

An Endless Story

Prologue: The Cage of Echoes

In the Nib Valley, where mountain mists gathered from five ridges to settle like a light, resin-sweet air, stood a solitary wooden cottage surrounded by a garden of Crimson-Lip blooms. The master of this sanctuary was Alex—a writer who genuinely believed that wherever his fingertips touched, reality yielded to poetry.

His garden was unlike any other in the mortal realm. The flowers possessed tightly folded, lip-like petals of deep scarlet. Every evening, as the horizon melted into burnt terracotta, Alex would set a rattan chair in the yard, unfold sheets of heavy, watermarked paper, and read his verses aloud.

"Night descends like a velvet cloak, stitched with the silvery thread of a drifting moon..."

At his voice, thousands of Crimson-Lip blossoms would tremble, opening to release a sound like countless glass bells chiming in a gentle wind. They sang back his cadences, mimicked his theatrical pauses, and exhaled an intoxicating perfume. For ten solitary years, this echoed applause was the mirror in which Alex gazed upon his own self-assigned greatness.

He lived cocooned in this praise until a late-autumn afternoon when the low horn of an antelope shell echoed through the pass.

The Silent King had arrived.

Accompanied only by four unarmored guards, the sovereign sat upon Alex's rattan chair. Having ruled for half a century and read every manuscript in the imperial library, the King's eyes were the color of cold ash.

Eager to prove his brilliance, Alex brought out his finest vellum notebook and recited his masterwork—a tragic, highly ornate tale of a glass kingdom shattering under the sun. His voice rose and fell with practiced grandeur, accompanied by the lush choir of his garden.

When he reached the climax, the King simply leaned on his cane and gave a long, slow yawn.

Alex froze. "Your Majesty... do you not feel the monumental sorrow of this scene?"

The King raised his dry gaze. "Empty," he said flatly. "A mountain of gilded words built to hide a hollow heart. You have lived none of this, writer. You are merely playing with pretty toys."

"What... what do you mean?" Alex gasped, his face draining of color.

The King stood, his grey cloak sweeping the grass. "I seek a story that can move a dead heart. A real story. I grant you seven days. Step out of your jar of honey, face the world, and bring me something true. If you return on the eighth morning empty-handed—or carrying more of this artificial noise—I will burn your singing garden to ash."

The Seven-Day Journey

Day 1: The Descent into Dust

Alex fled the valley under cover of night, driven by panic. By evening of the first day, the sweet air of Nib Valley was gone, replaced by the reek of mud and cheap spirits in a crowded border market. Sitting at a tavern corner, Alex tried to draft a grand epic, but his hands trembled so violently he could barely hold the pen. The roaring crowd, the coarse shouting, and the rough reality of the world overwhelmed him. He realized with horror that without his singing garden to echo his words, he did not know how to begin.

Day 2: The Bargain at the Burning River

On the second day, Alex reached a desolate ferry crossing where weary laborers huddled around a dying bonfire. An old, cross-eyed beggar with skin like dried coconut husk sat roasting rotten potatoes, telling the children about the death of his old mangy hound. It was a story raw, bitter, and absurdly funny; the children wept and laughed all at once.

Alex's heart hammered. *This is it—the raw tragedy of the common soul! The King will surely break his silence for this!*

That night, under the dim oil lamp of a roadside inn, Alex frantically dipped his quill into ink. He tried to capture the beggar's story, polishing the rough slang into flowing, gem-like prose. But as soon as his elaborate words touched the parchment, the ink distorted. The written lines writhed like grey worms and dissolved, eating through the paper.

Alex slammed the notebook shut, his hands shaking. The story belonged to the beggar because it was paid for in his own sweat and blood. In Alex's thieving, polished hands, it was merely a rotting corpse.

Day 3: The Ascent of Smoke Peak

Determined to find something noble enough for his style, Alex spent the third day climbing Smoke Peak, a mountain shrouded in perpetual mist. Near the summit, perched on a precarious ledge, sat an ancient sage with hair as white as snow. The sage wove fog with his fingers while murmuring a parable about the dawn of the cosmos. As he spoke, the night sky flared with brilliant ribbons of aurora.

Alex held his breath, envy scorching his chest. *If I possess this tale, I will not only save my garden—I will become a god among writers.*

Day 4: The Poison of Theft

In the dead of night, while the sage slept in deep meditation, Alex crept toward the old man's palm-leaf manuscript. Fear clawed at his throat, but desperation muted his conscience. *I am merely adapting it*, he lied to himself. *I will elevate it with my artistry.*

The moment his quill penned the final stolen sentence, thunder shattered the sky. The auroras collapsed into darkness. The notebook in Alex's hand burst into ash-grey flames, burning down to cinders and leaving a foul, pitch-black liquid that seeped deep into his skin, staining his hands like indelible ink.

Panicked, Alex hurled himself into a freezing mountain stream, scrubbing his hands against sharp stones until they bled. But the black stain of deceit remained deep within his fingernails.

Day 5: The Edge of Despair

By the fifth day, Alex was wandering aimlessly through a barren wasteland. Blood seeped through his boots, his throat burned with thirst, and his stained hands served as a constant mark of shame. He tried to invent stories from his imagination, but every idea felt hollow and dead. The silence of the open wild was deafening. Without an audience to validate him, he felt himself fading into a non-entity.

Day 6: The Broken Mirror

On the sixth day, a violent storm battered the plains. Drenched and shivering, Alex took shelter beneath the collapsed arch of an ancient ruin. Looking at his reflection in a pool of murky rainwater, he saw not a grand literary master, but a desperate, broken fraud who had traded his life for hollow echoes. He wept until no tears remained, realizing that his ten years in the valley had been nothing more than a slow death inside a gilded cage.

Day 7: The Silent Witness

On the final afternoon, exhausted and broken, Alex collapsed beneath a giant oak tree near the border of the kingdom. The sun was setting. Time had run out.

Beside the tree sat a child—a girl about seven years old, wearing a rough linen smock, watching dry leaves spin in the wind. Her eyes were large and clear as raindrops.

Like a drowning man grasping at straws, Alex scrambled over, pulling out a torn scrap of paper. "Child!" he rasped. "Listen to me! I will read you the tale of the velvet princess and the crystal cloud castle! Just listen, and tell me it is beautiful!"

He poured his remaining strength into his voice, using every trick of cadence and theatrical nuance he had spent a decade perfecting.

The child remained motionless. She did not blink. She watched his panicked, sweat-streaked face with absolute calmness. Then, she raised a small hand, waved it gently in the air, and shook her head.

Alex froze in a flash of frantic rage. *Not another one! Even a child scorns my art?*

In his madness, he fumbled in his pockets, pulling out his last gold coins and jade trinkets, thrusting them toward her. "Here! Gold! Jewels! Take whatever you want! Just sit still and listen to my story! Please!"

The child looked at the glittering gold, then up at Alex's ink-stained, bloody hands. She gently pushed his hands away.

Picking up a dry twig from the ground, she cleared away the dead leaves at her feet and carefully wrote in the damp earth:

I cannot hear. I have never heard a story in my life.

The Awakening

The silence around the oak tree turned absolute.

The scrap of paper slipped from Alex's fingers, drifting into the mud.

I cannot hear.

The words struck like a thunderbolt, shattering the fragile temple of his pride. All his life, he had hoarded words to seduce the ears of men. Yet here sat a soul to whom the doors of sound had been closed since birth. All his golden cadences, his glass kingdoms, his polished metaphors—before this child, they amounted to absolute zero.

Alex sank to his knees in the mud.

The little girl did not look sad. She smiled, turning her small palm upward. A single drop of dew fell from an oak leaf above, settling in her palm. She tilted her head, watching the droplet catch the fading sunlight, refracting it into a tiny spectrum of color. She looked up at Alex, her eyes shining with pure joy.

For the first time in ten years, Alex lifted his eyes away from his papers.

He looked where the child was looking. He saw the dewdrop. He saw the amber evening light brushing across the forest canopy. He saw the purple clouds drifting across the horizon, shifting slowly from orange to deep violet.

There was no flower singing his praise. There was no reader applauding his genius. There was only the wind through the leaves, and the vast, quiet pulse of the living world.

A strange warmth rushed through his chest. The agonizing dread vanished. The heavy burden of his ego dissolved like snow under a midday sun. He realized he had spent a decade drawing crude pictures of the sun on paper, never once stopping to simply look at the sun itself.

Alex smiled—a soft, weightless smile. He pressed his ink-stained hands against his face. As his tears fell through his fingers, they washed away the last traces of the black stain.

Epilogue: The Unwritten Sky

On the eighth morning, the Silent King sat upon his high throne in the valley cottage. Outside, the Crimson-Lip blooms stretched their necks, ready to burst into their usual sycophantic chorus.

Alex stepped into the yard. His clothes were torn, his boots caked in dust, but his stride was light. His eyes were clear and calm.

"Your seven days are up, writer," the King said, resting his hands on his cane. "Where is the masterwork that will save your garden from the torch?"

Alex did not answer. He walked past the throne into the middle of the garden. Recognizing their master, the thousands of scarlet flowers opened their petals, unleashing their sweet, artificial melody: *"Oh, mountain of words... Oh, god of poetry..."*

For the first time, Alex felt no pride—only pity.

He walked to the edge of the yard, snatched a burning torch from a guard's hand, and threw it straight into the dry moss beneath the flowers.

Flames roared to life. The sweet singing turned into distorted shrieks as the petals curled, burned, and dissolved into grey ash. The court held its breath in shock.

The King stood up, his voice cracking for the first time. "Are you mad? You burn your own life's work?"

Alex turned, the reflection of the fire calm in his eyes. "Sire, I searched the world for a story to save my title as a writer. Only on the final day did I realize that no story written on paper can ever be complete. Every book has a final page. Every word turns to dust. I spent ten years building a cage of words and trapping myself inside."

Alex raised his hand, pointing up through the open courtyard toward the sky above the valley.

"The greatest story—the one that never ends, and contains no lie—has been right above your head all along."

The King slowly looked up.

It was twilight. The sky above Nib Valley was shifting from soft amber to deep azure. Then, as if by a quiet miracle, the first stars flickered into life. Millions of light-years of cold, brilliant light opened up above them—endless, ancient, and deep beyond measure.

No words were spoken. No music played. There was only the vast, tranquil silence of time moving forward.

The Silent King stood rooted to the spot. Tears welled in the dry eyes of the old monarch. He had read ten thousand manuscripts, yet none had brought him this profound, quiet peace.

When the King turned back to speak to the writer, the space where Alex had stood was empty. He was gone.

There, in the ash of the singing garden, Alex's old rabbit-hair quill lay resting in the damp earth. And from its worn tip, a tiny, vibrant green sprout was quietly pushing through the soil, reaching up to catch the first dew of the starry night.