

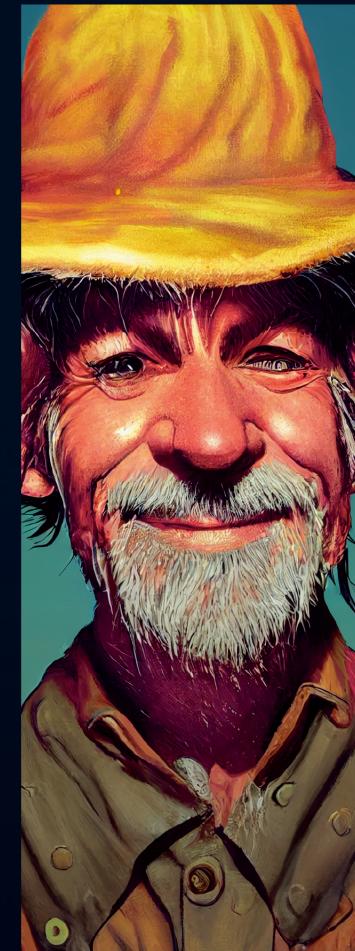
# DEWAN MURTO

A cluelessly depressed writer picks up his pen, only to be suddenly teleported into another dimension - right inside a world his future self created!

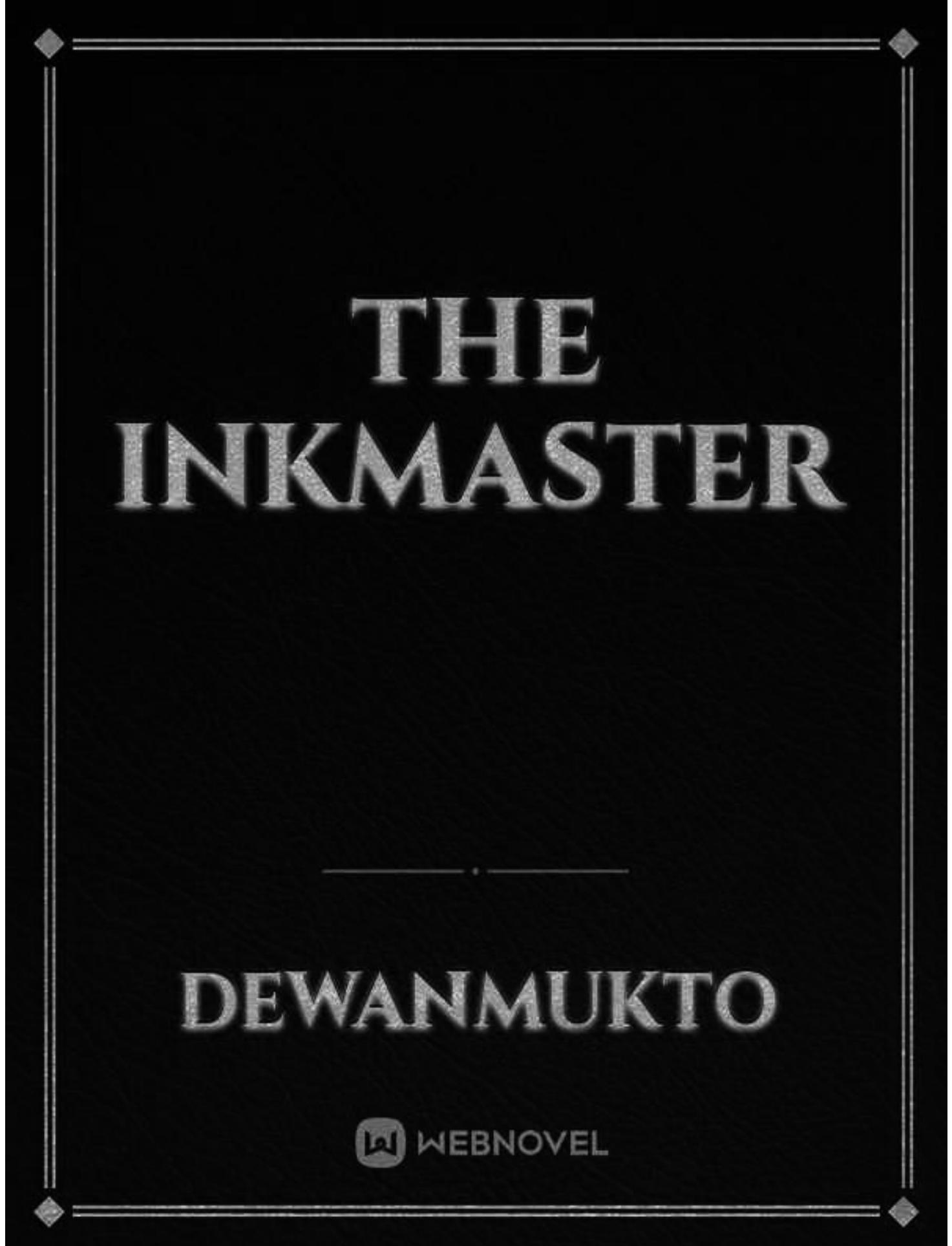
Tangled in a cosmic web of timelines, perspectives and goals, the writer must proceed to understand the motives of the world and people he meets. From undertaking mainstream rescue quests to voyaging against time and space, he must leave no stone unturned in determining the secrets of his own innate memories. What may await him at the roof of everything he created?

A bomb of misfortune impatiently burns its fuse as he spends more time in his own 'fictional' but consciously 'real' world, slowly but effectively reducing his own abilities and erasing his own past experiences. Can he reach the endgoals before his heart crumbles down by his own wrong timing and decisions?

In their world, he is **the Inkmaster**. A being unknown, a stranger unheard of.



## THE INKMASTER



# THE INKMASTER

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DEWANMUKTO





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## All I See Are Broken Dreams

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Empty.

A blank sheet of paper patiently awaited a pen to tickle its surface. Born from the death of a tree, a shell of a leaf, and a loose lump of essence, the page was particularly satisfied with its life so far. No doubt, its ancestors had held high hopes for what lay ahead for its destiny. It wished to be used as a tool. It dreamed of being successful, to live for its worthy ambition. Its purpose of life!

Silent and still, a bed of wood upheld the paper's dream. Waves and loops of age were visible on its skin. It, too, felt a cloud of pity for the paper bottling up in its non-sentient mind. A tub of anticipation to observe a worthy human finally set the paper free from its doubt of being a failure.

Yawning, a man in his thirties sat at his desk with his hands clutching his head like a boulder of rotten bread. Ideas trickled into his head but were drowned out by the screams he could hear storming every cell of his brain. Screams of trauma, screams of doubt.

To him, life seemed like an endless domino cycle of doubt, depression and distress.

"Ugh... Quiet down, you morons!" he threw a paste of anger-flavored words at the wall behind him. His own words bounced back from the concrete surfaces and annoyed his ears. A fact latched onto his current platter of logic, making him realize something important. His

eyes seemed dimmer. "Right... I forgot.... You're not here."

A room bare as a newborn, except for his dutiful desk and charitable chair. His wallet remained crammed with due receipts in another room unspoken of. He owned no musical device, so the monotonous beats of rainfall were all that currently provided ambience for his task.

He wanted to write.

Unfortunately, memories of his past clung to his sensory perception, infecting sensitive areas of his psychological health. From sudden uncomfortable visions to auditory illusions, he almost gave up trusting his own thoughts and interpretations.

Petals of hatred glistened from flowers of emotional pain he had acquired over years of triumph. Passion fueled his hobby, but toxic friends and unsupportive parents ate away at any roads of fortune he built. He had been bullied just for loving to write.

A nerd, a geek, a lifeless zombie... He could've written a list of their abusive nicknames faster than he could produce a fruitful work of literature.

"Damn it!" he delivered a smashing blow to the wooden table with his fist. Logic. Emotion. Passion. He didn't know which one to choose. A fourth option poked at him from the shadows - Vengeance.

'No,' he thought, quickly fluctuating his frame of mind to a calmer octave. *'I don't wish to write and succeed to seek revenge on those who demotivated me. Rather, I myself should consider responsibility for everything. My scars and my shining stars. I am because I was.'*

A caterpillar of pain throbbed and curled around his writing hand. Silently, the man tolerated the harvest of his own actions.

The wood where his fist struck remained visibly fine. No marks or signs of impact at all. On a subconscious level, though, pieces of the wood's soul ripped apart under the weight of its owner's hardship and mistreatment.

"Aaagh..." he clutched his forehead in the likeness of a Greek philosopher trapped in time, trying to rethink his life plans. "All my life, all I wanted was to create worlds and characters..."

A pen was sleeping beside the virgin paper. He turned his attention specifically towards that shaft of metal, plastic and ink.

"All I wanted was to weave life into my creations..." he muttered to people absent and invisible. "To let my readers enjoy them, to adopt them, nurture them..."

His chair involuntarily let out an anxious creak as he leaned forward to grab his pen.

"All I wanted was to be a good writer!"

His hand muscles whirred with motion - battling forces of excitement versus procrastination - positioning the pen's nib normally at the superficial whiteness of the piece of paper.

Both his mouth and his mind went mute for a moment.

A train of words were stationed in his mind, ready for departure out the gates of freedom. A pearl of sweat climbed down the ladder of his forehead cells. Hundreds of hours of melancholic memories were en route to being

imprisoned by the call of hope. The call of duty. For something magnificently great.

The paper, the pen, the person - all three dreams united as one.

His eyes grew dimmer and his lips drooped downwards into a frown. Without any external context, he scribbled the following words :

"All I see are broken dreams."

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## Living Or Dead

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The writer felt a sudden itch in his throat. Via the means of the built-in nervous reflexes, his vocal organs ejected a cough. Two coughs. Three.

*'I wonder how many more days I can live,'* he thought to himself as he shut his eyes to contemplate about his life's crisis. His ears recorded the soft but steady shower of rain battering at the extraordinarily large window occupying the entire eastern face of his rectangular room, as if it might be the last time he would ever hear those sounds again. The sounds he loved. The sounds he'd miss. A certain ribbon of pessimistic thoughts flaked off from the seabed of his mental ocean of decisions. *'Maybe I will never be able to scratch the surface. Maybe tonight is the last night I'd observe.'*

Stale and bitter ideas invaded his mind. Ideas intensively influential enough to wrestle logic. He drew a deep sigh.

His eyes glanced into the horizon for a moment. The nimbus clouds were busy at work; no spectral rays of sunlight were visible right now, let alone the golden aura of a sunset that he yearned for. Grim eyes looked at parts of their own twins on the other side of the glass.

A cityscape sprawled right in front of the man's perspective. Concrete trees of residence and architectural contestants competed for supremacy in terms of height. Little did the construction workers know about the resources of freedom they had snatched from the public. A brief brisk wind walked across the roads below. Empty and idle roads that died with their hope. He caught sight

of a piece of paper being hurled around by the aerial waves - a builder's blueprint.

"Great, atleast one less building to worry about," he chuckled with a smile fragranced by dark humor. He steered his attention and maneuvered his neck muscles towards the piece of paper sitting on his writing desk.  
"And as for my own worries... literally no ideas at all. Curse my luck."

Unable to efficiently focus, more bricks of depression added to the weight of his already towering wall overloaded with sadness.

The couple of words currently scribbled on the page was hardly a proper sentence.

*'Years of strife and hardships... only to become as useless as this?!"*

He rose up from his seat and courteously moved the chair aside.

Facing the glass window, he admired how tightly it had been constructed and set in place - unwavering to faint forces, impervious to any ramming attempts by the wind and immune against intrusive sounds. The contemporary design of the window impossibly relied on a single pane of glass flaunting its expanse from floor to ceiling.

*'Damn, that's a seriously deadly fall,'* he realized how high up his apartment was from ground level. *'If someone tried to jump out from here, I can only imagine the brutal ways gravity will torture them.'*

If the piece of paper had enough an ounce of a soul embedded into its flat body, it would've tried to shout out to its master to stop. The wood grains of the table, upon which it stayed limp and lifeless, paid witness to its emotions and reactions. They wanted to save the writer from an impending doom on its way to merge into this timeline. If only they were alive.

*'But whether I'm living or dead doesn't matter,'* he continued, unsure where these thoughts were emanating from. He felt his mind churning up a poisonous coffee brewed with the darkest of pessimism. Any moment now, his brain would be forced to have a sip. *'My writing days are over before they even began. I am a failure. I'm so sorry, everyone... I don't exist...'*

Dazed with an unknown illness, his body leaned forward. His reflection grew larger and larger against the glossy skin of the window.

Something made him stop in his tracks, however.

A hand grasped onto his own.

"Wh-what? What's this?" he spun around to meet his savior, eager and fearful to know who it might be.  
"Who's there?"

Before he could capture a glimpse of the unknown figure, they brutishly pressed their hands against the writer. Hands so dexterous they left blurry afterimages of their actual body part. Movements so skillfully honed sharp they seemed almost inhumane. Without warning, the person pushed the writer right at the window - with a thirsty intent to kill.

A whole bottle of adrenaline tipped over, spilling reflex energy into the writer's bloodstream from his kidneys.

"Wait, who are you? What're you—"

Innocent and helpless, the glass window shattered on impact with the writer's body. The laws of physics are partial to none, the window knew. It tried its best not to allow the writer to break through. Sadly, the fractures in its embodiment wounded its non-living soul, losing its life before the writer's off-balance body penetrated its own.

"—Holy freaking fu—aaAAAAAH!"

The writer fell.

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## Death Feels Like

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That face, that figure. The writer believed he had seen it somewhere, but he wasn't sure "where".

Around him, a bokeh of greyscale rainbows and palettes of confusion fanned in a swirling motion, encapsulating his falling body. His ears were being fed chunks of air fleeing from his freefall. His limbs wiggled like a frog stuck in an electrostatic trap. His eyes were peeled open taut with tension, previewing the bleak shadowy sky from a new parallel angle.

Who was that stranger? How did they get in? Questions bombarded his stationary mind. His friends had perished from the clutches of a global pandemic decades ago; none remained alive who could've known about the location of an author so underrated.

Time soon began crumbling away underneath his position. Time refused to keep his lifeline alive, it seemed.

With the last pinch of hope sprinkling away from his desolate fingers, the writer braced for his inevitable demise waiting to engulf his being into a dinner wrapped for Death.

To die.

He wondered if he would've been happy if only certain factors behind his solemn life had been any different.

"Would it really change anything?"

Indeed, the purpose of life was paradoxical.

"We live... to die..."

The writer contracted the curtains of his cold eyes - perhaps for the last time on Earth. On the bright side, if at all, he slightly felt excited to finally be able to smell and taste life's greatest recipe - death.

"Dear world, goodbye..."

Darkness. A void. Engines of silence.

"..."

A black so blue, it burned beautifully beyond any shade of white. His tongue felt a sharp pain, as if an insect suddenly lodged into his mouth.

"..."

Without any context of what was happening behind his shut eyelids, he simply spat out the object disturbing his oral premises.

Something was wrong.

Previously the writer had read trunkloads of books - from textbooks to novels to research papers - on the topic of 'death'. Scientists great and small were a prime vendor of inspiration redder than cherries and riper than strawberries. He had read nearly a hundred anecdotes on near-death experiences from survivors of heart-stabbing disasters, doctors of philosophy, Nobel Prize winners and the like. None of them proved to be useful in judging the quality of his own death. It seemed peculiarly 'different'.

Should he wait a bit longer? He was confident his apartment wasn't very high. A neighbor had once accidentally dropped a turkey outside their kitchen

window; it morphed into a gory mess of blood and meat within a minute after the asphalt below greedily grappled it with an arm of gravity before licking it through its surficial organ.

Should he part his eyes? Opening them may not be a problem. His journey would lead him to die anyways. He almost felt a sense of pity for the healthcare personnel who'd need to clean up his entrails on the ground afterwards.

Without hesitation, his paranoia handed over the baton to his impatience in their little relay race.

He opened his eyes, immediately stunned and speechless by the scenario in front of him.

"Am I... in Heaven?" he asked out aloud, to his utter embarrassment. "Am I dead?"

White wispy particles hovered peacefully atop his body. Gemstones of foamy perfection they were, sparkling with a wishful aroma of bliss. He was lain down on a bed, he noticed, soft enough to seduce a person to sleep for eternity and yet keep begging for more. A quilt rested and enveloped him from navel to toes, woven from fluffy feathers and petals of an exotic flower he couldn't recognize.

A crown of calmness strangled the nerves in his head, rapidly easing his shock and converting them into wonder.

Instantly his vigilant focus darted in the direction of the object that rolled down from his mouth. Looking at it with his own conscious eyes, he couldn't help but grimace.

It was ACTUALLY a bug - the size of a bluebottle, now resting in the valley of the blanket over and between his legs. But the most elegant of insects he had ever seen! Unlike the anatomically-awkward arthropods creeping and crawling on Earth, this beetle-like creature was adorned with gold. Feathered wings in place of the typical translucent.

The first consciously spoken sentence broke free from behind his teeth.

"What... the... fuck..."

Curiously curious and covertly impressed, the writer ordered his legs to slide gently off the bed, making sure not to disturb the other person.

'Wait... the 'other person'?!' he exclaimed in his mental cave.

Indeed, his gaze fell upon another living being that involuntarily made him blush out of shyness and an internal guilt.

Facing the other side, still entranced by sleep, lay a female creature far superior to any human women he had ever ogled. With skin radiating a sheen of prosperity and the possibility of a wealthy background, auburn hair that hypnotized his human eyes to believe it was tidy no matter how bizarrely tangled it seemed - scintillating in threads of satin - and owning a well-defined body lustrous with maturity and spiritual purity, the writer had never imagined that such women existed. Atleast not on Earth.

'This has to be a dream,' he concluded in his own psychic court. 'Or maybe this IS Heaven.'

Still not having cast his eyes upon the woman sharing his bed, his hands suddenly revolted and began issuing commands of their own. They proceeded to slowly, carefully caress her cheek.

*'Wait... NO! I don't know who she is. Nor what relation she has with me,'* he quickly fished out a stone of logic to hold back his desire. *'I may need to investigate a bit more before I approach her. Woe to me for being so hasty. Let me go find a mirror to observe my own body first.'*

With caution and respect, he tenderly debunked himself off the prize of a bed. For reasons unknown, he grabbed the beetle-like critter off the resting platform.

The floor, tiled by a conglomerate of foreign rocks, comforted his feet. Every footstep absorbed a flavor of pleasure that made him want to stand on the floor all day long. Slightly flustered to admit even to his own mind, the writer felt like a newborn; every object that crossed his line of vision invited new questions.

The room was well-lit. Pitching his head up to inspect the source of the lights, his brain got overloaded with eye candy.

A vaulted ceiling loomed atop the bed chamber, sieving rays of light so white it almost attacked his eyes' retinae. A row of tiny windows was engraved into the dome, with a few left open for dozens of touring birds and insects to liberally pass across each.

From another room unexplored, somewhere inside the building he was nested in, an aroma of crisp herbs and eloquent spices drifted around a corner. The scent reminded him of his favorite Earl Grey tea back home.

This new smell, however, brandished attributes that could clap his old preferences to the face. A champion of pleasant smells.

'*Is this what death feels like?*' he wondered quietly.

"Death?" a voice slithered into his ears so cute and pristine, the writer was scared the sensation may kill his vulnerable heart. Turning back, he discovered that the woman just woke up from her insoluble slumber. "Um... why would you be bringing about the topic of death?"

Their eyes contacted.

He wasn't sure if this was what he had expected about her appearance.

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## Dusts of Time

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The writer noticed extravagant ears protruding from the garden of the woman's hair. An elf, he noted.

Her eyes were almonds brimming with brilliance upon her flawless face. Irises pulsing with concentric rings of colors he had never seen before. Her angled eyelashes guided the right amount of light to complement her already overflowing aura of grace. Her lips, like hills of pastel pink skin, stood proudly at a placement more unique than the golden ratio.

His eyes could judge her beauty more profoundly than actually getting closer to her.

"Dearest of my heart, is something bothering you?" she spoke again, butterflies of her words fluttering wildly aimed for the man's defensive decency. Even a kitten's purrs would be outmatched by the subtle excellence and softness of her tone. "Why speak about ill matters like death, so early in the hour of the sun?"

The writer blinked with a poker expression on his face. She blinked back with motion indescribably adorable.

'Who? Is she talking to me?' he wondered whilst pointing at himself as if blinded by a fog of confusion. Just out of curiosity, he peered over his shoulder to check behind him. An empty wall waved back blankly. 'Me? Her dearest something?'

"Yes, my chandelier of life," she softly answered back, as if she rummaged his mind telepathically. "To you, I speak. For you, I live."

'Ehh?

He couldn't believe his ears. Luckily, it made him wake up from the trance. A phantom of distraction had bribed his mind to look away from the primary concerns he had : where was he?

Additionally, he ignored the newly encountered pill of curiosity casually walking towards his head to plague him with yet another question : why was she speaking so strangely?

"You seem confused, my love," she threw the blankets to a corner of the fairly large room by a kick from her long, bare legs. Before he could even catch a glimpse of her body, a cluster of dandelions burst out from every patch of her skin below her neck, leaving behind a dress - as if by magic - so impressively pretty that human women would be cannibalizing each other to claim its ownership. "Is something wrong? I wish to know what ails you and your wellbeing."

"Uh... I'm sorry, your words..." deformed sentences poured out of his mouth as he stepped back; she took one forward. Trust wasn't so cheap for him. Hoisting up a dumb bell of courage, he honestly asked her what his eccentric thoughts cheered him for. "Excuse me, ma'am. I believe I'm lost. Where am I? Who are you? How long have we known each other?"

The elfin idol of a lady uneasily smiled, as if startled. Or perhaps out of expectation.

"I knew this day would dawn soon, L'Esson," her tone suddenly adopted a new volume of entropy. Her voice seemed sad. Thin streams of shimmering tears paved the path from her precious eyes, exhibiting her sorrow. A

sadness emerging out of nowhere. "The day... when you'll forget about the existence of your own wife!"

'*Wife? Forget? What?*' the writer's brain experienced a roller coaster ride up a steep slope of information overload. '*And what did she just call me? L'Esson? God, I have no idea whatever the hell is happening to me....'*

"S-see?" she began sobbing, making whimpering and pitiful noises that were already straining his humility with lightning strikes of guilt and regret. "Y-you alr-ready forg-got wh-who I am..."

Her happy face transformed into the most wretched and desolate expressions tragic enough to make a serial killer grieve for his crimes.

"Whoa whoa... please stop! I'm being honest! I do not know how in the world I arrived here," he bent his knees and clapped his hands together in the posture of begging pardon. "I think I'm not the person you married. Crazy as it seems, I may have somehow possessed your husband's body...."

It was no use.

She bawled even louder, tainting her mature appearance by her rather childish attitude. Droplets of her tears parachuted onto parts of her exquisite dress, forming circular monuments of wetness like badges of tragedy.

"They told me this time would soon be upon us.... A dreadful time!" her medium-sized torso heaved with the huffs of breaths she inhaled and exhaled rapidly. "Lady Marveno... declared the prophecy earlier... but we didn't listen! Oh, woe to us! We didn't heed her honorary advice!"

*'Crap... It feels like I'm in an immersive version of a Shakespearean play.'*

The crying elf ignored that comment.

"She told me your memory would soon be cri-crippled by reasons unknown. She pr-promised a cure... but we were ignorant. Oh, L'Esson! We were ignorant, my love!"

The writer, currently being assumed a person by the name of L'Esson, inched away from the elf. Hard to believe, he found himself in a civilized prison; his thoughts were openly readable by that elf girl. Even the mere activity of thinking seemed like a punishable offence. Never in his entire lifespan did he ever imagine such a situation would cluelessly barge into his life!

"Erm... if you'd please excuse me, ma'am," he cautiously continued trying to dilute the misunderstanding. "I'd rather take my leave now. I don't know anything whatsoever. Maybe some fresh air will be beneficial for me."

"NO!" she yelled out, her voice unusually loud. "L'Esson, dear nectar... Please DON'T LEAVE ME!!"

The elf rose up from the bed and rushed towards L'Esson with an intent to grab his legs. Her eyes were drowning with tears. He wondered if she was mentally unlucky to have a limited supply of wits or if she was always crazy by this degree even before his consciousness sank into L'Esson's body.

He almost felt the elf woman wrap her delicate arms around him out of the need to embrace.

Changing his mind about trying to poke some answers out of her, he decided to let the current of her wishes flow with his own. Closing his eyes, the hair on his body stood up in an assembly. To warmly welcome the touch of a woman. For an angelic beauty like her, it was every man's dream to be stopped and hugged.

"Huh?"

The writer's fate faced another hiccup, as he found himself in a new scenario. A drastic jump down a gradient of inferior quality. Instead of the heavenly white palace he was in seconds ago, dull and dark metallic bars of iron welcomed him.

Darkness dripped from the ceiling like unstable stalactites. Metal cages loosely hung from chains corroded down to their minimum required for supporting their weight. The writer was unluckily and unfairly inside one of them. Silence grew from the cracks like cave mushrooms. A few orbs of wind ventilated the subterranean region. A dungeon.

His head was already dizzy with the swift and unpredictable situation 'jumps', throwing away assumptions and brewing new reasons behind the events he faced.

He could've sworn he was in another room (or even possibly another world) just seconds ago.

Unfortunately for him, this time he was all by himself. Trapped in a cell like a dangerous demon. Imprisoned for crimes he hadn't committed.

*'Did I just get teleported?'* he sent out an echo of his own internal thoughts into the darkness. *'The odds are low,*

*but I hope you are out there, elf woman. Can you hear me?*

"There is no elf down here," a brash male voice answered. "Rizekai, you spoiled brat! You'll pay for your crimes!"

"Who?" the writer inquired, swatting away the fact that his jailor was also able to overhear his thoughts telepathically. "Who's there? Show yourself!"

The air split into smithereens as a giant alien-like creature shoved its face against one of the walls of the cage. Its hand wrapped around the single chain keeping the writer's cage from falling down into the immeasurably deep abyss below. No signs of solid ground could be found anywhere nearby.

"You wanted, so I came!" the demonic being mocked sarcastically. "You are an uncouth entity, you know that Rizekai? Few boast a hall of fame full of misdeeds like yourself," it almost sounded proud. "I must say, I am envious of your accomplishments."

He kept his eyes averted from meeting the demon's gaze. The last thing he wanted in this current state of trauma was to introduce more fuel for nightmares later on.

*'Great. Now I'm probably in another body belonging to someone named Rizekai,'* the writer sternly pointed out to himself. *'How I wish I knew what's behind all of this? Why are these incidents happening? Where am I? More importantly... who am I?'*

The demon presumed the questions oozing from the writer's mind were meant for his ears, so it replied dutifully.

"You are Rizekai, the firstborn of King Isekai, ruler of the Twelve Days. Perhaps the dusts of time have polluted your memories, young one. Allow me to refresh and recapitulate a brief history of your sins..."

'*Oh damn, please don't bother!*' he nearly groaned.

Whether speaking through his head or mouth, these otherworldly creatures knew no barriers.

"Ah, but I MUST! You have the right," the demon rattled the cage, "to remain silent, Guilty One!"

'*Please... just kill me already!*' the writer slammed his palm onto his face. '*At this rate, I may end up forgetting who I am! The actual me!*'

"Rizekai," the demon's voice boomed once more. "I know not why you speak so strangely as of late. But I can sense something oddly improper about your behavior. You don't seem to be the person you ought to be. If not, then I ask... who ARE YOU?"

*You... you... you....*

The final words tailing the demon's speech etched permanent tattoos on the skin of his mental hearth. The writer's sanity was hanging onto the last straw above a pit of eternal lunacy. If even one more ton of weight became inflicted on his mind, he would lose his own sense of being possibly forever.

"I... am... an AUTHOR!" the writer yelled out, standing firmly on top of his desperation for escaping all of this trickery.

The world collapsed around him, revealing an exosphere of light so bright it blew the fuses running his nervous

system. As if his body was suddenly being filled with lead, he lost his balance. His eyes shrank from the drought of light whiter than sacred blood. He believed he was about to die.

*'Finally... an end to my suffering....'*

Before his eyes drew on the curtains to end the show of his life, an elderly man's face curiously looked at his own.

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## Turnip Seeds Were Not Cheap

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Falling through an ocean of sleep, bubbles of fear surrounded the writer's falling body. As if paralyzed with a tightly-bound noose of fatigue around his waist, he tried his best to not surrender. The effervescence clung to him like a chemist's electrode. It fed off his longing to die.

"Anothor!"

He was already frustrated with hearing new voices every now and then. His half-closed eyes were drunk with disappointment. He had seen things he never wished to. He had survived through experiences unimaginable.

"Anothor! Are ye alright, lad?"

The need to wake up pierced his mood like a harpoon, fishing him out of the twilight depths endorsing and urging him to continue remaining in a coma.

"Ghaaaah!" he sat up straight at the very instant he regained the reins of consciousness. "Whey-where the hell did-"

The writer chugged down a drought of the wine of anger. Believing he had had enough, the writer was prepared to strike down any person or being who dared to obscure his sanity any further. With not a single petal of mercy.

"Calm down, son," a badly-aged hand gently tapped his shoulder, the skin stuck like a thin layer of glue on bones. A stench of rotting mud swam about the peach pole of an arm. Citadels of microorganisms celebrated a mass migration onto a new host's body.

An old elf man shone like a symbol of peace beside him. Grasses of sun-boiled labor were stuck to his coveralls, made of a material reminiscent of Earthly denim. A straw hat perched on the rim of his head reminded the writer of classic oriental farmers back in Asia. Two holes let his gnarly ears pass through comfortably. His nose proudly presented itself two inches away from his face, hygienic and stain-free. Boots of unknown leather sheltered his rickety feet from any predators lurking among the soil kingdoms, splattered by liquids of red, white and green.

'*A farmer*,' the writer easily identified.

"Ya're in safe hands now," the elf continued tapping the writer's shoulder, this time drumming it with a speed higher than before. "Sayiiiife hands, m'boy. Say... where ye be from?" the farmer's overgrown brows drooped closer over his eyes in a squint. "Sixteen hundred years me lived. And never seen the likes of ye. Oh well, I can say for sure that atleast you're not a turnip!" he broke off into a 3-second chuckle, promptly slapping the writer's shoulder in the hint of sharing a light joke. "Otherwise me wife would be already cookin' ya... possibly alive! Ha-ha-HAAAH!"

The farmer elf's hazel eyes burned a sense of uncomfortable guilt into the writer's face.

"A turnip?"

The writer brushed his eyes over the surroundings. He was sitting atop a gruesomely murdered turnip, vegetable blood oozing out in puddles around him. Strangely, the pattern and placement of the dead root fruit's corpse oddly announced that the damage had been

implied not from the outside, but rather, from the inner parts of the plant organ.

He lifted his hands to inspect the sticky substance covering his fingers.

Turnip juice.

"A few moments back," the farmer informed distastefully. "I was walkin' through my crop fields just like any other day. Atleast today was better than the other days. I pretty am glad to the divines that I didn't find any thieves trespassing or trampling on me lovely li'l treasures. Or that I didn't get my arse set on fire by some winged lizard. D-dragons as ye call 'em. Anyways... I be walkin' down this aisle o' crops today while the sun sipped on my sweat. Bloody greedy bastard! And ayeee... I see one of me turnips had grown overripe. I was about to pluck it off when... goodness be limed! A hume creature pops out from the flesh!"

The farmer's eyes widened with wonder as if he was narrating a campfire tale to the writer.

"I thought to myself," the farmer acted out the actions as he spoke, mirroring his anecdotes. "This is rather peculiar. Most peculiar indeed. For I've plowed seven hundred acres of land in me lifetime and harvested for over eighteen hundred seasons, but never have I seen a hume creature popping outta fruits as small as a turnip! I knew at once, it must be a sign. A sign from those ruling above the skies. That I have been blessed! Ohh... I have been blessed, goodness be limed!"

Half of the farmer's bolstered words participated for a joyride in the writer's head. Only a quarter survived. The other half landed off-track.

"I have always wanted a son!" the elf thrust his hand towards the sky. "And by the grace of the divine deities, they have granted me wish! They sent me YOU!" he pointed the same hand's index finger at the writer's nose, touching tip-to-tip. An innocent smile crawled upon the old elf's face, aided by a hurricane of delight and satisfaction accelerating surreal happiness in his mind. "They sent a hume creature rather than an elf. But ye're a young one enough. I found ye screaming like a newborn, uttering yer name. I clearly heard ye speak that ye're Another."

*'Ah, I see. So he's another cracked nutcase,'* the writer concluded to himself. He realized how surprisingly low the farmer's intelligence quotient was despite his veteran-like appearance. He sighed. *'Well, atleast he doesn't seem to have the ability to read minds, I hope. And this time I'm in my own body, at last! Let him call me whatever he prefers.'*

"So... Another, me son," the farmer, now unofficially the writer's adoptive father, stood back on his unreliable feet and offered one of his arthritic hands for him. "Let's go head back home immediately and send word to yer mother. She'll be surprised! Also at the same time... she may kick us both outta the house. Those turnip seeds were not cheap, ye know?"

The writer silently accepted his *father's* hand.

"Atta boy, Ano! Come, come. Let's quickly hide under covers of wood and stone before that sun unhides from the clouds!"

Hand-in-hand, they both ran off towards the horizon. Particles of loam quivered beneath their feet. Nearby plants witnessed an earth-rumbling havoc that made them pray their leaves off to be safe from harm. Smokes of humus, the spiky flavor of fresh leaves and spongy beads of pollen hovered above the well-tilled rows upon rows of neatly organized crops. The elven farmer seemed to take his profession seriously.

Tomatoes flaunted their attractive pumpkins of scarlet. Grapes dangled from vines of silvery-green maple. Cabbages and cauliflowers grazed on a buffet of nutrients from the soil. The writer wasn't proficient or knowledgeable about plants so he could only name a few of the many species of vegetable brethren that lived there in harmony.

*'Seems better than death and the previous places. Although I wish he were a bit younger,'* he thought, biting on a lozenge of dark humor. *'This man seems like he might die from a cardiac disease before the next time I hear a rooster's cokka-doodle-doo.'*

What totally ticked in Another's mind was the shallow way that the old elf shrugged off the impulse to panic, even after seeing a human out of the blue. He seemed calm. A shade too relaxed, as if he had already expected This chill reaction reminded him of the flipside opposite effect typical alien movies he used to watch for his pastime back on Earth portrayed - humans calling in

their military forces to exterminate or abduct any extraterrestrial being their relatively hostile eyes found.

*'Maybe humanity is the only civilization to react like that,'* he avoided bringing his own set of stereotypes into the conversation.

"Marveno was right! She foretold I'd be receiving both good news and bad news on this forsaken day," Another's new father shattered the silence, including Another's convoy of thoughts. "Me think that ye're the GOOD part of today. Now..." his tone dropped by a notch; the initial joy he toted faded away. "...I be wondering what could be the BAD thing to happen."

*'Marveno... this name was also referenced by that elf girl,'* Another placed a hand on his chin, distracted by his own thoughts before hearing the farmer's last sentence.  
*'I wonder who she is. A fortune teller? Or something more?'*

Whoever Lady Marveno was, Another didn't approve his trust to entwine her name yet.

A swift shadow of a flying creature passed in front of Another and the farmer's fields of vision.

That was hardly anything prioritized compared to the issues the writer currently ranked on his mental list of queries. His mind fluctuated to-and-fro like a piston in an internal combustion engine - once thinking about what was happening around him and his mortal body, once wondering about the questions haunting his territories of thought.

The layers of clouds shadowing the sun above shifted positions. Searing heat rays darted straight at the ground and everything on it.

Another stopped walking.

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An hour later, Another and the aged elf farmer were spotted on the outskirts of the nearest town. Bags of weariness dangled from their heavily-scratched clothing. Their movements pronounced news of a tough battle they fought back at the agricultural haven. Every footstep was trudged out. Every breath's exhalation dense with physical exercise. What could have possibly converted their health status to such a dire condition? That, too, within a short span of time?

"I'm sorry, me dear son," the old elf coughed out words to banish the awkward silence. "Those darned crows are gonna pay for causing ye trouble."

The streets were caked with baked clay. Terracotta cottages nested within loops of road and ground. Blades of grass sneezed out fresh green scents to purify the town's atmosphere. Shrubs of flowers remained napping beneath shades provided by knightly trees and tall bushes towering over them. In the distance, a handful of multi-storeyed palace-like structures dominated the glory of the elven settlement - sparkling white domes over a low skyline shaded by green, beige and brown.

Under the warm influence of the sun, few elves were out wandering the streets.

The writer wished there were fewer.

Eyes shot arrows of curiosity at him as he continued following his 'father' back home. He couldn't blame the other elves; he felt like an exotic animal being escorted to a zoo. Pimples of mild shyness grew all over his face. Pointing his gaze at the ground, he avoided sparring with their frightfully sharper ones. Social anxiety bottled up in his spiritual mindscape without any valid reasons.

Nonetheless, the numerous minor injuries tattooed on his arms and legs shone a brighter spotlight over his position.

*'This... is rather weird,'* Another sipped on his thoughts. *'I've fought those monstrous winged pests with my bare fists. Not a single ounce of fear or worry was bothering me. Yet, here I am bathing in them, without any signs of violence aimed at me.'*

Voices whispered. A couple of uneducated hands pointed. One of them caught his ears' attention.

Jerking his head lured by the direction of that voice, for once, the writer's memory answered the call. He spotted a female elf insistently holding onto her husband's arm as they headed in the opposite stream of walkers on the current vein of a road.

*'Wait... isn't that?'* Another tilted his head in debt of remembering.

Indeed, it was, as his own ears paid witness to the proof.

"L'Esson, my cherry breeze, please! We must visit Lady Marveno to cure your mental ailments."

"S'Awira, dearest tune of my heart... I'm telling you I'm perfectly fine!" the man by the name of L'Esson replied

to the same elf woman Anothor had met. "By the grace of the divines, don't believe every grain of the old crone's words. She's corrupting you!"

The farmer, the writer and the elf couple crossfaded on their paths.

L'Esson and Anothor exchanged looks.

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## Stay With The Stars

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"Marveno, you're going too far!" a commanding voice originated from a mask-wearing silhouette. Its syllables were jagged, demanding and aggressive.

"Patience," the forsaken woman bowed slightly. A stripe of light covered half her face, accredited to the shape of the lamp hanging at the center of her workroom. "Every step undertaken by me is a root that feeds the tree of fate. How can I not perform what has been expected of me by my own destiny?"

"Silence!" the figure dressed in onyx spoke from a corner, shielded by a wall to not let the woman's eyes touch him. "All you converse about is 'fate this, fortune that'. You attract visitors and grant them access to glimpse at their future, unaware about the price they bear. Is that truly ethical a deed of you to do?"

Marveno's experienced eyes squinted at the wall. Her sense of respect for the person flinched.

"What I do is none of your concern, Tabléyét," Lady Marveno took a step forward. The wood from the floor groveled under pressure. "As a bounty hunter, you reserve no right to object to anything I do. Instead, you have the duty to accomplish whatever errand I entrust you on. Is that clear?"

"Clear my name!" the ominous figure finally revealed himself under the light. A broad-shouldered being of a race undisclosed, dressed in colors of the darkest midnight sky. His gloved hands bore the hilt of a unique weapon resembling an ornate torch sconce. "How dare

you use my own name? Should I teach that tongue of yours a lesson it never learnt?"

"I believe you are the one who's not disciplined, foul half-elf," the middle-aged elf raised her voice. For a heartbeat, she could feel the heat of her anger burn through the heavy cloaks worn by the mercenary. Her agile ears picked up a scent of footsteps drawing close. "We shall debate about this matter on the morrow. For now, make yourself scarce."

"I..." Tablýét shut his hidden mouth before his tongue could argue. Understanding the necessity for him to hide as fast as possible, he scurried off back into the corner. "You will answer for your disobedience, Marveno. You will regret your audacity."

He melted into the shadows.

Sighing with a feeling halfway tipped towards relief, she turned around to greet the incoming guests.

Three elves lifted the drapes guarding her room and merrily entered, two of which were familiar. Behind them, an outsider joined.

"Lady Marveno! At last, we meet again!" S'Awira knelt down to touch the fortune teller's toes. She brought her hand to her forehead before promptly rubbing it against her heart. She rose back to her feet, with her eyes gleaming with news. "You were right, ma'am! You were correct about your predictions. Oh Lady Marveno, my dear L'Esson has been afflicted by the curse of forgetfulness!"

Even for someone like Marveno, whose mind was populated with cobwebs of knowledge, she was slightly surprised at the appearance and actions of the young elf.

"Ah... Miss Awira, I see..." she ran her fingers through the elf's neatly combed hair. Perfume made from seven types of rare roses slithered onto her skin. "You've certainly grown even more beautiful over the last two moons!"

"Oh, Madam Marveno, you flatter me!" she giggled.

Marveno swapped her visual focus to L'Esson.

"And Esson, too. You remind me of my own son who married an elf as elegant as your bride. Though, I must say, even S'Awira may outmatch hers," she realized there were more participants behind the vignette of her regular clients. "And what's this? You brought me more visitors? How generous! Come in, come in!"

Farmer E'Norm and his newly adopted 'son' Anothor quietly stepped into the foreground, courteously having their hands pre-knotted behind their backs.

"My apologies for not noticing your presence, Mister Norm," she bestowed a badge of respect to Anothor's stepfather via her words. "Hope your harvests are successful this season. I'm afraid you had to wrestle with intruders and crows in order to uphold the lining of success," she transparently read their fate from their faces. "And who's this... gentleman beside you? He doesn't seem like an elf, by my wisdom."

"Him?" the farmer grabbed the writer by the shoulder.  
"Well, Sister Marveno, he's the fruit ye promised this

year! How honest and true your words are! Am baffled by the fortune, Marveno. I greatly am!"

"Oh, did I?" she couldn't recall any promises foretelling about his 'fruit'. Relying on her backup logic - the science of deduction - she inferred that the new person was his 'son'. Feeling safe about her rapid conclusion, she continued. "Ah, yes! I did. Your new son, I see."

The writer gulped as Marveno approached him.

"A handsome one, too," she held up his chin to make his eyes meet hers. She probed over every visible detail on his face. "A hume creature? Hmm-hmm... Interesting. Your past is blurry, your future is undefined. But your present holds up a placard of potential. I sense bravery.. chivalry..." she let go of her firm grip on his face before stepping back. "If my daughter was in town, I'd have requested you to bond with her."

L'Esson and S'Awira listened to the soothsayer's appraisal of the newcomer. Meanwhile, his father's chest swelled with pride and gratefulness to the deities he believed in.

"Now, now, my dears," she turned her back towards them. "Please enter and have a seat. I believe our night will outrun the day if we don't make haste about discussing your problems."

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Bliss condensed among the swarm of steam happily climbing out from cups of enamel-skinned porcelain. The tea cradled within ushered an avalanche of nostalgia for Another and an idyllic touch for everyone else to feel the massage of comfort. Platters of fine bread, castles of

dough snacks and an army of fruits had been summoned atop the table. A table round like the sun and veiled by fabric far permeable than silk but also stronger than polyester.

Sunlight changed its hue with every passing unit of time as dusk played a snare drum to notify the timezone about its arrival.

Another took another sip.

The hexagonal chamber of Lady Marveno was built out of a metallic stone tamed by volcanoes and schooled by the best of blacksmiths in the nation. Though she seldom stayed there. For one fact, it wasn't her actual residence.

Her guests helped themselves on the splurge snacks while she mentally formulated possible pathways to tackle any questions they would propose.

S'Awira put her cup down and headed out to the balcony parallel to the dining section. If there was one thing she adored more than her husband, L'Esson, it would be the nightly stars that peeked out from the pockets in the sky.

The drapes partitioning every section of the building were magically enchanted to hold back sound. Atleast until the landlady herself willed for them to let any sounds through.

"Madam Marveno," L'Esson swallowed a grape followed by a drought of water in a goblet adorned with amethysts. While his spouse was away and possibly deaf to the conversations indoors, he decided it was a wise opportunity to discuss directly with the Lady of Fate herself. "I have my utmost respects for you. But please... I beg your pardon and your mercy upon me," he clapped

his hands together. "S'Awira believes my mind is under the effects of some illness. But I'm afraid, that's not the case, as it should be apparent already! Please explain to her that I'm perfectly fine. It hurts my eyes and my soul to see her desperately wanting to cure a disease that isn't present in my body in the first place. Oh Lady Marveno, is there not something you can suggest?"

Petting his pitch like a domestic cat in her mind, Marveno silently communed with herself for a moment.

Another and his father busily chewed and munched upon the delicacies sponsored by her. They both were in the background of the other elves' affairs, so they kept it that way. If there was any emotion they felt, it was shame - for tailing two civilians and intruding on their host without an invitation.

*'It's been a while since I've tasted food THIS GOOD!' the writer screamed with delight in the halls of his mental space. 'Ah, I still cannot believe whatever the hell is happening with me. Where am I? Which country is this? More importantly... what happened to me? I haven't seen myself in any mirrors ever since I landed here,' he tried to extract his reflection from the surface of the tea but the lighting made it difficult for him to make out anything other than his bodily outline. 'Need to find a reflective surface... fast. I wonder if I'm in my own body or not. As far as my arms and physique is concerned, they seem... more fit. Well, someone like me could never judge physical qualities anyways.... ugh...' he released a soft burp, quieter than the sound of knives, spoons and forks dancing to the melodies of their handlers' eating preferences. 'I wonder what sort of house I'll be staying*

*in. For once, I kind of feel displeased with myself for not being able to live with that cutie elf. If I indeed was in control of her husband's body, I would've cried to stay like that for longer. Ah, no one would've ever known. Nor suspected anything wrong. It'd have been as if I was always L'Esson since birth! Heh...' a mischievous grin ate his next bite of cake. 'Whoever I am, I think I may possess some supernatural skills and abilities. I just need to learn how to harness ownership over them. Correctly. Safely,' he wiped a smear of chocolate off his lips. 'Secretly.'*

"Yes, my dear," Marveno replied with a smile colored by assurance. "I'm sorry if Awira had been unnecessarily troubling both your heart and mind. Based on your claim, I think she has misunderstood the prophecy I had presented to her, last time. Fear not, Esson. Let her enjoy her karaoke with the stars. Once she returns, I shall correct her wrongs."

A trivial thought dashed in front of Another's daydreaming eyes. He took the bait and immediately asked the fortune teller.

"Excuse me, madam."

"Yes, my dear?"

"About your daughter. She's currently not in town, you informed," unsure whether to continue to the next part, the writer proceeded blindly. "So I would like to inquire about her whereabouts. Where is she? If you wouldn't mind."

At his word, Marveno slammed her hands on the arms of the chair she was reclining on. Supported by her arms, she stood up, scrutinizing him where he sat.

"Tell me, my dear. Do you really want to know?"

Inferring by the challenging tone of the elf woman, Another fidgeted in his mind. Locked in a fluctuating coin flip of whether to answer "yes" or "no". Even though Marveno didn't explicitly scold him, perspiration of stress dabbled in the form of sweat down a side of his forehead.

"Y-yes, please."

Lady Marveno leaned forward, closer to his face.

"If I state that information, would you promise to bring her back as well?"

*'Crap. I didn't see that coming!'* Another looked at his father for comfort or support, but the old farmer shared the same mute expression of a statue with L'Esson. After all, he wasn't his real father. Hardly even a known stranger. *'Hmm... why would she ask such a thing? I wonder.'*

"You have thirty seconds before S'Awira re-enters the room. Make haste and decide fast, human. I'll be leaving for a distant island to the west of here. It won't be till next year that we cross paths again."

*'Something's definitely not right. She isn't addressing me as my dear anymore, either. Should I really risk it? What if her daughter's in some faraway fabled land, or captured by some rival prince or even taken hostage by bandits?' his mind only fetched the worst of possibilities.*

*'Those nasty birds back at the farm were already a menace too hard on my health. I own no money or equipment necessary for undertaking any quests.'*

"Twenty seconds."

*'Maybe, just maybe. I should try my luck? After all, she's the lady of luck.'*

"Fifteen seconds."

"Alright, I agree, Lady of Luck," he stood up. "Please tell me where your daughter is."

"Firstly," she retracted her face back. "I'm the Lady of Fate, not Luck. Secondly," she impatiently shoved all the utensils off the table in a single wipe. Her eyes and hairs began glowing with purple flames tipped with insanity.

"My daughter is... DEAD!" she lifted a slightly crooked finger at Another. "But not for long. YOU... will bring her back, you promised. So be gone at once!"

"Sister Marveno, what is the meaning of THIS?" the farmer snapped in disgust. "Have ye gone crazy? Come back to your senses! Goodness be limed, what sort of banshee suddenly— Aaaah!"

A blast of a spell unknown to Another materialized in a sphere. No. The ball of energy was draining the farmer's body dry of its mana – the secondary essence of life empowering elven souls and fueling magic. Wrinkles of pain crackled upon E'Norm's face. His entire body began contracting like a timelapse footage of a grape turning into a raisin.

"Lady Marveno! STOP!" L'Esson ignored the shock snaking into his opinion of the fortune teller. Acting fast,

he casted a spell to conjure a dagger before attempting to implant it into Marveno's neck. "This is too far, ma'am. I can't believe my eyes! What are you doing?!"

"L... LA... LADY MARVENO!" S'Awira's scream bounced off the adjacent walls. She hurried into the room, stuck in her tracks. "L'ESSON! NO!!!"

"Foolish girl, you should've stayed where you were," Marveno grabbed L'Esson's dagger with an iron grip. "Now you shall forever stay with the stars! Slain by the blade of your own lover!"

"NO!!!! NO!!!! NOOOOO!!!!" L'Esson realized his mistake a bit too late.

"RUN, S'AWIRA! RUN!!!!" Another himself tried to warn her. He dived forward to help her dodge the villainously sabotaged attack.

Her eye pupils captured the final moments of her innocent life, mere flickers of a moth's wing before a kiss of death. Her mounds of trust. Her dreams. She realized now how fragile they were compared to her own existence. Standing there, speechless, she hardly had enough time to shed a teardrop.

Warping her face for the impact, she closed her eyes and prepared for the worst.

Another watched in horror as his own last attempts to save the angelic elf were about to crash into the ground in vain.

The polished floors beneath S'Awira's feet braced for blood to shower upon them.

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## Missing Forever

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"Not this time, old hag!" a voice of hope crackled out of the depths of the building. "I've warned you before. But I believe it's time that you succumb to the hands of unbiased justice."

Puzzling every other occupant in the room, a large shadowy figure rolled out like a bear performing ninja techniques. Its target – Lady Marveno.

"Tabléyét!" the frenzied fortune teller gasped. Her entire nervous system suffered a thunderstorm of confusion, anger and angst. The irises of her eyes spun like a circular saw, triggered by the air of overloaded tension.

As if time had been slowed down, the hooded mercenary ambushed the commotion. Smelling of burnt roses, his cloak bloated out what little light was pouring out from the chandelier above. His fast-moving hands, gloved in black metal, seized the flying knife before it almost impaled S'Awira's heart, tampering with its trajectory mid-flight. The dagger safely lodged itself into a wall.

Another rammed into the elf girl in vain. His body contacted hers accidentally and slid out into the balcony.

"S'Awira!" her husband yelled. Wishing to reunite with her, he was still cautious about Marveno's unidentified range of spells. His business with Marveno was forfeit already. Escaping was the final task remaining for him and his wife. But he didn't wish to try any leaps of faith; he needed to undertake only the actions with a high probability of survival.

E'Norm collapsed to the ground out of exhaustion. Only Tablýét and L'Esson stood within reasonable proximity to interact with Lady Marveno. Their aura of vengeful fury clashing with the opposing elf's personal wrath. Their breaths freed fragments of their spirit. The spirit of good.

Two against one.

Weapons against magic.

"I... I'm sorry, mistress," Another apologized immediately. "I was about to stop the knife. Don't remember what happened. But... Uh... S'Awira? S'Awira!"

S'Awira had ejected her consciousness from the intensity of too many stressful activities gnawing at her mind, squeezed in such a short packet of time. Her fainted body lay like a soulless doll resting on the relatively rough flooring of the balcony. Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, her eyelids were shut.

*'Ah, even when you're not responsive to my words, your grace shelters your beauty so perfectly,'* Another stepped away from her, resisting multiple desires. Envy crawled behind his ears. Lust tried to cover his eyes. *'I keep forgetting I'm no longer L'Esson. It's sad. Sad that I cannot snatch away his rights nor his life. Both would motivate you to weep. I wouldn't want that, o queen of my dreams.'*

He sighed, contemplating on the short-lived frame of time he had spent with her at the first encounter, back when he was still in possession of her husband's body.

Meanwhile, the tides of battle met at their epicenter.

The weapon Tabléyét wielded was no ordinary one.

Marveno wasn't fearful anymore.

"So you finally broke your own contract?" the magic caster justly accused. "Do you know its consequences on your career? Your entire life's work?"

"You're a bad bitch, you know that Marveno?" the bounty hunter shifted his cape over his shoulder. "My life is my own to command. The gods will grow old before they fully list every sin, every crime and every curse you've injected into lives both guilty and innocent!"

"Truth is already walking on your lips, little bear," she mocked him with irony. "But yet, you refuse to guide it in the right direction."

Tabléyét paused, aligning his weapon parallel to his field of vision.

"I no longer believe in truth, old friend," Tabléyét confessed, his mask hiding away his emotions and disguising his intentions. "Not if truth is the reason behind peoples' suffering."

"So you abandoned your profession to become a saint? Ditching gold for bold? A pleasantly funny decision," Marveno passively prepared a new spell. "From someone who's about to go missing forever!"

Another entered the room just in time to witness the climax of a fiery argument. But his gifted eyes saw something which the others present couldn't. He rushed into the line of fire.