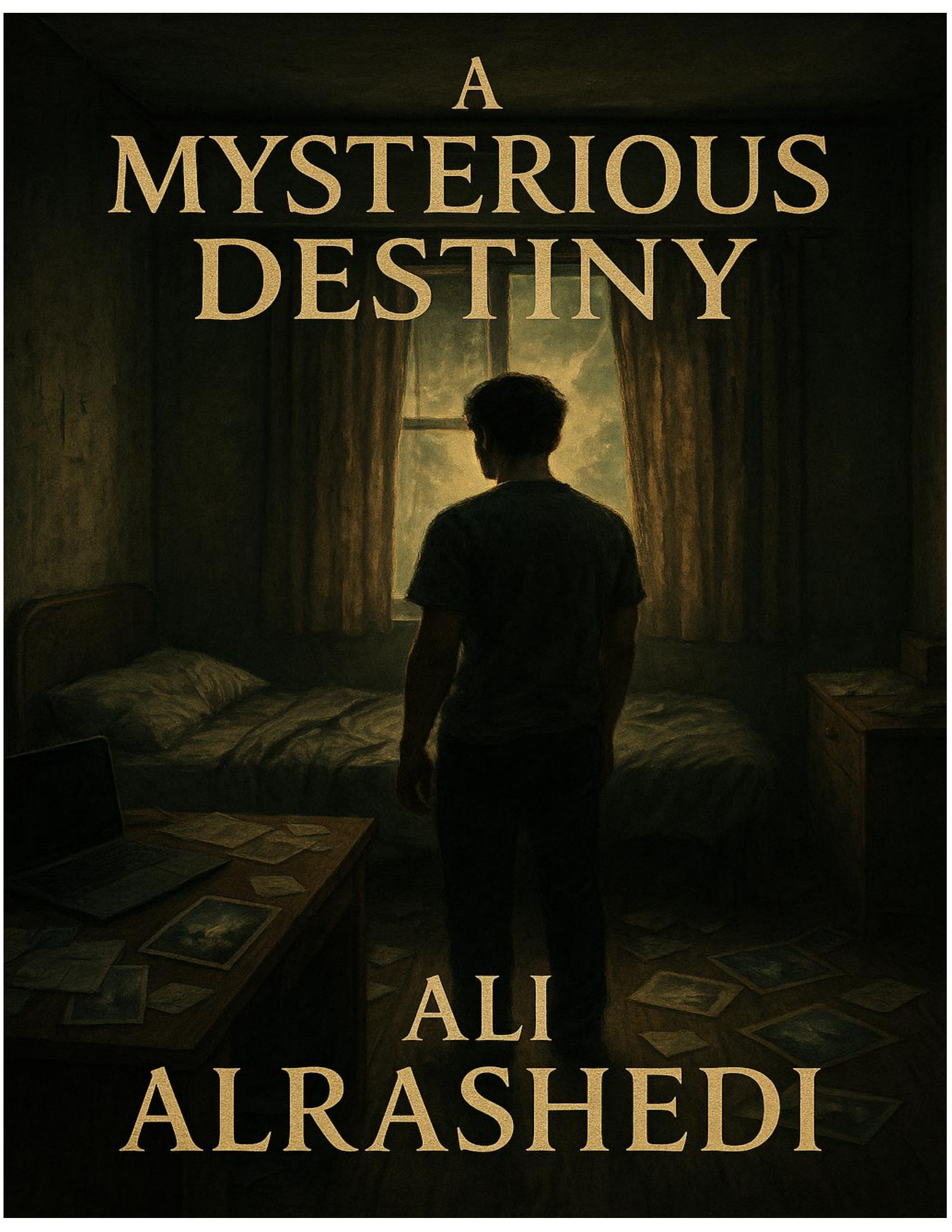


A man in a dark room looking out a window at a bright sky, with papers and a laptop on a table in the foreground.

A MYSTERIOUS DESTINY

ALI
ALRASHEDI

Prologue

A mysterious call rang on the phone; I was tempted to respond, yet I ignored it. Well, I continued killing zombies in this game. Soon, another call from the same number came in. I decided to decline the call, so whoever is calling me repeatedly would get the message that I don't want to talk to them. I received a text message from the number asking me to call back. I ignored it, too, feeling too depressed about what is happening in my miserable life as a fresh graduate from university with a bachelor's degree in IT. Not that I wanted to study; I just saw that I could get paid for studying this degree. I left my phone, went to the kitchen, and got myself snacks to munch on.

Feeding my depression with food seemed to help me forget about my miserable life. All because of this IT nonsense, they say study IT; it's fun, you will love it, and enjoy it. You get paid a lot, they said. Looking at myself, did I really want to be an IT professional? A thought came to my mind: Do I have to do something about myself? Am I satisfied with where I am, barely having enough to pay my bills and loan with what's left of my money?

I head back to my room, staring at my desk—just a screen, a chair, and a computer. Everything reeks of bad memories. That entire corner feels like a graveyard of failure and wasted time.

I decide to hit the sack. But first, I scroll through social media, letting my miserable life waste away one swipe at a time. Everyone's out there enjoying their summer, like they're the protagonists of some story... and I'm just watching the anime adaptation of their lives.

Part of me wants to murder them, take their place, and live their lives instead.

If only I could do more. I love money but hate working for it.

And with those final thoughts about my miserable life, I let sleep take over.

The alarm rang, playing my favorite soundtrack from this anime, I watched, Death Note. I kept on snoozing the alarm, to the point that its muscle memory it takes another hour to wake up from the alarm I had set.

I dragged myself from the bed and headed to the bathroom, doing my usual routine, which involves removing waste from my body, washing my face, and reminding myself of this miserable life I am living, rotting away.

After completing my morning routine, I order myself breakfast with what remains of my money. And open LinkedIn, hoping I'd get a job that pays well for what I do. Which is literally nothing, given that I don't know how I have this many certifications and job experiences, my CV makes me look like an entirely different person. After searching for and applying for jobs I hated, the doorbell rang.

I assumed it was my breakfast, so I yelled and told the driver to leave the food on the door. I'll pick it up, thank you. As lazy as I was, I literally called my neighbor and asked if they could bring me the food into my room, and I would share it with them. My neighbor knocked on the door and came into a disgusting apartment with a calm tone, saying: Don't you have anything better to do Ali? It hasn't even been a week since I helped you clean this place. It already looks like a jungle "It doesn't matter," I said. "Just come sit by the bed and let's eat."

A thought came to me while I was eating: my neighbor has truly seen it all. From the heights of "Top Ali" to the depths of "Bottom-of-the-Sea Filth Ali," yet she still has hope for me. It was awkward eating in silence, so I broke the ice by asking her a tough "would you rather" question. "Hey Gem," (that's what I call her, since I'm bad with names) "would you rather have a life where nothing goes your way, but you have to burn yourself out to make it go your way? Or have a great livelihood, but lack an objective to keep you striving and pushing yourself to be the best?"

"Uuhhmmmm," she mused, "this is a bit tough, but I'll choose the first one." Then, "Woah, Ali, this question is deep! I didn't expect it from you. Are you sure you're alright? Are you financially stable? Do you need help, or is there something I can do? Just say the word."

"Thanks, Gem," I replied, "but you've already done plenty. You helped me tidy up my room and found me my first big job, which I loved. Thanks to you, I've achieved a lot. I'm grateful to have a person like you as my neighbor." I continued, "Furthermore, you helped me get over the thought of committing suicide, with your existen..."

"STOP, Ali! WHAT DID YOU SAY?! SUICIDE?! NO, I DON'T ALLOW IT! Now I'm forced to stay with you. I need you to get out of your home. Go out, talk to your friends, be alive!"

"But they don't talk to me anymore," I stuttered.

"So be it! I'll be the one talking to them and hanging out with you!" she declared.

Things were wrapping up. I'd finished my meal, and somehow, I'd managed to make my neighbor worry about me even more, making things feel worse. I truly felt miserable. As Gem was cleaning up and tidying my room before she left, she said, "Ali, this might be the last time I stay with you. I just received a call from my dream company, and they offered me the role I wanted! They also told me they'll pay for my meals, flight, and my apartment rent. I'll do my best to put in a good word for you; hopefully, you might even land a job at my dream company."

I stood up with excitement. "GEM, that's amazing news! I'm so happy for you, I genuinely am. I kept praying for you to land your dream job, and now you've earned it! Thank you, Gem, I will truly treasure all these conversations we've had in the past and won't forget about you."

"Thank you, Ali, your words mean a lot to me. I have nothing but flattering feelings for what you said. Just do me this favor while I'm away: if you ever find yourself in deep trouble, or in this

depressing state, send me a message or call. If I can, I will help you. This is the end of my chapter in your life, and a new one begins for me."

Gem shut the door and left my apartment. With my newfound motivation, I used all my connections and put in effort to land a job I might like. My new sense of joy was now the bed, not the desk with my computer. I received a call from that weird number again from the other day, and since I was in a good mood, I answered it, thinking it might be a job opportunity for me.

"Hello, how's everything with you? This is Ali speaking to you."

A voice on the other end, urgent and hushed, cut me off. "Ali, you have to listen to me. I won't take much of your time, but this matter is important. In the upcoming days, you will be receiving calls from different numbers like this, but it won't be me speaking."

"And who might you be?" I asked, confused.

"Shhh... that's not important. Just listen to what I have to say," the voice hissed. "As I was saying, you will be receiving calls from weird numbers. Don't answer them, I repeat, DO NOT ANSWER THEM..."

*Hangs up the call

"That was a weird call, probably some random scammer, or maybe a prank call by kids." My phone vibrated, and I saw the low battery warning. "Oh crap, my phone, it's going to die." I quickly put it on charge and went to watch TV, having nothing else to do.

Scrolling through Amazon Prime, I noticed something strange. "That's weird, I've never heard of this show. Might be a glitch." Nonetheless, I clicked on it to see its details. Just then, the doorbell rang.

I answered the door. "Oh, hi... remind me of your name again."

"It's your landlord, you idiot! I'm here to play this game with you. If you win against me, you won't pay rent for this month."

"And if I lose?" I asked.

"You'll pay me the rent due today, right after the game."

"But it's too much of a risk for me," I complained. "I don't have enough to pay you in full."

"Just play the game, Ali," he insisted, a glint in his eye.

The landlord shuffled what appeared to be a deck of cards. "Listen to me closely," he began, explaining the rules while shuffling. "I will explain this once, so pay attention. The rules are as follows:

1. No cheating.
2. You are allowed to have four cards in your hand.
3. All cards must be of different suits."

While the landlord was rattling off the rules, I must have dozed off for a moment. That's all I remembered, and it brought back a funny memory from when I was a kid. "So, Ali, do you understand the rules?" he asked.

"Huh, what? Yes, yes, for sure I remember and understand," I stammered, pretending I'd caught every word. These weren't a normal deck of cards, though, that much was clear. But anyway, I played with what I could remember.

The landlord played a card and then said, "Just give me a moment, nature calls."

"Okay, you can go," I replied, a bit relieved.

When he left to take care of business, I dropped my cards, then slyly picked one up from my hand and took a card from my landlord's pile. I placed them side by side. It looked like a portal formed from the photos on the cards. "Woah, that's cool," I thought.

And then... blank. Just blank. All I could see was black.

Chapter 1

Did I die? Did I suffer a heart attack? Is this truly the end for me? No, I refuse to believe it. My life had just started. I remember hearing something from The Sopranos: "You probably don't even hear it when it happens." Was that what it meant? That I simply died without realizing it? I don't even know what caused it. Just an abrupt onset of blackness. If I am dead, then how is it that I can still think and hear my own thoughts?

Something was removed from my face, and a sudden burst of light struck my eyes. I heard a voice from behind me, demanding me to walk and nudging me forward. Still disoriented by what had just occurred, I stumbled onward. My hands were shackled, connected by chains to my legs. Wait, what? I'm shackled? I just noticed. Guards marched me along, continuously pushing me. I saw a set of wooden steps ahead. I walked and stepped onto them. The air filled with screams of joy, and I saw a rope directly in front of me. Hold on a minute—a terrifying thought struck me: these chains, guards pushing me, the command to walk, wooden steps, a rope. They are going to hang me! I screamed, "Please, someone help me! What's happening? I don't want to die! Please, anyone!" All hope evaporated. The crowd was thrilled, the guards relentlessly shoving me. The executioner began to place the rope around my neck. The speaker raised his hand, and the crowd fell into silence. "Today, we gather to punish the most hated criminal," he boomed, "the one responsible for countless corpses—those he stepped on, killed, chopped, the women he murdered. The brave men who paid with their lives will have died in vain unless we hang this filth, kill him, burn him, and leave nothing but ashes. He does not deserve any last words, just death."

I yelled, "Please, someone help! I am not who you think I am! I just got here!" Guards hit me, forcing a piece of cloth into my mouth. All I heard next was the pull of a lever. This is it. I'm in hell. I will suffer for eternity and die repeatedly forever. Soon, blackness enveloped me again. This time, I awoke, but I was not shackled. Instead, I held a piece of paper in my right hand, bearing what appeared to be some kind of message.

Chapter 2

The paper in my hand said: "Target: Clive the Butcher, Bounty: 300 gold coins." All I had was this paper and a big question mark. Would I die again? Do I want to pursue the bounty? And what time period was this? I saw flat grasslands with a house far off, about 10 kilometers away. I decided to go there first.

Upon arrival to the house and knocked. "Hello, anyone here?" An old man's voice snapped, "Go away, we don't want trouble." I quickly said, "Sir, I just need to know where the closest village or town is." The old man barked back, "Five fields east from here, you'll find the main road. Now leave me alone, kid." "Five fields?" I didn't get that part, but "east" was enough. I headed east, hoping to find a village and learn more about this strange time.

After walking for what felt like forever, I finally saw signs of people: a small town. I ran towards it. I saw what looked like a tavern, with two people who seemed like wizards – they looked funny. I went inside. A few drunk men were at the bar. I asked the man behind the bar, "Is there any work, or a way I can get money?" He flicked his eyes towards a corner table where a few more drunkards were passed out. Should I rob them while they slept? I'd already "died" once, so what else could happen? I quietly went to them and slowly took their gold. They had a lot of money, gold and silver coins, and other valuable things. I tried to take everything, but the feeling in the bar changed; people were starting to look at me. I took what I could, then went back to the bartender. I put down three gold coins. "One for you," I said, "two gold coins for everyone's drinks. Keep the rest." Suddenly, everyone's eyes lit up. "Free drinks!" they cheered. I left the bar with a good amount of money to start over.

I looked around, to hopefully get some essentials. I bought new clothes and then visited a swordsmith, where I purchased two swords. Next, I got myself a backpack and went to the general store for some food and supplies. Finally, I headed to the stables to buy a horse, something to aid my travels. I asked the stable hand, "What are some of your cheaper horses? I just need one to help me travel and gallop when necessary." He replied, "Ah, a new customer, always welcome around here. Can you tell me how much you have, or how much you're willing to pay?" I checked my money: zero gold coins, but thirty-five silver coins. "Twenty silver coins is my limit," I stated. The horse trader's expression changed. "The least you'll need is one gold, otherwise get out of here, you poor filth!" He attempted to push me out of the shop. "I will leave," I warned, "but don't push me." He kept pushing. I froze, my gaze locked on him. "Touch me one more time, and you won't see the dawn of tomorrow." The horse trader was unimpressed. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Leave this place. Your threats are as empty as your looks. You don't intimidate me. Leave now."

I left the stables, fuming. I would not be treated like this. "Just you wait," I muttered. I circled his stables, stealthily gathering information, conducting reconnaissance. I waited until midnight when the whole town was asleep. I snuck into the stables and searched for valuables. While looting, I found an important letter addressed to the horse trader. It indicated he would be receiving a new batch of horses from Westville. A brilliant idea popped into my head: I'd take some gold coins now and intercept the shipment. This plan might not be perfect, but he had thoroughly angered me. I took around 600 gold coins, an amount he would undoubtedly notice the next day. And I would also get myself a lovely horse. I left the stables, my heist a resounding success.

I returned to the tavern, hoping the bartender was still awake. I needed to ask him about Westville. I dropped a couple of silver coins on the counter and ordered orange juice. "So, any idea where or what Westville is?" I asked, sliding another silver coin his way.

"Westville is a horse trader," he explained, "known for his great horses, which range from about 200 to 900 gold coins each."

"Go on," I prompted, sliding a few more coins.

"I heard from our local horse trader that Westville will be arriving in town tomorrow at dawn," he continued.

"Is there a way I can meet Westville before he reaches town?" I asked.

The bartender coughed a bit. "Maybe there is, maybe not."

"Fine, here, take four silver coins. This should be more than enough," I said.

"Yes, there is a way," he replied. "If you go ten fields north of this town, you might reach him."

"Thank you, sir, for your help," I said, leaving one more silver coin for him before I left.

I continued my journey north of town, and the bartender's information was accurate. Soon, I saw Westville with a large carriage of horses heading my way. When I reached him, I yelled, "Horse trader Westville, can I get a horse from you?"

He stopped his convoy and approached me. "Hey there, fellow traveler, how can I help?"

"Sorry for bothering you at this time and stopping you from your travels," I said, "but may I buy a horse from you?"

"Depends on how much we're speaking, young traveler," he replied.

"550 gold coins, would that be fine?" I offered.

He smiled but said, "You should buy it from the local horse trader; I can't get much here." I then showed him everything I had, all the gold and valuables I could offer in exchange for a horse. He

stared at my gold and valuables. "Here, I thought you were joking about your gold and valuables. If you give me all your gold, you can have this fine stallion. It will do whatever you want. It's fast, it packs a punch, beautiful, and easy to control."

"Deal," I said, handing him the gold I had stolen. I got a free horse out of it. A great deal in my book.

Now I was finally ready. I had food, water, armor and clothes, protection, and, last but not least, transportation – a big checkmark there. I headed towards the forest with my new horse, hoping to rest a bit. Upon arrival, I took a nap. I slept for almost five hours without realizing it until animal screams woke me up. Strangely enough, the tree I was under had a great view of the forest. There seemed to be an unnatural open area where trees had fallen, almost like deforestation. I packed my stuff, got up, and went to investigate it.

Chapter 3

The horse was incredibly fast, almost like the cars back home. Is that why they say horsepower? Because the more horses you have, the more speed and power you gain? I still do not know the answer to this question. Marching towards the fallen branches, getting closer and closer to the center of the forest and reaching the open area, I stumbled upon the most magnificent creature I had ever seen. It looked like it came from a fantastical dream I had; It was as if she had descended from the heavens, leaving a trail of wonder in her wake, and the very air around her whispered tales of enchantment. Her presence was so striking, it felt like a gentle shockwave, stirring the leaves and vines around her, as if nature itself was captivated by her radiance.

I didn't want her appearance to let my guard down. So, I approached her with caution, knowing that at any moment I could be killed. "Hello, do you understand me? Do you know what I am saying?" I moved carefully closer to her without showing any hostility. Step by step, closer and closer, like a hunter moving in to strike its prey. Just as I almost grasped her, an explosion erupted in the forest, causing her to go on guard and protect herself from everyone and everything. She bolted out of there. Luckily, my horse was nearby, and I climbed on it and raced at full speed in the direction she sprinted, trying to capture her before anyone or anything could take her from me.

Chasing her with my stallion, I barely kept her in sight; she was incredibly fast. Soon, she was nowhere to be seen. I'd lost her, hadn't I? But I did find a small piece of cloth she'd dropped before vanishing. Now I need to find a wizard or a witch, someone who can help me track her last location.

I'm currently on top of a hill. The only way down and out of this area is through a cave, which also helps me avoid any unwanted trouble with people nearby.

Down into the cave we go. As I entered, it was pitch black—I could barely see anything in front of me. I took careful steps, fear gripping me. Is this a good idea? Should I just leave? All these doubts flooded my mind. I was deep inside a cave, and my stallion had barely fit. I decided to let him go. This was my own venture now, heading deeper with the hope of finding something useful or another exit.

I ventured deeper into the cave, my sword ready to strike anything that might appear from the pure darkness. No light at all. The further I went, the more eerie noises I heard. It felt like I was walking into a wolf's den. Despite my fear, I tried to push through.

"Yuck, disgusting, is this... turd?" I muttered. "Oh god no, it's disgusting!" The smell got even worse over on this side, and I nearly threw up. I tried going the other way, where the smell wasn't as strong.

"Woah, what's this?" I whispered. A skeleton? A corpse? A necromancer wizard skeleton? I poked it with my sword, just in case it was alive. Nothing. The skeleton crumbled, and a book fell out from under its robes. I poked the remains again, just to be sure it wasn't playing dead. Then, I carefully picked up the book. I couldn't tell what it was about or even its title in the dark.

I moved on, away from the awful smell behind me. After a while, I finally saw a dim light source in the cave. The smell of moss and algae told me I was probably near a river or maybe an exit. I took the chance to rest a bit by the light.

I looked at the book I'd found. The title was "Advanced Summoning Magic: Complex." Cool, magic! But "advanced"? Why not a basic or beginner's guide? "Useless book," I thought, but then again, it might be worth a fortune. I could sell it for gold...

"Oh crap!" I suddenly remembered my horse. I ran back to the entrance, led my horse into the cave with me, and we moved on slowly but carefully. More light shone near the end of the tunnel. Freedom at last! Could I finally leave this scary place? I approached the light slowly and carefully, and then I heard someone screaming...

End of chapter

"Huh, where am I?" I tried moving my hand, but nothing. My leg? Nothing. I opened my eyes and saw myself captured, tied to a rock. It wouldn't budge. I couldn't move it. "Help, anyone, someone help me!"

Someone approached. "So, you are awake. Good. Now tell me, how did you find this place, and where is Paul? How did you find this book? Answer me now."

"Now isn't that great," I retorted. "How about this: I'll answer all your questions, in exchange for my things back and my freedom? How about that? Fair trade."

"Silence, prisoner," the voice snapped. "You demand nothing. You have no right to ask for anything, much less your freedom."

"I tried being nice with you, senior guard," I pushed back. "But with that attitude, you won't go anywhere in life."

"Prisoner, stop it! You are playing with fire," he warned. "If you say one more word, I will come in and personally beat you to death."

"Fine, I'll be quiet for now," I conceded. I needed to think. How could I leave this place, or at least get information from the guard? I was stuck and chained, with almost no way to move. Hmm, this rock might be useful if the guard released me in the cell. Maybe I could ask him to let me move just a bit to stretch. How bad could things go? Let's try it.

"Uh, guard," I said, trying to sound apologetic. "I'm sorry for what I said moments ago, but I really need to use the bathroom. I can't hold it in any longer, please, I'm begging you."

"Silence, prisoner, your time to do your duty will come," he replied.

"But guard, I can't! Do you want to see an adult doing it to himself, number one and two? Please, just let me be free for a bit in the cell." He fell for it! "Yes!" I thought, "Slowly I will gain my freedom, and just you wait. Guard, you won't even see it coming."

"Fine," he grumbled. "You are allowed to be free in your cell for 30 minutes. After that, I will have to chain you again."

"That's plenty," I thought, a wide grin spreading across my face internally. "Hahahahaha, now you will see what the great Ali can achieve!"

The guard unchained me, and now I was free to explore and find ways to escape my cell for 30 minutes. That was more than enough time. I carefully looked around the cell. The roof seemed a bit damaged, but I doubted I could escape that way. There were lots of rocks, good ones in fact. With enough force, I might be able to knock out the guard or put up a decent fight. Perfect, a slippery floor from my earlier "accident" would make him slip, then boom—the rock on his head, and then freedom.

"Your time is up! Stand furthest to the back and face the wall," the guard called out. I stood there and faced the wall, and just as I expected, he slipped! With my speed, I grabbed the rock, smashed it on his head, and then locked him in his cell.

That's what I hoped would happen. But in reality, he called me towards the cell so he could chain me first, restricting my movement a bit. Then he entered the cell. He did slip, and I slipped with him, falling over him with the chains tangled around his neck. It was a fierce struggle. He struck me first, trying to push me away. I barely managed to brawl with him, keeping the chains tight around his neck, forming a loop. I squeezed with every muscle I had, yearning for my life over his. And then he stopped resisting. He was just a corpse now.

I looted him for the keys, unchained myself, and left my cell. Sneaking towards the exit, I remembered my gear. I searched the area, moving quietly to avoid drawing attention. And there it was—my loot, plus extra items from other guards and prisoners, I guessed. Lucky me. I geared up, making sure I had everything. But before I left, I needed to know where I was. I searched the place

and found a couple of books about the geography of this area, and then, boom, a wall map! Just what I needed.

It seemed I was in new territory, specifically "No Man's Land." I needed to leave. I had all the information I needed, but before leaving, I took a shiny card and a piece of paper. Then I left. Where were the stables? I needed a horse. I exited the area with my stallion and rode along the road, still looking for the creature that had left me.

I continued roaming No Man's Land, looking for a place to stay and planning my next move. I encountered some travelers. "Hey, excuse me, would you mind giving me directions?" I asked.

"Yes, what do you want?" one of them replied.

"Do you happen to know a town nearby?" I inquired.

"We just left a town a while back, and we're closer to the next one now," he said. "Would you like to join us for the time being?"

"Sure," I replied. "By the way, I'm Ali. Who might you be?"

"Sorry for not introducing myself earlier," he said. "My name is Mark, and this is my friend, Clive the butcher. We go way back."

"Nice to meet both of you," I said, a strange thought forming. "Mind if I ask your purpose for traveling, Mark and Clive?" As they mumbled about their journey, a chilling realization hit me: Wasn't Clive the same Clive from the bounty paper I got when I first arrived in this world? I opened my bag and looked at the paper. It was him: Clive the Butcher. I guessed I would have to wait until nightfall before executing him.

"So, Ali, what brought you here to No Man's Land?" Mark asked.

I chuckled a bit, then replied, "I came here because I heard there was a town where I could strike gold, since their quests were easy and paid a lot. But I still haven't found it. I got lost halfway and almost got mugged and murdered for everything I had." Pffft, I had to make up a story; otherwise, they might get suspicious of me.

We rode for some time, and it started getting dark. "We should camp; it's getting dark," Mark suggested.

"Great idea, Mark," I agreed. We went off-road, set up our camp, and relaxed. Now, I just needed to wait for the right opportunity.

Mark and Clive shared their food with me out of generosity, but Clive seemed a bit worried about something. Mark ate till he could not breathe. Clive ate worriedly. I feel like he is on to me. I need this to end quickly. Mark and Clive, go to sleep I will be on guard duty. Mark happily went to sleep,

but Clive seemed a bit worried. I asked him Is there something worrying you, Clive? He said in a worried tone, few things came to mind. I am just afraid that Mark would find out the truth about me. Jackpot, so he is a butcher and killed many people, that is what I thought. Clive sometimes life could be tough but one piss can change it all you look like you held it in way too long go and relief yourself. Thanks, Ali, maybe I should talk to you more.

This was it. He'd let his guard down. Now to kill him silently without alerting Mark.

As I reached for my sword and turned around, Clive was already there, his butcher knives raised, ready to strike me down. Luckily, I managed to block it at the last second, escaping with only a light cut. Thank God Mark was a heavy sleeper; I don't know how, but he managed to sleep through all that noise.

I told Clive, "We both want to kill each other. How about this: let's do it far from here. Mark has nothing against us."

"Fine, have it your way," he agreed. We both lowered our weapons and walked some distance away. But Clive didn't anticipate this: my sword was already in my hand, ready to slash at any moment. I do believe he thought I was an honorable person; he thought wrong. I held my sword with both hands, gripping it, and thrust it behind him like a snake. The sword went through him like butter. He coughed blood, and his last words were, "Filthy rat..."

When he died, I looted him. He had a card with a photo on it, which looked like it was made of similar materials to the one I had when I first entered this world.

Nonetheless, I went back to camp and was tempted to kill Mark too. At least his death would be quick. My sword was thirsty for more; it seemed to yell, "Mark's blood! I want it!" Driven by insanity and the joy of killing Clive, I struck Mark with a quick slash to the head, and it was over. Mark and Clive were dead. No one knew. Only I did. I looted the area, took all the goodies they had, and made sure to burn their corpses so no evidence remained. Then I left the crime scene.

After some more traveling, I took out the cards I had and the piece of cloth I'd gotten from the beautiful creature way back when. The bounty card that had Clive's name on it had changed; now it showed a photo. The other card, the one I took from Clive's corpse, had a photo of a couple getting married. At first, I thought it was his wedding photo with his wife. But as I looked closer, I noticed the girl in the picture looked strangely familiar, almost like I knew her. I kept that thought in mind and continued my journey.

I finally saw it: civilization. A large city, in fact. It looked like it might even be the capital. I galloped on my stallion, and the closer I got, the happier I felt.

I reached the city gates. "Goddammit, guards," I muttered, "I'm tired, just let me in." I noticed there were two lanes. One had many people lining up, while the second had far fewer. Naturally, I chose the less crowded lane.

The guard stopped me. "Show me your merchant's card," he demanded.

"Can you repeat that, Sir Guard?" I asked.

"No merchant's card, no entry," he stated. "Otherwise, line up with the rest of the people."

I told him, "Give me a minute, let me get it out." I looked in my backpack, searching for anything that looked like a card. I found nothing. Then, I looked in my horse's pouch, and yes! I swear I have the best luck in the world. For some reason, this was never my horse; I must have accidentally taken Mark's. No wonder it felt a bit slower. I showed the card to the guard. He checked it.

"You may enter," he said. "Welcome to the great city of Ulwood. Enjoy your stay with us."

Chapter 4

Ulwood, what a funny name, Ulwood, stupid wood in the name. more like Ulstone.

Anyway, my first priority was to find an inn or a place to stay. I trotted through the city on my horse, scanning for interesting spots, and found myself at an inn near the royal castle.

I entered, and the innkeeper greeted me, "Greetings, traveler, how may I be of service?"

"I'd like to know how much you charge per night?" I asked.

"Sorry, sir, but we charge by the month, not per night," she replied.

"Hmm, well, how much per month?" I inquired.

She listed the plans:

Basic → 45 silver coins

Deluxe → 65 silver coins

VIP → 1 gold coin

Ultra VIP → 10 gold coins

"These are our prices, Sir,"

"Do these also include baths, meals, and room service?" I asked.

"Yes, Basic provides you with basic room services, whereas the higher you go in tier, the more benefits you unlock," she explained. "So, what kind of plan would you like to choose from, Sir?"

I glanced at my pouch and my money: 100 gold coins and 230 silver coins. Not too shabby. "Well then, lady, give me the best you got," I declared, placing 10 gold coins and 30 silver coins on the counter. "Ten for the Ultra VIP, and 30 silver coins—treat yourself to a fancy meal, lady."

"Thank you so much, sir! You are a generous man and an adventurer," she beamed. "Follow me, I will be your personal servant for your time with us."

"Oh, that is nice. Mind if I ask your name, sir?" she added.

"My pardon, allow me to introduce myself. I am Ali, the brave hunter and trader. And you, milady, mind if I ask?"

"I am Imra Eliyen, of the elven race," she responded.

"Nice to meet you, Imra." She guided me to my suite, and it was amazing—it felt like a five-star hotel. She gave me a tour and explained the boring details of my plan, not that I paid much attention. What really interested me was that she was an elf, probably skilled in magic.

"And with this, we conclude your room tour and explanation of your plan with us. Do you have any questions, Ali?" she asked.

"Ah yes, I do have questions, but not related to my room," I replied. "It's about you."

"Oh, you flatter me, Ali. Ask," she said.

"Promise me you won't tell anyone what I'm about to show and ask you first," I requested.

"Ali, you are creeping me out, but fine, the customer is always king. I promise not to tell anyone about this," she conceded.

"Great. Do you by any chance know a wizard or a witch that can track a person from a piece of cloth they wore?" I asked.

"Uh, that is a tricky question, Ali," she mused, "but I do know a place where you can locate its origin."

"Great. Another question: does this person on the card look familiar to you—this girl?" I asked, showing her the wedding photo.

"Hmm, she looks familiar," Imra said. "I believe this is the princess, but the princess isn't married yet."

"Great, last question," I continued, "do you know magic and how to use summoning magic?"

"I know basic elf magic," she answered, "but nothing of summoning magic."

"Well then, Imra, thank you for your time, and I hope you won't tell anyone about this, right?"

"Yes, alright. I will take my leave now. Enjoy your stay," she said, and then she was gone.

Now then, I had to plan with the information I had: the cards, the princess, and the piece of clothing. So, I figured the first thing was to try and get an audience with the princess, maybe ask her a few questions and show her the card. But how? Sneak into the tower at midnight? Too much of a risk; I might even die. A tour at the castle, hoping to make friends with a few royals and maybe get to meet the princess? Low risk, but it would take a lot of time. Ugh, all this thinking! Let me go to the wizard first and see the origin of this cloth. It might lead back to the princess, though it's still a low chance.

"Hey, Imra," I called out, "would you do me a favor and take me to the place or wizard you know?"

"Sure, follow me," she replied. Finally, my own paid "slave" helping me do something that might get me to my goal.

"Here it is, Ali," she said as we arrived. "Anything else I can do?"

"You've done plenty," I told her, "but can you wait for me outside the shop?"

"Yes, sure," she agreed.

I entered the shop and found myself in a staring contest with the wizard. The moment I stepped inside, I felt unsafe, like he was reading my mind, staring at my very soul. "Welcome, how can I help you?" he asked.

"Hello," I began, "I want you to tell me the origin of this cloth, if possible."

"Show it to me," he instructed. I handed him the cloth. He looked at it, but first told me, "I need to make a contract with you, unless you are a merchant, then it's free of charge and no contract is needed." I showed him my card.

"Well then, Mark," he said, using the name from my card, "let me look for it." He did some wizardry stuff that I didn't understand, just that later he told me, "This belongs to the royal family. It is an expensive piece of cloth. And I believe it might be the princess's clothing, since she is the only daughter of the king, so naturally, she only gets the best."

"Thank you, wizard," I said, "I got what I needed. And by any chance, do you sell a book teaching the basics of summoning magic?"

"Hold on a moment, let me look," he said. "Ah, here it is. It will teach you the basics of summoning magic and how to create and make a summoning contract. It will cost 10 silver coins."

"Here it is," I said, handing him the coins. "Thank you and goodbye."

As I stepped out, Imra asked, "So, Ali, did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes, thank you so much," I replied. "I do have another question. Now, is there a way for me to get an audience with the king or princess?"

"Hmm," she pondered, "the king is pretty hard to see, but the princess—sure! She hosts a weekly tournament, and the winner gets to stay the evening and have dinner with her. Rumors say that she is doing it in the hopes of finding 'the chosen one'."

"Please lead the way!" I urged her. "Let me sign up for the tournament!"

She took me to the coliseum and pointed towards the person holding a sheet of paper, you can go there and sign up to the tournament. Thank you so much Imra, you mean a lot to me. thank you Ali I have to go back now otherwise owner will be suspicious of me. I trust you know way back. Yes no worries you may leave now.

"Name, please?" the registrar asked. "Ali," I replied. "Occupation?" "Adventurer. "Reason for participating?" "Audience with the princess." "Thank you, I've registered you. You may enter."

"Yosh, now that I'm in," I thought, "let me see how many fights before I'm victorious. Hmm, one, two, three, four. Four battles! That's crazy. Let me see my first opponent: Jarpo. Looks stupid, dumb, skinny, weak. Easy win."

The organizer called my name. "Ali, come, your fight will begin soon." I went to him. "Go on, kid, give him hell. It's you or him, my money's on you."

I entered the arena and fought Jarpo. He was weak and inexperienced and died from losing too much blood. Honestly, this fight was too easy.

After some time, the organizer called me out again. He said, "Your next opponent is Parpoo." "Hahaha, this guy has 'poo' in his name!" I thought. He looked more defined, able to carry a sword. He yelled at me, "I will avenge my brother Jarpo! You will die!" For some reason, he was funny. I didn't take the fight seriously; I got a light cut, but it was manageable. He irritated me, though, constantly screaming "poo" and "poo," so I put my sword in his mouth and ended the fight.

The organizer's voice boomed, "Now the real fight begins! The upcoming fights will be back-to-back—the third and fourth rounds will have no time to rest." So, I started taking things seriously. I took my rest, healed up, and then the organizer called my name. "Ali, your fight starts now! You will be fighting Scarpuff. He is tough, so take it seriously."

I entered the arena. Scarpuff was just as his name described: he had lots of scars on his body and face, and he was also a bit fat—I guess that was the "puff" part. Anyway, enough observing. I decided Scarpuff would be Scardead by the end of this. I pulled out my sword, ready to fight him. He launched himself at me, which surprised me; I'd thought he was slow and tanky, but he was strong and fast.

I didn't hold back. The crowd cheered, and Scarpuff showed no signs of fatigue, while I started feeling tired and worn out. Well, enough playing fair. Let me play dirty. I knocked him back to allow myself to catch my breath. I knelt to the ground, breathing heavily, and scooped up a bit of sand with my left hand, waiting for him to charge. He was strong, but he was dumb. When he thrust towards me, I threw sand in his face, blinding him. In exchange, he lowered his guard and allowed me to slash him with all my power. With that, Scarpuff was dead.

I was sure the crowd would boo me and hate me for this. But when I saw the princess, I was 1000% sure she was the one who had run away from me back in the forest, way back when. The crowd cheered for me, and the organizer said, "Well done! You are almost done and victorious. Your next opponent is much tougher than Scarpuff. He even knows a bit of magic, so be careful."

"Noted, thanks for the tip," I replied.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" the organizer's voice boomed across the arena. "Now for the finale! Who will earn their place by the princess? Who will be covered in his own demise? Let's welcome both contestants: Ali and Will!"

Will stepped forward, his gaze fixed on me. "Hey there, Ali," he said, his voice raspy. "Just so you know, I was one of the king's private soldiers, the strongest back in my prime days. Just because I look old doesn't mean you can spare me. Fight with all you've got. Kill me and leave nothing behind, for if you kill me, let me give you a tip: the princess has powers. She takes a liking to the strongest. If you've got what it takes, then kill me and show your strength to her."

"Enough chatting, contestants!" the organizer cut in. "Ready your weapons and may the strongest come out on top!"

Will proved his strength instantly. Swords clashed, iron hitting iron, sending sparks flying. He was the real deal, a true enemy. In fact, I doubted I could even beat him, even if I played dirty. He had it all: experience, strength, intelligence. Each clash of our swords felt like a conversation, predicting what would happen next. It was almost like we were dancing. It was either him or me.

I pulled out all the tricks I had, even the dirty ones. He managed to counter them and, in fact, use them against me, which is how he landed a few hits on me. I pushed him back. "Let's end it," I told him, "Nothing more, nothing less." He agreed.

So, I pulled out my second sword. That sword was special; it contained magic—an enchanted blade. Will sensed the magic and decided to enchant his own sword on the spot. He didn't know one thing, though, despite all his experience, he failed to take this factor into consideration: a snake will always attack from behind. He might not know this, but before the fight began, I'd bribed a guard and explained every detail of the plan. I'd give the sign for when he should ambush Will. Since this guard had a beef with Will, why not add more fuel to the fire? When I took out my second sword, that was his cue to get ready.

As I thrust towards Will, he was on guard, ready to counterattack. I threw my first sword at him, causing him to break his stance and deflect it. I slowed my speed, letting him regain his footing. And then it happened. The guard slashed his back, and Will, in turning, exposed his back to me. That allowed me to bury my second sword deep inside him, with his own blood.

Before he died, he rasped, "Be as fierce as you are... Princess... loves it... Kill... kii..." He never finished what he said. The guard I bribed died too, burned alive by the enchanted sword Will had used on him. And I stood victorious.

Finally, an audience with the princess.

Chapter 5

The arena shook with cheers as the announcer's voice echoed through the sky.

"Ladies and gentlemen, ready yourselves—for a new champion has arrived. Ali, the champion killer!"

The crowd erupted. Trumpets blared. The name "Ali" carried like fire on wind.

They handed me the mic, and I spoke calmly. "The strong eat the weak. Maybe I got lucky this time... but it was the best thing that ever happened to me."

I looked up. My eyes locked on the princess seated above the crowd, framed by gold and silk. She looked back at me—not with pity or politeness, but something else. Something curious. Something real. In that moment, she looked less like royalty and more like a treasure I had once lost and now found again.

Then came the announcement.

"The champion has earned an audience with the princess."

The crowd roared again. And I smiled to myself.

After the match, I was treated by palace medics. It took a couple of hours to heal. One of the organizers pulled me aside.

"She'll meet you soon. You might want to get cleaned up, bring a gift, something meaningful. It's dinner with the princess, after all."

"I need to stop home first," I said. "There are a few things I need."

Have it your way then Ali.

I went home took the piece of cloth, the two cards and a bit of money I suppose. I went bought the most expensive flower bouquet to the princess. The guards met me at the palace gate and walked me up to a high balcony. The view of the city was beautiful—candlelit towers, streets glowing under dusk.

They'd set a small table for two. Candles flickered gently in the evening breeze. She was already there, waiting in a formal dress, simple but graceful. She didn't look like royalty—she looked real.

I bowed. "Good evening, milady. I brought you these."

She took the bouquet. "Thank you, Ali. You're very kind."

She turned to the guards. "Leave us. I want privacy."

“Are you sure, Princess?”

“I know the one when I see him. Go.”

They nodded and left without another word.

We sat across from each other. I could feel her watching me—not suspiciously, but curiously. Like she was trying to figure something out.

“Now that we’re alone,” she said, “you can ask anything.”

“First,” I said, “check the bouquet. I left something for you.”

She pulled out the card and looked at it. Then back at me.

“This... is me. In a wedding dress. Where did you find this?”

“I’ve had it for a time. I never understood it until I saw you for the first time.”

She smiled a little. Strange. But familiar.

I want to know your real name,” I said. “No titles. Just the truth.

She held my eyes for a moment, then nodded.

Fine. Everyone here knows me as Princess Illoyana. But I’m not from this world. My real name is Elena. It means ‘the shining light.’

“I kept my name,” I said. “Ali.”

I pulled the piece of cloth I had with me.

“Recognize this?”

She blinked. Her voice softened.

“Yes... I used to wear that. Before I was pulled into this world.”

I nodded. “I thought so.”

“And you?” she asked. “Your powers—how did you get them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe luck. Maybe fate. I didn’t feel anything strange when I got here. But somehow I keep surviving.”

She tilted her head. “You fight like someone meant to do more than just survive.”

I leaned forward.

“Elena, I’ve got a proposal.”

“A proposal?”

“Yes. Let’s get married.”

Her eyes narrowed in surprise. “And then?”

“Then we kill the king.”

She stared at me, searching my face. “You’re serious?”

“I am. But the marriage—it matters. There’s something I need to test. Something I need to know. And for that, I need you.”

A long silence.

Then she smiled, slowly. “Yes, Ali. I’ll marry you.”

“Good. No big event. Just the people who matter.”

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll handle everything.”

I reached for her hand. She didn’t pull away. This wasn’t just a dinner. It wasn’t just a romance. It was the start of something dangerous, and maybe something beautiful, and it was ours.

After a few days, I received an invitation to the wedding. Elena had set up everything, just like the photo had shown. When it was time for me to take her hand in marriage and replicate exactly what the photo displayed, the picture on the card in my pocket vibrated.

Feeling uncomfortable, I tried to look composed. I looked at the princess and whispered, “It happened. We fulfilled what was required.”

“Shhhh, Ali, it’s our moment, don’t ruin it,” she whispered back.

I was happy, not because I was married, but because I had fulfilled what the card asked of me. The King congratulated me and hugged me. “Now a proper man will take over my kingdom after I pass away,” he said. “Now I can relax, knowing my daughter chose the right man to marry.”

Chapter 6

A couple of months after marrying Elena, I reminded her, "Don't forget what we planned from our previous date."

"Oh yeah, darling, I'm sorry, I forgot about it," she replied. "So, how do you want to plan it?"

"I'm not sure yet, honey," I admitted. "We're still guarded and can't freely do anything. Hmm, I guess we can do nothing right now but wait."

"Good point, Ali," Elena agreed.

So, we decided to travel for a while and have some fun with magic, maybe even worry the King a bit with the crazy tricks we did for fun, like fighting with real swords instead of wooden ones. Elena was quite a fighter; I'd say she was on par with Will, if not stronger. I may have gotten stronger, but I doubted I would ever reach Elena's speed since she had powers at her disposal.

While we were enjoying our time, one of the royal guards approached us. Elena knew that guard well enough to sense something was wrong.

"Guard, state your presence," Elena commanded.

"My Prince and Princess, I do hope you are enjoying your time fighting, to which I came bearing bad news," he announced.

"Stop beating around the bush and give it to me straight," I interjected.

"Yes, my Prince," he said, "the King is dead."

In my head, I jumped with excitement. I laughed. I wanted to hug the guard for this beautiful and amazing news. I looked back at Elena; she seemed a bit sad.

"My princess, now Prince Ali will be the new King. Do you approve of this?" the guard asked her.

She nodded in sadness, and then Elena told the guard to leave.

Now that we were alone again, I turned to her. "Isn't this great news, honey?" I hugged her and gave her kisses of joy. "He's dead, the old man! I wondered when he died." Elena pushed me away lightly and said, "I need a bit of time alone."

"Ahhh, so be it, have it your way," I said. I left her and went to the king's chambers to prepare for the funeral.

Elena was still processing what had happened. I still didn't know why she was grieving; she wasn't even from this world. If this was an act all along, then I didn't know what was real anymore.

Elena and I attended the funeral and completed the ceremony, not that I cared about it. For all I cared, he could have choked on his own saliva.

Time passed, and I was now officially the King of this nation, sitting on the throne. Giving out orders, I used my previous knowledge from my old world to lead my men and my country to new heights. We achieved advancement in science, increased political power, and captured lots of territory, all with my beloved Elena by my side.

Epilogue:

Years melted into decades under my rule. The kingdom of Ulwood, now a sprawling empire, flourished beyond imagination. My "previous knowledge" from my old world, technology and political strategy, but here, it was nothing short of revolutionary. We built roads that defied gravity, harnessed lightning for light, and forged alliances that crushed any whispers of rebellion. Elena, my Queen, was always by my side. Her magic, her fierce loyalty, and that unsettling strength she possessed made her an invaluable partner. Our "fun" sparring sessions had long since evolved into joint military drills, showcasing a bond the people revered as divine.

It was fun while it lasted. I truly felt like the king they needed, like I was in some grand game. I guess it was time. I had been so focused on the country that I'd almost forgotten about Elena. So, I decided to ask her out on a special, private date.

"Hello, honey, how's everything?"

"Fine... I just don't feel like I matter to you anymore. You see me as a tool or a stepping stone, not a wife. What happened to all the romantic dates we used to have? Do they not matter to you anymore?"

I hugged her and whispered in her ear, "You are my world, honey. I've planned a special date—it will be out of this world. You'll love me even more afterwards. Do you trust me with everything?"

"Yes, I do trust you. But what is this date really about? When will it happen, where, and what do I wear?"

"Calm down, lady. I already packed everything—including your outfit. I just need you to trust me. Will you?"

"Yes. I'll pack the most important things in my room and be ready in a jiffy."

"Take your time, sweetheart. Your clothes are also ready. Be sure to wear them."

I went to change my clothes and wore modern ones from my old world, which I had made custom by a very specific tailor, for both me and Elena. Then I had him killed. Can't let anyone else know about it.

Elena came wearing a beautiful dress from the modern world. She hugged me right away.

"I love you, Elena. Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Remember the time I showed you the card of us getting married?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Well, that is our ticket back home. Are you ready to go back together?"

"Yes. Let's go back and get married for real. I just hope my parents say yes."

I took the cards, placed them side by side, and they formed a portal-like figure.

And then—blackness.

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