

Dewan M.I. Mukto is a hobbyist author and poet born and raised in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Although his actual academic interests and professional occupations differ from the usual works of literature, Mukto aims to inspire and entertain countless people through the few publications he can spare.

You can feel free to contact Dewan Mukto on the following social platforms:



dewanmukto



dewanmukto



dewanmukto

IN THE WILDEST DIMENSIONS

A Novel

By
Dewan Mukto

IN THE WILDEST DIMENSIONS

1First Edition 2024

Copyright © Dewan Mukto 2023

Cover illustration by DreamStudio (A.I.)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author or publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For
Syed Imamul Hasan,
who heard it first

Ashrafull Islam Shawon,
who heard it too,

Virginia Cecilia Bouchie,
inspiring ex-employer

Rashida Samarah,
the top fan

Dewan Mahbubul Islam,
talented artist and younger brother

PROLOGUE

Empty.

The tuxedo-clad detective was on vacation, but certainly he hadn't permitted his wallet to be on vacation either. Fueled by a shower of embarrassment and a growing cloud of dread condensing above the canopy of his superficial emotions, he hastily tried to run a search warrant on his own apparel. The collection of pockets couldn't resist. They had to give in, he thought.

But luck was the lawyer for his fate tonight. And the judge of his life had already decreed what was about to unfold.

"I... Please give me a moment," his speech skills summoned the most mundane lines his mind could handle. Meanwhile, his arms and hands dutifully fumbled about the domain of his garments.

"Take your time, sir," a voice replied back, scented by fresh courtesy. Feminine in nature, young in stature. "I'll be available at the counter whenever you're ready."

"Ah, sure thing!"

The detective stood up from his seat. Due to a slight anomaly in the speed of his ascent, a metallic object slipped out of his trouser pocket. Under the light of

the ornate chandeliers, its silvery skeleton winked back at him with a pact signed by the night's disgruntled agent of luck itself.

Cli-nk! Clink!

The object performed a gentle hop before resting atop the floor. Car keys. Bearing the logo of the British automobile manufacturer 'Bentley'.

'Ahem,' the detective performed a swift swoop with his hand in the likeness of an eagle launching itself at a rabbit, but faster than a bullet fired from the weapon hidden within his suit. He placed his car keys back in his rightful place before throwing his gaze around the confines of the café, habitually trying to deduce if any onlookers had the honesty to capture a greedy glimpse of his keys. Luckily, and perhaps unluckily, he found none.

He heard a giggle. That same voice who had spoken a while ago. A cheerful tune that melted his stern stance immediately.

Rotating himself around, he faced the waitress. Slightly shocked.

"Don't worry, Mr Jucas," she had the opportunity to peek at his nameplate while he was dazed by his distracted self in fumbling about his pockets to trace any clues about his wallet. His surprisingly missing wallet. "These parts of town are unsusceptible to thieves or the like. People rarely commit crimes," she

stated while pouring out a waterfall of latté coffee from a kettle at the counter.

"Well that's strange," the detective, presumably surnamed Jucas, swatted away his suspicions for a moment. "A town without crime is like a business without funding."

"Oh, is that so?" the waitress donned a counterfeit smile, spiced by a sarcastic laugh. She stopped pouring the coffee; the cup was overflowing.

"Welcome to Vicilia, sir. May I have the privilege of asking what brings you here?"

"No," Jucas fought fire with fire, with a smile faker than hers. "I am sorry, but I'd rather not answer that."

He drew out his only hope for monetary support in the absence of his beloved wallet - the pistol buried in the womb of his suit. It was no ordinary weapon.

"E-excuse me?" the waitress took a step back dragged by the tug of reflex. "What are you doing?"

A double dozen customers occupying the environment passed on their puzzled, slightly frightened, expression in a ripple akin to a multiplexing domino effect. All eyes on the man non-native to this region.

"Committing crimes," Jucas replied bluntly.

The detective clenched his right hand's muscles, pulling the trigger five times.

American coins slipped out of the nozzle in free flight, headed towards the roof of the counter. Five of them. Five dollars.

Stunned by the unexpected scenario witnessed by the onlookers, the detective shoved an opportunity into his bad supply of luck for the night. With a pace neither too suspicious nor too slow, he reduced his displacement from the doors signifying the exit for the coffee shop.

"Keep the change."

A tiny bell connected to the doors tinkered with two musical notes, its pitch climbing up and down as the detective boldly fled the scene.

Naturally, the waitress relied on her sharp eyesight to immediately seize any remaining clues about the strange guest's whereabouts. To her curiosity's pleasure, her eyes were transfixed on a nametag peacefully reclining near the foothills of the counter. The text read: "Adam Lucas".

Nimbus clouds were dutifully busy watering the ashen garden of the cityscape dominated by flowers and plants in the form of trees and buildings. Adam stepped out of the café and briskly allowed his eyes to locate his vehicle.

Even in the shimmering haze of rainfall, the stock rims of the Bentley Continental SS automobile shone

as smoothly and perfectly as the day today. The license plate proudly displayed an alphanumeric combination that an informed individual could subconsciously deduce as being registered relatively recently.

Indeed, Adam only recently managed to afford his dream car.

After spending countless hours battling against the legions of fatigue, boredom and gritty work in the law enforcement life, Adam Lucas had honorably bought the car at the price of discrete dishonor to his reputation, by confiscating a large monetary sum from a criminal who had fallen prey to one of his sting operations. Luckily, none except himself are alive and breathing on this planet to be informed about the apparent act of dishonesty.

He recalled the moment: when the Special Weapons And Tactics team arrived to quarantine the location afterwards, all they found were a hill of drugs under the criminal's ownership, a pool of blood scented with degeneracy, a corpse tattooed with bullet holes, and a detective suspiciously unharmed and unarmed.

Being a man of renowned gallantry and crowned with mystery, Adam was confident he could walk the streets of any city within the United States and have not an ounce of fear enveloped inside him. His gait alone, he believed, could send certain criminals fleeing for their non-existent families if they could recognize him.

‘Ha, to recognize me?’ Adam’s egoistic miniature (chibi) commented within his mental chambers. ‘I doubt it.’

Adam Void Lucas, honorary detective from a city afar and a police force unspoken of, was dismayed by the subtle sight of his car’s engine not cooperating with him.

The moonlight had fallen in love with the Bentley Continental’s lustrous body, perfectly curved and cornered for optimal reflection of the stolen sunlight. The circular orbs adorning the front of the vehicle in the shape of headlights were sadly snoring inactively; the battery itself liable for standing in contrast against the ignition chamber.

Blurred out by the thickness of glass and his current distractions, the waitress knocked on one of the windows from her location indoors. Her attempts at hailing Adam’s attention sunk down in vain.

‘You couldn’t pick a merrier moment to fail, huh?’ Adam silently aimed an insult at his prized ride, riddled in rhetoric with a sauce of sarcasm. Having no choice left, he walked over to the hood of the Bentley, preparing his dexterous hands for a remedial diagnosis of the car’s ailment. ‘Oh well, all the more beneficial to act on it than to nag and grumble.’

With a swift stroke upwards, he pulled the metallic skin apart, to expose the internal organs of the transportation machine.

‘Sigh.’

He broke free from a delusion as a personal fact rushed towards his curious mind like a tsunami overpowering a temple – Adam Jucas was not well acquainted with mechanical knowledge.

Turning around, his sixth sense merged with his peripheral sense of vision.

His nametag was in the wrong hands.

A KEY TO HER HEART

“Thank you for the lovely evening tonight, Jucas.”

“The pleasure is surely mine, Miss Catalie,” Adam let go of the waitress's hand, softer than his domesticated cat back home. “Better yet, you should be thanking luck.”

“Luck?” Catalina Bouchie pretended to be a silly little infant, unsure about his responses. “Luck be in the air tonight, is what I'd say.”

Adam blew a soft breath alongside a quick shaking motion of his head, handsomely-shaped by God, in accordance with a smile of dismissal.

“No, no, mademoiselle,” the detective ran his gloved hands across his shoulders to enact strict measures for the eviction notice for any dust that had settled on his casual suit. “If my car hadn't broken down, mayhaps we'd never have exchanged numbers.”

“N-numbers?”

To her surprise, Adam skillfully drew out a nametag from his mysterious pockets. On the opposing side of the rectangular piece of laminated plastic, a phone number had already been etched.

“An eye for an eye, or should I say... nametag,” some rogue neuron in Adam's brain instructed him to wink his eye. “My number awaits your presence on your

tag. Through the night, you had been lost in your thoughts when you dropped yours. I didn't dare to disturb your chain of mental processes, till the time seemed ripe. So it is. You still have mine tucked away in your purse, I believe."

For a duration of two heartbeats, Catalie's mind cycled through the confusion.

"B-but, how did you know that I've already written down my number on it?"

"A simple glimpse of experience, m'lady," Lucas pressed on the full throttle for 'Flirt Mode' in his mind. However, he knew he wasn't adaptive enough to know his limits, to be wary to not sound out of touch. "Surely, you hadn't expected a man like myself to return back to the café on time. So you must've scribbled down your own number in case it goes missing again. A woman of your attitude knows how to be reliable in the right portions. Thus, a dutiful employee working with such passion at such an elegant establishment obviously knew the arts of humanism."

The woman standing at the doorway of her apartment remained surprised, simultaneously freezing with intrigue by the expressions of the man she'd just met.

"Wow, you have good eyes, you know?" she let out a smile that showcased a shallow dimple. "But I find it strange. The way you talk, it's so... formal. Almost seems stressed intentionally."

She reached down to her purse dangling atop the curvature of her hips, the imitated golden decorations of the storage accessory dazzling under the fluorescent lights.

“Ah, well...” Adam redirected his body weight to roleplay as a Leaning Tower of Pisa on the freshly-limed wall beside Catalie’s door. In his mind, angry fireworks were being lit; he had lost control of the conversation. “A matter of old habits.”

“Oh,” Catalie pulled up the quirky detective’s official badge of identity. “Must be very peculiar habits then!”

Two pairs of hands swapped nametags.

Adam retracted his verbal misfires with a nervous laugh.

“If you say so.”

Catalie’s grip fastened on her door’s oblong handle. “You’re such a strange man. A gentleman, too,” she switched her vocal tone to a silky sweet whisper. “Welcome to Vicilia, sir. Some people here call me strange, too. If you’re not busy, you’re more than welcome to explore some of my own habits.”

The door clicked shut.

Lucas flushed out all the neural connections affiliated with the female acquaintance, as a matter of old habits.

He immediately commanded his legs to commence on a stride to locate his own apartment. The celestial satellite visible outside the 2nd floor corridor was already climbing down its saddle to make way for a much suitable star.

With the budget of time at hand, he wasn't fortunate enough to call for aid from a local mechanic to fix his vehicle. And he was indubitably unfortunate enough to have to rent a room for the night at a place guided by the only person he found familiar – Catalina.

Noiselessly walking across the array of doors, his eyes glimpsed a name and number of the unit he just passed: "Radiyana D., 206"

For a reason unknown, Adam's mind summoned an uneasy feeling in conjunction with the name.

Indeed, hardly a month had passed since he lost his wife bearing the same first name.

His trained mind kept all memories about her wrapped with dread and channeled at bay. He hoped that the namesake woman hadn't undergone the same tragedy.

"205"

The lenient landlord rented out the empty apartments to anyone willing to pay, knowing that hotels might be a shade pricier than its long-term counterpart.

Lucas grasped the cold, stiff door handle and escorted his thoughts to sway towards other matters.

His nametag rested on his palm.

With an eager roll of the object, he observed the temporary numbers on the other side.

Immediately, out of utter shock, his pupils constricted. He wasn't sure if he was truly expecting his predictions to align perfectly with reality, but the burst of confusion blew a great cloud of embarrassment, flavored by enigma. Nevertheless, his own eyes couldn't believe this improbable sight.

It was his phone number instead of hers.

HER STRANGE HABITS

Cuddling with the blanket and bedsheet he'd been provided, Adam held back on the neuroticism for the night.

Dwelling in the dull blue hues of a midnight background, the detective's ocular organs couldn't be at ease. Like an insomniac, he watched the lunar lights etch shadows on the wall and floor of his room, mimicking the window frames' outlines. On a wall adjacent to the detective's bed, an analog chronological measurement device displayed needles glowing green.

3:00 am. The hour of the devil, as certain religious researchers would ruse.

'How in the world did she know my contact information before I even revealed it?' the detective's brain was restlessly running a marathon of logical thinking. In the line of policing and evidence collection, his own industrial experience seemed to have betrayed himself. 'Unless there's a whole lot more to that waitress than meets the eye.'

Shifting positions on the springy mattress, his head flopped over to face the window side.

Unbeknownst to his absentminded consciousness, a family of nimbus clouds had begun to shed their tears. Their droplets pattered and splashed onto the silica

plates enveloped by the wooden chassis. Softly, like a natural melody being played on a grand piano, the raindrops produced a passive source of white noise.

‘By any case, I’d be quite interested in exploring that woman’s “strange habits”’.

Quite quietly, his awareness quit the presence of this moment in time and space, leaving Adam’s body to remain hugged by sleep, and his soul to roam freely by climbing up the ladder of subconscious dreams.

Heat waves from the dawning sunrise evoked a poetic response from the world outside the Leafy Lodgings.

Yawning from the palaces in the sky, ascending from the womb of the sea, painting its signature golden dye, upon the halls of air set free, it arrived with a fresh smile.

It arrived waving at the Earth, riding rays of light so agile, it heralded the news of its birth.

Time tellers dutifully displayed sevens, while “Prince Sun has arrived!” yelled the Heavens.

“Your Majesty, we awaited your presence,” the youthful morning star waved back with benevolence.

Birds conjured chirrup harps; roosters picked up vocal violins. In unison, they sang of the forthcoming dawn, of the blossoming Sun’s righteous era. From every patch of soil, sand and lawn, reminding all of

flora and fauna, that the pleasant promenade of light has begun!

From afar, Princess Luna slowly hid behind the astral curtains, shy; her silvery servants desperately followed. Changing the colors of the celestial stage slightly made her cry, but she knew the might of the Prince could have hers overshadowed.

On a foreign bed of azure, she sleepily faded out of view, leaving behind only a faint pearlescent hue.

The Sun inspected the assembly of his Peoples.

“Ah, here come the Clouds!” he spotted his contrasting disciples, riding atop wispy winds galloping swift.

“Hmph!” snorted the Cloud Nimbus, seeking to broaden their physical rift. “We Clouds can bloat out your radiance so appraised!”

Aghast with awe, the kingdom of the Sky exploded into a fog of blaming and blasphemy. By the natural orders described by Ptolemy, advocates of the Weather flocked towards the commotion.

“Sire, we admit apologies for the lack of locomotion,” judging the situation, they sincerely bowed. “But we’re afraid the clouds have contested the roads we plowed.”

Expecting conflict and chaos, the atmosphere fell grim; instead, the golden prince respectfully disagreed.

“My domain is free, let all heavenly beings live their dream,” the Sun ordered by the face of his royal decree. “My cloud brethren may strive to defeat me, but in the end, all life remembers who remains steadfast, on whom to depend.”

Alas, the Sun lifted his hands, exhibiting his palms of power, “The subtle differences between us were granted by birth, for I provide sustenance through light, you via shower, but affirm as your own the way you interpret your worth!”

Hushed as they were, Cloud Cirrus took responsibility for their legion, “My deepest regrets, Prince. Our elders know no self-esteem,” as she dragged Nimbus away like luring a wild pigeon. “May your reign be victorious; may your sister gleam!”

With that, the clouds were finally absent from the solar focal region.

“Praise be to the King of Heavens! Praise be to Him for your Blessing!” exclaimed all non-human lifeforms surfaced below the Sun’s sacred gaze, “Praise be to your Creator, ruler of Night and Day; for you, we sing!”

Reminded of the God, the Sun let loose his full form, ablaze!

Dancing through dew drops, rampaging through rain, dictating the darkness, purging ecological pain, light echoed in every shape and color, as photons marched in waves of honor.

Participating playfully in Newton's prism, motivating rainbows to climb out of their closets, catering to philosophers the sweetest topic of surrealism, diving into copycat glass and watery pockets, the Sun left his holy mark in a state of hysterical sarcasm.

Alas, flags of the Sun's ascension were already up; eyes awakened, chloroplasts held out their cup, so the solar syrup stormed out, caressing every fan, directing blind plants, making skin tan.

The sun had risen – every Earthly object now greeting “Hi”.

Yawning like the *Homo sapien* he is, Adam Lucas gazed at the calendar perched atop the flat inner membrane of the building. Printed text mentioned the name of the month: June.

Squinting for a handful of time, he allowed his eyes to adapt to the harsh concentration gradient of light invading his room.

‘Well, well, if it ain't an average day in the middle of June,’ he chuckled to himself as his jaws made two quick embraces via the lips. ‘Time to check on that Cat, and judge in what weird tones she purrs.’

Waking up from bed fully, his feet gently slammed onto the hardwood floors. A satisfactory creak was audible as his own stretching body made his back crack.

He drew a deep breath.

Picking up his tuxedo, he slipped it on with the help of regular habit.

He was about to leave his apartment when an unidentified object captured his visual reflexes. It called for his attention immediately.

A white square object had been slipped under the front door overnight.

Kneeling down, his bare hands dug parallel to the floor to pick up the square piece. He could've sworn it wasn't there before.

Turning it over, his heart faced a similar sensation as last night.

It was a photograph.

Of himself.

TRAPPED BY HER VOICE

Still processing the fresh sensory stimulus in his mind, Adam wondered and questioned his own memory.

The photograph showcased himself sitting blissfully at the café, his likeness smiling directly at the camera. If only Adam had been struck by a mild dose of retrograde amnesia, he would've truthfully believed what he saw.

Alas, he was sane and sober.

He clearly remembered and recalled the events precedent in the last 24 hours.

The detective was hardly aware of his oncoming fate back at that moment. He had no reason to smile nor gaze at a camera lens. And he wasn't a fan of the coffee being hinted in the canvas.

Something was definitely not consistent.

And only one person knew the answer.

Trudging with an extremely unconfident and impatient aura, Adam Jucas walked along the corridor, now fragranced with the sun's royalty.

Arriving at Catalina's door, he hesitated before attempting the activity he'd planned.

‘What if she’s not guilty? How can I be so sure that she’s behind this?’ his intrusive mental entity advised further. ‘Whatever it may be, it surely isn’t a healthy prank. I can still ask her if she’s observed something relatable.’

His rolled-up fingers formed fists and pounded on the timber platform obstructing the path to Catalie’s chambers.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Footsteps followed the end of the three hits, the amplitude ascending according to the Doppler effect.

The door opened, and the familiar face of a female human appeared.

“Hi Adam!” her doe lips moved with grace. The tips of her upper incisors were slightly visible. “Good morning!”

“Good day, miss Catalie,” Adam locked held his left fist within his right, both arms reclining vertically on his back. “A pleasant morning, indeed.”

The more it made sense, the more it didn’t.

“Sorry I forgot to mention about this eerie coincidence earlier,” Catalina sipped on her bubble tea. “I genuinely thought that you were the same person.”

“Ah, that’s alright. Human nature is about making mistakes,” Adam japed along, as he stirred his cappuccino. The foamy liquid danced around the edges of the exquisite porcelain cup. “And learning to mend them.”

The photograph was of another person whose resemblance matched that of his with utmost accuracy. Spotted at the Café Eve-Jack, during a typical work shift as a waitress.

Right now, Catalie was drowning in leisure on her day off.

But the café was a place of comfort for her next to none. She couldn’t resist inviting the detective over for a chat.

“Mhmm,” her suction on the straw made faint sounds as the creamy flavored water gushed up into her small mouth. “I figured you’d gone to sleep so I just slipped it underneath. Haha,” she stopped for a draught of air. “Photography is one of my hobbies. But unfortunately, I lack patience sometimes.”

“No worries,” Adam slipped two expert fingers into the cup’s ring, the fingernails well-trimmed and clean. “A woman ought to have passionate wishes and ambitions. Especially one of your accords. But I admit I am running low on my free time. I am on the lookout for someone who could fix my car. Would you be kind and informed about any such leads?”

“Oh, a mechanic. Is that what you’re seeking?” her blue eyes lit up like gemstones, vibrant with a sparkle of interest. “You could try asking my uncle, Michael. He runs a factory in the south. Not a mechanic by trade, but I’m sure he has sufficient knowledge about cars.”

“Bingo!” the detective slammed an excited fist onto the shiny topcoat layer of the table. “Thanks for the information, miss Bouchie.”

Standing up, he left his cup of coffee to cool away via steamy convection currents.

“The drinks are on me,” Adam withdrew crisp notes of currency from his wallet and laid them on the cashier’s desk.

He could feel two feminine eyes admiring his sense of courtesy. His humble mannerisms.

Being a detective on the field for a number of years, Adam Lucas had been accustomed to properly verifying evidence and anecdotes.

He was the man for never wavering under the influence of his own emotions.

On any normal day at work, he’d have navigated through any trails of lies or trials of deceit easier than plucking out a feather belonging to an endangered wild ostrich species. Even when his mission

demanded such a task, he could be trusted upon for fulfilling it sincerely.

On any normal instance of trusting strangers, Lucas would always have his stance prepared for aggression. In the past, he had escaped multiple attempts of his enemies willing with the flow of either hatred, fear or jealousy, using various means necessary – from seduction to abduction.

Arriving at the factory mentioned by the off-duty waitress, he knew that today wasn't one of them.

WHO IS SHE?

Darkness.

Darker than the insides of his eyelids in a completely dark and desolate room. Tangling around his neck and shoulders like an anaconda on a revengeance spree. Dangling from the top of his forehead, heavy with desperation. Strangling his neck tighter than his own wife's turgid thighs had.

He was at peace. Until he realized he was at peace.

Daylight streamed into the cornea of his eyes as the eyelids dutifully parted to welcome the savory sun's energy.

With a jump, he got off a bed.

Adam Lucas found himself in a new location, foggy with uncertainty. A wooden cabin, his first impressions noted. Spruce logs composed the sturdy walls decorated with natural lines of xylem and brittle bark.

Residencies of dust had settled in every corner. Their airlines were busy among the godly rays of light stationary from ornate windows scantily-clad by muslin fabric.

A bookshelf, a table, a standing mirror and the bed he found himself on were the only visible articles of furniture decorating the single-room cabin.

A book had spread its pages wide, lying on a hard bed of wood that the table was made of. A pen remained inserted along the middle, leaking ink shamelessly.

'Whoever the hell was writing on it last night is an irresponsible fellow,' he commented in his lonely mental space. 'And whoever the hell is responsible for bringing me here is a distasteful one.'

He couldn't recall anything about the past week.

'That's strange. I've always remembered every clue, down to the last pigment. How come I remember nothing about what I am doing here and why?'

Discovering his reflection on the mirror, he found himself staring at a man in his thirties, crowned with youth, dressed in a tuxedo gleaming like polished obsidian in the morning light.

He steered his attention to anchor onto the table at the center of gravity of the jungle house.

It was a journal.

"June 16th," he murmured the words aloud from the two pages currently facing the ceiling. "Today I found a man stranded on the highway. His attire highlights his importance. He smells so nice and his face drives the butterflies in my heart crazy! I hope he wakes up soon. He seems to be in a deep state of sleep. Can't wait to talk to him!!"

The detective grimaced. Intuition analyzed the tone of the author and deduced that some woman had been behind this.

He found his branded formal shoes at the door, the squishy soles yearning to be crushed under his firm feet.

Vines of an unknown herb grew helter-skelter along the edges of the semi-detached door. The hinges creaked relatively noisily, as the rusty iron cylinders rubbed against each other.

Adam wasn't sure what to expect on the other side of the door, but none of his expectations matched the outcome.

A forest sprawled outside the cabin. The air was sour with a contaminant he couldn't recognize. Sunlight collided on the forest floor, rich with humus from fallen leaves. As for the trees...

No leaves, no branches.

Odd.

Stiff poles of pine crowded everywhere for supremacy on the soil. The temperature felt extraordinarily cold for a summer month in the Northern Hemisphere. With every moment being spent in this strange land, a blackhole of confusion grew stronger in Jucas. The gravitational force only seemed to attract more complexities.

'I need clues. I need to find someone,' the detective unofficially abandoned his vacation. 'I must uncover the roots of this problem. Whatever is going on with me.'

He began to walk towards the east, where the abundance and density of trees seemed to wane.

'What's this? A highway?'

He accelerated his pace to approach the hint of asphalt detected by the fovea of his eyes.

In a moment, the kingdom of trees heeled at their borders, meeting the black pitch of a proper road meant for transport purposes.

'I wonder if that generous woman is around here somewhere.'

A milestone nearby displayed: "Vicilia - 0 km"

From down the depths of his subconscious memories, cluttered around his hippocampus, Adam's mind conjured up a disconnected memory. Right on the tip of his tongue.

'I'm not sure where, or how, but I think I've heard that name before. Strange.'

Not a single car drove on the stretch of bitumen. Yet, his deft and crafty ears picked up a distant noise. Like a constant humming of engines.

Without thinking twice, he began walking with a vector aimed north.

Some cars were parked outside a café. One of them sent a sudden sensation of dé jâvū groveling for approval in the detective's mind, currently under the reign of skepticism.

A Bentley Continental.

He wasn't sure who was the lucky individual to be the owner or had the honor of driving it.

'Hmm... Let me go grab a cup of coffee. A shot of caffeine ought to clear out some of the serotonin.'

A tinkling bell rang twice as the door opened, the musical note pitching down and up.

"Hi there! Welcome to Café Eve-Jack," a blonde waitress merrily greeted him from behind the cashier's desk. "How may I help ya?"

Adam's eyes darted along the horizon. But they only saw a damp stench of emptiness. Not a single customer in sight.

His gaze still hadn't taken her face into account. But when he did, a mallet of that old familiar feeling landed on his cranium, shaking up his senses once again.

"I-" his lips were one step ahead. He had to legitimately end the sentence before he ended up speechless. His vocal cords selected honesty. "I think I've seen you somewhere. Don't ask me how, though. I myself find it a struggle to remember."

"Oh, is that so?" she covered her cute lips with her hand for hiding her giggle. "Well, I guess you could try an espresso. The thinkers' favorite, they say. Might help ya remember things more fashionably."

"Aye, I'll be ordering a cup then," he reached for his wallet but he found it missing from its usual spot. His fingers found it in the other pocket of his dress pants. The waitress had occupied his retinae. "And what might be the name of such a lovely lady such as yourself?"

"Sure thing! A shot of espresso coming right up! Oh, and I'm Sophia, by the way."

"Pleasure to meet you, miss Sophia," Adam sent his hand forward to shake her hand. She had already turned around, so to save himself from the spotlight effect of embarrassment, he changed the elevation of the arm to pretend to comb his hair. "May I please know where's the washroom?"

"Ofcourse, sir," she answered from behind a curtain separating the kitchen from the customer sitting space. "It's right by the vase of Katniss."

'Ah, that word reminds me... I think that waitress had a different name. A name that begins with the same syllable. How very curious indeed.'

Adam dived horizontally into the male washrooms, and found a row of urinals lined along the length and a mirror conquering the area of the opposite wall, beveled with faucets. The messy and grimy tiles on the floor complained about the lack of maintenance. Reflections of the circular lamps of the ceiling glistened.

Washing his face with some hydrogen oxide raining from a tap, something caught his eye.

In a ceramic urinal on the other wall, a key rested at the bottom of the bowl.

Wrinkling up his nose, he slid on some disposable gloves before picking it up. Life as a crime investigator was certainly very stubborn when it came to handling all sorts of situations.

A label had been attached to the key fob.

"Michaelangelo B."

SHE IS EVERYWHERE

Petals of fear blossomed in the sickening oily pond of Adam's anxiety. Fear, an emotion that he hadn't felt since the turning of events about a moon's revolution away.

The name on the key was both the cue and the clue.

Standing here, he realized that he was being deceived. No, not a simple form of deception; this was beyond the average limits of lying and gaslighting psychological techniques. This was the most convoluted and esoteric case to have ever landed in Adam Lucas' hands.

And now, he gladly accepted.

'Something's not right with that waitress. And I'm not in a mood to investigate further. First things first, I need to get away from this forsaken town.'

He flicked the gloves off and rinsed his hands one more time. Next, he did the same for the key, making sure to wrap it around another spare glove to prevent contaminants and possible pathogens escaping.

Pretending to continue being an amnesiac, he exited the washroom with the minimal noise he could produce.

"Ah, there you are, sir," the waitress walked up the aisle corresponding to the washrooms with a shot

glass full of a black liquid, slushing around slightly in synchrony with her stylish footsteps, perched atop the lap of a metal tray. "Your coffee is ready. You're gonna love the bittersweet combination of our special recipe."

"Oh, thanks, thanks," Adam's dipped his tongue with the sauce of verbal etiquette. "Please leave it at a table. Yes, this one's fine. Perfect. Thank you for your service, ma'am."

"Ah, no sweat at all, sir!" her fingers delicately lifted the glass and landed it onto the glamorous surface of the nearest table, right next to a miniature bonsai plantation serving as decoration. "Enjoy!"

Lucas sat down suspiciously on a chair and scrutinized the espresso in front of him.

'Hmm, how very strange,' he thought. 'Could this coffee be the next clue? What's so special about that recipe? A mind-numbing potion? Nay, such idiosyncrasies scarcely peek at modern solutions. If someone wanted to inflict malicious effects on me, poison would be the jackpot reagent.'

He drummed his right hand's fingers on the wooden surface.

'Well, either way, I don't see a specific reason why I am able to recall my memories so quickly. Maybe it's not just the drink. There must be something else.'

His eyes spotted her reflection on the episurface of the caffeinated drink, walking towards him. Out of sheer reflex, his gaze sprung up to face the waitress in the real world.

'What the -'

His eyes couldn't believe the obscure oddity.

Sophia was actually walking *away* from him.

He lowered his gaze to check the liquid reflection again, to be bewildered yet again. The reflection was attuned to the real-time incidents now.

'Yep, something's definitely not right. Even if I had a bet on proving it otherwise.'

Adam stood up, compiling a list of excuses to apply for casually cancelling his decisions. He knew that there wouldn't be an easy way out of this right now. That coffee *was* cursed, even if a divine messenger of God would convince him that it's not.

Throughout the lifespan that Adam Lucas clearly remembered, this was the first time he was dealing with the supernatural.

Furthermore, the first time that he was, in fact, afraid.

"Sir, your drink-"

"Keep the change," the detective sprinted as if a pitbull was chasing him. With the lack of time and

concentration needed to count the money, he simply threw his wallet onto the cashier's desk.

He didn't even turn around. Not even once.

Not even when the waitress called out his real name despite never revealing it to a certain Sophia.

He ran.

He remembered his Bentley, sitting out under the afternoon sun like a royal carriage from a children's fairytale.

Thinking irrationally, he climbed in.

"In the name of God, the most merciful," his lips autonomously chanted while his hands gripped the steering wheel and injected the key into the ignition chamber hole. For a fraction of time unspeakable, he prayed.

And it worked.

A miracle!

The twin-turbocharged V8 internal combustion engine roared like a dinosaur being resurrected back to life.

"Adam! Please wai-"

No time for females. No time for sympathy.

Adam knew better. A racecar spelt backwards is still racecar, but a girlfriend spelt backwards is dneirflirg, which made no sense.

His strong legs caressed the accelerator pedal, whipping the reins of more than a five hundred imaginary horses.

The speedy vehicle finally rotated its wheels, the forces being transmitted directly from the discs, pistons and the blood of ancient creatures.

Within moments, the car had a net displacement of half a dozen hundred meters.

But something that was supposed to be amiss wasn't.

"Adam, please just sto-"

He could hear the voice of that uncanny, but gorgeous, waitress woman despite being so far away. He had good ears, but certainly not *this* good enough to be able to pick up sound waves from nearly a kilometer away.

Just to catch a quick peek, he looked behind him via the rear-view mirror.

Adam was stunned.

Curiosity didn't kill the Cat.

WHERE IS SHE?

Detective work meant wearing the wings of Justitia to carry out tasks of humanity. To punish those who are guilty and protect souls who are innocent.

Detective duty implied being on the frontlines, scouring for action and crime. Trying to decipher remnants of the perpetrators' misdeeds. Spending countless hours assisting the police in locating and identifying the right people guilty of the wrong things.

Adam Jucas no longer wished to identify as a detective.

Indeed, having the knowledge of how other detectives operate indicated that he himself knew how to avoid being detected by them.

Loops of dread were already coiling around his frowning face.

Right now, the only person guilty would be himself.

A first-time life-time experience in reverse-engineering a case where the culprit was already looking at him in every reflection.

'Congratulations, you've done it again,' he mocked himself by imagining a mental scenario of his employer acknowledging him for solving this exact case in the forthcoming future, dragging the limp,

attractive body of a woman he had almost weaved cobwebs of dreams of a happy life together for. Her soft fingers were curling inwards, growing ever stiffer and colder by the minute. The doe lips he had hoped to kiss one day were now forever tainted in blood. 'You've solved the case, Lucas! A celebration should be announced in your name. This case was so crafty that we spent months trying to get him.'

Carrying her like a princess lost in sleep, Adam walked towards some bushes underlining the forestry on either side of the monopolist highway of Vicilia.

The trailing skid marks of his vehicle's pneumatic tires were painted red with the wine of Sophia's life essence.

Sophia or Catalina. The detective couldn't tell.

With no eye witnesses around, only the barren trees paid a standing ovation to the burial of the womanly corpse. A doll of flesh and blood with a voice so serenely special.

One last time, out of an inner blob of respect and admiration for the grown girl, Adam's lips in intercourse with hers.

The embrace left a sour aftertaste of iron from the hemoglobin in Sophia's blood in his mouth.

If he were a vampire, he would've lusted for sucking out every last drop.

Such a pretty face, with innocent eyes.

Adam never wanted to hurt her.

He doubted whether any human would. Nor would any carnivorous creature, based on the limited amount of jiggle he had felt from her torso, hips and locomotory organs while she was in his arms.

Somehow the realization dripped a crueler feeling into his gut.

He was worse than the entirety of the Earth's population. Killing just one person burdened his mind to believe that he had slain all of the humans at once.

It felt like it.

It felt worse than losing her due to an accident.

It reminded him of the past.

It reminded him, of his ex-wife.

Transitioning from a warm-hearted detective to a cold-blooded killer, Adam Lucas began to feel more like a dead man alive.

He heard whispers.

Whispers from an entity foreign to human perception. A being from a different dimension and race. A spirit, more like.

"It's not your fault," it consoled him, resting on his shoulder, alive, ancient and invisible. "You only did

what's right. She deserved it. She was the one trying to trick you. To manipulate you."

Adam tried to shake the demon off. But it was useless by his own attempts, he knew.

"I seek refuge from this devilry, dear God," he prayed solemnly. "Please forgive me. Whatever You've created certainly returns back to You."

The whispering halted. Even if for the time being.

Whether the waitress was completely lifeless or not, he wasn't sure. The impact of the brakes and hundreds of kilograms rolling over her body had certainly mashed her ribs in much the same manner as foretold to be done to sinners in the grave. Guilt was his girlfriend now.

The ex-detective refrained from leaving the body of a Heavenly female human out in the open for predators, and he didn't want worms and parasites to infest her body as soon as she wore the ground as a blanket.

He placed her in between the bushes, the only leafy things in sight. Her organic leafy lodgings for the everlasting night.

'This should do it. In case I am hunted and accused, I could round up the charges to point to my doppelganger instead,' his cerebrum highlighted a memory of the day before, of the photograph. Lifting up his tuxedo by extending out and angling his arms in triangles, he shoved it down to blow off any

unsettling dust or biometric information from the dead woman. 'As a matter of fact, I doubt that most detectives in this region would be able to look ahead like I do. I should be safe with my tracks turbid enough.'

His footsteps softly echoed across the woods, vibrating with nature's sadness for the foul work.

He got back to the car and drove off to the north.

"Nice ride," a middle-aged man slapped the Bentley's hood with care. "You're from out of town, eh?"

"Yes, quite so," Adam replied, unsure how to feel proud behind the thick layers of lies currently piling up and fertilizing his tree of mental strain. His arms were crossed idly. "Vicilia seems like a very peculiar place to live in. This is my first time visiting this citadel."

"On vacation, eh?" the bearded man thrust a dispenser tube into the fuel tank with a hairy arm. "I say, have ya visited any coffee shops around here? There's one called the Eve-Jack. Fancy place, affordable prices. Simple as."

Adam wasn't sure how to react. How did he know that he was on vacation? Worse still, the reference to the forsaken café seemed surreally ominous to hear, at such a frequency.

"Ah, yes, how did you know?" he couldn't help but agree. On one hand, he was slightly curious to hear more from this person managing the gas station. "About that café... I myself have visited it a number of times already. Love it as you do."

"Oh hell nah! I only guessed. Heheh," the man's belly bod bounced with his heaving lungs full of laughter. "Ohh, well that's interesting. Good for ya, good for ya. The place was founded by Eve Bouchie and Jack Lucas. Eve is my niece's name, by the way."

Adam gulped down a gasp of shock. He just realized who the man was. He just discovered new answers to his previous curiosities. He knew what was coming next.

"Ohh... Your niece?" he was struggling to keep his voice monotonous with the initial tone in the conversation.

"Yes, my darlin' niece! Oh, how I miss her! She works a few shifts sometimes. Presuming that you've already visited their café, I'm sure you've met her?"

"Aye..."

"Been a long time since I last met her. Got too busy with m'factory down south. How is she now?"

MISSING HER ALREADY

Adam Lucas had no recollection of the moment he had lost consciousness, back at the factory. The bottle cap of concussion had just exploded out, right off the grooves near the tip of the neck, the raw fluid of senselessness spilling out and succumbing his sentience.

He hardly knew if he had even set foot inside the compound, let alone recall if Michael was there.

Nonetheless, now that the present situation called for a truce with this bulky strong individual claiming to be the uncle of the waitress, Adam deemed it ideal to remain calm and cautious.

"Hmm," he interjected the thin slice of silence. "If I'm not wrong, then your niece truly is a wonderful woman. Both in terms of beauty and skills. Her coffee is unlike any that have ever touched my lips."

"O'course, o'course," Michael nodded unhesitatingly, as if he was the one receiving the credits and compliments. His facial expression turned stern at his next words. "But... Don't you ever dare disappoint her! One single tear down her cheek, and I'll be sure to tear down whoever was behind that sadness."

'I wonder if dead people cry,' Adam thought sarcastically. 'I wonder if he will ever understand. It wasn't my fault for acting in a way so suspicious.'

"True. For a kind of girl like that, I'd happily lay down my heart and my sword."

"Heheh, I knew it," Michael patted his niece's killer's head, unaware of who he is. "You're a good fella. I knew from the moment I saw your ride. To be honest, I'd even let ya ride *her* sometime, too."

"Ahem," the ex-detective had no time for dirty jokes, ever since the dark ones occupied his head. "Thanks, but no. My heart had been sold to someone else, already."

"Had?"

"Yes," Adam hated bringing up the memories of his previous wife. But to win the friendship and trust, he had to keep the conveyor belt of words and anecdotes running. "I married the queen of my life a year ago. Radiyana was her name. Just like the radiance of the sun and all the stars of the celestial sea, she shone brightly into my life. Alas, nigh a month ago, a tragedy tapped on her shoulder."

"Ahh..." Michael's bushy eyebrows drooped in a hyperbolic curve of negative emotions. His mirror neurons exhibited a replica of the kind of emotion running through Adam's. His scallop-like lips extended out to portray a soundless gasp of sympathy. "I feel ya. I feel ya, m'son," he patted Adam's back. "Reminds me of my own moon and stars. Some lousy bastard ran her over and crushed her to death. Worse still, the police found her soulless body lying

beside the highway, covered in leaves and blood. Can you believe it? Can you believe that a human person just like you and me, would ever be insane enough to commit such a crime?"

Adam stood rooted to the ground, hoping that it'd swallow him in order to quit being assaulted by fate and throwing coincidences at him like an artillery barrage.

Ofcourse he could believe. He himself had committed an atrocity strikingly similar.

Too similar.

"I... I cannot believe it, Mr Michael," he pretended to be a tint more surprised than he actually was. "My condolences for your beloved."

Ambiguously, Adam had wished it for both Michael's wife and his niece.

Michael wiped his eyes at their top corners, before switching to a different topic.

"Anyways, where are ya from? And what's your name, son? Your car is certainly very expensive, so I believe you're from a well-to-do background or some'in'?"

Vesicles on Adam's skin felt a kind of pressure exerted from non-physical origins.

He didn't know what to do next.

"Well, um... Nice to meet you, sir, my name's Adam. Adam Jucas--"

"Jucas!!" Michael's eyes bulged out with a newfound enthusiasm. "Are you really Jucas?"

At the moment, Adam felt like he himself would begin asking himself the same thing. What was going on? Was this a nightmare? Could he be hallucinating?

"Well, yes, I'm Adam Void Jucas, son of Jared Lloyd Jucas and Sarah Klein Candace," he boldly introduced himself. "I'm a detective by trade," his canine teeth almost dug into the flesh of his tongue. "And an avid activist against masquerade."

One of Michael's questions remained unanswered. Adam hoped his intelligence quotient wasn't agile enough to let him pick up on it.

"Hmm, impressive names, impressive feats," Michael turned his attention back at the polished metal chassis of his customer's Bentley. "Are you related to Jack Jucas in some way?"

"Not in a million years. I honestly didn't know that someone with that name ever existed in our heirlooms."

"Uh-huh, very strange," the broad-bellied man drew out a lungful of air. "But still, good to know you carry the same name as my niece's fiancé."

For reasons unknown, the last fact punched Adam's cardiac muscles.

"Mhmm, what do you know? We learn something new everyday," the ex-detective's social difficulty was tuning up the violin of guilt with a higher octave every ten minutes. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm in a rush, so... Please let me know the billing total."

"Sure, sure! No problems, m'son. Although your tires could use some more pressure. The p-s-i seems way too uncomfortable for the rims."

Adam's hairs were about to stand on end, figuratively.

"No, no, it's fine. It's totally okay. I'll check it out at the next city."

He saw Michaelangelo Bouchie inspect the tire treads, and already began to be afraid of the change in his eyes. Blood-shot and staring widely, the veins pumping the same red liquid that he found stuck to the tires' skin.

Adam Jucas, son of Sarah and Jared Jucas, was about to faint.

WANTING TO MEET HER

The murderer drove.

Thankfully for the Bouchie household, the killstreak maintained by Adam Jucas was still stalling at one.

Michael Bouchie, suspected to be the uncle of the woman Adam had brutally slaughtered within the past hour, was right behind him, driving a Ford F-150 truck, mimicking the velocity of a Lockheed-Martin F-15 jet. If any industrial journalists were present, it would've been their lucky day - to put the Bentley Continental SS to the test.

Four pairs of wheels spun round and round, like vinyl records being played on an Edison era phonograph. Two pairs belonging to each vehicle. One delivering greater torque, the other guaranteeing better performance.

'Blasted blasphemy!' Adam cursed at his fate and luck. As far as he could recall, it all began from the moment he'd set foot at the café.

He had to lose his tailgating pursuer.

Speeding along the highway, with a fuel tank full of petrol (gasoline), Adam Jucas was confident that his superior speeddevil would outrun Michael's.

He didn't blame that man.

If he had the privilege of having a niece in his family and if someone had committed such a sin to her, surely he would've chased that rascal down to the pitfires of Hell.

"Tell me where's my niece, ya bastard!"

Michael's booming voice spit out anger-flavored words of angst. The auditorium bracketed by layers of branchless trees ricocheted the aerial vibrations around the artificial biome.

Up ahead, out of nowhere, a chasm greeted the incoming cars.

Putting his faith forward, Adam accelerated further.

"Oi, stop right there, you son of a Jucas!" Michael's voice was no longer audible with sufficient clarity, given the lack of proximity. "If that blood belongs to my niece, I'll shower you with so many bullets there'll be nothing left to bury!"

Adam ignored the threats bluntly and continued approaching the massive crack in the ground. The highway continued perfectly on the other side. Based on his mental pantry of knowledge cakes, one crumb narrated that the hundred-meter-wide horizontal hole was a faultline. Atleast a thousand feet deep. A fatal fall, but not for the dragon-hearted.

Adam was determined to see the sun rise up again.

Michael pressed on his brakes, the Ford skidding under the influence of oversteering to the right. Paragliders of the tar kingdom rose up in smoke, attempting to hide the embarrassment of the heavy truck being unable to make a jump that far.

His rage-driven ocular irises only reflected the stunt being performed by the ex-detective's Bentley. His jaw muscles clenched themselves tight, colliding thirty-two white enamel-coated bones together in his mouth.

Michael got out of his truck and aimed his Remington 870 shotgun.

Climbing out of the wreckage, the first thing that brought wrinkles of nervousness to Adam's forehead was whether his favorite tuxedo was dented or not.

Pulling out some glass shrapnel from his arm, he frowned.

The damage dealt to his Bentley was the least of his worries. Underestimating Michael's fury, he had to survive punctured tires and gain more distance from the redneck behavior. Unfortunately, his car rammed right through the bordering trees, while trying to break free from the line of Mike's sight.

Cars could be fixed. Suits could be stitched. But the pain from bullet wounds couldn't be mitigated with ease.

The ex-detective knew from experience.

'Damnations!' he carefully lifted his legs out from the debris of the windshield and windows. 'Maybe choosing this route was a bad idea.'

He made a quick prayer to the divine entity above all, for ensuring his safety with a minimal number of injuries.

But time wasn't his friend. Nor was fate.

Adam grabbed two weapons from the glove compartment of his dying mechanical mount - two handguns, identical and indistinguishable for ordinary eyes save his, one containing lead-antimony cones in shells and the other with coins in its womb.

The area seemed a bit familiar to him.

He chose a random direction away from the clean asphalt for now, heading into the haphazardly domain of petrified trees.

The prince of the sky was en route to bed, slowly descending through the vertical horizon, painting tiger skins and flat skeletal shadows from canopy to forest floor.

Somewhere in Adam's mind, it all felt very familiar. Reeds of his consciousness grew around ponds of his memories. A sensation too oddly close to one he'd detected before.

Trudging briskly, highly alert, he placed his pistols into his pockets.

From the corners of his eyes, he concluded that he was being watched. But from locations unknown and undisclosed. Not from the ground, nor from the trees.

He walked, treading with a steady crutch of caution.

'If someone really wants to make me taste death, they should be here. Any moment now.'

The forest was silent. Not a bird nor any fauna in sight.

He saw wooden edges amongst the closely-standing conifers.

Based on the patterns he'd been facing throughout the day so far, Adam could predict what the object was. But he still couldn't contemplate on the reason *why* it should be there.

Or why *he* should be here.

His mind was certainly packed to the brim with stress and guilt. And the cabin in the woods was just a blink away.

SHE IS HERE

Sleep caught him in its cozy clutches, biting into his neck and charming his jugular veins to let go. Sleep licked his eyelids, cheering on their momentary demise. Sleep extended a finger down his throat, calming his internal organs.

Adam Lucas experienced euphoria like no painkillers had ever achieved, as he flunked himself onto the bed from which he awoke.

"June 17th", the pages of the journal stated on the following morning. "The man is still asleep. I'm not sure if he's reached the wilder dimensions. But surely something is wrong. I found a vehicle crashed near the southern pole. No bodies were traceable. This man might be quite important, for having people trying to find him. And the part that ticks me the most is his face. He looks just like my dear Jack."

Similar to yesterday's routine, Adam was up and awake, alone and drunk on confusions. Life as usual, or at least the life he remembered from the lapse of the last three days.

'Wilder dimensions. Southern pole. This town unnerves me more than solving the ridicule of criminal cases. An anomaly. Absolutely.'

Stigmatized by the arrival of the new terminology, Adam wanted to sit down. With the absence of chairs, he parked his rear onto the flaccid mattress.

The identity of the mysterious woman bounced about his prefrontal cortex. None other than the same name mentioned by her uncle - holding valid as long as that man really was her uncle, and if she really was his niece.

Spoken facts and eye witness testimony go hand-in-hand, he knew.

Now, the question was where and when to find *her*.

The train of thoughts stopped at the next station.

Michael mentioned Eve Bouchie and Jack Lucas being the founders of the café bearing their first names. First names instead of their surnames, as the general population would. But Adam swatted that question out of his encephalic viewfinder.

A greater inconsistency rose.

Concerning Adam's own parents.

The names had spilled out of his mouth like running water, as if from a previously-trained muscle memory coiled up in his cerebellum rather than an actual search query through his real memories.

How come he didn't remember a single second of his childhood? Why couldn't he remember their faces?

The sound of his father's voice? The touch of his mother's skin?

It seemed almost as if his amnesia stretched for a longer time period than he expected. Almost artificially.

Almost as if there was no "almost", and all such instances were actually true with a hundred percent probability.

The life-questioning thorns stung more bitterly than ever.

Even after recovering his lingering memories from the moment he entered the café the last time, in the bathroom where he found the key, he still had not a clue about the events preceding the three days.

Presumably Adam was the best detective in a town without crime, and yet he was unable to scratch for clues.

Clues about his own life.

What was this life anyway? Where did he come from? When does his vacation end?

Conjuring the motif of the key, he urgently plucked it out from his pockets.

'Good thing I didn't give the key back to that bullock,' he turned it over to reveal a new word on the opposing side. 'Factory.'

The woman's journal had indicated that her cabin was near the south of Vicilia. Jucas didn't need a volunteer to tell him what else was located near the south.

He stood up.

He felt the vigilant eyes crawling on his presence again.

Jerking his head out towards the door, he heard a gasp.

A female voice.

IS IT REALLY HER?

"S-Sophia?" Adam couldn't believe his eyes nor his memory.

The woman took a step back, shy and scared.

"Um... I'm not Sophia," her doe lips trembled. Her personality surely concluded that she wasn't the person whom the ex-detective had been acquainted with. However, her appearance couldn't fool him. "I... I was worried that you were, um, sleeping for too long. I'm happy to see that... you're... awake, sir."

Adam initialized his memories. With a head full of questions and unlimited answers, he had to tread lightly.

He approached the alive and breathing carbon-copy lookalike of the woman he had shed blood of. Who could this be? If not Sophia?

"Well, thanks for the hospitality," he raised his hands to show signs of surrendered, peaceful intentions. "I'm Adam, nice to meet you."

The woman was dressed in a pearl-white turtleneck sweater, bottomed and gift-wrapped by navy blue overalls. Her blonde hair was neatly organized in a pixie bun, with strands of her sideburns gracefully hanging from the tops of her temples. With her plush doe lips and inhumanly beautiful blues of her eyes,

naturally lined by a royalty of eyelashes, she was a dreamgirl for every man who desired an innocent butterfly for a life partner. Someone to protect every day and cherish in every way.

"Um... Pleasure to meet you too... Mr... Adam," she replied, unconfident. "My name's Evelyn. You can call me Eve. I think... I think I know something that I shouldn't."

Adam's suspicions yelled "one" in Spanish to his table of a card game of a mental gallery of hints.

She was not Sophia, the woman he had murdered. Based on her reactions from encountering him, she was also unlike the other people he had been talking to. For starters, she wasn't aware of his identity. Whether she was truly the niece of a man named Michael, and the co-founder of a café, was about to be investigated.

"Hmm, I see. What's the knowledge that's troubling you, miss Eve?"

"Er... Something that would take some time to explain... But... You look like... Like..."

"Jack Jucas?"

"Mhmm," Evelyn nodded, closing the purse of her lips as if she was slightly flabbergasted by Adam's mind-reading response. "Are you... Jack?"

"No, I'm Adam. Adam Jucas."

"Nice to meet you, sir. I'm Evelyn. You can call me Eve."

The repetition triggered a different response in Adam's mind. 'Well, that was unexpected. Didn't she just introduce herself a while ago?'

Then it hit him.

Eve might have an affliction of anterograde amnesia.

"Hmm, okay Eve, is this your cabin?"

"Mhmm."

"I have some questions, if you'll please cooperate with me," Adam gestured a welcoming butler's hand towards the room. "It's a dangerous town, this Vicilia place."

An aroma of uncertainty clung to her like perfume. Adam's eyes were transfixed on hers. Hers on his. Finding a common ground of involuntary consent, Adam invited her inside.

A shuffling noise startled Adam.

Turning around, he found Eve hastily scribbling down notes into her journal.

"January 22," Adam flicked through the previous pages of Eve's journal. The owner of the notebook was dreamily undergoing rapid-eye movement, tucked in

a comfortable bedroll on the floor like a sleepy kitten. He didn't want to breach her privacy, but it had to be done. He read. "I feel scared. I feel trapped. Oh dear God, please help me. If only someone else had escaped from the domestic dimension like me, maybe I could still have hope. I cannot do this anymore. Mentally drained as I am, I wonder for how long I can survive."

'Somber words,' Adam commented to himself. 'With no way to verify the authenticity. But it'll do, I guess.'

He tenderly flipped the beige-skinned pages back to the default position marked by the current date.

The Selene solemnly smeared the world of wood outside in monochrome honey. Outside the urban areas marked by the café, no flora nor fauna sang spontaneously.

Thanks to Eve Bouchie's past experiences and her sentiments, Adam could recline on some solid hypotheses for explaining everything so far.

The weight of all the information would've overencumbered anyone not accustomed to handling mass fleets of facts.

The town of Vicilia wasn't an element within the Venn diagram of maps produced in the foreign lands far away. In fact, it wasn't a real location; the most relevant definition would be a staged laboratory for experiments. Human experiments. Cloning.

Indefinite numbers of men and women subjects had been generated in a place beyond the limits of Vicilia, and the limits of Eve's knowledge. For a number of years, the world had remained an infinitely recurring cycle revolving around the life of a visiting detective on vacation. Certain people were already aware of all the basic facts about the detective, drilled into their brains from the moment they were born. But none were allowed to venture any deeper or further.

Certain people already had a fixed biography, with a profile pertaining to their roles.

Michael Bouchie owned all of the businesses in Vicilia, with the gas canister factory, the Leafy Lodgings apartment, and the gas station being inclusive examples.

His niece, or more suitably his "nieces", jointly owned and worked at Café Eve-Jack. They all were clones based off an original female anonymous host.

Engaged to his niece was Jack Jucas. For reasons unknown, the number of male clones - based off an ancestral and unnamed male host similar to the Bouchie women - were proportionately fewer. Much scarcer than the female clones. Adam Jucas, was bound by the strings of fate to be the only other male clone alive.

Other people existed too, but with an importance far too sparse to have their own lifestyles. They were often seen hanging around the café as "filler material".

All the people knew only what the authorities behind the enclosed economy wanted them to know.

Depending on a variable ratio of delays, the entire town of Vicilia underwent a pandemic of amnesia - each person forgetting what they had done in the past... unless they had regained a fragment of their consciousness.

Eve Bouchie was the first clone to randomly realize about the frugal fake world they lived in. Due to a mutation in her genes.

Adam Jucas was the second clone to reach that level of sentience.

Eve had referred to this as “reaching the wilder dimensions”, with the totally unaware people being dubbed as “living in the domestic dimensions”

Jack Jucas had previously gone missing ever since Michael lost his wife due to a roadrage incident. Eve had lost count of the number of years, but it wasn't more distant than three solar revolutions into the past.

Evelyn had known the stakes of being discovered. Of the wrath of the faceless authorities if any test subjects were suspicious of having too much knowledge for their sake. As for the hoard of her own, she had managed to learn a lot simply from natural observation. Spending days and months working at the café, substituting the schedule for Michael's wife.

But she knew she couldn't live near the bustling buildings with a relaxed spine.

Some of the ideas were mainly theories for explaining the social physics of Vicilia.

Yet, Adam noted all of them as being the most accurate formulae for representing the insanity he had just awoken into.

He knelt down to caress the soft smooth cheek of the sleeping survivor.

Sadly, Eve developed a disease that limited her ability to retain memories of the present for too long.

Thankfully, she trafficked logs from a lumberjack's mill till she had a roof over her head and a place for refuge, out in the bowels of untamed forests. She built her own furniture, and manufactured her own paper.

Out of desperation, she had become the only lonely wise woman. But an independent woman.

The hurricane of controversial information passed its eye over Adam's cranial cage of consciousness, soothing his nervous system via the aid of endocrine hormones.

Adam was grateful to God for showing him the way, if not the way out.

He was now convinced about everything he had seen and heard. 'Looks like they're gonna miss their favorite detective when they arrive for the

maintenance. Who knows when that'll happen, but I must hurry.'

Sophia's murderer seated himself back onto the bed, donating a glance back at Sophia's sister.

'*We* must hurry.'

REMEMBERING HER

Adam and Eve. Just like the scriptures of Abrahamic texts had foretold the first human couple.

He couldn't remember the past; she did. She couldn't remember the present; he did. Entwined and bound for each other. Dependent on each other, yet independent together. Yin and yang, black and white, night and day. Any heartfelt philosopher could bathe in the romanticism references for hours on end.

Crisp sunlight tickled Adam's eyelids at dawn, reminding him once more that life isn't dictated by dreams; it's about navigating through the difficulties.

As such, he promptly got out of bed.

His tummy rumbled due to a deficiency of food from the last 48 hours. The last thing his tongue's taste buds had contacted were some saccharides from the colloid of caffeine and processed coffee beans.

His eyes scaled the cabin, looking for signs of his encounter with Bouchie lady. Regrettably, he found nothing. No bedroll. No woman.

'What else could a man expect by owning such an ill fate?'

He sighed, wondering if everything was just a dream. It couldn't be.

Worst of all, he genuinely wished to be with someone. Someone who understood his situation. Someone who shared the same fate. Someone who resembled her.

A dead angel with a human name.

The ex-detective reclaimed his occupation, to solve the mysteries behind his own life, or what he knew about it from the perspectives of people around him.

He had already planned his day out. But a top priority was to replenish his healthy gastric system.

"One cappuccino, please," Adam entered the café, his movements weary with exhaustion from all the walking. "And some cakes, if you have any."

"S-sure, sir," the waitress leaned her head forwards in a slight bow. "Please p-pick a seat, and I'll be r-right back."

Adam walked over to an empty chair, with his eyes locked-on to her, the shallow rise and fall of her hips.

"That must be Eve, aye. Such a cutie. Who else could it be? That slight stutter. That *deerlina* appearance,' he quietly recapitulated. "That innocent sign of forgetting who I am. Of all the conversations we had gone through last night."

His memory neurons summoned the vision of him introducing himself repeatedly every few minutes to cope with Evelyn's neural illness.

A pity.

There were a few more customers today.

He noticed a young couple spending some time to get to know each other, bubbles of fresh romance budding around them. Across the aisle, a rather plump woman chatted away with her children's aunt, with her own two offspring chasing and smacking each other at present. Her husband returned from the washroom to eradicate their sons' commotion.

A pleasant environment for comfortably snoozing amongst a bokeh of glittery lights and gentle voices.

The waitress arrived with Adam's order, placing three species of muffins supplemented by foamy, spicy cappuccino nestled in a biodegradable plastic cup. She removed the tray and walked away to answer another customer's call, without a single extra word nor gesture spoken.

Adam sighed, shoving the succulent and spongy appetizers into his mouth. He was hungry, he had no time for etiquette. He was confident that his tuxedo did the trick anyways.

He had to wait until the end of Eve's shift.

"Hey there!" Adam walked up to the woman currently taking off her apron and uniform. Underneath, she had her own casual clothing. "Do you remember me, perchance?"

For a second, Eve's pupils dilated and constricted back to normal, outlined by the blue ring of her iris pigments.

"Um... I apologize, but I don't think so," she seemed nervous upon Adam's behavior. "Have we met before?"

Adam laid a caring hand on her shoulder. The soft, frictionless and cold skin met his leathery, rough and warm superficial surfaces.

"We have," the detective informed. "I am the man you've been taking care of, in the cabin the woo-"

At his words, Eve forced her hand over Adam's mouth and held him by the elbow, immediately dragging him into the backrooms.

The staff room. The utility room. And then into a cramped spot feared by claustrophobics.

"Sshhh," she finally spoke again, whispering not to be heard by anyone else except the man towering above her height. "Please don't m-mention about the cabin. Promise me."

"I-" the detective was too stunned to speak. "I promise. I wish no harm to be done to you."

Her eyes licked the delicacy pressed against her in the tight cavity between some pipes, scanning him from head to toe.

She weakened her grip on the detective's arm. The shape of her small fingers had engraved their image temporarily on the tuxedo fabric when she let go.

"O-okay, Jack," she cupped his face looming a few inches above hers. Her lips trembled with a nostalgic heartburn. Her eyes were getting soggy with heartfelt emotions. "My dear Jack... M-my love... You're okay."

Adam wasn't sure what particular memory film was currently running in her mental theatre, but he didn't want to ruin the moment.

Silence eavesdropped on their timid company.

"You're mistaken. I'm not Jack. I'm Adam."

"No," she slammed her head against his chest, hearing the same genetic heartbeat of her fiancé. "No. You're my Jack. I can't le-let them take ya away from m-me," the perspiration of her eyes landed on Adam's chest. "No matter w-what they say. You'll always be my J-Jack."

The detective ran an empathetic hand over her head, stroking the strands of hair dyed in natural gold.

"Okay then. If that's the name you'd offer me, then so be it," he could hear the soft sniffles. Her body was too intensively near his, nearly touching.

It didn't feel right.

He didn't wish to fool her by the blind spots left by the handicap. He felt an odd sense of impostor syndrome in claiming to be the man he wasn't. He knew the truth. He had to be responsible enough to maintain and guard it.

No reward nor punishment was anchored to the decision. It wasn't a question of right and wrong; it was a test of humanity.

And Adam would gladly be dragged along by regret than to bask in the blessings of a false opportunity.

"M-my Jucas. My only hope left," she wrapped her arms around his torso, getting closer both physically and socially. "I'm so h-happy for meeting you."

"I understand, Eve. I do. But... Could you please calm down?" his words slithered out like chocolate snakes, disapprovingly deadly yet generously gentle. "I am grateful for your knowledge. And I'd hate to be the bearer of bad news but... Your future husband is dead. And we might be next if we do not hurry."

"No," she swung her legs up in the air, hugging his waist. Her body was indecently in contact with her betrothed's twin. "My husband never died," she looked up to mirror his face. "He only swapped bodies."

HER NAME

Adam saw himself in the third person for a flap of a moth's wing. The environment of the utility room under the dim incandescence jeopardized his perspective for a moment.

What was he hearing? What is all this? Was his life a lie, or was he the only person living upon the truth?

He didn't know.

Right now, his thoughts were harnessed by the grown-up girl. He was now the skin for her. And she was for his.

'The answers could wait. This intimate moment cannot.'

For the first time in his apparent chronological remembrance, the detective was pleasantly enjoying himself. Feeling the cosmic curvature of a feminine body by his experienced hands. He doubted if he really had a wife named Radiyana, if it was simply a ruse and an artificial memory implanted by the so-called authorities of this so-called experiment. What sort of government in the world would allow such an intricate test upon human psychology?

If he truly was married with someone else, then he hoped for her forgiveness and a permission for polygamy.

Right now, all he thought about was Eve.

Evelyn Bouchie, a name that pronounced its beauty. A blend of Anglo-Francais that kissed linguistics and poets right on the forehead.

"Tell me more," he whispered amidst the mental festival of euphoric hormones. "About this city. About Vicilia. Tell me everything you know and anything you'd need," his hands and lips moved automatically, as if they had minds of their own. "If I'm truly Jack, then who is the other namesake? What was his fate?"

Eve didn't reply. Her brain was being bombarded with an inexplicable feeling of joy, enhanced by a lustful urge. Her short-term memory was struggling to retain the core information about the situation.

"Mrgmmm," she murmured, eyes closed. "I....do... I do... I do..."

There was a delay for Adam's analytical capability to capture the context for her irrelevant responses. But then, a rush of understanding escaped from his amygdala.

"I do, too, I accept you," he continued exploring the wonders of God's creation on her attractive physique. "Now and forever," he cupped her face with his hands, gazing upon the closed eyelids sheltered by eyelashes only describable as regal. "As my humble wife, to the end of time and space, beyond life and death. May God bless you."

Their lips met, absorbing each other's' moisture, stabilizing their internal environments in equilibrium.

'This is it,' Adam smiled in his cavern of thoughts. 'This is my life now. And this lovely lady is the one who brought some meaning to it. Finally.'

The Leafy Lodgings loomed in front of the newlyweds. Once a friendly face in the form of a brick-and-mortar accommodation, now a stranger to adjust with the endangered lifestyles of the duo.

Adam and Eve, hand in hand, entered the block of a building, ascending up a concrete staircase.

'Now, the real difficulty would be to assimilate ourselves with the regular residents among us,' the detective-on-vacation closed the door behind him. A taxi cab sped past, along the ordinary road outside. 'And to stay away from the landlord, as per Evelyn's knowledge.'

The ground floor lobby was quieter than a library, with not a soul in sight. No one was seated at the reception.

"Let's go upstairs," he suggested, looking for approval from his bride.

Eve nodded, with her eyes simulating signs of anxiety, curiosity and satisfaction. She was stressed about the same reason why Adam Lucas was avoiding Michael.

She was curious about everything in general, but slightly more biased towards following her husband's directions. Lastly, her overall sense of tranquility would be accredited to being near the man she had hidden so cleverly from the wrong eyes.

"So... Tell me one thing, dear Eevee," he inquired while gaining altitude via the stairs. His Heavenly girlfriend still gripping onto his palm. "About Jack. Who is he? And... Who am I?"

"Um... You're Jack Jucas," she let go of his hand, still climbing up the stairs with him. "It was actually me who named ya Adam... well... because I had to hide you under guise. And my name was Eve, so... uh... I thought it would be more... um," she circled her index fingers together, orbiting like a neutron star pair, as her eyes averted themselves out of harmless guilt. "Sorry if you don't like it."

"Oh, nah, it's completely fine. My mindscape was simply hungering for the reasoning behind it. Thank you for clarifying," Adam/Jack Jucas smiled behind him. "In that case, what was the name of my twin? That clone who was killed?"

"Oh, that was... um... that was you, too! But now you're back and I'm so glad I found ya!"

Adam felt two smooth and thin arms tighten around his waist from the back. Her skin was colder than his fingers as he untightened them.

The couple reached the landing of the second-floor corridor.

"Ah, it's okay. It's okay, I'm here now," he couldn't figure out why a fully grown adult was behaving so timidly in the likeness of a child. Maybe it was a coping mechanism for neutralizing all the harsh sights and scenes that Eve Bouchie had witnessed so far. "And... We're here now."

They stopped in the midpoint between two doors.

One led to Catalina's apartment, a notable clone of Evelyn. And Sophia.

The other led to Adam's.

Perpendicular to their position, a third door stood by. Radiyana Doestoevsky. Adam's wife, presumed dead.

'Ah, damn! I wonder which door would be better.'

The nocturnal princess of the sky and her starry handmaidens silently watched from the wide horizontal windows spectating the long hall of doors.

A cloud shifted to cover the moon's eyes, as an unexpected moment took place.

One of the doors woke up, creaking its hinges noiselessly.

Catalina Bouchie walked out of her unit. Noticing the two people in front of her, a white flat object slipped free from her shocked fingers.

"Catalie?"

SHE IS A BEAUTY

"Ad-Adam?" the twin sister of Adam's second wife stood in the silvery grace of the natural night lights, motionless except for her vocal organs. Her voice had lost its usual sparkle of maturity and womanly wisdom. "And... Who's that beside you?"

Eve Bouchie mirrored the same expression as her clone, too speechless to mutter any comments.

Only Adam was unaffected by the sudden encounter. As such, he boldly threw the tennis ball of conversation towards Catalina.

"Yes, Catalie. It's me," he took a step forward. "I'm Adam. Adam Jucas. I'm also Jack Jucas. I know this is a very troublesome situation right now, but please remain calm," he gestured using his hands to visually communicate with the afraid woman. "I'm sure you'll understand soon enough, once we've explained everything."

Catalina took a step backward.

Adam spread the palm of his left hand on Eve's shoulder, pushing her forward, gently.

"This here's Evelyn, your twin sister. You may or may not be acquainted with the conception behind Vicilia. But if you'd please listen..."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaah!" Catalie let out an agonized scream, loud enough for being audible across the entire building. She dived right into her apartment, shutting the door behind her as if she was being chased by inhumane monsters. Behind the door, sobbing noises and her hyperventilating gasps could be heard.

'What's wrong? What did I even do to scare her like that?'

He looked behind him to check. Eve quietly followed in the likeness of a young bird learning from her mentor.

Nothing visible with the naked eye.

'Hmm... Strange. I didn't predict this sort of reaction upon meeting Eve.'

His mind quickly relapsed to the main objective.

'Two doors remain. One leads to a certain Radiyana D., a woman bearing the same name as the wife I lost. Based on the cyclic nature of this experiment, Catalie was going to deliver this photograph,' he walked over to the spot where she had dropped it. 'Perhaps to another clone of mine behind unit 205.'

Steering himself around, he asked Eve to follow him as he quietly, carefully, attempted to break into 205.

The handlebar was locked from the other side.

"H-here ya go, Jack," Eve whispered, handing her lover a master key to every door in the building. "This'll work."

Adam didn't look behind him, but he could feel her lips curl into a wholesome smile of success as the shaft was thrust into door keyhole and twisted clockwise to initiate a tiny amplitude of a click.

"That solves the minor part of the problem. The major one is already resting on the bed inside."

"Let's go inside, Eve."

He walked over to the bed, pacing towards his placeholder twin. For a subconscious reason, Adam was elated with the thought of getting to meet a mirror version of himself. A real twin brother.

"Mr Jucas," he flipped the blankets over. "Sorry to wake y-"

His eyes were blinded by what he saw. His mind lost its buffer. He was so confused by the sight of the person on the bed that he himself felt like Eve's dose of amnesia.

"W-where am I?" Eve's frightened voice wafted in. "J-Jack? Are you there?"

She saw what he saw. But she didn't know what he knew, at the moment.

"OH MY GOSH!!!! JAAAAACK!!! NOOOOO!!!!!!" she sprinted forward to hug the man on the bed, ignoring

the real one standing right by.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!"

She wailed.

Then she saw the man beside her. She wasn't comforted. It was the opposite effect entirely.

She screamed, pushing Adam away from her before exiting the room.

Her cries continued echoing around the corridor.

Adam was already preoccupied with his own questions.

The blankets were coated with blood. Bullet holes were scattered about on the sleeping clone's torso. Sleeping, but never bound to awaken again.

'Goddamn...'

The midnight sky was busy watering the flora and fauna below when Adam walked out from 205.

His makeshift autopsy was complete, based on the basics of forensic science he held his anchors of knowledge about. The conclusion - a big, tall and bearded man fond of guns was guilty for homicide. In his own property, nonetheless.

A sin upon sin.

'I wonder where did Eve go off to. A pity that I myself got distracted for losing her concentration of undivided attention. She must've seen that dead man's face before mine, completing forgetting about my identity.'

He took a moment to inspect the corridor, to the left- and right-hand sides. Clear as day, black as the night. The lack of moonlight had reduced the illumination of the environment.

'Hmm... Why would Michael do this? Or, better yet, how did Michael do this? How'd he locate my clone?'

He extracted the photograph from his pocket to take a look. Empirical evidence always beat theoretical assumptions. Nearly a week in this strange town and he had already learnt a lot of lessons.

'Ahh... There it is! The answer. The assistant.'

Instead of the photograph of himself at the café, the face of Eve was visible, proudly exhibiting her malicious achievement. Knife in hand, dripping with Adam's fresh innocent blood.

'So I was wrong. Yet, it explains more than enough. Michael must've contacted his niece to be wary of a particular man. Catalina was shocked to see me. Ofcourse, who wouldn't be afraid of a dead man alive?'

He walked past 206, unholstering his handgun.

'I've killed Sophia once. Why can't I kill her a second time?'

A devious smile materialized on the detective's face.

He still had the special key in his gloved hands.

"Aaaa! AAAAA!" the water of pain welled out from Catalie's tear ducts as she crawled backwards on the floor. Her ankles and kneecaps were no longer functional due to the bullet particles lodged in the soft flesh and bone. "GET AWAY FROM ME!! UNCLE!! UNCLE MICHAEL PLEASE SAVE ME!!!!"

Her lungs and vocal cords ached from the excessive pressure of screaming too much.

Her attacker walked slowly towards her. Taking his time, like a lion playing with his food.

From the shadows, the silhouette took shape of the man she had been assigned to assassinate. She had been successful, but fate had been bent to the will of a greater good.

Adam struggled to hurt women who looked just like Evelyn, ever since he regretted the last time such a thing had occurred.

But it had to be done. For his safety. For revenge.

"Scream all you want, wretched wench!" he bitterly mocked with a poker face. "You stepped in the wrong

sea when you followed the menacing storm. Your uncle and I are not on good terms. Neither are you, to me."

The off-duty waitress panted and gasped for air, partly whimpering for mercy, partly struggling to find a way out. Her cutlery was out of reach and so were her windows. Even if she did manage to climb out through one of them, her fragile bones would shatter like glass onto the pavement below.

"HELP!!! UNCLE!!! RADIYANA!!!"

"Shut up, you she-devil," he aimed the gun again, to her forehead. "May God grant you the fair judgement you deserve."

He pulled the trigger.

Gunshots send out astonishingly high decibels of sound radially. Adam's ears rung once more.

He missed. Instead of the head, the bullet pierced through Catalina's aorta. Fate itself had denied the swift, clean death Adam wanted to gift her.

Blood squirted out from the woman's shoulder, now crying with a pain too unbearable, reinforced by an impending doom. The red bodily fluid splashed around her like a fountain. All the force from her heart ejected the blood out from her own body.

Adam shot again, now that she slowed down her movement.

By the time the used bullet shell clattered to the crimson-clad flooring, a line of her blood slithered down the middle of her face.

It was over.

Eve's twin's body lay lifelessly on the floor, the same doe eyes glittered with tear crystals corresponding to suffering emotions, the pupils no longer responsive to changes in the brightness of light. Her head was slightly angled up, resting on the wall of her bedroom.

The expanding pool of her blood spread underneath, slipping out from between her injured legs.

Adam Jucas fell to his knees, the smoking gun slipping away from an ashamed hand.

'Another addition!' his evil side cracked a dark joke to suppress the uncontrollable feelings storming inside him. 'Adam Jucas sets a new record... In a town without crime.'

The world grew silent again. The thunder from his pistol seemed to have convinced the rain clouds to scam off.

His guilty eyes pointed to the corpse he had just produced. He couldn't believe it. Nor could he lift the blame off.

He wondered if he could bring her back to life. Her body cells were still alive, he knew. Still buzzing with

respiration. The individual units of life. The entire motherland, however, was clinically dead.

The loss of life had returned the innocence of her pretty face.

In honor of his wife, Adam reached over and kissed her silent lips.

In honor of Michael, he inserted the tip of his gun inside her wet mouth.

In honor of his twin in the 205, he shot again, averting his eyes before the trigger activation.

He didn't look back in her direction till he left the room.

It hurt him on the same caliber of satisfying him. His bloodlust for securing a world of fairness. A true world. He knew the consequences. He knew the rules.

In a world not defined by the irregularities, Adam Lucas was determined to escape with Eve Bouchie.

Somewhere near the door of Catalina's apartment unit, he heard footsteps.

'Ofcourse. It'd be a miracle if all that ruckus doesn't attract any attention at all,' he switched a fully loaded magazine to his semi-automatic ranged weapon. 'Michael, oh Michael. I hope it's you out there. Let all my worries perform their funeral rites tonight.'

The footsteps grew louder and nearer.

"We'll take it from here, love," a woman appeared at the doorframe, blockading the only exit out. Her curvy silhouette stood distinct from any of the female clones.

'Who? What? Wait... I recognize that voice! But how is it possible?'

"Radiyahana!" Adam called out.

"Sorry, m'love," the woman's honeyed words protested his welcoming one. "Too late for formalities. We'll have a reunion when it's time."

A flash. A loud gunshot.

"Nooo! AAAAAAaaaaah," the detective fell backwards, losing his balance and foothold. Clutching the area of the bullet wound inflicted upon him, he relentlessly crawled forward. "Radiyahana! If that's you... Please wait!"

A MYTH BUSTED

The tranquilizers began to dissipate away into dilution in Adam's blood. What felt like a minute's escape from consciousness was actually a healthy thirty minutes from the moment his heart had been impaled by Radiyana's gun.

The same Radiyana conflicted to be Adam's first wife.

"Ugh..." he grunted as he vigilantly woke up in a dark room. "Radiyana, what's the meaning of this? And how a-"

They were in unit 206, Radiyana's unit. The window shutters silenced any exterior light from blessing the dim confines of the rectangular room.

Candles were lit, their wicks patiently watching from every corner.

A hand clasped over his mouth, the skin softer than satin. From the coolness of the body temperature and the overall fingerprint pressure points, he deduced a familiar identity of the person doing this.

"Good girl, Aria," Radiyana's voice flew out like an arrow from the corner of the room. "Our little pet detective needs to be disciplined about knowing his limits."

'Aria? Who's...'

"I know what you're thinking... mister detective," the slightly older, curvier woman walked nearer. "Aria is the middle name of our dear Evelyn Bouchie. I'm sure you already know the reason why your name needs to be classified, given the circumstances of girls whose memory are as fragile as their hearts."

'Ah, how did she do that?! Is that really Radiyana? THAT Radiyana Doestoevsky? She's... Not dead?'

"Now, Aria."

"Y-yes, Radi?'"

"Release him. It's time to cut the cake."

Adam raised his eyebrows. 'What? A cake?'

From a table out of view, the timid (but sentient) female clone retrieved a platter of circular baked yeast, topped with creamy cacao paste.

"Congratulations!" the Russian-surnamed woman held it out in front of the detective, sitting against the window side wall. "It's your birthday. Have some cake."

'What?'

She smeared and squashed the cake on Adam's confused face, without warning.

"Hope you enjoy the present," she let the platter fall to the floor with a clangor that was guaranteed to wake up the neighbors below. "It's very handy."

For the time in his life, Adam Void Jucas gulped down an uncertainty pill.

Among the sticky crumbling mess of the confectionery, a piece of meat rested in the middle.

It was a disembodied human hand.

"Goddamnations!" he exclaimed. "What madness is this?!"

Radiyana chuckled. Her siren eyes sparkled with vengeance, matching the scarlet hue of her irises. Her long platinum-blond hair reflected off a pastel cyan sheen in the ochre fiery luminescence.

"The same goes for you, dear Jucas," her height matched that of the detective perfectly. "Running around from door to door... massacring clones as if they grow from the ground!"

"J-Jucas?" Eve suddenly recognized the man's face. "My dear Jack! H-how are you? I missed ya... I'm sorry... I'm not sure what's going on," she embraced her husband.

"I should be saying the same," Adam verbally noted. "But you both have some explaining to do."

"I'll do the honors," Radiyana stroked the detective's cheek with a gloved hand. Her deeply rich femme fatal voice brought a feeling of warmth and care in her ex-husband's mind. "Welcome to Vicilia, m'love. A town that doesn't exist. Yet always did, and never will."

"Do you always speak in paradoxes?" Adam interrupted. Eve removed her face from his beating heart and stepped back to a vantage point ideal for facing both him and the other woman. "Not sure how you're alive after a month. Not sure how you're in Vicilia. Not sure if you're the same shy girl I remember."

Radiyana continued after securing the lock on her frontdoor.

"Patience," her siren lips were glossy with an aesthetic coating of lipstick. The maturity of her face stood in clear cardinal opposites with the youthfulness of Bouchie's. "It's no wonder how you've finally gained sentience in this mess of an intellectual hellscape. The question is... What took you so long. Usually we expect one unusual male clone every two months. You're the first one we've seen in the last six years. Now... I'm sure my partner-in-crime here," she laid a sisterly arm on Eve's shoulder. "Has already declared the rough ideas about what's going on. Your questions have some straightforward answers, to be honest. Especially for a detective's intelligence quotient."

Adam tilted his head to the side. 'Huh?'

"No worries if you're defective on the detective angle, mister Lucas. Every clone seems to have some aspect of their profiles missing or faulty. I can still clarify, by the blessings of long-term probability and the knowledge banks robbed from the Authorities themselves."

Radiyana began walking around in circles, orbiting her target listener.

"Firstly, I was never dead. Atleast from my sentience and memories. In order to safeguard yours, me and Eve had planned out a synthetic background to add some depth to your sense of being. You wouldn't have lived long enough for your consciousness to breakthrough completely if you were questioning the past too early. Eve isn't the only female who has reached the wilder dimensions. I was there first. I was there for Eve when she first showed minor signs of gaining her mental independence. Sadly enough, her memory capacity began deteriorating till it reached the state you see her now in," she ruffled Eve's hair. "Such a sweet girl, no?"

Adam straightened his neck upright again.

"What's the meaning of that hand then? Whose is it?" he demanded.

"Ara ara~," his pretend-wife brought her fingers near her mouth. "Don't wanna leave out any curiosity for dessert? Hahaha..." Radiyana's body showed signs of attaining a higher level of womanhood than her adopted friend's. "It's Michael's. That annoying brat keeps getting on our nerves. We can't really blame him though. He thinks this town is real like the way you all did before you knew the sealed truth. I chopped it off this evening, while you love birds were busy pecking each other's heart out. Otherwise he'd have come upstairs to his dying niece's aid by now."

'With that kind of cleavage and sacred femininity organs on your chest, I doubt any man would resist,' Adam smiled subconsciously.

"So... My dear soldiers of love, are you ready for your next quest? Vicilia gives me nightmares. I cannot wait to lead us out of here."

"M-miss Radi, what ab-"

A powerful fist knocked on the front door.

BARELY KNOWN HER YET

All three personnel inside the apartment unit were on alert. At this hour, at this moment, it was imminent who the person could be behind the locked door.

“Michael,” Radiyana’s tongue slipped. She spoke at an audio range far too low to be heard outdoors. “What does he want now? Still not satisfied without a hand? Fine, I’ll chop the other one off, too.”

“No, stop!” Adam retorted. “I cannot allow this to happen. If I had known before, I’d have put the bullets in your knees instead of Catalie’s.”

“Hush, little detective, don’t you cry,” she smacked Adam’s nose with her hand. “I may not be your wife, but you can call me Mommy. Haha~”

The knocks continued. This time, a voice ushered itself in.

“Open up before it’s too late!” the man’s voice carried more worry than fury. “Please!”

Adam pounced upon Radiyana from her back, wrestling and pinning her down to prevent her from infiltrating his choices.

“Go open the door, Eve. I’m stopping Doestoevsky.”

Evelyn did as she was ordered.

A large burly man in his 40s barged right in, scanning the surroundings with his eyes. His short-trimmed hair and beard were a shade of black so matte, they almost seemed to blend into the shadows. His left hand was missing, with the stump of his wrist dressed in linen bandages.

Michael panted as his body dispelled some of the stress.

“My dear... niece...” he grabbed Eve in a tight bear hug. “Oh, my dear sister’s daughter! Ahhh... Thank God you’re okay. Oh, I missed you. I missed ya so much. My heart... is finally at rest!”

He still hadn’t taken note of the other man and woman still stuck in a knot of arms and legs and awkward positions on the floor nearby.

“Uncle! Are you my uncle M-Michael?” Eve asked.

“Y-yes, dear,” he replied back. “I was so worried ever since I heard about the roads growing more deadly than they used to be.”

Evelyn Bouchie now realized what Radiyana had done. She had attacked and injured her uncle. A branch from her own family tree. She spun round, breaking free from her relative’s embrace, and walked over to her ‘friend’.

She aimed a vicious kick at the Russian’s beautiful eyes when the detective caught her foot midair.

“S-stop! She’s the evil one,” the doe-eyed cutie innocently cried out for permission. “You don’t understand, my Jucas.”

“No,” her Jucas disapproved. “You don’t understand either, my dear nectar.”

“What d’hell’s goin’ on here?” Michael walked nearer. “Son of a Jucas! It’s YOU! God... I should’ve known... now I feel sorry for chasing ya around, believing you were some killer going around and slaughtering people. Even if you were one, you certainly have my appreciation and thanks for keeping my niece safe. Anyways... What’s the issue here? Why are ya busy playing hanky-panky with this disgusting woman here? She’s a monster, I tell ya.”

Adam couldn’t react in time to stop Michael’s kick.

His steel-toed boot collided with Radiyana’s elegant right-hand fingers. Momentarily, her knuckles crunched under the pressure as she let out an inhumanely scream of torment.

“Sir, that’s not very decent of you. Hurting a woman like that” Adam stood back up, leaving his disclaiming wife to grovel on the floor. “I am a detective by trade, so it is in my common interests to arrest everyone in this room before reaching a fair conclusion.”

Radiyana’s heaving sobs turned to laughs.

Everyone paused for passing on the turn to speak to her.

“Fools, all of you,” she groaned slightly as she regained her balance and her standing stance. “None of your memories are real. They’ve all been forged by the Authorities beyond our scope of thinking. Each of us have been born with a detailed profile in the hopes that none of us ever question our existences. In truth, you are all being deceived. Me, myself, included. Aria, my dearie, you have no parents nor relatives in Vicilia. Michael is just a fake memory. He is a total stranger. Vice versa for Michael towards Eve. She’s none of your concern. And, Adam,” she pulled on the proclaimed detective’s ear, twisting it playfully. “You’re no detective. Hardly even a man of justice. I’ve watched you shed blood so eagerly that it’s a miracle that you weren’t locked up in some prison by now. So quit nagging around like babies and learn to listen to reason.”

Michael, Adam and Eve blinked blankly. Their own humble minds were tumbling down a cliff of hope, plummeting to the waters of hysteric nihilism. How could they believe this? How could they believe what they had known all this time? How could she deny everything that had seemed like a whole lifetime of scenic moments preserved in their neurons?

‘It makes no sense,’ Jucas wondered. ‘But the more it does, the less remains to be falsified.’

Radiyana’s face shifted through multiple instances of pain as she massaged her fractured fingers. Her tears

were still visible in the golden candlelight, but expertly ignored by her desensitized mind.

“Ow... It hurts,” she told her guests. “But nothing hurts more than the feeling of solitude and hopelessness rummaging through your heads right now, I understand. Ah... ouch... my fingers... please excuse me for a moment.”

She walked to her washroom, finding some first aid materials.

Eve Bouchie and Michael stood glued to their positions, without a word spoken nor an eyelid closed for a blink. Their facial expressions were neutral. Like stone statues they grieved. For themselves. For being fools.

The sound of running water from the bathroom faucet echoed into the bedroom. Splashes were audible.

‘What a world,’ Adam rubbed his ear, red with all the stretching. ‘What... a... world... can I call this a life? Am I even alive? What is all this? An experiment? I daresay, once I am out of this pandemonium, I’m gonna revoke their licenses. I’m all the more curious to know which forsaken government in the world had allowed for such atrocities to be committed under broad daylight. I truly wonder.’

The tap water ceased to produce its sound.

Out stepped the Russian woman, brushing a towel over her right-hand fingers now shielded by splinter brackets.

“So, miss Radiyana. What’s the plan?” Adam became the spokesman for the Bouchies.

“Oh, I have bad news, *gospodin* Jack,” her dainty lips teased with a smile. “We are increasing in numbers. If too many people are sentient like us, then the authorities will be tempted to punish or eliminate us.”

“How do you know so much about the Authorities?” Adam inquired, slipping a hand inside his pocket.

“*Bozhe moy moy*, Jucas. You surely are a candy to be cherished,” she reclined on the bed. “I was one of the Authorities myself.”

HER DETERMINISTIC MIND

Birds chirruped under the fresh morning aura of the solar wonder. Chlorophyll-infested plant breathing organs rustled to the tune of the visiting breeze. Cicadas scratched their wings from niche ecosystems unseen.

A pleasant start to a summer-squashed day.

Two pairs of ladies and gentlemen sat round a table in Café Eve-Jack. The largest person among them placed a slab of newsprint onto the topcoat of the table, for them all to see.

“A town without crime, eh?” Michael’s smile was drugged with sarcasm. “Not going to hold onto that title for too long. I’ve hidden the bodies in 207 and 205 for now. But with no landfill nearby to dump it in, I guess the Chasm will do.”

“More roadkills,” Adam read out the headline of the article covering nearly two-thirds of Vicilia Today’s current day issue. He continued reading the first paragraph. “An unidentified body, 26F, has been located near the northern end of our highway. Private investigator teams have concluded that the individual had received fatal impacts from a speedy vehicle.”

“T-this is bad,” Eve commented. “We need to be cautious.”

“Duh,” Radiyana rolled her eyes. “Although the damage is done already. We need to tread lightly and silently. Vicilia may not have a police force, yet. But the Authorities are certainly observant of the anomalies,” she brushed a strand of hair away from her face.

“Michael, I apologize for everything that had happened yesterday. I could build a prosthetic hand that will serve you to a greater extent than your God-given one did!”

“Aye, seems good enough,” Michaelangelo nodded. “The painkillers seem to work on the pain for now. Why did you even attack me in the first place, damn woman?”

“Haha~,” the Russian ex-scientist covered an accidental giggle with her hand. “Why, you still couldn’t figure it out, cute dummyhead? I guess all your brains have turned to brawn,” she playfully stroked her hair, her articulated fingers freely brushing past the keratin fibers. “If it shouldn’t be apparent enough, you’re the one who contacted your niece, Catalie, to attack a man fitting the descriptions of Adam, suspecting him to be behind something treacherous. While you’re not wrong, you were the culprit who began the chain of bloodshed. Thus, I simply returned the favor.”

Michael’s lips gloomily curved in a maximum parabola. His brown eyes jerked in eighty different directions per second, out of an internal frustration and regret.

Doestoevsky continued.

“It’s just like the Hindu philosophy of karma. You ordered Catalie to kill Jucas. Jucas killed Catalie, out of his own conviction. And I wanted to leave a mark to serve as a monument for remembering the lesson – to not judge people without solid ground evidence. Do that again and I’ll be sure to discard you to the Chasm.”

“Pardon me to interrupt but,” the detective stepped into the convoy of Radiyana’s monologue. “What’s this Chasm you speak of?”

“Ah, glad you’ve asked!” her eyes lit up. “Remember the large wide faultline in the ground near the northern and southern ends of the highway? That’s the Chasm. A pit so deep that you could call it nearly bottomless. Also, if you haven’t known about this elusive fact yet, travelling over the Chasm from the northern end brings you to the southern end of the highway. Vice versa for the opposite direction. As far as I can recall, the Authorities wanted to test a teleportation prototype via a wormhole generated through space-time. Whatever lies at the bottom of the Chasm is behind this unique physical phenomenon.”

“Gods be amazed!” Michael nearly jumped out of his seat in surprise. “Y-you mean to tell me that Vicilia is fake? All of this is jus’ some big corporation pulling our strings to do their bidding? Gyattdamn, those people must be insane!”

From what Adam could see, Michael was undergoing an existential crisis. Sweating heavily, his facial skin wrinkling and his body fidgeting around with a new kind of fear.

“Insane? Huh!” Radiyana lowered her gaze, her eyelids covering the blood diamonds of her eyes from the other three listeners. “The Authorities have done even more outrageous activities than you’ve all known, or ever will. If only my memories weren’t erased and reformatted, I’d have been able to narrate from my experiences. To the point that I remember nothing about them. Not even their names. So I’m just labelling them as ‘the Authority’ for referential integrity’s sake.”

“Well, then, what’re we waitin’ for?” Michael dampened his emotional instability. “Let’s just head out of this town and begin spreading the news about these crazy people in coats working on us day and night like lab rats! The world needs to know!”

“Sure,” the mature woman agreed. “But where to? And how? Nobody knows how much time has elapsed in the outside world. Whether there even ‘remains’ a world, is yet to be found out. And even if we want to get out of this pit of Hell, impossible-to-climb steep cliffs surround us. The highways in Vicilia lead to nowhere, recurring with each other in an infinite loop. The Chasm doesn’t seem to be a very neat option for escaping. There are no coastlines, so the way of water is also a crumpled-up piece of paper.

From my suggestions, I'd assume that the only feasible option would be by air. But there exists no airport in Vicilia. We're literally in the most landlocked piece of human settlement ever constructed."

Adam instructed himself to pave a path out of the pessimistic overview laid out by his ex-wife. A wife that never was.

"Is there a library in Vicilia?" he asked the three common residents.

"Yes, t-there used to be two," Eve decided to contribute to the conversation. "One of them had been d-demolished recently, for making s-space for a new h-hospital."

"Is that so?" Adam's artificial skills of crime detection were spinning their gear wheels in his default consciousness. "Perhaps there's still hope."

"Ah, my dear bumble bee," Radiyana brought her face forward, resting her chin on her hands, with their respective elbows touching the table vertically. "I wonder what you want from me."

"Simple," Adam slid his elbow over the table to enter a more relaxed sitting pose. "We have no aircraft? We *build* our aircraft!"

"You sure about that, son?" Michael seemed worried about what's coming ahead. He didn't want to risk dying from an aerial accident. "Where will you get the

materials from? And have you ever built one yourself? You must be high on nuts!”

“No, he’s right,” Radiyana replied supportively. “Adam’s brain has been gifted with knowledge spanning over a range of academic disciplines, including forensic science and engineering. I think he knows what he’s upto. Don’t ya, my honey-crispie?”

“Y-yeah,” Adam felt awkward getting treated around like a junior from a woman of the same age as himself. “The books will serve as references, and we could rely on Michael’s factory for the metals and equipment.”

“One small problem,” the factory owner criticized. “For several months, my gas cylinder factory has been out of order. Due to labor shortages. And... I lost my key somewhere.”

“Heed no worries!” Adam joyfully held out the relevant key from his pocket. “Here’s your key, sir.”

“Whoa, where’d ya steal that from?” the big man chuckled. “Not like it matters, as long as you’ve returned it safe and sound.”

“Okay, the faster we get started on this is the earlier we quit being involuntarily tested upon by the Authorities,” Jucas stood up from his seat. His companions followed. “My clone’s Bentley is right outside. It’s a two-seater though. Maybe we could all hop in if we jam in?”

Eve and Radiyana immediately shook their heads.

Michael exited the café.

“No, thanks, and also you deserve no thanks,” Eve’s female friend spoke out. “You two get right in. Go to the factory, drop off Michael. Return back here. I’ll be next and Eve will be the last.”

“One moment!” Michael’s voice boomed from outside. “Jucas! Your car’s ignition chamber has a wiring problem. See if there’s a toolkit inside the café.”

“Alright.”

It all doomed on him. He was observing all the various events he had experienced from the first day of extra sentience, in the current behind-the-scenes perspective.

He made his way to the back.

‘So this explains how I had found my car suddenly fixed the other day. If everything is indeed cyclical, then some things need to be modified. The last time I was here, the waitress in charge had fallen prey to my rude actions. No doubt, if a new clone of mine is bound to appear, my history will repeat itself.’

He found the toolkit. He also found someone else entering from the staff entrance.

Another Bouchie clone.

MEMORIES RECTIFIED

“Oh, hi there, sir, sorry I’m late today. Didn’t expect an inspection day today.”

Adam had expected it. But not as soon as this current moment in time. How did another female clone arrive within a single night? From where? Vicilia was land-locked and thus imprisoned by geography. From where were the clones arriving or appearing from?

‘I guess she thinks I’m Jack Jucas. The owner of this café,’ he casually put on his best businessman demeanor, smiling and shaking her hand politely. ‘Ah, such soft hands. The same hands as my dear Evelyn, nonetheless.’

“Adam, what’s going o—” Radiyana entered the staff chambers, freezing in her movements at the sight of the new Bouchie waitress. She immediately swept her thoughts aside to prioritize putting on an appropriate attitude for the girl without causing her to suspect anything unusual. “Ah, the waitress! Here you are, at last.”

“Good day, ma’am,” the waitress greeted the Russian platinum-blondie. “I am not sure if guests are allowed at the back, but... since you’re here with Mr Jucas, I guess that’s alright.”

“Yes, indeed,” Radiyana grabbed hold onto Adam’s elbow, landing a kiss on his cheek and stroking his

hair from the other side of his head. "He's my husband, after all."

'Err... this is getting a bit out of hand,' Adam wanted to protest but his thoughts put a leash on his tongue. 'She is overdoing it.'

"Oh, you must be Mrs Eve," the waitress innocently threw a wild guess, based on the information available in front of her. "A pleasure to have both the business owners here, today."

"Indeed," Adam smiled back, while leading Radiyana out of the room, elbow in elbow. "Well, we'll be right here in the front! Whenever you're ready."

When the coast was clear, Adam poured in his thoughts to Radiyana's ear. Eve was outside, with her 'presumed' uncle, Michael.

"Hey!" the detective harshly yelled, at a tone loud enough to be heard and yet quiet enough not to be. "Cut it out, woman! If you're truly not my wife, why would you even pretend? Also, you've got some explaining to do... ex... Authority member!"

Radiyana diverted her eyes outside, to observe the duo inspecting the Bentley. Her siren lips were silent.

Adam grabbed her neck, not too tightly. He asked again.

"You're certainly hiding some things from us, aren't ya? Why should we believe someone who had

previously chosen to work on an experiment like this in the first place? Why do the Bouchie clones not know that they are also surnamed as the same name of the co-founder? Why do they not recognize me without the proper context? What's the secret behind these new clones materializing out of nowhere? Huh? Answer me, you damned disgrace to femininity!" he increased the force on his grip. "Now you've even begun behaving like a prostitute! Don't you know that I'm now married to Eve? Why do you behave in such indecent ways when you're with me? Where's YOUR husband?"

"Adam! S-stop!" Eve caught sight of her husband strangling his 'presumed' ex-wife. She immediately hurried inside to intervene. "ADAM! PLEASE!"

Radiyana's face turned pale and her eyes closed by the time Adam finally let go. He held up her body, unable to stand.

'Oh sh... what have I done?' he cursed at himself. 'Damn you, Adam! Damn you, Authorities! Damn you, accursed Satan!'

"Day-yum, son!" Michael boomed, entering the café. "What calamity have ya caused this time?"

All of the noises and voices attracted the waitress to arrive on the scene, too.

"Sir—"

Adam shoved Radiyana's weakened body onto Michael's arms, and sprinted towards the waitress to land a bone-shattering kick to her head.

The waitress flew with the momentum of a hundred thousand butterflies moving in one vector direction, colliding with the nearest wall with a **thump** and a patch of blood imprinted onto the surface.

Eve gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. Seeing her beloved behave in such an aggressive manner made her rethink her marriage choices. What was going on? Had Adam lost his sense of humanity? Was his mind growing numb under the effects of all the pressure and fusion with con?

"ADAM JUCAS!"

Before he could turn around to face Michael, he launched a spinning kick towards him to increase his chances of survival against a 7-foot-tall giant. He missed, thankfully.

The detective-turned-psychopath had a fire of hysteria blazing across his neural synapses.

'Ugh... I can't take this anymore!'

He ignored the voices telling him to stop; he only obeyed the one that told him to go.

And so, he went. Outside. Running.

For freedom.

“JUCAS! STOP!”

“J-JACK!”

He ran towards the highway, confident in the power of his stamina.

‘I’m tired of it. I’m tired of it all. This life. I hate it. That hole in the ground is my only way out.’

Back at the café, Michael rested Radiyana’s unconscious body on the floor with one hand, and dialed up an ambulance next.

Eve faced such an extreme dose of mental shock that she fell on her knees, gasping and wheezing with cries. Her twin remained lifeless across the floor.

Instead of an ambulance, however, a black armored van made its entrance to the scene.

MEMORIES IDENTIFIED

Trudging helplessly for half an hour, Adam was close to the forsaken factory in the south. Closer to the Chasm.

He threw his tuxedo to some bushes to rid himself from a few hundred milligrams of weight. With so many wrong decisions plaguing every corner of his mind, he forcibly shut them all off. In the hopes that he could avoid irrational thoughts.

According to the patterns of the Vicilian hellscape, he predicted that he might encounter another clone of himself anywhere and anytime by now.

He had no wish to meet himself, but he was curious to know the exact chain of events that preceded the moment when he himself was struck by a temporary memory loss. Who dared to knock his consciousness out?

His mind hungered for answers, but the only dishes on the menu were clues.

The sun was sipping on his sweat, while the faint fog hugged him more passionately than any of his wives ever did. Flanked by the branchless trees, the highway cut straight into the horizon. The confines of the gas canister factory loomed beside the road with the likeness of an abandoned nuclear research facility.

‘Why is my fate like this? What have I ever done? Who are the damnable authorities? I guess I’ll never know.’

The environment was eerily silent the further he moved away from the bustling urban areas of the town.

No vehicles ever ran outside, save for travelling within the arbitrary boundaries of the main central location littered with buildings. His was the only one registered from a different land. Vicilian license plates strangely didn’t raise any information when Adam tried scouring his memories for clues. After all, he was supposedly ‘blessed’ with an artificially-trained brain fit for being one of the best detectives in the world.

Or so he was expected to believe.

Adam stopped walking, taking a moment to inspect his hands. The same limbs and organic tools he had committed great crimes with, in a town initialized with none. Crimes against humanity, nonetheless.

Turning his attention back on what was ahead, his brown eyes blinked twice.

His own reflection stood near the gates of the factory compound, locked in a powerful, yet soundless, gaze. ‘Well, well, well. Who is that? Another Jucas?’

Both the Jucas detectives reached for their guns, but unlike his doppelganger, Adam attempted to aim for the first strike. He knew that his older self was not a monster that he is now. But unlike attacking any other

person, seeing himself in the third person seemed to disturb and distract him.

“Hands in the air!” Adam pointed his gun at the replica of his own flesh and blood.

“After you,” the clone calmly replied. His hand was still buried in the pocket. “I do not know who you are, but you certainly baffle me with that look on your —”

A bullet pierced through the back of his clone’s skull.

“What the!” Adam dropped his gun, disbelieving his own eyes and hands. The resonance of the Colt 0.45 upon impact with the asphalt of the ground accurately confirmed that he had not pulled the trigger yet; the current magazine was still full.

His twin brother stooped forward limply, falling upon Adam’s arms.

“B-brother!” the words of sympathy automatically poured out of the surviving detective’s mouth. For the first time in his conscious memory, Adam was not the culprit for the murder. Was he really dead? Was it a real bullet?

Another bullet whistled past his shoulder, nearly grazing past his tuxedo. The sound frequencies matched that of a 0.338 Lapua Magnum caliber.

His hawk-like vision began a hardcore game of **‘I, Spy With My Eye’** to locate the unknown third party trying

to assassinate him, while simultaneously rushing towards the forest for cover.

He dropped the other Lucas on the road to save himself first.

Positioning himself behind a tree, his gifted mind subconsciously calculated the trajectory of the last two projectiles he had witnessed. Tracing them imaginatively back to their source, he found a cleverly camouflaged sniper firing from the other side of the road, hidden deep within the trees.

Adam ducked to dodged another bullet. This time, he was able to hear the gunshot.

‘What in the 99 names of God is happening? Who’s that daredevil attempting to try his luck at angering and attacking me?’ he squinted his eyes to make out the approximate shape of the weapon that other person was making use of. ‘Using a Barrett M98B sniper rifle, too? Luck be cursed! That fellow’s a specialist. Where’s he or she from?’

From the direction of the Chasm, two noises startled the silence.

Adam rolled and dived to another tree, repositioning himself to a better vantage point. Closer to the highway. Closer to the aggressive opponent.

A convoy of black heavily-armored SWAT vans (or what seemed like them) sped along. One of them pressed on their brakes right near his hiding spot. In

the sky, he caught a glimpse of a Boeing C-17 Globemaster aircraft.

‘Oh God,’ Adam couldn’t figure out anything now. He certainly didn’t like the looks of the incoming vehicles. ‘These must be the Authorities, then.’

He realized that he had committed the biggest blunder of his career by dropping his only ranged weapon. He equipped himself with his decoy pistol, armed with only a handful of coins.

“APA-7” was printed in a large stencil font on the sides of the van.

Four armed men got out of the back of the van, followed by two more from the driver’s and shotgun seat.

The size of their guns fired a whole set of darts at Adam’s balloon of courage, massacring it to bits and pieces. Luckily, a second balloon constructed out of the skin of the first, was still alive – hope.

“Adam Jucas,” one of the soldiers called out. “You have five seconds. Utter your last words. You’re being eliminated for disrupting the natural rules of this experiment. The Authority of Psychological Assets, Department 7, Human Sociology, demands your immediate execution under the orders of Lucifer Doestoevsky.”

‘Doestoevsky? Freakin’ fu—’

Adam's sixth sense helped him dive aside to save himself from another M98B bullet, only to accidentally jump into the line of sight of the road.

Thinking fast, Adam's neurons reached full swing, calculating multiple possibilities of the soldiers' attack patterns while also identifying the depth and structural integrity of the armor they were wearing.

His coins would barely put a scratch on them.

But the right momentum would.

Roleplaying as an athlete throwing a hammer, Adam spun around fiercely before firing a coin at the soldier who had volunteered to announce his death warrant.

The centripetal force conversion of the ejected coin sent it zooming straight at the military-grade vest, piercing right through it, and lodging itself into the concrete flesh of Michael's factory's boundary walls.

'What am I thinking? What a fool I am!' the detective sighed, still continuing his revolutionary rotations relying on rigid physics. 'One down, five to go. Physics may defend me, but probability will not.'

Not a blink was wasted.

The APA guards opened fire.

To Be Continued.

End of Volume 01.