

3. CREATIVE WORK

RAINDROPS ON THE WINDOWPANE

ONE

THE DISCONCERTION

Nika

I believed what's written in the stars was ill. At least in my stars, that was, if they even shined for once. The sky above me was always dark, even when it's light out; it's a sight I often missed. Who was always under the sun, I had no idea. But when I finally did, it was in the form of a harsh, urgent voice, snapping at me to STOP. It wasn't Ama, it wasn't Lia, it wasn't even the lady who delivered bags of pre-cooked *kwetiau* every morning.

It was inside my head. A man's voice. I was not one.

I was so distracted, searching frantically for whoever's right there with me at 4.30 in the morning, that I didn't realize the grinder machine had begun to devour my right hand. Adrenaline prompted me to hit the emergency stop button and the pressure on my forefinger halted. My spine shuddered, my heart a thousand miles per hour. Oh, it's bad.

I looked around again. I was alone. Of course. I looked past the translucent glass partition between the preparation room I was in and the rest of the shop; the dark steel door was shut, not a soul in sight. The pain in my finger began to pronounce itself, crawling from the tip of my finger to my palm, pulling me back to focus on the more urgent matter... the smell of freshly ground fish meat with a hint of iron wafted in the air.... While trying not to think too much of that voice, I called Lia, the young helper of our noodle shop who's preparing some toppings back in the kitchen.

"What is it—OH MY GOODNESS!!" Lia practically leapt to my side, her whole body shivered with horror. "What—t-this—why—"

“Just—just help me pull my hand out, it didn’t go that deep. I think my forefinger was... anyway, the plastic glove really prevented my hand from going further.”

Lia shifted her weight from one foot to another, debating on how she should approach my hand. I urged her to hurry and she stifled a cry while helping me pull my hand away from the blades. After a moment of maneuvering around to find the right angle to get the widest gap, my hand was released. The plastic glove crumpled around the blade, and there was red everywhere.

I inspected the bowl of ground meat beneath the machine and took it out before the blood really trickled. “Glad the blood didn’t spill on the fish...”

Lia’s face turned paler, stuttering that we should hurry to the emergency room in the nearby small hospital. She’d take the motorcycle and drive me there because there’s no way I could steer right now. I tried not to look at the injury and wrapped my hand tight with the cloth that Lia passed on to me. But the pain was bad, the fear pumped my heart faster than I would like. *Don’t cry, don’t cry.*

Ama—my grandma, was not back yet from her morning market trip, and she’d flip out when she saw the bloody machine yet not a soul in sight, so I called the uncle who was the caretaker of the Confucian temple next to our shop. He should start his cleaning routine around this time.

“What in the world!” Budi, a childless widower in his late 60s whom we all usually called Apek, hurriedly walked out after looking at the bloody cloth on my hand. His gray eyebrows were knitted together.

“Apek... uh, this is from the machine.” I let out a short not-a-big-deal laugh. “Please let Ama know that we’re going to Kharitas and hopefully will be back before six.”

His mouth gaped open and asked, “Are you gonna be okay? Who’re you going with? Do you want me to drive you there?”

“It’s-it’s okay, Lia will come along. Could you let Ama know once she’s back?”

Apek shot a distrustful look towards Lia who’s standing by on the motorcycle, but I knew he wasn’t being mean. He’s equally worried about her small stature that had to carry my super tall being at the back seat. I assured him we’re fine, it’s not that far anyway.

Two things were stuck in a loop inside my head the whole journey to the ER.

One, would I lose my finger?

Two, who the hell was that?

My head hurt; I didn't know if it's due to the blood loss, the excruciating pain in my finger that now reached my head, or something else. *Someone* else. One that's living... in my head? I scoffed, it sounded ridiculous. No matter how I tried to make sense of it, it didn't. I tried to push away every possibility, and decided not to think too much about it.

But it remained there, at the back of my head, a small thought but prominent enough to make me mull over it all the time.

I walked through the ER doors and it was dim inside. The curtains were all open and the beds were empty. A nurse extended her neck behind the administration desk after hearing the automatic door opened. She looked at the bloody cloth wrapped around my hand, and then hurried to assist me walk to a nearby bed.

She helped me lay down and went to call the doctor on duty, while Lia stayed at the administration to fill out some information. A ball of nausea began to form in the pit of my stomach, threatening to swell. The doctor arrived and the ball vanished. She was a woman.

I glanced at her copper name tag: *dr. Indri*. She was wearing light purple scrubs and a matching headscarf, a generic white coat draped over her petite stature.

While being treated, I gave a short explanation from my side: I fell asleep for literally just a millisecond, and it seemed my glove was stuck on the motor of the blades. It was sucked in, then rolled around the blades, and my finger was pulled along with it. All the while I was being treated, I never looked at the process, fearing when I did, I'd lose my mind, something that I began to question ever since I heard that man's voice.

The doctor let out a satisfied sigh after she was done cleaning my finger. "You'll be fine. The blade did cut the tip of your fingers, but thankfully it didn't reach the bone. Your reflex was good to stop the machine right away. Staying put and not hurrying to yank your hand out of it were also the right decision. Because imagine, if you pull your hand while the blade is still deep inside, you'd scrape the rest of the flesh and your nail off. The muscle bit is still torn so you'll need some stitches."

"Ah... is that so? That's a relief..." I fought back the tears and focused my eyes on the ceiling of the ER. I think it was collecting dust.

At this moment, Lia came back from the administration desk and stood by my bed. “Will you be okay?”

“I mean... it’s still intact, that’s a relief,” I replied. Lia nodded, eyebrows still knit together.

Several minutes that felt like an hour passed. I felt pressure on my finger, then it was relieved of it, then more pressure, then I heard some clinks of metallic apparatus, some cold liquid that stung so bad, and finally my finger was wrapped tight.

“Okay, now you’re done.” The clink of the steel tray was heard. “You might see some blood discharge seeping into the cotton, but it’s fine as long as it doesn’t soak through. It’s understandable because the cut is deep. But just in case it happens, please come to the ER right away. I’ll prescribe some antibiotics and painkillers for you, and please come back in a week to remove the stitches.”

I lifted my right hand, inspecting the bulge of bandage at the tip of my index finger. It’s throbbing with pain, one that made me grimace at the slightest movement, and I hoped that it would subside within a few days because I needed to work.

“Any more concerns? Do you have any questions for me?” the doctor asked. Her tone never strayed away from a gentleness that’s calming and reassuring.

There’s a tug at the back of my mind regarding the voice I heard. “Uhm... when will it fully recover, doc?”

She contemplated something for a while, then said, “Usually it will take about one to two months. It depends a lot on how you treat the wound. The drier, the less strain, the better. It will be uncomfortable for sure, but bear with it for a little bit, okay?”

I nodded and asked no further questions. The unpleasant tug at the back of my mind was still going, sending a feeling I identified as worry into my chest. It began to ache, so I balled my fist and gave my chest one, two, three soft knocks while I breathed out.

Lia helped me get up and we walked to the administration to finish the rest of the payment. It’s almost six and I couldn’t imagine how worried Ama would be.

The old lady was standing outside the shop, and it seemed like she never went inside because the bags of groceries sat on the ground close to her feet. Apek stood by her, hands behind his back, and his eyes lit up when he saw our motorcycle approaching. But somehow Ama looked grumpier.

“Why are you not inside? We should be opening the shop in a little bit,” I said as soon as I was within her hearing distance.

“What happened? Are you okay? Where’s your hand, let me see,” Ama bombarded me with questions, showing no interest in waiting for my answer, and snatched my left hand. She inspected it carefully, eyebrows furrowed because she couldn’t find the injury. “You said you’re hurt??”

“It’s this hand, Ama.” I showed her my right hand, and she looked confused. Lia laughed but covered her mouth as soon as Ama shot daggers through her eyes. Apek let out a hearty laugh in her stead.

“Are you okay, though, Nika?” Apek asked.

I hissed and created ambiguous filler noises, deliberately stalling time to answer because it's kinda fun teasing them.

Ama hit my shoulder. “Tsk, hurry answer!”

I gasped, looked offended. “Ah, I’m fine! It’s still whole, see?” I lifted up the bandaged finger and Ama examined it. “I got stitches, so I need to go back in a week to remove them. Putting that aside, Ma’am, aren’t we supposed to open the shop now?”

“How can you work with that kind of hand?” Ama retorted. “Let’s go, Lia, bring the rest of the bags inside.” She took one bag and proceeded to unlock the steel door, with Lia following straight behind. I could hear her high-pitched nag when she passed the grinding machine.

“Don’t force yourself too much, ‘kay?” Apek gave my shoulder a pat and disappeared into the temple doors.

I glanced at the gray morning sky. My shoulder was warm. Everything should be fine.

I was ordered to only be in charge of preparing the toppings for the noodles. It was bad enough that we had to push back the opening hour, and operating with only three and a half hands in the cooking station made it worse. We were so slow that the customers piled up. I insisted that I was able to work as usual, indeed with a slight delay in speed, but I could boil, season, and toss around the noodles just fine. Ama was more adamant, I couldn't make her budge. So the role was reversed today.

I was done getting the noodle toppings for all the orders ready and was waiting for Ama to finish preparing the noodles. Lia was going around apologizing for the delay while serving iced tea for the customers. They mostly didn't mind. But I did.

Fish balls, boiled shrimp, fish cakes, shrimp cakes, soy sauce-braised pork, dumplings, fried dumpling wrappers... everything was ready. I was checking on them several times, making sure they all had the same amount. This tardiness was unprofessional because we never had this many sets of toppings piling up.

"This is the normal speed, you know!" Ama spat. She knew that I was constantly complaining inside my head.

I let out a huge sigh and sat down, slouching over the counter. When Ama was done with several bowls of *yamie*—the dry noodles, I put all the toppings meticulously on it, and Lia served them when they're done.

We usually took a break for four hours starting at twelve o'clock in the afternoon, then reopened at four to around seven or eight o'clock at night. But today Ama shut the doors at eleven, saying she's sleepy, going as far as politely refusing several customers who came for their lunch. This was unheard of.

Lia looked at me, confused. I just stood there, behind the counters, not saying anything because I knew she wouldn't take a no, especially from me.

"You heard the Ma'am, let's tidy up," I told Lia.

"No, no, you go rest. I'll tidy up with Lia." Ama snatched the cloth I was going to use to wipe the working station. "Oh, wait, I'll make noodles for you first, and you should take the medicine after."

With shoulders slumped, I sat at the nearby chair and waited for my lunch. I desperately avoided doing nothing because then I could feel the tug on my mind going stronger, so I paid full attention to Ama preparing my food.

It felt weird looking at the cooking counters from this point of view. I'd sit here a bunch of times when I was young, looking at the backs of my grandparents, cooking and preparing bowls of noodles, but I stopped only sitting down when I was around twelve. That's when I started helping them out a little, serving and preparing drinks.

The tables were still the same from back then, and I think it's been here since they first moved to this building in the 90s. Previously this shophouse-style building was a clothing store, and my grandparents rented the space in front of it to sell noodles once they closed in the evening. That was probably in the 70s. Twenty years later, they owned the building.

The tables were a kind of celebratory token of their success back then. It was a type of heavy wood that's chunky but well-preserved; they're now stained with darker marks that couldn't fade away from decades of condensation from iced beverages, oily splatters, accidental knocking down of condiments and layers of cleaning products. It budged a lot because the legs were uneven, so I shoved folded thick papers because the thought of eating on a constantly moving table drove me crazy. It also happened to the chairs that's made out of similar wood. There were instances when customers almost fell over because it became too unstable. To prevent any accidents, we replaced them with sturdy plastics. Perhaps it's time we should replace all the tables.

While thinking about remodeling the place, Lia came with my bowl of noodles. It's... incredibly huge.

"Ah, Ama! Why did you use the jumbo bowl?" I protested.

"Just eat it! You usually finish it all."

I poked the abundant side dishes on top of the jumbo-portioned dry noodles. This was for two people, or one very hungry person. I sighed and poured a lot of chili sauce on it.

I offered some to Lia who's arranging chairs, but she politely refused. "I'll eat *nasi campur*," she said.

Oh, that reminded me. "Let's go to the furniture store some time later," I told her.

Lia was now arranging the clean glasses on the serving counter. “But Ama refused to throw away these tables.”

“We won’t *throw* it away. Someone must need them so we’re *giving* it away,” I said, deliberately with a high volume. Lia stole a glance at Ama, gauging her reaction. None given.

I knew Ama had been thinking of replacing the old tables, because it’s pretty old by now. But she couldn’t seem to let them go. She bought them with Akong, my grandpa, and they witnessed their humble store grow exponentially. I’d wait till she’s ready because then, I would also be ready.

Sweeping dust under the rug was never a great idea. The room was never clean, it only appeared to be clean. We might even forget there was dust beneath the rug, but it settled, and over time, it would be dangerous for our health.

I thought ignoring the tug in my mind would make it disappear. I thought it was only a temporary worry or confusion that I had. Working helped a lot because I only needed to focus on the tangible things in front of me; real things that yielded money, a proof of my hard work. So when it was time to close the shop, I dreaded it too much. Nothing to do meant a lot of things to think about, and I was totally not ready to face whatever the thing this morning was.

People heard voices in their heads all the time because it’s theirs, and they consciously voiced it, creating internal monologues and trains of thoughts. That’s normal. What’s not was when we couldn’t identify with the voice....

Was I having an identity crisis at 20 years of age? Around three, four years later than it was commonly expected? I’d had one already, back when I was debating on going to university or working at the noodle shop. Our teachers wouldn’t stop pressuring us to make the right choices, and sure enough, they disagreed with my decision.

I scoffed, reminded of the deliberate remarks they made in the classroom that the only way to success was through education. I understood what they meant, and I did think they wanted the best for the students, but their response was actually mean. I didn’t take it too much to heart because they didn’t understand my position, and I believed I made the right choice. It’s not that I didn’t want to pursue higher education; I wanted to, someday. But Ama needed me;

we needed each other because the grief was still fresh as we lost Akong when I was fifteen. I was glad I made this decision.

My crisis in life was done, or so I thought. Was this different from that time in high school?

It was almost midnight and I was Googling ‘voices in my head’ when some papers by my laptop caught my attention. I printed the excel sheet of our income and expenses last night, and I just remembered that I should go through it today. A yellow sticky note was on top of it.

Recheck formula.

Did I write this last night? I absentmindedly opened the excel page on my laptop and checked the formula bar. A couple minutes of inspecting, there’s indeed a small error. I fixed it and reprinted the new sheet, then peeled the sticky note I saw just now, examining the handwriting.

It somewhat looked like mine... but not at the same time. I didn’t remember writing this at all. Or perhaps I did? I’d been forgetful these days. Perhaps I wrote this as a reminder to double check the excel. I was too tired last night.

I reopened Google and skimmed through some pages, feeling uncomfortable. Then the reality hit me: it’s only that one time. A moment of crisis and urgency that needed a jolt of coming to that my reflex prompted. Right, I hadn’t heard anything the whole day.

“Pfft, it’s nothing then,” I scoffed.

I turned my laptop off and while waiting for the screen to turn totally black, a deep voice boomed. *“What do you mean it’s nothing?”*

I turned around to look at my door that instant, then looked around my room. My hand trembled. There’s no one here. Fear crept into every single cell in my body, my heart thumped and thumped so hard it hurt.

“Lia?” I called, while in my heart I know it’s not her. It’s a man’s voice, a totally different man than the one who shouted this morning, I could hear it. There’s no reply from Lia. Of course. There’s no way she’s still awake right now.

I unlocked my door and peeked into the hallway. No one. I tiptoed to the right, towards Lia’s bedroom door—it’s shut; I stuck my ear to her door, silence; I walked away, tiptoed to the

bathroom at the back, I peeked through the window that overlooked the back terrace, not a single soul. I checked the doors and windows, everything was locked and secured. My heart drummed so loud in my ears. And that's it, the only thing I could hear was my own heart beating with all its might, alerting me of something I couldn't see. Something that might not even be here.

I should go see Apek first thing in the morning.

"Apek, could you look at our third floor?"

A baffled face and the smell of morning coffee greeted me when I stepped into the temple. It's barely five and I was done arranging the containers of toppings into the counter, so I had some free time as we opened at six.

"What do you mean, third floor?" Apek asked.

"The third floor, where Lia and I sleep. I heard something last night, like a man's voice but there's no one. It's confusing. Didn't your friend stick paper charms everywhere?"

Apek was remembering something and nodded. "It should still work. Did you tell your Ama?"

"No, she'll freak out. Could you just look around, please? I couldn't sleep last night," I said, rubbing my sweaty palms together, trying to make it warm. Apek poured a little bit of hot coffee into a small mug and handed it to me. I mumbled thank you.

I knew Apek would agree, and frankly, he's the only one who would understand what I meant, as he had the sixth sense so he could feel the energy of the unseen. Although he couldn't cast those things away, his shaman friend could. If there's indeed something they'd help deal with it.

As expected, Ama questioned why Apek was here this early in the morning. Apek joked as if she had never seen him this early at all, like she had forgotten the coffee he had shared with Akong every single morning before the opening time. Ama was ready to retaliate when I told her I needed him to check the wiring upstairs because some lights were on but the others off. She was soon back to preparing the noodle broth.

To be honest, the air on the third floor was fine. I hadn't turned off the lights ever since I did that little inspection last night, and when I went to the bathroom after I woke up at dawn, I didn't sense the dread like I did before. Perhaps it's because I knew the sun's going up, or I could hear Ama shuffling downstairs, or Lia making some noises in her room—basically I wasn't alone. I felt a little silly to trouble Apek this early in the morning....

He walked around, observed the space from floor to ceiling, inspected the bathroom, looked into my and Lia's room, and the back terrace. I followed him like a puppy.

"Hmmm... there's nothing here, Nika," he said after circling the entire floor a couple of times. I was relieved, but not really.

"The second floor?"

"None felt either. And as I said, these charms still work. They're all in place, none was torn or faded," Apek explained as he pointed at the yellow sheets glued above every door and window.

I frowned, scratching the nonexistent itch at the back of my head. "What did I hear, then?"

Apek started to walk down the stairs. I turned off all the lights and followed him. "Perhaps it's your guardian," he said lightly. I didn't know if he was joking or trying to make me feel better.

"Like an angel?"

"Perhaps. Or just a kind spirit. Everyone has a kind spirit protecting them."

I hummed. If that's true I could let this go and move on, going back to the routine that I liked so much. A kind, guarding unseen energy wasn't a bad thing. Also not a bad way to end my worry with a good note.

But the unpleasant tug still existed in my mind, now also existed in my heart, shoved into the corners, concealed but somehow still seen.

Growing up next to a Confucian temple, I was no stranger to the talks of paranormal. Although I wasn't spiritual and had never once seen or experienced something supernatural in

my life, I respected people's belief they existed. My grandparents were devout practitioners of the teachings, fully believing the otherworldly beings who lived among us: the good and the bad. Good spirits were of our ancestors whom we should take care of, like providing offerings and keeping their altars clean; there were also the spirits of nature, whom we should treat just as well to live together harmoniously. In return, they protected us from misfortune. The bad ones only brought harm to the people, usually dark spirits summoned by ill-intentioned people to cause disruption in life, sickness, financial loss, even death.

I didn't recall having enemies bad enough for them to send me a curse.

"Do I have enemies?" I asked Lia during our break time. We're sitting at one of the tables while munching on sweet red bean breads from the bakery two doors down.

"Maybe. Why?" she replied with her mouth half-full.

I gasped. "Really? Who?"

Lia stopped chewing to think for a moment. "The sporting goods store's son...?"

I racked my brain to put a face and a name on that information. There was a small river passing through this area of town, and on each side were streets lined with shop houses like mine. Three bridges connected the two sides, and once we walked down the street from our shop for a few seconds, there's one. The sports store was located right across that bridge, and the owner had a son about my age. "Who is it again? Fernan? Ferdy? F...errr..."

"Ferry."

I paused. The name was familiar, but I couldn't remember having a single dispute with another person, moreover a guy. The only thing I ever did was avoid them like a plague. "What did we fight about? When did it happen?"

"I think it's around this time last year.... He ordered noodles for takeout but it's right when we're about to have the break time. You adamantly refused to serve the guy," Lia explained.

I raised my brows. "I did that?"

"You forgot? Well, I guess it's been quite some time. And he hasn't come here since then. His parents do, but he doesn't."

I totally forgot that even happened. Now that she mentioned it, I hadn't seen the guy's face for such a long time, even though he lived just across the street.

"Do you think he cursed me?" I asked Lia, quite concerned if he's the one who did. I couldn't possibly confront the guy.

"What? Why? Just 'cause you didn't make noodles for him?" Lia laughed. "Of course not. They are Christians anyway."

"Really? How do you know?"

Lia mentioned she saw a cross on the wall when she made a delivery. Well, that helped a little. Usually Christians here didn't get involved with supernatural things.

"Okay, maybe not him. Anyone else?" I asked her again.

Lia mentioned several people that I knew but didn't recall ever interacting with, much less getting involved in a dispute. The illegal parking attendants, a handful of customers from the nearby coffee shop, and stubborn street singers to name a few. Moreover, according to Lia's descriptions, it was all petty tiffs, not all-out altercations.

"Is it so bad that they perhaps, you know, want to curse me?"

"Hmmm, I don't think so. Again, they're petty fights. You don't remember at all? You just had an argument with that new parking attendant last week."

"M-me?" I felt like oxygen was running out.

"I know right!" She laughed. "He's not exactly a parking attendant, just a random guy who wants to profit off everyone here illegally. But you were so brave, and wow, you hit him exactly where it hurts—with your words. It's not like they wanted to risk it all to hit a girl. Apek helped you a moment later to chase him away. You don't remember?"

I shook my head. She didn't press me further because my face showed genuine confusion.

"Anyways, I'm always on your side because they're all at fault. Gosh, they're rude. I know you never want to voluntarily talk to men but someone has to stand up and scare them. You're scary. And it worked." She laughed and the balls of her cheeks squished her eyes, emanating jokester sparkles. I pulled her ponytail jokingly.

Lia gathered the empty plastics of the bread and went to throw it away. What we just talked about only added unwanted weight to my mind and magnified the anxiety in my heart. Had I always been this forgetful? So much so that I forgot little quarrels which might be dangerous if left not taken care of? An unfamiliar troubling feeling swirled around my gut. No matter how hard I tried to remember, I just couldn't. It's not that I didn't want to, but there's no memory to look for in the first place.

This continued on till midnight, and tomorrow was the day I was supposed to take out my stitches. Sleep hadn't been a good friend since I heard the voices. Well... I hadn't heard anything since those two times. Still... it might catch me when I was off-guard. I didn't know which was worse: hearing the voice when I was expecting it, or hearing one when I wasn't. I wonder if I could request sleeping pills....

My nights had been going this way: countless questions of whether I would hear them again or not, what I should do when I heard them, to whom I should tell about this strange thing, if I should reply to the voices, why didn't they appear anymore.... And this continued on till I fell asleep, which didn't give me much rest because I needed to wake up a couple hours later to prepare for the shop. Overthinking was draining, but my brain just couldn't shut up.

Dr. Indri noticed my fatigue as she worked on my finger the next morning. I assured her that it's not because of my injury, but there's just something that weighed on my mind. I couldn't seem to find the answer.

"If it's health-related I should be able to help," she said once she's done wrapping my hand with a new bandage.

I hesitated. I'd never said this out loud aside from that time with Apek. "It wasn't exactly visible to the eyes..."

"Virus is invisible and it still harms our body," she said.

"Ah, right." I let out a nervous laugh. It's better than nothing. "It's just that... I heard, uhm, a voice that morning when I cut my hand.... It's like a sudden, short, and loud warning telling me to stop. I heard it in my head."

I glanced at the doctor, expecting her to laugh because it's weird. But she still listened intently, waiting for me to finish.

“That’s why I was able to stop the machine,” I continued. “If I hadn’t heard the voice, my hand would have been gone. I didn’t know if I should be thankful because it’s also the same thing that makes me lose sleep.” I looked at the doctor, awaiting her reply. I couldn’t read the expression on her face because she still appeared calm.

“Does this always happen, doc?” I asked.

“When did it start?” she asked back. I told her that morning was the first time it happened. Then I heard another that night.

“Was it your voice, or?”

“Uhm... it was a male voice. Two different men. I could hear them clearly and it’s not my voice.”

“And you only heard them twice? All inside your head and involuntarily?”

I nodded. Something I recognize as desperation began to grow. I hoped the doctor could tell me what this was.

“Do you remember what the second one said?” she asked again.

“It’s like, um, kind of clarifying something that I was thinking,” I said. “Is it because I was too tired?” I asked again when she took a minute longer to reply.

“Hmmm, it could be. But... there might also be an issue in the brain that caused the auditory hallucinations. You haven’t heard them since the day of injury, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. There are a lot of possibilities and factors at play, so we can’t diagnose you right away with a specific condition. I’ll prescribe a med that helps you sleep and also multivitamins, so you can get enough rest and your tired body is repaired while you’re at it,” she said while going through her prescription sheets, preparing to write something down. “Stress and fatigue are huge contributors to a lot of health issues, including the decline in the clarity and sharpness of the mind. Let’s see if you feel better in the next few days. Oh, and one more thing.”

She stopped writing on the prescription list. “If you hear anything that tells you to do something you don’t want to, or for you to harm yourself or others... try your best to ignore them. Or when they insult or mock you... don’t listen to them. Distract yourself to do something

that you like, perhaps reading or watching movies. Anything to keep your mind off of them. Then come to me right away. If it's too late at night, come here first thing in the morning."

I assured her I would absolutely do that. She sensed my worry and told me not to, it could just be extreme fatigue.

Never in my life had I wanted to be exhausted so badly.

"Ama, am I different sometimes?" I asked Ama when we were preparing for afternoon opening hours. Now that my finger was better, I could go back to noodle-prep. And Ama also returned to her topping-prep spot. It felt good to stand in this area of the working station again.

"What do you mean?" Ama asked back. She was stacking the small bowls used to serve pork bone broth, another accompaniment to our dry noodle dish.

"You know... maybe I was absentminded one time, and then, like, depressed another time, then rude, then quiet.... Did you notice anything?" I tried to phrase my question carefully. I wasn't even sure of what I was going to say.

Ever since Lia mentioned the forgotten quarrels I had with a number of people, I had been Googling a lot of things. Some said Google was far from a real doctor and it only contributed to overthinking things that perhaps wasn't even true, but I didn't have anyone to ask. At least anyone with credibility—not like Google had any either, but I was too curious. I hadn't heard any voices since those two occasions for several days now, so I couldn't barge into dr. Indri's office, demanding her to treat something uncertain. Now I doubted if they even happened at all.

The thing about Google was that it offered so much information at once, and everything sounded true. It told me I had several conditions at once: extreme fatigue, schizophrenia, bipolar, even brain tumor. I felt like losing my mind due to the confusion, and several articles recommended asking other people who could observe our behavior from an outside perspective. So I asked Ama.

"You do seem out of it sometimes, but I thought it's because you're sleepy or tired," Ama said.

"Did you see me pick a fight with some illegal parking attendants?" I asked her.

“Oh, yeah, I thought that was weird at first because you avoid men so much. But you did the right thing, we need to make our environment pleasant for the customers.”

“Do you remember how I acted? What I said? ‘Cause I don’t.”

“Eh... I don’t really remember either. Don’t worry, they’ll never come here again,” Ama reassured me.

I didn’t need reassurance about that. I needed reassurance about *myself*. Ama then mentioned I talked differently sometimes. One time I was so chatty that she needed to shut me up, another time I was so quiet and confused that I overcooked the noodles. Once, I laughed so loud and chatted with the coffee shop customers throughout our daytime break. Other times, I play with neighborhood children during the break. I didn’t remember any of them.

“You’re just weird, that’s why,” Ama teased. “Ah, hurry wash your face! The customers will be here any minute!” Ama shooed me to the bathroom.

My feet went on autopilot to navigate through the rows of customers’ tables, the glass partition that led to the preparation and storage room, the kitchen, then turned left to the bathroom door beneath the stairs. The sink was right beside it.

I stood in front of it for a while, pausing to empty my head. After a moment, I washed my face, then tried my best to get rid of the remaining water droplets.

“Was I not me?” I asked the reflection before me. Eyebrows knitted together, eyes slightly red from the water that slipped in, confusion glossed over the two pupils.

“No, you’re still you.”

I turned around so fast to catch whoever was speaking. No one. I looked around the room more carefully, no one. I looked into the mirror above the sink. It’s just me. Was it me? My heart a million miles per hour, sending painful stabs to my chest, and just like a crude oil spillage on the ocean, fear spread to every single cell in my body. It is one lit match away from a massive explosion. Tears began to form, but they hadn’t fallen yet.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice a low tremble.

Several seconds passed, and finally a male voice boomed inside my head, *“I’m Egon.”*

I jumped, not being able to utter a single word for a moment. It actually answered? Now of all times? I pushed myself away from the sink, bringing my hand up to claw at my short hair. Perhaps the pain could wake me up from this bad dream.

“Stay calm. We’re not here to hurt you.”

“STAY CALM?” I hissed through my teeth. “We’re—there’s more than one of you??”

I paced around the room. The beat of my heart matched the beat of the excruciating pain in my head and my vision began to tunnel. Everything apart from what’s directly in front of me went dark. I rubbed my eyes till it hurt, and splashed my face with cold water again. I was fully awake and lucid.

“Who are you?” I asked again.

“Stay calm. I’m Egon.” A pause. *“I am a part of you,”* he said. I was now sure it was totally not a ghost because his voice was clearly coming from inside my head.

The prickle in my eyes appeared, a sign that tears were falling and new ones continued forming. This couldn’t be happening. What was even happening?? My heart was beating so fast and it was hard to breathe. It’s as if the oxygen in the air had depleted.

Who was he? Who were they? Was I going insane? What the hell was happening?

Everything in front of me began to blur, and my vision tunneled further. Something pricked my heart, and it hurt so bad. My eyes were filled with tears. I blinked and blinked again. It didn’t clear up.

I blinked and blinked again.

Egon

I knew that was going to happen. What an absolute mess. The sudden shock and emotional distress had sent Nika to her 'pod', a remote place where her consciousness always resided whenever she dissociated. We'd leave her there to rest for the time being. I knew Ara would keep watch on her.

I let out a heavy sigh and washed my face again. My eyes hurt because Nika rubbed them too hard, and now it's red. Glad the tears stopped before more would fall. I looked into the mirror and straightened the disheveled short hair. Gosh, she had made it spiky. I tried my best to flatten it out using a little bit of water.

My gut urged me to hurry the hell up because the shop should be open by now, and Ama would grumble if I was nowhere near the working station a second longer. After making sure nothing was out of place, I ran outside.

Thankfully there was still no one.

"Were you pooping?" Ama confronted me jokingly. "Took so long."

"My stomach hurts, I can't help it," I told her, then took my apron and put it on. "I'll run away if you forbid me from pooping, let you run the shop on your own. I don't care." I pouted.

"Heh, little devil," Ama scoffed. "Try running away, Lia will find you anyways. What's with your hair? You pooped and then took a bath? Wah, you're so fast then," Ama said as her fingers brushed through my damp hair.

I swatted her hand lightly. "Ah, stop it, Ama! You'll mess it up, I've worked so hard on my hair."

She clicked her tongue and grumbled some more, something about already buying and not using a hairdryer as I was supposed to. I chuckled. Lia poked her head from the beverage table, confused as she missed our light banter.

The first customers had arrived and I started to work.

I actually genuinely liked making noodles because it's repetitive. Everything became muscle memory: the exact amount of noodles, the cooking time, the measurement of seasonings, the technique in stirring, the placement of toppings. Nika didn't realize that she was

so skilled and efficient at preparing noodles because of me. I did most of the afternoon shifts for so many years because Nika was too drained from the morning ones. And when she couldn't do the early morning tasks, Ara would step in.

The day went by without a hitch, and I could sense that Nika was still inside her pod, and it seemed she wouldn't come out anytime soon. It's fine, because I was the best at 'acting Nika,' as we all would say.

I appeared when Nika was five.

I didn't know where I was before being forced to wake up and was confronted with the most horrible thing a child could ever experience.

I came to, and saw my two hands, dirty and bruised. I didn't wear any clothes, and there were bruises and scars, new and faded, all over my body too. My body was so filthy I refused to look at it. On top of me was a monstrous man my brain recognized as my uncle, my mother's older brother, doing unspeakable things I didn't even want to remember.

I was scared out of my mind. Why was my uncle doing this to me? No matter how much I begged and pleaded, he didn't stop. The more I wailed, the harder he smacked me. Whenever I screamed, a lit cigarette burned my skin. I thought I had the strength to push him away, but my hands were too little, and all my muscles hurt so bad that moving them actually caused more pain. So I swallowed all my tears, shut my eyes and covered my ears. It felt like a long time had passed and then I was left alone in my room: a small dark square, filthy and smelly, with nothing but a thin mattress, a crooked shelf, and a wardrobe with no doors.

I tried to sit up, but I couldn't. The pain was immense and I wept, unable to fathom the situation I was shoved into. The light of the dawn reached my window some moment later, and just then I realized: I was a little girl.

But I was a guy. I knew I was fifteen years old. And... that's it. That's the only thing I remembered. It's like everything that happened before this time vanished without a trace. At the chaos of the violation, I didn't realize how small my hands were, how high my voice was. I didn't look and sound like this.

I was baffled for a long time, looking around the foreign yet somehow familiar room. Then I found the strength to dig into the shelf to find some clothes to wear. I peeked out the

door and saw no one. In fact, I was the only one in the house, which sent a shrill of relief down my spine as I feared I'd see my uncle again. After I looked around the house, there was nothing to eat, but I found an opened package of some crackers inside one of the kitchen shelves. It was terribly soggy, but I needed to eat. And then I fell asleep.

I didn't know how long I slept, or if I even slept at all, because even when I was unconscious, I felt that familiar tug, like something was pulling my drowning self to the surface. When I awoke, the same scene unfolded before me: the physical and sexual abuse from my uncle.

I thought I was living in a time loop: fell asleep-awakened-abused-repeat; but one day I realized my hair had slightly grown, it's then I knew that this nightmare was happening in real time.

Then, over the years, I learned that there was a pattern: I was always awakened at the time of the abuse. I lingered for some time, then I fell asleep. Sometimes I could do some activities for a few days, but I was asleep again; everyone called me Nika, and I thought that was my name for a long time. It turned out it's this girl's name. I didn't have one and didn't know if I even had one in my previous life; this little girl was always left alone, starved and abused; the three of us—my mother, my uncle and I, or at least the woman and man I initially thought were my mother and uncle—lived together in a tiny village, hours and hours away from the West Kalimantan capital. Where was Nika's father? Not even her mother knew. She was never present, always fooled around, got pregnant back when she was seventeen, then gave birth to Nika, and continued fooling around. Her working, older brother was expected to care for the child, but he did the opposite instead.

When I finally had access to the internet—years and years later, I learned how to Google things. I studied a lot from Google, found the harsh truth that was both enlightening and heartbreaking. I found out Nika fragmented her consciousness in the midst of the abuse, and that was when I came into being. I was a part of her, one that was unknown to her; she was a part of me, one that I didn't realize initially. We live in the same body, and the both of us made up a whole person people see as 'Nika' on the outside.

I was hurt, both physically and emotionally. Everywhere was pain, every day was suffering. I detested everyone, including Nika, including myself. Why did she create me in the

first place only to be the cushion to all her sufferings? Why did I feel too much? I was enraged for a long time, alone and confused for a long time, was a punching bag for a long time.

About a year and a half later, Araceli appeared, an adult woman little Nika expected a true mother should be, and at least I wasn't alone anymore. When I came into being, I brought with me Nika's hopes and dreams of an adult man who was the complete opposite of her uncle: kind, protective, loving. But I guess the abuse also fucked me up because Nika's understanding of an adult man was around fifteen years old. Couldn't blame the child's mind.

"She's still inside." I heard Ara's gentle voice inside my head. I just finished cleaning myself and was drying my hair while pacing around the third floor's living area. *"I'm worried."*

I hung my towel on the drying rack at the back terrace and took huge steps to go inside my room, locking the door right away.

It was actually effortless to communicate between us. It's just like talking to yourself, but in our case, there's another voice who could give a reply. We could hold a full conversation inside our head, after all we share the same brain. Even though I was the one currently taking over the body, Ara's consciousness could be present near my own, and we could talk to each other that way. However, we deliberately built a high wall between Nika's consciousness and the rest of us, and Ara made sure the barrier wasn't breached, so Nika didn't have any recollection of us and what we did when we took over the body. It's so much safer for her this way, as she was already hurt and unstable enough.

The body belonged to all of us, though Nika hadn't realized it yet. It didn't only belong to her. We understood that she might feel like she's the sole owner, but... truth was she wasn't. Each of us had also thought we were the sole owners at some point, but we'd come to learn that this was like a shared housing. The space was shared with some others who took turns to function in the outside world. We hadn't really thought about how to break the news to Nika.

"Well, she had stayed longer before," I said, keeping my voice low so Lia didn't suspect anything. Ah, let me just play some music, what was I thinking? It's just that Nika never talked on the phone with anyone, so hearing her speaking by herself must be so out-of-character in Lia's perspective.

"It's different now, Egon, you know that. Now she knows we're here," Ara said, her tone was filled with worry. The volume from the speaker was increasing, and I think it's safe to speak with a low to normal voice.

"What should we do now?" Ara asked me, and she's also asking herself.

I tugged the ends of my bedsheet, tucking all four corners so that it was straight, and swept away all the invisible dust. Tsk, the motion messed the sheet a little, and I should straighten it again. After sweeping my hand across its surface five times, I was satisfied with its smooth surface. I laid my butt down carefully on the bed. Ara was patiently waiting for my response.

"Do you sense the defensiveness she has put up ever since I first communicated with her?" I asked Ara. A new wall had been erected ever since that morning, and it all came from Nika herself, following her around. I didn't think it was a good thing.

"Yes." Ara sighed. *"And Hector made it worse."*

Tsk. That brute. He had no business sputtering things out of the blue. Look at where it brought us. There's a spark of anger in my gut, but Ara calmed me down. There's no use patching a hole that kept widening by the minute.

"Don't let him take over this time being, Ara. We need to figure out how to deal with all these before Nika resents us more," I said, bitterly. 'Cause I did feel bitter. Perfect camouflage for more than fifteen years now on the brink of exposure just because of one stupid cut. We had survived worse abominations.

"It's not your fault, Egon. It just happened that way. You can't take over in a split second. And you can't tap into her reflex either," Ara tenderly consoled me. *"It's bound to happen. She'll know about us someday."*

I picked the rough skin on the sides of my nails. "Yeah, but not like this."

Ara fell silent as she agreed. We're worried for Nika, and for ourselves, for the continuity of our system. How would she react once she woke up? We had been doing our best to protect this body and her consciousness. Now we were stepping into an unknown territory because we couldn't predict her response, although we could guess a little already. What if she decided she didn't want this system anymore? What if—

“Egon, stop worrying.” Ara interrupted my thoughts. “We’ll talk to her, approach her slowly. She’ll come around.”

I truly hope so.

“Tsk. Leave the fish balls alone.” I turned around and Ama was standing behind me, arranging little bowls for soup without even looking at me.

I glanced down and saw the most-perfectly-lined-up rows and rows of little white fish balls. I looked at other trays of toppings; the dumplings were aligned, the shrimps all curved in one direction, and now the fish balls. Oh, I must have done that without realizing, as I was trying to empty my mind of all the ticks and worries. I still had a handful to arrange into the remaining space.

“Let me finish,” I told her.

She then left me alone and walked to the cashier counter, scanning the tray for how much we had made so far today.

What I observed about Ama was that she never questioned why Nika did certain things that were out of the ordinary. I arranged things when I was taking over, obsessing over cleanliness and order in everything; Ara took more care and thought to our—I mean, Nika's outer appearance, like trimming her hair when it's time and applying tons of skincare because Nika never really did. Nika herself was orderly and clean, but not to this extent. Still, Ama didn't question these things. At least outright to my face.

Lia always did, though, like why I suddenly arranged all these things, why I let them be other days, why a large box of skincare arrived on our doorstep, why I talked loudly sometimes, why I didn't talk at all other times. But once she finally got tired of questioning all the time, she never asked again. I guess our agreed answers of ‘I just feel like it’ or ‘I don't feel like it’ also bored her. And Lia was too polite to press me further.

It had always been our main goal to act as normally as possible, which meant acting like how Nika always did to our best abilities: reserved, keeping things to herself, soundless—seriously, Nika never made a sound even on the creakiest old wooden stairs, I didn't know how she did that. But sometimes it became quite tiring to keep on performing, so certain things like what I did to the fish balls sometimes happened. Again, Ama never suspected anything.

“I think she does, but she doesn’t want to ask. Perhaps it’s her form of respecting what she thinks is Nika’s personality,” Ara chimed in. “Not collective personalities.”

I hummed in understanding.

“What is it?” Lia asked.

“What is what?” I asked back.

“You nodded and made a sound like you understood something.”

“Oh, I was just proud of my artwork right here,” I said as I lifted up the tray of perfectly-lined fish balls, like how a new mother lifted and showed off her newborn baby. “Wow, it belongs to the museum.”

Lia laughed and told me that my effort would all be in vain because the toppings would be gone anyway by the end of the day. Might as well not arrange them at all.

“You’re no fun! It could attract customers as well. They like weird things. Do you know the noodle shop that tossed their noodles, like, seven hundred meters up in the air a thousand times? People love that.”

Lia furrowed her eyebrows and wrinkled her nose. “Are you sure it’s that high and that many times?”

“No, it’s actually just a boring one meter and tossing around five to eight times,” I said quickly. “Anyways, stop bothering with my art. This is my entertainment.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, someone’s coming,” she said, straightening up her posture and stepping aside to make way for new customers.

“Did Apek repair the wiring?” Ama asked me when we’re done serving the customers.

“The what?” I asked back, cleaning the counter with a damp cloth. Even one drop of water would break my concentration.

“The wiring upstairs, you said only some of the lights are on.”

I paused. I didn’t recall anything about any wiring or any faulty lights. I asked Ara inside my head if she knew anything. She didn’t.

It must be Nika then.

“The-the wiring? Ah, it’s not the wiring. Turns out one of the lightbulbs was dead. I have bought new ones,” I said, as nonchalantly as possible, masking my surprise. Ama made a sound indicating she understood and didn’t ask me anything anymore.

I didn’t know how many times I made up stories to dodge questions about things that happened while I was not taking over the body. I was often speechless in the beginning, but as time went by, I got more creative. It taught me to be more observant of the situation, taking in every little detail, and went from there.

And just like that, the day ended. Today I was given the final task to count the day’s earnings. It made me rethink if Ama knew it’s me that was now in control, not the usual Nika, because I almost always did the sales recap. Almost every time I was out. Perhaps she recognized the surfacing of the extremely detailed side of Nika. It’s totally fine, I liked numbers anyway because they never deviate from the truth; one plus one is always two.

Perhaps it’s also because I was lightning fast in summing up all the numbers without the use of a calculator while my fingers brushed through every single layer of money, never missing even one sheet. This way we could wrap up everything in the nick of time.

But this task took a toll on my hands because now it’s dirty. Almost everyone knew money had a lot of germs, and I needed my hands clean to move on to my next routine. And because my finger was injured, it took much, much longer than usual. It’s my fifth time applying soap on my hands when Ara interrupted me.

“Egon, she’s waking up.”

I stopped rubbing my hands. “What?? I’m not done yet!”

“Run to the bedroom now.”

I could feel Nika’s consciousness approaching closer and closer. I blinked and blinked. Okay, the door’s now locked. Blink and blink, the familiar tunnel was here. I sat on the bed.

I blinked and blinked.

Nika

The first thing I noticed was my hands were soaking wet and the skin around my nails stung. They were red and some parts of the skin had peeled off. I took a new towel from my wardrobe, dried my hands and patted on the flaky skin gently. The skin in that area often peeled off, so I had a box of band aid ready inside the drawer.

After I was done plastering several fingers on each hand, just like an alarm that rang to remind me of something, I looked around. This was my room, I wasn't on the ground floor. I scratched my head, it felt like I just woke up from a nap, and I still felt sleepy. But when I looked at the time on my phone, it's ten o'clock at night. I remembered it was Tuesday. Then I looked at my phone again because I missed looking at the date. It's Friday now.

"I slept that long?" Realizing how impossible the question sounded, I tried to rethink the situation. I was gone for three days.... Where did I go? What happened these past three days?

Then it finally came to me that something significant happened on Tuesday. I scrambled to my door and knocked on Lia's. She must have sensed the urgency in my rapid knocking and opened the door that very second.

"Why? What happened?" she asked, looking around, looking past me and into the hallway, then she looked back at me.

"Where was I today?" I asked her carefully.

She opened her mouth, ready to say something, but closed it again. Confused, she tilted her head and squinted her eyes, as if asking if this was a trick question, or if I was being serious. But she composed herself, like she had done this before.

"Uhm... you're here, at the shop the whole day," she told me. I was waiting for her to add something else, and she caught on. "And yesterday too, and the day before, and the days before. We're always here." She ended her answer in a cheerful tone. When I didn't say anything, she continued, "Did something happen?"

I was snapped out of my confusion and told her it's nothing. After wishing her a good night, and assuring her twice that I was fine, I took small swift steps back to my room. Something *did* happen.

The door was locked behind me and I took a good look at my room. I never noticed that everything was just so... *straight*. I knew my chair was always crooked because I always sat there and never slid it back into the table. Now it was tucked inside. Why hadn't I noticed this before? Was I so out of it?

There was not a single slanted angle here. I remembered the right door of my wardrobe couldn't fully close shut because of the bulky black sweaters that always protrude out of the bottom shelf. I pulled the door open, and the sweaters were neatly tucked inside, then I closed the door again. It's completely shut. Huh.

"Who the heck are you..." I whispered while my eyes darted around my room, looking at something faulty, but nothing was. This was my room, but somehow... it also wasn't. Was I too tired all this time to not notice these things? Did I really just breeze through them? How could I not remember?

I couldn't sleep a wink that night. Questions, countless questions roamed around my mind, and they're all unanswered. It's like my brain was an unfortunately active factory that produced a thousand questions per minute without the intention of stopping, without caring whether the body could keep up. Because it couldn't. The next morning when I tried to wake up—emphasize on *trying*—my eyes wouldn't open. I must have fallen asleep at some point last night, but still not enough.

So here I was, dark bags under my bloodshot eyes, trying to navigate around the day while feeling like I was floating all the time. I had to see Dr. Indri during my break time.

It was a half-an-hour wait till I entered Dr. Indri's examination room, and she still greeted me with a smile while knowing I came with heavy news, one that she might not have an answer to. But I appreciated her open mindedness and acceptance.

"Uhm... apparently I was gone for three days," I said. "But I was physically around, I was still working, doing things that were not out of the ordinary. At least that's what I'm told."

"And this happened right after you talked to the voice in your head? It didn't say hurtful things, or commanded you to step away from the mind? Nothing of that sort?" she asked.

"No... actually it's calming me down because I was panicking. It said there were parts... of me. I didn't understand. And then I woke up three days later."

“Did you notice that you’ve been forgetful? It’s more than, ‘Oh, I forgot to turn off the light’ or ‘I forgot to input this item on the register.’ It’s something like losing chunks of a day’s memory, or even more. Just like losing three days’ worth of memory like you just experienced.”

I worked my brain enough to induce a headache after she said that. I felt like I was always working and went through every day just the same. If there’s anything out of the ordinary I should clearly know.

“I thought I wasn’t, but what other people said made me realize I have been forgetting a lot of things. Like a lot.”

“Okay. When those people retold the events for you, did you remember doing that?” she asked again.

“No, it totally sounded foreign. I don’t think it’s me that they saw, but they clearly saw me. So how can I not remember any of that? Is there something wrong with my brain? Do I need to go to a brain specialist?”

Dr. Indri thought hard. Her eyes darted from left to right, left to right, then turned to the computer screen in front of her.

“Did someone say you’re different sometimes? Like how you present yourself, or the way you talk?” she asked.

“Yeah. I feel like I’m always like this, but our helper described someone I didn’t know when I asked her the same question. I mean... it’s impossible that I did or said all those things, like confronting someone else, joking with strangers, or playing with children. I would avoid those things.”

Dr. Indri nodded. Something clicked, but perhaps she was still unsure.

“Will I get better, doc?” I asked her.

“I have my suspicions regarding your condition, but it’s out of my field of expertise, and I couldn’t officially diagnose you because perhaps I could still be mistaken. I’ll prescribe some meds to help you maintain your physical health, but I’ll refer you to a friend of mine. She’s a psychiatrist. Is that OK with you?” Dr. Indri explained.

“A psychiatrist?” I repeated, thought I heard wrong. “Why should I go to a psychiatrist?”

“You see, the brain is a complex organ. Very complex. And there are things I’m not familiar with being a general practitioner myself. There are specialists who are far more qualified than me. However, I don’t think your problem lies in the physical part of the brain, as in having a tumor or something of that sort. Your bloodwork was perfect, you don’t drink and don’t do drugs, and you don’t have any other medical conditions, so I ruled all those out. Perhaps it lies on the psychological side.”

My heart dropped low to my gut, and they were all wrung together, making me jittery and hard to breathe. I tried to stay calm. “What do you mean?”

She took a deep breath. “There could be several possibilities to explain your condition, and I have several terms in mind. But this is still outside of my expertise and I can’t point out what condition you have without proper and specific tests,” she said, and then observed my reaction, which I was clearly showing apprehension. She calmly continued, “Perhaps I could also be mistaken. That’s why I advise you to see a psychiatrist, as they are more credible in conducting the right tests.”

My eyes lost focus, and I tried hard to look at Dr. Indri’s face, but it was blurry. She wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to me. On it were a name, a phone number, and an address.

“She’s my good friend, and I trust her. She could help you, Nika,” she said, looking right into my eyes. “Without a doubt.”

I looked at the neat scribbles. It’s like a password to enter an unknown gate to an unknown location, one that is so unfamiliar and daunting. I had mixed feelings about this....

“Do I really have to go, doc?” My voice sounded like a plea. I hoped she said no, I didn’t have to, I’d get better on my own. “I’m not insane.”

“Oh, no, no, I’m not saying you are. Going to a psychiatrist doesn’t mean you’re insane. It’s just that if there’s nothing wrong with your physical aspects, but you’re still feeling unwell, it’s not a bad idea to check on your mental aspects as well. As I said before, stress, which starts psychologically, could cause repercussions to your physicality.” She checked if I remembered, I nodded. “Perhaps you can get to the root of the problem, and find the right way to treat it. There’s no harm in just visiting.”

Her kind smile didn't calm me down like it used to. It's like there's a ton of weight on top of my shoulders, pressing into my lungs. This was something foreign, I didn't like it.

"I'll... let my grandma know, doc. Discuss with her first," I said, hoping she didn't notice my effort to flee her room that very second. I wanted to run away from all these. But she's still so kind, reminding me to take the meds and come to her right away if there's still a problem.

There was a problem, one that I was unprepared to face.

Egon

My vision cleared up and the sun beamed on my face. I instinctively brought my hands up to cover my eyes when I realized I was holding a piece of paper. I was about to read it when someone demanded that I move out of the way. Around me were rows and rows of motorcycles, parked and waiting for their owners to finish their business in the hospital and pharmacy. Not wanting to get to the parking attendant's nerves, I quickly stepped away to the front of the hospital window. Wait, the hospital? Nika went back here? She just had the stitches removed several days ago. Or was it a week ago?

I looked at the note in my hand.

Psychiatrist dr. Elly Lo, Sp.KJ.

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Pancawarna 102

Psychiatrist? Did Nika come here to ask for a reference?

I couldn't feel anything aside from the anxiety and worry that began to fade the deeper Nika went into her pod. One's feeling was their own, and one could only feel the remnants of the other's for a moment, just like a vivid yet fading dream the more awake we were. Now Nika's feelings completely dissipated. I was left with the blazing Equator sun and a note that could mean anything.

The alarm on my phone rang, indicating that only thirty minutes were left before the afternoon opening time. Geez, I could shower for only a short time. I searched for my motorcycle among the rows and drove away after paying the attendant.

It was one minute to two, and I scrambled to put on my apron.

"Calm down, it's not like they'll come at exactly two o'clock on the dot," Ama said.

Right at that moment, a car stopped in front of our shop. I pointed at it and raised my eyebrows. Ama then uttered gibberish admitting defeat.

I tried hard to conceal my worry in order to work well for the rest of the day. But apparently the weight in my heart also weighed on my hands, as there were more mistakes made than I would like to admit. It should've been *kwetiau*, not noodles, or vice versa, should've been soup noodles, not dry... this was embarrassing. It might seem trivial for others, as we could always remake it, but it's not for me. It's like letting defeat take control whereas I was the one who should've taken control.

I was drained more than usual when I finally lay on the bed. It was then that I could really think about the day's event. It was not unusual for me to be out suddenly like that. It didn't happen in an instant, though, as the process of dissociating was gradual. Nika must have started dissociating ever since she's in the doctor's room, then dissociated completely once she stepped out of the hospital.

I was just glad it wasn't one of the littles who stepped out once Nika was inside.

"I made sure they didn't go near the outside." Ara's voice was heard in my head. *"And you were closer so you're pulled outside. It's unwise to let Hector take control for now."*

I sighed. "That's good. That's good. You need to keep watch of the littles."

"They're now asleep. And I didn't see Hector, he must have disappeared somewhere."

"Probably in his hammock. He's just sulking 'cause you didn't let him out," I said, annoyed. I didn't know when he'd realize this kind of decision was to keep the body safe and not raise further suspicion. It's not like Ara deliberately forbade him from appearing without reason.

I could imagine her feeling guilty, hands clasped tight in front of her, shoulders slumped, somber eyes on the ground. She didn't want this either.

"It's not your fault. He'll know we're doing this for his sake too," I consoled her.

Ara went inside and I was left alone. I didn't know how long I'd be out now. There's not always a fixed period. One time I was out for almost half a year—of course alternating with the others—and the shortest was around fifteen minutes or so.

I resented Nika for this, leaving the body and the hardships before her as she pleased, and letting us face them in her place. I resented her for a long time. But Ara brought me around, saying we're all in the same boat—literally; the same body—and who else could take care of it

if not us? If the body's gone then we're also gone. I didn't want to fade away, so my perspective shifted. We needed to survive.

It's been three days and Nika was still inside her pod. My worry went tenfold because now she'd notice the lost chunk of time. Before, she was never conscious of it because we always repeated the same thing over and over again, creating reliable muscle memory which Nika considered as her own daily routine when she's not present. The bad details always stayed with us, depending on who faced them.

Now annoyingly she didn't come out. It's not like we could force her to; it's unhealthy and draining to the mind, which affected the body. Once, Hector forced to take over and we're bedridden for the whole day, enduring an incurable earth-splitting headache.

We never forced someone else to come out ever since.

"Is leaving notes a good idea?" I ask Ara. This night marked a week I'd taken over the body. Every passing second felt like a step further from Nika.

"It could always go the other way. Either she'll ponder about it, or outright reject it." Ara spelled out the harsh truth. *"I hope it's the former..."*

Looking back at how defensive she got when she first heard Hector and me, and how she stressed out so much at the possibility of visiting a psychiatrist to the point of staying inside for a week... I doubted that. But she should know, so she could get better. Otherwise, she could never escape from this circle of stress. Everyone in this body would feel the consequences.

I pulled my hair. I shouldn't have stopped her that dawn. But if I didn't, we'd lose our hand.

"Egon, it's not your fault." Ara had repeated this phrase countless times. I wanted to believe her. I desperately did. But even Ara couldn't make me feel not guilty. At this point, nothing could.

After some time contemplating, we decided to write a note for Nika when she's finally out. It's better than nothing at all, and we truly hope she'd understand.

Nika

It's three thirty in the morning and my only source of illumination was the dying nightlight on my bedside table. There was no window in my room as it was located at the inner part of the house, so I'd never know when the sun's up. Next to mine was Lia's room, which had four large windows overlooking the front road, and the sunlight was blinding every morning. I preferred to be woken up by the sound of the alarm, instead of the painful glare of the sun.

I turned on the light in my room and closed my eyes that instant, then gradually opened them to get used to the dazzle. I still had about half an hour before I needed to prepare for the shop. I was sitting on my bed, looking at my phone, when a piece of yellow sticky note entered my field of vision. It's dense with neat letters.

My heart drummed its familiar anxious beat, urging me to acknowledge things I thought weren't real, a piece of yesterday I tried to throw away. Apparently it's a boomerang, one that would return no matter how far I tried to toss it away.

Nika,

I apologize for startling you back then, believe me when I said I meant no harm.

No, I'm not a ghost, we're not ghosts. We're people, just like you. We're real, just like you. We're all people with our own minds and intentions, likes and dislikes, hopes and dreams. But we're unique, we're different, and that doesn't always mean a bad thing. We all live in the same body. It's confusing, I know. I didn't understand it myself either at first. But believe me, no one wants to harm you. We're always here for you, always have been.

We'll talk when you're ready. Until then, please take good care of yourself.

Egon

My head was now a whirlpool of confusion, fear, and anxiety, and my heart kept accelerating, making my fingers tremble and my forehead covered in cold sweat. It was suddenly hot and cold inside the room at the same time.

What in the alien hell was all this?

Did I write all these in my sleep? Sleep... writing?

What the actual heck. Am I really going insane?

I scrambled around the table, looking for that specific note I got from Dr. Indri. Where was it again? I stopped doing everything when I realized something.

When was the last time I saw Dr. Indri again? I snatched my phone from the bed. Oh my God... one, two, three, fo— eight days had passed. EIGHT DAYS WHAT THE DAMN HECK.

I paced around the room, yanking my hair and ignoring the prickle of pain my scalp suffered. If anything, it's the only thing that felt the most real at the moment. Tears stung my eyes, and they fell out of frustration. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't real. Where did I go? Where had I been these past eight days?

I threw myself on the bed and shut my eyes, hoping when I opened them, everything would come back as usual. But what was the usual? Losing chunks of time? Having absolutely no idea of everything? Having *someone else* residing inside me? Doing *God-knows-what*?

I ran to the bathroom to have the coldest shower but ended up just standing there, frozen not because of the cold water, but fear. I was scared out of my mind and I couldn't take this any further, but ironically, heartbreakingly, I needed to work. I just couldn't come downstairs and tell Ama and Lia I couldn't work. Physically I was healthy. Physically there was nothing wrong with me.

What should I tell Ama? That someone else was harassing me? But they're unseen and they are inside my head? She wouldn't believe me, she'd tell me I was haunted by demons.

What if I was? Possessed by a spirit who took over my body and sent my soul to who-knows-where?

I didn't think the day when I truly considered spirits affecting me would come.

But all these didn't make any sense. What if it's not a spirit? The note said they're not ghosts. Then it's all my brain's work? I hadn't taken tests yet so I had no idea what condition I had.

But this could also be a case of a stalker.... Did they enter through the back? Or the front? But even if there's an intruder, it's hard to enter my room. I had always locked my door without fail, that's the first thing I did whenever I closed it. Or... I didn't lock it when I went who-knows-where.... This was a nightmare.

For all I knew, whatever this was threw my life off balance. I hated when things were off balance because what's left was a chilling downhill slope that made it impossible to climb back up and restore the previous equilibrium.

TWO

THE REALIZATION

Nika

But I hadn't heard anything else. I took careful note of the days the first thing in the morning when I woke up, and it's been a long twenty-day streak.

I was confused as to why this... thing, this entity, came forward only to stay silent for a long time. Was it all a dream? But the note proved otherwise. As much as I wanted to crumple and tear it to pieces, that's the only thing I truly knew didn't come from me.

Again, working helped keep me distracted, but when the closing time arrived, I was left wondering and anxious, fearing if I fell asleep tonight, how many days after would it be when I finally woke up? At dawn I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the correct date on my phone, one day after the previous, but then an unimaginable weight of uncertainty also hit. I never knew when I'd be gone. What if I'd be truly gone? And they finally took my place? Not even Ama or Lia would realize because look how far they'd come pretending to be me.

I shuddered at the thought, better continue cleaning my room than going truly crazy from the what ifs. Ever since I found that note, I had been looking for others. If this thing really existed, they must have left other clues. Strangely, I hadn't found any. Everything here was familiar, I knew I'd seen them before. My books, my notes, the stationery, generic meds for when I felt under the weather, folders of excel sheets and receipts—wait, I remembered that one sticky note telling me to recheck the formula.

I flipped through the neatly arranged sheets—oh, there's one. And there were others scattered throughout the plastic sheets of the folder. There were some scribbles on the charts and files as well. I frowned, clearly remembering all these, but at the same time they felt like a distant memory, like a long time had passed. I collected some of the notes from the folder and compared the handwriting to that short letter I found.

It's the same entity.

They might pass as my own handwriting, but if one looked closely, this one was slightly slanted.

I leaned back on my chair, creating distance between myself and all the notes.

Why had I never noticed these before?

My hands covered my whole face, putting pressure on it. I wanted to sink down a hole and escape from whatever this was.

I turned on my laptop and went to Google. Then I froze. What should I type into the search bar? My fingers wriggled, but they never touched the keyboard. As much as I was curious, something like typing the things that bothered our mind was like acknowledging that it existed. I feared I would be faced with the truth. So it's better to not know, right?

What a bull. I knew it would hunt me down to whatever end of the earth I ran to. There's no other way to face this other than head on. So I sat on the bed, at half past midnight, when the only person awake was me. There's not even a stray cat wandering around the street. I look straight ahead, eyes fixed on my wardrobe.

I took a deep breath. "Who are you." It sounded more like a demand than a question.

No answer. Only the steady hum of the AC was heard. I cleared my throat and repeated, emphasizing every word, "Who are you."

My eyes roamed around the room, like expecting some apparition to float around. It's still just me and the silence of the room. There was not even a single answer. I was starting to feel stupid. And there's something else beginning to form in my chest: anger.

I repeated the question one more time, there's still no reply, and that's it. "Why the heck did you appear when I didn't want you to, but didn't when I wanted you to? This is such a joke."

I balled up my fist and punched the light switch off, heading straight to bed, feeling like an absolute idiot.

"What would you do if I were crazy?" I asked Ama out of the blue one day. We're all eating lunch together during our break. It's been a (not so) peaceful month without any crazy voices or loss of time. Honestly, the uncertainty of whether I could keep being myself was slowly eating me alive, and my 'research'—which consisted of late night Googling—only made it worse. I felt like everything it said were true, that I had someone else living inside my head, interacting

with the people around me, eating things and doing things I might not want to, even picking fights, all without me being aware and able to control. If that's not the case, then Google said I had an irreversible brain condition, and I'd ultimately lose myself and become totally dependent on full-time care. If that's not it, Google said I needed to consult a physician ASAP.

The more I read, the more scared I got, the higher the anxiety, and it took a toll on my body. I was constantly tired, I got so little sleep, and when I wanted to, I feared I would wake up losing a chunk of time, not knowing what consequences were waiting for me.

"You?" Ama asked. I nodded. "You seemed normal to me."

"I know but what if I were crazy?"

"But you're not," Ama said, matter-of-factly, as if implying that would never ever happen.

"Will you take me to the mental hospital?" I asked again.

Saying that out loud sounded so weird. We as kids had always been joking about sending our friends to the mental hospital whenever they goofed around, acting 'crazy' for the sake of being funny, without knowing what even was categorized as craziness, what even was happening inside the institution. Now that I encountered a one-of-a-kind experience that might indicate having lost my mind, I had mixed feelings. I thought being admitted to the mental hospital was a tale from another universe that would never happen to me. Now, I was not so sure.

"Are you? Crazy?" Ama asked back.

I paused, poking at the bowl of half-finished noodles. Then I finally replied, "I don't know."

Ama looked at me, frowning, like she didn't believe me. She then looked at Lia, who was keeping every comment to herself, so as to not be rude because this conversation seemed to take a more serious turn.

"Don't talk nonsense, you're completely fine," Ama said, and her tone was final. Everything I said wouldn't change her mind. Did she dislike even the thought of me losing my mind?

Lia must have noticed my disappointed face once Ama left shortly after that.

“Don’t worry, you’re not,” she said, grinning.

“How do you know?” I asked, my tone glum.

“Well, you don’t look crazy,” she said. I shot her a ‘you don’t say’ look. She chuckled. “You talk to yourself sometimes, not that it always means we’re crazy because don’t we all talk to ourselves? Have you ever heard Ama mumbling things to herself so quietly? Maybe you got it from her.”

My eyes blinked twice. “I talk to myself?”

“You do. But not all the time. I talk to myself too because it helps me concentrate and focus. It’s motivating too, saying something to myself like, ‘you can do it, Lia!’ or, ‘it’s okay, Lia!’ you know?”

I nodded and forced a smile. “I... see...”

I never talked to myself; out loud, that was. The notion of voicing out our thoughts while doing something was so foreign to me, and I never understood people who did so. Need a thought be said out loud? Couldn’t they just keep it to themselves? What came out were sometimes just unintelligible mumbles that caused misunderstanding for others who heard them. Did they talk to me? What did they just say? And when we asked them these, they’d say it’s nothing. When they were indeed saying something to us and we ignored it, they might get upset because we’re not paying attention. It’s tiring.

But what Lia said bothered my mind. Me? Talking to myself?

The ball of anger began to grow inside my gut, spreading unpleasant heat all around. That was not me.

More than a month of sleep deprivation didn’t do the body any good. Everything was blinding—the sun when it’s day, the light when it’s night; everything was floating and wavy, like the mirage one saw in the middle of the desert; and keeping my focus was harder than ever. Every time my eyes blinked, the lids wanted to stay shut for a few seconds longer, and my brain was ready to lose consciousness, but I needed to stay awake to work.

The heat inside my body had been lingering for a few days, but it was mild and a few paracetamols could calm it down, at the same time reducing the headache that always came

along. However, it developed into an all-out high fever one morning, several hours after the shop opened, and unfortunately I couldn't stand for longer than five minutes anymore. My head was killing me and cold sweat damped my shirt. My face must appear ghastly pale that Ama banned me from coming downstairs and told me to never leave my room except for bathroom breaks. I didn't even know if I had the strength to walk to the bathroom.

Lia accompanied me to my room because Ama feared I would just pass out in the middle of the stairs and would hurt myself more. I lied down immediately, finding relief because my whole body was no longer upright and my bed's cushion felt heavenly. I could just sink in and sleep for as long as I wanted. Some moments later, Lia entered my room again to leave me extra medicine in case I needed any and two huge bottles of water.

"What were those for? I have a gallon here," I complained.

"You know Ama," she replied. "She even told me to check on you every hour."

"Tsk. You don't have to. I'll be fine."

"Yes, Ma'am!" She gave me a salute. "Please call me when you need something," she said as she closed the door.

I tried to sit up and felt the room whirled, so I steadied myself. After a while, only the sharp pain inside my head remained and I quickly gulped down two paracetamols. I really hoped whatever this was could subside soon.

Ara

I always felt this familiar heat. Probably more than the others.

I searched inside my mind and found that Nika had resided in her pod. I hoped she had a nice rest. Meanwhile, I should check the body.

Nika didn't shower this morning, I guessed it's because she knew if she did, she'd get sicker because the water was so cold. But it's not good to sleep without cleaning ourselves. I'd at least wipe the body with a damp cloth so when Nika woke up, she'd feel a bit refreshed.

I didn't think it's been that long since Nika fell asleep, so I'd better finish what I should do to let the body rest. Taking it slow was always good to make sure we didn't hurt ourselves and made us feel worse. Besides, it helped with reserving energy. So I took my time sitting up while making sure I take slow, deep breaths to prevent sudden rush of tornadoes inside my head and the blinding lights in my vision. One might think they could get used to headaches when they had had it so much, but I couldn't. It hurt a lot.

When I was sure I could hold myself up, I planted my feet on the ground and hoisted myself, then carefully walked to the wardrobe to take a new small towel. The walk to the bathroom was also slow but steady, making sure my feet stepped firmly on the floor to prevent slipping or anything harmful. After dipping the whole towel into the water, I wrung it half-dry and walked back to the room, not locking it to let Ama or Lia enter when they wanted to check on Nika.

The towel was cold so I held it for a moment, hoping the warmth of my hands would increase the temperature. Then I really made sure I wiped every inch of the body and had a change of clothes as the previous one was already sweaty. It was quite the challenge because everything seemed... floaty. I felt like I was suspended in the air, and the pain drummed loudly inside my head. This was close to the pain we felt when Hector forced himself to come out. I grimaced when I walked to my bed. Almost lost my balance there.

I put the towel on the hanger and the dirty clothes in the basket by the door. There's a small first-aid box inside one of the table's drawers and I took it out. I had always checked the stock whenever I came out: general meds, thermometer, band aids, a small bottle of alcohol, gauze, Betadine... oh, here's the fever patch. Everything else was untouched.

I made sure the patch adhered to my forehead well and went to sleep.

It was always confusion that I felt every time I became conscious.

And I was particularly disoriented one gloomy morning. It's been years... but that day remained crystal clear in my memory. The day I found out the cruel hand of fate: my appearance when Nika—this body, was almost seven.

I thought I was coming home from church when everything went dark and a moment later I woke up.... But strangely, I didn't remember anything else prior to that.

And I felt *terrible*. Every inch of my body hurt, I had a burning fever and my throat was dry and painful. My voice sounded like old shoes scraping against rough gravel, pins and needles stabbed the walls of my throat every time I swallowed.

I searched all over the house for some medicine, anything to treat my body, and thankfully there were some painkillers. Were the cabinets always this high?

When I felt well enough, I made a trip to the pharmacy.

The lady was taken aback when she saw me, but still asked what I needed, and I listed the drugs on top of my head: all the generic drugs I should restock at home; fever meds, cough, flu, diarrhea, muscle pain....

When it's time to pay, my heart dropped because I forgot to bring money.

"Ah... it's okay, Nika. I'll put the total under your mother or uncle's name. You go home," the lady told me.

Nika? I was confused, but still incredibly thankful for her understanding. I was really worried that she wouldn't give me any.

After I took all the meds that I needed, I headed to bed. The more the time passed, the worse I felt. I really hoped I could get better.

In my dream, I saw a young man beckoning me to a large round table in the middle of a garden. He was tall, thin, and he wore black-rimmed glasses. Half of his shoulder-length hair was tied into a bun. I was unsure because he also looked unsure, but I still approached him nonetheless.

“Do you know where this is?” he asked after I sat on the stone chair, two seats beside him.

I shook my head. “Someone’s garden?”

“This is a mind space,” he said.

I frowned and looked around. This garden was inside such an enormous and bright glass dome, and the stone tables and chairs were right at the center of it. There were stone steps branching out of the center, some leading to small openings, some to areas obscured by trees and flower bushes.

“What’s a mind space?” I asked him.

“Uhm... I think this is how we visualize our mind.”

I nodded. “But who are you?” I asked him. “I didn’t think we’d met before. Do we know each other? How are we inside the same dream?”

He was deep in thought for a while, and I patiently waited for his reply while admiring the elaborate garden around me. Some flowers I knew, some were unfamiliar, but they all were incredibly beautiful. The bright variation of colors blend so well with the greenery and the earth; every single corner could be shot and framed, and people would think it’s a painting.

The young man cleared his throat, pulling my attention back to him.

“Actually... you’re not dreaming,” he paused, watching my reaction. “Do you remember who you are?” he asked.

I blinked. Once. Twice. “I’m...”

My lips remained open, but nothing came out. I couldn’t find anything inside my memory. I couldn’t remember anything. Who was I? Where was I before this?

“I bought some medicine at the pharmacy...” I trailed off. That’s the last thing I did before going back to sleep.

“Do you remember anything before that?” he asked calmly. His voice was always calm and collected.

“I was on my way back from church...”

He seemed a bit surprised. "Anything else?"

I searched my head, nothing came up. "No..." My heart beat faster. "What is happening to me?"

He shot a pitying look, but at the same time understanding. His eyes were glossy with held-back tears when he looked around the garden. "I've been here for almost two years."

I gasped. "Are you trapped? How can one be trapped in a dream?" I thought of several possibilities, then one thing popped into my head. "Are we in a coma? Together?"

He shook his head. "I don't really understand it myself either, but it's not like I'm completely trapped here. I can wake up, and when I do, I'm not... me. I mean, I don't appear like this in the outside world," he said while pointing at his face and body.

The creases between my brows must have gotten deeper, and I felt like crying. "What's going to happen to me now? Can I get out of this?"

He brushed the stray baby hairs away from his face with his fingers, and his hand settled on the nape of his neck, massaging it. He was thinking for such a long time, and from the look of his face, there was not an ounce of good news.

"I don't know," he finally said, his head hung low.

I broke down.

That's when I first met Egon, the second resident of this body aside from Nika. There was a little girl hiding deep inside the garden; she was the third. I was the fourth.

Nika

The sound of Lia hustling and bustling woke me up, even though she tried her best to stay quiet. She must have come to check on me, or refill my drink, or give me my food, or whatever Ama asked her to.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” she sent an apologetic smile. “I’m just picking up your dirty clothes.”

“What—” my voice croaked. I cleared the lump inside my throat and continued, “What about the shop?”

“The shop? We’re closed. It’s already half past nine,” she said.

The surprise completely woke me up. Exactly how long had I been asleep? My heart beat so fast and it caused painful throbs in my head. I quickly checked my phone and was relieved it’s still the same day. Damn but I slept for the whole of it. Could I even sleep through the night now?

I followed Lia’s movement and she picked up an empty bowl from my table.

“Ooh, you finished it. Good job,” she praised me.

I was puzzled. “Did you bring that up? What was that? Noodles?”

“Of course, it’d be ridiculous if we gave you rice,” she chuckled.

I scoffed. “But I didn’t eat it.”

“Huh? Then who did? Are you sleep-eating?” Lia joked, not taking me seriously. “Ah, you must have eaten it when you’re half-asleep, our noodles were so fragrant it woke your body up but not your mind.”

I was too baffled to let out any reply. My stomach indeed didn’t feel any discomfort; the needles and pins that always prickled my gut and my back whenever I was late into my meals didn’t show up. My fever now felt like lukewarm water in a bucket left outside during sunset. I reached into my forehead and felt a rectangular patch, its minty sensation had dissipated completely. What’s left was my stubborn headache.

“Did you put this patch on my forehead?”

“No, it’s probably Ama who did. She checked up on you during the break.”

I nodded. That’s believable. For what I knew I was out so cold that I couldn’t even possibly stick it myself. I thanked Lia as she exited the room.

An unpleasant swirl of confusion still lingered at the back of my mind, however. I never woke up to eat, drink—I looked down and found a new set of clothes on me—oh God, I didn’t even change the clothes myself. Ama’s small frame could never lift my towering unconscious body and help me change, let alone Lia.

The rapid drumming of my heart made my headache so much worse, and I could feel another wave of fever coming. Now the feeling of worry was so prominent that it brought tears to my eyes. And my blood was boiling.

“Tsk. You weak thing.”

I jumped. The voice boomed in my ears, one that originated inside my head. I looked around my room and caught myself thinking that’s impossible. Apek said this whole house was clean. And that note clearly stated they’re not ghosts.

My heart was erratic, and it was hard to breathe, like the oxygen inside the room suddenly depleted. Trails of tears formed on my cheeks. “Who-who are you?”

“Why does every little thing make you upset? Such sheltered brat.” The voice was deep and it left a low hum of bass even when it finished talking.

I checked the entirety of my head, searching in vain for any bumps or cavities. Tears blurred my vision, and I blinked hard to let them all fall. This couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be—

“What’s the use of crying? Little brat, lemme tell you, why don’t you just suck it up and face the truth? Do me a favor here. I missed eating that damn KFC and you won’t let me. Just go back to your stupid pod and be miserable there.”

I gripped my head and screamed, “NO! NO! Go away!”

The voice continued its relentless boom inside my head. *“Don’t be such a wuss.”*

I was hysterical by now, and Ama and Lia must have heard me. They came running into my room, face pale and eyes wide. I buried my head into Ama's embrace and cried and cried. I screamed incoherently to make 'it' go away.

Ama waved her hand frantically into the air, shooing the invisible. "There, there! It's gone! Aiyooo... who dared hurt my granddaughter! Go away! Shoo, shoo!"

I continued sobbing. It was really painful here in my heart, and all the stress I'd been holding in had erupted into uncontrollable tears and wail.

Ama never let me go and she continued stroking my hair gently. She uttered threats for those who wanted to hurt or disturb me, and then spoke words of comfort. The soft cradle of her arms finally brought me to sleep.

Egon

“YOU BRUTE!! Look at what you’ve done!” I yelled.

My feet stomped the steps leading to the central table. I looked back past the lines of bamboo trees to the clearing at the end; Nika’s pod was closely shut. Ara stood beside it, worried.

“How many times have I told you not to fuck with her?” I hissed between my teeth, my blood was accumulating at the top of my head.

A pair of dark eyes looked back into mine, challenging me. His thick eyebrows raised and he showed the smuggest face I’d ever seen. I swear if I could claw that expression off his face—

“Calm down, slick. I just gave her a tiny push,” he replied. The smirk never left his face. “Nothing harmful.”

“A tiny push.” I threw my hands into the air. “To the canyon!!!”

I paced the area several times, thinking of ways to make things right, to have things go back to the way it used to be. I couldn’t find any.

“Give it up. It was all ruined when you told her to stop that time,” he said, his tone evidently accusing me.

“You want to lose a hand? You want to go through that pain? Huh?” I confronted him. Was he being serious right now? Did I need to spell everything out for him to understand? “You moron.”

He stood up that instant, looming far above me, a two-meter tower of muscle and arrogance and unfortunately, pea brain.

“What did you just call me?” his low voice reverberated within the dome.

I craned my neck to stare at him, unblinking. I never flinched in front of him, and I never would. He didn’t scare me. No matter what I did, he always thought I was challenging him anyways.

Hurried steps were heard behind me and it reached us in no time.

“Stop it, you guys.” Ara stood in the middle of us, gently pushing me backwards. “Sit down, Hector.”

The brute sat down, didn’t even break eye contact with me. As much as I wanted to keep fixing my threatening look towards him, it’s tiring. I looked away, letting out a huge exasperated sigh.

He chuckled, as if he’d won.

“There was never a battle in the first place.” Ara spelled out the truth for him. It’s my turn to let out a satisfied small laugh. Hector rolled his eyes and looked the other way.

I circled the table and sat down at the opposite end of him, while Ara sat beside the brute. We really needed to talk about what’s next now that Hector had made things worse.

I sighed. “Who will take over the body tomorrow? If Nika’s still inside her pod, that is,” I threw the question on the table, and immediately cut off Hector when he’s about to say something. “Not you.”

“What authority do you have? You own this body?” he raised his voice. There’s a sheen of sweat on his hairline, which always appeared whenever he’s upset.

“I know what’s best for us, and that’s certainly not you and your pea brain. Remember the one million that you turned to ashes in that gym membership? That’s our money in case there’s an emergency.” I raised my forefinger and pointed at him, stabbing into his direction, imagining a real sword that’s in my hand. “Aren’t you glad I’m wiser in finances?”

“Fuck off. Don’t keep bringing that up.” Hector pouted. I knew the gym card could always make him feel guilty, and I will keep using it till there’s another major mistake he made.

Ara put her hand on Hector’s impossibly muscular arm, calming him down. I still couldn’t comprehend how his arm was almost the same size as Ara’s head. It’s a ridiculous sight.

“I’ll take over tomorrow. The body’s still sick,” Ara said, sympathetically. But she then managed to form a small smile, which could always send a wave of relief to us. “You guys know I’m the best at taking care of the body.”

“That’s true, unlike a certain someone,” I said, deliberately in a louder voice while looking towards the general area where Hector was sitting, never directly at him.

“You little—” Hector balled up his fist.

“Stop it, Egon,” Ara told me. I cackled, it’s so fun teasing him. Perhaps that’s one of the only entertainments I got here.

“Anyways, Hector, I think it’s best for you to stay put right now. You’ve felt the defense Nika put up when you went near her consciousness, right?” Ara made sure Hector paid full attention to what she’s saying, and waited until he gave a nod, acknowledging the facts she said. “We don’t want her to despise us more, even though she hasn’t fully understood this condition yet. Think back on the first time you came to this garden and spotted us.”

“Heh, he’s a little deer caught in headlights,” I chuckled. Hector shot me death daggers. “Weren’t you, Bambi?”

“Say one more sentence and I’ll cut that stupid roll of a bun off the top of your head,” Hector threatened.

I lifted both my hands up, feigning defeat. “Okay, okay. Don’t touch my bun.”

Ara looked exhausted, but she’s used to our little... exchange, I’d say.

“You got it, Hector? Give Nika a little more time, that’s the best we can do right now. Her breaking down only leads to the body breaking down, like these past few weeks. We’ve got to let the body heal first, then we’ll start to introduce ourselves gradually from there,” Ara explained.

“Okay,” Hector replied in such an unbelievably gentle tone that absolutely didn’t fit his appearance, a tone he only used to reply to Ara.

“Got it, Hector?” I asked him, repeating after Ara.

“Shut up.” His tone a sharp prickle headed in my direction.

I rolled my eyes and Ara laughed.

Nika

I woke up at the first ring of my alarm. It's, as always, 03.30 a.m..

My heart dropped when I saw the date. I had lost two days. The last thing I remembered was that horrible voice echoing in my head, and Ama came running into my room. I quickly sat up, and felt around my body, expecting bullet holes or injuries or anything out of the ordinary—of course there's none. My body wasn't in any pain, and the fever's gone, I was back to normal. My clothes were clean, my hair was washed, heck, my room seemed untouched. Everything was *normal*. But the dates couldn't fool me.

I ran down the stairs and saw that Ama was on her way to the first floor. She heard the loud steps and was looking for the source of the sound.

"Nika! Don't run!" she told me, meeting me on the landing of the second floor. "You'll slip and fall."

"Ama I can't remember the past two days, what have I been doing?" I blurted out everything in one exhale of a breath.

Ama looked at me, concerned. "Wha—"

It took a lot of me to hold back my tears. The dread I felt was still fresh, like it'd happened just last night.

"You don't remember anything at all?" Ama asked, her eyebrows curled in a worry.

I shook my head. If I opened my mouth at this moment, I'd break down and wouldn't stop. Ama sat me down on the nearby sofa, and called for Lia, who's still upstairs, to bring a glass of water.

"Do you still feel unwell?" Ama asked me. I shook my head.

Lia came down the stairs carrying a bottle of water. At least it could wash down the lump that's ready to transform into a cry, and I could speak though my voice was still shaky.

I listened to Ama's description of what I'd been doing the past two days, which was... nothing. She told me to just rest in my room, so I did, she said. She told me to eat everything she brought, and I did finish everything, even the porridge, she said. One alarm in my head

blared. And she said I was no longer upset, it's as if whatever frightened me the previous night was no longer here.

"Budi came here to check, and there's nothing," Ama said.

"Did I talk to him?" I asked. "How did I sound? What did we talk about?"

"You did. But it's just like how you always talk to him."

"But I don't remember talking to anyone..."

Ama ran her hand along my back, warm strokes yet not comforting enough to ease my jumbled mind. I fumbled at the hem of my shirt, twisting and twirling it until it was a wrinkled mess. Who did Apek talk to? I knew it wasn't me. What demon possessed me that it could perfectly impersonate me?

"Rest for one more day, Nika," Ama said, tucking short stray hairs behind my ear.

"No, I'm okay now. I feel fine. I should work. Or else..." I trailed off. Admitting it sounded like defeat, but I needed help from Ama and Lia. "I'm afraid I'll lose myself when I'm alone."

Ama was a statue for a few moments, but sprung back into motion and tightly hugged me. "Don't worry! Whatever that was won't ever come back, they're all afraid of this mighty woman," she said, pointing to herself. "Don't you worry."

I let out a sad chuckle. I wanted to believe that. I truly did.

The day went on without a hitch; very smoothly I should say. Work went well, it's like I was oiling the cogs of my performance while I was 'resting.' Not a mistake was made, and all the customers went home happy and satiated. Nothing was out of place.

And this continued on for a week.

I had told Ama and Lia to check on my awareness, if I had forgotten anything or if I seemed out of it. I was always aware.

At night I took the lowest dose of melatonin to help me sleep, and it really helped me get drowsy; a good first step to have a full night's sleep. I didn't think I could voluntarily go to bed after that incident. I didn't think I could get sleepy and stay asleep. Sometimes I didn't want to, fearing I'd wake up days later with no memory of what I'd been doing.

Twenty minutes had passed since I took a pill of melatonin, and my eyelids were getting heavier, a sign that the drug was working. I chose to take it because it seemed lighter than any other sleeping pills. Indeed it was different, as in it wouldn't totally knock me out cold several minutes after I took it. My brain was still actively working, but melatonin sent weight on both my eyes, leaving me no choice but to close them, and before I knew it, I was deep in a dreamless sleep.

But tonight I was dreaming. At least I thought I was in a dream.

I dreamed that I was walking on a stone path, barefoot; I couldn't see where it led to yet. Around me I saw beautiful flower bushes and trees, and they were all trimmed to perfect shapes as there were neither stray branches nor yellow dying leaves, and the soil was clean; not one little piece of trash was in sight. The cool wind brushed gently on my hair, and I could smell a faint fragrance of sweet tea it brought along. There was also the smell of freshly cut grass that I liked, the smell of greenery.

I looked up, and I saw a clear glass encasing the whole space, like a giant dome; it reached far into the back and far into the horizon beyond me, and it somehow sparkled. The sunlight could completely penetrate through, but strangely it didn't hurt my eyes even when I stared at the blue sky for a long time. The only sound I heard was the crisp rustle of green leaves, sounding like a light trickle of rain on a vinyl raincoat. It was peaceful, and I believe if one stayed here longer, it could heal their soul.

The long curvy track of the stone steps led to a huge round table, also made of the same light-colored stone. Around the circular table were stone chairs, which looked more like a heavy stool and I didn't think anyone could move them. I sat on one of the stools, admiring my surroundings. This looked like the central area of this enormous garden, and there were trails of stone steps branching out, and if one could see from right above, it looked like a picture of the sun with its rays, all made out of light stones. It was breathtaking.

At the small corner within my perspective, I noticed a slight movement, along with the sounds of soles grazing against the stone surface. A dark brown hair then peeked out from behind a large tree, and it hid again when I noticed, as if startled I could see them. Murmurs from several voices were heard, and I couldn't make out what they're saying.

"Uhm... hello?" I called, a bit unsure. What if they're dangerous? Ah, I wouldn't be hurt in a dream anyway. Maybe scared, but not hurt.

There were further furious discussions behind the tree, and finally someone walked out: a woman in her, I think, mid-30s, who looked like a fairy living in a splendid garden like this. She was graceful in every step she took. I couldn't quite place it... but she radiated a kind and gentle energy that's calming and accepting. Her expression was cautious, as if unsure, but she hid it well beneath the small smile she had put on. Whispers were heard behind her but she paid no mind and continued walking towards me.

I forced an awkward smile, thinking I was going to be alone here. But, oh, well.

"Hi," she greeted me, her voice was like a soft bell chime. "Can I sit with you?"

I smiled back. "Sure, go ahead."

She was wearing a flowy white dress and had French-braided her long brown hair. Her eyes emitted kindness and undivided attention to whomever was speaking in front of her, and the smile never left her face. She's a bit on the chubbier side, but that only made the curve of her body more defined, and the dress made her look like a goddess. In short, she's gorgeous.

"Is it your first time here?" she asked.

I was brought back from my reverie. "Uh, yeah, I think so. I've never been here before, but it somehow feels familiar." Then I remembered something. "Wait, I thought this is inside my dream?" I looked around. Everything seemed both real and dreamy at the same time. I had never seen anything like this in the real world, at least not yet. Perhaps there was a similar garden somewhere outside of the country.

"Not exactly.... This is your mind space," she paused, confirming that I was still utterly confused, then continued, "This is how you visualize your mind to be."

"So I created this?" I asked, my eyes wide, and I was smiling because I was excited. She nodded.

I looked at the glass dome, and the bushes, and the trees.... I made this? Even the gentle breeze and the bright yet cool sunlight? I couldn't believe it. Perhaps those fantasy books I had read over the years fueled my imagination. I guessed everything was possible inside one's mind.

I turned my head to her. "And you live here? But who are you?"

She seemed to hesitate for a moment. “My name is Araceli. You can call me Ara. And yes, I live here,” she paused, again with hesitation. There seemed to be an ongoing conflict within her, and she finally continued, “Along with some others.”

I was stunned. Confusion still clouded my mind, but now there’s that familiar unpleasant tug. If this is a space inside my mind that I created... and there are others living here....

The smile disappeared from my face. I knew what she’s talking about.

I stood up that instant, looking around frantically for a way out. Ara calmed me down, repeating that she wouldn’t hurt me, that it’s fine if I was still confused. She took my hand and convinced me to sit back down, and I instinctively slapped her hand away. I needed to get out of here.

Then several footsteps came running towards us. A tall man... and right behind him, a much, much, taller, powerfully-built man.

They must have noticed that I was beyond scared, so they stopped at their tracks that instant, far enough to give me space. Well... it’s more of that first tall man spreading his arm to stop the monstrous muscle man.

“We’re sorry, we meant no harm,” the first man spoke, both his arms were put in front of him, a gesture of calming one down.

I gasped. I recognized his voice because I’d heard it several times in my head, but I was too stunned to speak. It’s like my fear had blocked my airways, making it impossible to speak and hard to breathe.

He noticed my surprise, knowing I remembered his voice. “Yes, I am Egon, and I have spoken to you several times. Please, we meant no harm,” he said. His gentle tone put me somewhat at ease, but the horrible feeling easily overpowered it. I really wanted to get out of here.

The loud sigh of the big man behind him startled me. He had on his scary face, like he detested everything that’s unfolding before him.

“Don’t baby her.” His deep voice boomed, sending waves of terror towards me, awakening the absolute distress I felt the night I went hysterical, and that’s it.

I turned the opposite way and ran away. I ran as fast as I could, cutting through the bushes, the lines of trees, down the hill. I kept on running and running, never once looking back for the fear of finding that man chasing me.

I needed to get out of here.

I ran and ran, then the trees around me blurred into a tunnel. I could see the light at the end. I ignored the burn in my legs and my lungs, and I ran as fast as I could, piercing into the light.

My body jolted awake, like it had been electrified, making my heart race and dampening my skin with sweat. My lungs fought for oxygen, and no matter how hard I breathed, it never seemed enough. There's this feeling of dread that wouldn't go away. I rubbed my face then realized I'd been crying.

I snatched my phone from the bedside table. It's two in the morning. I lay back down.

What was that? A nightmare?

My heart never calmed down, and the dread in my gut was making me nauseous. It felt so real. I could finally put a face to the voice—if that's really their faces. I didn't even know if they're completely real.

I couldn't believe I was lured by that kind-looking woman. For all I know, she could be on the same page as the two men, wanting to drive me crazy, perhaps even planning to trap me inside that garden forever. I was lucky I could get out.

I spent the rest of the one and a half hours Googling whatever came to mind: possessions, hallucinations, stress-induced illusions, other entities residing in one's body... then my morning alarm rang.

I slowly sat up, my body felt much heavier than usual. The nauseous dread never went away. And Google said I was crazy.

Ara

I thought revealing myself to Nika was a much better idea than letting one of the two guys see her. I didn't even understand why we should even debate about it in the first place. If I were Nika, I'd of course want another woman to explain all this... absurdity to me. It was perplexing enough to be in a peculiar new place; added by being here with the presence of a man? She'd freak out. That much they should already know.

So I just stepped forward, ignoring the reasons Egon was sputtering to convince me that it's better for him to meet Nika. As for Hector, he just wanted to mess with her, compromising the already fragile tightrope we'd been hobbling on. He's totally out of the equation.

"Ara, oh, shit, Ara!" I could hear Egon's agitated whisper behind me as I walked towards Nika, ignoring him completely.

I was careful not to drop the bomb the first time Nika was conscious enough to roam around her own mind space and realize that she wasn't alone. But somehow our conversation led us there. Were there some other ways to convey this information to her? There were, but I never thought the day when Nika would sit at the central table would come. We were all in a crisis at that moment, one that we didn't prepare for.

Then it happened; Nika thought the worst of us, downright refusing to listen to whatever we had to say, and she was out of the mind space that instant.

My hand stung from when she struck it, but my heart ached more. It shouldn't have happened this way. I was devastated that Nika felt apprehensive towards us. She shouldn't have felt that way. We only wanted the best for her, for this body that we shared. We were planning to keep on doing what we had been doing for years: go unnoticed. How much longer could we go unnoticed?

"Are you okay?" Egon asked.

I nodded, never taking my eyes off the point where Nika vanished. "I hope she's okay..."

She wasn't.

It's been three days since, and cumulatively the body only slept for five and a half hours. It was ceasing to function as it was never made for long hours of staying awake. Ama finally ordered Nika to have a bed rest, and that's when she finally resided in her pod after taking a sleeping pill.

I woke up at noon the next day, groggy and feeling absolutely horrible. The gastric pain was nasty, making me continuously feel gassy and nauseous; my eyes were heavy and watery, and I felt like I was constantly floating. There was a warm bowl of pork porridge on my bedside table and two huge bottles of water. Lia must have brought that in not too long ago. I'd better eat so I could take some meds.

I felt sorry for both Ama and Lia. They must have been worried sick, confused as to why Nika kept on falling ill and seemed to get worse day by day. I think deep down they had speculations. I knew Ama didn't want to even consider the option of taking her to see the psychiatrist because she believed that was like admitting Nika was crazy. We couldn't blame her as that's what she understood for so long: psychiatrist meant insanity, or at least overreacting. And we also understood that Ama chose to go on the supernatural path instead. When Ama said she would open the shop a little bit later, that meant she went to the Confucian shaman somewhere in the city. She went home a few hours later, carrying with her various flowers and herbs to put on the bathing water, Chinese paper charms that needed to be burned and their ashes diluted in water for Nika to drink later, and more paper charms to replace the old ones above our doors and windows.

I didn't know if it would work—frankly, I didn't think it ever worked because the root of Nika's health problem was not supernatural, it's mental. We didn't blame Ama for her actions because that's the only way she knew how to deal with unknown causes. At least the things she brought home from the shaman didn't make things worse. I was actually glad if it could at least provide Ama and Nika a peace of mind.

Now I should take over and nurse this body back to health so they would stop worrying, after all that's what I'd been doing for years.

Nika

I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was the sky—the bright blue, cloudless kind yet it didn't bring tears to my eyes.

The only sky that could do that was inside that place.

I gathered my thoughts. This couldn't be my room. So it should be that place.

The more I looked at the sky, I realized that there was a clear thin glass several centimeters above me, and it slid open the moment I touched it. What...?

I sat up, greeted by a gentle breeze that smelled of freshly cut grass, caressing my hair and tickling my cheeks. Around me were various flower bushes in every shape and form, and behind them were bamboo trees that formed a circular, tall, private fence. Right in front of me were stone steps that led to somewhere I couldn't see, and the trail was lined with similar bamboo trees.

I stepped down from my bed—only to find out it's not exactly a bed. It's more like... a capsule bed of some sort, like those in sci-fi movies, or the trending capsule hotels in big cities. This capsule also looked like it came from the future, kind of ill-suited to be put in a traditional and natural garden like this.

I sighed. I knew where this trail led to, but I still decided to walk along it anyway. Where else could I go? The only way out was through. I was just hoping I wouldn't encounter... other people.

As I was walking, the gentle wind and the faint smell of tea helped calm me down, and I could see a clearing up front. This was it. I arrived at the end of the bamboo forest, and saw a long, brown braid, its owner's back facing me. She didn't know I was here yet.

I looked around, this woman was alone and I breathed a sigh of relief.

It seemed she had heard my sigh and instinctively turned her head. Her eyes went large, eyebrows raised, and she began to stutter, totally taken aback, not expecting my being here.

"N-Nika? Oh, you're here. Uh—"

She looked around, making sure no one was there with us. When it's confirmed that we're alone, she gestured for me to sit on the chair beside her. I left two stone chairs empty and sat down.

"I thought you'd still be asleep," she said after an awkward moment filled with silence.

"That's where I go every time I sleep?" I asked, skepticism never left my voice.

"Yes..." she sounded like she still had more to say, and I waited. She gave up and continued, "That's like your, uhm... living space? We... each have one. Some are in the form of little huts, or tents, or just a single bed. Only yours is in the form of a capsule. We all call it the pod."

I didn't respond to her. My brain still couldn't comprehend any of this.

"So we're all living together here?" I asked.

"Y—"

"Where are the others then?"

"Uhm... they usually just stay in their respective spaces."

I gritted my teeth, and it felt hot inside my chest, one that reached my head. "What are you all?" I said, never looking her way.

She was silent for a long time, and from the corner of my eyes, I could see she's hastily wiping her face, hiding the obvious fact that she was crying.

Footsteps were heard approaching us, and I stood up, alert.

An enormous shadow loomed over, as if the black cloud was here to warn us about the incoming rainstorm. But it's a storm in the form of a man, one that was so huge and muscular. It's that Herculean rude prick.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" His tone was disgustingly light, and a cocky lopsided grin was plastered on his square face. Both his hands were moving about in front of his chest, as if he's preparing for a fight.

I stepped back, creating a space as wide as possible between us, my eyes never leaving him. I was afraid if I blinked for even a split second, he'd leap into my direction and beat me mercilessly.

“Hector, stop right there,” the woman—I think her name was Ara—warned. The dude stopped on his tracks, his smile never disappeared. I felt like I could pee my pants that very second, but I somehow managed to appear braver than I was. My heart already sank to my gut a long time ago.

“To what do we owe the honor of your presence, Your Highness?” he said. When I didn’t show any intention of answering, he continued, “It’s such a once-in-a-blue-moon occasion to see you standing here at the table of the peasants. Never thought this day would come! Will it rain pigs tomorrow? Oh, dear, that’ll be a splendid sight to see.”

Only the sound of his excited claps echoed, followed by his loud laugh. Nothing’s funny.

I wanted to claw at his damn face.

“Stop it, Hector,” Ara said, then she turned to me. “I’m sorry. He, uhm, he doesn’t mean it.”

“Oh, I do. I most absolutely do. Nika, Her Majesty, could now lower herself enough to reach the world of the unlucky. I appreciate it.” Hector clasped his palms together, like he’s being grateful, but his eyes said otherwise. Everybody could recognize the detest in his eyes without a doubt.

He hated me, so what? The feeling’s mutual.

“Tell me how to get out of here,” I told Ara. I needed to escape before Hercules right here did something to me.

Ara glanced at Hector, then turned to her left. “There’s a steel gate at the end of this trail, step outside and you’ll soon wake up.”

“Is it locked?” I asked.

“No. It’s always unlocked for you,” Ara said. I didn’t know if it meant anything, and I didn’t ask her because I speed-walked away from them that instant, not looking back.

I wouldn’t run because that made me look like I’m scared, and I wanted to show Hercules—Hector—that I was not.

The trail was longer than the one leading to my pod, but I could see the shining metal at the far end, and beyond that, a shadow of a person who was also approaching the gate. Perhaps it was my own reflection from whatever portal it led to.

The gate was tall; it was made of thin steel, and the spaces were wide enough to let a cat in. There was no latch, let alone a lock, and beyond it... the shadow who turned out to be the man who always introduced himself as Egon. I stopped. My heart was frantic.

He also stopped; his face grim. He looked at me, then looked at the ground. I heard him sigh and he pushed the gate open, leaving it ajar for me to walk out. One, two, three, steps, and he kept on looking at the ground, passing by me, walking away without saying a word.

I looked at his back, confused. Why didn't he say anything?

Ah, I had no time to dwell on it.

I passed the gates, and when I had stepped to the other side, it automatically closed. I kept on walking and walking. The bushes were scarce now, and the light was dimmer. Ahead of me was a large screen, like those in the cinemas, and it was showing a familiar counter. My cooking counter at the shop. The closer I got, the clearer the image, and there's a voice I also recognized. Ama's voice, and she's calling my name a few times.

I was so close to the screen now, and when I lifted my hand to touch, I was transported into it. It's like the screen had zoomed in so large that it disappeared into my eyes, and the image it showed became my vision.

I blinked a few times, disoriented. I blinked and blinked.

"Nika, two bowls of dried noodles! Did you hear me?" Ama yelled close to my ear. I jumped, clutching the ear because I was afraid it would fall off.

"Ah, Ama! I heard you the first time!" I complained.

"You spaced out like your soul went somewhere! Quick, they are waiting."

My body rode a familiar rhythm of preparing and cooking noodles, seasoning and plating them. And as I was working, a thought heavily weighed my mind: I did go somewhere. And that guy Egon was just here. He returned to that somewhere, and I took over.

THREE

THE RESISTANCE

Nika

The charms never worked.

I had drunk several glasses of ash water, gagging from the burnt smell and the bits of burnt paper—I still woke up in that garden.

Ama had put folded paper charms and herbs and something else inside a tiny cotton envelope, and she slipped it under my pillow—I still heard their voices.

I bathed in cold water every day, and floating on it were several types of herbs, leaves and flowers—I still lost chunks of days.

All of that didn't work, and I stopped using them altogether. I felt bad that Ama had spent her time and some money on visiting the shaman and buying those things, but they're all useless. Why should we keep on using something when it's of no use?

Ama understood and she could see that I was not improving, but she'd like to try one last thing: bringing me to the shaman herself. All this time it's like secondhand treatment, like going to the doctor without the patient even present. She knew this was the last resort because I never wanted to face a shaman. I feared they would speak of things I didn't want to know, and I always assumed they only spoke in a general manner, hitting where it's close to the target, but never spot on—it's no use. Also seeing how nothing they had done worked, I could just visit them to give Ama a peace of mind. When her supernatural things didn't work, maybe I could persuade her to allow me to see a psychiatrist...

So here I was, sitting on a creaky rattan stool that's probably older than myself, waiting for the shaman to get possessed by I-didn't-know-what-spirit. He was sitting across from us, with his back facing us. A long table was placed in front of us, perhaps separating the mystic and the earthlings; that made me feel a little bit better, having something tangible between us. I glanced at Ama, who was sitting beside me, and she could sense my unease as she held my hand tight. The sharp fragrance of the incense was overwhelming, and its undying flame painted thin,

white curls of smoke into the air. I thought I'd get used to smelling it living beside a Confucian temple, apparently I was not.

My heart kept pumping so fast that my palms got sweaty, so I looked everywhere except at the person in front of me to distract myself. When people passed by this shaman's place, they'd thought it's just a regular house, except for the bright red accents: red streaks of paint, red altar in its yard, red Chinese decorations... it's like every day is Chinese New Year here.

This shaman was a good friend of Apek as they grew up together in a village that I forgot its name. This friend came from generations of shamans, and he, too, was blessed with the power of prophecy and healing—at least for those who believed him. Perhaps because Apek had been hanging out with him for decades, a teeny-tiny bit of the power splashed onto Apek. I'd ask him when I came home later.

The wooden floor beneath me began to shake, and I thought there was a mini earthquake, but I scratched it out as it never happened here in Kalimantan island, so perhaps it's just a heavy truck passing by. But the motion came from the shaman who was stomping rapidly on the floor with his one foot; he kept on doing that and his head bobbed unnaturally, mouthing soundless gibberish.

I shivered, not because I sensed a spirit was coming, but his movement was so bizarre and honestly creepy. I wanted to get out of here as soon as I could, but Ama tightly held my hand so I couldn't escape. She was calm as she had witnessed this procession countless times; but I wasn't. I never tagged along when she said she'd visit the shaman, and she never asked because she knew I'd be uncomfortable. The procession felt never-ending, and when it had become unbearable, he finally stopped; his head hung low. The air was still around us.

"Why did you come, child?" a low, guttural sound slipped out his thin lips, and he didn't lift up his head. I swear he didn't sound like that when he's... him.

I glanced at Ama, and she answered in my stead, "*Pek Kong Kong*, we came here to seek help in healing my granddaughter."

"This one, is it not?" he pointed at me.

"Yes," Ama replied.

The shaman turned silent and didn't move an inch. He was so still, like a statue, and if it's not because of the steady rising and falling of his shoulders, I would've thought he didn't breathe at all.

His head suddenly lifted up, facing straight at the altar, at the golden statue of a certain god with a long beard and elaborate traditional garments.

"Something is inside," he said.

I held my breath. I was sure Ama could feel the pulse in my veins even through my shirt.

"Is it a bad one?" Ama asked.

He cocked his head sideways, as if looking for something between the spaces in the altar with his eyes still shut. I really disliked the possibility of the god looking around and inside my head. Was that even possible?

"There are a lot of them, that's making her unwell. If you don't get them out, her body won't be able to hold on for long."

I gritted my teeth, feeling my heart sink, and disliking the fact that whatever he said sounded like a final sentence. Was he telling the truth?

"Are they all bad spirits?" Ama asked, and I was amazed at her steady tone. Then I realized she had asked several shamans about me. Perhaps they all said the same thing.

It took a moment for the shaman to answer. "Yes, awful beings. They all want different things. You need to get them out before it's too late."

That's when he lost me. I knew very well the things inside me weren't spirits; if they were, why did the countless charms from other shamans never worked? Were they so powerful that no charms could prevail against them? I was beyond skeptical at this point, really feeling like I'd been wasting my time; if it wasn't for Ama, I wouldn't be here. The shaman spoke like I was possessed. I thought I was possessed, but if the supernatural couldn't win against another supernatural, then perhaps it wasn't related to the paranormal in the first place.

I didn't really hear the rest of Ama's consultation, feeling bored out of my mind. When I saw Ama fumbling with her purse, looking for a red envelope, that's when I knew it's over because she's going to pay him.

The shaman went through his strange routine of stomping his leg and bobbing his head, which I guessed it's for letting the spirit out. He gave his head a final shake and turned back to glance at us. His eyes were slightly red, like those when we're suddenly woken up from a deep sleep. Like a reflex, he gathered the bright yellow paper charms the spirit had written before it left, and he arranged them into three groups.

"This one's to drink, this one's to bathe, this one's to put under the pillow," he explained while pointing at each group, his voice back to normal. "You'll need to go to the traditional medicine shop, I have received a list of medications that you should take. I'll write one more charm for you to wear with your clothes, see it as an extra protection."

I paid attention to his swift movements in preparing the brush, dipping it in red ink, and writing the complex lines of mantra on a blue charm paper.

"How do I wear it? Like, pasting it on my back?" I asked, genuinely confused as to how one wore a long charm paper without intriguing others.

The shaman chuckled, "No, you fold the paper into a small square, put it inside a small cotton cloth and fasten it underneath your shirt with a metal pin."

"Or you could just slip it inside your jeans pocket," Ama added.

The shaman nodded. "Right, as long as it is close to your body."

We thanked him and headed back home. I didn't feel like anything we brought home would work.

Flash news: it didn't. But what's new?

I took the small cotton bundle containing the folded blue charm paper from my pocket and was about to throw it away when Apek took notice. He had just finished cleaning the short incense sticks and their fallen ashes from the altar in front of the temple.

"Don't throw it to the trash," he said as he speed-walked to my counter.

"Why?"

"Charms shouldn't be thrown away, they contain power. Burn it instead." He took the small bundle and walked away.

Across the street from the temple, there stood a large fireplace, shaped like a wine gourd, where people burn joss paper and various paper offerings. Smoke always soars to the sky on special occasions, like the Chinese holidays and festivals, the first and the fifteenth day of every lunar month, and the *Qingming* period when we pay respects to our ancestors and those who had passed. There was nothing special today, so the smoke wasn't seen, but Apek still threw the cotton bundle into the mouth of the gourd, which was located on its lower curve, where people put the papers to be burnt.

"It will be burnt with the papers later?" I asked him when he returned.

"Correct. If you have any charm that you want to throw away, give it to me. I'll put it in the gourd."

"Okay."

"I heard you went to visit my friend several days ago. Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"I... think so?" I forced a smile, but Apek could sense something was still off beneath it. He waited for me to continue, and I gave in. "Honestly, I don't feel any difference."

"Of course you won't. It's not the paranormal, I've told you," he said.

"I know. Ama thought it was."

"Then you should go to the doctor, let them check. If it's not spiritual, then it's physical."

I looked at the road, at the passing cars and motorcycles, but not really looking at them.

"I will," I said, more to myself than to him.

Egon

“I have a bad feeling about this,” I said.

I was sitting beside Ara at the central table of the garden. We had been standing by for several nights, ready to take over the body in case Nika didn't get out of her pod the next morning. It happened quite often in the past; and with her instability lately, it had happened, and it would happen again.

Nika had been pondering about going to the psychiatrist, but I could feel her fear of really going whenever I took over. Even within mere seconds of sensing Nika's feelings which soon dissipated, the fear was so prominent that it stayed longer, making me extra anxious.

Ara sighed, massaging her temple. “The body isn't getting better, and it is hard to maintain its health because the mind is in jumbles...”

We're all tired. This wasn't like the past, when one could take over until the other heals from fatigue at times when Nika was absent for a long time. For the past few weeks, we had been taking turns in controlling the body rapidly, more times than ever in a short period of time to accommodate Nika's increasing mental instability and her inability to stay conscious. Because she was beginning to grasp her own condition, every time she retreated to her pod, she wouldn't stay there to recuperate. It's like she unconsciously wanted to hold out as long as she could, but it only took a toll on herself, then on the body, then on us. It's like a domino destined for doom if this kept on going.

I laid my eyes on the lines of bamboo trees; Nika's pod was at its end.

“Do you think she'll wake up tomorrow?” I asked Ara.

“I don't know,” she answered.

“I'll make sure she won't,” a deep voice was heard behind the trees. Funny how he could make a single sentence sound so nauseating.

I rolled my eyes. “Do that, and see what happens to you,” I threatened. My fists were ready on the table.

“What happens to me? Oh, great, great things. It's been so long since I last ate fried chicken.” A smug grin appeared. Hector took a seat across from us. “Hey, perhaps what this body

needs is good food. Don't you gag at the sight of noodles by now? That's the only thing she wants to eat."

"It's not like she *wants* to, she doesn't have any choice. How insensitive are you?" I sent him a cynical glare. Then I tapped my fist against my palm, as if reminded of something. There's an imaginary bright light bulb on top of my head. "Ah, I remember. You have no heart." I showed a sympathetic smile.

Ara chuckled.

"You, just wait, you," Hector said, pointing his index finger at me. "Anyways, I'll take over tomorrow—" He glanced at me. "If she doesn't wake up. I'll take the body to eat something yummy."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Fried ch—" he stopped himself when Ara warned him with her eyes. He cleared his throat. "Nutritious... food."

"Like...?" I repeated.

"I don't know, okay. Boiled eggs, carrots, greens, I'll ask Lia tomorrow."

I scoffed. I bet he didn't even know what nutritious meant. "Fried chicken?"

"That too." Hector grinned.

"Okay, but not too much," Ara said. Hector punched the air in victory, and honestly, I was beyond worried if he took over the body. Hector wasn't actually... subtle. He's just him, and that was a problem because he didn't look like *this* on the outside world. Outside, he's just a tall skinny girl who didn't train her muscles, was revolted at the sight of white rice, kind of gloomy, and quite defensive of everyone else. This brute was the literal opposite of her.

"And, repeat after me," I gestured for him to spell out the mantra that we always recited before he took over the body. "Be..."

Hector folded his arms, looking bored. "Behave."

"Good. Bear in mind if you stray too far away from how Nika acts, I'll pull you out of the screen room myself."

"Heh, like you can, slick," he mocked.

“I can’t, but she can,” I said, pointing at Ara with my thumb, feeling satisfied that I could knock him down before he could utter one more insult at me. As the one who watched over the steel gate—the gatekeeper, Ara had the authority to allow or forbid anyone to pass.

“Whatever.” Hector rolled his eyes, and stood up, walking to his area. “Let me know if it’s the morning.”

“You can hear the phone alarm,” I said. We only heard a grunt before he disappeared into the lines of trees, back to his hammock in his space.

“Perhaps he’s right,” I told Ara when we couldn’t hear Hector’s footsteps anymore. It kinda hurt my pride admitting the brute was right.

“About what?”

“The body needs more nutritious and diverse meals,” I began. “I know Ama has tried her best in providing that, but incidentally Nika’s the one who usually eats, and she never finishes the meals. At least when you’re out, you’ll eat them all. But she always comes out when it’s mealtime now.”

Ara nodded. “And what Ama gave her was really good too. I felt bad that Nika didn’t get to savor everything, she’s just shoving everything down her throat. And because the stomach is upset by the sudden large intake of food, added by her own thought that everything in front of her is revolting...”

“It’s never good,” I sighed.

I looked back at the trail of bamboo trees. Resilience. Nika had been trying hard to stay alive.

And we were too.

Nika

I woke up and I didn't feel anything.

But that's not it. I should feel something.

My eyes should feel heavy, but they're not puffy. My visions were crystal clear and no sleepiness remained. My stomach should feel pain and my back a dull ache due to the pins and needles of gastric, yet I was not even gassy. My head should be *throbbing*, but there's nothing. Not a single discomfort.

My heart jumped 'cause I was healed! But, no, I had lost a week.

I gripped my phone so tight my hand was trembling. I had lost one freaking week.

Safe to say that whole morning I did everything with rage. Everyone acted as usual; of course they'd act as usual, there's nothing out of the ordinary. In their eyes, I woke up as usual, worked as usual, ate as usual, slept as usual. They fooled everyone.

I was sitting on the sofa in our living room after showering for the night. Staying inside my room felt stuffy, and I'd sleep later when I felt sleepy. I was watching YouTube when Lia emerged from the bathroom, water still trickling down her hair, dampening her shirt with blobs of damp spots.

"Are you ordering delivery?" she asked and took a seat at the end of the sofa, ruffling her hair gently with the towel and making sure the droplets didn't reach me.

"Of what?" I asked without taking my eyes off my phone.

"KFC."

I frowned at her. "I don't eat KFC."

"You ate a lot of them this past week! And you promised to buy some for us, have a KFC party tonight. You begin to eat rice, you like the cream soup too, I like them too," she said, excited. "I offered to order from my account but you insisted on ordering them yourself, I thought, okay..." Her voice trailed off, knowing she's stepping on a frail glass because she saw my reactions.

I was staring into the distance, my face hot with fury.

“Or we’ll just order it next time, it’s fine!” Lia kept her cheerful tone.

“I ate rice?” I said, my voice low, and I was trying so hard not to lash out at her because it’s not her fault.

“Uh... yeah. And you also drank a lot of herbal soup that Ama brewed. I guess that really helps with your upset stomach and your overall recovery. I bought some vitamins for you and you also took them. You always went straight to sleep at night, and never slept in,” Lia recounted everything with a tone indicating she’s used to it, that she thought I needed a recap of what I’d been doing every time. I only asked about this lately.

“Did I say anything weird?” I asked.

“No, but...” she trailed off. I urged her to continue. “You, like, made a toast with the parking attendant.” She looked at me, eyes weary. “With a glass of iced tea.”

My mouth was agape. “I did?” I said, clearly offended, clearly not believing what she just said. No wonder the attendant called me today, and when I didn’t respond, he walked away verbally sounding disappointed. I covered my face with both my palms.

“Are you... okay, Nika?” she asked. Her face showed that she’s really worried, but didn’t want to ask me further. I really appreciated her respectful nature.

I rubbed my face over and over again. My eyes stung from the tears. “Honestly, I don’t know, Lia. I don’t remember what I did this past week. At all. I don’t remember eating KFC. You know I hate them.” I looked at her, and she prevented herself from giving away big reactions. “I didn’t know who,” I sighed. “Or what took over my body.”

“That’s bad.... Do you still feel unwell now?” she asked.

“No, and that’s the weird thing. I feel perfect. I feel fine.” I grunted, waving my hand about in the air, trying to grasp something unseen, and frustrated that I only grabbed the air. “I...”

“I’m sorry you have to feel this way, Nika,” she said, then showed me a smile. “Hey, at least you’re healthy. You don’t have to drink Ama’s bitter potion anymore.”

I let out a pitiful chuckle. “I didn’t even know it was bitter.”

Lia gasped, covering her mouth. “I’m sorry...”

I patted her shoulder a few times, assuring her she didn't do anything wrong. A few moments of silence passed, and we could only hear Ama shuffling back and forth downstairs. She was probably sweeping and mopping the floor late at night. Sigh, that woman.

"I should probably help her," I said, getting ready to stand up. Lia stopped me.

"No, no, you don't have to. You just recovered and it's better for you to rest. I'll help Ama." Lia stood up and ran to the back terrace to hang her towels, then ran downstairs.

I was left alone on the couch, my heart a blizzard of wrath. In the silence of it all, that's when I could hear someone talking. Several voices having a conversation. It was faint, but it still could be heard when it's too silent.

I peeked downstairs. Ama and Lia were working without speaking to each other. I put my ears on the wall; perhaps it's the neighbor. Silence. I put my ear to the other wall. Silence. I ran to my room and locked the door.

The bed didn't make a sound because I lowered myself carefully. My eyes were closed now as I wanted to concentrate on the murmur of voices. I heard them, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I made a sound with my pillows, sweeping my hand back and forth, and I compared it to the voices. Their origins were different. The voices came from inside my head.

I let out a loud *SHUT UP*. And it dissipated that instant.

I sat on a stone stool inside the garden, folding my arms, hoping the gesture could prevent anyone from approaching me. I had a feeling I would come back to this garden, and here I was. Thankfully I was alone when I reached the central area, but I knew it wouldn't last long. They just *had to* appear, huh?

"Heeeeyy, look what we have here!" An impossibly smug deep voice was heard behind the trees, approaching me. I massaged my temples, and glared at him when he reached the table. "Whoa, whoa, if looks could kill." Hector stood with a mocking gesture of admitting defeat, and then he was shoved out of the way by another man—Egon.

"What the f—" Hector yelled.

Egon stood at the opposite end of the table from me, and sat down. Hector sat beside him, his eyes never leaving me. I was so, so uncomfortable. I sensed a presence to my left, and I jumped when I saw Ara sitting three stools away from me. How could she be so soundless?

“Ha, I guess the board meeting is happening,” Hector said while rubbing his palms together. No one responded to him, and no one spoke after that.

So I started, “What are you guys doing here?”

They all looked at each other, as if throwing an imaginary ball of who should answer first. When Hector opened his mouth to speak, Egon stopped him.

“We live here,” Egon said.

I had heard that from Ara before. She mentioned that she lived here, along with some others. But was that even possible?

“What... are you?” I asked again.

The ball was tossed around the table again, and finally Ara answered, “We’re just like you,” she answered with a smile. But I could see a hint of weariness in it.

“You’re me?” I asked, finding all these sounding like a lie, like an impossibility that one could never encounter in their life.

“No, we’re all different from each other,” Ara answered again, her voice was as always, gentle and soft. I guessed this was indeed how she sounds normally.

“Yeah, look at how we all look, brat,” Hector chimed in, then groaned in pain because Egon had punched him hard in the arm. Egon whispered something between his teeth that made Hector shut his mouth. I couldn’t hear what he said from where I was sitting.

“I’m sorry—I-I can’t.” I covered my face, putting pressure on my eyes.

“You should stop doing that, it hurts the eyes,” Egon said.

I looked up. His face was expressionless so it’s unreadable. We held eye contact for several seconds and he looked away. What I noticed from Egon was that he... kinda looked like me. He had similar slanted eyes to mine, and he’s also skinny and tall. The other two were poles apart from us. That’s freaky.

“Please leave,” I said.

All three sets of eyes shot at me. What followed was deafening silence, rustles of leaves were not even heard as the air was so still. Egon's face showed betrayal. And hurt. Ara's too.

Hector's laugh boomed into the whole space. "Hah! Good one." He pushed Egon's shoulder, urging him to laugh along with him, but Egon's face was a stone. "You're stuck with us, honey," Hector cheerfully said, and he kept on laughing, as if years and years of suppressed laughter had exploded. I balled up my fist and turned away from them, running towards the steel gate.

I woke up in my room, gulping a huge breath of air, headache prominent, shirt soaked.

This couldn't continue. They all looked so different from me, they talked differently, and they acted differently. They must have been conspiring against me, seeing how perfect they impersonated me. Ama, Lia, Apek, everyone was utterly fooled. Everyone thought it was me who had a toast with the parking attendant, who fought the illegal ones, who picked a fight with the sports goods store's son, who ate rice and KFC and all the things I would never even touch. It wasn't me. When I was *gone*, I would be gone in silence, with not even one soul remembering me. They would all think I was still living, but instead, other entities had successfully taken over.

What was more heartbreaking than that?

Ara

There's a pain so prominent in my heart that it forced tears to fall down my face. They were fat and heavy. Egon put his warm hand on my back, patting it occasionally, and it gave me a little encouragement in the midst of this bleak situation we were at. Hector stood tall behind us, facing the steel gate where Nika just went through, not showing any sign of stepping away, as if withholding her should she come back.

"I'm afraid we've lost her," Egon said. "She hates us."

"Heh. She'll have to fight me if she wants to kill me," Hector chimed in, his voice ever-so-confident, seemingly unfazed from all the chaos that just happened.

I understand Nika; of her feelings, her decisions. Every single person would be shocked when faced with a revelation like her. Twenty years of 'normal life' came crumbling down, everything that she knew seemed like a lie, something fabricated from some others she didn't notice their existence. It's like losing control of one's life, of one's relationship with the people they knew, that they thought they knew.

She's confused, she's angry; we all knew that, we felt that. But all we needed was time. New moments to patch the lost ones, time to talk and time to explain. I feared Nika didn't want that, looking at all her responses towards us. I couldn't blame her because I also didn't want all of this if I were her. But it didn't hurt to talk. It certainly didn't hurt to try. And if we failed, we'd be hurt, but that didn't mean we should stop trying.

So I wiped the tears away from my face. I shouldn't look like this if we wanted to patch things up, nothing good would come from crying all day.

"Hector," I called, my voice was so little but he could hear me. He turned his head. "Give me an ounce of your courage."

Hector smiled wide, his dimples adorned his cheeks, and he swooped me into a tight bear hug. He moved side to side, and I felt like a little child in a giant swing on a bright summer day. No one ever asked him for a hug aside from me because they're all too afraid of him.

I chuckled, feeling so much better. "Put me down. I'll throw up."

He did as I said, putting me down on my feet gently, then absentmindedly traced his fingers on my upper cheek dimples, the indented lines that always appeared when I squinted my eyes in excitement. He always did that when he wanted to tease me. I jokingly slapped his fingers away, telling him my fear of him poking my eyes every time he did that.

Egon just stood there with his arms folded, looking at us but not saying anything.

“You want a hug from Mr. Bear?” I asked Egon, pointing at our version of the bear who towered among all of us.

Egon immediately put his arms into an X mark, shaking his head in disbelief. “Oh, no, no, please, no. I’m fine. Stay where you are.”

“Aw, c’mon! Come to me!” Hector began to approach Egon, who instantly stepped away the more Hector got close to him, sputtering panicked curses. The giant behind him increased his speed, having so much fun teasing him and laughed so loud.

I looked at the both of them, then at the garden. My face smiling, but my heart torn. This was our home, no one should ever take it away from us.

Nika

“I want them all gone.”

A set of bewildered eyes fixed on mine, and if one looked past the dark tunnel of her pupils into her mind, it had stopped working for two seconds.

“Come again?” a calm voice responded, a hitch of breath accompanied the last tone.

“Get rid of them,” I said. “Please.”

Dr. Elly Lo was a woman in her mid-forties who was sitting in front of me. She blinked twice, then held her gaze on mine. Even though her eyes were behind a pair of square glasses, it remained sharp and alert. I didn’t look away, indicating I was dead serious, and I fully knew what I wanted. No one could tell me otherwise, not even her.

She cleared her throat, then arranged the scattered documents she had used to explain to me all about the term she had diagnosed me with: Dissociative Identity Disorder—DID—where my brain split my consciousness into several personality states due to trauma—blah, blah. It had been an extensive several hours of tests, interviews, questions and explanations. My shock was gone, now I was beyond exhausted. The more she explained, the more I wanted them gone.

She opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, but stopped herself, arranging some more papers. Then she finally said, “I understand this is upsetting. But it’s a normal response; the unknown is daunting. And you have experienced indescribable fear in these past few months,” she paused, looking straight at me, her eyes sharp yet attentive. “I’ll give you some time to think. Overall fusion of every personality is such a long and arduous process, and it can’t happen overnight. No matter what your decision is, I’ll do my best to support you. But remember, there is another way.”

“And I don’t want that,” I said, holding my ground.

She replies with a kind smile. “And that’s fine. I respect your decision, but think about it again. I’m only a call away, or a message away, whichever you prefer. I will answer any questions you come up with to the best of my ability. Remember, no doctor wants bad things to happen to their patients. If you feel unwell, come to me right away.”

I left her practice mentally and physically drained.

“Hey, how did it go?” Lia welcomed me with a huge smile when I parked my motorcycle in front of the shop. They were preparing to open for the afternoon shift, and I really hoped Ama allowed me to work after taking the morning off.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with a piece of tissue I saved in my jeans pocket. “Uh... I don’t know.” I tried to show her a smile, but it came out as forced. I gestured to ask her if Ama was inside. She nodded.

“Ama, I’m back,” I called when I reached the back kitchen.

She hurriedly walked to meet me. “How was it? What did she say? You OK, right?”

I sat on the kitchen chair and took off my jacket. I didn’t even know where to begin. Everyone expected me to be out for long, but not this long. Even then it was me who ended the session early; if not, we’d continue till the evening. When I first contacted dr. Elly, we chatted for a bit on the phone for her to get the general idea of my condition. Once I mentioned ‘the others,’ ‘the garden,’ ‘losing chunks of days at once’... she cleared her whole schedule to have our meeting today. That’s when I knew it would take so long. And that it’s serious. I had been there since the morning.

“Is she any good?” Ama asked again while taking another chair to sit facing me. She’s getting impatient. “What did she say you have?”

“Uhm... it’s complicated,” I said. Then unsure of how to form the jumbles in my head into coherent words. I hadn’t even fully grasped all the things dr. Elly said.

Ama was waiting, and I knew she couldn’t wait forever because the shop’s about to open. “She said... I have a... condition where I have, uhm, there are other people inside my head.”

“You mean like spirits? You’re possessed?” she asked.

“It’s different from that. They don’t come from the outside like ghosts, then slip into my body, no, but they come from inside, from my brain.” I pointed at my head.

“So it’s not spirits?” she asked again. I knew she was trying hard to understand. I really hoped I did a good job in telling her what I had just learned. “Then what are they?”

“No. They are... personalities? Person? A different person living inside my head. There are some of them... and I have met three. The doctor said they are called alters,” I said, my voice broke at that last syllable. I was trying so hard to not cry, to swallow any lump that blocked my throat so I didn’t appear weak in front of her. “That’s why the charms didn’t work.”

“You’re sure you’re not imagining them?” Ama chuckled, trying to lift the mood. “You had some imaginary friends back then. But now you’re all grown up maybe you’re just too tired—”

“No, Ama,” I cut her off, frustrated. Was it *that* unbelievable? “They’re not fantasy.”

Ama nodded, understanding at least that last part. She must have noticed me trying hard to hold myself together, but she didn’t say anything about that. She’d carry me when I couldn’t go on anymore.

“But can they be called a person when they don’t have a body?” she asked.

“They use my body.”

“Ah...” She scratched her head and stared into the space between us, lost in thought. “Did she say why you have them?”

I explained that it was due to trauma I had when I was little, but I couldn’t remember anything about any past trauma. That’s when dr. Elly said the memories actually stayed with the alters because they’re the ones who faced them.

At this, Ama’s face changed. She knew something. Her eyes lost focus and she became restless, her hands were rubbing against her knees. When I asked her what she knew, she answered with a tone she always used when she wanted to hide something. It’s usually about the things she asked Lia to order on online shops. This one was similar, but I knew it bore a much, much heavier weight.

She immediately stood up and said the customers should be waiting outside. I was told to clean myself and rest, and come back to work later when my exhaustion had lessened. I couldn’t stop her.

There were *more* things that I missed?

I covered my face and cried—the most silent and painful of all.

Egon

I blinked and blinked.

It was dark inside my room, the nightlight wasn't even on. I looked at the phone and it's still early in the evening, barely seven o'clock. I knew that Nika went to the psychiatrist's place this morning, and the garden had been in a bit of a chaos. It's more of the brute making a ruckus that scared the children.

I knew this day would come and I'd pictured it a million times—all leading to our demise. Of course, there were other possibilities too: Nika never realized our existence, we went on our merry ways, or Nika took notice of us, but not making it a huge problem, we went on our merry ways, or Nika broke down, decided that she wanted to get rid of us, we fought her, we went on our merry ways. Or it could end with all of us dying.

What living thing desires death?

I studied the documents dr. Elly had sent to Nika's email, then forwarded it to my own email, hiding my trace after that. I had read similar explanations years and years ago; I knew what we had, what we were, how we came about. I knew how to 'deal' with us. Nika wanted to 'deal' with us, that's why she went to the psychiatrist. Now let me deal with it.

"Nika, where are you going?" Ama asked me when I passed the counter. It's almost closing time, so only a couple of customers left.

"I, uh, forgot to take some documents from the doctor. I'll be quick," I said as I got on my motorcycle and left, not listening to what she said next. I sped through the evening, knowing fully where I'd go 'cause I had remembered the doctor's address.

It was a two-story minimalist house, painted white with black accents, and a board above the gate displayed who she was and her consultation schedule. A car was parked inside, indicating the owner was home, and thankfully, the gate wasn't locked. Perhaps it's for allowing easy access for the patients. I parked my motorcycle outside the gate and pushed the door open.

There was an administration desk, but there's no one sitting there. The dark sofas where the patients could sit while waiting for their turn were also empty. To my left was a door I assume was the doctor's office, so I knocked on the door. No answer.

I knocked again, and it swung open. Standing behind it was a woman in her forties, her long hair draped over her shoulders to her back, as black as the frame of her square glasses. Her face showed confusion, but her eyes were sharp, and her lips curved into a smile.

“Nika! Didn’t expect you to come back. Come, come in,” she said as she stepped backwards to give me space to enter the consultation office. I muttered my thanks and walked into a wide space; rows and rows of bookshelf covered an entire side of the wall, and on the other side were countless frames of certifications and awards. The room smelled of fresh laundry, which I guessed coming from the long curtains covering the large windows. A set of beige sofas surrounded a low glass coffee table at the center of the room, and there was a work table at the far end of the room, facing us.

I sat on one of the couches, and waited for her to finish taking whatever she wanted to take from her work table. I noticed that her long hair had been tied into a neat and high ponytail. She then sat across from me.

“What brings you here?” she smiled, interlacing her fingers and landing them over one of her knees. The smile never left her face. I couldn’t read her; she came across as someone genuine, but there was something off. I didn’t know if it’s because of her job that required her to not show too many reactions, or if there’s something else.

I picked at the rough skin on the sides of my fingers, trying my best not to let it show because that meant I was nervous. “I... forgot to ask you the details of my treatment,” I stated.

“The details? Oh, I have attached them in my email. But I was going to give you time to think. There are indeed two branching lanes to ponder about. Have you thought about it?” she asked.

“I, uh...”

“Are you still going to stick to your choice?” she added.

I kind of knew what Nika chose. Everything that happened these past few months and her hostility led to this decision. Now what I needed to do was to choose the other one.

“*Just leave, tell her you won’t come to any of the sessions. End it here,*” Hector blurted inside my head. I jumped a bit but then acted like nothing happened. Damn, his voice was so loud.

“Nika?”

That’s the thing about living in a body whose name was not yours, it took a moment to realize they were calling you. I was so good at answering whenever someone called me Nika, but this was new, and I was so out of it that my delayed response made something click inside the doctor’s head.

“You’re another person, aren’t you? An alter?” she asked, but her voice wasn’t cornering me. “Nice to meet you. I’m dr. Elly, and who am I speaking to?”

I sighed, finally straightening my back and it let out a few cracking sounds because I’d been hunching all this time. Nika always did, so this was just a little thing that we always made sure to do.

“Egon.”

The doctor nodded. “Nice to meet you, Egon. How can I help you?”

“What did Nika say she wanted to do again?” I asked.

She seemed to hesitate for a bit, then answered, “She... decided to aim for final fusion. I believe you know what that means?”

My face was hot. I’d expected this outcome—integrating all personalities into one whole self, but hearing it in real life might send me spiraling. I took one, two deep breaths, and replied, “Yes. I’ve read about it.”

“And you disagree,” she said, carefully. I didn’t know what Nika had been saying about us to this doctor, for all I knew, it wasn’t good. Nika had not one good thing to talk about us.

“We disagree.”

She nodded again. “Unfortunately, Nika stands resolute. I understand the fear she went through after finding out she has DID...”

Her voice began to fade. There’s a familiar tug at the back of my mind, a sign that someone wanted to come out. I tried to concentrate on the doctor’s mouth, paying close attention to what she’s saying, focusing my ears on her now muffled voice.

“Egon?”

I glared at the doctor, then I blinked

Hector

And I blinked.

I took a sharp breath in, then looked around. Books, books, books, frames, frames, bright light above. A woman in front.

My head stung, like it had been hit with a steel plate from behind. My visions blurred and my fists clenched so hard that it trembled due to the terrible pain. Ah, this wasn't good. Egon would chew me later.

Not that I care.

"Egon?" the woman called.

I needed to leave. Egon didn't have it in him to throw a straightforward refusal that left her speechless. I was good at that and that's exactly what I was gonna do. Stalling never gave a good outcome.

I opened my eyes. The light was blinding. "Egon's not here anymore," I declared.

The woman perked up, her face kinda changed, I couldn't quite put it but she looked alarmed. Surprise was apparent too.

"Who am I talking to?" she asked, careful not to show too much emotion in her tone.

Heh, I could always sense the walls around me, those that some people had built when I appeared. Most of them were unfamiliar and confused because Nika 'wasn't always like this.' This woman was no different.

"Doesn't matter. Anyways, I refuse all treatment, won't come back here anymore. G'night." I put my palms up to show refusal, gritted my teeth to endure the pain and stood up.

"Wait—"

I slammed the door behind me. That wasn't so hard, was it?

My vision was still blurry, but it wasn't a problem because once I bit the insides of my cheek hard enough it would clear up. My mouth was tangy with blood when I finally reached

home and the ladies were wheeling the cooking counter into the house. I immediately helped them push.

“Have you got the documents?” Ama asked me after she locked the steel door of our shop.

“What documents?” I asked back, then it took me a second to realize. I hurriedly answered before she took notice. “Ah, those? Turns out they don’t really matter so I left them.”

At the corner of my eyes, I saw tiny Lia sweeping the floor. The hum of the song only she knew was heard.

“Lia! Let’s go to KFC,” I called. Her head turned to me, eyes wide. She then looked at Ama, unsure of what to say after my sudden invitation. “I said we’re gonna have a KFC party right? Tonight’s the night.”

My wide grin made her more unsure, then I felt a stinging pain on my arm.

“How many times will you eat KFC! You just recovered and now you want to eat fried chicken? Next time you cough up blood I won’t help you,” Ama blurted.

I laughed. “How can one cough up blood after eating KFC! That’s nonsense. C’mon, Lia.” I took the keys from Ama’s grip and unlocked the door, leaving just enough space for us to pass.

“I’ll just finish sweeping then I’ll come with you,” Lia said, then glanced at Ama who grumbled and disappeared into the partition.

The short ride to KFC was filled with silence. I knew why. Lia’s unsure of all the changes, and she would’ve gotten the hints by now that there’s something happening to Nika. But she’s too polite to ask.

“You...” Lia began, then hesitated. I was stuffing my face with one crispy chicken breast—oh, the juice, the spice—then looked at her, indicating to her to continue. “You said you hate KFC...”

“Me?” I swallowed, then chuckled. “Some days I hate ‘em, some days I love ‘em. Today I love ‘em.”

She let out a nervous laugh and didn’t ask anything further. In turn, she told me to eat more slowly. “No one’s going to take it away from you.”

I knew, but this chance wouldn't come so often. I ordered everything I wanted: five pieces of fried chicken, three packs of rice, two large French fries, two burgers, two cream soups, a portion of spaghetti, wow and the cashier's face was unforgettable. I thought Lia was used to my big order because I always ordered delivery, but she turned her head to look at me over and over again whenever I ordered one more menu.

"I couldn't finish all these," she said, almost giving up after eating one pack of rice, one chicken, and some fries.

"What! C'mon, there are still some left," I said. She shook her head and said to wrap whatever's left to bring them home, then she left to wash her hands.

I was slurping on the spaghetti when something tapped me inside my mind. *Oh, no.*

I stuffed the rest of the spaghetti into my mouth and gulped it down with a glass of soda. The room seemed to swirl around me, and my vision couldn't focus no matter how hard I tried. I still needed to finish this chicken!

Blink, blink, blink,

Nika

The scent was familiar, a scent I believed so many children and adults alike loved. But it is a scent I found revolting.

My vision cleared and I could finally see the familiar red and white of the fast food chain logo and its iconic old colonel. My hands were shiny with grease and golden crumbs, and a few grains of white rice stuck to my fingers. I could finally take a look at the spread in front of me: clean bones, a couple of fries left in its box, plates filled with chili sauce, crumpled sheets of paper used to wrap steaming hot rice... my stomach violently churned. Everything I had just eaten was at the edge of my throat, if I didn't hurry to the bathroom—

I stumbled from my chair and crashed to the floor, I couldn't believe the intense *pain* that's in my head. I wanted to freaking pluck all my hairs out and claw at my scalp to take out my brain and throw it on the floor. The pain caused an agonizing groan out of my throat, and I tried to at least sit up, at least sit back down at the chair, but what came next was the horrible sensation of your whole insides being forced out of your mouth, scraping your throat and spilling to the floor. I heard people around me frantically screaming, and I heard Lia's high-pitched shriek before losing consciousness.

"Eat it, or I'll slap you."

The man's face was blurry, but I recognized the voice. My uncle.

In front of me was a plate of rice. It smelled, and some of it was already dried up. When I dropped the dry grains to the floor, it made clicking sounds.

My uncle dumped light brown powders from a small red package on the rice.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Shut up and eat."

I did as he said. The taste made me want to puke, but if I puked my uncle wouldn't give me food anymore. So I tried hard to finish everything.

And that's the only thing I was given to eat for days and days and days.

“Nika?” a muffled voice was heard, along with the low hum of the AC. Distant footsteps came and went.

I tried to open my eyes, but the lights above were so blinding that they wanted to stay shut. I guessed my slight movement prompted the voice to call my name over and over again. It’s Ama.

“Ama... the lights...”

“Oh, oh, quick, turn off the lights,” she ordered someone. Lia must be here too.

Wait, where was here?

“Where...?” I croaked. My eyes now were beginning to adjust to the darkness. Lights were coming in from the rectangular piece of glass on the door.

“You’re okay now, we’re in Kharitas,” Ama said as she stroked my hair with her fingers. I looked at their worried faces—I could see it even in the dark. “What happened?”

Lia glanced at Ama, and she explained, “You fell to the floor and vomited everything you’ve just eaten, then you lost consciousness...”

“Where did that happen?” I asked, confused.

“At KFC. Luckily Kharitas is just next door, so people carried you to the ER. We moved to a room because you need to be hospitalized.”

I couldn’t think. My head was too painful. Everything Lia said passed through my brain and didn’t stay. The agonizing throb threatened me to puke once again. Seeing this, Ama hurriedly lifted up an empty basin. I retched, but nothing came out. Then I cried. Then I passed out.

Egon

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

I glared at the bastard who was sitting on the stone chair, his eyes lingering somewhere at the bushes across from him, jaws clenched. His gaze emanated a low fire of anger, unknown at himself or us or something else. Ara and I stood within a distance from him; never mind me, even Ara was pissed.

“You dared pull me back with force?” I hissed. “You’ve forgotten what it did to us? This body won’t have the *slightest* chance of staying alive with you being like this.”

“Shut up,” he spat.

I threw my hands into the air and walked away, my face felt puffy and hot with all the blood rushing into my head. I couldn’t deal with him.

It was dark inside the hospital room, but I could see Lia sleeping on the thin mattress on the floor. Ama had brought it from the house so when one of them stayed, they could rest on it.

My head was still killing me, and I wondered why the drugs didn’t work. But I also realized this was not an ordinary headache. The last one only lasted for a day, but now it’s been two. Perhaps it’s made worse by Nika’s accumulated stress.

“Lia,” I whispered. She didn’t budge, so I called her again with a louder voice. She tossed and mumbled something.

“What time is it?” I asked. Judging from the dim light outside the room, it had passed the hospital’s night curfew.

Lia peeked at her phone and groggily replied, “It’s two. Why are you awake?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Really? Guess you’ve slept too much during the day. How are you feeling now?”

“My head still hurts. Any news of when I can be discharged?”

Staying here gave me anxiety, like something didn't feel right. I had been the one who had been taking over the body for our stay here, and I guessed I missed my routine at home. But I know I couldn't do anything about it, the body needed to recover.

"I don't know, sorry. Let's ask the doctor when she checks on you in the morning," she said, slurring her speech a little bit and I could sense her drifting back to sleep. I mumbled okay and she didn't reply anymore.

There's this sharp pain at the back of my hand, and I lifted it up to see the IV needle, stuck deep into my vein and pasted with translucent tapes. It's painful to even wriggle my finger. I sighed, and my throat still burned. My stomach hurt, and the nausea was still there. My back hurt, and my anger never dissipated.

Just after lunch, I was watching some nonsense on TV when there's a knock on the door. Familiar sharp eyes and a high ponytail could be seen from the glass on the door. I looked away and tried to focus on the TV, but I couldn't.

"How are you feeling?" dr. Elly asked, then added, "Nika?"

I let out an annoyed sigh. "Egon."

"Egon. My friend told me you're admitted three days ago. How are you feeling now?" She sat on the chair beside my bed.

I clasped my hands together. "I'm fine."

"That's good," she smiled, then I could sense her eyes focused on my hands. "You know I notice that."

"What do you mean?" I turned to look at her, lifting my chin a little bit. She pointed to my hands.

"Skin-picking is related to," she paused, waiting for me to pay attention to her, "OCD. I also noticed you always face the door when you're standing, sitting, even lying down like this, checking the door every few seconds. Only you who sat on the sofa that faces the door in my office."

“I didn’t ask for a diagnosis,” I told her, offended. I knew about OCD, I’ve read all about it on the internet, and I didn’t have any problem with it.

“I’m sorry,” she chuckled. “But think about the body. The others will feel the pain in the fingers.”

I stayed quiet. I remembered the boxes and boxes of band aids Ara had stocked over the years. Even Nika had the muscle memory of treating them when they flared up. “I know,” I finally whispered.

Dr. Elly smiled, she didn’t bring it up anymore. The rest of her time here was spent asking me questions; some of them I answered, like why we were admitted to the hospital, who took over this whole time, who accompanied us.... Others I refused, like the questions of my origin, how many alters that I knew....

She understood the boundary I had set and never pressed me further. She went home a few moments later, telling me to reconsider the treatments she had offered whose details I could find in her email. I didn’t promise her anything.

I was allowed to go home in the afternoon, and Ama picked me up after she closed the shop temporarily. When I reached the front doors of the hospital, I could see the familiar black old car that belonged to Apek, and he’s sitting behind the steering wheel, sending me a wave and a smile. Ama bolted out of the passenger’s door to walk me to the back seat, Lia tailed us carrying the rolled thin mattress and my bag of clothes. The short walk was slow because I could still feel the ground shaking with every step, everything seemed tilted, but the pain was no longer excruciating.

“I’ll take over after this, Egon. You did a great job.” I heard Ara’s voice echoed tenderly in my head. She understood my limit.

So I leaned back and closed my eyes.

Ara

Recovery was quick as I paid close attention to every single thing. Meds right on the clock, finish every meal, sleep early, sleep in, bed rest, hydrate, happy thoughts.

The last one took extra effort, though, but it was never impossible. Watching aesthetic countryside life and cooking videos on YouTube always cheered me up, plus it gave me new ideas for my cooking. I always tried to cook whenever I was out, making variations of healthy meals that's still delicious, so the body could get some nutrition. Although I didn't really get to eat them because the others just happened to take over, I was still glad the body could eat healthier.

Ama refused to give me white rice anymore, but I knew it would be hard to recover if I didn't add it to my food. So I asked for porridge made of red rice. She made it perfectly. Hopefully Nika would like to try it someday.

We always tried to sneak in little bites of white rice every now and then over the years because it was not good to exclude it altogether in one's diet. It was called the staple Indonesian food for a reason. Nika only wanted to eat noodles, and she wasn't really fond of any protein either—chicken, beef, fish—at least she didn't refuse pork and vegetables completely, and never refused the shop's toppings. It's like she was made for this noodle shop—eating only what she sold, and never got sick of it.

Ama had tried to cook brown, black and red rice back when we—I mean, Nika was little, rooting from her absolute concern that Nika wouldn't grow properly if she didn't eat any rice, but Nika refused all of them. It was etched so deep into Nika's subconscious that rice equaled disgust, equaled abandonment, irrelevance. As years went by, Ama never forced Nika to eat rice anymore as she vomited more than she ate.

But we ate it for the body's sake. It didn't affect us. We're just making up for what Nika couldn't take.

"And that's how you guys tackle the rice problem?" dr. Elly asked. She scribbled something into her notepad without even looking at it.

I nodded. "I had my share of rice and MSG back then, but I never ate as much as Nika. Somehow it was always her that appeared at mealtime—"

“Fronted,” dr. Elly reminded me of my newly learned vocabulary. Front, fronting—when one of us took over the body.

“Right, sorry,” I laughed. “Anyways, the others and I had prepared ourselves to just shove it down our throat and get it done with, but we only ate them occasionally, so it didn’t affect us that much.”

The sun was high in the sky and its rays forced their way into the long beige curtains of dr. Elly’s office. Both Egon and Hector violently protested when I asked Lia to drive me to this place, but I just built my walls higher, and their voices automatically muffled. Besides, I wasn’t worried about someone forcing themselves to take over; everyone was traumatized from our last experience.

I’d been here for more than two hours now, having tests and answering questions, sharing stories from my part. A lot of stories. Traumas. I told her Egon’s and Hector’s stories as well. Although I didn’t have their memories, they had mentioned their experiences to me. Not detailed, but enough for me to understand why they acted and thought a certain way.

“What made you decide to come to me? The others seem to dislike me,” she asked me right after I first introduced myself, accompanied by a laugh that I could describe as soft but crunchy.

“It’s their reflex—refusing what’s unfamiliar. They all *hated* uncharted territory, Nika included. Now that it’s related to their survival, they’re more hostile than ever. But... after some thought... I think this is what’s best for our system. I believe there’s a treatment for integrated functioning?” I asked.

“Right, a way to positively encourage cooperation between all alters, so that the system could function seamlessly. That’s actually the recommended treatment for DID patients. Not one psychiatrist deems it wise to ‘get rid’ of the alters,” she said with an air quote, showing a sad smile. “That’s the option that I offered Nika—which she completely refused, as you have already known.”

I nodded and my lips imitated her sad smile. I remembered the daggers of pain and disappointment the first time Nika told us to leave. It left gaping marks.

“That’s all we’ve been doing all this time, anyway, but with Nika not knowing. It will be a long shot knowing how badly she responds to all of this.” I waved around with my hand. “But it doesn’t hurt to try.”

Dr. Elly smiled, and beneath it, I could see sincere gratitude.

“How are you feeling now? I’m sorry it took so long because everything that comes out of your mouth is precious information for me,” Dr. Elly laughs, apologetic.

“No, no, it’s totally fine! I’m tired, though,” I said, and she apologized again. And I assured her it was fine, again. We heard the sound of a motorcycle approaching, then completely stopped just in front of the house. “Oh, my friend must be here.”

“Good! Let me see you out.”

Lia was standing by on the motorcycle and she waved when she saw me walk out the door. They exchanged greetings and we left the place.

“How was it?” she asked, voice a bit muffled from the mask and helmet she’s wearing. “She seems nice.”

“She is! It’s a great session today and we’ll see each other again in three or four days,” I replied. “Did you ask Ama if I can work?”

Lia shook her head. “She forbids you to step even one foot to the cooking counter.”

“C’mon, it’s been a week!”

“I know!”

“What the hell is wrong with you??”

That’s the first thing I heard when I lowered my wall. I wondered how long Egon had been aggressively complaining about my decision. The body was asleep now in the bedroom, and I decided to face the guys in the garden.

“Do you want us gone??” Egon yelled while he met me in my tracks to the central table. Hector seemed more monstrous the more I approached him.

“It’s not cool to keep us out like that,” he said, his voice sounding more bassy than usual. I apologized to him, and to Egon.

Egon sighed and sat beside me. His face showed annoyance and disappointment, which made me feel guilty because he was never annoyed or disappointed at me. As bad as he felt, he never really showed it in his face, but today’s different.

“Please, explain,” he said.

I told them integrated functioning didn’t mean integration of, or combining, all of us. In our case, it’s just like what we’d been doing all these years, taking over the body when the others weren’t able to.

“And we have been doing just fine. We don’t need someone else to teach us how to. The doctor doesn’t even have DID, what does she know?” Egon protested.

“But we’ve been doing that *before* Nika knows of our existence. You guys know it won’t be the same anymore, and we can’t leave Nika out of this. She lives here too,” I said as my sight landed on the bamboo trail, the others followed my gaze. “We shouldn’t be going against each other.”

“We don’t, but she does,” Hector pointed at the bamboo trail with his chin.

“For once I agree with the brute,” Egon said. Hector clicked his tongue but didn’t retaliate. “And you forgot one thing, Ara. Getting into treatments meant facing the trauma we have buried so deep and sharing them. Who’s to say integration won’t happen in the midst of the treatment?”

With that I fell silent. Dr. Elly explained that when two or more alters integrate, it could be beneficial in the sense that they could be more aware of and present in the situation in front of them, aware of the events they didn’t know before, and even become stronger as the knowledge to deal with problems increased. One alter’s response to resolving a problem might differ from the other, and integration could mean the fusion of strengths, making the whole system more stable. However, at the same time, these things weren’t separate anymore. Separation was what made us... us. We’re just like a giant dam with a lot of partition walls, keeping one body of water separate from the other—an individual body of water, whose water content was only unique to them. When one of the walls was slightly lowered, the mixture of

water would happen. When the wall was completely removed, the fusion of every water content was inevitable.

But that's the thing: we're all water.

"There's also the possibility that it won't happen," I said. "C'mon, it won't happen overnight. Let's just try."

The two of them wouldn't meet my eyes. Sigh, this would be a long journey of convincing. They thought we're okay, but really... we're not. There were other... parts living in this garden. In the dark corners far from the bright center. This garden was larger than we all thought; I knew the guys also knew about them, but they chose to ignore. Because I was the one who oversaw who passed through the steel gate—a gatekeeper, I saw them passing by, I couldn't even stop them—not that I could stop anyone, really.

We're all just scared, but hiding wouldn't end anything. Facing them would.

"Is there any positive trigger to encourage an alter to front?" dr. Elly asked.

It's our third meeting today (my second) (Egon's and Hector's didn't count), and since I had been fronting ever since we were discharged from the hospital, I was the one who went. Sometimes, it wasn't of our own willingness to leave or stay; we all could sense the tug—to front or to leave—and this was all the brain's work. If one forced the other to front, well, we all knew how that went.

"Sometimes I get pulled to front when certain songs are playing." When she asked what kind of song, I replied, a bit sheepish, "K-pop."

She smiled. "You don't have to be shy, K-pop songs are really good! Who's your favorite?" she asked, excited.

Then we went on for half an hour discussing our favorite songs and singers, even K-dramas and reality shows. I always made the time to update myself in the K-pop scene whenever I fronted, of what's new and exciting and trendy. It made me happy.

"Anyways, back to the triggers," I said, changing the topic because I feared this session was only filled with my rant of what's the best K-pop song this year so far. "Hector loves food, especially fried food, like chicken, fritters, anything fried. He's the eater among us. And Egon

loves books. He's the only one who reads, and he reads everything. But his favorite book is Harry Potter. He had the complete series in ebook form, saved to Nika's phone, so he could reread them whenever he fronts. Luckily, Nika also likes to read, so she bought the physical books several years back."

Dr. Elly nodded enthusiastically. "That's interesting! What's the probability of you guys fronting when faced with these triggers?"

"It doesn't always happen automatically, except if the trigger is strong. Once, a car blared a very loud and upbeat K-pop song that I recognized, and I fronted. Sometimes another person fronts without any trigger at all. So... it's quite uncertain. But when the body faces negative triggers, it almost always pulls us out, more often than the positive ones," I said, grim. "But, yeah, it depends on the situation too."

"Acknowledging negative triggers is also a huge step towards cooperation and improvement. We can teach ourselves how to deal with the inner turmoil when we're faced with the very thing that reminds us of the trauma," she paused, contemplating something. "Is it okay if I ask you what's yours?"

I nodded, showing her a strong smile, which I believed appeared otherwise. "Mine is always sickness and exhaustion, also hunger. Because I was based on a kind Church Auntie Nika met when she was little, Nika's conditions at that time were carried with me into my memory as well. This auntie helped the sick, helpless, and hungry Nika, and I guess she's the one who scooped Nika out of her misery."

"Did she take Nika in?" she asked, her tone concerned.

"Temporarily. I remembered not long after I was split from Nika, we lived in her house for a few days. Turns out she had contacted my grandparents in the city, telling them all about the neglect and abuse Nika had experienced from her own mother and uncle. Ama and Akong brought us to the city right away."

"I'm really sorry..."

"That's okay, it's all in the past now." I smiled, then remembered something. "Oh, right. Triggers. Egon's and Hector's triggers are similar, which are cigarette smoke and confrontation with men. Because, uhm, the body was terribly abused by the uncle while he was smoking cigarettes, it remained in the brain that these things meant harm. That is also why it's deeply

ingrained in all of us that men are equal to harm. I know not all men are abusers, but that's just how we understand the world, I guess."

"So the brain's first response when faced with smokes or men is get one of them to front, right now," she said while snapping her fingers, indicating urgency. I nodded. She continued jotting down notes. "Do you think it's fine to encourage someone to front?"

I was thinking for a moment. "Perhaps. But I can't promise you anything," I chuckled. "They all kinda hate me because I came here."

Because we couldn't access any fried food right now, we decided on having books. With the rows and rows of books that dr. Elly had, Harry Potter was bound to be there. I took *The Deathly Hallows*—Egon's favorite, and started flipping through the pages, then reading a random chapter.

About six pages into the book, I sensed the familiar tug, then I could feel myself getting pulled back slowly. The tunnel was here. The words on the pages now became incoherent blurry lines. I blinked and blinked.

I blinked and blinked.

Egon

My vision cleared and I was holding a heavy book, which I immediately recognized its passages and the names of the characters.

I frowned. Then I heard someone call my name. I looked up in reflex, no one outside had ever called my name before. The woman before me was familiar. This room was familiar.

“Egon?” she called me again.

I paused, I blinked and blinked, needing a second to get out of my disorientation. “Why am I here?” I asked, my gaze suspicious at her. I closed the book and laid it down gently on the coffee table in front of me. This must be Ara’s doing.

“Sorry, I’m leaving,” I said before she could say anything.

I hurried to the exit, ignoring the surprise of the administrator and a couple of people waiting on the sofa. But I didn’t find my motorcycle. I cursed under my breath, Lia must have driven us here. I took out my phone.

A slight commotion was heard from inside the house, and the doctor calmed everybody down. She stepped out and said, “Sorry, but... I think you need to call your friend to pick you up.”

“That’s what I’m doing,” I spat.

Lia finally picked up the phone and I told her to hurry and pick me up. She was taken aback by my slightly panicked voice, but assured me that she’s on her way. I pocketed my phone and waited.

“Do you... perhaps want to wait inside?” the doctor asked. I didn’t answer.

She sighed. “Look, Egon. I’m sure Ara has given you her reasons why she agreed on the treatment. I know you know no one wants to harm the system. It doesn’t hurt to encourage cooperation, to open up and—”

“It hurts if one of us disappears,” I said, looking straight into her eyes. “If that’s not harm, then I don’t know what is.”

I was still banned from the cooking counter and it really annoyed me. My body felt fine, it had fully recovered, but Ama couldn't seem to see that fact. I missed working because aside from earning back the money we had spent on the hospital; it could help distract me. Unfortunately, the shop now only operated from six to two, and we took the rest of the day off. When I asked the reasons why, Ama said, "I was getting old, no one opens a shop for more than ten hours a day."

"There is! The coffee shop down the street is open for twenty-four hours." And I was hit on the arm after that. She said she's getting old but her slaps were still spicy.

"You want to stay open for twenty-four hours? Want me to die fast??" Ama snapped.

"That's not what I meant! Why did you twist my words like that?"

"Tsk. I am the boss. I do what I like." And she left for the kitchen, leaving me baffled and annoyed.

"It's good to take a rest," Lia said. "Perhaps once she could really see that you're okay, she'll open the shop as usual."

The clock showed it's almost four in the afternoon. I sat on one of the chairs. Usually this dining area would have been filled with people by now.

"Do you think I'm okay?" I asked Lia who took a seat across the table.

"Don't ask me things only you know," she laughed. "I think deep down you know if you're okay or not. Well, from the outside you're fine."

I took some time to think. We *were* fine. Now that there's a disruption, I wasn't so sure anymore.

"Do you think you're getting better now that you're seeing the psychiatrist?" she asked me after a moment of silence.

"I don't feel like going anymore," I told her while absentmindedly arranging the condiment bottles on the table. Remembering my time there only evoked anger and disappointment. And fear.

“Why not? She’s good at containing all the stories and hardships, and never sends the slightest judgement, creating this safe and secure interaction. Her remarks also help create new perspectives,” she said.

I looked at her, my brows frowned. She was saying it matter-of-factly, eyes wide open, like I should’ve known all these things: how a psychiatrist should be. “Says who?” I asked.

“Says you!” She pointed at me with both her palms, like presenting something. “You were so excited before. Did she do something wrong today?” Lia grimaced. “I was shocked when I answered your call earlier.”

I was quiet for a moment, wrecking my brain thinking about the things the doctor did wrong.

“Well... maybe she didn’t mean it. Everyone made mistakes, but I believe in second chances,” Lia said, quite proud of herself. Coming from her, it sounded relieving because everyone knew she was kind and forgiving and optimistic. These attributes of her reminded me of Ara.

“But some people don’t deserve second chances,” I said, so low that Lia needed to ask me to repeat it again, which I brushed off as nothing. She didn’t press me further.

Not everyone could come to the garden every single time, and be there at every single minute of every day. Sometimes their consciousness directly arrived at their own living space far from the central table.

I had been coming back directly to my space for several days now. I could meet the others, but I was not in the mood. It’s not that I’m mad—I did, initially. I thought we’re all in the same boat, but Ara now had one foot out one side, while Nika had her foot out the other. Hector just hated everything.

But now I only felt anxious. Nika hadn’t come out at all since the disaster at KFC, and every single scenario where things went wrong when she finally woke up kept replaying in my head, all leading to our disappearance—our *death*. Now I understood that death seemed over the top here, but it somehow could describe what it meant to be fused, or to integrate. I had learned about them many years ago when I had access to the internet and absorbed every single thing as much as I could. Essentially the walls that separated us dissolved, and with it our own

experience, memory, attributes would merge. It's like an absurd math equation of one plus one equals one. Each of the 'one' was unique in its own way, and the final 'one' was the combination of all quirks—the good and the bad.

The merging also dissolved... the consciousness. The autonomy. The personality. The very essence of that person which made them, them.

Didn't it sound like death?

Everything they had experienced up to a certain point right before the integration stopped, and they couldn't continue forward anymore because they wouldn't experience it themselves. They had lost their individuality, and that's heartbreaking.

I didn't ever want to lose anyone. Ever.

I'd do everything in my power to prevent that.

Hector

I wasn't exactly the best at cooking. I love eating, not cooking. Cooking wasted a lot of time, and the food only needed a minute to be devoured. It's not worth it. So I always tried to push the four-hour break time as long as I could to do things I liked: going to the gym, eating out, visiting cafes, going for a second round of eating, jogging if I really wanna push it... till my phone rang and Ama yelled to my ear to hurry back. This body has a job and routine, and I had to go back to it so other people didn't feel the body was acting abnormal.

In cooking, I relied a lot on muscle memory and feeling. There's usually no complaint from the customers, but Ama always noticed my slight sloppiness.

"Ah, I knew it, you're still unwell, aren't you?" Ama cornered me one morning when I was allowed to return to cook.

I let out a laugh. "What? I've been absent for almost two weeks. Don't tell me your handwriting is still pretty when you haven't written for a long time."

She mumbled something I couldn't hear, but didn't bring it up again. "Have you taken the meds?" she asked.

I paused to think. I couldn't remember when I was supposed to take them; was it morning? Night? Before or after a meal? I wasn't good at this. I hadn't been around much when the body needed to take drugs, it's usually Ara.

Ama was waiting for me to answer, and I thought hard of a believable answer. But I just gave up. Ama knew Nika was unwell, so she shouldn't question much. "I can't remember," I finally replied.

"Take one each morning after breakfast, the rest are for the night before sleep," she said after taking the plastic containing clips of pills from the table nearby. "I put some here just in case you forget. You did forget."

I took one pill as she instructed and mumbled sorry. She tapped my shoulder and put the plastic away.

I was the first one to meet Ama and Akong when they came to the Church Auntie's house to bring me to the city. Not long after Nika's consciousness split into Ara, it split again into me.

The first thing I felt was pain, excruciating pain all over my body—but I guessed every single one of us was always in pain the first time we were brought into being. I blacked out shortly after because the body went into shock due to the heavy blows my uncle had struck. Damn, he's not my uncle. He's the fucking devil, there in the flesh.

My consciousness was then transported into the garden, a deer in headlights, blah blah... and I hated everything and everyone the first several days after I was split. It wasn't fair. I thought I owned this body, but apparently they did too. So did Nika. What's worse was that I was always pulled out whenever there was physical abuse. I was the one who watched the bruises grow in size and change in color, I felt every single one of them. When I exploded at both Ara and Egon, demanding why I should be the one in pain, they grimly said that they couldn't take even the second blow. The first one was enough to knock them out. That's not the case for me; the pain was still agonizing, but I could withstand it. Later, I found that my pain threshold was the highest among them. When I took over, the body somehow could turn off its pain receptors much better than when the others took over. Added with the anger and shame from what had happened to me, Egon said I had taken the role of the persecutor of the system—dealing with physical pain and harm that came our way. I didn't get it at first because who could even *think* of what they were when they're in a crisis? We found out everything and learned about everything years later.

But when I was still in that tiny house, all I knew was I needed to fight back; of course I fought back. It's because the others were too weak to fight back that the slaps and punches and kicks were getting worse. I wanted to stop it.

One night, I ran away after knocking the devil in the form of that man out cold, using my fists and everything else in my reach. It was a long battle, but one that I won. I ran and ran, not knowing where to go, but my feet stopped in front of a familiar door. The Church Auntie's house. I knocked on it frantically and it opened right away, a shocked face was behind the door and she hurriedly pulled me in, then scanned the area around her house to make sure I wasn't followed. I was confused, but finally I felt safe. I slept on the bed for a really long time after that, too tired to do anything else. Auntie woke me up several hours later to feed me porridge, and she told me that she had finally found a way to contact my grandparents. They'd arrive first thing in the morning and I didn't need to worry about my mother and uncle anymore. Safe to say they'd

been disowned later by my grandparents. Hadn't heard from them since. Last time I was informed they're in jail or something.

Ara explained to me sometime later that Auntie Maria—the Church Auntie's name, was the one who fed us and treated our wounds a few times back then. But the third time I sought shelter, Nika's uncle banged on the door with a red face, and he dragged us back home. Auntie was afraid, and she was no match to him either, so she let me go. Since then, she was on a mission to find out where my grandparents lived in the city and their numbers. It was hard, there was no internet back then. Even though it's the mid-2000s, this was a remote village. But thankfully she found a way. Her effort brought me to my grandparents.

Because the body was battered and bruised, I was in charge of it the whole journey to the city. I knew the others wouldn't make it. They couldn't even front for longer than five seconds because the pain was too much. We stopped a lot because I kept throwing up due to motion sickness and me eating too much because it's the first time I'd seen that much food. I also had never been in a car before, and it took hours and hours and hours till we arrived in the city.

Tomorrow marked one month since Nika had been away. She'd been away longer before, but this time it created a suffocating atmosphere in the garden. Ara's afraid Nika refused to wake up altogether.

"I don't think it will happen," Egon said.

Ara sighed and hastily wiped her tears before they fell. "This time's different."

The noodle shop was closed for the day, so I went to my room to take a rest—also Ama's order. Couldn't say no to the woman. I realized that sometimes she lingered at the stair landing of the second floor, as if she wanted to ask me something. I was on my way up to the third floor when I noticed her not moving. When I asked her why, she said it's nothing. I think she couldn't arrange the words to form a question about my condition. Nothing surprising really, because Nika herself couldn't continue explaining things to Ama because she's in the pod. Ah, but really Ama was afraid to ask further because she didn't want to expose Nika to her past that she had forgotten—the past that stayed with us instead.

Ama was the type of person who swept dust under the rug—Nika got it from her—ignoring things that should bug her mind, thinking that if she did that, the problem would go away. But she loved Nika so much that she was weary of the many dusts. I hoped either Ara or Egon was fronting when Ama finally asked questions. I couldn't explain well. Whatever Egon explained to me about our condition so long ago had disappeared from my mind. Only tidbits remained.

"She'll come out when the brain thinks it's safe," Ara said.

"We are safer than we've ever been," Egon protested. "The body's healed, we're eating well, we avoided unnecessary interactions, what else is there to harm us?"

I folded my hands in front of my body. My biceps bulged. "Us."

Ara and Egon were lost for a second, then they face palmed. I chuckled bitterly, not believing they didn't even think of this.

"I'm serious. It's us! We're the harm. Nothing's coming from outside, so it's us then," I mocked. "That's why she's still in there. That's all she's been doing all these years. Leaving at the slightest bit of inconvenience, and coming back when everything is peaceful."

They're silent. They knew I was right.

"That's how the brain works," Egon finally said. His voice was low, a hint of tremble was heard.

I laughed so loud I almost fell over.

"Are you OK now, Nika?" Ama asked me one morning when we're finalizing the preparations to open the shop.

I looked at her, put the two trays of toppings on the front counter and didn't say anything. Shit, why now when I was fronting?

"Nika," she called again.

I showed my smile and said I was fine, with a cheerful tone I hoped was genuine enough. She narrowed her eyes slightly, clearly disbelieving me.

“Are the voices bothering you again? You haven’t been going to the doctor, is that part of the treatment?” she asked.

“Nope, there are no voices anymore. I think the... two? Three sessions? Already helped,” I said, my tone full of confidence.

Ama nodded, seemingly quite convinced. She still had her doubts, I was sure, but I guessed the discussion could stop here. “Good then. You tell me when you feel unwell, don’t keep it to yourself.”

“Got it,” I said.

Lia approached me while carrying a tray of thinly sliced fish cakes that I took from her and put on the counter.

“Is it OK if I ask you something?” Lia began, unsure, craning her neck to look around to make sure we’re not on anyone’s hearing radius. I gestured to her to spill whatever’s on her mind. “OK, what’s it like? Having, uhm, other people in your mind?”

“Who told you this again?” I asked. She seemed to be quite surprised by my tone, which might come across as more defensive than I intended to.

Her eyes widened, afraid of being wrong. “Uh, you?” she said, now the question could either mean she’s unsure of what she’d heard, or unsure of which version of me who told her. My bet was on Ara.

“Now you know it’s not me because I don’t remember telling you anything about this.”

She showed a nervous smile. I assured her it’s fine, but I showed my ‘offended’ face. She began to panic, but didn’t show it directly. She was a good kid who was so afraid of offending anyone.

I laughed and her head shot up to look at me, confused. “I’m just messing with you.” She let out a nervous laugh, but the worry in her eyes finally disappeared. “I’m fine! I don’t hear voices anymore, I’m not sick anymore, all’s good. By the way, do you wanna come with me to the gym later?”

Lia blinked, confused of how fast the conversation changed, and also not expecting me to invite her along. “But I think I need to help Ama...”

“Ah, don’t worry about that. What’s there to help? The shop’s now closed for the whole afternoon shift,” I grinned. “I’ll teach you how to lift weights.”

She shook her head. “I can’t, I’m not strong enough. Can you, though?”

“Of course! See my muscles?” I flexed my biceps. When I saw Lia’s forced smile, I looked at my skinny arm and rolled my eyes. This scrawny little body couldn’t survive the harsh world. “We’ll train together.”

I would find a gym which allowed daily workouts without being a member. There should be one, so Egon wouldn’t nag about ‘unwise financial decisions’ anymore.

“Lower, lower,” I said as I counted how many times Lia had done the squats. Her face was beet red and she looked like she wanted to cry. I shouted out the number twenty and she fell to the carpeted gym floor, chest heaving and body limped like jelly.

“I... can’t... anymore...” she gasped, her eyes closed. “You’re... evil...”

I laughed out loud. “It’s only the beginning! C’mon, let’s move to the treadmill,” I said as I pulled her up to stand. She deliberately made her body heavier, but stood up eventually.

We walked on two treadmills that were next to each other and I told Lia to increase the speed if she wanted to. She immediately offered me a polite smile while she refused.

Ah, I was so glad I could run again. If I ran on the streets, my anxiety would heighten because the brain thought it was too dangerous. I always tried to ignore it though, to the others’ dismay, but it wasn’t long before I noticed several pairs of filthy eyes following my every move. Soon, catcalls were heard, followed by degrading questions and disgusting laughter. Damn, I couldn’t even exercise in peace. There seemed to be nothing safe out here if you have a female body. Everything posed a threat. The anger I once felt towards this body now had shifted to the fucking perverts in every corner of the streets. I thought the more I covered my body, the less they would bother me, but clothing was not the issue at all. I wasn’t the issue at all. I could run in a *Kuntilanak* costume and those fucking men would still catcall simply because they saw a woman.

Once, I threw stones to the shitty men who had been following me. They were enraged, of course, and terribly embarrassed that a scrawny girl could cause so much pain. I was so ready

to fight them when some passersby stopped us, blaming the guys, asking if they had no shame picking on a girl. They seemed to shrink a bit, showing their cowardice. Angered that I didn't get to hit them, I blurted out trains of curse words towards them and those fucking shameless guys blamed me for that. Nothing a girl did would sit right in the eyes of those kinds of men. What an abomination.

“Nika!!”

Lia's loud voice snapped me out of whatever trance I was in, and I hit the emergency stop button on the treadmill. My legs burned so bad and I was out of breath. My ears rang and the room around me seemed to spin. Lia was now supporting my body, fearing I'd fall and hurt myself.

“Are you OK? I called you so many times but you kept on increasing the speed! I was afraid you'd slip and fall,” she said, her tone filled with concern.

I was still catching my breath, then realized I must have pressed the speed button without thinking. “I'm okay, calm down,” I said. With her help, I stepped down from the treadmill and sat on the nearby bench. Lia passed a cold bottle of water and stood by me.

That could've been dangerous. I was careless.

Lia was shifting her weight from one foot to another, then she stood up straight, but slightly slouched again. Her fingers were tangled with each other, twisting and pressing till it became a knot which she uncurled to form balls of fist. If one didn't know her well enough, the conflicted expression on her face was enough to tell us she had something she wanted to say, but she was weighing whether she should.

I knew her, so I ended her dilemma with a short question. Otherwise, she wouldn't stop fidgeting. “Sit down. What is it?” I asked.

“Uhm... are you... Nika?” she asked. “Because you didn't respond when I called your name so many times. It could be that, uhm, Nika's not your name.”

I looked at her, baffled, kinda mad at myself because I didn't respond to her calls immediately. This instance had happened many times before in the past, but I always gave stupid reasons like my hearing was bad, or I was daydreaming, or anything else that she directly accepted. I averted my eyes, knowing I couldn't run away like I used to. It's different now that she had an idea of our condition.

“Uh... I am... not...” I paused, straightening my back, “Nika.” My eyes roamed around the room, too nervous to look Lia in the eye because this was the first time I admitted that I wasn’t the one she thought she knew. I didn’t know how she’d take this.

“Who are you then?” she asked, her tone didn’t show any surprise or apprehension. “What’s your name?”

At this question, I finally looked at her. My heart was drumming; I didn’t know if it’s due to the treadmill or my uneasy feelings. I’d never introduced myself to anyone before. “You’re not afraid of me?”

She laughed, which caught me off guard. “Why should I be afraid of you? We must have known each other for a long time. Only that I didn’t know who was who.”

“I could be The Beast from that movie for all you know.”

She waved her hand. “Ah, impossible. If you were, then I must have noticed your awakening,” she said, followed by a laugh. “And I’ve never seen you being carelessly violent.”

I let out a soundless laugh. There’s always this invisible string that tugged at my chest, like it’s warning me not to disclose something that’s forbidden, something that we had guarded for so long. Then I remembered, Ara had actually leaked our information to that shrink anyway; then the string poofed into nothingness. I could do that too. Besides, it’s Lia that we’re talking about, it’s not just anyone. She’s already a part of the family.

“My name is Hector,” I said, then I cleared my throat. It’s weird listening to my name with this body’s voice. It felt wrong but also right at the same time. I couldn’t believe I could say my name out loud, pronounce it to another human. Then I looked at her, gauging her reaction. She didn’t really show much.

“So you’re a guy?” she finally asked after a moment of silence.

“So what if I’m a guy?” I retorted, slightly offended.

She laughed. “I’m kidding!”

I recognized that sparkle of a jokester in her eyes. I’ve seen it a lot of times. “Youuu. I’ll flick your forehead, you,” I said jokingly, getting my fingers ready.

Lia lifted up both her hands, feigning defeat while still chuckling. “So, Hector, are you the one who stuffed your face with one hundred portions of KFC?”

“One hundred—” I blurted out, disbelieving what I just heard. Lia was holding back her laughter. She’s kinda right, if we counted my meals even far before the incident. “Yeah, that’s me. How do you know?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, I just know.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Choose one. You don’t know or you just know?”

Lia threw her head back, laughing again. “I don’t know! It’s just... feeling, okay? I know Nika is sometimes different. But I didn’t know it’s to this... extent.”

“Are you not weirded out?” I asked while preparing for the worst answer I could possibly hear. Not gonna lie, I felt like I was gonna get hurt if she said she was weirded out, but again, what else can I do? It’s not like I got to choose.

She pursed her lips, a thing she always did when she’s thinking hard. “Can I be honest with you?”

“Please.”

“I was... at first. But it’s not like I hate you,” she said quickly. “Or Nika, or whoever it is that’s taking over. It’s more like, I was so worried. This is so complicated, something that I’ve never even heard before, and I’m afraid I’ll offend someone. So I, uhm, looked at the brochure you brought from dr. Elly’s place in your room—sorry, I hope you don’t mind. Then I Googled everything I don’t understand, which is basically everything,” she said, letting out a pitiable short laugh. “It’s so hard to understand, but Nika simplified them for me the other day.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t Nika,” I said as soon as she finished that sentence. Then I laughed out loud when her mouth fell open. “It was another one of us. Ara.”

The heavy silence indicated that Lia was working hard to piece together the information she just heard. I noticed that the more she thought, the more confused she was. Her face began to show one thing that I feared the most: betrayal. *Ah, shit.*

I knew someone would feel that much when they’re revealed the opposite of something they had believed for so long. I would feel that too.

“Listen, Lia,” I said gently, waiting for her to look at me. It hurt me to look at the pain in her eyes. “It’s not like we wanted to... to fool you. It’s just that... we’ve been living like this for so long that we can’t imagine otherwise. Think of it as a defense mechanism.” I paused, then scoffed at how ridiculous I sounded. “Look at me, I sounded like that smartass. Point is, when there’s a threat of an enemy, we’ll feel safer behind the mighty fortress that we’ve painstakingly built. This body has gone through so much that it can’t imagine life without the fortress anymore,” I paused. “And we’re the fortress.”

Lia was deep in thought for so long. I waited and waited, I’d explained the best I could. Hate to admit it, but Egon could probably explain much better.

After a few more moments, Lia nodded her head, then turned to look at me. “It’s not like you deliberately deceive us. I hope I wasn’t being inconsiderate. Please, forgive me if I was.”

My lips curved into a smile. “No, no, you never did! I know the others will agree with me.”

“How many, uhm, people are there?” she asked.

I counted my fingers. “Uh... I don’t really know. There are four of us who often appear, including Nika. I believe there are others but they rarely come out.”

“Do you think I’ve met them?”

“Of course. We take turns regularly if the others are tired. This body is a lot of work,” I laughed. “Ama knows us, you know us, Apek knows us, but you all think that we are one Nika. Only Nika.”

There’s a heavy pause between us. The only thing we could hear was the lame upbeat nameless song booming from the speakers and it had been in a loop for two thousand times. Some people were exercising but they didn’t pay us any attention, too busy looking at themselves in the mirror or counting how many reps and sets they had done.

“This is all so confusing.” Lia laughed nervously.

“It’s totally fine if you don’t understand this right away. I don’t even fully understand it! If you want to know more, ask Egon.”

“Egon?”

“That’s the other one. He’s the brainy one.”

Lia massaged her temples, and I chuckled at her reaction. “It’s OK, baby steps,” I tell her.

“Never in a million years I’ll... listen about these things,” she chuckled. I saw thin lines of wetness on her eyes, but they’re not heavy enough to fall. She blinked a few times to clear her vision. “Makes me wonder... just how much I’ve missed.”

She turned to look at me. Her face looked the same, but also different. There’s this knowledge in her that she didn’t possess before, and it showed in her eyes, her gesture was also slightly different. I didn’t know how people would react once they knew about our condition because I hadn’t experienced any of this before, but I could clearly differentiate positive and negative reactions.

“You didn’t miss anything, it’s us who missed a lot. Take the KFC incident. Nika didn’t know we’re gonna have a KFC party. You guys must’ve seen it as Nika being forgetful. But it’s just... yeah, it’s because only one can be present in a conversation.” Then I remembered something. We could sometimes stand in the screen room while one is fronting. “Well, sometimes not only one. Anyways, we can’t know all the information out there.”

“Now that you mentioned it, that’s right, Nika is so forgetful. I got so used to reminding her all the time that I didn’t think of it too much. I guess that’s bound to happen when you can’t share memories. But how can you all be so good at cooking noodles?” She’s genuinely curious and I found that cute.

“It’s called,” I paused for dramatic effect. “Magic,” I said while fluttering my fingers in the air. She didn’t get it for a second, frowning her brows, then it clicked in her head.

“Come on,” she pleaded. “That’s, like, so lame. How old are you?”

I laughed, so loud that some people turned their heads to look our way. I quickly covered my mouth, reminded of the time Egon passionately blamed me because I acted ‘unladylike.’ I was bummed. I wanted to laugh so loud people thought it was thunder, or lift up my legs whenever and wherever I sit because it’s more comfortable that way, spreading them too because I thought might as well, the body always wore pants anyway. I got scolded so many times because I walked with my chest puffed out. I didn’t even realize I was walking that way, that’s just how I was. But Nika’s trademark was slouching, so I needed to do that whenever I fronted. All these weren’t the ‘norm,’ and if I did that, people would frown, and that meant

attracting unwanted attention. Egon explained this 'equation' to me, and I thought oh, well... no one wanted to be noticed.

"I'm probably ten years older than you. How old are you now?"

"I'm seventeen."

I counted in my head, then moved my palm side to side, indicating it's more or less ten years. "I'm twenty-six."

"That's amazing," she mumbled. I cocked my head to the side, not getting what's the amazing part about this. "I mean, it's unique that you all have different ages. I thought you'd all be twenty like Nika."

"Nah, that Egon guy is old. He's like, thirty-five or something." Then I felt an abrupt tug in my head, and I knew it's him protesting. "Or, like, thirty."

Lia laughed, then she perked up. "Oh, right, what about Nika? Is she okay?" Her eyebrows furrowed, clearly worried. "Where is she?"

"She's... uhm, coping. There's this pod that she always sleeps in when she's unconscious, and she's been there for a while. She didn't know there were others, so it's kinda hard on her."

"That's understandable." Lia's shoulder slumped, feeling bad for Nika. "I hope she's okay..."

The sun was beginning to set, and what we'd been doing was just talking. I made a promise to Lia to bring her here again, had a real workout. We packed our shared bag and got ready to go home. At the parking lot of the gym, I asked Lia, "So, are we okay now?"

"Why are we not okay?" she asked back, clearly confused.

I realized how stupid my question sounded. "I mean, uhm..." I didn't even know what I wanted to ask. Thankfully Lia caught on and understood.

"Yeah, we're okay. I don't think it'll change much 'cause... it's been like this all along, right?" She smiled.

I breathed a sigh of relief and smiled along.

Nika

I woke to the sound of knocking on the door. It's pitch black in my room. Why didn't I turn on the nightlight?

"Are you awake?" Lia called from the other side, and she knocked on the door again. I dragged my feet and opened the door slightly, squinting at the morning sunlight coming from the window at the end of the hallway. Wait, why was it this bright already? Even if I woke up late to prepare for the shop, it shouldn't be this bright.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"It's almost the opening time and I just wanted to give you this," she said while lifting a small plastic, asking me to take it. My hand absentmindedly received the plastic and I looked at its contents. There were an assortment of traditional cakes and sweets usually sold in a morning snacks stall by the street.

"What about the shop?" I asked again, feeling so lost. "It's opening?"

"Oh, last night you asked Ama if you could sleep in, and Ama—" she stopped after seeing my baffled expression. "I mean, Ama said you could sleep in today. So don't worry about it!"

She then stepped away that instant before I could say anything, hurriedly running down the stairs like she was being chased by a dog. Then I was left alone. *What just happened?*

I stood by the door for a few more minutes, frowning. I felt like I just woke up from a very long sleep; my body was perfectly fine, but my mind didn't feel clear. This whole thing felt like déjà vu.

Oh, crap.

I slammed the door and snatched my phone from the nightstand, throwing the plastic somewhere I didn't care to notice. I looked at the date and I scoffed, it's the future. I had lost more than a month at once. I couldn't *freaking* believe it. My face was hot, my head began to hurt from the anger that violently erupted. What had they been doing? What had Ama and Lia thought I'd been doing? What did I say to them? What kind of nonsense was fed to them?

I called dr. Elly that instant.

She was surprised, confused, unsure, but still maintained her composure. I explained to her I lost a huge chunk of my time, and I didn't have any memory of what I'd been doing. But the panic in my voice didn't faze her because she calmly instructed me to pay attention to any pain in my body, or any changes around me, and I needed to ask Ama and Lia to help me recount my activities from the last thing I remembered—which was the horrible accident in KFC. That felt like ages ago. Then we'd have an emergency session in the afternoon to discuss in more detail what we should do.

I felt like crying, but more of pure anger than the pain of losing and not in control. I didn't want any of this. They had rid me of my life, of my memories with the people around me, of our relationship. This was unfair, and it gave me that final push into my decision. I wanted final fusion more than anything. I wanted to gain the full control of my life back.

"The last thing you remembered was that night at the hospital?" dr. Elly asked. She put down the glass of water on the glass table in front of me. I nodded and took a sip of it, clearing my throat of the invisible lump that hindered me from speaking clearly.

"It felt like it's been ages since I came here..." I said as I looked around her practice. It didn't change at all, but I hadn't been here for more than a month. I didn't even come here often enough to deem it as familiar. "Did they... come here?"

She took a folder from the table and flipped a few pages. "I was introduced to three personalities. Two immediately left, one stayed and even returned. But it's also been a long time since any of them visited me."

"I feel like I know which one is which," I said, bitter. "They're the only ones I saw in the garden as well. Is it possible that there's only three?"

"It is. But we'll never know how many there are until we dig deeper. Some of these alters are fully formed and developed that they have their own autonomy, just like the three, but some are just incomplete fragments of your memory or trauma," she paused, then recalled something. "Did you ask for other people's recounts? What the body had been doing?"

I shook my head. "The shop was hectic, and I couldn't really ask them anything. I'll ask them again tonight." I sighed. "But I feel fine."

“That’s good. Please let me know if you’re in any physical pain or discomfort. It’s better to treat it soon, so we can focus more on treating the mind,” she said as she wrote something on her folder. “I’ve sent you messages and emails this past month, but I guess you didn’t get to see that?”

I checked my phone. It’s exactly how I last saw it—no new messages or emails from dr. Elly, except for spams and ads. “I didn’t receive anything...”

Dr. Elly leaned forward to see our chat history and frowned. She showed me her phone, and there were rows of chat bubbles she sent to me, and it showed that I’d read it.

“Someone deleted them,” I said, my voice low because I was holding myself back from cursing. “They can’t know my password...” Then I was reminded that this phone could also use facial recognition to unlock. They had my face. *Dammit.*

“I’m sorry, Nika...” Dr. Elly empathized. “We’ll create a separate private room to communicate if that’s what you want. I’ll create one online, and only us both know the password.”

I didn’t answer. But she knew I got it.

“Now, Nika, listen. I think you already know who’s the one returning to my office to consult, and I think you need to know what we’re discussing.”

An uncomfortable feeling swirled in my gut. I should not be swayed. Not twice, not by that woman.

“Ara positively agreed to integrated functioning,” she said.

I was confused. I thought they all refused treatment altogether?

“And the others?”

“Well... the other two, Egon and Hector, refused. This is expected in a DID system. Not everyone is on the same page. Agreeing to something so crucial needs exhaustive elaboration and persuasion.”

“But I don’t want integrated functioning,” I said, infuriated. Who was Ara to decide something as she wished? She didn’t have the right to decide anything. “I have the only right. This is my body.”

“And for them, it’s also theirs,” dr. Elly said. There was this hint of empathy in her voice that I didn’t know was directed for me or them. It’d better be for me. “The thing with DID is, these personalities are so developed that they think, act, speak, just like any other person out there. Imagine living together inside an apartment together. There are bound to be differences, some might be poles apart, and misunderstandings are bound to happen. But all these people compromise,” she said, gently emphasizing the last word so as to not offend me, “to create harmony.”

“But I’m the owner of that house. They go by my rules. If they refuse, then they’re the ones who should leave,” I said, unblinking. “Not me, not ever.”

Dr. Elly was silent, pondering hard over something. I couldn’t believe we’re still debating about what’s the right thing to do. I didn’t know why she always implicitly discouraged me to continue with final fusion.

“I know it’s a lengthy and difficult process, but I know I can go through it just fine. I don’t want to live like this anymore, and to stop it, I must start now,” I added. This seemed to persuade her because she nodded and scribbled on her folder again.

“To start the fusion process,” she began, “we need to confront past trauma.”

“Okay.”

“Because alters are split when the brain wants to separate the hurtful memories from everyday consciousness. To fuse an alter, you need to recall the memories, feelings, and experiences associated with that alter, and acknowledge it as your own.”

“Okay.”

“And to do that, you all need to communicate.”

My body went cold. I felt like I fell deeper into the ravine. I needed to face them all? My fists trembled, my nails dug into my palms.

Dr. Elly continued, “Because here’s the thing, in your case, you can’t know something happened if there’s no one recounting it for you because you don’t experience it yourself. These painful memories are separated from your consciousness, and that’s for a reason, one of them is for survival. It’s normal to recoil whenever you’re reminded of them. Our brain doesn’t fare well with trauma.”

“Okay, so I need to talk to them. How do I do that? I can’t control when I can arrive at the garden. They also won’t talk to me when I ask them, like here on the outside.”

“The garden is yours. The brain created it to visualize what it looks like inside your mind, so I think you actually can enter it freely. It needs getting used to, of course, but I believe you can do it. The brain is so powerful,” she smiled, looking proud. The brain was indeed powerful; it could create these cursed alters as well. I gave her a slightly forced smile.

She then took out several pages from the folder and handed them to me. On them were long paragraphs as well as lists of bullet points. “These accounts were from the sessions I had with Ara, and I think they can help you know them a bit better. But these are mostly from Ara’s perspective, though, because Egon and Hector haven’t had any sessions with me. Their stories could differ, and their personal experiences will vary. Think of these as a step further in knowing more about yourself.”

I scanned the pages, but didn’t retain any information. I’d read them when I was alone in my room later.

“Okay. A step forward,” I said, assuring myself.

FOUR

THE RECONCILIATION

Nika

Reading the documents from dr. Elly felt like reading a story about someone else's life. Everything was new to me, and it's horrifying. *That's the amnesia protecting you*, she said. *But these things indeed happened to your body, and the memories were kept by the alters.*

The thing was, it's so hard to accept something happened to you when you had no recollection of it at all. How could I know Ara wasn't lying? Making it all up? These were subjective. It might not have happened this way for all I knew.

I scanned the pages again and one bullet point caught my eye: likes K-pop.

I didn't really listen to music, only sometimes when I couldn't sleep, and I mostly listened to English pop songs, not K-pop. I checked my Spotify. There's no playlist consisting of K-pop songs, but I noticed in the Like tab, there they were. Song titles that I couldn't read, singers that I didn't recognize. I was getting dizzy.

Another bullet point also caught my eye, under Egon's name: likes books, Harry Potter.

I had read Harry Potter. Who hadn't?

I had all the e-book versions in my phone, I also had the physical copies in my shelf. There weren't that many books there but I had some renowned ones: Harry Potter, Narnia, Ulysses Moore, Percy Jackson... mostly fantasies. I took one of the Harry Potter books out, flipping through the pages. Skimming through it made me realize, what was it about again? I looked at the cover, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*; I knew I'd read this. But there's a huge chunk of the book that I didn't remember.

I put it back, my heart started racing.

It's common that people forget what they'd just read, right? That's why some kept rereading a section numerous times, or reread a book for the sake of nostalgia.

Or I started reading, Egon finished.

My vision started to blur from the tears. The kind that stemmed from hurt one felt in their heart, from mourning something one had lost. I hated this.

I opened my eyes and I saw the huge stone table. It worked.

Before I went to sleep, I imagined myself walking through the steel gate and arriving at the central table. I had no idea how to enter a place that's not even materialized in the real world. Yeah, people imagine, but how real was that imagination that it maintained its consistency? So I thought, my brain made this garden, it's not impossible to use its power to enter and leave the place freely. I fell asleep not having that high of a hope, but here I was.

It's always calm and quiet here, just the way I liked it. The smell of freshly cut grass and freshly brewed tea always lingered, not too overwhelming, just the way I liked it. The sun was bright but it didn't burn, something I always wished we had in the real world, especially the city I lived in. I believed Pontianak stood closer to the sun compared to other cities in the world. The sun was *that* scorching hot.

Footsteps were heard from one of the branching stone steps, and not long after, Egon appeared. He stopped abruptly in his tracks, shocked to see who was sitting at the table: me. He seemed unsure whether to turn around or continue walking. He chose the latter, slowly approaching the table. Before he sat down, he wiped the surface of the chair with his hand a few times.

"Uh... how long have you been here?" he asked. Not a hint of expression in his face.

I couldn't ever guess what's on his mind. His face was like a stone, unlike the others. No one's face was as flat as his, and no one knew what he's really thinking. Ara didn't show much, but emotions still found their way to her face muscles. But that giant guy, he wore his heart on his sleeves.

"I just arrived," I answered.

Then awkwardness announced its presence, growing with each passing second, choking me with unseen force. I knew he felt that too. Even though we only saw each other a few times, I knew we're both the type that despised small talk.

“So.” He’s the one to break the silence. I looked at him, but not really looking. “You visited the psychiatrist again.”

“How do you know?” I said, challenging him. He pointed at the screen room beyond the gate. “You’re spying on me now?”

He didn’t reply, which for me was like admitting I was right. I scoffed.

“I don’t want to fight,” he told me.

“Who says we’re gonna fight?” I crossed my arms and leaned on the table. “One can’t possibly be hurt here.”

“How do you know?” he asked, as if challenging what I knew about this place because I only found out about it recently.

“I made it that way.”

His lips were a flat line, unable to refute because he knew I was right. He scratched his temple where baby hairs tickled, then sighed and said, “What do you want?”

“I think you know the answer to that question.”

He clenched his jaw, and for just a moment, I could see him slightly panicking. But he masked it well. “We’re not going anywhere,” he said, unwavering.

I wasn’t going to flinch either. “We’ll see,” I told him, deliberately making it sound more like a threat. He should know who’s in charge. They all should know.

I stood up to return to my pod because I didn’t want to talk to him anymore. At the start of the steps leading to my space, I stopped and spoke without looking back at him, “If anyone dares take over from this point, I won’t stay still.”

“How’s your session with the doctor so far?” Ama asked me one afternoon after we’d closed the steel doors of our shop. When I thought about it again, closing early had its benefits. Ama could get more rest, and before this I didn’t think she needed one because she was always so healthy and spirited. Never in my life had I seen her stop working or get sick—sure, she got tired, but she was always back to normal after a good night’s sleep. I didn’t realize as I grew older, she also got older. It’s unhealthy for her to work long hours anymore. Our future savings

were sufficient. If we needed to open like before, I'd prohibit her from even standing near the counter.

"It's good. There's an improvement," I said, reaching the second floor and sitting down on the sofa in the living area. "I hope."

Ama sat beside me, putting down her herbal tea on the table in front of us. "You don't feel any changes?"

"To be honest, I don't really feel anything. It's so complicated," I said, watching my tone so I didn't sound that sad or dispirited. "The doctor said it will take time."

"What is it that you have again?"

"It's a bunch of words you won't understand." She hit my arm and I chuckled. "Just know I have this bunch of others living in my head. They're not spirits like we suspected, but they're like, people people."

"Isn't it like an American illness?" she asked, and there's this seriousness to her tone that stopped me from laughing or saying something sarcastic. I needed to remind myself that a seventy-year-old grandma was asking things she didn't understand.

"What is an American illness, Ama?" I asked her back, suppressing my smile.

"I dunno, those that appear in movies. There's a movie about that, right, several years back. You and Lia went to see it. I thought the talks about it had died down because there were no movies about that anymore. Remember how big it was when it first came out? Even I still remember that."

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered asking Lia to go to the cinema with me, and there's this thriller movie that had been the talk in the media for several weeks—maybe months. A movie about DID.

"You still remember that?" I asked, somewhat amazed she remembered this small detail. I didn't even recall what movies I'd been watching. *Tsk, well...*

"Yeah, and then you grumbled nonstop when you got home. Lia said you had been upset since you guys hadn't even stepped out of the theater. I guess you hated it."

I pressed my temples because I felt a headache coming. I realized that I didn't finish watching the movie because I couldn't remember how it ended. In my memory, I only recalled watching teenage girls being kidnapped by James McAvoy, then brought to an isolated place, met different versions of the character—welp, that's it. I let out a short laugh, I couldn't remember anything else after that.

“Yeah, that wasn't me,” I said, reminding myself to read the movie's Wikipedia page later. What made them upset? “That's uh... someone else. And no news doesn't mean it doesn't exist... I believe this disorder is still everywhere.”

“Yeah, like America? Are you sure you have this American illness?” Ama asked.

“Ah, Ama, it's not an American illness. Since when does an illness have nationality?” I laughed. “There are some cases in our country, too, although it's very rare. But not that rare actually. Dr. Elly said they aren't as exposed as in the US because there's still not enough research here. It could also be that the patients themselves don't realize they have it.”

“Like you?”

I paused. “Like me.”

The sound of Ama sipping her tea filled the silence in the room. I've been living for twenty years, yet there's this huge thing that I didn't realize I had. It's like not realizing I had blue skin even though I had been seeing myself in the mirror. But wait, shouldn't Ama know something? She must've seen my blue skin.

“Did you know I have this illness?” I asked.

She avoided my gaze, a sign she knew something. She didn't want to answer but that only made me press and corner her further. This woman needed coercion.

She sent me an irritated look. “You talk differently, you act differently, sometimes you can't remember anything at all, sometimes you're scared, other times you're so snobbish, sometimes you didn't wanna walk, other times you talk too much—”

“Okay, okay, I know that, you've said that,” I cut her. “But you're not confused? You didn't think something's wrong with me?”

“Course I did! That’s why I always gave you burnt charms to drink! I thought you’re being tormented by spirits,” she said in a high-pitched voice. “I changed all the paper charms periodically, even asked Budi to look after you when I’m out.”

“But all those didn’t work, surely you must’ve thought of something else.”

She cleared her throat. “That’s how I understand your condition. Bad spirits persist, and I thought I should just keep on doing what I’m doing to maintain the chain of defense. And always keep you physically safe.”

I sighed. “Well, now we know.”

She then went on to tell me that sometimes I didn’t respond when I was being called—that’s when she thought my soul went flying away, then I told her these alters had different names. Then she asked about the times I was so sociable that I spent the whole break talking to people in the nearby cafe, I stressed that it wasn’t me.

“You think I’d joke around with strangers?!” I said, upset.

“I know! I thought it was weird too. Which one was that?”

“I don’t know,” I snapped. The angry fire was raging in my gut.

“That also explained the fights,” she mumbled to herself.

“I hate this,” I snarled at the air in front of me. “They’re such *good* actors who ruin someone’s life.”

Ama rubbed my shoulders. “You’re treating it, don’t worry. You’re my only granddaughter. So how do you get rid of them?”

This was the part where I told her I needed other people’s accounts of the events in my life because I had to acknowledge them as my own. The brain separated those events and put the memories into the alters, that’s why I lost so much information about my own life. To gain my life back, I need to regain those memories.

Ama was silent for a long time.

“Tell me things that you know, Ama. That way I can get better,” I told her.

“I thought you had completely forgotten them,” she finally said. “Turns out it still stayed with you, though in other forms.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. She didn’t reply. From the look of it, she didn’t want to talk about anything, but I needed to know. “Is it about my uncle?”

Her wide eyes looked into mine, her gray eyebrows knitted so closely together. “What—how do you know?” Her mouth was agape, making it seemed she still had something to say, but she couldn’t utter another word. Ama didn’t get shocked that easily, which made her a boring person to give surprises to, but right now she’s *really* surprised. “How far did you remember?” she continued.

“I didn’t remember anything. Dr. Elly gave me documents about another person’s memories. Are they real?” I asked.

She sighed in relief and looked away. “You don’t need to know.”

“But, Ama—I need to,” I protested. “If I don’t gain the memories, they will stay forever within that alter. Then I can’t recover.”

“It’s better that way, you don’t need to remember everything,” Ama said.

And that baffled me. I was speechless because it only confirmed one thing: Ara was right.

I ran upstairs and slammed the door of my room.

“Okay, that happened. I acknowledged it. But why does Ara still exist? Or any of them for that matter?” I asked Dr. Elly, my tone was harsh and demanding, but I didn’t care. When I woke up in my pod this morning, I walked to the central table to head to the gate. There she was, sitting at the central table with the Hercules. I ran to the gate before anyone else could take over.

Dr. Elly rubbed her hands. “Unfortunately, you didn’t acknowledge anything, Nika.”

“What?”

“What you acknowledged is only a pitiful story of a child,” she paused, looking straight into my eyes. “Not *your* story as a child.”

“The thing is—” I bit my lower lip, rearranging my thoughts before continuing. I sighed. “I *can’t* remember,” I finally said, defeated.

“Your memory is with the alters. Have you talked to them?”

I shifted in my seat. The cushiony beige sofa suddenly felt like bricks. My butt hurt.

She knew what my silence meant and said, “It’s, of course, not easy to confront the unfamiliar. I didn’t ask you to dive into your trauma story headfirst because that’s counterproductive. Just talk to them, anything will do, because that way you can get to know them. The trauma talk will flow on its own.”

I made a face asking ‘*do I have to?*’ I don’t feel like talking to them at all. If I could avoid them for the rest of the treatment, that would be the dream.

“Just try.” Dr. Elly smiled. I couldn’t lay another protest because I knew she’s right.

I didn’t know that talking could be so hard. I wasn’t one to initiate discussion or conversation, except if it’s needed, like deliberating over which fish was best taste-wise and price-wise, deciding the marketing strategies for the shop... they all had their purpose.

Ah, this also had its own purpose, but why was it so hard?

I don’t know where to start.

How did one start a conversation again?

While I was zoning out thinking—but not really thinking—about what to talk about, the wind carried a smell I detested the most. I searched for its origin; it turned out a couple of very young street singers were smoking cigarettes two shops to my left. They were chatting while sitting on people’s parked motorcycles.

I looked at them and tried to focus, but my vision blurred. I rubbed my eyes, probably there was dust. I tried to focus on them again, but my eyelids were heavy, like I was going to go to sleep. I squinted at them, but they had become more blurry

Egon

My head did an involuntary slight jerk. My vision was blurry so I rubbed my eyes. What's in front of me cleared up and there was the familiar cooking counter. Wait.

I looked around, there seemed to be nothing out of place. No new customers, the current ones were still eating, neither Ama or Lia was calling me, there's no one talking to me, no fire... why was I brought forward?

Then I smelled it. *Ah...*

I looked to my left. In front of a closed shophouse, there were two scrawny teenage boys smoking cigarettes on top of parked motorcycles, their cheap ukuleles on their laps. I clicked my tongue, no wonder I was brought to the front.

The two boys seemed to realize I was angrily staring at them. They whispered something between each other, smirked and stood up. Their footsteps were heading towards the shop. *Ah, shit.* I shouldn't have glared at them. I forgot that most guys didn't take girls seriously. They must have taken this body's glare as a challenge, and they definitely thought they would win against a girl. What did they need to prove? That they're the dominant one? *Yuck.*

"Sorry, you can't busk here," I stopped them, pointing at the "No Busking" sign on one of the shop's pillars. They ignored me with a smug grin on their face, beginning to strum their squeaky ukuleles. I sighed.

Then I quickly stepped out of the counter and stood in front of them, preventing them from stepping into the dining area. I was easily much taller than any of them. They needed to slightly look up, and I knew they didn't consider my height because they only saw me from afar. My height seemed to bruise their fragile pride because they immediately looked away.

"Please leave," I told them.

"Sis, we're only making our ends meet," one of them said with a sickly sweet voice, displaying a pair of puppy eyes that only showed they're enjoying this encounter.

"One time won't hurt," the other said, taking another drag at his cigarette.

"You brats are already taking poisons, huh? Now go away before I really cast you out," I said, keeping my voice low to not make a scene.

One of them laughed, then dropped his cigarette near my feet. He looked me in the eyes and stepped on the cigarette, deliberately creating a loud stomp with his sandals. Never once did I blink or look away.

He then blew a puff of gray smoke right into my face.

It got into my eyes and in reflex, I pushed the boy away and he tumbled down with surprise. My eyes stung and I couldn't breathe.

I heard the boy growled and said, "YOU DARE—"

Hector

My left arm stopped an incoming ukulele, twisted the owner's arm and I kicked his butt. Not that hard, but he still fell with a loud groan. Another ukulele flew to my face, but I grabbed a hold of it before it landed, and kicked the other boy to the ground. I contemplated breaking the instrument, but stopped myself because I didn't want to pay for compensation. I knew they're *that* petty. So I just threw it near their lame wincing bodies.

I let out a tired sigh, indicating that this fight was a piece of cake, that they didn't pose any challenge to me at all. "Now you've made a scene," I told them.

Some motorcyclists slowed down to see what's going on, and I just waved them hi. In the dining area, the customers were all standing up, whispering amongst themselves and looking worried. I told them, with a reassuring smile, that everything was fine and the boys just fell on their own. They went back to eating not long after, occasionally looking my way to see what would happen next. I also calmed Ama and Lia down, who were trying their best to not add to the customer's panic, while silently panicking themselves, not knowing what to do.

"Run along, now. Don't you ever come back," I said with my lowest possible voice this body could make without sparing them a single glance. Ah, the cloudless sky was exceptionally dazzling today.

The delinquents didn't dare say anything anymore and sprinted towards the junction at the end of the street, holding back shame and fury. They probably vowed to get back at me someday. I should be alert.

"That's dangerous! What were you thinking, Nika!" Ama screeched with a low voice, then hit my arm.

"Ouch, Ama! Why did you hit me!" I rubbed at the stinging spot. "They started it first!"

"But that doesn't mean you should kick them in the butt! What would you do if they came back to have their revenge? We can't know what kind of ring they're involved in."

"Ah, it's probably just lame street boys. I could tell they're new here because no one ever dares to mess with us. But that's fine. I'm here." I looked at Lia and winked. She smiled, knowing it's me, Hector.

“Oh, hello, welcome! What should I get you?” I said, smiling at the new customers approaching us. I slipped back to the cooking counter like nothing happened and took their orders.

After I finished making the order, Egon reminded me what Nika had said. It’s better to leave now than later. I concentrated on a single point on the table and blinked. My vision tunneled and I closed my eyes.

Nika

“Nika.”

I rubbed my eyes and turned to look at Lia, who just called me. “What is it?” I asked her, trying to focus on her face. A few blinks and her face was clear.

“Nothing,” she smiled. “Table one wanted extra dumplings.”

“O-kay...” I said, a little bit suspicious, but I didn’t know what. It’s just a lingering odd feeling that I was sure would fade away if there’s indeed nothing happening. I prepared the dumplings in an instant and placed the bowl on the serving tray she’s holding.

I looked to my left, where I saw the two teenage boys. They’re not there. I frowned, maybe they went somewhere.

A customer then approached me to pay for their meals, which made me shift my focus to her and the register machine.

“It’s been so long since that happened,” the customer said.

“What was that?” I asked while counting the change, so I didn’t really get what she’s saying.

“The thugs. I think you need to report to the town authorities. They’re increasing in number and should be put in order,” she said with a fiery concern in her eyes. “If not, the safety here will be disrupted. Apek and the parking guys couldn’t do much if they kept on coming.”

My head stopped counting for a second, my hands floated midair, but I composed myself and recounted the change. I handed her the money and said, “I’m sure there will be patrols soon. Don’t worry about it.”

She walked away after commenting on how cool and brave I looked just now. I thanked her for her continuous patronage, while a fuse of exasperation exploded like fireworks within me.

“The hell did you do?” I snapped as soon as I reached the table. Egon and Ara were sitting at the table. The latter directly stood up, trying to look strong and welcoming, uttering words to calm us down.

Egon rolled his eyes. “Don’t waste your energy, Ara. Nothing we say will make her understand.”

Ara seemed unsure of how to react to us both, and hesitantly sat down, looking very uncomfortable and worried. The giant was nowhere to be seen. Not that I cared.

“I freaking told you not to come out.” I pointed at them angrily. “And you still did.”

“It’s not like we *wanted* to front!” Egon said, frustrated. “What part of involuntary do you not understand?”

My lips were pressed together. “Couldn’t you at least fight it?” I said between my teeth, angry at them for not trying.

Egon threw his hands in annoyance, giving up in trying to explain. He didn’t look my way anymore. I stood there, fighting back tears. That’s one thing I hated, tears always fell when I was either angry or sad, or both. Crying in anger made me look weak and made the other person think I was scared. Ara gently told me to sit down to calm myself, saying it’s no good speaking when your emotions were heightened. I did as she said.

“Do you know what happened before you dissociated?” Ara asked me a few moments later. Egon still refused to face me. The hell with him.

“I saw two guys two shops down,” I said.

“What were they doing?”

“Smoking.”

“Anything else?”

“None.”

Ara nodded, then looked at Egon. “It’s his trigger,” she told me. “He’ll almost automatically front when the body smells cigarette smoke.”

I didn't respond for a while, trying to take it in, matching what she said with Dr. Elly's documents. "I've read about that," I finally said, my eyes downcast. But my pride still trampled on my guilt.

Seeing that Egon didn't want to talk to me, I'd just talk to Ara. Might as well, because we're here anyway. I'd do what Dr. Elly asked me to. From the three, Ara seemed the most approachable, and she's the only one who didn't reply with sarcasm or cynicism.

"Are all the things you told Dr. Elly the truth?" I asked, keeping my voice low so Egon wouldn't hear us that clearly.

Her mouth curved into a sad smile, an expression I often saw on her face. "Yes."

"The abuse? The neglect?"

"Yes." She looked away to quickly wipe her tears. This I noticed too. She never wanted others to see her tears, just like Egon didn't want others to see his emotions. It's obvious from the glassy redness in her eyes that she's crying.

"But I can't remember," I said. "Who took the memories?"

"We all did," Egon chimed in.

I clicked my tongue at him, very annoyed because he's been eavesdropping. Well, anyone's going to hear everything anyway, I was just irritated by him. "I'm not talking to you."

"So rude," he said under his breath, which I heard.

Ara was showing her nervous smile, pleading for us to stop with her eyes. She echoed what Egon had said, "Pieces of memories from that period stayed with us. Egon holds more, though, because he appeared first. Aside from us three, there are the littles and some fragments."

"Fragments?"

"They're the holders of specific incomplete memories. Not that developed, and they seem to be stuck in the past. I've seen some of them in the depth of the forest." She pointed at the dense trees beyond a small valley.

"They can't front?"

“They can and they did, several years back, and it’s... bad,” she said, glancing at Egon. “We tried to deal with them, but their conditions made it difficult.”

An idea popped inside my head, but I needed to know more about these fragments. “How do you know they’re fragments? Are they, like, incomplete? No hands or feet?” I shuddered at the horrifying image. Did someone that scary really reside in this serene garden?

Ara quickly shook her palms to refute what I just said. “You’ll know when you see them. They, uhm, look like you.”

“Me? Like this?” I pointed at myself. “What, like, twins?”

“It’s not a twin. They’re a much younger version of you... always look scared and always refuse to move from their spots,” she explained. “Do you want to meet them?”

I was lost in thought for a second, then I realized Ara was waiting for my reply. “Huh? Uh, not now. I’m not ready yet,” I lied.

Damn, I had more to deal with. These three were already beyond burdensome, now I needed to face more. But the thing was, these three were so developed. They’re their own person, and they’d planted their roots deeper than I thought. I didn’t think it’s the case for these fragments. They didn’t even let their roots penetrate the ground from what I understood. But they still did their damage. Just like unwanted plant pests, I needed to weed them out. That way I could trim the yellowing and dead parts first, leaving only the large branches to deal with at the end.

Now I needed to concoct a thorough plan.

Ara

“You gave away too much information,” Egon said once Nika was out of sight. She had returned to her space.

“I think she deserves to know. It’s her garden too,” I replied, feeling tired.

“But who knows what she’ll do? This is risky.” He clicked his tongue. “I should’ve stopped it.”

“Stopped me?” I asked, disappointed. “Why didn’t you? After all we’ve been through, you still think I want to harm the system?”

“That’s not what I meant—”

I quickly stood up and left before I bawled in front of Egon. Heavy tears threatened to fall and I couldn’t stop them. They’d continue falling because my heart hurt so much.

I didn’t know how long had passed, but I felt like I’d cried for a long time. It was just so painful thinking about our current situation—everyone was against everyone. I knew the road to recovery was difficult, I should’ve been more prepared. If I did, I wouldn’t be this hurt. I just wanted everyone to get along.

Now I needed to check on the littles, so I gathered myself and stepped out of my small cottage. Who was standing before me almost made me jump in surprise.

“Nika,” I gasped, lightly tapping my chest to calm my thumping heart. I closed the door behind me.

I could never get used to seeing Nika anywhere in the garden. She never roamed around—well, she did, but always in this half-dreaming state, like a sleepwalking person, which had made her think this place was a dream. But that was also a very rare occurrence. Her consciousness was always transported specifically from her pod to the screen, and vice versa.

She hummed. “It’s a cozy cottage.”

I looked around automatically. It was dimmer in my space because the sky always showed a moment before twilight began, so it was filled with a slightly brighter hue of soft

sunset colors above. It illuminated just enough for us to still comfortably see the small cottage I live in.

“Please, sit here,” I said, pointing to the dark wooden chairs on the porch. She followed me silently. “Do you perhaps need something?”

She was still looking around the space. “How come I only have a single pod?” she asked no one in particular.

A short laugh slipped my lips. “That, I don’t know either. This has been here since the beginning,” I said as I pointed around the space.

I remembered walking on the path leading to my cottage for the first time. I just came back from a beyond painful experience, feeling extremely lost and confused but my feet seemed to know where they’re going. They led me here, to a safe sanctuary exactly how I wanted it to be.

“What flowers are those?” She pointed at the greens that lined the trail, adorned with small bell-shaped flowers, clustered into beautiful downward curves. The flowers were all white in color.

“Oh, they’re Lilies of the Valley. Pretty, huh?” I said, feeling proud. The lilies were cute on their own, but when clustered together, they formed this elegant line that I always admired.

She nodded, but didn’t say anything anymore.

“Why did you come here, Nika?” I asked her. If she didn’t want to start, then I’d start the topic for her.

She’s thinking about something, I could see it from her darting eyes that didn’t linger at a certain place. Hector did that too.

“I... just thought you’re the most approachable person here. I have a lot of things to ask,” she finally said, careful and guarded. “The table is always occupied, so I think it’s best to come here to talk to you in private.”

Nika was always nervous when she’s here, as expected from someone who was in a foreign place, especially when they didn’t realize they’d been here all along. I knew she tried to look strong in front of us—or perhaps the guys, but I knew she’s scared nonetheless. Seeking support was always good.

“I’m so glad you think of me that way,” I smiled, genuinely happy. “Indeed, there’s always someone at the table because that’s like the communal area here. You know, the others may not look like it, but they’re kind too.”

She scoffed. “I don’t know about that.”

“Baby steps,” I told her. “Okay, we have a lot to discuss, how about you come with me to see the littles? You haven’t met them, right?”

“What?” She was taken aback, her smile completely disappeared from her face, only looking at me confusedly as I stood up. I could see her cowering, like she had shrunk in size due to the anxiety of facing something new. This she shared with Egon. Egon’s worse, though.

“C’mon,” I said, motioning her to follow me. I walked along my trail knowing she’s following me a few steps back. We passed through the central table, and Egon’s still there, gawking at what he’s seeing—a picture he’d never seen before: Nika tailing me, we’re both heading to the daycare.

The trail to the daycare—the space wherein the children occupied—was located right next to mine. As the system’s caretaker, I needed to be the closest to the littles, so that I was always ready when they needed me.

Pretty gardenia bushes greeted us along the trail, and not long after, we heard giggles. I was glad they’re in a good mood. One little girl noticed us approaching and ran to smash herself into my leg, hugging it tight.

“Ara!” She showed the biggest smile, deepening her two dimples at the corners of her mouth. The others noticed me and rushed to hug my legs. I laughed and counted their heads in my mind—one, two, three... the fourth was missing.

“Where’s Wen?” I crouched down to match their eyes. They looked around and shook their heads. “Did she play with you?”

“No, she’s been inside,” Tara said, pointing at the door leading to the daycare center.

It’s not really a daycare center like the outside world. It’s just a rectangular room whose door and large windows were covered with colorful stickers in all shapes and sizes. Inside, there were colorful soft mattresses where the children slept and a bunch of toys and picture books. In one corner, a little girl was reading, her knees tucked close to her chest.

“Wen,” I called. She looked up. “Come here, I want to introduce you to someone.”

She put her book down and approached me slowly, her hands crumpling the edges of her shirt, her eyes downcast. I held her hand and we walked outside the room. Nika was standing at the end of the trail, unsure of what to do because the kids were all looking at her curiously. I needed to step in before they bombarded her with endless questions.

“Now that everyone is here, let me introduce this person next to me,” I began. “She—”

“I know her! She lives in a rocket!” Tala, Tara’s twin sister, cut in with her loud voice.

“Oh, that one! I saw it! But she’s always sleeping inside,” Tara chimed in. “Are you the sleeping beauty princess?”

“Huh? Uh—” Nika turned to look at me, looking like she wanted to cry.

“The sleeping beauty princess is only a fairytale, you fools!” Ren, the only boy, retorted. Then the conversation quickly escalated to arguments whether princesses really existed or not.

I clapped my hands a few times to catch their attention. “Okay, guys, stop arguing. This is Nika, say, ‘hello, Nika,’ in one, two, three.”

“Hello, Nika,” they all repeated in unison. I smiled and praised everyone.

“Nika is our neighbor, so we should be kind to each other,” I told them. I wasn’t worried about the kids being mean, they all didn’t really care about what’s happening out there and they only wanted to have fun. And we should keep it that way. What’s happening outside wasn’t their concern.

After checking on them and didn’t find anything out of place, Nika and I left the daycare. I’d check on them a few hours later.

“What if you can’t? Because you’re, you know, outside. Fronting,” she asked.

“Egon will check on them.”

“What about the Hercules?”

I stopped in my tracks and dramatically shook my head, showing a made-up horrified expression. “They’re *terrified* of him. He’s so big!”

“And he’s rude,” she added.

“Well, that, too.” Then I giggled, she shot me a confused look. “It feels good, talking to you like this.”

She was speechless for a few seconds, but composed herself together and let out a nervous smile. “Baby steps,” she repeated.

Nika

I woke up at dawn after a few rings of my alarm, feeling like I'd been staying up for a few days. It was exhausting, but only mentally. My body felt fine. It's one of those days when your head felt cloudy like a river after a torrential downpour.

After we visited the daycare, Ara and I spent, I don't know, maybe a couple hours talking at her cottage. Then I returned to my pod to sleep, it turned out I only slept for such a short while—I just napped, really. The body got its rest, but I didn't. I needed to figure this out, divide my time, because I needed to do more things inside.

Yesterday Ara and I mostly talked about the kids because I didn't have any idea about their existence—well, I didn't know *any* of their existence, but I expected everyone to be all grown up. At least not as young as five years old. Teenagers I still understood.

The second ever alter to appear was Wen, a five-year-old girl who was a trauma holder. She was split shortly after Egon due to the abuse my uncle inflicted. The brain had separated the hurtful memories a five-year-old experienced, bringing along the body's appearance, feelings, and thoughts of that specific time. That's why she looked like me. Well, she was me when I was five years old. I couldn't wrap my head around this fact initially, a part of me denied it, and perhaps that's why I couldn't bring myself to look at Wen for more than two seconds. I'd seen photos of me when I was young, but not this young. The first picture of me was taken when I was about nine or ten, once I was healthy and all my injuries completely healed. I could see Wen's resemblance in that picture of me.

Back when I was still living with my mother and uncle, Wen didn't front that often because Egon did most of the time, then followed by Ara and Hector. I thought, at least that's good because it's beyond horrifying for her to experience the trauma again. Because she's a trauma holder, the memories of the abuse stayed within her, and she's always reminded of them. That's why she rarely smiled, always looked scared and cautious, as if constantly expecting something bad to happen. The nightmare never left her.

I shed a tear when Ara told me this. Wen was an alter, but she's still a little child nonetheless. But Ara said the company of the other three children really made her better, even though she rarely participated in their activities and games. At least she wasn't alone anymore. The adult alters always paid closer attention to her.

Wen's triggers were similar to Egon's, which were cigarette smoke, loud voices of men, and physical pain. There were several unfortunate instances when she fronted, which wreaked havoc in the garden. Egon then sprinted to the screen room and coaxed Wen to return and he soon took over.

"We mostly can't control who the brain is going to pluck and send to the outside world, but at least we can deal with the aftermath of it. That's also why I'm always, always at the central table, taking a seat where I can easily see the gate to monitor who's fronting. We can't afford to harm the body," Ara said.

The identical twin sisters, Tara and Tala, were the manifestation of the brain's desire for a happy and fun, worryless childhood. One that all children deserved. They mostly played and giggled all day long, sleeping only when they're tired, and continued playing and giggling. They're their own best friend and no one could ever separate them. But why twins? I asked.

Apparently they were split because of the little me's desire to have a sister—but not someone older or younger, so, twins. That way they're equal. They also looked different from Wen. While Wen had medium length hair, the twins had a thick short bob and flat bangs. Wen's stick thin, the twins were chubbier, though their height was shorter than Wen. Wen was perpetually pale, but the twins always had rosy plump cheeks. The sisters both loved everything about princesses, sparkles, plushies, and rainbows.

"That's the twins' triggers." Ara said shortly after that. Then she reminded me to avoid them because it's extremely unsafe if one of them fronted. Even though they were in the body of a twenty-year-old female, they're still five years old inside. They'd be confused and scared, easily lose their way and could harm themselves. Okay, I assured her.

The last child alter, Ren, was split shortly after I moved to the city. He's the manifestation of courage and toughness because the body was bullied—he's the complete opposite of Wen. There were some kids around my age in the neighborhood, and most of them were curious about the new girl who never came out of the house. Even though my grandparents' noodle shop was as crowded as ever, I always stayed on the second floor. I didn't remember what I was doing all those times.

When I asked Ama about that, she recounted things that I had mostly forgotten. She told me I was mostly sleeping back then, waking up only to eat or clean myself. There was a helper back then, but I refused to see her because I was scared. Ama took care of me most of

the time so she couldn't really help the shop. When I was well enough, I went downstairs but still hid in the back kitchen or the preparation room. About a year later, I could stay in the dining area without freaking out. That's when the neighborhood children often came to visit, which I always avoided because I'd never seen these many kids wanting to play with me at once—it was too overwhelming. But my grandparents encouraged me to join them and I did, so as not to disappoint. Some of the boys bullied me because I seldom talked to them and I was very thin. My skin was full of scars and they bullied me for that.

Ren then came into being and took over whenever the kids approached the shop. He fought most of them, venting the frustrations of being made fun of, which spooked most of the children because they didn't expect that at all, coming from the mouth of a very quiet girl. The neighborhood kids didn't dare to bother me anymore.

I had forgotten all of that. Everything I had just learned was as good as new, which strengthened the notion that I was listening to someone else's story. I couldn't relate to Ara's documents and stories about the littles. Sure it happened to them, and that's sad, but I just couldn't imagine it happening to me. But it really happened, which made everything more bizarre than it already was.

I dragged a plastic stool to the cooking counter and plopped down, letting out an exasperated sigh which I didn't realize was that loud.

"Why? Are you tired?" Ama asked—more like interrogated.

"No," I refuted. Then I looked around, the shop was hitting its slow period, which was around ten o'clock. It's not quite breakfast but also not quite lunch. I got time to interrogate Ama in return before the lunch frenzy began.

I lifted one of my sleeves, then saw numerous dark scars in the form of little circles. I had never paid much attention to them because I thought they were allergy or smallpox scars. After learning about my past, it gave me an idea how they were inflicted.

"Ama, what marks are these?" I deliberately asked her. She came closer and bent down to look at my upper arm.

Her brows furrowed and her expression turned grim. "I don't know. Probably from the smallpox you had when you're young."

“I don’t think smallpox can cause scars this big. Are you sure they aren’t cigarette burns?”

She straightened her posture and looked at me with eyes full of concern. “Why did you think that?”

I unfurled my sleeve and rolled the other side up to see similar scattered scars. They were found in a lot of places: my chest, my back, my stomach, my thighs, my legs. Some of them had faded, but most still persisted. I scoffed, all this time I thought they were smallpox scars.

“I saw some fragments of memories,” I lied. I hadn’t seen anything. Yet.

She shifted uncomfortably. She knew she couldn’t escape anymore.

“It’s okay, Ama. It’s part of the treatment so that I can heal,” I reassured her.

“It’s all a part of the recovery process,” I repeated, reassuring myself.

Hector

“The hell are you doing here?” I snapped at a thin figure lurking in the shadows of the trees.

The figure jumped in shock and tripped over a thick root, falling to the grass. I stood there, amused, as I saw her stand up immediately, face red with embarrassment.

I was sitting at the table as usual when I saw movements, far past the valley into the trees. Alerted, I headed there immediately, trying to see what it was. It’s not that uncommon to have shadows lurking in the trees because they are the manifestation of nightmares. But they’re mostly harmless, and they never left the woods. After some time had passed, they would disappear on their own. I’d just check if there were some new ones.

“Leave me alone,” Nika said as she walked past me, entering deeper into the forest.

“What are you looking for?” I asked, following her not far behind. “Or, who are you looking for?”

She turned her body to face me so fast that I stopped in surprise. Wasn’t she dizzy because of that? Her brows formed that V shape like the clock hands when it’s ten past ten.

“Heh, your eyebrows are ridiculous,” I said as I pointed at them. She covered them with her palms.

“Shut up. Don’t follow me.”

After a few minutes of walking, I wanted to tease her. “Have I told you that there are spirits lurking around here?”

She stopped, but refrained from asking me further questions because I knew her pride got in the way, so she continued walking. I knew she’s scared. Eh, but it could also be that she’s foolish. It’s much dimmer here in the forest, as one could expect how a forest with dense canopies would be. The breeze made the leaves rustle, creating a fake rain sound. Thankfully it’s always sunny in the garden, so we wouldn’t have to worry about nightfall.

Then as if the wind had stopped blowing, murmurs could clearly be heard from a small clearing beyond a large oak tree. It’s not a collective sound, but rather it’s coming from a single source, one that talked nonstop.

Nika stopped to collect herself, then tiptoed to the tree and peeked at what's behind it. I left a space between us and also looked at what's there. Nika gasped.

"Is that me?" she whispered shakily, couldn't believe what she's seeing.

Crouched into a small ball in the grassy clearing surrounded by oak trees was Nika—a much younger version of her, that was. She's in her early teenage years, wearing a black sweater and black leggings. The wind made her disheveled hair messier. And she's spouting gibberish.

"I saw uncle, he's mean, I saw uncle, he's mean, I saw uncle, he's mean..."

That was the murmuring sound that we heard.

I looked down to see a shocked older Nika, she had become a statue. Well, these fragments weren't exactly a pleasant sight to see. I'd seen some of them scattered within this forest, so I wasn't surprised to encounter one. But it's the first time Nika had encountered a fragment.

"Nika," I called. Both of them turned their heads to look at me. I suppressed my burning urge to laugh.

"Not you," I told the older Nika, then proceeded to approach the fragment slowly. "Are you okay? What did you see?"

She's seen me before, so we could skip the part where she's so spooked that she hysterically cried for help, and Egon came flying to her rescue. I'd received bitter scolding because not much was known from these fragments, but that didn't stop me from trying to get to know this one. She was split when Nika had flashbacks of the abuse, which happened when the body's around twelve years old. An unpleasant encounter with an older man who refused to leave the storefront triggered the younger Nika. I fronted shortly after, while the flashbacks split into a fragment.

"Uncle shouted at me. He was angry because I said I was hungry." Young Nika's trembling voice was barely audible, so I needed to stick my ears closer. I nodded, and nodded, having listened to the same story. This trauma happened when she was still living in her childhood home, when she's around four years old: she was hungry, uncle barked his insults, assaulted her, and left her to starve till the next day.

"It's okay now, uncle already left," I told her, gently stroking her head.

She looked away, her eyes as empty as the water barrel during drought. It's calm before the storm now, because in a moment she would see the flashbacks again. Fragments couldn't escape them—not that we could, it's just... it's harder on them because they couldn't turn it off.

I looked at the oak tree where older Nika was hiding. She still peeked at us, so I beckoned her to come. She stepped forward cautiously, minimizing the sound of rustling grass and leaves under her feet.

“Say hi to you,” I joked.

It's a really peculiar sight to see: two people with the same face looking at each other, though one was younger. There was shock shown on their faces, but different types of shock: one was due to the trauma she's been reliving in, the other was due to the disbelief of facing a real and broken piece of herself.

“C'mon, shake hands, you guys know each other,” I said, trying to sound cheerful so as not to scare both of them.

Like a mindless robot, older Nika stretched out her hand and the younger one did the same. They were looking into each other's eyes.

Then, like a slowed-down scene of a movie, the twelve-year-old Nika started to blur, like her skin had pixelated and the tiny pieces scattered, floated into the air, then vanished. It only took seconds, then the twelve-year-old was gone, leaving Nika's palm hanging midair. I watched the whole scene unfolded, and was speechless, a few more seconds later I barely collected myself together. Then the cry started.

Nika

My vision darkened, then it turned completely dark. Everywhere around me turned into a silent abyss that seemed never-ending. I was searching for any source of light but I couldn't find any. Did I just turn blind?

Then something unfolded before my eyes, just like the old film reel unrolling itself, showing moving pictures of a forgotten event in the past. I saw my little hands, dirty and crusty with dried blood. My stomach was awkwardly swollen, on its sides were rows and rows of thin rib cage lines, so prominent that it evoked horror. I was starving, I was tired. The dark bruises on my skin throb with pain, the circular scabs not so much, but they still caused discomfort. I begged for my uncle to give me something to eat, I cried in desperation.

But he smacked me across the face in a shocking, burning blow. Then I was kicked to the ground. Of course I was hysterical. With every growing ache I cried even louder. What did I do wrong? I just wanted to eat. But instead of food, I received another blow.

The louder you cry, the harder my smack will be.

One threat made me realize I couldn't escape any of his torture if I continued crying. So I tried so hard to stop. Little cries still slipped out, but I managed to stifle them altogether. I was hoping he would give me food after I was completely quiet.

But he dragged me to his bedroom.

I screamed and I screamed.

Everything was so painful I passed out.

I collapsed to the ground with a loud thud. Then I heard someone call my name over and over again, shaking my body so hard but my eyes couldn't focus on anything. I felt so worn out that I couldn't even lift a finger. Then my body was hoisted up, clutched close and tight in a pair of muscular arms. It felt hard yet tender at the same time.

I could feel the wind brushing against my cheek as we ran so inhumanly fast across the forest, out into the little valley, and reaching the center in the blink of an eye. Panic shouts were

heard, an alarming chaos, but we didn't stop. The ground wasn't shaking beneath me anymore when my body was gently laid onto a familiar soft mattress. My pod.

I just hoped my uncle wouldn't come to my dreams.

Egon

“The fuck did you do to her???” I screamed. I didn’t care if the others could hear.

“I didn’t do anything!” Hector heaved. Drops of sweat rolled down his temples, to his jaw, to the ground.

I still couldn’t grasp what was even happening and I could already feel my anxiety attack coming. It’s getting harder to take a breath. This was bad, I couldn’t make any sound with my mouth. I hit my chest a few times and brushed a few strokes to prevent it from getting worse. Ara patted my back as she saw me getting more and more breathless.

“Can you explain?” she asked Hector, who was looking at the unconscious Nika whose face was wet with tears, concerned and shocked.

“We just... we were just...” He couldn’t continue as he was too overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events.

“Hector, look at me,” Ara commanded. Her hand never left my back, emanating warmth that spread all over, helping me calm down. Hector did as she said, his face still stunned. “What happened to you guys in the forest?”

Hector cleared his throat, but his voice still trembled. “We... I found her walking inside the forest. She told me to go away but I followed her just in case.... Then we came across a fragment of her when she’s twelve years old. They shook hands, then she...” Hector stopped.

“What happened next?” Ara gently urged him.

“The fragment disappeared.” Hector looked at us with horrified eyes. “Then Nika started to scream, and she lost consciousness. I ran here as fast as I could...”

Ara and I looked at each other, understanding the weight of the problem.

“They just integrated,” I gasped.

The sky somehow looked gloomier than ever before. There’s this grayish hue that accompanied the usual blue, and as expected, it was dimmer in the garden. This had happened before, once.

Nika was still inside her pod, and while Ara watched her, Hector and I went to the forest to check on the vanished fragment.

She was indeed gone.

We checked on other fragments, thankfully they're still there in their respective places. The lurking shadows seemed to take interest, but they fled at the sight of us. As scary as they might appear, they were scared of us more than anything, so we didn't have to worry about them disturbing the fragments. On the other hand, the fragments were all too busy drowning in their own trauma to notice the shadows.

Integration had happened before, but only among fragments. As the memories and feelings integrate, so did the fragments who possessed those memories and feelings. There were instances where we found two fragments merged into one, then this one merged with another. We didn't understand how it happened either, so we tried to not interact with them too much, only when necessary.

"I think it's my fault," Hector said as we walked back to the center. He's been dejected ever since the integration. "I told them to shake hands."

I pushed away the plants that blocked my way. "That doesn't make any sense. We shook hands with them before, and we didn't integrate."

"But why did the fragment integrate right after she shook hands with Nika?" he asked, frustrated.

I'd been thinking the same thing over and over again. It's scary when we're unable to know what's the exact thing that would stop us from existing. "I think I know, but it's only a theory."

"Well, your theory is usually the truth," he quickly replied. I didn't know if that's meant as an insult or praise.

"They easily integrate because they look like each other."

Hector narrowed his eyes, his mind in between believing and disbelieving me. "Go on," he said.

"I mean, think about it. The ones who integrated so far were only the fragments, and they all have the exact same face as Nika, albeit different ages."

Then his eyes went round, the gears finally clicked in his head. "I think you're right," he said. "Wow, I think you're right. We need to guard the forest, so she can't enter and integrate with the other fragments."

"We should do that," I agreed. "But I wonder if she wants to go through the same process of integration if it's this painful. She passed out due to the shock."

"If she trained she'd get used to it," Hector said matter-of-factly. I looked at him in disbelief, what masochistic mind would want to be hurt repeatedly?

"Imagine working out! It's incredibly painful the first time you train, but when you push through it, you'll get used to it. It's the same concept," he explained, again with his usual condescending tone.

"I don't like exercising," I said, short and straight to the point, then I walked faster to leave him behind. But I understood what he's saying. What I doubted was whether Nika was tenacious enough to go through all that over and over again.

If she did, then we're doomed.

Ara

The shadows in the forest were increasing in numbers, and the patch of sky above it had darkened a lot, creating this eerie and cold atmosphere, which I didn't expect would ever happen in this space.

There had been integrations before, but was it because now Nika was involved?

I had been thinking about the daunting scenario where the sky went completely dark when the body eventually experienced final fusion. I wouldn't ever want that to happen because what's the use in living in darkness even though the mind had 'recovered?' I was right to go with integrated functioning.

Unfortunately, there were two things that followed my decision and the recent happening.

First, Egon and Hector were more and more adamant in rejecting any treatment, be it integrated functioning or final fusion.

Second, integration would still happen.

As inescapable as the earth revolving around the sun, integration was bound to happen no matter how we prevent it. What the guys didn't understand was that something as simple as sharing experiences and memories was already counted as integration, but it's in really small quantities that they didn't even realize they were integrating. But it was still an integration. We're all still separated because we didn't share every single thing, so the barriers were still intact.

As expected, I was brought to the front the morning after Nika had integrated. She's just too shocked to function. I was actually thankful because I couldn't imagine how Nika would fare after witnessing the trauma. I sighed, we should brace ourselves for the possibility of the body falling sick again.

I went about the day as usual, keeping the routine intact and paying extra attention to the wellness of the body. New vitamins and other supplements were delivered to our door this afternoon and I should paste an eye-catching sticky note somewhere in the room to remind the

others to follow the schedule of each pill. This way we could at least maintain the body's immune system. I also restocked some medicines, just in case.

When I returned to the garden after the body was asleep, Egon and Hector were already at the table. I looked past the valley to the forest, it's getting darker and more shadows were floating around.

"I've never seen that many shadows before," I said, concerned. I was getting restless because we didn't know what these many shadows could and would do.

"It's because Nika is continuously having nightmares," Egon said, angry. He was claspng his hands tight and his elbows rested on the table, his eyes staring intently at the forest. "We should wake her up."

I turned to look at him. "What? We've never done that before. We don't know what's going to happen!"

Nika could be more traumatized, or the mind would shut down for all we know. This was an uncharted territory and I couldn't believe Egon especially would think that.

"I know but this kind of integration also had never happened before! And that many shadows! First thing they increased in number, and the next thing we know they might attack us. We have to try," he said, panic could be heard in his voice.

Before I could say anything, Egon had bolted to Nika's space. I stood up to chase after him but Hector grabbed my hand. Although his eyes emanated regret, he didn't let me go.

"Hector, please," I pleaded.

"I'm really sorry, Ara."

Nika

A jolt within had woken me up, making my heart race. The first thing I felt was the raging headache inside my head which seemed to get worse with every blink. I looked at the time, it's almost six in the morning.

Gosh, why didn't anyone wake me up?

I tried to sit up, and almost instantly, vignettes of images hit me like a truck, completely disorienting me.

I'm so hungry, please give me food.

No, don't hit me. It hurts. Don't kick me.

Please, don't hurt me.

Please don't bring me to the bedroom.

My chest was in pain that I thought I was going to pass out, but I hit it a few times with my fist and tried to take a deep breath. I began to get choked up, and the silent cry soon turned into painful sobs. Then it repeated.

I'm so hungry, please give me food.

No, don't hit me. It hurts. Don't kick me.

Please, don't hurt me.

Please don't bring me to the bedroom.

I was screaming by now. Reminded of the hellish pain I'd felt that day. I heard faint footsteps rapidly approaching. Please don't be uncle.

Wen

I cried so hard.

I was afraid of my uncle. He appeared in my dreams again.

I tried to take a breath, but I couldn't.

My arms were squeezed hard. They shook me hard. I opened my eyes.

Who was this grandma?

"Nika! Nika!" she screamed my name.

But I was scared, I didn't know her.

Where's Mommy?

I wanted Mommy, but I couldn't say anything.

I looked around, it's not my room.

I looked around again, looking for my uncle. I was afraid he would hit me again.

Someone approached. I covered my face.

"Don't hit me... don't hit me..."

My voice was hoarse.

"Why is this happening, Nika? Nika!" the grandma shouted again.

I got more afraid. Leave me alone!

I started to swing my arms and legs to free myself from her grip. I needed to get out of here, but as soon as I ran I fell down. Ow, my leg hurt.

The grandma and one more person helped me get up, and they sat me down on the bed again. But I was scared of them. I didn't know them.

Then the room gradually got darker. Oh no, was my uncle here? Did he turn off the light?

"No, don't do that to me, don't do that to me," I cried.

The grandma shushed me, tried to hug me, but I tried to break free from her arms.

Then I heard a familiar voice.

“Awen, come back here... c’mon. I’m waiting for you here.”

Oh, it’s Egon. I looked around to look for him. But he was nowhere.

“Awen, come to the movie theater. C’mon, you can do it.”

Oh, it’s coming from inside my head.

“Lie down and close your eyes. Don’t worry about the grandma. I will count to ten with you.”

“Okay,” I said. Then I lay down and closed my eyes.

I counted from one, two, three, and Egon counted with me. When I forgot the number, he helped me remember.

The room became silent. And inside my eyes I could see the big screen. Egon was standing inside the theater. Ara was there too. I walked towards them.

Egon

“Don’t say it,” I said, ashamed.

“I’m not going to say anything,” Ara said, her voice as calm as ever. I did think it was scarier that she could maintain her composure even after a huge incident like this.

We just returned from the daycare, both Ara and I needed to console Wen who was so shocked. I persuaded the other children to stay outside while Ara tried to soothe the crying Wen, and thankfully they complied. I assured them that Wen just had an unexpected trip to the outside, and she got terribly scared. But she would feel better soon. This was also to discourage them if they had any desire to go outside. It’s all for their safety.

“Well, then, I’m gonna say it. You crazy fucker,” Hector quickly added.

“Watch it. You agreed with me back then, don’t pretend like you’re not. You’re no saint,” I retaliated. It really pissed me off. Which side was he on?

“I did. But who’d expect the little one would front? I didn’t see that coming. If I had known, I would have tackled you to the fucking ground before you could even take the first step to Nika’s pod,” he said.

I didn’t see that coming. No one did. I was ashamed of myself, I regretted my decision. I’d never wanted this to happen. The last time Wen came out, the body got into a traffic accident. That was one of the grimmest periods of our lives. We didn’t want that to happen again.

When I realized Wen had fronted right after Nika, my heart dropped. Everyone went into an appalling state of panic that the sky went temporarily red. It’s as if everyone was reminded of the day of the accident.

“Let the body rest longer. I’ll front when it’s time to,” Ara said. And we didn’t argue with that.

“You genius prick should take responsibility,” Hector said, pointing at me insultingly.

“What the fuck do you mean?” I asked him, clearly showing my offended face to him.

“Help Nika deal with the flashbacks,” he told me, again with his stupid condescending tone that begged for a punch in the face.

“Oh, this is my problem now?” I spat. “Last time I checked you’re the one who felt guilty of her integration.”

“You’re the one who forced her to wake up. I never said anything that agreed with that.”

“But you still kept Ara from going after me. Choose your side, you shithead.”

“You—”

“Stop it,” Ara snapped. “Both of you. Now’s not the time to lay up blame on anyone.”

I shut my mouth, while Hector still grumbled something unintelligible. This was going nowhere. And if this kept up, the body would deteriorate faster.

Hector

I just saw Ara off to the gate. It's time for the body to wake up now and I could at least rest assured that she'd always take perfect care of us. Her storytelling skills were also so creative that she could say anything and the ladies would believe her. Hopefully they did.

That jerk Egon was inside his space. I didn't know what he's doing, probably sulking or doing some introspection or something. I also didn't want to see him.

I'd better watch the forest, see if the shadows were up to no good. If they had the slightest intelligence to think about combining forces to create one monstrous shadow, that would be a huge problem. Eh, but I didn't think they had brains. But better be safe than sorry.

Just then, a familiar scrawny silhouette passed through the trees. *Ah, shit.*

I sprinted past the valley and arrived at the edge of the forest in record time. Heaving, I called her to catch her attention.

"Nika!"

She screamed due to the shock of listening to my loud voice, lost her balance for a little bit, then caught herself before she fell to the damp ground.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I yelled because there was still some distance between us. "Get back here!"

"Leave me alone!" she shouted back, then turned around to run deeper into the forest.

I looked at the shadows floating near the tree canopies, as if spying on our every movement. *Shit, shit, shit.* I chased after her.

The distance between us shortened in an instant because I gave my best in catching up to her. When I reached her standing ground, she had also stopped.

"You little brat. Come with me this instant," I commanded.

"Shut up," she snapped, her voice a little hushed.

"The fuck—"

“Tsk!” She threw death daggers from her eyes and turned around, focusing on something in front of us.

A fragment.

This one was from when Nika was around fifteen, when she just entered senior high school. That time, she unfortunately passed through an alleyway behind her school and was met with her seniors. They were smoking cigarettes and when they saw Nika passing by, they berated her for ‘spying’ on them, throwing insults and threats with a loud voice, scaring her out of her mind. Flashbacks then came uninvited and the horrible experience split into this fragment, making her still wear the white-and-gray high school uniform.

“Nika,” she called the fragment, who turned her head to look at us. The fragment was taken aback and quickly stood up from the big stone she was sitting on.

“Who are you?” the fragment spoke. Same voice.

“I’m you!” Nika said, then walked closer to the scared fragment. The latter went a few steps back. Nika stretched out her hand and commanded, “Shake my hand.”

The fragment refused, hiding her hands behind her back. “Leave me alone!”

Nika clicked her tongue in frustration and she grabbed the fragment’s arm so forcefully in an instant. The fifteen-year-old Nika cried with shock and fear, trying to free herself, but Nika didn’t loosen her grip even a little. I quickly yanked the older Nika away, removing her hand from the fragment’s arm, and we both fell to the ground.

But I was too late. The fragment began fading. She looked at her own hands that seemed to break into pieces like shattered glass with the look of horror. It would stay in my mind for a long time.

She vanished within seconds, leaving no trace at all. In the midst of my shock, I could hear Nika begin hyperventilating beside me.

Her eyes were wide open and her pupils moved uncontrollably, but she didn’t blink at all. I called her name and waved my hand in front of her face, she was still unblinking. It’s like she’s seeing something invisible that petrified her whole system, making breathing a struggle.

“Nika, Nika, come back here,” I urged her, shaking her body and tapping on her cheeks gently to wake her up from whatever trance she was in. A few shakes later, her eyes finally focused on my face, but she was still unable to speak. Her eyes were bulging in horror.

We needed to get out of here ASAP. I carried her and ran out of the forest, paying close attention to the ground so that I wouldn’t trip. Whooshes could be heard above us because the shadows went crazy. They usually floated around calmly, minding their own business, but now they had picked up speed, going through the trees and heading in one direction—us.

“You bastards!!” I yelled at them, but they’re unfazed. I didn’t think they understood anything I said. They were just blindly chasing after us.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins and propelled my legs faster. A few more steps and we’re out of the woods. At the edge of the forest, however, a shadow dived in at a sharp angle and pushed me over with such force that I tumbled. Nika slipped out of my arms and rolled down the shallow hill.

I rushed to her side, taking a look at the shadows for a moment, and as expected, they couldn’t pass the boundary. I thanked whatever gods there may be for trapping them inside. But there’s no time to continuously say thanks, we needed to get to the center.

With a grunt, I hoisted Nika into my arms again and started running.

I finally slowed down when we reached the table, and Nika was moving about in my arms, wanting to get down. I put her down on one of the stools, then checked if there’s any injuries. Well, there’s none. I checked myself, there’s none either. One more thing I was grateful for, no one could get hurt in this mind space.

“Damn, those shadows, how did they get so violent?” I looked at the forest, and could still see the dark figures flying around. We needed to do something about them.

Sitting on the stool, Nika slightly trembled. There’s like a mini earthquake that vibrated in her muscles, sending uncontrollable spasms that didn’t calm down. I also noticed that the first time she integrated.

“How do you feel? You OK?” I asked her, searching her eyes. She mumbled something but I didn’t quite catch it. I put my hands on my hips and began interrogating her, “Why did you return to the forest?”

Welled-up tears began to fall, her eyes and nose reddened. She refused to answer. I crouched down and asked her calmly, “Why did you do that? It’s dangerous.”

“I wanted to get better...” Her broken voice squeaked like a little mouse.

I scoffed. “You think forcing fragments to integrate will make you better? Heh, Your Majesty, you can’t even walk after what just happened!”

She wiped her face, but tears still streamed down. I sighed, suddenly got tired. Why did I have to babysit her? I rested my butt two stools down, finally feeling relief on my knees and calves.

“Hoarding all the memories isn’t the answer. Setting the obvious pain aside, who’s to say there won’t be more fragments created? Don’t you think you’ll be going in circles?”

She looked at me, confused. I couldn’t believe she’d be so reckless.

“Flashbacks may create more fragments,” I told her.

“How?”

Geez, glad I remembered some of Egon’s explanations. “Look, princess. The brain, especially ours—because we share the same one—is like archenemies with trauma. Whenever there’s something bad that it doesn’t want to keep, it will be separated. Separated into what, you might ask. One of them is fragments.”

She stayed silent. Probably knew she had made a mistake, or probably still shocked by what just happened.

“Do you think what you see after integrating with them is something pleasant?”

She shook her head without looking up.

“That’s what I’m saying. You’ll spend an eternity trying to integrate with them by force, while creating more at the same time.”

“Then tell me.” She then took a shaky breath in. “How do I get rid of them?”

I gritted my teeth. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

She stood up and wobbled, but managed to maintain her balance.

“You don’t know pain,” she said, as if spitting out an obvious fact I was too proud to admit.

I scoffed. Me? I didn’t know pain?

I watched her leave. Her head was as hard as stone, so we’re similar to each other in that sense.

Nika

I woke up in my pod, didn't know how long I'd been sleeping. Even though I didn't wake up like this that often, the sky above the pod always seemed familiar, as were the bamboo trees that surrounded me. I might have seen them in my dreams.

I dragged my feet to the common area, where Hector and Egon were debating about something. Ara was nowhere to be seen, so I assumed she's the one who's currently fronting. I couldn't quite hear what the two guys were saying. I stepped closer, trying my best to conceal myself behind a cluster of bamboo.

"...can't enter the forest anymore."

"But there aren't any fences to keep her out of it," Egon said, clearly frustrated. He was massaging his temples, his eyes closed.

"I don't want to watch her 24/7!" Hector snapped.

"It's either you or me. If not, before we know it, Ara is the one who accompanies her to the forest. That's worse."

I walked back to my pod, feeling helpless. They said it's *my* mind space. But why didn't I have any freedom to do what I like? Why did they hold more power in a world that's supposed to be my own?

I shouldn't be running away.

So I turned around and headed to the table. The guys stopped speaking altogether, clearly hiding something, not wanting to let me know. I took a seat that's farthest from both of them.

Hector cleared his throat. "Well, the princess is here," he said without even looking at me. Egon didn't say anything.

Ah, the three most clashing people were left alone. What could happen?

"How are you feeling?" Egon asked. It sounded like he didn't mean any word of it.

"I didn't feel anything," I said.

“Heh, liar,” Hector mocked. “You trembled like a little wet puppy.”

“Shut your mouth,” I told him, annoyed.

Talk to them. I remembered dr. Elly’s words. The dread made my fists clenched so tightly. But I gradually opened them, trying to let go of my pride, see if what I was going to do worked.

“So you’ve been here since I was five?” I asked Egon. He was quite taken aback, not expecting me to ask anything about him at all.

“Yeah, I was.”

“So you’ve seen my mother and my uncle.”

“Heh, they’re yours alright,” Hector mocked.

I was ready to tell him off again when Egon lifted up his palms to shut us up. He then said, “Yes, I’ve seen them.”

I could sense Hector narrowing his eyes in my peripheral vision, refraining himself from cutting the conversation to see where it’s going.

“How were they like? I have no memory of them, you see.”

Egon glanced at me, suspicious. Then he finally said, “I know what you’re doing.”

I pursed my lips. Why was it so hard getting through him?

I sighed. “Look, if we’re going to, you know, work together, we should at least get to know each other.”

“And you taking my memories along the way?” Egon asked, stating my intentions spot on. Hector snorted, then covered his mouth to hide his smile.

I rubbed my face. “This is impossible.” I shook my head, repeating that sentence several times, showing my annoyance. How could I talk when they refused to give away something? I might as well try what I did to the fragments.

At a split second, I leaped over several seats and grabbed Egon’s arms so hard it took him several shakes to release himself, aided by Hector who pulled him away. I fell to the ground

and stood right back up, see if something happened. I heaved, my heart was beating out of my chest and the adrenaline made me want to puke.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!” Egon yelled, rubbing the sore spot where my grip landed.

“Have you lost your mind?” Hector shortly followed. “You’re a psycho, that’s what you are.”

“Did you think I could disintegrate the moment you touched me?” Egon asked, still furious. “I’m not a fragment. I’m a person. If that’s how it worked, I would have absorbed you ages ago.”

I sat down. Defeated. Still feeling helpless. Why was everything so hard? I sighed and rubbed my sore hand.

“Oh, are you pitying yourself? Boohoo, the princess doesn’t get what she wants, so she’s gonna sulk,” Hector sneered.

“Shut your face,” I told him, which made him laugh in satisfaction. “Go on, talk about how you want to watch me 24/7 so I can’t hunt any more fragments.” I signaled for them to proceed their discussions with my polite hand.

The guys sat down next to each other, our position was like the clock when it hit 12.30.

It’s gonna be so awkward.

They didn’t really talk about anything so far. Egon was closing his eyes, feeling the breeze that rolled throughout the space, and Hector was looking at everything in the garden but me. I rested my chin on my palms, waiting for any of them to make a sound.

I heard something, but it’s not coming from any of the guys. It’s the persisting rustle of the branches, shaking the leaves down to the ground. I looked over to the forest. The movement of the trees didn’t match the extent of the blowing wind. The air was calm, but the trees looked like they were in the middle of a monsoon.

The guys were also focusing on the woods now, brows furrowed and face somber.

“I’d never imagined they could do that,” Egon said.

“They pushed me,” Hector admitted, which was then followed by a dramatic widening of Egon’s eyes. “It happened when we, uhm, escaped the forest,” Hector added, his finger pointed at me then himself.

“What the heck? Why didn’t you tell me that?” Egon was clearly upset. “That changes everything we know about the shadows! Who’s to say they won’t attack the center next?”

Hector grimaced, imagining the horrific event that hadn’t even happened yet. But what I noticed from both of them was they were afraid. Of the shadows that couldn’t even break free from the boundaries of the forest.

“What’s the deal with them anyway? They can’t leave the forest,” I said, taking it lightly.

They both turned their heads to me at the same time. Egon scoffed, couldn’t believe what he’s hearing. Hector’s mouth was agape. They looked almost comical, as if time had stopped flowing through them.

“That’s outrageous, coming from you,” Hector said, narrowing his eyes. Then he shook his head, disappointed.

Of course I was offended. I didn’t feel like saying or doing anything wrong. “Explain yourself,” I demanded.

Hector snorted. “Of course Her Majesty doesn’t know anything about anything. She’s always taking cover, not knowing even her own nightmares had manifested into the shadows!” he exclaimed sarcastically.

I clenched my jaw, feeling the tension it sent to my temples. “They came from me?” I spat. Angry. At what? I didn’t even know.

I kept looking at the forest. The sky above it was dark, not as blue as I remembered when I first entered it. Not nearly as bright as the rest of the space. I thought my own mind space was a safe haven. Perhaps it was, at first, before all this ordeal. It’s the first time Egon and Hector saw these many shadows, and they’re growing in power to make matters worse.

I didn’t remember having nightmares. What usually lingered was the feeling of dread when I woke up, but I couldn’t picture what was in my dreams. Turned out they went to the forest.

It made me realize that every mind had its own dark space. It was quite impossible that one had an eternally bright disposition.... I guessed this forest was my dark space. That's why the fragments lived there, that's why the shadows were trapped there. But when we nurtured too much the dark side of our mind... it wouldn't end well.

I'd think about how I could get rid of them. Dr. Elly might have some answers.

"The sky..." Egon mumbled. His eyes never left the general area of the forest. His face didn't show that much emotion, as usual, but I noticed it had hardened, like all his face muscles were strained.

"I know," Hector chimed in.

"What is it about the sky?" I asked, but no one responded. "That it's darker now?"

Egon glanced at me. "Yes, as you can see."

"What does it remind you of?" I asked him.

Egon shifted his gaze to Hector, like asking for his permission, but Hector seemed to contemplate something. His face was oddly serious, like the air had changed. Oh well, they probably didn't want to share anything with me anyway. Damn, I had never asked these many questions.

"If you—"

"The accident," Hector cut me off, then bitterly chuckled. "Not that you remember."

At this point, I wasn't surprised with anything anymore. What did I know about my own life? Nothing. The ones who stored the memories I'd lost didn't want to share them with me. Okay, I admitted I had exerted questionable efforts, those that probably pushed them further away. But I was desperate. What other choices did I have? They had also left me with nothing. And now they acted like I wanted to snatch everything from them, when I was the rightful owner of those memories anyway? What a bull.

"That's because *none of you* wanted to tell me *anything*. How was I supposed to remember something that's not even engraved in my own memory?" I spat. I looked at both of them, their image was blurry because tears began to well in my eyes. I was so disappointed in both of them and myself. We were going in circles.

So I walked away, not to my pod, but to the screen room. It's unbearable to stay here a second longer.

The transition was smoother than I thought. I guessed Ara didn't realize I was trying to front. It did take me a while because I got even more dejected when I was standing in the screen room.

Now that I had the chance to pay closer attention to this room, I realized I'd been here—far before I knew anything about my own condition. Of course I'd been here, it's the bridge between the mind space and the outside world.

I was looking at the screen, not having control of my own actions. It happened a lot of times in the past—it turned out I went to this place. At those times, I felt like I'd been pushed back. I could still see my own actions, but in a more muted, faraway place, where I couldn't move the way I wanted. My hands and feet, my body seemed to move on their own. It was really like watching a movie about yourself, and you were the only spectator, only capable of watching the scene unfold. It was *frightening*.

Standing for a few minutes in the screen room made me realize that. Back then I thought I was just getting tired and sleepy, floating between the realm of being conscious and sleepy. We'd all felt that, like we went out of our body just for a moment before realizing we're falling asleep.

Well, that's not the case for me then. I was undoubtedly dissociating.

"Nika?" Ama called. I turned my head to her, blinking several times and focusing on her face. "Nika, go upstairs," she said.

"Why? It's not time to close yet. What, it's only—" I looked at the clock. "One. We still have an hour to go."

Ama frowned, and she paused for a while then continued, "We're going to the doctor. You need to rest first," she reminded me.

I scratched my head. "Who told you that? Did the doctor tell you that?" I asked, defensive. I didn't remember anything about Ama coming with me to the doctor.

“...Yes.”

There’s a slight pause in the beginning of her answer that alerted me. This was suspicious. But I was kind of a wreck right now to drag this problem out longer. I needed to see dr. Elly as well, rant to her about all the unfairness the host of the body received.

“Welcome! This is your grandma?” Dr. Elly greeted us at her office door with a kind smile. Her eyes also smiled.

Ama initially refused to ride the motorcycle with me because she thought it was dangerous, with me being unwell and all. But I wasn’t going to spend some taxi money when I could just take my motorcycle to the practice. It’s not that far, and I felt fine honestly. So she relented and held to my jacket so tight the whole journey.

“Yes, this is my Ama,” I said as we entered her room. I sat down on the sofa, and gestured for Ama to sit beside me. She silently followed, unsure of what to do or say.

Dr. Elly sat across from us after setting down two glasses of water for us, and took her folder that’s on the table.

“Doc, did anyone... set a schedule?” I asked a question that’s been weighing my mind.

“Uh...” dr. Elly glanced at Ama. “Ara contacted me yesterday.”

I knew it. “What did she say to you?” I asked Ama. “Did you know she is an alter?”

She was unsure, but she started speaking. “She introduced herself to me yesterday, or was it two days ago? And she said that it’s important that I accompany you to your sessions. Especially after your breakdown that day.”

I paid attention to dr. Elly’s response after hearing about this breakdown, and she didn’t show any surprise or alertness. Ara must have explained everything, then. So I added the things I experienced: Ara was the one who introduced me to the child alters and told me what their stories were. Then there’s also the thing about my plan of integrating with fragments—which backfired. My declining relationship with the guys. The nightmares.

“Ara described that the body experiences unfamiliar symptoms that appeared after your integration. From what I gathered, we could say it’s PTSD because you’re reminded of the trauma the body has experienced,” dr. Elly said.

I hadn’t been fronting since the integration so I didn’t know what that meant. I knew inside I was having nightmares because of the images I’d seen from the fragments. Dr. Elly said the body might feel more tense, shaky, jumpy. The heart palpitated. Headaches occurred more often. It made Ara restless, so she immediately scheduled a consultation, asking Ama to tag along because she needed to know, as next of kin, and it’s safer than me going alone.

I thought Ama wouldn’t understand because this information was all brand new, even I found them hard to comprehend. So I didn’t think of asking her to accompany me, but I also didn’t think of just how attentive she was in listening to dr. Elly’s explanations, asking things she didn’t understand, which were a lot, but dr. Elly patiently explained with simpler words. I had underestimated Ama.

“I apologize if I asked too much.” Ama chuckled nervously. “I wanted to understand my granddaughter’s problem.”

My eyes welled up.

“Not at all! We’ve been working on it,” dr. Elly smiled. “Although it’s still a long journey, it’s not impossible.”

We discussed the treatments for PTSD, which included psychotherapy and some medications I needed to take if I experienced discomfort. Because it was closely related to DID treatment, the treatment would not be completely separated. When PTSD symptoms had subsided, we could end its treatment. There wasn’t a fixed period on how long I’d be experiencing it, so what we could do was keep on treating it.

That meant... I’d keep reliving everything until I could finally handle it.

We agreed to meet again next week, but if there’s something urgent, I should contact her immediately.

“How did you feel when you met Ara?” I asked Ama when we arrived home.

She sat on the living room sofa, carrying a plate of her dinner. We were famished once we stepped out of the practice, so we went to buy some food before going home.

“Weird,” she scoffed. “It felt like it wasn’t you, but you at the same time. She reminded me of the times when you acted a certain way. I guess that’s her.”

“How did she act in front of you all this time? Is she any different from me?”

“You’re—*she’s* very particular about body care. Like the serums you use, the creams, the supplements... oh, the phantom hair...”

“Huh?”

“Sometimes you stroke the area around your neck, as if you have long hair. But then you stopped, realizing you don’t have hair.”

“I have hair,” I pouted, she laughed. “Ara has a long braid. In the inside world,” I added when Ama was confused.

“So they all look different inside?” Ama asked again, which I confirmed and I continued describing how they looked inside, what they like and dislike (those I read from the documents), what their mannerisms were, how they talked, how different they were. They were all split from me. We then connected the dots, what Ama noticed on the outside to which alter it was. It was both comforting and distressing to know how I acted when it wasn’t me who controlled the body. Talking about these things really helped me sift through the qualities and characteristics that were purely *me*, not *them*.

They couldn’t act like me 24/7, their own identities were bound to show, and I concluded that this combination was what people thought when they thought of me, my whole personality. Never once did they think that ‘I’ consisted of many personalities because it sounded like a faraway possibility, a fictional condition that provided high revenue for publishers and production houses.

“My granddaughter is amazing,” she said right after our discussions. Shudders ran up and down my spine, I wasn’t used to her saying things like that. She was ever so uptight, guarded, focused, due to her upbringing in a poor, traditional Chinese-Indonesian household. All her life, she only knew how to work hard to earn money for her family. This led to her not being able to watch her children grow, leaving them in others’ care that I was born unwanted, then abused

and neglected. I knew she thought this was all her fault. But I didn't think that way. Not even once did it pass my mind.

"What's with that!" I laughed, and she hit my arm, embarrassed.

"I need you to know that this is no one's fault," I told her after we were done teasing each other. I needed to tell her this so she could have a peace of mind.

Ama put her plate down, then took my hand in hers. "A part of it still. If only I had taken at least one of my children here..."

"Then I wouldn't have been born."

She looked at me. "Right, you wouldn't. That's more depressing, I wouldn't have any helper," she said, her face serious.

"Hey!"

Then she chuckled.

I squeezed her hand very tight as a light retaliation, then she hit my arm again. I pondered at this moment. I wouldn't have it any other way. She was my happiness. I was sure I was hers too. Nothing would prevent me from being happy—not DID, not PTSD, not alters, not shadows. They were just hurdles in my life that I should jump over. And I know Ama would always be on my side every step of the way.

I could sense they were targeting me from miles away, even when they were just a speck at the end of the street. No one could mistake their lanky figures, walking with their heads high as if they owned the street, complete with cheap ukuleles clutched tight to their chests. Short-tempered vengeful people were the most dangerous.

To let them think I was still not aware they're coming, I casually walked around the shop, to the temple, and called Apek. He was tending the small altars, but he put away the cleaning cloth when he noticed me.

"Apek, the thugs who disturbed the shop are back.... Could you help me?" I asked. He agreed right away.

Apek had always been my ally in dealing with these kinds of disturbances—this whole complex’s ally, really. He, along with some workers, always kept watch of suspicious-looking people who were usually up to no good. It was easy to spot them because they’re usually not from the area, and their gestures always showed that they wanted something from either us, the shop owners, or the customers. Because Apek was one of the elders, he was usually respected. But without all of them who cooperated with him, it was hard to find order and safety, at least on our side of the shops.

Apek followed me when I returned to my cooking counter, and I began to prepare a bowl of dry noodles for him. He stood next to the counter, as if he was waiting for his ‘takeaway noodles’ while casually talking to me.

The cigarette smoke arrived long before the smokers. I cursed the wind that carried it; why should it blow in this direction? I tried hard to stay in my body when I could feel the dull tug at the back of my mind, a sign I was beginning to dissociate. The more I blinked, the more I felt distant, like I was beginning to lose control of my hands. This wouldn’t do; if I relented to the tug to pull me back to the garden, I would lose control altogether. So I pictured I was standing on a large container filled with hard concrete that buried my legs, locking them in place so I couldn’t be taken or moved. It kinda worked; although the tug was still there, it was not as prominent. I concentrated on preparing the noodles.

Squeaky strums of ukuleles were getting louder, then they slowed in tempo when they noticed Apek, who was occupying the walking space that connected the dining and cooking area. They couldn’t pass without asking for Apek’s permission. Well, Apek could just step aside a little to let the guests pass, but these guys weren’t welcomed.

They stood there lamely, faces showing childish resentment.

“Can I help you?” I asked as calmly as my voice would let me. My hand worked on auto-pilot in tossing the noodles.

With sneers on their faces, they completely ignored me and walked to the storefront. They stopped right in front of me, my huge cart that displayed various toppings standing between us. From the glass, I could see them spat on the road then leisurely walking away. I couldn’t believe what I’d just witnessed.

I stopped my hands from stirring the noodles, feeling my head get increasingly hot due to anger. Without thinking, I immediately shouted, “HEY!!”

They jumped, totally not expecting that. Now that they’d seen me get angry, we could see them visibly cowering. Apek also stepped out of the store to yell at them for being extremely impolite. At this, they instantly fled. He kept on watching the junction where they vanished, making sure they didn’t return.

Just then I realized my hands were trembling. The sauce had splattered everywhere. Strands of noodles went astray. My heart was in a frenzy. I felt like I was smashed deep into the earth.

“Little shits. We need to be careful, they might come back,” Apek told me. When he saw I wasn’t responding, he called my name several times, shaking my shoulders lightly to not surprise me. I dropped the mixing bowl, and he caught them in time so it wouldn’t spill out.

“Whoa, there, are you alright?” He then called Ama, who rushed to my side from the dining area, leaving Lia to clean the tables by herself.

“I think Nika is unwell,” Apek told her. “The thugs were back, but they left right away when they noticed I was here.”

“Oh, dear. Nika, are you okay?” Ama panicked.

It took me a while to gather myself, it took all of me to stop myself from crying. I shouldn’t cry now, I could cry later when I was in my room. I gulped down my sweet iced tea I had left on the counter to stop feeling jittery. I assured Apek and Ama that I was fine. Then Apek told me he would keep watch and help when they return.

It might not seem like a big deal, but it was the first time I consciously defended myself from some strange men who intended to harm me.

Hector

“You saw that??” I asked no one in particular. Us three were standing in the screen room, watching the scene that just unfold. It began when I felt the tug indicating I was going to front, but was stopped just before I entered the screen, then I called the others because this had never happened before.

“You felt that??” I asked again, holding my gut because that’s the place where I felt her fear the most. It was clearly not mine and it was nauseating how strongly it affected me, us.

Both Ara and Egon were speechless because this never had happened before. Nika had *never* willingly faced any kind of confrontation before. The brain’s automatic response to that was always throwing either me or Egon forward to face it, pushing Nika to her pod, then bringing her back when it’s all over. She had no experience.

What made her act differently today?

“Do you know why she fuckin’ did that??” I asked again.

“Shut up. I would have told you if I had known,” Egon snapped, his hands folded tight in front of his chest, his eyes darted here and there, indicating he was racking his brain hard. “Where did she get the courage...” he said under his breath.

I glanced at Ara, and she just smiled. Like this was something to be proud of. Well, it perhaps was, but it was weird. I didn’t know how to feel about this, so I left the room to return to my space. It seemed that I wasn’t needed anymore.

I walked the trail leading to my hammock, stopping at each step to look at the flowers. They’re dahlias, Ara said to me once. I never noticed how colorful they were. It’s like every color in the spectrum was shown in their ever-blooming petals. Well, that’s cute.

When my feet stepped on the soft crunch of the sand, peace always filled my heart. My hammock stood strong even though it was built on the sand. I could slam my body on it and it still wouldn’t budge. Well, that’s exactly what I would do. I spread open the thick cloth and hurled my body to the side, lifting my feet at the same time. As dangerous as it seemed, I always landed in it safely, the soft cloth cradled me like it had known the shape of my body.

Feeling the light sway of the hammock, I put my hands beneath my head, making it a pillow. The sky was a soft blue today.

I felt her fear, the same one I always felt whenever I was brought to front. It was the strongest when we just switched places, and even though I had never felt that much fear by myself anymore, Nika's fear always reminded me of what once took control of my heart. I was mad because I thought as I got stronger, I wouldn't feel it anymore, but Nika made me unable to escape the dreadful fear. It drove me to train the body harder, build muscle and hone its reflex. It worked, but not like I wanted to.

I wanted to push harder, to make the body stronger, faster, bigger, but it wasn't built like me. The others might call me Hercules for fun, but they didn't realize that I was literally based on the demigod. Back in the village, in the short period when the body escaped to Auntie Maria's house, she always played Disney cartoons for us—I mean, for her it's Nika. I guessed the image of the strong, courageous and adventurous Hercules stuck with Nika that her consciousness split into me. My name was Hercules for quite some time too. It was the brain's wish to bravely face the uncle that it manifested into me.

I didn't like the name Hercules. It made me seem like a fantasy, only existing in cartoons or myths, whose real-life existence was questionable. So I surfed the internet to find other names. At that time, Egon and Ara had already found theirs—they were nameless at first too, because the brain didn't think of one when the splitting happened. The situation at hand was too chaotic, the only choice was to survive so we didn't have the luxury of naming ourselves. Years later, when we finally had access to the internet, Egon found Egon—I think it meant sword or something, and he also gave Ara her name, Araceli—which meant the gate of heaven, if I was not mistaken. The names suited them, as Egon was the system's protector and Ara was the gatekeeper.

I wanted a name of my own too, something to really establish my own identity. Nothing resonated until I came across 'Hector,' the greatest warrior in the Trojan war. He's revered and loved; heh, I wanted to be revered and loved too. Besides, Hercules was such a mouthful of sound. So over the top. The others would endlessly make fun of me. Hector sounded strong, didn't play around.

I wanted the body to be like me. Then I learned the body wasn't a demigod. It was meek and scrawny, its muscles dormant, seeming to refuse growth. Fats do not adhere, water was not

retained. It was *hard*. I guessed the body developed eating disorders because I forced it to binge-eat every time I fronted. Egon scolded me. Ara needed to tend to the body, feeling all the discomfort I had caused. Then I learned to adjust to the body's capabilities. What a hassle. But I managed.

For the first time—ever, I felt her courage beneath her fear today. It felt like finally finding the needle in the haystack. Nika was always filled with haystacks, I thought that's all she had—my opposite, because all I had were the needles, heh, also probably only one strand of hay. I thought she would never find the shiny, golden needle beneath all the similar-colored hays. But she had it all along. And she finally found it today.

The thing with this needle was, it could turn the hays into needles. That's the magic everyone possessed, even though they hadn't realized it yet. Nurture it with confidence, trust in oneself; one needle could turn into two, two then multiplied into four, and before we knew it, the whole space was filled with sparkling golden needles. Gorgeous!

I smiled. This was great.

That familiar thin backside came into view, slouched with one side of her cheek flat on the table, her feet tapping the ground in irregular beats.

"When did you arrive?" I asked. The feet taps stopped.

"Just now," Nika answered without lifting her head. I walked to the side until her face came into view. She looked at me and then looked away, her feet continued tapping.

"Who's outside?"

There was a pause, she's probably thinking. "I don't know, probably someone."

I snorted. From the steel gate, we could get a glimpse of the screen to see what the body was seeing. From the way the hands do things, structured and robotic, somehow moving in a four-beat rhythm... "Yeah, it's Egon," I confirmed.

Nika let out a flat sound, acknowledging whatever I just said, but not really acknowledging it. I sat down several seats from her, and she noticed my presence but didn't say anything.

“You tired?” I asked. She seemed lethargic. Probably drained from the new experience she just had.

“Hm, a little bit.”

It’s been quite a while since she could roam around the garden on her own accord, and I still couldn’t get used to seeing her, let alone interact with her. It’s always been us three. Well, now that she’s really conscious, four.

At the thought of that, something filled my chest—something unfamiliar. What was this?

I frowned. I opened and closed my palms, looking at them, finding what’s wrong with them. There’s nothing wrong with them, but I felt something at the base of my palms. The feeling originated from my chest, an indescribable dull pain that spread to my hands and my gut. It pulsated, sending ripples of similar ache, coming and going in intervals. What the heck? After several waves, it left a trail of heaviness behind, one that lingered. One that made me think hard of a word to describe it. Ah, I didn’t know big words. I’d ask Egon later.

I’d ask Ara now, but she’s nowhere to be found. Probably checking on the littles or staying inside her cottage. We had made an agreement to not invade the other’s space except when it’s really urgent.

“You wanna come to the screen room? See how well Egon’s playing you?” I joked.

She glanced at me, pursing her lips. “I don’t like that room.”

Then silence. C’mon, just continue with your reasons, what’s so hard about that? Why did I have to ask why?

“Why?” I asked.

“It makes me feel trapped... not having control of my own body. Only a spectator.”

“Heh.” I put my fingers on my chin. “I never thought of that. Well, that’s one way to put it. But you can still talk and he can hear you, though.”

She lifted her head, her back straightened. “I can do that?”

“You don’t know that?”

She shook her head, disbelieving what I just said.

“You—you’ve heard us before, right? When you’re outside?” I asked, pointing to my head, then her head. She nodded. “Same thing. That means we’re in the screen room.”

She nodded her head again, her mouth was shaped into a small O.

“It’s better to not do it so often, though,” I added. “Because it can distract the one who’s fronting. So it’s unsafe. Plus, it’s freaky. Don’t you remember that time Egon screamed into your ears?”

“That first time?”

“He was in the screen room, that’s why he can see you almost grinding your fingers. And when you hear unclear murmurs somewhere inside the head, probably that was us being loud here,” I said, pointing at the table, then I drew a line starting from the center to the steel gate. “You see the distance, right? Not that far.”

She nodded, seeming to recall something. “I think it’s called being co-conscious.”

“Is that what it’s called?”

Her narrowed eyes told me she wouldn’t repeat what she just said. This midget...

“I saw it from dr. Elly’s documents,” she said.

“Ah, the doctor. Won’t see her!” I stood up, and stretched out my hand. “C’mon, let’s tease Egon a little bit.”

“But you said—”

“It’s fine, it’s Egon.” I peeked at the screen room again, Egon was sitting by the counter, using the phone to read articles.

“It’s *Egon*,” she warned. I chuckled and just took her hand, pulling her to the screen room. She didn’t fight.

We stopped before the large screen, which was showing the whole peripheral vision of the eyes. Egon was so focused on reading an article about... what was that... oh, not an article, it’s just a novel. Was he rereading Harry Potter again?

He’s so focused that everything around him became a blur. We could also hear the passing motorcycles, though muted because Egon also had activated selective hearing.

I inhaled a gulp of air. "OI!" I shouted, loud and sharp. Nika jumped.

Egon also jumped in shock and he dropped the phone to the counter, scrambling to catch it before it fell to the floor. He looked around frantically, finding the source of the sound. We could also hear the heart beating so fast. When he didn't find anything that could make that sound in the outside world, he knew it's from the inside. From me.

I laughed out loud. It's been a long time since I last did that.

"You feel that?" I asked Nika, while rubbing my gut. She was holding her stomach, nodding in discomfort because she also felt Egon's surprise. "Yeah, that's 'cause we share the brain. We can feel it clearly when we stand in this room, although the feeling belongs to the other one."

"FUCK OFF!"

We both jumped at the sudden boom of Egon's voice, echoing in the entire room. Nika looked around, then she looked at the screen. Egon's vision focused on one point on the counter, concentrating on sending that message to us, inside the head.

I laughed, then shouted OKAY, just as loud. We could see Egon jump again, then slammed his fist to the counter. We then heard Ama asking if everything's fine. Before we could hear Egon's answer, we rushed out of the room. I was still laughing, recounting how Egon jumped, and Nika chuckled.

"He's gonna smack you later," she said. We sat on our initial seats.

"Oh, he won't dare. He'll just spit out colorful words."

Moments of silence passed, and we could only hear the rustles of the leaves. When I looked at the forest, it seemed calm, but then several dark figures circled the trees. I didn't know how long until they would completely disappear.

A beat later, Nika asked me, "Why are you doing this?"

I turned to look at her and right at that moment, she averted her eyes, focusing instead on the texture of the stone table, her hands tracing the irregular lines. I had never been one with difficulties in speaking my mind, or preparing what I had to say beforehand, so everything just freely slipped out without any filter. But I knew Nika was like Egon, they needed to rehearse the words they're going to say hundreds of times in their heads, changing words and tones, thinking

of the other party's possible answers... It's damn tiring. That's just how their nature was, and I could tell she had been rehearsing that question in her head.

"What's this?" I asked back.

"This." She pointed ambiguously around. "Like telling me manuals of this place."

"Oh, you should know, don't you think?" I said, matter-of-factly. If no one knows anything, it could be dangerous. Even the littles knew not to go near the steel gate, or invade the others' spaces, except when there's something urgent. Although we needed to remind them what was included as something urgent, and ask them to recite it back to us, they knew.

"Yeah, what's with the change of heart?"

I pondered over her question for a while. Did I have a change of heart?

"I dunno, my gut tells me," I told her.

"To guide me around?"

"Something like that."

"But your gut must've told you to get rid of me," she said. Which made me frown.

"My gut never told me that," I told her. I meant every word I said. "You've been thinking that all this time? Little one, aren't you the one who wants that?" I chuckled.

She looked away, neither admitting nor denying.

"Y'know, I was mad at you for a long time. You seem to get all the best things."

"But I don't—"

I held a finger up to stop her from interrupting me. She complied. "Perhaps missing a lot of things is the price you have to pay to get the best of things. Haven't you looked at it that way?" I paused to let her reflect on it. "It's not fun to remember things. Painful things. So I envied you that you had the purest memory. The innocence that we all didn't have. But since you integrated with those fragments, guess you aren't so innocent anymore," I grinned. She slouched further, and her expression reminded me of the twins when they were forced to take a nap.

“Point is,” I continued. “I understand why you did what you did. Not knowing things gives you this insecurity, and because you’re like Egon—which is unfortunate—you *overthink* this insecurity. Creating all these crazy scenarios. Gosh, it’s scary how you share the same character.” I shuddered, deliberately shaking my whole body just for the laugh of it. “And also, it’s wrong of me to get mad at you, you don’t deserve that because you don’t know anything. See? I was also insecure, so I thought of all those stupid things. When you take a step back, everything’s actually much simpler than we think.”

Nika blinked a few times. Then she sniffled, though no tears fell. I hoped she understood what I said. I had done some thinking in my trusty hammock, and at one point it’s like I was struck by Zeus’s lightning bolt itself. Heh, the others might think I wasn’t *capable* of thinking. I was based on a demigod, for Zeus’s sake!

“Thanks,” she said in her little voice.

I heard her, but I just wanted to tease. I cupped my ear and leaned closer to her seat. “What was that?”

When she didn’t say anything, I glanced at her. She was forcing a small smile, knowing what I was doing. Then I repeated, “What did you just say, little one?”

“I didn’t say anything,” she said with round, innocent eyes, clearly acting.

“I heard you said thanks. You can’t escape these demigod ears.”

“Well, you heard me then.”

I gasped dramatically. “Youuu, little sucker, you!”

She finally laughed. The kind that’s free and without worry, and I witnessed that for the first time.

The same pain erupted in my chest again, branching to my gut, to my arms then palms, to my throat, to my eyes. It was heavy and suffocating. But the lingering sensation it left behind was a pleasant warmth that made me believe we would all be just fine.

Nika

I finally understood what dr. Elly meant by talking. And it worked now because previously it wasn't two ways. It's either they didn't want to listen, or I didn't want to listen—it never worked. No message was sent across and we all dwelled in our own made-up scenarios and pride.

Would things change after this insight? I didn't know. Dr. Elly said the first step before any step was communication. I tried to leap forward and ignore that first step, and look where it got me. I painfully fell down the steps on my butt, landed back to square one battered and bruised. Stepping back allowed me to look at the entire flight of stairs I needed to climb. At the very top was the recovery.

When I fronted, I could feel the physical toll of the PTSD that Ara described. I had nightmares every night, of the abuse, excruciating pain, humiliation... and the anger, sorrow, disappointment.... It was like drowning in the deep waters of misery all over again. At times it was hard to even wake up in the morning, but I needed to escape the nightmares, so I forced myself to wake up, earth-splitting headaches almost always accompanied. I took the meds dr. Elly prescribed—it helped, but not that much. But every time I did the therapy, I felt a little better. It would be a long process.

I was jumpy and jittery all day, spilling sauces and condiments, stuttering to assure Ama and Lia I was fine, but they clearly could see I wasn't fine. I cowered at the sight of older men, startled at their very voice, and it was honestly so, so, exhausting. I wore double masks to protect myself from cigarette smoke, but because I wasn't used to it at all, I got lightheaded because it was hard to breathe. But I pressed on, clinging to the promise that I would get used to it the more I wore it.

During the quiet period between breakfast and lunch period, Ara came near my consciousness—meaning she was present in the screen room. She gently offered to take over because I was getting more and more unwell.

I thought I was going to feel apprehensive about it.

But the only thing I felt after listening to Ara's offer was pure relief.

I lay on my side, in my pod, with the glass cover open. The rustles of the bamboo leaves sounded like gentle sea waves, or crumpled up thin plastic bags unfurling themselves. The sky above seemed to know I needed rest as it had gone significantly dimmer, but still retained its light.

I immediately arrived here after switching out, and a second later I was off like a light. Even though I didn't feel the physical pain anymore—instead, Ara was dealing with it—the phantom-like pain still remained. How could one medicate when the pain was unperceivable? Painkillers clearly targeted the hurting nerves. Perhaps this meant the body didn't stop feeling pain even after I had switched out. I wondered if the others in the garden felt it too. What about the littles? Were they always in pain too?

I sat up.

Why did I care so much about them now?

Hector also asked me this yesterday, asking me back the same question I had asked him.
What's with the change of heart?

I thought hard of a reason then. I told him that it was purely selfish: I wanted to be independent. And he caught on that this was one of my many efforts to achieve singularity.

He didn't mock me like he used to. I thought he's going to berate me about my wish to achieve final fusion, to discourage me of this impossible thing. But he didn't. When I asked him why, he told me this was also my effort in getting stronger, standing up for myself. No matter how small, it's still progress. I hadn't thought of it that way.

I rethought the first several times we all came into contact. Hostility, fear, confusion. Even hatred. And stepping back, I could see that it all came from *me*. I knew it all along but of course I rejected it, displacing everything into them, so strongly convincing myself that *this* was all *their* fault. I was too distraught then—but it's not an excuse.

Pitter patter of heavy rain. It sounded like raining pebbles.

Where was I?

I gasped. That man was scary! No, there was another man too!

I ran and ran, out into the rain. Into the darkness.

I heard someone scream. But it's not my name.

I kept on running.

My bare feet were now wet and dirty, but I couldn't stop running because I was scared.

Then bright lights zoomed into my eyes.

I jolted conscious. Looked around. This was still my pod. Bamboo trees. But what did I see?

My heart was stabbing my chest. Was that me? I didn't think that was me. It wasn't my memory, but I recognized where it was. The shop.

I ran to the central table and found the guys chatting with each other. Their faces fell serious when they saw me breathing frantically with horror in my eyes. Their image shook. I tried to say something but I was hyperventilating, and I began to choke on my own tears. Hector rushed to my side and sat me down on the nearby stone chair.

"I... saw... I... ran... the rain... lights..." was all I managed to say.

They looked at each other.

"Check on Wen," Hector told Egon, who bolted to the daycare right away. "Calm down, you're OK," he told me.

I was still heaving and sobbing when Egon returned.

"Wen's dreaming—uh, having flashbacks. I've calmed her down," he said, pacing back and forth, trying to hide his panic. "But why—how can Nika see it too?"

Then something dawned on him, he snapped his fingers. "We share the same brain. But how come I never see the memories?"

"Calm the fuck down, Egon, you're not helping," Hector scolded. He was patting my back, a gentle but firm force that was able to ease my breathing.

I coughed. "What was that?"

They were looking at each other again, unsure of what to tell me. Why? Because they think I couldn't take it?

"Was that me?" I asked again.

"It was, uhm, Wen," Egon said. "One night she suddenly fronted. Got scared. Ran away... got into an accident."

My breath hitched. My eyes were hot and painful from the heavy tears. "She got into an accident?" I choked.

It happened when the body was around eight years old. Switching was still messy back then, and all alters didn't have a good relationship with each other. Stress piled up with another stress, pain and trauma seemed to have multiplied and worsened—it was calamity repeating itself. Wen just so happened to front the first time after arriving in the city, it completely knocked them all off guard, both in the inner and outside world.

Shocked, confused and utterly scared, Wen ran out of the shop one stormy night, to the panic of Ama and Akong, to the hysteria of the other alters. The accident happened in a split second; the body was struck by an unsuspecting SUV, bounced off to one side, only to be struck by another car.

The garden went pitch black while the body was in a coma.

It was grim. Beyond painful.

Since then, everyone had the trauma of going out on a stormy night. Innate fear of crossing the street developed. I had them all too.

"It was total chaos inside. And we needed to deal with the outside world too. But no one was strong enough to endure the pain. Except for this one." Egon pointed at Hector. The latter flexed his muscles but then let out a bitter laugh, like this wasn't something to be proud of.

"It's a no-brainer. 'Course it should be me. So I... fronted the whole recovery period. How long was it, almost a year?" he asked Egon, who nodded. "Yeah, too bad I couldn't eat a lot. But I had a bucket of KFC right before I switched back."

"And you slept for a whole year after that," Egon said, voice on the brink of breaking. He cleared his throat.

“Aw, you guys must have missed me,” Hector widely grinned, which was responded with a light punch from Egon. Then they continued throwing playful insults at each other.

A different storm was raging in my heart. There’s this anger of, again, not being able to remember and being left out, but it was easily overpowered by... guilt. Grief. Regret. There’s this intense ache that was hard to put into words. And it kept growing, making it hard to breathe, obscuring my vision. It felt like someone was trampling on my chest, took out my already-bruised heart, and shattered it on the ground.

Even though I only caught a glimpse of the moment before the accident, I felt *everything*. The sheer terror of seeing an unfamiliar place, the scary faces—they made the dark raging storm a better place to run into. Then I saw the speeding headlights. CRASH.

I didn’t see anything after that because Hector must have stored all the memories from that point on. I could only *imagine* the pain, the excruciating pain. The long and arduous recovery and rehabilitation. Even the thought of it all made me nauseous due to the horror of what he must have been through.

There were dark discolorations all over my body that I didn’t think too much about. The faded linear scars from the surgery seemed to adorn my skin since forever ago, the smaller marks also felt like they had always been there. I thought I just fell from something. The raw pain when they were newly formed had never even crossed my mind. How ignorant was I?

“I’m sorry.” My voice broke. The last syllable became a high-pitched whisper that contained all those feelings. “I’m sorry.”

They didn’t say anything. My shoulders shook, my face drenched in tears and snot.

But a large warm hand rested on my head, stroking it over and over until I was done pouring everything out.

Hector

“How was she?” Ara asked.

“Uh, sleeping,” I said while standing next to Nika’s pod. She was indeed sleeping with this frown that wouldn’t go away. I hoped she’s not having nightmares.

Ara just switched with Egon because she began to feel a little bit tired—heh, no, she was worried about Wen. Egon had gone to the screen room to tell her the weird telepathic connection between the little and Nika, their breakdowns. Ara needed to calm Wen down.

I didn’t know what kind of magic she had, but kids always stopped acting up and being sad when she’s around. Me? They *screamed* when I was around. Not the playful and teasing kind, but *screaming* screaming, like I was some boogeyman or something.

“You kinda look like it,” Egon said once. I clicked my tongue to show my annoyance and he kept teasing me about that.

“Y’know... kids... and me... we don’t match,” I said with a made-up regretful tone, demonstrating repelling magnets with my hands. “They’re noisy.”

“You’re noisy,” Egon said.

Every time Wen had flashbacks, Ara was always there to soothe her. Unfortunately this time Ara’s fronting, Egon’s freaking out because Nika’s freaking out, and the little hated me. Because Egon’s the closest in proximity to the screen, he replaced Ara once she slipped inside. Ah, it’s not good, he’s agitated as well, so I stood by in the screen room after I took Nika to her pod to rest.

As expected, Egon couldn’t function that well, so when I could feel he was dissociating, I stepped out right away.

Fronting was like finally getting suited up and ready to move. It was like an invisible second skin that just felt *right*, one that could allow me to move and think freely. Be in control.

The shop was closing and I helped the others wrap up. Caught glimpses of the ladies observing me, but I didn’t say anything. It’s better this way because that’s what we’d all been doing; covering things that the others didn’t need to know. They’d let it pass. Even though

they're worried about Nika, they could sense the silence that meant *I don't want to talk about it*. I was thankful that they're considerate.

It was still around three in the afternoon when we finished, and my phone rang. It's a reminder that there'd be a session with dr. Elly in an hour. I gripped my phone tight. As much as I didn't want to see her, no one could right now, and we still needed to be treated.

"Anything you want to tell me?" the doctor asked, still smiling, without an ounce of annoyance.

I pressed my mouth shut, not looking directly at her. I deliberately came late, thinking she would let the next patient in, but she was waiting for me. The glass of water on the table was ready, and documents were spread around, waiting for us to discuss them.

The long hand of the clock kept moving, but it didn't make any sound. It's the silent type of clock that moved the hands smoothly. That's understandable; if someone like Egon were to sit here in silence with only the ticking sounds audible, they'd lose their minds due to anxiety.

"I believe this is the second time we saw each other," she continued.

I pursed my lips. "How far has the treatment progressed?" I asked.

"There are some setbacks, but that's absolutely normal, we're treating PTSD as we come along, and you're here."

"Hm. I didn't feel any difference."

"Perhaps the effects are stronger in others. But you must've noticed something, maybe not physically."

I pondered on her last statement. Everything was different ever since that dawn. The continuity that we had maintained for almost two decades—disrupted. I knew that was bound to happen.

But I wasn't mad anymore.

That blue raging flame was reduced into a small spark, all because of the exchange of words. I didn't know it could act as a downpour. The pain in my chest still kept on growing, but it's a warm ache that stung my eyes. But not due to sadness. I finally knew what this feeling was.

“It’s a work in progress,” I said.

The doctor smiled.

I put down the fragrant bucket in front of Lia’s face. Ah, the majestic smell of grease and spices and fries. Her eyes widened, like they had seen something illegal.

“Why did you buy these??” she scream-whispered, and looked around the third floor living room as if someone would ambush us at any time.

“Relax, it’s not drugs or anything,” I said as I took out a piece of fried chicken and put it on her plate. I took two for myself, and gulped down half of the soda. My burp made Lia jump, and I laughed out loud.

“That is not ladylike.”

“I’m not a lady,” I said, which made her realize something.

“Hector! You know Ama banned you from even getting near KFC!”

“It’s been so long since I’ve eaten a meal! C’mon, I only bought some.”

“A bucket is not *some*! Nope, that’s your quota for today,” she said as she put on the bucket’s cover and set it aside, out of my reach.

I dramatically gasped. “Are you kidding? This is like, half a meal for me!” I protested. She sent me a stern look, and I knew I couldn’t steal even one. So I pouted but still savored my two precious chicken pieces. KFC never disappoints.

We talked about what I had been up to, to which I replied I didn’t have much to do inside the garden aside from watching the forest. And made fun of Egon. My only two entertainments.

“Be careful, he’ll hate you,” Lia laughed. “Don’t bother him too much.”

“Nah, he says he hates me, but he doesn’t actually,” I grinned. “They all love me.”

She laughed again. “I bet they do.”

Then we talked about Nika’s treatment, how it could help us all divide responsibilities, have an equal role in life, and get better. It was a rare and foreign condition, so studies were still being conducted, and not one DID patient’s story was the exact same with the other. There’s

still so much to know about it. Things that I didn't even know, which prevented me from understanding things.

"So now we work on cooperating," I told her. "That way we can live in harmony."

Lia nodded. "I hope it goes well."

I smiled at her, "Me too."

I walked the trail to Nika's space, crowning my neck to look at the top of the bamboo trees. They made her trail and space cool and shady, made her calm. When I arrived, she was sitting on her pod and looking at the dim sky, legs close to her chest.

"It's kinda dark in here," I said.

"It's because I just woke up. I think it will gradually light up."

"How do you feel, little one?" I asked.

She gave me a small smile. "Okay. At least I can rest longer here. If I was fronting, I needed to wake up at dawn to prepare for the shop."

I knew she felt guilty not being able to help the store, but we're doing that for her. If she forced herself, the body would feel worse.

Footsteps approached us. It's Egon, kinda shocked to see me already here.

"Hey! Who do we have here?" I said with my deliberate loud voice. He jumped when I said *hey*. He's kinda jumpy these days. Well, he's always jumpy, that's why I liked to startle him, but now because the body was going through PTSD, it really made a mark on him every time he fronted. I guessed we all had a version of it. Now that Nika had it too, it's like the disorder went tenfold.

"Why do you have to do that," he hissed between his teeth. I let out a half-hearted sorry.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"What else? Checking on her," he said to me, then shifted to Nika. "How are you feeling?"

Nika shifted her gaze at me, then at Egon, then me, Egon; she wasn't used to this yet. She cleared her throat and said she's OK. Gosh, these two wouldn't survive being left alone for longer than five minutes, the awkward silence would choke them. Sometimes being too similar had its downside as well.

"Who's fronting?" Nika asked.

"No one. The body's sleeping," I said.

"Oh, you're not sleeping too? I thought when the body is sleeping everyone will be asleep," she said.

I turned to Egon, throwing the question to him because heck, I didn't know what to say. I'd answer if I knew. He glared at me and I just grinned.

"Uh... I don't know," he said. Straightforward. No added sentence.

"You don't know??" I said, deliberately making it dramatic. It's fun to see him get annoyed.

"How could I know! You think I'm dr. Elly?"

"But you, like, study everything!"

Egon scoffed, tapping his foot impatiently. "Listen, Bambi, do you think—ah, forget it. Point is, I. Don't. Know."

"You can ask dr. Elly on the next visit," Nika chimed in with an innocent tone, her eyes mimicking it.

I snapped my finger. "Absolutely great idea."

But only Egon could hear the sarcasm beneath that sentence. He looked at me weird, and I replied to him with a grin. He left after reminding Nika to keep resting.

"Funny guy," I said with a wide smile on my face.

She also smiled, then turned to look at me. "Aren't you going to rest?"

"I'll stay here with you if you'd like," I offered.

I remember the times when she was sleeping in this pod after several episodes of flashbacks or encounters with unpleasant things. I stood here in this spot next to her, watching

her with such hateful and angry eyes. The pain in my heart exploded, then it turned to guilt. She didn't know anything. She's never at fault.

"You will?" Her eyes went vibrant.

I smiled and leaned on the side of the pod. We talked about a lot of things. What I remembered, what she remembered, what I thought about Ama and Lia, about the choice she made to work and not study, about my love of food, about Egon and Ara, the littles, the garden.

"What would you do when the thugs are back?" I asked.

She thought for a moment. "I can't fight like you. But I can ask Apek for help, he's always around. But let's see what they do first, if they just wanted to throw insults, I'll throw even better insults. When they're starting to move, I'll throw something. By then, Apek will have heard the commotion. He'll stop them. Or if he isn't around, the customers will help us. I don't think they dare do something foolish because there are a lot of passersby."

I grinned. "What a thorough plan! That's what I'm talking about." I lifted up my fist and she bumped it with hers, feeling proud of herself. "I know Apek will always help us. He loves us like his own."

"Do you think he knows you guys? Have you ever introduced yourself to him?"

"I don't think so—at least I've never introduced myself. But I have a feeling he has noticed our differences, just like Ama. Have you realized she only asked us to count the money when Egon's fronting?"

"That's what I thought! I do that sometimes, but she always recounts them, or just doesn't ask me at all. I usually only receive the sum so I can enter it into the excel sheets."

"That's freaky." I shook my head in disbelief. "But I'm thankful she doesn't completely reject us."

"I'll convince her," she said.

"Yeah? How would you do that? She's as stubborn as a rock."

"Oh, please." She pointed at herself.

"Oh, you're not a rock, you're a boulder." We laughed.

"A rock can crush another. Weaker ones."

I agreed with her. Talking to her sent me these fluffy clouds swirling around in my gut. Happiness.

She yawned. I told her to sleep. I didn't know how long we'd been talking. I was tired as well, giddy when I thought about swinging in my trusty hammock.

"Night, Hector," she said as the glass cover closed. Her eyes were already closed.

I gave the glass two gentle taps. "Good night, little one."

Nika

There's this tune that kept on playing inside my head even when I wasn't even fully awake yet. I knew I'd heard this from somewhere, but I couldn't remember. It was gentle and melodious, and I knew the woman's vocals were also soft and the lyrics profound, but all I heard were vague sentences.

I opened my eyes in the darkness of my room and concentrated on the song.

Then the image of lines and lines of movie credits appeared in my head, seeming to roll endlessly. Oh, it's the soundtrack of a movie. But what movie?

Like said movie had been reversed, I saw images unfold in my mind: a war, a prince, four siblings, a lion.

"Narnia," I whispered.

I sat up, then took my phone to search for this song. I scrolled and scrolled, trying to find anything that rang a bell.

I'll come back when you call me

No need to say goodbye

It's Regina Spektor's *The Call*. I knew I'd heard this before. But did I see the movie? I remembered it was big back then. Maybe someone saw it, I didn't know who.

I opened YouTube and played the song. Ah, it really rang a bell. It was such a good song. I was humming along and then came across two lines of lyrics.

Just because everything's changing

Doesn't mean it's never been this way before

A pang of heaviness struck my gut so hard I dropped my phone. *What the heck?*

I felt a thousand needles punctured my chest over and over again, slicing it open and letting it bleed out. It was *painful*, but it wasn't coming from me. *What?* It's getting hard to breathe.

NIKA!!

Egon screamed inside my head. I screamed from the shock.

WE CAN'T FIND HECTOR.

What did you mean you couldn't find Hector?

WE CAN'T FIND HECTOR.

I stared at the dark walls of my room. A vicious storm was still raging in my chest, wreaking havoc inside the garden, wrecking everything that's in its way, leaving nothing but broken rubbles and unmendable hearts.

I searched for his presence, his warm large hands, his boom of a voice, his thick brows and muscles, his nicknames and colorful words, his arrogance and comfort. I turned the place upside down. Still he wasn't seen.

Egon and Ara's panic and horror kept multiplying, sending endless prickles to my chest and a sharp ache that I didn't have any words to describe. Their fright made it so hard to breathe, like the weight of their feelings also weighed over mine, so I was confused if those were also my own feelings. They were too intense to be compartmentalized, as if everything had merged together to form a monster of a feeling.

Merged...?

I saw my dirty room.

The fucker someone labelled my uncle.

That's Auntie Maria.

My grandparents' car.

My new room.

I love KFC.

The accident.

Nika.

The anger, the shame, the fear,

The guilt, the sympathy,

The affection.

I remembered everything.

I was Hector. Hector was me.

What followed was a cry coming from a place inside one's heart that's so fragile that a brittle exhale could turn it into a pile of dust. There's no way it could be rebuilt, there's no way one could ever recover.

The sound coming out from my mouth bore a weight from three different voices, each were different but carried the very same heartache.

I felt my body shake. Someone had barged into the room but I couldn't see who it was. Must be Ama. She had gripped my arms tight and didn't let go because I didn't stop crying. She asked me something but I couldn't make out the words. The pain in my chest had paralyzed my ability to speak. And I felt like the tears weren't fast enough to carry our sorrow, that it was contained within the eyes, which was to be let out for a lot more days to come.

(intentionally left blank)

No one could ever see this coming.

Not me, not Hector.

When I came to, I was still in my dark room, feeling lost but found at the same time. I didn't know how long had passed and I didn't care. I knew Ama and Lia were worried out of their minds but I didn't care.

Grief had overtaken me, the heartbreak was devastating. Egon and Ara were beyond crushed.

But there's this small spark that remained aglow, providing light in the dark garden, clearing my head from this cloudy sorrow.

I did what people did when they were mourning, felt what they felt. A huge part of it was guilt, and it felt so much more intense than when I integrated with the fragments. But the thing was, there was no resistance from Hector in the fusion process, as if he just let it happen. And it all happened in the dead of night, in the silence of the sleeping hours, in a place no one else resided. I was both Nika and Hector in the morning. If it wasn't for Egon and Ara's frantic search for Hector, I didn't even know we had fused. But I think he left that song in our consciousness as his final message when he was still his own.

Deep inside, I knew I wanted to fuse—at least when that part of me was Hector, I wanted to fuse. I didn't know how one fuse with the other at that time—I still didn't—but there's a thought passing through my mind that said fusing would make me even stronger, not the opposite. Hector was strong, and I was ready. So it naturally happened. No one was forced to give just as no one was forced to receive.

Now I had the best of both. I could already sense that I was stronger, more steadfast, more optimistic, like I could face everything in the world head on. That's the Hector in me. I still loved routine and structure, even though I could see myself being more lenient.

Yet I was still scared, the trauma was still there. I was still prone to overthinking, and my pessimism might prevail against the optimism. I could see myself being reckless and spontaneous.

But that's me now. Although it felt foreign, it felt just *right*.

My affection went a hundredfold. Hector loved everyone else unconditionally in his own way, even though he didn't know it's affection he's feeling. He just knew he wanted the best for everyone, as careless and reckless as he might be.

And he wanted the best for me. For us.

Even though the others had not understood it yet, the Hector part of me was sure they would come around, just like they always had.

Egon

I didn't know heartbreak took the form of recurring echoes that reverberated countless times inside someone, ripping their insides apart, leaving them alone to take a breath. And just when they thought it was over, it started all over again.

I didn't think I had ever felt this kind of heartbreak. I tried to think about the happenings that evoked similar pain. None.

When Akong passed away more than five years ago, I was devastated. The grief struck us all that the garden was gray. It was gray for a long time, but we could rebuild everything again. We might never completely get over the grief of losing Akong, but at least we moved on. The garden was green again. The activities went on.

This? I didn't know about this.

Hector was a part of us. Although he and I often clashed, it was *our* banter. We had *our* own way of communicating, things only *us* knew. We were our own enemies, and we were our own best friends.

I had stayed in my space ever since that morning. I didn't have it in me to come to the garden to see an absent brawny shadow. The chain of events was still vividly engraved in my mind; the empty garden, the empty hammock, the sudden realization that one of us was gone. And it's *him* that was gone.

I didn't know grief would feel this way.

Ara

The central area felt enormous. I didn't know the table was this big.

Had the stone chairs been this many?

The sky was a grayish blue.

Perhaps if I were to concentrate more on my ears, I could hear his muffled yawn and heavy drag of feet, lazily making their way to the table, then picking up speed when he realized I was already sitting here. Then I could hear his loud cheerful voice, greeting me and asking me if I wanted the bear hug, then poked his finger on my upper cheek dimple just to mess with me. He would then joke that I might need his outstanding motivational speech if I were to front that day. *The energy to pretend*, he would say.

Then I'd gladly say I needed his bear hug, felt myself being swept off my feet and spun around until I felt the nauseous ball begin to form in my stomach. That's when he put me down, holding my hand tight to keep me from falling over, until I regained my balance. With the disappearance of the nauseating ball, so was my every single worry. What he gave me was a charge of energy and a spark of encouragement, a mighty reassurance that everything's going to be okay.

My vision was blurry. I blinked and it created warm tracks that served as trails for my tears to fall. They kept on falling. I couldn't stop it.

Hector was my source of strength, but how could I be strong now that he's gone?

Nika

“Are you seriously eating that??”

I dropped the piece of chicken I was holding due to the shock, and thankfully it landed back on my plate. If it fell to the ground I would honestly cry.

“It was leftover!” I retaliated.

Ama took the plate away from me and looked at its contents in disbelief. I guessed no one could ever expect I went near the very thing that put me in the hospital again. For the record, I still couldn't eat rice, but I could eat some of it if I mixed small pieces of fried chicken into a scoop of rice.

“What would you do if you threw up again?” Ama sounded desperate now. I looked at her distressed face, knowing I had made a mistake in eating KFC silently. How could I convince her that now I could eat it (somewhat) normally?

“I ate only a little... and it was actually good...”

She looked at me, confused. *What's with this sudden change?* She must have thought. Nothing's changed.

Eyeing me suspiciously, Ama pinched several pieces of meat and put them on my plate, taking the rest of it away. B-but the crispy skin.... I couldn't protest because then the conflict would drag. I'd just gradually show her that I could eat KFC without getting sick anymore.

“Aren't you lively,” Lia said with a grin one morning.

I stopped moving. I thought she had already gone downstairs, so I exercised a little, pumping my blood so I could gain more energy for the rest of the day. I was running in place when Lia appeared from her room.

“I thought you're already downstairs,” I said, heaving.

“I was still in my room when I heard thumping. What's this? You never exercise in the morning like this,” she teasingly smiled, perhaps thinking that this was just a whimsical activity of mine that I wouldn't hold for more than a week.

“Ah, it’s always good to get active. What, you wanna join me? We still have time!”

She refused with all her might and escaped downstairs. I was relieved she didn’t ask anything further. Countless possible scenarios ran through my head during our brief chat, and everything ended up with her asking me if I was Hector, which I was, but not like how she remembered. I hadn’t thought about the explanation I should give her regarding fusion when she had just learned what DID was.

That time would come, it’s unavoidable that I should explain to her that I was both Nika and Hector, but I was still Nika all the same, and Hector all the same. But how, one would ask. That I didn’t know, so I needed to consult dr. Elly.

Dr. Elly’s eyes widened when I told her that I had fused with Hector, clearly taken aback. It’s one thing to fuse, but it’s another thing to fuse with someone who was initially so opposed to myself and to treatment. She asked me about events that I didn’t have memory of before, those that I could describe in utmost detail, those that one shouldn’t have known if they didn’t experience it firsthand.

Like how I managed to defeat my uncle, how many punches I had landed on his stomach, face and groin, how the wooden chair disintegrated when it landed on his head, how I ran so fast but still knew where to go, the shock of the Church Auntie—Auntie Maria’s face, the hatred and anger and jealousy I felt for myself—Nika, and how it all turned into affection and a vow of protection.

“How did you feel when you first found out you had fused?” she asked.

My lips quivered because I remembered the feelings of that morning, but I could stop myself from crying. “Loss. And guilt. Fear. And most of it was also because Egon and Ara’s feelings were so overwhelmingly strong that I thought it was my own. Then when I finally managed to distance myself away from them, I found myself actually comforted by the thought that I wasn’t alone anymore—well, technically I am now, but you know what I mean.

“And I am able to perceive what happened to me in a new light. I think Hector’s experience helps me rethink my frightening experience back in the village as a hurdle that I had actually jumped over. It’s still traumatizing, sure, no one could ever say it otherwise, but... heck,

I survived over that, you know? Well, the ghost still followed, and to be honest, I think they'll tail me forever. But I feel like... they are *really* in the past now."

I let out a huge sigh after saying all that, feeling weird that I was able to put these feelings and thoughts into words then saying it out loud—it felt more real. It's not like everything would be smooth-sailing from this point onwards, but I gained comfort from knowing that at least I had the strength to face them.

Dr. Elly smiled at me and nodded. "Although it doesn't seem that way at first, I think you know that this is a win," she said. "And you must have realized some changes because it's still two very different and developed personalities that merged. Did you have a hard time adjusting?"

I tried to think of something that I found interesting. "I speak more bluntly now, I think. Hector is... uh, he uses a lot of... rude words that I never used," I chuckled nervously. "But I try to filter them out when I speak, although it always appears on my mind. It's rude to, you know, say that."

Hmm, what else? I told her I was still extremely anxious, but as if there's a newly-installed automatic sprinkler, it put out the fire a little bit better. I also liked being more active now, whereas I never exercised a day in my life before fusing. The last time I did anything physical was in PE class at school. I could eat KFC and a little bit of rice now.

The differences certainly went so much deeper than what I liked and disliked doing or eating or talking about. There were so, so many layers that I could peel one by one, and with each piece I found something new yet familiar. I couldn't possibly list them on top of my head as I still need to find them myself. I got time.

I remembered my interaction with Egon and Ara and the littles, how I felt about them—the whole system.

"He loved them unconditionally," I said.

Dr. Elly replied, "And so you love them unconditionally."

I looked at her. Then I looked into my heart.

"I do."

Egon

It's the first time I fronted ever since the fusion. It's funny how the outside never changed even though we were going through, should I say, an upsetting huge change. No one knew what was going on inside—but wasn't that the thing that always happened? Nika developed her repulsion towards us and her own condition because of that. The never-ending judgement from the people who didn't even know what was really happening inside one's head.

The others probably didn't know this, but there were gossips floating around when the body was hospitalized and stayed sick for quite some time. Some said we—I mean, Nika, became a sacrifice for the sake of the shop's popularity. It's not uncommon here to use supernatural forces to increase sales. Ama never used that. She's always honest and our shop's quality could speak for itself. So just like how it quickly arose, the gossip also quickly dissipated. The people who had been Ama's customers for decades were the ones who refuted that nonsense.

Others gossiped about how Nika contracted an illness that could potentially spread through the food served. It was utter nonsense, but people still believed in it. It took time, but the bullshit also dissipated. We didn't really deal with it because we didn't have the energy honestly, so we opened the shop as usual, and the customers gradually returned.

We couldn't control what other people said, but we could control how we dealt with things. Sometimes proceeding as usual could return things like how they used to—not always, but better than wasting our effort in doing futile things.

Oh.

Ara

I covered their little bodies with their favorite fluffy blankets, quietly so as not to wake them. I was thankful that they were here, distracting me from the grief and providing me comfort. As selfish as it sounded, I needed them more than they needed me. The image of a hammock then appeared in my mind, but I quickly brushed it away. It found a way to my heart and punched it blue.

I rushed out of the daycare and silently cried outside once I reached the stone trail. It's not good if they saw me crying. I would never distress them.

The garden was never as bright as before. The sky was still blue, but it's closer to gray. I didn't know if it would ever return to the bright blue like it was before.

When I arrived at the central table, I saw Egon's back, slumped, steadily breathing. I hadn't seen him for days. My hand landed on his shoulder gently, and this made him look at me. He showed me a sad smile.

"Where have you been?" I asked him, taking a seat beside him.

"Inside," he replied, looking at his trail. "I was just from the outside, though."

"Where is she?"

Egon shrugged. "I don't know. Tired, probably. That's why I was brought to front."

I landed my gaze on the trees, but not focusing on anything in particular. We all needed time. But how long? I never knew this day would come. We hadn't spoken to Nika at all, and I guessed she was giving us space too.

"You know," Egon said, and I turned to look at him. "I kept thinking. What was his intention in sacrificing himself? What did he want? Why was he the one to disappear?"

He swallowed the urge to cry after his voice trembled saying that last word.

"I don't understand him. I thought it was going to be us facing the world like we always had," he said. "But he left."

Egon's head hung low. I stroked his back, wishing this didn't happen at all. When I chose integrated functioning, I thought we could cooperate without having to go through something like this.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't apologize. It's not your fault. It's not anyone's fault." A voice was heard.

Nika approached us from her trail. She looked the same. It's like there's no trace of Hector anywhere. It's like he was never here.

Nika silently sat opposite us, cautiously eyeing our expressions. I knew everything was clearly pictured on our faces: grief, loss, anger, disappointment. There's this other unease that appeared in my heart, and that was guilt. Should we act this way towards Nika? It's not like she forced Hector to fuse. She didn't even know it happened initially. But the hurt was too overwhelming.

We didn't say anything because we didn't know what to say. And so did she. We sat there in silence.

Nika rested her head on her palms, sitting on a slanted angle to the side that might send off a message that she was bored and lazy. Then her jaws and lips did a series of little movements; she was biting the insides of her cheeks.

And just at that moment, I could picture Hector doing the same thing.

The way Hector sat, slanted and lazy, didn't always mean that way, it's just the way he had always been sitting. And he always had this unconscious urge to bite the insides of his mouth, then inevitably biting it hard when someone surprised him. Then he would complain.

It's him.

Nika periodically brushed her nose, suppressing the itch that wasn't really caused by anything. A habit he had.

So that's how it was. I should've known this all along.

Nika

“Ah, the fu—freaking shadows. What a sore sight,” I said to myself, annoyed. It’s been some time, but the lush green trees were still tainted by dark figures floating here and there, and I was wondering for how long they’d still live there. I didn’t think I was having nightmares that frequently anymore. At least those that I know....

I hope they’d reduce in number so I could pay some of the fragments a visit. I had no intention of integrating with them for now because Hector’s memories were already heavy. And it was enough. Besides, if I passed out after an integration, who would carry me back to the center...?

I shook my head. It’s best to leave things this way until I know when to move on.

It’s been about three months after the fusion, and everything went just as normal. Somehow I fronted most of those times. I didn’t know if it’s either I was the one who got stronger, or them who refused to front. We sometimes crossed paths in the garden, but very little words were exchanged. If there was something we needed to discuss, we would still do it as usual, but it’s like, strictly business now. I wondered how much longer things should be this way. I couldn’t force anything to happen, so I just... gave them time and space.

One day, when we were debating over whether we could continue going to the gym, Egon said something that was so frustrating.

“Even though you had fused with the brute, it doesn’t mean we’re physically as strong. What would you do if you ended up injuring the body? Who will deal with the pain? Ara.”

“Egon,” Ara reminded him—I didn’t know, to watch his tone, watch his intentions, watch whatever bullshit he wanted to spout.

“You don’t think you’re as strong as him, do you?” There was still a major hint of spiciness in his tone. Oh, I’ll reply with the same amount.

“I am stronger; that I can feel,” I spat. Then I paused. Of course they caught on, so they waited for me to finish what I was unsure of saying. “But not, like, 100% strength like when I was Hector,” I said with a low voice.

“See! You’re a reckless ticking bomb. *Think*. Don’t say your brain also shrunk after you had fused,” Egon replied with such an infuriating, condescending tone.

I put circular pressures on both sides of my temples with my fingers. Felt like something had been pressing on my chest—a mixture of all sorts of things: anger, frustration, disappointment. He had been going on and on about how I would just leave if the body was hurt. Sometimes...

“Sometimes I just want to yank that bun off your head and cut it off.”

And I heard his breath hitch. “What did you just say?”

“Nothing.” I was too tired to repeat myself.

I just wanted this debate to end. The pain in my head was beginning to get more prominent, and I knew this conversation wouldn’t go anywhere. I’d gladly argue with Egon for hours and hours, but doing that would waste our time and I didn’t want to spend my precious energy rattling rubbish. So I stood and began to walk away.

“...bun alone.” I heard Egon mumble something incoherent.

I turned to him, and let out a question with a tone that’s kinda harsh. “What was it?”

“Leave my bun alone,” he repeated without looking at me.

Then an image flashed before my eyes, a *déjà vu*. But no, it’s a real image from the past. A real conversation happening in the past. I was there.

I didn’t realize I’d been looking at him, stunned, and he shifted his gaze to look straight to my eyes. He then broke away and let out a sigh. His face was conflicted, like he wanted to cry, like he was desperate, like he was ready to hang his hope somewhere else. That’s one of the few times he blatantly showed his feelings.

“You see, I can’t do it like Hector,” he said. “I’m fucking scared, honestly. I don’t know if I have the guts. *He* was full of guts.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “But I know I saw Hector in you.”

I seemed to have lost my ability to speak for a moment. “Well, that’s cause—”

“I know it, dammit.” Then he realized he was being too harsh. “Sorry.”

“S’okay...” I replied with a little voice. When I sensed that they still wanted to discuss something, I silently returned to my seat.

“Tell us, Nika... is he there?” Ara asked.

I contemplated on how to answer. “Well, he is and he is not. Are both possible?” I asked no one in particular. “I remember everything when I was Hector. I didn’t lose myself when I was Nika. It’s like... the merging of two drops of water. They are not necessarily gone and the one drop doesn’t mean it’s a new drop—do you get what I mean?”

“They become whole,” Ara said. I nodded, pointing to her and agreeing that what she just said described how I felt. Missing pieces were put into place, additional parts made me more of a whole person. “That makes sense because we’re, you know, separated and incomplete parts,” she told Egon.

“So do we all need to... fuse to become a completely whole person?” he asked. I could sense the dread hidden in his voice.

“Nope,” I quickly replied, before they could even for a second speculate I wanted that. “We don’t have to. Didn’t you listen to what dr. Elly said? Final fusion is not recommended. It just so happens that, uhm, Hector fused. And frankly, I don’t know if I can go through that again.”

Ara gently took my hand. Hers was smaller than mine but still warm nonetheless. “I’m sorry, it must have been hard for you...”

I squeezed her hand tight. “Hector’s strong, you know that. So I’m strong,” I grinned.

Then her eyes did this squint that showed just how happy she was. I knew that look. I’d seen it many times before. Every time she did that, two lines appeared on each of her upper cheeks. Heh, she looked like a fox.

My finger moved on its own, landing gently on the indented lines and slowly tracing it. When I realized what I had done, I pulled it back and apologized. But she held my hand in place, inches before her face and her lips quivered as one, two tears dripped down.

“Oh, why—why, why are you crying? Did I hurt you??” I immediately pulled her into a hug, patting her back a few times hoping it could comfort her.

She sniffled then chuckled. “I’m okay...” She tightened her arms around me. “I missed you.”

It was awkward, to be honest. But I knew where this came from, so I hugged her tighter, but realized maybe it's too tight. "Sorry, I hope I don't hurt you," I blurted.

"It's okay. Your hugs always give me courage."

I chuckled. "I know."

I caught Egon showing a little smile, but immediately changed his expression to a poker face when he realized I was looking at him. He was comedic.

"Just smile! No one forbids anyone from smiling," I told him.

"Shut up," he said, but there was not an ounce of unease in his tone. It's a light *shut up* that he always said every time I fooled around.

Perhaps we still have a long way to go before everything is really settled. The sky is still a grayish blue, the shadows still roam the forest. The trauma is still there. The future isn't surefire. But Hector's giant leap gave us a gentle push forward.

Into the path of recovery.

And I have everyone with me.