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# Chapter 1

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## <The Winter>

It was a usual day in the month of January. The air outside was bone chilling yet people were going to their work as usual, children playing in the park. The trees lost their leaves leaving nothing but their remains, the birds are nowhere to be seen and the sky was empty, the weather was cloudy and dull. That's when I noticed the sacred tree was left to its only leaf while laying on my bed and the beeping of the machines continue.

"Maybe it will fall today.", I wondered as the clock rang and within few seconds the nurses came in my room with usual medicines and reports. The smell of antiseptics, medicines still disgusted me, even after a month. The nurses came by my side, smile politely and gave the same report to me, "You're stable for now", Stable? As if that meant anything. I'm just a patient number to them—another one in a line of rooms and then I asked the same question to them, "have they came yet?" and in response I always get the same answer, "No sir. No one has come or requested upon you".

Actually, I've been admitted to the hospital for past one month for chronic heart failure, after all it was the fruit for years of dedicating my life to smoking. I knew it already that this day would come someday and I have to pay for it. I was taken to the hospital immediately when I suddenly collapsed at my work place one day. My coworkers called for an ambulance and in the mean time they informed my relatives but when I came to my senses, I found myself in this bed, I saw none. My colleagues told me that no one has picked up the phone when they called from my number and even when someone picked up, but upon hearing my name, they immediately ended the call. I guess it was my fault for not informing them beforehand that I've no relative nor any such kind of people left in my life anymore. I didn't feel much when they told me no one had come to visit me either. After all, what's one more disappointment? It was as if I'd already prepared for this—for the quiet, the solitude, the absence of anyone who cared. Doctors told me that my heart is dying and there's no chance of survival even if transplant or surgery is done. One of my colleague, rather now a friend of mine after you spent years with them, shaded into tears

after hearing I've no chance of surviving, while I shaded none. Doctors told me to remain admitted in the hospital if in case condition worsens.

The first day there were a number of people who were visiting me, but as the days turned into weeks, the count of such people started to decline and after a week or so, the count became zero. Even until a few days ago, they used to text me or phone call me, asking me how's my health even though knowing that I'm eventually dying, and in response I always told them monotonously that I'm feeling good day by day. We all knew that was a lie. Actually, they resented me for leaving my portion of work to them. Though they can't say it to me directly but I could feel they were furious on me and just chanting, "just die, you good for nothing".

But in response of people leaving me to die alone, didn't moved me at all. I've already experienced the feeling of people leaving me so many times at my crucial points that even I've lost count of it. I've already thought of this day so many times and played it in my mind that I'm wondering if even this time it is real or not. I'm an overthinker, yes, I think a lot. A lot means so much that I could predict someone's next move or predict the upcoming future just by thinking only. But even after being so cautious with step, every move of my life, I sighed heavily while wondering when and where did everything go wrong. A nurse still present in my room, while noting down the medicines and writing the reports asked me, "No visitors today, huh?". I replied with numbness, "No. There won't be any. Not tomorrow either", looking at my face she replied with a smile, "you never know". I didn't reply her back nor it looked like she was waiting for any, but in my head, I said, "I do".

She left the room as everyone leaves, leaving me alone with these machines and the wires constraining in every part of my body. The outside looked the same as in the morning. The cloudy weather and an absent of a clock in my room makes it difficult to say how much physical time has passed. But lately, I have been feeling it—something just beyond the edge of perception, like a shadow that disappeared when I looked too closely near the half-opened door of my room or the corner of the window at the night. A strange chill that settled deep in my bones, different from the cold of winter. The smell of the room seems different than other days and the outside was way too ominous looking. I couldn't explain how that feeling was but, I could anticipate someone's coming closer to me or rather a coldness is engulfing me with each tick of clock. I noticed a flower vase beside me, containing yellow dandelions

and a note hanging from it. I didn't have any energy nor any interest to see who kept it. I wondered maybe the nurses have kept it while turning to other side of the bed facing towards the door. The medicines began to take effect, pulling me into drowsiness once again. My feet felt cold, and a dull ache settled in my chest. But just my eyelids closed, I saw it again—a dark figure, standing high, just outside my door. But without overthinking about it, I let the heaviness of sleep take me.

I don't know how long I slept, it felt like I was sleeping for eternity when I woke up, but when I woke up it was already pitch dark outside. The light in my room was kind of dull and night lamps were on. I wasn't feeling too well. The coldness had crawled further up my legs. I couldn't move my legs and a slight ache in my heart continued. It felt like with every heart beat I'm losing my life. Suddenly I heard a high pitch, ominous sound just outside window. It felt like someone was screaming at top of their lungs. I tried to identify the source of the sound but couldn't move well therefore found nothing. Before I could react to the sound or think about it, the nurses and a doctor again barged in my room. They lit up the room and started doing their respective jobs. The doctor looking annoyed and, in a hurry, with a straight face and avoiding eye contact asked me, "So how are you feeling today?". I monotonously again replied, "good". While he was seeing my reports and prescribing medicines, I was busy thinking what sound was that and aren't they getting the foul smell in the room. I hesitatingly asked the nurse beside me about the foul smell and the screeching sound a moment ago. But in response she looked so confused and said, "what smell and sound are you talking about, sir? We all were present at the adjacent room only. We didn't hear any. Don't think about it very much". Though she looked confused and trying to uplift me, but her face seemed terrified, and her voice was shaking as if she knew something. Walking a few metres away from me, she immediately whispered something to the other nurses and upon completion of their gossip, they left the room without any further ado, leaving me alone once again with my dinner served in front of me. It felt disturbing. "Why did they leave the room in such a hurry and looked so terrified?" Each time while leaving, they gossiped with me until I finish my meal. But today it was different. The foul smell has already left the room and I didn't notice it till now. I started sweating just by thinking all that. I consoled myself by thinking, "Old age has really left an impact upon me or maybe spending so many days alone in this huge hospital while fighting for my life has really made me insane." I guess I'm losing the grip from reality after all. I tried

to eat the food but hospitals food isn't too tasty and also without any physical activity my appetite was below average. I ate half portion of the food and kept the remaining in the table next to me. The flower vase with yellow dandelions again came into my sight. I almost forgot that they were present here from the morning. I tried to reach for the flowers but as soon as I elongated my hands to reach the vase, the nurse from the morning came inside my room, and without any facial expression nor any sign of empathy or kindness for a patient, she just handed me the pills for the night, took the plate switched off the main light, turned on the night lamps and left the room leaving the door half closed. It felt like a storm and I was just too surprised to react. Each and every day for past one month, they always tried to engage in small conversation with me, console me and always said good night before leaving the room. Their tone always sounded so optimistic but today it was so different which stroked me. Just as my eyelids grew heavy and the medicine tugged at my consciousness, I heard it again—the high pitch sound but this time it sounded like someone is crying just outside my door and the foul smell just kicked in once again. The smell was so gross it was making me sick. My heart thudded painfully in my chest as I forced my eyes open. The door creaked, inching wider. The lights now completely went off in my room, leaving the corridors lights on. I saw someone peeking from the door. The lights were in the hallway, facing completely opposite to the figure peeking from the door. It wasn't a nurse nor a doctor and I couldn't understand a thing. I tried to scream but no sound came out of my throat. I tried to move but my body has already given up on me. I held my breath, waiting for someone to step through. The shadow entered, but the thing that entered wasn't a human.

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## Chapter 2

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### <The Arrival>

As the shadow crossed the door, it moved with unnatural fluidity as it's like gliding towards me without a sound. Its red eyes kept a permanent impact on my heart. My heart pounded wildly, its weak and irregular rhythm including a striking pain on the left side making each beat feel like I'm coming towards the end of my life. But just as the shadow drew closer to me, it disappeared just like it vanished into the thin air. The door remained wide open and the lights on the hallway the only source of light till now finally went off.

I tried to catch my breath, but I couldn't. I couldn't move, more specifically it felt like my entire body made of flesh and blood has turned to stone. I tried to calm myself. The machines beside me were beeping so frequently that it sounded like it was a continuous spectrum of sound. I tried to grasp the situation I'm in but it felt like the room including me were kept in an absolute nothingness. It was pitch dark except the small lights peeking through the machines which didn't help the situation at all. I confused the direction I'm facing and lost complete track of direction and orientation. The shadow itself didn't haunt me so much but the sensation of being helpless, cut off from my sense of sight and complete paralysation terrified me. I again tried to scream at top of my lungs to call for help, but it was futile. I was screaming in my head, "what is this? what is this? what is this? what is this? what is this? what is this? what is this?"

A few minutes has passed on while I was laying on my bed in complete helplessness. I wondered if I'm dead or am I hallucinating. I thought so this is what death feels like. A memory rather a self-regret from the past strokes me. "So, this what she felt when she died? How much pain and terror did she suffered just for me? Did she deserve all of that? Of course she deserves it, after everything she has done", I began wondering. "Maybe my last perception before death was you after all".

While submerged in a bottomless dark pit, except my sight, my other senses began to thrive and adapt and I could feel through my skin that the air density in the room began to thick like an unwelcoming guest is present in my room. The foul smell like decaying of a dead animal has completely left the room.

Suddenly a faint ray of light fell on my bed rather on my laps. I looked to the right. It was the moonlight which finally broke through the clouds that was peeking through the window. Though the light was faint, the absolute darkness sharpened my sight, allowing me to see everything with unsettling clarity. I looked outside the window; the sky was clear, the stars gazing and it was a full moon night. The sacred tree outside the window still has that one leaf left and it looked like the branches were twinkling due to the mist.

Before I could even take a deep breath, I saw something rather a tall creature with red glowing murderous eyes with a scythe in the left hand, standing in front of my bed. The air grew impossibly cold across the room and by the sight of such a mysterious yet terrifying creature, I couldn't keep myself calm at all. I tried to move, but I couldn't, I tried to call for help, but I my throat kept frozen. Whatever stunt I tried to pull off, it was a complete failure. I was struggling like a prey who got captivated. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I gave up. This was it—my fate. I gasped for air, but none came. The machines beside me beeped frantically, their alarms blending into a continuous hum. I have always wondered how death will be and what it feels like, but now a shadow standing in front of me finally gave me the answer of my long-term question. I closed my eyes, acknowledging that my life was nothing but a mere failure of mankind. Minutes passed or maybe hours, time has lost it's meaning in front of death itself.

"Calm down." The voice echoed across the room, carrying a heavy authority that was both soothing and terrifying, like a command from the gods themselves—unyielding, impossible to defy by none.

The pressure across the room changed drastically, but it wasn't just the air; it was like a crushing soul pressure. It felt like one wrong move would mean my head is severed from my body in an instant. The room drenched in bloodlust, thick as a suffocating fog that pressed my neck; choking me, crawling slowly towards the floor from my bed like a predator is circling across its prey.

My mind remained a void, frozen in utter terror until a cold sweat travelling down my face falls into my hand, snapping me back to this reality. With every ounce of courage I could muster, I forced my eyes open, praying, begging that it was all a dream. But as my vision cleared, I knew it was the harsh reality. The creature was still standing in front of me with the same expression as before.

I tried to look up, but the creature towered over me, its form stretching impossibly high, casting a shadow that swallowed the room. I felt small, powerless, worthless, like an insect beneath its looming presence. Yet this time something was different. Fear and terror didn't cloud my thoughts, rather a cautious awareness took hold. The creature's words which echoed in the room, felt like a magical spell that soothed my mind, leaving me strangely calm yet confused. This time I took a closer inspection of the thing standing upright in the room. It was slender, towering over 15 feet, looked like a living shadow, gripping a scythe in its left hand. The moonlight finally fell upon the creature revealing more of its characteristics. The creature was tall and slender as I predicted, but it looked like the creature wore a tattered black robe hiding all of its body including its face, leaving only the red glowing eyes. Two horns protruded from its head, curving slightly in opposite directions. Though it seemed to stand tall, I noticed it was slightly hunched, leaning forward. The scythe in its hand appeared ancient, crafted from what looked like the branch of a long dead tree, its surface worn and threads hanging from it. Attached to its end, was a long-curved blade, gleaming ominously in the faint moon light. The edge of the blade sparkled like a diamond, sharp enough to slice through the space and time and the very fabric of life itself. At the tip of the blade where the curve ended, it glowed with a faint but glistening charm, giving it an almost otherworldly weapon. It was a weapon both beautiful and terrifying, the perfect tool to reap the unforgiven souls.

Though the light was faint and my sight wasn't that clear, but my other senses didn't lie to me to understand what is this. The creature wasn't a mere hallucination nor a nightmare brought by fear and medication, rather it was a Harbinger of Death, an actual grim reaper standing in front of me. There was no more fog clouding my mind nor mere confusion. The truth was sharp clear; I was staring into the eyes of death itself, and it has come for my soul this time.

I smiled a little, finally accepting my fate. There was no more fear, shaking or pain in my body. It felt like I'm free from every pain in this world. I was terrified yet I tried to open my hands towards the grim reaper, tears flowing down my cheeks like a mother welcoming her child.

"So, you finally came to your senses?", again a voice echoed around the room, deep and reverberating. Taking a pause, the silence was broken again, "You aren't going to die so easily, worry not", the voice continued, each word

crushing my soul into millions of pieces. Another pause, more unsettling than the last, before the final words dropped like a hammer:

“Rather... the bill comes due”.