually feel it... starting to work. Very slowly, but progress nonetheless. In some of her nightmares, it feels as if she is actually... awake? The feeling is very faint, and is almost gone the next moment, but then it will return again not long after. It all feels very weird and almost sends her to insanity, but when she reports her progress to Dr. Bernard, he does say that it is actually normal to experience those sorts of moments, that it sometimes has to stabilize first for a lot of people trying to induce lucid dreaming for the first time.

Sophia changes to her soft, comfy satin pajamas after brushing her teeth, stretching her body and feeling the satisfying pops that happen all over her neck, back, and arms. After making sure that she has set the alarm, she climbs into her soft bed, feeling the mattress dip under her weight. She lays her head on the similarly soft, satin pillow as she reaches for her faux fur blanket that just feels amazing on her skin. Her bedroom is nothing but exquisite, especially compared with the rest of the mostly barebone apartment. After all, Sophia has tried to make sure that she gets nothing but the best for everything in her bedroom, in the hopes that she will be able to reduce her nightmares if she goes to bed feeling comfortable and soft, with all the right equipment.

Her eyes start to grow heavy as the seconds tick, the soft feeling of the pillow as well as the warm blanket cocooning her in a feeling of sleepiness, her dreamland just slightly out of reach now.

And then it finally happens.

One moment she is laying on her bed, and the next she is transported to a vast, black sea that looks akin to space, empty and void. Weirdly enough, Sophia can still breathe just fine, meaning that this is not... exactly in space. Sophia frowns slightly as she asks herself the same question that she has been asking multiple times for the past few days now,

Am I awake? Or am I in a dream? If she is indeed awake, there is no way that she can be transported to a sea of blackness without any warning, right? Especially since she remembers...

She remembers going to sleep, she remembers tucking herself in, hugging her bolster close to her body, as she lays her heavy head on the soft satin sheets.

That's right. She just fell asleep not too long ago, didn't she? Then does that mean that she is dreaming? But why does she feel so... awake at the same time? Is this what lucid dreaming is?

She's not entirely sure if it is a lucid dream or not, but when she blinks her eyes again, Wanda is suddenly in front of her, shouting all kinds of curse words at her way. Her stepmom's right hand is also holding a broom with a metal pole, a weapon ready to be struck anytime if Sophia even shows any hints of disobedience or fighting back, be it verbally or physically. Wanda will never allow her to do so unscathed.

Sophia blinks again, and the scene is distorted slightly, becoming blurry, as if she is not standing straight anymore, but rather curling into a ball position in front of Wanda, trying to protect her head from being hit if Wanda deems it necessary to move her right hand down her

way. It is also Sophia's way of trying to block out the hurtful words that Wanda is throwing carelessly at her, as if it can prevent her from being broken down even further than she already is.

She's not entirely sure if it is a lucid dream or not, but when she blinks her eyes, Wanda is in front of her, shouting all kinds of curse words in her way. Her stepmom's right hand is also holding a broom with a metal pole, a weapon ready to be struck anytime if Sophia even shows any hints of disobedience or fighting back, be it verbally or physically. Wanda will never allow her to do so unscathed.

Sophia blinks again, and the scene is distorted slightly, becoming blurry, as if she is not standing straight anymore, but rather curling into a ball position in front of Wanda, trying to protect her head from being hit if Wanda deems it necessary to move her right hand down her way. It is also Sophia's way of trying to block out the hurtful words that Wanda is throwing carelessly at her, as if it can prevent her from being broken down even further than she already is.

Is this a dream? Sophia asks unconsciously, feeling as if she is weirdly detached by the scene in front of her. Sure, the feeling of terror and fear is always there, ever consistent and never leaving her heart, but this feels different somehow. Like she is... more in control? When she never is, not when Wanda is concerned.

While she can't be entirely sure herself, most of the time, when she's dreaming, all she remembers after she's finally woke up is the vivid details of her nightmares, as well as how floaty she feels whenever she is in the dream.

But this particular dream is anything but that. The usual floating is long gone, replaced with some sort of a dull feeling of being there, with everything around her feels real but unreal at the same time. It feels real because she can feel, she can see through her eyes. She can feel how cold it is in this dark, empty space with naught but, well, darkness. It's like a void, where no life and being exists yet in this world, or in this particular universe. It feels very jarring and out of place, which makes her feel that these whole things are unreal. How can this empty void even exist in the rich, flourishing world that she is currently living in?

Even when human beings are in their worst state currently, destroying nature left and right, even complete and utter destruction won't look something like this. It will probably make more sense if the world will look a bit like the apocalypse, a dystopian world that Sophia often sees depicted in sci-fi novels and films. All this empty space and void just feels... wrong.

Sophia can see the tall figure of Wanda slightly distorted now, standing next to a figure that is way shorter than her, who should be Maria, her biological daughter. Both of them are standing tall and proud in this empty and void space, and Wanda is still gripping the metal broom tightly in her right hand. The scene feels as if it keeps flickering back and forth, with Sophia herself feeling like she's an outsider of her own body, watching herself curl up before flickering back towards her current standing spot.

And then... she sees him.

It feels as if time itself has stopped momentarily, right at that moment, at that second. The previous scene feels like it has blurred away entirely, her sole attention focuses on the man, an intruder of this empty void space. It is his existence, funnily enough, that makes Sophia entirely certain that this is all a dream, and she is fully aware that she is dreaming. Because there is no way whatsoever that she will be able to see this handsome man in real life, in an empty void, and not remember ever seeing him. She might be bad with remembering names, or even faces, but he is one of a kind. Such a unique presence in this barren, deserted world of her dreams.

Maybe people don't use the word 'beautiful' to describe a man very often, but that is the word that appears in her mind right now as she gazes upon the man's figure that seems to light up the entire space even without doing anything. His bronze skin seems to be even smoother than her own, which Sophia feels she is mildly jealous about. His short, black hair is ruffled up in a way that makes Sophia want to touch them, looking absolutely fluffy and endearing, especially paired with his smooth, scar less face. His brown eyes seem like it can penetrate right into her soul, and his pink lips are curled up in a soft smile as he looks far away into the horizon of the sea...

Wait, the sea?

Unbeknownst even to herself, she finds herself slowly starting to command her body to walk towards the man himself, the image of her kneeling over in front of Wanda completely forgotten in the very back of her mind. The salty sting of the ocean waves wafts on her nose, And she can even see the sun set slowly on the horizon of the sea, on the line that separates the blue sea from the rest of the still dark void emptiness all around her.

Sophia finally arrives beside the man's side, and then sits down next to him without a word, overlooking the sea. It is not an exaggeration to say that the sea in front of them is the only light in this dark, void space. Sophia closes her eyes momentarily, allowing herself to bask in the salty taste she can almost taste from the oceanic waves.

Is this what a lucid dream is? She realizes that she's able to control her own body, at the very least. She is able to move away from her previous horrifying state of kneeling before Wanda and Maria, and move on her own will towards the side of this handsome man who is overlooking the sea.

"Have you always wondered why nature seems so calm... yet so angry at the same time?" The man suddenly asks her. His voice sounds low but comforting at the same time, tickling Sophia's ear in the best of ways. She wouldn't mind going to sleep with him reading her some bedtime stories or something.

"Eh? Um.." Sophia just realizes after a moment that the man is indeed addressing her, as there is no other person near them currently.

She snaps away from admiring the man's features and starts pondering the question for a while. She thinks... and thinks... but only comes up with a blank. What does the question even mean? Nature being angry... Does he mean something like a natural disaster or something? A cruel way of nature taking revenge on human beings by exterminating them from their surface? And kind... does it mean a way on how nature still provides to human beings despite their transgressions? Providing them oxygen to breathe and water to consume, not to mention all the materials to make food, build buildings, and many other things.

"I guess... nature acts like how god acts in religions, I suppose? While I'm not one to believe in god or something, I do recognize that their believers see them as some sort of an almighty being, both merciful and merciless," she speaks as she ponders about Becky's beliefs in Christianity.

"Oh? You can actually see me, and respond in such an interesting way?" The man replies back.

Sophia tilts her head in confusion at that. "What do you mean? You are addressing me, right? Or did I get it wrong once again? But there's no one else here aside from me, though. Unless you are only speaking to yourself."

The man laughs at that, and Sophia's eyes zooms in at the crinkles on his eyes as he does. He is indeed a beautiful man. His smile and laugh alone is enough to calm the dread and fear in Sophia's heart, even just for a moment, as she engrosses herself in the beauty of the only light that exists in this dark space. She doesn't know exactly why this man has such a big impact on her, nor does she understand it. All she understands is that this moment is beautiful. She might not understand much of it yet, nor is she certain yet whether this is a lucid dream or not,

but she really appreciates the different scenery of a beautiful man overlooking a vast ocean in this dark void that houses nothing else but pain and dread.

Maybe the man is only a fragment of her imagination. Her wish projecting itself into her lucid dream, which is entirely possible. Dr. Bernard does say that one who masters lucid dreaming can definitely change the environment and elements of their own dream, after all, which is the reason why Sophia is trying to learn it and induce it herself, so that she can change the elements of her nightmare into one that is not as painful or terrifying. And she might be doing exactly that right now, although a bit unconsciously.

This man in front of her might just be what she is hoping to happen this entire time. A light in the dark, no matter how faint, to light up her dark, empty, painful world, whether it be in her dreams or her reality. This small section of the map where it houses this stranger with a beautiful sea sounds exactly like what she has been looking for for the longest time ever. It feels a bit surreal to be able to do this so quickly. To be able to induce her lucid dream and change her nightmare into a much, much better scenario.

"Hmm, you're really interesting. Maybe I'll visit you again. This proves to be extremely entertaining," The man says in an almost playful tone as his eyes bore straight into Sophia's own.

Sophia's cheeks redden as she realizes that the man has caught her ogling at him shamelessly, and basically almost drooling right about now. She is usually not as brazen as this! To stare and admire someone so openly--it is something that Sophia will never do in real life. Maybe her dream has made her a tad braver? Basically throwing caution to the wind and doing things that she's never been brave enough to do. Yeah, that sounds likely. After all, this is her dream. If she does anything untoward in her own dream, only she will remember the details of it. Dr. Bernard doesn't need every little detail, after all. She can just easily say that she has become braver in her dreams, but doesn't specify exactly how she becomes braver. No one will be able to judge her if her actions are only done in her own dreams.

"Are you a fragment of my imagination? My wishes? This is the first time I've ever seen you in my dreams, after all. And it just has to be the first night I've finally managed to retain some lucidity in my own dreams," Sophia blurts out.

"Hmm... Maybe you can call me one? I do like the idea of fulfilling someone's wishes or fantasy. It sounds amazing," The man gives Sophia one of his best smiles yet, and Sophia can feel her cheeks redden again, this time for an entirely different reason.

The man suddenly stands up and stretches, and although he is far from the definition of masculine, Sophia still admires the view before her nonetheless. The man is tall and lanky,

probably even thinner than Sophia is, which is saying something. The man is only wearing a black t-shirt and yellow shorts, nothing special, really, but Sophia can't help but still stare intently at the man. He is truly beautiful.

He smiles once again at her, this time looking down at her from above. However, she doesn't feel like she's in a lower position, or that she's lesser than him, even though he has to look down on her to be able to talk to her and look at her. Unlike Wanda and Maria, who likes to look down on her from above in order to prove their superiority, to lord over her, and show her that she will always be lesser than those two giants, this man gives Sophia a feeling of comfort, even if he is currently in the same position that Wanda likes a lot. For one, he doesn't have any hints of wanting to hit her with something, both of his hands are completely empty of any weapons that can be used to hurt her. Secondly, he is also giving her such a warm smile, something that Sophia doesn't see often in her real life.

The only people who give her such warm smiles can probably be counted on one hand. Her parents, then Dr. Lestari, and now, this beautiful man currently standing, overlooking the sea once more, before turning back to give her another warm smile, as if he always can feel her gaze on him.

"Well, as much as I'd like to stay longer, it seems like your consciousness is already trying to pull you away from me, which I don't blame. It might already be morning in your place right now. Look at your hands if you don't believe me," the man says once more.

Sophia looks down at her hands after hearing his words, and realizes that he is completely right. Instead of seeing her usual hands, clothed in her comfy, soft pajamas, she can see through her hands, as if her hands have started to be transparent. Surprisingly, she doesn't freak out when she sees this bizarre scene, as if it is perfectly normal to see this scene, even though in the back of her mind, she knows that it is anything but normal. But at the same time, she strangely feels like this is bound to happen, that her time in this world is not long, let alone permanent, and that it is time for her to leave this warm, cozy dream and return back to the real world.

"Will I ever see you again?" Sophia asks, timid, afraid of receiving a negative response.

Short as their meeting might be, Sophia has finally experienced a dream where all is not only pain and emptiness, but a warm and cozy feeling that wraps around her heart, something that she treasures very dearly. It is as if she knows that this man is the main reason why she doesn't have a nightmare today. A projection of her lucid dream, she might say. Maybe if she

masters her use of lucid dreams even more, she can once more summon this man into her dream, and be able to meet him and make her dreams a much, much better experience?

Maybe one day, she can even get excited at the prospect of getting to sleep, so that she can once more experience this comfortable and enjoyable feeling?

"I did say that I'm going to visit you again, didn't I? So of course we will. I'm not a man that will go back on my words, I can promise you that," The man chuckles and turns his body fully to look at her, facing away from the beautiful, vast ocean that he has always been facing this entire time. "On one condition, though. Will you tell me your name?"

Sophia nods fervently before answering easily, "Sophia. Sophia Wulandari is my full name, but really, everyone just calls me Sophia."

"Sophia, huh. What a fitting name for such an interesting woman like you. I shall visit you again, Sophia. Do call me Leo the next time we meet, will you?" the man--Leo's voice gets fainter and fainter as he finishes his sentence.

"Leo, Leo..." Sophia murmurs under her breath as the environment around them starts to blur and change. She wants to remember this name. She wants to treasure this warm feeling in her heart. She wants to be able to have another lucid dream so that she can meet Leo once more, the light in the dark, empty void space where her nightmares always reside.

Sophia blinks awake, slowly but surely. The empty, dark void space that houses a random, vast sea in the middle of nowhere slowly starts to distort back into the view of her cozy bedroom. Sophia yawns and stretches, feeling her back pop in a wonderful way that signifies that she has been staying on the bed for too long of a time. A feeling that she definitely doesn't feel often, as she usually stays asleep for a short period of time before she gets woken up by the nightmares that always haunt her.

But this time, she actually manages to conquer her deepest, darkest fears for once. Her eyes crinkles into two moon shapes of happiness as she looks at the clock showing the time once she opens her phone laying on her bedside drawer.

It's 05:00 am. She has successfully slept through the night without being disturbed or woken up by her nightmares. She has actually succeeded!

She will probably start jumping in joy on her bed multiple times if she could, but she knows that there will be a big chance of breaking the bed if she does so. She smiles in exhilaration before slowly waking up, preparing to start another new day.

But this time, instead of going to work still haunted with her nightmares and two dark circles under her eyes, she goes with a smile and a warm feeling wrapping her heart.

X
Metamorphosis

"Ah!!!" Sophia screams as the metallic rod of the broom hits her skin that is already littered with old scars, adding another one to the list.

The hit burns, like it's searing itself onto her being. Tears spring up her eyes as she clutches the fresh wound with her unwounded arm. She can already feel the new wound marking itself onto her skin, a new purplish hue that will decorate her body even further like a painter's brush across the canvas.

She looks up at Wanda and Maria, who are both looking down at her at their position above her kneeling body with contempt. Sophia must have cut a sorry figure right now. Her hair is definitely not combed, getting all over her face and body, probably like a porcupine.

Sophia can see her own body flickering rapidly like a hacking program she often sees on those films. But the pain is still hot and searing, branding itself onto her body like fireworks that explode on her skin, making her tremble in anguish and despair.

Is this a dream? But if it is, then why is the pain so prominent, so real? Sophia can barely think straight at this point, the pain clouding her best judgment, her logic thrown out the window. From the corners of her eyes, Sophia can see Wanda reaching for the broom once more and raising it high up onto the air, ready to strike her again.

Sophia cries out and tries to curl herself into the only defensive position that she knows of, curling up into a ball position and trying to cover her head with her arms in order to protect the most fragile parts of her body. But she momentarily forgets about the new, fresh wound in her arm, and a shock of pain jolts through her body as she tries to lift her arms up.

She can only watch in fear as the broom comes down on the top of her head, her limbs frozen in place from fear and pain, paralyzed from acting further to try to protect her head. She watches as the broom gets closer and closer, and then...

She hears his voice.

"What are you doing, you idiot! Will the nightmare go away into something more positive! You've done it with the seas before!"

She has done it... with the seas before? Does he mean the ocean that both of them are watching just the other night, that beautiful blue sea amidst the black void space in her head?

With the broom getting closer and closer and giving her almost no time to think about it any further. Gritting her teeth, she does the only thing she can do, she tries to make herself

concentrate on the fact that this is only a dream. But no matter how much she tries to convince herself that this is all only a dream, her unconscious tries to scream at her that it isn't the case, that the pain she is currently feeling on her arm is a big evidence that this is indeed reality, and not only a mere nightmare like usual.

Just as she is on the brink of giving up and letting the broom just fall on her head and end everything in one smooth strike, Sophia's eyes suddenly catch the sight of a blue bat. The same blue bat that appears in the bus when she was with Becky, as well as the same blue, crystallized bat that appears on top of her diary and even left a piece of crystallized thin layer of something that looks like its skin.

Time seems to have stopped entirely, except for Sophia and the little sapphire bat. Wanda's position is frozen, with the metal broom mere centimeters away from her head. Even Leo, the handsome boy from the other night, is also frozen stiff, his hand still outstretched as if to protect Sophia from Wanda's strike, his face losing its usual gentle features and replaced with angry lines and frowns. Despite that, Sophia's heart warms at the knowledge that Leo wants to protect her.

But she digresses. Her eyes flutter as she gazes at the blue bat that lands almost instinctively on her shoulder. Then she suddenly hears another voice, this time an entirely different one from Leo's own.

"Don't be afraid. You have successfully induced your first lucid dream, after all. I'm sure that you can do it again. Believe in your own power. Embrace it as your own. Imagine not the bad things in your life, but the good, the beauty. I know it is hard, but try it regardless. Then project that beautiful image into this world, your world, your dream."

It is... bizarre, to say the least. The voice sounds like it doesn't come from the sapphire bat, but it is echoing straight into her mind, as if a strange, new voice has penetrated her mind and invades it. Despite that, she has no doubt that it comes from the blue bat. It is weird, but for her, it feels like a... known fact. Something that she knows innately despite not having heard the voice before. Or maybe it is because everyone else in this room is frozen, and only the blue bat's fluttering wings and her heavy breathing are the only two movements in this dark void.

At the same time, the voice also feels warm and comfortable, like curling up with a cup of hot chocolate and a warm blanket on a cold night. Sophia can't even generalize what the voice is. Is it a male or a female? An old or a young one? She's not sure. It's like a mix of multiple voices mixed into one, generating a voice that sounds like a different one altogether, a unique entity.

"Who... are you?" She croaks out, realizing that her voice sounds damaged, probably from all the screaming she does while she is in pain.

"That's not the most important thing right now. All will be explained to you eventually. I can only give you but a sliver of a time to protect your unconscious so that you can enhance your power even further. My power is waning, but yours are not. Use that power to change your nightmare. Believe in your ability, your capability to induce lucid dreaming."

Sophia breathes out harshly. This all seems... too weird for her. So, so weird. Despite her consciousness starting to come back and reminding her that this is all only a dream, a dream is still way too simple of a word to explain all the weirdness going on tonight. Maybe, just like Leo, this blue bat and its whispers are all only a projection of her own wishes? An entity that can come and help her when she is at her lowest, stepped on by her so-called step-mother and step-sister?

That indeed sounds like the most likely conclusion that she can come to. But, how exactly can that explain the sighting that she sees in the past? The same blue bat that she sees in the bus, as well as on top of her journals? It doesn't make any sense. But the sapphire bat is right on one thing, at least. That iron broom is still coming for her head, and if the time continues once more, her head will probably explode from the impact.

And that's not something that she really wants to happen, is it? Now that she gets a chance to change it all, to switch it all for the better, why will she ignore this fact?

Propelled by the fear and the pain, she starts to get motivated. Motivated to try and change her fate for the better. Because if she can, once again, change her nightmare into something beautiful, something that won't let her fall into despair the second she wakes up from her dream, will that not be taken as a major victory for her progress towards making a better life for herself?

She closes her eyes, and focuses on trying to think about all the good things that have happened in her life. Things that have provided her hope for a better tomorrow. Her biological parents' face is the first that comes to mind, but she also quickly discards them, as she knows that thinking too much about them will also bring her tears, as she will miss them too much, and...

Then Dr. Lestari's warm smile and voice comes to mind. The first doctor that has truly brought hope into her dark world, the doctor that has given her such warmth, especially with the community that supports her and all people suffering from various mental health illnesses, all the messages she's read in that spreadsheet that Becky has given her.

She can feel the temperature around her start to warm up, and even through her closed eyelids, she can see a sliver of light passing through. Both things are not supposed to exist in this place, this void, empty dark space of her nightmare, but she pays it no heed for now. She needs to concentrate more. To succeed. To finally jump in joy and smile at Dr. Lestari and Dr. Bernard, who has given her so much hope, and the people who haven't given up on her even if she is at her lowest.

And Dr. Bernard. Ah yes, the peculiar doctor who can never stop talking even if the world ends, probably. And even though Sophia has a feeling that Dr. Bernard only cares about her as much as he cares about his test subject going through another one of his experiments, Dr. Bernard still does his job well and Sophia has progressed quickly all thanks to his help and guidance on how to induce her first lucid dreaming.

Her nose suddenly picks up the gentle scent of blooming flowers, as well as the salty sting of the sea, combined together into something that she can definitely enjoy, relaxing on a field of flowers overlooking the sea, no matter how unrealistic that might sound, as usually the sea is only surrounded by sands. But the scent of the salt that she can almost taste definitely reminds her of the man she has just recently met.

Leo. The handsome, beautiful man that she has met in her dreams. The projection of her lucid dream, her wishes, of someone to hold her hand when she is feeling down. Someone to smile at her, and ready to offer her a hug to comfort her and will her pains away. A presence that she has unconsciously linked to the light in the dark depths of her dreams, the waves of comfort that come with the blue sea.

And then a wish suddenly comes upon her. Unprecedented and so sudden, but also so strong and relentless. A wish, so that she can also show all these amazing people that have come into her life, no matter if it's in reality or a projection of her dreams, that she is not totally hopeless. And that thanks to them, she has also come far in life, that she has also improved, thanks to their helping hand and warm smiles that keeps her going every single day.

Sophia feels warmth blooming on the palm of her hands, accompanied with an urge to open it, to spread this warmth, onto all corners of her dreams. To once again paint colors on this dark, empty void that is her nightmares. The result of all her pain, all her trauma, condensed into one, big, single space that is meant to torture her every night, making her recall her horrifying past over and over again. x

But Sophia wants the power to be able to change all that. To finally take control of her own dreams, of her own nightmares, and change it for the better. To show anyone who cares

that she is also a woman that can stand up once more even after falling down, and that she can also spread this warmth and color back once more to her own nightmare. It's scary, of course. Of course it is. Doing this means that she is finally taking her own stand and fighting back against all the fear and trauma she has regarding Wanda and Maria. She has to be able to drive them away from her nightmares if she wants to return the color to her dreams once more. But can she really do that? Even though she now realizes that this is all only a dream, and that the fact that she can, for once, fight back against the tyrannical power of Wanda, it still scares her to no end. Reality or not, the mere idea of opposing her step-mother is a terrifying one, but she has to go past it, to overcome this hurdle.

Because she also wants to live without fear. Without nightmares haunting her sleep every single night. So that she can finally smile again, and do her work with a lot of energy one can only get with a full night's sleep, and finally get rid of the threat of being fired away from her mind entirely.

She opens her eyes and stretches both of her arms in front of herself, with her palm open, and through them a gale comes forth from within herself. And she can see the world glow, the darkness swept away by some sort of force. The force itself is blue in color, so bright in its hue. The force looks like it's some sort of a cyclone, a wind storm, but a gentle one, with the crystallized texture not dissimilar to the one that the blue bat has all over its body. But despite its crystal-like texture. The gale doesn't hurt the skin at all, like it's a very thin, almost transparent layer of wind that feels like a gentle caress on her body instead of a harsh one.

The blue bat lands on her outstretched palm, and the time starts ticking again. Wanda, who is previously raising a metal broom on top of Sophia's hand looks in confusion as the blue wind sweeps her further and further away from her prey, together with her biological daughter, Maria. Wanda tries to anchor herself to the ground by sticking the broom underneath her, but it accomplishes nothing, as the world inside the dream itself is still a void, eternal space that has no specific rules on how gravity works.

Sophia can see Wanda whipping her head towards her after the failure of her actions, Wanda's usually peerless face twisted in an angry snarl, her perfectly shaped eyebrows forming a menacing image, especially paired with her exposed pearly white teeth. Sophia shivers in fear at the sight, an unconscious response to the scary sight in front of her, but the blue bat flutters slightly on her palm, and Sophia can feel calmness and logic return back to her once more.

That's right. This is her dream, and she is the master of this space. If she wants to drive Wanda away from her own dream, then it is completely in her right to do so. Wanda is the intruder of this space, after all. Not her.

And with that final thought, Sophia silently thinks about the wind sweeping Wanda and Maria further and further away from her, and the wind does just that, bringing them away far enough until Sophia can barely see their figures or forms, swallowed by the sapphire gales.

Sophia lets out a long breath after that, suddenly feeling completely exhausted. She plops down on her previous spot and tries to massage her stiff neck and arms, while admiring the new environment she herself has just created. It truly is beautiful. Being able to influence her own dreams, drive off things that she doesn't want to appear in her sleep, and then create a beautiful sight that she can only fantasize or see in a fantastical movie in the cinemas. Being able to see them herself, even if it is only in a dream, definitely feels like a wish accomplished. x

Lucid dreaming truly is amazing. She doesn't know whether it truly is all because of her new-found powers to induce lucid dreaming alone that all of this is possible, though. She glances at the blue bat still sitting neatly on top of her palm, fluttering softly as the seconds pass. She still doesn't know exactly what the bat is, or why the blue bat seems determined to help her, as well as appear even in her real life, beyond her dreams. She has so many questions, but her mind is interrupted when she hears a voice from behind.

"Well, that was brilliantly done. And look at the skies and the ground. You've done amazing work here, Sophia," Leo appears in front of her while sporting his usual grin.

Leo's smiles and grins are truly infectious. Sophia can feel her lips stretching at the sight of the smiling man, who after a moment settles in front of her and sits down on the space.

It seems a bit weird, that both she and Leo can sit down on this ground, which is supposed to just be empty space, while Wanda can't even try to anchor herself with the same ground that both of them are sitting down on currently. Is this another one of her so-called powers? Or her ability to control her dreams when she is lucid dreaming? Only allowing what she wants to happen and erasing basically the rules of science and logic away from her dreams, the fantastical space that only exists inside of her mind.

Whatever it is, she is definitely grateful for it. For she can rest in this position, but also doesn't allow her predator to come close to her.

"Is that blue thing the one that has helped you tonight?" Leo asks while pointing at the resting bat on Sophia's palm.

"Eh? You can see it?" Sophia asks, surprised.

Sophia can see Leo nods as a response, which puts a smile on her face. She remembers that the first time she sees the bat with Becky, Becky has no indication that she can actually see it, nor the other passengers and people near them. Only Sophia alone can see them, so she is pleasantly surprised on finding out that Leo can see them. It feels like a shared secret that only the both of them knows, almost, and that thought alone is enough to make her feel giddy. Maybe it's because of the influence of the space inside her dreams, and Sophia wills it that Leo will be able to see the blue bat? That seems more like the logical reason.

"Well, yes. I'm not sure exactly what it is, and it seems like it's not talking to me anymore after all that ends. Still not sure why it helps me either, or why it chooses to be here as well as in my real life. Everything still seems so confusing right now, but I have no answers to any of my questions yet," Sophia prods the bat on her palm with one hand, and giggles as she feels her finger flutter in response.

"Wait a minute. Does it appear in your real life as well? How is that possible?" Now, it is Leo's turn to sound and look surprised.

Sophia sighs. "I'm not sure exactly myself. But in my real world, no one seems to be able to see it except for me. Or maybe all of it is just my own brain messing up with me? I don't know. But it does leave a flicker of its layered skin before, so I'm not sure if it's only my imagination either. It's all so weird, but I just haven't got the time to truly think about it all, really."

"Fair enough," Leo nods. "Seems like you've got a better hold over your lucid dreaming now, as well. You seem to flicker less often than before."

"Oh, really?" Sophia examines herself, but can't seem to find any differences. Maybe because Leo pays more attention to her than she does to herself. That thought makes her cheeks redden, but she tries to wave the thought away before continuing to speak once more.

"But yes, I do have the feeling that I am getting better as well. After all, none of this..." She pauses, waving her free hand in a circular motion as if to point out the beautiful sapphire sky that the both of them are seeing currently. "... are not possible without lucid dreaming, I suppose. My doctor did say to me that I will be able to have the power to change the content of my nightmares if I can do lucid dreaming, and I suppose that he is completely right. I should buy him flowers as a thank you."

"Oh? You go to a doctor to be able to lucid dreaming? Why is that so?" Leo sounds surprised again.

"Well, yes. I didn't even know much about lucid dreaming in the first place before meeting Dr. Bernard, let alone trying to induce it myself. The reason why I meet him is to deal

with my nightmares problems, which I guess you can already see for yourself what kind of nightmares I get," Sophia says sheepishly.

She doesn't know why, but her words seem to flow freely whenever she is with Leo. It almost feels like she doesn't have the need to hide anything from him. But then again, why would she need to hide anything? Leo is only a fragment of her imagination, after all. Something she conjures into her own dream so that she will have someone that can help her and be by her side when everything seems very scary. She knows for sure that Leo will not betray her, or hurt her on purpose, and that is why she can feel at ease whenever she is around him. And even if he one day decides to spill her secrets, who will he spill it to anyway? There is no one else in this dream world of hers except for the two of them. And the blue bat, of course.

Sophia's gaze turns slightly rueful at that thought. Yes, of course. After all, everything in this dream is just a fragment of her imagination, the reality created by her strong wish to have someone by her side. A wish strong enough that she can finally manipulate and control her own dreams by lucid dreaming, and then summoning and creating all these amazing views and people inside of her. So at least, in her own dreams, she will be able to live a happy and fulfilling life, where she can freely conjure up people who care for her, and will not betray or hurt her.

"Hm, I see. For me, lucid dreaming comes naturally, for some reason. I've always been able to do it, and ding ding ding, now I'm here, in your dreams," Leo flashes Sophia another warm smile after finishing his sentence.

Sophia sighs in her mind. Even Leo, the person she conjures in her dream, is able to act in such a way that he makes Sophia feel normal, ordinary. That the fact that she has to do lucid dreaming, or is able to do so at all, is completely normal. Leo truly is someone who will go to such lengths to be able to make Sophia happy and feel comfortable, and Sophia doesn't know whether she should feel guilty or happy about it. Guilty, because if Leo isn't a product of her imaginations pouring itself out onto her dreams, there is little to no chance that Leo will act the way he is right now, willing to be so kind to Sophia, as well as trying to protect her from her nightmares. After all, what right does Sophia have to deserve all that? They don't even know each other that well, heck, this is their second meeting still. How can Leo already care for her so, if not for the fact that he is merely a product of Sophia's wishes, and therefore will do what Sophia hopes might happen?

But still, Sophia decides to humor herself. This is her dream, after all. She might feel guilty, yes, but her lucidity inside of her dream now definitely helps a lot in terms of being able to differentiate what is reality and what is a dream much more easily now. And since all of this

only happens in her dream , then there won't be too much trouble for her trying to accomplish her wishes in her own dreams. After all, why would she have to feel troubled? Everything will return back to her dull, normal life once she wakes up in the real world, and everything in the dream world will only be that--a temporary escape, a fantasy world that only she knows of, and therefore will have no effect whatsoever in her real life, and will bear no consequences, except adding happiness in her real life. This is because with better dreams like this, with being able to control her own dreams by inducing lucid dreaming, she will be able to have a much better sleep, with less nightmares, and will be able to keep her job and ensure her daily life will proceed smoothly.

"Well, Leo, how come you are here instead of your own when you can do lucid dreaming? Don't tell me that you can actually travel through dreams?" Sophia laughs a bit at the absurd idea she just comes up with.

Sophia can feel the little blue bat fluttering slightly on her shoulder, but pays it no heed. After all, the bat does like to do that a lot, as if it's shaking its wings around.

Leo laughs back in response. "I wish I had such cool power like that, but no. I just wake up here all of a sudden, instead of my own dreams. But I have to say it's a much welcomed presence. Despite all the nightmares, the world you create with your own hands is much, much better than my own dreams. I like it here. Especially when I can also see you, and converse with you like this. It's certainly been a while since I've last had a human interaction, although I'm not entirely sure if I can even call it that, considering we're both in a dream."

"Hmm.. Are you implying that you also have your own lucid dream? Do you remember anything about it? Can you tell me anything? I'm still an amateur in all this lucid dreaming thing, and might actually benefit from hearing about other people's experience about lucid dreaming," Sophia inquires.

Leo doesn't answer immediately, instead he rests his right arm on his crossed legs, while placing his chin on his open palm, looking like he is thinking hard about his own answer.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," Sophia hurriedly adds, noticing the way that Leo's face scrunch up at her question.

Maybe it's a sensitive topic for him? Sophia shouldn't probe too much. After all, while Leo might only be the product of her wishes coming true in her dream world, Sophia still sees him as his own person at the same time. A person who, while too kind and protective of her, also still has his own feelings and secrets, just like any other human being does. Sophia can't really think of him as fully hers... that would just feel wrong, and dehumanize him into something

more like a robot, unfeeling and will unconditionally obey her orders, no matter what she asks of him.

"No, no, it's not that I don't want to, but just not sure how exactly to begin...? For one, it's quite hard to recall some of them, despite my lucidity. Sure, I do seem to remember my dreams better than my peers thanks to my ability to lucid dream, but it's still a bit of miss here and there, so I don't really think I'm a good example if you want to learn more about lucid dreaming," Leo tries to explain, waving his arms around as he does, which Sophia finds rather cute.

He pauses for a moment before continuing again, "Most of my dreams are about my past, really. When my parents are still, uh, alive. A pillar of support that I don't expect I'll lose so soon in my life."

Leo lets out a bitter smile after that, but quickly erases it again with a cheery smile. But that glimpse of the sad smile makes Sophia's heart ache. It's such a different contrast to the cheery portrait that Leo seems to have for himself, and in a way, also makes Sophia feel like she's just taken a glimpse into the real personality of the man in front of her. Peeling back layer through layers of masks, before finding a hint of the real struggles and personality underneath.

"It is obvious that I miss them, especially considering how many times I've dreamed about them. Contrary to your dreams, mine is not so much as a nightmare, more like a bittersweet one, really. So in my lucid dreaming, I never do much like you to change the contents of my dreams, since I like it as it is. Spending time with my parents again, and being able to see them again..." Leo sighs, before ruffling up his hair with both hands, like he is frustrated.

Maybe frustrated with himself? Sophia is not sure. She can sympathize with him a bit. After all, she has also lost both of her parents, although from the sounds of it, Leo has lost both of his at a much younger age. And at the same time, before her father passed away, Sophia doesn't exactly have a good impression of him, after remarrying a mean woman who likes to abuse her in private. Her dad never believed her words when Sophia tried to tell him that Wanda and Maria hated her and had hurt her many times, and even accused Sophia of trying to split them apart with no evidence. Wanda is very cunning, after all, and never leaves any visible wounds when Sophia's father is around.

But enough about her own past.

"The only things I usually change are minor details, like how I can hug them in my dreams, and talk to them about struggles in my current life. And how I can bring some things from real life to my dreams, since I've always wanted to give them something, anything, just to

show them how much I appreciate their help in my life," Leo admits, rubbing his right arm with his left as he does so.

Leo does sound like he loves his parents very much. Sophia is still not sure what other problems are troubling the man right now, but she won't probe if he doesn't want to tell. It is obvious that he is also struggling from something, as he admits himself that he always wants to share his struggles to his parents in his dreams, and that is what he does when he has his lucid dreams.

Sophia remembers what Dr. Lestari has done to calm her and try to cheer her up, and she tries to copy that gesture to Leo. Slowly, tentatively, making sure that Leo can see her movements in case he wants to pull away from her if he feels uncomfortable, Sophia reaches her hands out to hold Leo's own. She can feel that they're clammy and sweaty, probably from nerves, but she still holds tight and squeezes them slightly with both of her hands, trying to radiate comfort that Dr. Lestari has provided for her previously.

"Thank you..." Leo croaks out, her voice hoarse.

When Sophia lifts her head up to look at him, he has some tear stains rolling down his cheeks, his own black orbs trembling, eyes damp. Sophia bites her lip at the saddening sight, resisting the urge to lift her hand and brush the tears away. That might feel too personal for both of them, and she doesn't want to do that to either of them. It might actually spook the poor man away, too.

"I'm sorry if my questions make you recall pain, that was not my intention at all," Sophia apologizes, looking guilty. She knows that her questions might have dug up buried pain from Leo's past.

It feels so weird, but also so right, apologizing and holding hands with a person who is basically the conjuration of her own wishes, manifested in her own dream. She feels like this is what losing her mind will feel like, feeling compassion and pity towards a person who is not even real, but Sophia doesn't mind too much. At the moment, at this second, with her hands holding Leo's tightly and her eyes boring into his own, this feels completely right, and that's what she cares about right now. Not her own sanity, or the fact that none of this is even real. She only cares about how full her heart is at the moment, and how much she wants to get to know the man in front of her better.

The rest can wait.

"You really don't need to apologize, but I appreciate the sentiment," Leo flashes her another warm smile. "But enough about me. How about yourself? May I know how lucid

dreaming is for you? I mean, of course I've seen myself the effects of your lucid dreaming, with this whole world actually appearing before us right now, but I'm also still curious about how you feel about the whole thing."

Sophia ponders the question for a moment, looking down on the floor-or what she expects to be floor, only to be met with the endless expanse of space, which is no longer black and empty. Instead, the 'floor' underneath her looks exactly like those fantasy worlds that she often read about in her novels. It is vast, and the blue sapphire color of it makes her feel like she is sitting down on the sky itself. It also has a crystal-like texture on the color, similar to the blue bat's. Thanks to this texture, the sky-like floor looks like it is made of crystal, glass, or diamond, with some edges of it twinkling and making it look like it is glittering brightly in the night sky. It is beautiful beyond words, and Sophia can feel the proud feeling rising in her heart, knowing that this amazing sight in front of her was truly created by yours truly.

"Sophia?"

She snaps out of her own thoughts and rubs her head sheepishly. She can feel her cheeks burning, feeling embarrassed that she has been thinking of weird and absurd things while Leo is still sitting right in front of her, and awaiting her response at that. A slight pang of guilt hits her right after, feeling terrible that she has ignored him, no matter whether she intended to do so or not. After all, Leo has been so kind towards her,

"Ah, um... Lucid dreaming for me, right? I don't know if I've experienced it enough to be able to say for sure how I feel towards it at this moment, to be completely honest," Sophia admits. "The two times I've successfully lucid dreamed, it feels... I don't know how to place it in words exactly, but maybe it's weird?"

She pauses for a moment, trying to recall how she feels right after waking up from her first lucid dream. She has called up Dr. Bernard excitedly, completely forgetting the fact that the time when she wakes up is an ungodly hour of 5 AM, and she receives a lot of reprimanding from the grumpy brain specialist for that fact. But Sophia doesn't feel too guilty, if she has to be completely honest. After all, Dr. Bernard himself is the one who told her to call him immediately if she needs anything, wants to ask anything, or whatever it is. And Sophia is just following his order to the letter.

However, after hearing that Sophia has successfully induced her first lucid dream, it seems as if Dr. Bernard's sleepiness is gone entirely, replaced with excitement and bombarding Sophia with question after question. It definitely feels like karma to her, since she regrets calling Dr. Bernard so early in the morning after receiving the barrage of questions which seems like it

will never end. She can only escape by telling Dr. Bernard that she needs to shower and prepare to go to work.

Well, one thing that she is sure of is that she is ecstatic, for sure, to be able to do her lucid dream after weeks of trying and pain of having to write down her nightmares in detail after she wakes up almost every single night. Not to mention, being able to control her body in her nightmare, as well as being able to basically change elements of her own dream feels fantastic. She feels like she is in power for once in her life, being able to steer the direction of what she wants or where she is going, instead of being lorded over by people like Wanda or Aaron.

But after the ecstasy subsides, she starts to really think about what lucid dreaming really means, and how it affects her. And while she is definitely still happy about the lone fact that she is able to alleviate her nightmares somewhat, it is still there, as evidenced by what happens today. And if Leo and the blue bat aren't here to help today... Sophia shudders to think about the consequences.

She remembers vividly that she definitely feels like she is losing control of her grasp over lucid dreaming, feeling like she falls back into the horrifying circle of hell of where she is trapped forever in Wanda's grasp, being played like a fiddle, completely unable to resist, let alone fight back. Which just means that she still needs someone else's help in order to solve her nightmare problem.

Sophia just thinks, or hopes, that with lucid dreaming, she will be able to solve her nightmares alone. That she will have the full power and control over how she can snap out of her nightmares and change her nightmare into something that is less scary. A normal dream, if you will. She wants to be realistic. There is no way she can regularly visit Dr. Lestari and Dr. Bernard so often in the future. Not only does it take a lot of time, it has also been hurting her wallet quite significantly.

Sure, she won't mind some visit every week or so just so that the doctors can keep track of her progress and give her tips if she is struggling, but not on a regular occasion like she is doing right now. Which means that, eventually, sooner or later, she has to learn how to be independent. Finding out how to solve this issue of hers by herself, instead of leaning on others all the time.

And now... after being able to induce her lucid dream, she actually still needs other people's help in order for her to snap out of the nightmare still. And who's to say that this won't happen again, that it won't be a repeating thing in her nightmares of hers every night? If she needs help right now, who's to say that she won't need it tomorrow? And the day after that?

Her stomach twists, feeling like the bottom of the pit just drops underneath her. That prospect is scary. Very scary.

Leo and the little blue bat might only be the product of her imagination coming to life, something that might not even be considered real. Some people might even say that Sophia even beats her nightmares with her own power, seeing that both entities that have helped her come from her own will, her own imagination and wishes, integrated into the insides of her dreams. But Sophia doesn't really see it that way. While they might indeed be the product of her imaginations seeping into her lucid dream, it doesn't necessarily translate that they will always appear every time she dreams, or has a nightmare. And that will be her downfall.

"I just wish I had more control over it," Sophia finally answers, her head hanging low. "I feel like I'm hanging in this thin thread. I think I've told you before that the only reason I learn how to lucid dream is mainly because I'm suffering from nightmares, which you also have witnessed yourself."

Leo nods in response, but doesn't respond any further, waiting for Sophia to finish. Which also feels weird to her somewhat, that this man seems to know exactly how to act and speak around her that will put her immediately at ease. Other people might have already tried to interrupt, or ask more questions, but those things can make Sophia feel uncomfortable immediately, but Leo is different, and seems content to just basically wait for Sophia, at Sophia's own pace.

"But, well. Again, as you see it yourself, I've lost control almost immediately when I'm placed in a nightmare that's very scary to me, as if I completely forgot that I can try to rationalize things and do lucid dreaming just like what I did last night, but instead I forgot everything about that and need you and this little bat over here in order to snap me out of it and basically remind me that I can create things and manipulate things in my own dream. It's pathetic, is what it is," Sophia says with a bitter smile.

Leo stays silent for a while, as if to process the information that Sophia has just given him. Sophia also appreciates this, as usually this means that the person in front of her is actually thinking seriously about how to help her, instead of only giving her comfort words and try to appease her so that she will stop ranting or complaining. After all, it happens a lot with her so-called friends in high school.

Not that she blames them, or holds a grudge against them. It's pretty human to have curiosity, or be bored of her story, or even annoyed. And those things definitely make her appreciate Leo even more.

She unconsciously starts biting the skin around her fingers again, and only realizing it when Leo's hand brushes gently against her own, prying it away from being hurt even more by Sophia's teeth. She smiles at him as a response, and tries to ignore the fact that she feels uncomfortably okay with Leo touching her so casually, as well as the way her heart flutters slightly at the small action he takes.

"Well, I can't say for sure that I have had nightmares like yours, so I can't really be a good judge, but I do see myself that your nightmares are extremely scary, and it is totally understandable and humane that you react the way you did. you're scared, trapped in your own past, maybe, and that fuels the fear in your being that disregards all logic in order to protect yourself the only way you know how to, so far," Leo starts speaking, but his hand still doesn't leave too far away, their fingers brushing against each other, making Sophia's skin tingles.

"The fact that you are able to snap out of it, even with our help, is already a feat in and of itself. Sure, you might need some reality check, or some help from me or that little bat sleeping comfortably on you, but you eventually snap out of it, and receiving help is not a mark of weakness," Leo continues.

"I know that accepting help isn't a weakness, but I also need to be independent," Sophia sighs. "There's no guarantee you or the bat will be here the next time I have a nightmare, and if I'm always dependent on you guys' help to be able to lucid dream successfully once more, then what am I to do?"

"I didn't say that you should be dependent on us. Receiving help doesn't always mean that you will be bound to be dependent," Leo explains, his finger making some words on her own. "And besides, it's only your second time doing lucid dreaming. You're still adjusting to how jarring it feels, and how to control your own consciousness in your dreams. You will be able to master it on your own if you're motivated, you know? It just takes time."

"Hmm..." Sophia mumbles,

He is right. Completely so, in fact. Even Dr. Bernard has also warned her that progress is not instant, and that she might be met with a lot of failures, even the first few times after she's successfully induced her lucid dreaming. Sophia has been impatient, yet again. Demanding result to be delivered directly onto her lap the second she has successfully induced her first lucid dream. Now that she has calmed down after Leo's speech, her logic is starting to return back to her, slowly waving away all the emotions controlling the way she is thinking.

That's right, she has been so illogical and rash these two days. The emotion adrenaline from being extremely happy at the prospect of being able to do lucid dreaming for the first time,

only to have the serotonin in her body to experience a major downfall today, when she has to experience the horrible nightmare once again and has a very difficult time to escape from it, despite her new learned skill of inducing lucid dreaming. The crash from two completely contrasting emotions cause her to be pessimistic and depressive, even much more than usual, her body unable to take the sudden stress and shock it is forced to experience without any warning or preparation.

"Thank you," Sophia replies, her eyes still downcast.

Leo has definitely helped her a lot. In the first night, he has successfully diverted her attention away from her terrors of nightmares and made her first lucid dream proceed smoothly. And tonight, he has also helped her to snap out of her terrors and also try to comfort her and just generally being a very kind and caring human being. Sophia wishes that she can do something in return for him, to repay him, or just basically to show her gratitude on how much he has helped her in such a short period of time.

"Do you think that I can keep lucid dreaming whenever I want to? I know now that it can be a skill that can be learned. After all, I have learned how to induce my own lucid dreams the same way, from learning how to basically do it myself instead of only waiting for a chance. But sometimes I just feel like my control is slipping, or that it's becoming harder and harder to separate dream and reality. Not being able to realize that I only have a nightmare is one thing, but it's a different thing altogether when what I'm feeling right now is..." Sophia pauses, carefully studying her own feelings right now.

She hasn't been paying much attention to this particular feeling just due to how overwhelmed she has been in the past two days, but she starts to notice it now, how she really feels. The fact that she is starting to have difficulty differentiating what is really a dream and what is really her reality. The truth is, she doesn't only have problems with differentiating whether she is dreaming or not only when she is having a nightmare. But even now, when she is staring at the boy in front of her, having the skies underneath their feet, it is extremely hard for her to be able to know whether this is only a dream or a reality.

It is a very strange feeling for her to feel. On one hand, she is absolutely sure that this is all only in a dream. After all, the environment around them is the product of her own making created in the space of her dream. She even witnessed the moment of creation herself. Not to mention, nothing like this will even be possible in reality. On the other hand, there is a part of her that wishes so strongly that this is her reality instead. A reality where she can embrace the seas, the blue sky, and change whatever she wants and create things she wishes to be true. A

reality in which there is a person in front of her who is so kind and thoughtful, and is not bored or tired with her presence. She can also finally escape from Wanda's clutches, even in real life. That strong wish makes her unconscious feel confused, torn between acknowledging this as reality or only as a dream, which sometimes also makes her feel torn and confused.

But then again, like Leo said, it has only been two days since the first time she has done her first lucid dreaming, which means that she still has time to think it all over and try to come to reality about what lucid dreaming really entails, and learn bit by bit about how she can fully take control of her own dreams without needing any help from Leo or the little blue bat.

"Nothing," Sophia shakes her head, smiling slightly. She wishes that she can stay here forever, encased in a beautiful environment where she can be happy forever.

But reality is not kind, and so is her third night after learning how to induce her lucid dreaming for the first time.

XI

The Void, Once More

Sophia's third night can be called brutal, or even horrendous.

Tonight, she doesn't dream of Wanda or Maria. Aaron is also not the star of her current dream. Worse still, she has even successfully induced her third lucid dream in a row, and she is fully aware right now that she is inside her dream world, with Leo beside her, gripping her hand so tightly it hurts. But Sophia doesn't even register the pain for too long, because right in front of them is a sea of nightmare, multiple black spots covering her sapphire blue world. And Sophia can hear cries of pain and moans of anguish coming from the spots, which makes her shudder in fear and confusion.

Amidst the beautiful blue sky, these black spots look like a tumor, and they are pulsing and writhing as if they are living beings themselves without any definite shape. Sophia can even see some of the black spots gurgling and spreading dark mist around their edges. The worst part is when there are too many dark shapes clumped together, so that the dark mist spreads overlaying all together. And to her horror, she can see another black spot forming on the layers of dark mist that is overlapping with each other, giving birth to another tumor in her dream world.

She can also smell it, and while she can't exactly pinpoint what it is, it smells like a mix of rancid sewer water and wet mud filled with an animal's waste. It is awful, and while Sophia has never encountered any poison, or even smelled one, she reckons that a type of poison must have smelled like this, because it does feel like a poison to her nose buds.

What is the meaning of this? Isn't her lucid dream world the place where she is supposed to be escaping from the harsh reality and enjoy the beautiful blue world for once without feeling any fear? Isn't she supposed to be able to control her own dream world, able to conjure up or even erase elements in her dream world? She has even done it herself, basically expelling Wanda and Maria away from her lucid dream and creating the blue sapphire world with the help of Leo and the little blue bat. But that same world is now being corrupted by some black spots that almost look like slugs, disgusting and horrifying. She has tried, oh she has tried. She can't even keep count anymore of how many times she tries closing her eyes and willing the spots to go away from her world, to return her beautiful, peaceful world she has created through her lucid dream back to her once more. But all her efforts are for naught. Not a single black spot has even

left her world. In fact, what is happening right now is that the illness is spreading, and giving birth to more and more black spots no matter how much Sophia tried to stop it,

"Is this another one of my nightmares? But I feel like I'm fully aware of the fact that I'm only dreaming now, which means that I am lucid dreaming right now and I should be able to do what I did yesterday, right? Why is nothing changing to my will?" Sophia cries out, feeling her heart pounding in her chest.

She knows that it is slightly illogical to be so concerned or freaked out over this matter. After all, this is only her dream world, and no matter how disgusting the sight in front of her is, it is nowhere as terrifying as Wanda's beating or threats over her head, although much more bizarre and weird. And if her world is corrupted, then it will just still stay as it is--her dream. It will not seep into her reality, and therefore shouldn't cause her any concern. But she is very much concerned, as she has grown to get attached with her current world that she has created through her lucid dreaming, and she doesn't want to lose it to a bunch of newcomers that she can't even recognize what it is yet.

"I'm not sure, it should be the case, but we can definitely see that it's not going away anytime soon," Leo's voice sounds unsure this time, which causes Sophia to look up at him, as she just realizes that he is much, much taller than she previously expected. This is the first time they are standing side-by-side, after all.

Leo's eyes are hard, and his brows are furrowed, and Sophia can even hear Leo gritting his teeth so hard, she's afraid he will break it. He has never looked this grave or serious before, which just settles the gravity of this situation to Sophia.

"Isn't that the physical manifestation of nightmares? Why has it appeared here?"

Sophia suddenly hears the familiar voice inside of her head again. She instinctively looks at the blue bat sitting snugly on her left shoulder--or not as snugly anymore. The blue sapphire bat has poked her head out of her clothes and is also staring intently at the growing sickness spreading in her dream world. Its voice is also hard, as opposed to the calm and guiding voice that Sophia hears from it for the first time today.

"Hey, is there anything you can do to help?" Sophia asks, realizing that the blue bat might know what are the... things that they are seeing currently.

She knows that just yesterday, she says that she wants to be independent and won't need their help anymore to solve her nightmare issues, but this is a different matter entirely. Her nightmares usually consist of the things that she has met or experienced in real life, like

Wanda, Maria, or even Aaron. Not black slugs that look like giant tumors almost as big as her whole head spreading almost endlessly in her world.

"I am... not sure. I don't even know how exactly to solve this problem in front of us," The blue bat replies, its sound appearing hesitant.

Sophia feels terror clawing up her throat even more rapidly now. She's not exactly sure what the blue bat is, but she knows that she's grown to see the blue bat as something magical-something powerful. After all, the blue bat is really the one that has helped her to realize what she can do while she is lucid dreaming, gripping her away from being trapped in her nightmare and helping her create this beautiful world. The same beautiful world that is currently being corrupted by the black slugs at a speed that is even visible to the naked eye.

"Then... then what should we do? Should we just let them fester like this forever? I tried doing the same thing I did today, by willing my dream world to erase them or to create something to replace them, but none of it works," Sophia claws at her hair.

Sophia can see the blue bat shaking its tiny, crystallized head, its wings drooping on both sides of its body.

"No, we can't do that. We have to find a way out. If we let those things be, it might actually affect your real life situation as well."

Sophia feels her toes go cold, freezing her in place as she stares blankly at the growing tumors in front of her. What exactly does that mean? Sure, she is freaked out, but not over the safety of her real life body, but more about wanting to protect this beautiful dream world she has created herself.

"I'm sure you have many questions once more, and I will try to explain as best as I can. In summary, those things right there, they are the manifestation of other people's dreams, or specifically their nightmares, seeping into yours. When too much nightmares are clumped together in one space, it will become that abomination," the blue bat continues,

"That has nothing to do with harming my real body, though, is it? I want to cleanse it because I treasure this dream world of mine, but having the threat to my real body is a different matter entirely!" Sophia can feel herself freaking out, panic and horror intermingled with each other to create a mix of emotions that almost drive her to the brink of despair and insanity.

"The problem lies in the fact that if this is your dream world, and if those clumps are allowed to fester in here, it will become bigger and bigger, and will eventually overtake your dream world. And if you try to lucid dream, it will be this same world that you will come to." The blue bat's voice echoes in her mind once more.

"Of course, the alternative is going to a different world than this one, but it will be hard, since your body has already recognized this specific one as your dream world. Though the content might change, as well as the environment, it is still one world, but just painted in different ways. It is, in a way, like reality itself. The people living in it can create and destroy whatever is in it, but ultimately it will still be the one world, earth, that you are living in currently, even as it changes rapidly over the course of history," The blue bat continues.

Sophia is driven into silence by the sudden influx of information, as she stares at the blue bat now sitting on her outstretched open palm, the growing tumor in her world temporarily forgotten. Why does this blue bat know so much, and is willing to help her so? Who exactly is it? But Sophia can't really ponder the question for too long, because the next moment she can hear Leo's shout from beside her.

"Look out!"

She can feel the harsh tug of Leo's arms in her body as he drags her away, her consciousness slipping in and out for the moment from the sudden shock. Before she can recover from the sudden dizziness, she can see a huge black, misty whip lashing out at the place where she was standing just a moment ago. Sophia's breath hitches in her throat. If Leo didn't drag her away, she would probably...

Dream as it might be, death is not something that she wants to experience here, even if the consequences might just be that her waking up from lucid dreaming turned into a new nightmare.

"I think you can start to see why I say that this unsolved issue might impact your real body. Sure, it might not hurt you physically, but you will basically go back to square one. You will fear going to sleep once more, even with the fact that now you can induce lucid dreaming, because this is the world that has a very high possibility to greet you the moment you open your eyes in your dream. And it will get worse, since they are spreading very, very rapidly." The blue bat finishes, and flutters its wings.

"Then, then what should I do?" Sophia doesn't realize that her voice and body is shaking, and tries to clear her throat afterwards, trying to appear brave. She has beaten back her long-time nightmare about Wanda and Maria, goddammit! She is not going to be defeated by some stupid black ink slugs!

"All I have now are theories, so I can't be sure that they will be able to succeed, but if it does, then it will be able to help you drive away these nightmares away from your dream world," the blue bat's voice rings once more in her head.

"I will try anyway," Sophia nods towards the blue bat.

"Okay. So, my theory is that you might be someone who my own kind calls Spiritwalker, the person who has the ability to traverse through other people's dreams. In other words, when you are lucid dreaming, aside from only visiting this world, or your dream world, you can also go visit the dreams of other people who are also currently dreaming, just like you," The blue bat explains.

"Spiritwalker? How... how do you know I am one of these... this spiritwalker?" Sophia's mind whirrs, thinking of the possibility.

Is that really possible? It sounds like it is straight up from a fantasy novel and movies, not something that should have existed in reality. Or maybe is it because she is currently lucid dreaming? But it still doesn't make any sense. Lucid dreaming, as Dr. Bernard explains, only allows her to modify the aspects of her own world. Sure, she is able to conjure up magical things and even dream up Leo, someone who almost feels like a real, complete human being, but visiting other people's dreams? That's in a different world entirely, and she's not sure what exactly all of this means.

"I know you must be doubting me, that much is normal. But think of this. If the manifestation of other people's nightmares can suddenly invade your world, that must mean that there must be some sort of a 'gate' that can connect other people's dreams to yours. I haven't really identified the cause of this, but the fact that there is a connection point between your dreams and theirs means that there is a possibility that you can also travel to their dream worlds," The blue bat explains to Sophia.

Sophia ponders over the words, thinking it over in her mind. While some of those words do make sense... it still seems way too absurd for her to absorb. It just doesn't make sense at all, even though she can see where the blue bat is coming from. But still, if she doesn't even try, what will become of her dream world? Or what will become of her, who has already seen the light at the end of the tunnel, where she can finally beat back her nightmares that have been haunting her for years little by little? Will she have to actually go back to the nights where she always feels afraid whenever she has to go to sleep, just because she knows that a horrendous nightmare will be the one to greet her the moment she falls asleep? If the blue bat is correct and that she will always go to this current world whenever she is lucid dreaming, then she is basically doomed. Sure, she might still be able to change the elements of the other parts of her dream world, and change the environment around her, but what if the black spots in front of them spread even more, eventually taking over all the space in her dream world? She has seen

firsthand what those things can do when they struck her before, as if they are recognizing the owner of the world and wants to get rid of her for good. They definitely don't want her to stay here, lest they won't try to attack her without warning.

"I understand but... why me? Why my dream world, specifically? I'm sure that there are a lot of people out there in my world who are also sleeping, lucid dreaming, like me. They must have their own worlds that they occupy. I just don't understand how all this happens. Sure, you might say that there is a point of connection between my dreams and theirs, but really, none of this still makes any sense to me," Sophia shakes her head, feeling it buzz over from the pain of getting dragged away by Leo as well as the explanation that the bat is telling her. All of the confusion and pain feels strangely real. She is aware that she is currently dreaming, that she is lucid dreaming, able to recognize her lucidity in her own dream, but at the same time she also can feel all the pain and confusion vividly as if she is living in the real world. The combination of the two definitely doesn't match each other, but Sophia doesn't pay it any heed for now, not when she sees the black slugs creating a long lash similar to the one that has tried to strike her before.

"Hmm... I'm not sure exactly, but human beings who often dream, especially those who can lucid dream, whether by nature or by learning how to induce it manually, sometimes have this power, or one can even call it magic, to be able to traverse the dream world. Some might find out about it accidentally, or get told by another ancient being like I just did to you. But I've never heard of any case about other people's dreams invading another, only legends of it," the blue bat's voice echoes through her mind once more.

Sophia can feel Leo's grip on her body tightens at that, but she pays it no heed, just registering it as Leo's reaction to the whole black slugs thing in front of her.

"This is all so weird," Sophia murmurs, her head heavy, but she looks at the blue bat once more despite it. "Then what should I do... to fix this whole mess, then? Where do I start and how? How do I even traverse other people's dreams?"

"Simple. You go to those black slugs over there, towards the densest part, and it will suck you into their world," the blue bat's voice is nonchalant, but Sophia feels like her heart almost stops.

"Are you mad?! Don't you see those things literally just tried to murder me?!" Sophia screeches out, staring in horror at the bundles of black slugs in front of her, as if they are all collectively staring at her menacingly, making her shudder.

"If you want a quick solution, that's the only thing I can offer you. Aside from it being fast and you don't need to find the point of connection between your world and theirs, it will also make sure that you get transported to the dream world of those who has invaded yours, and not get thrown off into a random one," the blue bat replies, and Sophia is almost certain that this... this ancient being is messing with her.

"Now that that's over, I'm sure you can do it yourself, yes? My body is naturally an enemy of those things, and I might just pass out and die if I follow you inside. So good luck, my dearest child!" The voice echoes once more inside her head.

Registering what exactly the words mean, Sophia's eyes open in panic as she hurriedly shouts "Wait!!!", but it is too late. The blue bat has gone in a poof once more, leaving only a trail of blue glitter dust on its wake, sprinkling on her hands.

Sophia stomps her feet in frustration, but doesn't feel the satisfying friction on her heels, forgetting momentarily that there is only endless space below their feet. She looks at Leo, who is still holding her on her side, looking clueless and confused.

Oh, right, Sophia feels like she just realizes something belatedly. Leo's not able to hear what the blue bat has said to her, doesn't he? So in his point of view, he would probably only see an insane girl talking to herself, having a conversation with her own mind like an idiot. Her cheeks burn, but she ignores it in favor of explaining again what the blue bat has said to her, as well as hoping her explanation will dispel whatever weird thoughts he might have inside of his mind about her.

"So... we need to get past those murderous black slugs so that we can basically purify it, is that what you're trying to say?" Leo asks carefully, as if he is still in disbelief from all the information dump that Sophia has just forced him to listen to.

Sophia doesn't really blame him. It indeed sounds outrageous, when one puts it like that. Even she herself still has difficulty accepting all these things, magic and whatnot. But she still wants to try even though her consciousness is screaming at her that all this is just a mad hallucination, because she wants to save her dream world, as well as protect herself in the real world. She doesn't want to return to square one after coming so far.

Especially when her lucid dreaming does prove to be very advantageous. It can definitely help her with her nightmares by driving away all the horrors that she is afraid of and replacing it with something less scary, something much more beautiful. Not to mention, being able to control her nightmares and her dream world at will also gives her a sense of power and control that might help making her going to sleep a much less scarier prospect in general, since now she

can definitely turn the tides when her nightmare want to swallow her up, even if sometimes she still need help to snap out of it. She doesn't want to lose all that, not after going this far.

"Alright then," Leo sighs before shooting Sophia a smile.

Sophia can't help but smile back. It's like an unconscious move that she does whenever Leo smiles at her. She will just always have to smile back, just because of how beautiful that smile he is giving her.

She doesn't see a lot of genuine smiles in her life after all. Maybe only her real parents, Becky's, Dr. Lestari's, and now Leo's. And she wants to treasure all of them dearly in her heart.

"I can't believe I'd ever say this but," Leo chuckles slightly, gripping one of my hands in his. "Let's go beat some slugs."

Sophia nods back in return before closing her eyes, willing herself to delve deep into her world and imagining that now, both her and Leo will be able to fly, so that they can reach the black slugs easily while trying to dodge the weapons they are throwing at the same time. Not too long after, she feels something heavy weighing on her shoulders and back.

When she opens her eyes again, she can see Leo admiring his new wings, which is black in color and remind her of a fallen angel's wings. She doesn't know exactly why he gets the design, since she is pretty sure that she didn't even bother thinking about specific designs when wishing for them to be able to have the ability to fly.

And speaking of just wishing it like that... Lucid dreaming is really neat. Not only that it can help Sophia drive away the source of her nightmares away from her dreams, she is also able to create neat things like this, that are just not realistic in real life, no matter how hard one might wish for it. Being able to fly and have wings, even if it is only in her dreams, is something amazing enough that it makes her feel like her heart is bursting full in her chest.

She tries floating, and even though it allows her easily to do so, it feels very awkward for Sophia, who is just not used to having a set of new limbs on her body. She is pretty sure that if she can see herself, she would look like a newborn chick who is trying to flap their wings in a very stupid and non-effective way, but how can she help it? Humans aren't meant to have heavy wings on their backs, after all.

She takes a moment to adjust herself, to the feeling of her body floating and not needing her legs to move. Funnily enough, it doesn't feel too weird to float here, when the floor underneath them is just empty space, which makes it look almost like they are meant to fly all this time, and the fact that they have been walking thus far is only because they are humans and Sophia's mind has created an invisible path for them to walk on in this space.

"Well, this certainly feels a bit funny. But also incredibly fun," Leo's voice echoes beside her, as he flaps his black-feathered wings behind him to catch up to Sophia.

Sophia eyes him slightly with envy. The way Leo handles his wings makes it look like he's a natural who has always worn wings on his backs the entire time, taking little time to adjust. His wings are flapping heavily and powerfully behind his back, giving momentum to his every movement and causing him to be able to fly in a stable and precise manner, unlike Sophia, who flies more like a lost bird with an injured wing. Isn't this her dream? Why is Leo the one who looks like he belongs more to this world, sometimes? Adapting very quickly to any situation, and able to control his pace much more fluidly than Sophia does.

"Okay so, any plan or do we just jump straight into it?" Leo asks, looking back towards the black mess in front of them.

Sophia bites her lips, suddenly nervous at the sudden question. Right. They don't really have any plans, do they? But even if she wants to, how can she plan this? She knows next to nothing aside from what the blue bat has told her, and the fact that she needs to jump into the dream world of all these people and try to make their nightmare better will be able to clean the black sludges away from her own world. But she also has so many more questions in return. How will she even be able to cleanse their nightmares or whatever? And then... will she really be safe, traveling to other people's dreams just like that? Without their permissions, on top of that?

"Hey, don't be so nervous. We haven't started yet. I don't know what awaits us, but I'm sure you've seen yourself what amazing things you can do with your dream world. We can take one step at a time and try to solve things as we see more of what is awaiting us, okay?" Leo's warm voice manages to calm some of her nerves down, and she grips back the hand holding hers tightly, feeling like it has provided her some warm comfort and support.

"Alright. Okay, let's go then," Sophia takes a deep breath, and holding Leo by her side, they fly through the mess of black slugs, straight into the heart of one of the biggest one amongst them.

Sophia can hear their inhumane screeches as they fly through, and she can't help but grip Leo even tighter, the echoes of the screams battering her eardrums mercilessly. On the corner of her eyes, she can see a bloody black whip flying to their side, and without thinking, she grabs Leo by the waist and flies the opposite way, barely managing to miss the whip striking down on their side, the impact of it sending black mist and dust to every corner. Sophia coughs as the rotten smell of the mist pierces her nose, fighting the urge to gag and vomit.

Sophia grits her teeth as she tries to bear with it, knowing that it is much more important to get to the center of the black sludge in the safest way possible instead of rerouting and trying to avoid the mist encroaching all around them, which makes Sophia's sense overload with the urge to hurl her stomach out.

"Let's do this," Sophia grunts lightly, and would take a long breath to try and calm her nerves if it won't make her puke.

She grips Leo tightly as she flies past the whips still being thrown their side, but almost missed one as the whip whizzes past her skin, causing her to flinch back as the pain sears through her skin as if it is trying to eat her alive, rotting her skin from the inside. She gasps when she can feel Leo grabbing her and then flying away from the whips that are flying towards her previous spot, aiming for her when she is most vulnerable, hurt and distracted. She would probably say something along the lines of thanks to Leo if he isn't completely focused on trying to steer them to safety, his handling of his newfound limbs much more expertly used compared to Sophia, as they fly straight to one of the blackest parts of the sludges.

Sophia braces for impact as they get closer and closer to the black sludge until it is the only thing that she can see. She is expecting to be met with either pain from her body slamming into something, or being enveloped in darkness just because of how dark and thick all the slugs are. But instead, the warm atmosphere from her dream world is suddenly replaced with a chill, freezing her skin as her nose buds cleared up, no longer smelling the awful sewer stink and replaced with a fresh, flowery scent that is very much welcomed after the disgusting trip her nose had to endure. Her eyes are blinded with a sudden flash of white light that is a big contrast to the darkness that she was only seeing before.

She blinks her eyes repeatedly, trying to blink the darkness away, and is met with the sight of Leo as well as his still newfound wings flying them both to the ground.

Wait, the ground?

She blinks again, and realizes that they're in a different world completely. Gone was the blue sapphire sky that dominates her world, and they are instead met with a regular two stories house with a perfectly regular asphalt road. The house itself is quite big, and looks homey, dominated with white and brown colors. It also has a mini garden on the front of the house leading to the main road, where the bushes are trimmed neatly and a plethora of flowers that Sophia can't name growing all over, with some pots of plants that probably house other plants that Sophia also can't name.

She's a secretary, alright, not a biologist or an explorer or a science major student or something.

It is currently nighttime, and if it's not for the feeling of her wings as well as seeing Leo's wings, she would think that she has woken up and is now back on earth once more. It looks like a perfectly normal sight on earth, a house in a housing district, and it is nighttime, with the black night sky up in the air and some twinkling stars surrounding the full moon up high. She can feel gravity pulling her down this time the moment she stops moving her wings, and she knows that she is not in the domain of her dreams anymore.

Like hearing her own thoughts, the moment their feet touch the ground, both of their wings slowly disappear into thin air in a puff, now that her consciousness feels like she doesn't need it anymore. Or maybe, is it because she doesn't have a lot of power over a domain that doesn't belong to her?

She looks around curiously, and her ears can even catch sounds of the crickets, as well as some loud snoring from the open window, where the main bedroom probably is located.

So this is it then. The dream world of another person. A dream world that is not of her own, but is inside the mind of someone else on earth sleeping right now. It all still feels a bit surreal, by how alive everything around her seems to be compared to her own dream world, but she knows well enough that she is definitely not in reality by the way they had come here as well as the fact that Leo is still beside her. Even though they don't have wings anymore, their presence together is proof enough that Sophia is still lucid dreaming. All in all, Sophia has to say that the view of the dream world of another person is a bit... underwhelming? But then again, maybe this dream world is a normal dream world, something similar to her own nightmare dream world that she always experiences every night before she learns how to induce lucid dreaming into her nightly sleep.

"Any idea how we should go from here?" Leo asks, his hands busy brushing soot and sludge away from his clothes.

Sophia realizes that she should probably do the same, and sure enough, she can see endless disgusting black sludge all over her clothes when she looks down. Her face scrunches up as she tries her best to wave away all the disgusting things away from her clothes. Sure, this all might only be a lucid dream, but she can still see and feel clearly, and doesn't really want those smelly black things to stick on her, even if it is only inside the dream world.

"No idea, to be honest. Seems like there's nothing wrong even going on in here? I don't know how I go about purifying something that is--" Sophia's answer is cut short when the slam of a glass hitting the floor deafen their ears.

She instinctively jumps away from the house where the loud sound seems to be coming from, and she can also see Leo doing the same from the corner of her eyes. She doesn't linger on that for too long though, keeping her eyes focused on the window where she can hear the shouting.

Without thinking too much about it, she starts to get closer once more to the house in front of her, peering inside through the big, open windows available. While it is covered up by thick curtains in beige color, she can still see what is happening on the other side through some gaps available that the curtains have left. Not to mention, the shouting happening inside also makes it easy for her to paint a picture of what is currently happening inside the house, or inside the dream.

"What do you think you're doing, you dumb fool? You just ruined my entire batch of pasta! How will you make up for this?" Sophia hears a loud shout from a woman from the inside. Are they cooking something? But why does it all seem so... violent? She frowns at that thought. Ruined pasta is bad indeed, but is there a need to call someone a dumb fool for ruining it? Especially if it is by accident? Because why would someone deliberately try to ruin food?

She presses her face closer to the window in the hopes of being able to know more just what is going on inside, but the gap of the curtains doesn't really allow her to be able to see a lot of details or issues of what is happening inside of the house, making her makes a sound of slight frustration. She knows that this might be one of the keys or hints that will let her know what exactly this nightmare is about, and how she can help solve it, even though she hasn't the faintest idea on how to go about it yet.

Sophia can distinctly hear another voice meekly replying to the shout from before, although she can't really make out the words from how soft it is, especially compared to the previous woman's voice. But she can definitely hear the woman shouting once again, probably in reply to the previous meek sentence.

"I don't care whether you're doing it on purpose or not! The fact is that my pasta is ruined and it's all because of you, you ungrateful child! Why do I have to have such a useless kid like you hanging around here?"

Sophia feels her head buzz as she hears that sentence, her eyes going distant and unfocused as the same sentence rings over and over again in her head. Useless kid... Useless kid... Why does that sound so familiar to her?

She can barely feel her own nails digging harshly into her palm, clutching her fists hard enough that she draws blood. But her head is muddy with the thought of that awful sentence, said again and again not to the meek person opposite the shouting woman inside the house in front of her, but shouted to her face by a tall figure with red heels and a velvety dress.

Sophia tries to take a sharp breath, but she feels like her chest is constricted, like it can't take any more air anymore, leaving her gasping for it and suffocating for fresh oxygen. Panic clouds her mind even as she hears the distinct shout of a familiar masculine voice as she falls down on her knees, barely registering the painful thump of her knees hitting the flat dirt underneath her, as well as the sudden stop of shouting from inside the house, creating a deafening silence that amplifies the pain surging inside of her even more.

She doesn't see the silhouette of the shouting woman from the gaps of the curtains anymore, but now she instead see a very vivid image of Wanda inside of the house instead, lecturing a crying Sophia who tries her hardest to control her hiccups or sobs, knowing that Wanda will be even more upset if Sophia lets out even a single sob or cry.

What a useless child she indeed is, unable to make her new step-mother happy no matter what she tries. She tries to help her cook, help her clean the house, help her with anything, but she only regards her with sharp words and harsh eyes, the complete opposite of how her step-mother looks at Maria, her new sister. Why does dad even marry this woman if she hates Sophia so much? Doesn't she know that dad already has a child before she marries him? Isn't the new mother's job to help take care of her as well? Or does she get it all wrong? Her dad doesn't seem to believe her as well when she said that her new step-mother doesn't love her at all and is only putting a caring front only when her father is present. What should she do, then? She can't exactly go to the police, can she? She also doesn't want to grow up in an orphanage! But she also doesn't want things to stay like this forever!

She cries and sobs and curls up into a ball, trying to rock back and forth to try and soothe her bleeding heart. She doesn't understand what she has done wrong. She has lost her mom too soon, and her seemingly new mom seems to hate her for no specific reason at all. Maybe Sophia is just a bad kid. A kid who brings bad luck. She has driven her lovely mother away to heaven and then caused her new step-mother to hate her as well. And then not long after, her father also follows her mother to heaven too...

Truly the worst kid anyone could ask for, just like Wanda has said before to her. She has driven her parents away back to heaven because she is way too naughty, and none of her new family members will ever accept, let alone love her. Who can she turn to, then? Is she bound to just stay alone in despair forever?

From the corner of her eyes, Sophia can see that her arm is slowly glitching away like a broken programming tool on a PC monitor, blinking back and forth from being transparent and physical very, very quickly, causing her eyes to widen. Her mind is torn between reality and dream, both images blurring together into a cacophony of a broken orchestra performing on different keys with a series of untuned instruments.

"Sophia, snap out of it! What are you doing?! You're going to destroy this world if you don't wake up!" Leo shouts in her ear, causing her to jump in surprise at the sudden loud sound breaking the image slightly from inside her head.

"What... what... I don't... I don't understand..." Sophia stammers, blinking away, tears blurring the image in front of her as Wanda's imposing figure still haunts her mind, making her whimper in fear.

"Just wake up, please! Your emotions are running rampant and calling all these horrible things, you need to stop!" Leo shouts again.

Horrible things...? Sophia blinks repeatedly, trying to understand what Leo is talking about. Horrible things... like Wanda? Does she actually summon Wanda to this world because of her fear?

Her heartbeat racing and breath hitching, she frantically looks all around her in a panic, only relieved when she sees that she can't find any hints of her step-mother anywhere. But not too long after, her eyes widen again in complete shock, staring at the abomination in front of her. She raises one of her hands as she points at the gigantic black slug in front of her with trembling fingers, her consciousness slowly starting to return to her. She starts to remember once more. That's right, she is only dreaming right now, and there is no more Wanda in this dream world, because Sophia has gotten rid of her for good from her dream world. But...

"Wait... since when is it there?" Sophia's eyes constrict as she surveys her surroundings once more.

Sure enough, there are multiple black slugs all around her, surrounding the house and even the asphalt road. They are moaning and howling in pain, screaming out in pain, the noises threatening to burst Sophia's eardrums to oblivion. She widens her eyes as she stares at her

hand, which still has a trace of the black ink, which certainly wasn't there before. She did make sure to clean herself up thoroughly after seeing Leo did so, after all.

Then does that mean... she summons those things into this world? How? Why? This doesn't make any sense! Does that mean that she unconsciously moved the black slugs away from her dream world to this one? But doesn't that mean that she has basically destroyed this dream world?

Her eyes widen in horror as the black slugs start to expand rapidly and start emitting black mist, as if it is hearing her thoughts. She can see the mist slowly swallowing all the plants around them, and even the roads, cleaning them off of any materials, whether they be alive or dead, until all that remains is an empty, dark void of nothingness.

"Stop! Please, stop!" Sophia screams.

Her stomach lurching, she rises up quickly, stumbling when her foot shakes under her sudden body weight, not prepared for her sudden movement, but she presses on nonetheless. She runs straight towards one of the blackest ink slugs that she can find, hoping that it can transport her to another dream world just like it did back when she was in her own dream world.

But no such thing happened. Instead, it feels as if the black slugs don't care about her at all. She bounces back from impact after hitting the black slugs in front of her with full force, whimpering in pain as her butt hits the ground harshly, causing it to probably bruise over.

"No... No, no!" She shouts once again as she tries to wake up from being knocked down.

Tears stream down her face as she sees a familiar bloody whip being extended from the black slug's body, heading straight towards the house behind her, straight towards the place where it probably holds the people who are shouting and being shouted at.

She can do absolutely nothing but stare straight ahead as the carnage starts, the flowery scent turned into the sewer stink she's grown a bit familiar with, much as she hates it with all her pores, but then it changes into a cloying metallic scent of blood not long after, thick and filling the air with its distinct scent that cloy the nose.

Her eyes widen and turns glassy as the whip returns back to the black mist's side after finishing the attack on the house's insides, and she can see the tips of the whip layered by blood, a red color that is a bright contrast to the rest of the dark, misty shape of the whip. The blood drips down from the tip, down to the plant right below it, as if it is trying to hydrate the flowers by the blood of its owners.

"Aah..." Sophia whimpers, and barely registers it when Leo comes to her side and picks her up with a grunt, adjusting her until she is laying on a bridal carry while Leo runs away from

the carnage of the black slugs and whips. The slugs ignored them entirely still even as they got further and further away until they could barely see the black slugs amidst the empty lots and roads among them.

"C'mon, we have to go back to your dream world. This world is becoming quite unstable now that the owner of the dream world is dead. They will probably wake up soon and this dream world will cease to exist until she goes back to sleep once more," Leo tries to shake her slightly, still refusing to let Sophia down, as if Sophia can break if he releases her from his hold.

"What--what have I done?" Sophia is still staring at the carnage that they have left behind, the world that they are supposed to save. "Why is this happening? I can only see Wanda just now, and then--and then--"

Sophia hiccups and sobs, raising both of her hands to her face to muffle it but flinches away when she realizes that her fingertips are still stained with the dark mist of the slugs, the distinctive stink of it wafting up her nose and makes her gag. She pushes away from Leo's hold, not even registering that Leo stumbles and almost loses his balance from Sophia's sudden movements as she kneels down on the dirt road, vomiting all over the ground until her tears sting her eyes once more and her throat is burning dry.

She starts trembling as her body still tries to vomit even though there is nothing that she can eject anymore, tears mixing with snot as well as the black smudge that has managed to stain her face when she raised her hands previously.

"I just... I just killed someone... I summoned those black slugs here and they--they killed them--" Sophia sobs, looking at her hands, as if they are stained red with blood instead of the black mist still clinging on to them stubbornly.

"You didn't kill them. At least, not in real life. Maybe the poor girl getting shouted at would even be relieved that death has claimed her in the dreams before the one shouting at her does," Leo speaks behind her.

"What?! What do you mean? How can anyone ever think of that?" Sophia shouts back as she turns around to glare at the man through blurred eyes.

Leo hangs his head and sighs, before raising one of his hands, clean, unlike Sophia's, to rub against his forehead. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. What I mean is, at least she will be able to wake up once more later. And considering this is not a lucid dream, and a regular dream world instead, there is a high chance that she will wake up not remembering most of the details and will just wave it off as another one of her nightmares."

"Maybe so... but we were tasked here to help solve the issue of this nightmare so that the source of the black slugs can disappear, but instead I bring some of the black slugs from my own dream world to hers, killing her in process," Sophia sobs, and curl up into a ball as she tries to block out the reality around her.

"I don't entirely blame you. You have to be met with a dream world, or a nightmare world, similar to your own the first time you try to venture into another person's dream world, right? No wonder that it will trigger your trauma and cause you to lose control like that. It's not one else's fault but your abuser as well as the dreamer of this world's abuser that all this happened," Leo tries to comfort her, getting closer to her step by step, as if ignoring the fact that Sophia probably looks like shit and smells like one, too.

Sophia lifts up her head from her ball position to look at Leo, the vivid image of the whips destroying the dreamer's house still stuck firmly in her brain. "Is there any way we can actually help this world, still? Undo everything that has happened?"

Leo shakes his head, although Sophia can also see that his expression is also sad and troubled, unlike his usual cheerful and optimistic self.

That's because of her too, isn't it? No matter how much Leo tries to comfort her, the scene that has just happened before them will probably have shaken him to the core as well.

Why can't she do anything right? Is she truly that helpless? She thought that she has well and good driven away some of her fears from Wanda and Maria away from her thought the moment that she has successfully kicked them away from her dream world by lucid dreaming, but the moment that she hears the words of the screaming woman, her instincts had gone haywire and she can only see herself being the receiving end of those words, with Wanda shouting it at her.

And now, look at what that has caused. She has intruded into someone else's dream world in a selfish goal to save her own, and then proceed to destroy it with her own two hands.

"I don't know how we can return back to your dream world, but we should go soon. We can't stay here any longer, especially if our physical bodies are still sleeping. I don't know if it will have consequences or not, but it will probably be bad to stay in a world where the dreamer will wake up soon. C'mon, Sophia, we can think more about it as we try to go back," Leo tries to coax her again, his voice even has a slight tone of pleading.

Right. Sophia will prefer to stay here if she can, atoning for her sins and searching for ways to undo what she has done, and try to fix her mistakes. She doesn't want any of it to happen, after all. She only wants to go here and try to help with the dreamer's nightmare issues,

since the blue bat does say that she will be able to get rid of the black slugs corroding her world once she has done that, as those black slugs are a result of too much nightmares coming into one place. She wants to stay here, dangerous as it is, in order to try to fix her mistakes and not let all that carnage happen in this world.

But she can't only think of herself. No, she can't be selfish, just like she does when she goes to this world only thinking about the safety of her own world, not really caring about whether the dreamer will even benefit from her visit using her newfound magical power with the help of lucid dreaming or not. No, she only thinks about herself and her world and nothing else, and she can't afford to do that again. Especially so when the person that she might be endangering even further is Leo.

She doesn't know exactly how to get out herself, or whether there will be any consequences of staying longer in a dream world where the world itself is almost destroyed and the dreamer killed in her own dream, which will probably wake up her physical body in the real world. But she doesn't want to take the risk and stay when there is a chance, no matter how little, that Leo can once more get dragged into her mess and get endangered because of her. She can't handle two guilts like that in a row.

She will leave this place no matter what. She will keep Leo safe from being harmed.

"Alright," Sophia says as she tries to stand up once more, her knees wobbling under her weight, still weak from all the shock and guilt she has to undergo tonight in this world. "We're going back. Let's go, Leo."

"Going back?" Leo's voice is incredulous, "You know that those whips are still running rampage, do you not? It's not safe! I understand that you might want to redo your mistakes, Sophia, but this is not the time--"

"I know that there's a high chance I won't be able to redo my mistakes or even atone for what I have done!" Sophia shouts back in reply, cutting Leo's reply short. "But I'm going back not because I want to try doing that, but because I want to keep you safe! We... or I... as a spiritwalker, probably, manages to go to this poor dreamer's world by flying to the center of the slug's heart, do we not? Then we probably will have to go back the same way."

"You're... right, actually. I'm sorry for assuming right away. Alright, let's try this, then. Do you think you can still use some of your lucid dreaming powers in this world? I know that I can't, since I tried, when I saw you summoning those things here, ah... sorry..." Leo stops talking once Sophia's face starts to become uglier and uglier.

Sophia shakes her head and focuses once more, channeling the energy that she has felt when she has summoned the blue sapphire skies for the first time, and driving Wanda and Maria away from her dream world, as Leo has asked her to do. She tries to think of all the positive things she can think about, but it was hard, way harder, especially after what she has just done.

It takes multiple tries before she can barely feel it, a sliver of energy on the corner of her mind. She wills herself to paint an image and create a picture of running boots underneath hers' and Leo's feet, willing the boots to be able to take the both of them on a safe journey back towards the heart of the black mist and even going back to their own world.

When she opens her eyes, she can see that their shoes has been replaced by the sonic boots that she has envisioned in her mind, but she can see that it is faint, almost transparent to the point that she can see her original shoes, and sometimes even glitching in and out like it's malfunctioning.

"It is definitely weaker. Not sure IF it is because I was not capable of channeling the positive energy that I have done before when I first tried to create the beautiful world that now exists within my dream world, or is it because I'm in another person's dream world entirely. Maybe both. But it should serve us a little, no matter how short. It will at least help us get to our location quicker and hopefully can also help us dodge all the incoming whips if they suddenly decide they will take a fancy on us," Sophia explains, adjusting her new, glitching boots with the help of her hands as well so that her feet will fit better inside of it.

"Alright, thanks, Sophia, for trying. And even succeeding at that, which is already much better than my own attempt to do the same thing. Let's do this, then," Leo adjusts his own boots before holding Sophia's hand in his.

His hand is warm, and comforting, as if it is channeling his strength towards Sophia, like he is trying to convey a message to Sophia and Sophia alone. Her heart warms, knowing that Leo doesn't leave her or gets disgusted with her despite what she has done, even though it will definitely be entirely in his right to do so, as Sophia can feel that she is even disgusted with herself for what she has done to this world.

Hand in hand, they run back towards the site of carnage, the boots allowing them to run much faster than before, and not even a minute later, they have arrived back towards the place where they first arrived in this dream world, but the scene before them has changed entirely.

Instead of a cozy neighborhood where a lot of comfy-looking houses are standing tall surrounded by gardens, it is now replaced with black slugs who are happily whipping their weapons everywhere. Blood stains the stone pavement and the road, and almost all the houses

are destroyed until only the rubbles are left, the gardens torn beyond belief, with all the beautiful flowers now strewn on the ground, trees unhinged and laying on top of roofs and roads.

"This is horrible..." Her voice trembles as she takes sight of the dystopia before them, the weight of what she has done sinking in more and more as she observes each and every destruction wrecked before her eyes. Sophia looks down on her trembling hands, still stained with the putrid black mist of the same slugs that are happily destroying the world around them. It was through her hands that those things had come here. It was through her world that they invaded this one.

"C'mon. We can try thinking about fixing this later. We can't do anything when we're dead," Leo tries to tug on her arm when Sophia stands frozen on her feet, unable to move as her eyes take sight of the destruction that the black slugs have wrecked.

No, the destruction she has caused.

"Okay..." Sophia nods, a slight dip of her head as she follows Leo once more to the heart of the destruction.

The black slugs still pay no attention to them even as they get closer and closer, perhaps knowing that they do not come from this dream world. The physical incarnation of a lot of nightmares collected in one place, that's what the blue bird told her about what those black slugs are. In all honesty, she's still not entirely sure about what the whole nature of those slugs are. Sure, they might truly be these physical incarnations of nightmares that become a real entity in a dream world, but how exactly are they created? Can nightmare worlds truly move over like that? Her being able to traverse other people's dreams is already weird enough as it is, she can't imagine a world where the whole nightmare of being able to move the world on its own without human aid is even possible. It just all sounds so surreal and imaginable, straight out of a horror fantasy or something along those kinds of fiction that Sophia tends to avoid at all cost.

She's already had her own nightmares to supply her fears, thank you very much. She's not going to torture herself even more by reading those kind of fiction books. But looking at the slugs in front of her now, she wonders whether she should start. After all, maybe books can help her view all these bizarre things in front of her in a new light.

Licking her dry lips, she goes closer and closer towards the black slugs in front of her, thankfully still completely ignoring their presence. She doesn't know whether she can still handle another round of avoiding whips that want to kill her too on top of what she has already experienced today. It might just be way too much.

While the way back home might be much, much easier than going here, without all the murderous whips aiming for her, her steps definitely feel much heavier, even with the speed boots she is still wearing on her feet. Rather than helping the owner of this dream world and making it better so that Sophia can slowly get rid of the black slugs invading her dream world, she feels like she has done much more harm than good, which twists her gut into feelings of guilt, remorse, and regret. Each step she takes forward to the gate taking her home feels more and more like she is just abandoning her task and responsibility and leaving the consequences of her actions in ruins, for others to pay for it instead.

But there's nothing else she can do here. The owner of the dream world will be waking up soon thanks to all the destruction she has wrecked with her hand, and she needs to keep Leo safe. With that thought, she squeezed Leo's hand tight in hers as they walked towards the center of the black slugs.

Light blind her eyes once more as their bodies make contact with the black slugs, and once she blinks back, she's already transported back into her dream world, still full of the black slugs, although noticeably less than before. The blue butterfly is watching her mutedly from one side as she watches the black slugs still writhing restlessly in front of her eyes, probably mourning the loss of some of their friends. It is confirmed then. The missing black slugs from her world are definitely transported to the poor girl's dream world by her own hand. She is not entirely sure why, or how, she can even do that, but her hand still stained with the mist is evidence enough that it is by her hand that those slugs are moved to a different dream world.

"So, you failed, although maybe not entirely. You did get rid of some of the nightmare entities, although not exactly by the method I will recommend," the blue bat's genderless voice once more rings inside of her head.

Sophia hangs her head low, unable to respond. Once more, she can feel tears pricking the corner of her eyes, the weight of her failure hanging heavily over her shoulders. Like Leo has said himself, her actions might have only impacted a dream world, and that the owner of the dream world might not even vividly remember what has happened, it doesn't make her any less guilty. It is still by her hand that everything has happened, and in the end, she still does hurt the world, and maybe the owner too.

The blue bat has even said before that leaving her world in a state where it is full of black slugs might be harmful for her health in her physical, real body. That was the main reason why Sophia decided to try out all this Spirit Walker magic... thing... and traveling to other people's dream worlds. It is because she wants to keep her dream world safe, as well as her physical body

from any harm that might have come from the result of her fear towards all these black slugs occupying her real world.

With what she has done tonight, doesn't it mean that she has condemned the owner of the dream world she has just visited into the same risk she has to face right now? That thought alone makes her tremble in fear, her breath becoming labored.

"Don't be too panicked just yet. It is partially my fault as well for not explaining to you what you should have done, as well as the responsibilities that a Spirit Walker has, much as I loathe having to admit to my own mistakes," the blue bat's voice resounds in her mind once more. "For now, what you need the most is just rest. And seems like it is about the right time as well, since I can feel your consciousness slowly separating away from your dream world, which means that you must be waking up soon in real life."

Sophia looks down and sure enough, her hands are starting to become transparent once more. It seems a bit weird. She feels like now she is living two different lives, one in the real world and one in her dream world. And it is becoming more and more apparent that her life in the dream world starts to become more and more impactful and important for her as well. Her feelings about the whole thing today is proof enough that she doesn't merely see all of these as just mere dreams anymore, but rather something that means a lot more, maybe as important as her daily life in her real world itself.

"Alright, then, see you later, Sophia."

And then the world goes black.

XII

Apricity

"Black slugs? Magic? Spiritwalker? Traveling to other people's dream worlds?" Even Dr. Lestari herself looks completely taken aback, flabbergasted from all the information dump that Sophia has just given her.

Sophia is currently sitting down inside of Dr. Bernard's office which she has become somewhat familiar with. She has just finished summarizing everything that has been going on in her dreams for a week to both doctors who are sitting down in front of her. Not only did she tell them about her first experience in being able to induce her lucid dreaming for the first time, she also tells them about how she has successfully driven Wanda and Maria away on her second night that she has induced her lucid dreaming, which makes Dr. Lestari beams like a proud mother bird.

But then their expressions change drastically after Sophia starts telling them about all the things that she has experienced after that. Dr. Lestari's expression turns more and more puzzling while Dr. Bernard seems more and more intrigued with every word that Sophia has spoken of. From hearing the blue bat's voice, being able to see the blue bat that she has also seen multiple times in her real life before, meeting Leo, all the black slugs that has invaded her dreams, as well as traversing to other people's dreams as well as her failure in trying to help the other girl's nightmare better and wreaking havoc in her world instead.

By the end of it, Dr. Lestari is staring blankly at her with her mouth open, a new look that Sophia has never seen on the generally calm and composed doctor. Dr. Bernard, on the other hand, is writing furiously down on his notebooks with chicken crawl writings that Sophia doesn't even want to try to read even if she has the chance to. She herself is fidgeting on her seat, her guilt still prominent and strong even in real life. It feels like everything is just real--too real. Maybe it is the whole point of lucid dreaming, but all of her dreams are just so vivid Sophia would believe it if they say it's a different world that she is living in altogether.

"Well, normally I'd be able to try and understand all of this by trying to put everything that my patient has experienced into my perspective so that I can understand them better, but this one is just beyond me. All these... magic things are just not my forte, unfortunately. Are you not absolutely sure that it is just a fictional thing that happened in your dream, Sophia? After all, almost all of us human beings have experienced some sort of magical dream before, where

everything that is not possible has become possible. Maybe your whole dream is just that... a dream? That you don't actually traverse to another person's world?" Dr. Lestari tries to suggest.

Sophia can't really blame Dr. Lestari since she knows that everything that she has just said will sound ridiculous to any other sane person. Heck, even she herself will even laugh out loud if anyone else has tried to tell her that a similar thing has happened to them and that now they believe that magic is real and that they have the ability to go to another person's dream, basically invading their dreams. Sophia will even probably call that person mad. And yet she is now that exact person, telling her doctors that she now believes in magic after experiencing two lucid dreams.

"Wait, Lestari," Dr. Bernard suddenly says, putting down his pen before turning back to look at Sophia.

And then he starts clapping, along with a loud, boisterous laugh, something that she has never seen the serious and strict doctor ever does. He also keeps doing it for a while, clapping both of his large palms together until Sophia can feel her eardrums bursting, looking at pity towards the red palms of the brain doctor.

"Good! Very good! Extremely good! This is the most interesting thing that has happened over the course of my career, and that's saying something, since I definitely have seen a lot of things in my life!"

"Dr. Bernard...?" Dr. Lestari sounds completely unsure as she looks towards the male doctor.

Not that Sophia doesn't understand why. Dr. Bernard looks like he's almost completely deranged, a wild animal on the loose when they saw a food they really like, a predator looking at its prey, in this case Sophia herself, in an eerie sort of enchantment.

"Hahaha! I like this, I really like where this is going. You know, when you first come into this office, all shy and always keeping your head down all the time, hiding meekly behind Lestari, I will never imagine that you will be able to go this far in the world of lucid dreaming, let alone experience all these magical things! Tell me, how does it all feel? How does it impact your nightmares and fear of sleeping in general?" Dr. Bernard throws a bunch of questions at Sophia with a large grin that doesn't seem like it belongs on his strict, serious face.

"Um... I suppose that it has helped with my nightmares a lot, that one I'm sure about," Sophia answers as she nods her own head, thinking about the powerful feeling she has felt when she has finally succeeded in driving away her step-mother and step-sister while lucid dreaming. It feels as if she now has the power to control over her own dreams, making her be able to rest

easier at night. She definitely doesn't dread going to sleep as much anymore, knowing that she can change the contents of her nightmares if they ever come visit again, now that she knows how to induce lucid dreaming, and be able to realize if she is currently sleeping and dreaming.

"That's good, that's good. How about all the magic then? Do you really think that you actually do all that magic? Since you ARE aware that you are dreaming when you currently do it, do you not?" Dr. Bernard continues to ask.

Sophia hums for a bit before nodding once more. "Yes, I'm ninety-nine percent sure that I am definitely aware that I was currently dreaming the whole time. That's why it feels that much more ridiculous, if that even makes sense. Because I'm well aware of what I'm doing."

"Does that make you feel more nervous, when you were doing all the dream world-hopping thingy, knowing that you are fully aware of what you are doing and you are deciding what to do on your own out of your own volition?" Dr. Bernard guesses.

Sophia is not even surprised anymore that Dr. Bernard has managed to guess her feelings directly. He seems to be doing that a lot the more that Sophia knows him, especially during the days where Sophia is first learning on how to induce her lucid dreaming manually, calling a lot with the male doctor about her progress as well as the details of each and every one of her nightmares. Sometimes, Sophia is even convinced that Dr. Bernard is a mind-reader on top of being a brain specialist doctor.

Before Sophia can even nod again in affirmation to Dr. Bernard's queries, all three people in the room jump in shock when there's suddenly a loud knocking sound on the door separating Dr. Bernard's room and the hallway outside of it. If Sophia were to be honest, she'd probably say that the person knocking is banging on it instead, with a fist, and full of power at that, like they are some sort of gangster demanding money. There's some muffled voices that can still be heard through the soundproof room not long after, showing that the people arguing outside must be doing so with a very loud voice if they can hear even a sliver of it.

Sophia looks towards the door, puzzled. This kind of thing has never even happened before. Is someone's family member dying and needs immediate operation or something? But why would they go to the psychiatrist section instead of the emergency section? And even critically ill patients and their family members would know better than to start banging harshly at the doctor's door, who might just be the key to saving someone they care about. It just seems so absurd and sudden.

Sophia can also see Dr. Lestari and Dr. Bernard getting on their feet, pushing their chairs back. Dr. Bernard looks absolutely pissed off, his face scrunched into angry lines and his neck

even has a hint of redness on it, veins almost all visible. Even Dr. Lestari doesn't look all that good either. She has a permanent frown on her face on both her arms crossed in front of her chest. Sophia feels slightly bad towards the intruder as they would have to face these two upset doctors, and she will not be volunteering to take their place anytime soon.

Dr. Bernard especially looks like a man ready to kill. He stomps over towards his door and opens it in a flash without warning. Sophia has a slight feeling that he has hoped to open them fast enough so that the intruder will fall over from the sudden force. Sure enough, not long after, she hears a loud thud followed by a chain of curses that gets drowned over the nurses trying to pull the intruder away with loud voices, but Dr. Bernard silences them all with a mighty shout that Sophia herself is tempted to cover both of her ears with her hands.

"What the hell is going on here?! Don't any of you patients know how to line up and wait properly like a polite human being?! And you nurses, why won't you call the security?!" Dr. Bernard bellows, but the next voice that replies Dr. Bernard freezes Sophia on her seat.

"I'm here to look for my stupid step-daughter, you dimwit! I have every right to knock this door down if she is in this room as I need to speak with her immediately!"

Sophia feels her whole body freezing over, but not from the cold temperature around her, rather from the fear and panic that suddenly attacks her being with full force. Her head whips towards the entrance of the open door, and then finds a sight that feels like she has stepped into pandemonium once more. Her living hell, coming into real life once again.

There, in front of the door and surrounded by a lot of nurses as well as patients, stands two women side-by-side who look like they don't belong in the hospital at all. Wanda is standing tall in her signature velvet dress and red heels, looking down at everyone and anyone who gets into her line of sight. Next to her is a shorter woman with a tight, short, sleeveless black dress that shows all her curves and skin as she tries to dust away her skin, her hair visibly rumpled from being knocked down by surprise by Dr. Bernard's sudden opening of his door. Wanda's biological daughter, Maria.

"There you are," Wanda's eyes finally spot Sophia, who is still sitting frozen on her seat, walking leisurely towards her. "Why don't you ever answer my call, you dumb nitwit?"

Sophia clenches both her fists as she feels like she has been plunged back towards her childhood, where both figures have always been like this, walking towards her in leisure steps as they know that she will never be able to run away from them, threatening her and prolonging her pain as long as possible. And then Wanda will get her belt out, and start whipping her until Sophia is crying from all the abuse and pain. Her eyes cloud over and her breath hitches in her

throat, curling up into a ball on top of the chair and try to run away from the horrifying sight of her past trauma coming back to haunt her, but her limbs will not listen to her, pinning her down on the seat and unable to do anything as Wanda keeps coming closer and closer.

But then she sees someone else's back in front of her sight, taking most of her eyesight away and hiding her away from Wanda's sight and vice versa. She looks up, and sees Dr. Lestari's white coat standing in front of her protectively.

"I'm sorry, but no one is allowed to make any ruckus in the hospital, as it will disturb the hospital's peace and the patient's health and mental well-being. Please leave immediately before we are forced to call the authorities on you," Dr. Lestari's voice is firm and hard, unyielding from her place in front of Sophia, even though Sophia herself can still hear Wanda's heels coming closer and closer towards them, despite not being able to see her step-mother.

"Oh, yeah? Didn't you hear me, woman? That child right there," Wanda points at behind Dr. Lestari, "is my step-daughter, and therefore I have the full right to go in here, no matter what you say. It is fully within my right to see my own family member, is it not?" Her voice turns more and more mocking as she speaks, and even if Sophia can't really see Wanda's face right now, she can definitely already imagine it. Smug, without a hint of weakness, as if the world is already within her palms.

"I'm afraid not, madam," Dr. Lestari cuts again, still standing straight in front of Sophia, despite the fact that Wanda is still moving closer until their face is mere centimeters apart. Sophia is eternally grateful for her first doctor in this hospital. She is definitely still the Dr. Lestari that Sophia can rely on, the person who is there to offer her a helping hand when everything seems grim. "Sophia is her own person, and she is already a legal adult, who has her own rights. Without her express permission, you are not allowed to visit her, especially barging and disturbing the hospital's peace like this."

Sophia can hear Wanda scoff. "I'm done talking with you, woman. You do allow me to visit you here, don't you, Sophia, my darling child? You will know what to do if you refuse me yet again, do you not?"

Her body keeps suffering from another tremor as Wanda's tone becomes increasingly more and more aggressive and threatening, her heart beating so fast it feels like she is going to have a heart attack soon. "I... I..." She stutters out, her eyes unfocused. Her mind screams at her to say no, but her instinct that only knows pain from the hands of her step-mother urges her to say yes and make it less painful for her in the long run. She's lost and she doesn't know what to do, her mind plunged into an abyss from where she feels like she can't return from.

"Sophia, listen to me," Dr. Lestari's voice echoes in Sophia's ears. "You don't have to say yes to her, alright? You're under no obligation to do so."

"B-but, s-she's--" my step-mother, Sophia, wants to say. Or rather, she would probably say something more like her biggest fear. Her nightmare. But now it's not merely a nightmare anymore. It has truly become alive, once more. And Sophia has to bear the brunt of it firsthand.

Wanda is truly in front of her now. Alive and strong. Dominating, just like she always is. A presence one just can't ignore, evidenced by how the majority of the hospital staff and patients are still looking intently at her. Or maybe that's just because she has just made a ruckus in front of everyone. But still, Wanda is truly here, and Sophia is panicking. Panicking so much that her heartbeat is going haywire, beating itself so fast she thinks it will leap out of her chest altogether.

Is she dreaming? Or is she awake? She asks the same question that she has been asking herself for the past couple of days, desperately hoping that it is the former and not the latter. She hoped that this was all only a dream. A nightmare, just like the usual night terror that likes to plague her sleep every night. She really hopes it is only a nightmare, something that she has some control over right now. A version of Wanda that she can just easily wash away by willing it to be. Kicking her away from her dream world and replacing her world with something better, something that won't scare her or make her anxious. Create a world that is suitable just for her and her alone.

But life is cruel, and her nightmare has become reality. And unlike dreams, reality is not just something she can get away by just imagining it, or wishing for it. Life will not make it easy for her by kicking Wanda away from the hospital through some sort of divine intervention, no matter how much Sophia wills it to be.

This is why she remains an atheist, and will always be one. Because God will never help her, right? No matter how much Sophia prays, or no matter how much tears she has shed, God will still turn His back on her. Even if she is currently breaking down in the middle of the hospital, with a lot of people watching this humiliation, God will never interfere, and that is the cold, hard truth that Sophia has to deal with currently.

"Sophia!!!" Wanda's shout rings out over the hallway, loud enough to make the other patients and workers from the hospital inch away from the shouting woman.

Sophia flinches hard at the loud noise, cowering even more behind Dr. Lestari, who's now facing back and forth between Sophia and Wanda, probably confused on how she should handle this, not that Sophia can blame her much. Sophia is now shaking like a leaf, barely able to know what is going on between her panic and Wanda's anger towards her.

It's really pathetic how much Sophia is shaking now, on the brink of despair, and her tears already falling over. Why? Why, why, why? Why is this happening? She really wishes that she can be stronger, able to fight back Wanda with all her might just like she did during her nightmares. But her strength is dissipating; her body is failing her completely, leaving her unable to do what she wants.

Why? Why can't she muster the strength to fight back? Talk back to Wanda, or even leave completely from this hospital, as if Wanda's words don't matter to her anymore. Her brain keeps churning out millions of ways on how she can escape or fight back, but her body is just not following her brain, her mental state breaking down as the second ticks by. Isn't she able to fight Wanda back during her nightmares multiple times now? Then why is she so hopeless now? Why is she still so afraid of Wanda, despite already fighting her back in her dreams? Why does her life seem hell-bent on making her suffer as much as possible? Torture her until she can barely stand on her two feet once more?

She understands, of course, that life is not easy. That it will not always go the way one wants it to. But this? Throwing her under another set of despair just after she barely climbs up from her previous one. Returning her nightmare back to her, this time in full force, with the presence of Wanda in real life, really feels like a slap to her face. A slap to her who has been working so hard in order to get rid of her nightmares, so that she can sleep peacefully once more. A slap to all those nights where she has struggled to call for Dr. Bernard after experiencing a harsh nightmare, and having to relive it all over again, just so that she can learn how to induce her first lucid dream and gain control over her dreams at night. What is the point of all that now, if life will just throw her nightmare back to her face, and this time she is unable to do anything about it once more? She is once again back to square one, without any way to be able to run away from Wanda's grasp, just like the previous her, who is always running on the palm of the Wanda in her nightmare, unable to escape and forever entrapped in the dark, void world. But this time, it is not a dark, void world anymore, but a real hospital, with real people around her, witnessing her being humiliated and breaking down in real life.

"Do you not hear your step-mother talking? Answer me back right this instant!" Wanda's voice roars out once more.

Sophia can see that Wanda is trying to side-step Dr. Lestari in order to get to Sophia, but the kind female doctor will not let Wanda get her way that easily. Dr. Lestari easily steps in front of Wanda just after she side-steps, not allowing Wanda access to Sophia.

Sophia can also easily see that when Maria tries to step in after seeing Dr. Lestari block her mother's path, Dr. Bernard also quickly steps in to stand beside Dr. Lestari, creating a barricade that won't allow people easy access to Sophia, whether it be Wanda, Maria, or even the strangers still enjoying the show in front of them.

Words really can't describe how grateful Sophia feels towards the two doctors who are so willing to protect her, hiding her behind their backs like two sturdy walls who won't give up on her, no matter how low her life has hit or how pathetic she is right now despite all the guidance that they have given her. The warm feeling occupies her heart, even strong enough to strengthen her limbs once more, allowing her shaking to die down, despite the anxiety still burning bright in her heart. But their warmth and kindness have reached her, allowing her to appreciate this amazing feeling that they have made her feel.

"Security! Where's the security?" Dr. Bernard's loud voice roars back, and before long, heavy footsteps can be heard across the hallway.

The security is here. They certainly took their time, but they have arrived. Sophia watches blankly as the group of guards in standard security uniforms ushers Wanda and Maria away, despite all their screaming and screeching. Sophia definitely feels bad for the security. They definitely don't deserve all the verbal abuse as well as the screams that might be able to deafen them after all this ends. Some of the security left also ushers the passersby who are standing around the trio, although with less force than they have done with Wanda and Maria, making sure that they won't bother Sophia or the two doctors as well. They scatter easily enough, uninterested now that the culprits have been brought away.

Relief floods her senses, and Sophia slumps down on her spot, her eyes still wet and blurry with tears. Of course, she knows that Wanda and Maria won't give up easily. Sophia is still not sure why the nightmare duo has sought her once more, but she's sure that it's not anything good. She knows that with their personalities, even this won't be enough to drive them away, and there will come a day where she has to face them once more.

But for now, she has gotten rid of them, although of course it is more that Dr. Lestari, Dr. Bernard, as well as the security team, have gotten rid of her. But still, she knows that both doctors did it for her, and it makes her feel relieved and thankful. And with them gone, Sophia can probably be better prepared to face them next time. Most importantly, though, at least for today, she doesn't have to deal with them.

"Thank you," she tries to croak out, and she is worried that maybe her voice is too unclear and soft, but both doctors seem to hear it and smile at her. Even Dr. Bernard, with his

awkward smile. Funnily enough, it seems that awkward smile is the one that manages to break Sophia out of her despair and make her laugh a bit, no matter how broken her laugh might sound.

It is obvious that Dr. Lestari's features become relieved after she hears Sophia's laugh, though, and so Sophia considers today a win.

"Are you strong enough to stand up, Sophia?" Dr. Lestari asks her.

"Yeah," Sophia answers, but her action definitely does not match her words. She stumbles on her weak feet as she tries to get up, falling onto her butt once more, her limbs completely betraying her. Dr. Lestari seems to have expected this, though, as she calls some nurses to help Sophia onto a stretcher. She seems to be completely blind and deaf to Sophia's argument that she can stand up, letting the nurses bring the reluctant Sophia onto a stretcher, which isn't much of a struggle considering how frozen Sophia's limbs seem to be currently.

Sophia is laid down on a soft mattress inside Dr. Lestari's office; not long after, the nurse leaves behind Dr. Lestari, Dr. Bernard, and lays Sophia inside Dr. Lestari's room after making sure that she is comfortable in her new place. Dr. Bernard turns to Dr. Lestari after locking the door behind them, which makes Sophia think that this will be a serious conversation.

"Okay, I know that Sophia's well-being might be important now, but I think my question is of the utmost importance here. How the hell does that woman know that Sophia is here? I'm pretty sure that information regarding patients is pretty much confidential," says Dr. Bernard, narrowing his eyes. "And I'm sure that neither she nor her daughter is a patient of either me, you, or the rest of the doctors in this hallway who might have seen Sophia come in here during her check-ins, so that rules out the possibility that they might have seen her by total accident."

"I've been thinking about that too, but I can't really find any answer that might be plausible yet, because we still don't know a lot about her. First, even if one of our staffs or patients know her and told her that she's seen Sophia here, we can't just interrogate them one by one," Dr. Lestari replies, looking very serious for once, her usual warm smile gone, replaced by a deep frown that seems to have been permanently engraved on her forehead.

"Why not?!" Dr. Bernard argues back, seemingly frustrated. "Isn't it against the hospital regulations to disclose the information of patients here?!"

"Because we don't have enough information yet!" Dr. Lestari replies back, her own voice gaining in volume. "How can we prove that one of our own staff or one of our patients have been leaking information to Sophia's step-mother? Even if we interrogate them privately one by one, and even if they did do it, what can we do if they just say no? They can all just say that they

didn't do it and we can't even blame them because we have zero evidence to know who actually did this! You're a brain specialist, use your brain for once!"

"Why, you--" Dr. Bernard's eyes bulge out as his shaking index finger points at Dr. Lestari's face.

"Guys, please stop arguing," Sophia tries to intervene from her place on top of the bed when she sees that the argument between her two doctors has turned rather heated. "I don't like seeing you guys fight, especially if it's because of me."

Both doctors pause in their arguing and look at Sophia in unison. It is almost comical, and Sophia would have laughed if the situation was not looking good in her favor or the hospital's, or if she had more energy left to do anything but sleep until next year.

"You're right, Sophia. I'm sorry. Both to you and Dr. Bernard. We both lost our cool because we've seen your step-mother, even though I should know best that you're probably the most shaken person now after all that ordeal," Dr. Lestari sighs.

Dr. Bernard looks like he's about to argue back for a moment, opening and closing his mouth, not too different from a goldfish in Sophia's old home when her father is still alive. But after a moment, he decides to close his mouth and not say any other word. He didn't apologize like Dr. Lestari does, but Sophia doesn't mind it too much. After all, Sophia knows that the reason why Dr. Bernard is upset is also because of how much ruckus Wanda has caused in the hospital as well as Sophia's well-being, and Sophia takes it as a sign of love from Dr. Bernard all the same.

It's a bit weird feeling like that, when she knows best that weeks prior before meeting Dr. Bernard, she would have seen him as the scary person that he is, like her first impression, amplified by a hundred after seeing his angry face. But now, Sophia knows him quite a bit after communicating with him a lot, and knows that it is just Dr. Bernard's way of showing that he cares, which is already a rare occurrence in and of itself, knowing how absorbed the doctor is with his research usually.

Or maybe he only cares because he's seen Sophia's interesting lucid dream and wants to experiment more on her. Who knows.

Either way, Sophia doesn't see that it will harm her, whatever reason that Dr. Bernard might have to care for Sophia to this degree. As long as he doesn't aim to harm her, which Sophia doubts will even help her, then Sophia will be grateful for Dr. Bernard's aid regardless of his reason for it.

"In any case, how are you feeling, Sophia?" Dr. Lestari speaks again after a few moments of silence, perhaps realizing that Dr. Bernard won't say anything further.

"Better than I thought I would be after everything that has happened today, to be honest," Sophia admits.

Which is the truth. In the past, whenever she had to deal with the nightmarish duo, she would be left in a much worse state than she is currently right now. Not only would she be trembling and crying, she would also be bruised, her mental health broken once again, to the point that she won't be able to see what is good and not. She would even, at one point, blame herself for everything that has happened, even though it is completely the duo's fault that she ends up in this state.

Yes, now, with two people who are hell-bent on protecting her, as she has seen herself, after meeting Becky, after meeting Leo, she knows that she has done nothing wrong in terms of her abuse that she has received in the hands of her step-mother and step-sister. They hate her without any reasonable excuse, and blame her for everything, even though it is not her fault. They will blame her for Maria's lowered grades, for Wanda being late to an event, and many more ridiculous things that they would point their fingers at Sophia for, despite those things having nothing to do with her at all.

"That's good, that's good," Dr. Lestari cracks a smile after hearing Sophia's answer. "In any case, I'm really sorry for everything that has happened today. Letting Wanda barge in just like that without your express permission is definitely the hospital's fault, and we have been careless to let that happen to you and let you be humiliated like that. We will try our best to find out how Wanda has known that you have been going here eventually, so please trust us with this case and don't blame yourself for it, because everything that has happened today isn't your fault."

"I know. Thanks a lot, Dr. Lestari," Sophia smiles at Dr. Lestari, even though she knows that her smile must still be faint and a bit broken, judging by how weak she still feels right now.

"Look at that. You've gone a long way, haven't you, my dear patient?" Dr. Lestari flashes Sophia her usual smile, which makes Sophia feel glad and proud at the same time.

Glad, because Sophia has been worried that Dr. Lestari has also been impacted because of Wanda's arrival, which makes Sophia feel indescribably guilty. And proud, because she knows that smile. That is Dr. Lestari's smile that she has when she is proud of Sophia's progress. The same smile that she has when Sophia follows what she has asked of her, and when she has shown progress towards her mental health issues. That means that Sophia has done something good, good enough to make the doctor proud of her, and that makes Sophia feel happy and satisfied.

"Honestly, I feel like I would recommend Sophia to stay overnight in the hospital tonight," Dr. Bernard suddenly speaks up, breaking the quiet moment that Sophia has over feeling the warmth in her heart due to Dr. Lestari's smile for her.

"Wait, what? Why?" Sophia asks at Dr. Bernard's sudden suggestion. As far as she knows, she is definitely not sick enough to warrant a stay at the hospital overnight.

"Don't worry, it will be easy to get an overnight stay. I can cover the cost as well, especially since they will be able to provide a free spot easily enough for me. I'm not the head department for anything, after all. You also don't have to worry about tomorrow, someone will be able to drive you easily enough to your work space," Dr. Bernard continues.

"Thank you..." Sophia replies, almost instinctively, before she realizes the problem once more. "Wait, wait, no. Those are not the problems that I am dealing with, Dr. Bernard. I mean, why do I even need to stay in the hospital in the first place? I'm not sick enough for that, right? It's not as if I need to be paid attention to 24/7 to ensure my health or something," Sophia argues once more.

"Wanda meets you today. In the hospital," Dr. Bernard turns to look at Sophia.

"Yes...?" Sophia tilts her head, completely unsure on where the conversation is going. "I'm sorry, Dr. Bernard, but I really don't see the connection between the two. What does my step-mother coming here have any effect whatsoever towards how I should stay in the hospital overnight tonight?"

"Well, because--" Dr. Bernard places both of his hands on his hip, looking like he's ready to give a full lecture to Sophia, who he is currently facing. And sure enough, Sophia isn't wrong in this regard. "Your mother just came here, and she might still be lurking around, judging by how desperate she is to meet you when she is here. She has an ultimate goal regarding meeting you--and while we still don't know what exactly is that goal, I am sure that it will be anything but good, and she might still be looking for an opportunity to get to you when we're not here."

"Wait, that means--" Dr. Lestari whips her head towards Dr. Bernard, looking like she's realized something herself, with how wide her eyes are open right now. "Wanda can basically ambush Sophia when she's outside of the hospital, since we won't be there to help her and we can't kick them out on the basis that they're in the hospital anymore."

"Bingo!" Dr. Bernard grins. "Which is why I suggested that Sophia should stay overnight in the hospital, so that she don't have to take the risk to meet Wanda outside once she's left the hospital, which I'm sure would be quite disastrous for Sophia herself, on which I think she can imagine herself how bad it will be."

"I... might actually agree with Dr. Bernard in this one, Sophia," Dr. Lestari turns towards Sophia once more. "How about it? Will you stay in the hospital tonight?"

"But..." Sophia bites her lower lip.

She knows that Dr. Bernard will cover the cost for her, which she appreciates, but she doesn't really want to bother the two doctors even further than she already has, no matter how tempted she might be to take them up on their offer.

Of course she's scared. She is terribly, undeniably scared. She's scared of the fact that Wanda has found her once again, despite already moving out of their house. She's scared of the possibility of what Dr. Bernard is saying coming true, being ambushed by Wanda and Maria once more on the road, and with no one to back her up this time. She desperately wants to avoid that chance, and Dr. Bernard is right in the fact that Sophia staying overnight in the hospital would give her the most security from having to confront Wanda today. After what has happened today, she knows that there is little chance that Wanda will come back to the hospital to find Sophia once more in order to avoid being humiliated even more, as Wanda really cares about her public image. Not to mention, knowing them, Sophia knows that they will quickly give up when they don't see Sophia coming out of the hospital after a certain period of time. They will never be able to wait for her for more than one night, especially if that requires them to camp outside or something like that. They never will.

"If you think you're going to be a bother or something silly like that--don't. Or how about this. In exchange for letting you stay overnight in the hospital today, you have to tell me all about your lucid dream the past two nights. Every single detail, too, not the shortened summary you gave us today," Dr. Bernard harrumphs.

Sophia rubs her head sheepishly, not expecting Dr. Bernard to realize that she had some parts out when she told them about her lucid dreams today. Specifically, the parts about Leo and her. She doesn't know why, but she had the urge to just not spill all the details about Leo and told them only the basic information before skipping past it quickly. She just feels... reluctant, to tell all the details about the moments she had with Leo. It just feels like a personal moment. Something sweet, tangible, but also fleeting. Something she needs to take care of, because it's precious.

Something that feels just like a memory only the two of them will ever know.

"I think I should at least pay for the room," Sophia says towards the two doctors. She would feel bad if the two doctors had helped her to get a room without even needing one in the

first place, and then having them both pay for the room for her as well. It would make her feel too guilty.

"Of course not! We--"

"Okay, Sophia," Dr. Lestari quickly interrupts Dr. Bernard, who then turns to look at her with a glare.

Sophia tilts her head as she sees them have something akin to a silent conversation, with both doctors' expressions changing every so often, as if their faces alone could tell each other what they are thinking. It is quite impressive, Sophia thinks to herself.

"Fine, fine. If you say so. As long as you allow me to get some discounts for the room. By which I mean torture the receptionist desk's workers a bit," Dr. Bernard grunts, apparently the one losing out on the silent conversation between the two.

He sighs before turning back and leaving Dr. Lestari's room not long after, his steps heavy and loud, signifying he is still upset about something. Sophia reckons she knows what it is about.

"Wait... torture the receptionist?" Sophia asks, belatedly, finally registering the words that Dr. Bernard was saying. She frowns, worried, and is tempted to follow after the male doctor as she gazes into the now closed door once again.

Dr. Lestari intervenes before long, though. "Don't worry about it. He is just a bit special, and can get, well, quite special privileges in this hospital. There's a reason why he can practice in this psychiatrist hallway instead of the brain specialist's section, you know."

"Special?" Sophia tilts her head, looking at Dr. Lestari once more, who is now busy scuttling about her own office, taking out several papers and documents from her desk and bookshelves.

"Yes. Don't you notice how he doesn't act quite like a doctor sometimes? Very carefree, hopping about in the hospital without a care, has some of the most expensive-looking machinery in his office, as well as how rules doesn't seem to bound him?" Dr. Lestari gazes at Sophia as she speaks before returning to her task at hand. Sophia is still not completely sure what Dr. Lestari is searching for.

"Well... Now that you mention it..." Sophia hums to herself, thinking back on Dr. Bernard's behavior.

It seems correct, doesn't it? Dr. Bernard does seem different from Dr. Lestari, or any other doctor that Sophia knows of, for that matter. He seems to act almost like he's in his own

world, unbound by anything else. And then there's the fact that Dr. Lestari seems to respect him a lot when Sophia first meets him for the first time.

Not to mention, when Dr. Bernard has called in nurses on the off-chance that he might need someone to support or help him when Sophia is in the room, she can also see that the nurses also treat Dr. Bernard differently, almost like in reverence or something. It's completely different from how they treat Dr. Lestari, for example. And of course, the odd glaring elephant in the room, with a brain specialist being situated in the psychiatric department. Sure, now that she has met Dr. Bernard, she can see why Dr. Bernard has a lot of interaction with the psychiatrist department, especially since his technology and help has helped a lot with patients who are struggling with mental health issues like her, who can use his help in the expertise of lucid dreaming and all that entails. However, despite all that, Sophia does still think that Dr. Bernard would probably have been a better fit in the brain department hallway still, and let the patients from the psychiatrist department who might benefit from his help go to the brain specialist section instead, and not the other way around.

"Yeah, what's up with all that?" Sophia ponders.

"Well, safe to say that he's one of the directors slash founders of this hospital, which of course does grant him extra benefit on top of a lot of paperwork, some of which you might have seen in his office," Dr. Lestari shrugs, as if it's not a big deal to tell that to Sophia.

Meanwhile, Sophia's eyes have gone as wide as saucers. "Excuse me, what? The director and founder of the hospital? WHY did I not know this before?!"

Dr. Lestari gives another shrug. "Guess he just doesn't like to publicize it. Draw all attention to himself, he said. So just try to treat him like usual and don't feel too bad about the big discount you'll probably be about to receive, yes?"

"W-well, I'll try to," Sophia stammers.

Honestly, Dr. Bernard being the director of the hospital won't be such a big deal to Sophia if it were not for the fact that she had seen him regularly for the past month or so. Especially when she keeps bothering him in the middle of the night or day, after she just woke up, to call him about all her recent nightmares, her progress with lucid dreaming, and so on. Dr. Bernard just seems like an uncle or a neighbor next door at one point to her, and having known that she has been treating probably one of the busiest figures in the hospital like an uncle makes her head spin.

She is still in a daze during the whole process when Dr. Bernard is back to usher Sophia into the new room where she is apparently staying over for the night tonight. Her head spins

once more when she sees the luxurious room, which is undoubtedly something akin of a VIP room or something. And she has said that she will pay for it too.

"Don't worry about it too much, you'll get a big discount. It'll probably be cheaper than your usual regular room once you check out. As repayment, how about you allow me to monitor you while you sleep tonight? I'm still oh-so-curious about this lucid dream of yours. It sounds unlike anything I've ever seen before," Dr. Bernard looks at her with twinkling eyes.

And Sophia has the gut feeling that this is probably the big reason why Dr. Bernard even suggested that she stay overnight in the hospital in the first place.

The overnight stay in the hospital is... well, quite underwhelming, especially when compared to the whole mess that has happened in the afternoon just before. Aside from trying her best to sleep with Dr. Bernard watching over her like a hawk, the rest of her stay seems peaceful, although the same thing probably can't be applied to her dream that night.

When she goes to the uncomfortable bed, despite already being in the VIP room, Sophia sighs a bit at the freezing temperature and the beeping of the machines Dr. Bernard has set up all around her to monitor her sleep, or rather, her lucid dream that Dr. Bernard seems convinced would happen. In all honesty, Sophia also thinks the same, especially after having met Wanda just today. There will be no chance in hell that she will not visit her in her dreams tonight. It is almost certainly a guarantee, to the point that Sophia will think that she's still awake if Wanda is not in her dreams tonight.

Anxiety burns in her heart as she tosses around on her new bed, trying her best to go to sleep without feeling too afraid of what will be coming in her dreams. She knows that she has the ability to lucid dream now, and force Wanda away from her dreams, just like she has already done two nights in a row. But after meeting Wanda in real life and unable to do anything to fight back, and can only cower in fear behind the two doctors, will she still be able to do the same thing like before? Won't her consciousness just scream for her to run away or hide, just like she has done today?

She's afraid, she's so terribly afraid, and so she falls asleep with fear in her heart and anxiety gripping her mind.

Unfortunately for Dr. Bernard and fortunately for Sophia, the night in the hospital is a dreamless night. One of the very rare nights where no dream or nightmare has visited her during the sleep. Sophia wakes up with a wide grin on her face, feeling relief wash over her at the

knowledge that she doesn't have to deal with Wanda and Maria on her night as well on top of having to see them already during the day before.

However, when Sophia visits Dr. Bernard and Dr. Lestari to thank them for their hospitality and generosity for tonight, she can see that Dr. Bernard's face is anything but sunny, the complete opposite of Sophia's own refreshed complexion. Sophia tries her best to pretend to not see it, as she knows exactly the reason why he is so grumpy so early in the morning.

After thanking both doctors and paying for her night, which is undoubtedly cheaper than she has expected, she runs away from the hospital before Dr. Bernard can unleash his frustration on her. As Dr. Bernard has promised yesterday, she does have a chauffeur waiting for her as she exits the hospital, an old man kind enough to wait for her clumsy steps to go inside the luxurious car as they drive away towards Sophia's office building.

"Um... Can I trouble you to drop me off in that cafe, instead, please? I think I will have my daily dose of coffee before going to the office. But don't worry! I can easily walk towards the office after you drop me there, so no need to wait for me or anything," Sophia says, stumbling over her own words.

"Of course, Miss. Not a problem for me at all," the old man replies.

After thanking the kind driver and giving him some tip, which the old man tries to refuse before Sophia just shove it in his hands and run away from the car, Sophia breathes out a loud sigh as she steps into her favorite coffee shop that she always go to before she goes to work whenever she needs a sip to wake her up before the life grind begins once more.

She hums slightly as she walks towards the coffee shop, feeling as if she is in a good mood today. Of course, the fact that Wanda comes to confront her yesterday in the hospital is anything but good, but at least she didn't have a nightmare last night because of it, which is always a good thing.

The bell clinks softly behind her as she steps into the warm coffee shop, something that she always enjoys, and which also makes her want to stay longer in the coffee shop every time. Her vision is focused on her phone even as she walks in, trying to see whether she has any new upcoming emails she needs to pay attention to, any missed calls or messages. Mainly, whether Aaron will shout at her if she misses any of her work, which she prefers to not have before she comes into work.

"A cup of hot caramel macchiato please, medium, with an extra shot of espresso, less sugar and soy milk, thank you," Sophia relays out her order with her head still buried on her phone.

She knows that it's impolite, but the bartender, Miki, is someone who she already knows well and understands her well enough that it's not her being rude but just her doing her work like usual. After all, Sophia also treats Miki to a lot of dinner, as well as talk to him properly when Sophia decides to grab a cup of something sweet after she's done working.

"Alright, that'll be fifty thousand rupiah, Miss," A voice that is definitely not Miki's replies to her.

Sophia's head whips up from her phone at the very familiar voice, a voice that she knows doesn't belong to Miki but belongs to someone very dear to her which should never be here.

A gasp leaves her lips as she finally confirms her suspicions when her eyes lands on the barista in front of her. A tall man with bronze skin, familiar warm doe eyes and long black hair to pair it with. And of course, the warm smile that fits perfectly on his face, making Sophia's heart thump down rapidly as she can hardly believe the sight in front of her.

"Miss? Are you okay?" The bartender asks once more with that familiar voice when Sophia still doesn't reply to him after a while.

"I..." Sophia tries to reply, but her eyes are still glued to the bartender's face. Is this a dream? Sophia tries pinching her own arm, but it hurts like hell. But it still doesn't make any sense. Why is the person in front of her standing in her reality like this? This isn't what Sophia thinks she will walk into at all.

"Leo...?" She tries asking, her voice trembling.

The bartender--Leo, tilts his head as his gaze deepens on Sophia once more. "Yes, that is indeed my name, Miss. Did you read my name-tag just now? Hahaha."

Sophia's eyes darted down involuntarily at that. And sure enough, he does have a name tag on his black shirt that spells out 'Leo Inawan'. She feels as if the floor just opens up below her. How is this possible? Isn't Leo just a product of her imagination in the dream world? Then how come the same exact Leo has shown up in front of her right now, flesh and all? It is the exact same one as well, Sophia is plentily sure of it. The same face, the same voice, even the same exact warm smile that never fails to comfort Sophia even when she was in her deepest despair. It is the same man that has shown up in Sophia's lucid dream again and again, even accompanies her to another person's dream world and has supported her when she was almost hit by Wanda once more. He's the one who stays by her side even when the blue bat has left her side once.

"Why... are you here...?" Sophia tries to ask, her hands trembling by her side. She's only thankful that there's almost no one in the coffee shop at this early hours, which means that she won't be holding up anyone in line.

Leo tilts his head again before replying, "Oh, are you searching for Miki? He is on break right now, since he is now taking night shift only instead of the ungodly shift he had before. He says he's finally relieved that someone is there to share the job with him, so if you know Miki, you will still find him in the evenings here."

Well, that is good to hear, since Sophia does wonder a bit about how Miki is, but if she is completely honest with herself, that is not exactly the burning question she has on her mind for now. In fact, it is probably the furthest thing on her mind now.

How is Leo here, alive and breathing, right in front of her, in the real life world, no less? And how does it feel like Leo doesn't even know her? Doesn't even recognize her? How come this is happening? How can Sophia recognize him but not the other way around? Does all the things that happen in Sophia's mind only a dream after all? A conjunction of her own imagination? But then how does she create a whole person who also exists in real life, who she has never met before? The same exact person with all the complete details, from the face, skin colour, the voice, even the way he smiles and the way he speaks? Is that even possible to create something that she has never seen or experienced before?

But if that is not the case, then is the Leo in front of her really a real person? A person who somehow has also appeared in Sophia's lucid dreaming? But if the Leo in front of her is the same one that has also appeared in her dreams, then why doesn't he recognize her at all?

Feeling like a migraine is coming, Sophia clutches her head with both hands, her phone falling towards the wood floor with a loud thunk.

"Miss? Miss?! Are you okay?!"

Sophia can hear Leo's concerned voice piercing through her mind even amongst the wild thoughts running amok in her head. But instead of the usual warm comforting feeling she got from him, she feels a piercing pain on her chest, like his voice just lightens up all the painful nerves on her body all at once.

"Leo... Do you not recognize me?" Sophia tries to croak out as she lifts her head up once more, asking the question almost in desperation. She searches his face, hoping that something will give her a hint. Anything, no matter how small. A hint that the Leo in front of her also recognizes who she is. Just a tiny hint. A twitch of the mouth, a slight widening of the eyes, a

sharp intake of breath. Sophia waits with bated breath, hoping she can catch any of those hints, but Leo only furrows his brows in confusion.

"I'm... sorry, Miss. I don't think I do? This is the first time I've worked here, after all. I don't think I've ever met you somewhere else before. After all, I was in a different city just a week ago. I just moved to Jakarta hoping to find a job last week, so I don't think there's a chance I might have met you before. Have you perchance mistaken me for someone else, Miss?" Leo asks, his voice unsure and full of doubt.

Ah... right. Sophia hangs her head low, tears threatening to spill from her eyelid once more. She's not exactly sure what she is hoping for, actually. That somehow her dream can become reality? But how can she not, when someone she has never met before, appears in her dream and becomes one of the people Sophia actually really cares about and cherishes, and then suddenly he also appears in real life, right in front of her? How can anyone else doesn't hope for the same thing?

Grief strikes her heart, as well as confusion. Why is this happening? How can this happen? Why is the man in her dream world suddenly becoming a person, alive and all? And a barista in the coffee shop near her workplace? Is this earth's way of making the biggest joke out of her?

She lifts her head once more, uncaring of the tears freely falling down her cheeks to stare at Leo. Leo, the man from her dreams, who has now also become the barista next door. Not knowing what else she can say to the oh-so familiar presence who doesn't seem to recognize her at all, she says the only thing that she has on her mind left.

"Meet me tonight. Whether in real life, or in my dreams... That is for you to decide."

After saying that, she picks up her phone from the floorboard, turns back, and leaves without sparing another glance back.