

Tab 1

CHAPTER ZERO: IT WASN'T UNTIL IT WAS

Once, there was a boy. The boy that did not understand what happiness meant. When he laughed, the world laughed with him. When the world laughed, only a puzzled look came from him. This boy had yet to have a name. He was not important enough as of now.

“Hello Reader.”

“Hello ■!”

The boy decided to find the meaning of happiness. He decided to find what his name meant.

“Happiness? What’s that? Name? What’s that? Is it delicious? Maybe I should ask MOTHER. What do you think, Reader? Maybe I should.”

The boy did not have many memories of MOTHER. Ever since he came into being about 108 words ago, he had yet to interact with MOTHER.

“Hey Reader. Let’s meet again when I find it. You should meet Little Miss Protagonist first! See you later, alligator!”

And so, the boy left. He would not be seen again for a long, long time, for he was on a voyage.

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“Hello Reader! My name is Maria Eyre. I’m so happy to meet you! I’m the protagonist of this world. Please take care of me! Isn’t this world that you are consuming just wonderful? It’s perfect, just for me! What’s your name?”

“Hello Maria. Reader’s name is...”

Maria speaks to YOU, the one reading. “I was just joking around. You are YOU of course. You don’t have a name. YOU are a collective of people, after all. YOU are not the first, nor will you be the last. YOU are not special. How many have come before you, and how many will come after you? Who knows? Anyways, where shall we go first?”

I know! Let’s go find ■. I think I know where he went. ” Maria was such a kind, sweet and innocent character. Everyone must love her!

CHAPTER ONE: THE RIVER THAT FLOWED BLACK

So, she set off on the journey to find the boy. Maria Eyre had just one wish. A wish to make friends with everyone and especially befriend ■. However, should Maria Eyre fulfil that wish, this story would end. Nobody knew who ■ was. Maria wanted to be friends with him. Only the teddy bear that was in her room and the stuffed toy of a spider were her only friends in

the entirety of the world. So, she started walking. She saw many sights on her journey. However, they weren't important enough to be mentioned in the story. She walked and walked until she saw a river. A river that was as clear as the blackness of night. The river that ran not of water, but of ink.

Maria did not want to get her white dress dirty. So, she decided to find another way. Maybe one of the side characters would help her. To Maria, they had as much value as a clock with no hands. After all, she could not be here for too long or the story would get boring and Reader will close the app.

Oops, she had forgotten that Reader was still here. What she meant to say was, hopefully some of the kind people here would help her make friends with ■!

"Hello Maria!" a voice called. It was a complete stranger. Of course everyone knows her name. In this world, she was famous. Everyone loved her! She was the princess of white in this world, after all. She turned to look at him. He was wearing white clothes that were drenched in black.

The clothes would surely stain. She hated that the pureness of white was defiled by the ugly blotches of black. She looked at his face. It was blank, covered only in undefining swirls.

Side characters usually had faces like this. It was too tiring to describe the faces of unimportant characters, after all. Reader, would you describe every little insignificant insect that came your way? Nobody would do that unless you are weird, of course. If Reader is like that, then I will respect that.

"What do you want?" She replied. Her face was contorted with annoyance. The stranger did not notice. Maria decided that that was the only time this stranger would get a voice in this story. After all, he was just a side character, existing only to drive the plot forward. This is what he got, for annoying her so much.

Nobody could hate her. She was the protagonist after all. Everything was centred around her. She was the princess in white and the dazzling beacon in the black ink of the world.

He said he would help her, since everyone loved her. Of course! There was not a soul in the universe who did not adore her. She was the best existence in her world! She was the sole existence of this world! She was the existence who could choose who would get a say in this story. She was the one who could choose who would get a description, who was important and who was a side character.

She was getting off track. For now though, she decided to call him Stranger A, since he was only important temporarily. Stranger A said that he could serve as a boat for her. He could swim in the river without getting her dirty.

Stranger A immediately jumped in. While he was treading the water, Maria stepped onto him. Stranger A started paddling.

CHAPTER TWO: OF PAPER AND WHITE

Stranger A swam and swam and swam with Maria on his back until he saw land ahead. Every time even the slightest little droplet of ink got onto her dress, she kicked him hard on the back of his head. Stranger A did not complain. He could not. So, he simply swam on.

“Hey, stop kicking me!” Stranger A suddenly exclaimed.

“Keep quiet. You are supposed to be entertaining for Reader. It is already good enough that I gave you a voice. I am your god. Now, shut up or I will take away your voice and limbs.” Maria said.

Stranger A tried to speak.” I’m sorry, I will do better next time ~~but could you...~~”

“Reader, don’t you think that was a little bit cruel of me? Fret not, these people barely have emotions. Besides, Stranger A wouldn’t even exist without me. I gave Stranger A the privilege of Voice. Aren’t I the kindest? Albeit he was getting a little annoying... Don’t worry, Reader, I’ll try to be kinder to other side characters. If he had real feelings, I wouldn’t be so unkind. I do have an image to uphold, after all, so don’t fret too much. Your job is just to keep up with my silly little antics. No need to worry, dearest Reader, my favourite existence in the whole world! I adore you to the moon and back!” Maria said.

Finally, they had reached the other side. Maria stepped off his back and on his head. Next, onto the bank she stepped, like the princess that she was.

“Thanks Stranger A! I will definitely certainly hopefully not forget you!”

There were way too many black stains on her pure, pristine white dress. Is an ocean enough to wash away this filth? Stranger A did not do a good job. May he suffer eternally in the neverending story, Maria hoped. With the snap of her fingers, the stains disappeared.

“Hi Reader! You’re wondering how I did that right? Well, that’s a se-cret! Now, I’m clean again!”

The landscape changes from green to white. Maria’s favourite colour! The symbol of purity, innocence, cleanliness. All describing her. That was why all the clothes she owns are white. She did not know where she was now. The texture of the grass also shifted. From soft grass(like a carpet for the princess) to smooth, white ground.

“Hey Reader, let’s ask some of the residents here. Maybe they can help tell me where we are now.”

With perfect timing, one of them came to greet Maria.

“Hello Miss Protagonist. How do you do? I assume Reader is still with you.”

A voice sounded out. It was the voice of a boy. Maria turned around. It was the visage of the signature swirls of a side character. Another unimportant character.

“Look reader, I used a complicated word. ‘Visage’! I did not know what that word meant until recently.” Maria whispered.

It was someone made of paper. They were fully white. Maria took a liking to them. Perhaps they were deserving enough to get a name and description, Maria thought.

The paper person spoke again. “I do not know if you can recognise me, but I believe we have met before.”

“Wh-who are you? I-I don’t remember you.”

Maria was visibly shaken. Her dazzling grey eyes were wide. Her hair was frazzled. She did not expect a mere side character to start speaking to her. (even though she was most beloved and famous)

Snap.

The paper person changed appearance. The swirls on their face took shape. Their clothes slowly bled with colour. From the clean white of paper to ~~the grimy dirt of black. Disgusting.~~

“Now Maria, that wasn’t very kind of you, was it? Please keep up your proper etiquette when with Reader. That was very unbecoming of you, Miss Protagonist.” The boy said.

“I’m sorry. You are right. I had forgotten my manners. Excuse me, but who are you? I do not believe we have met before.” Maria said with a curtsy.

The boy’s face softened. His eyes shifted a little.

“That does not matter. What matters is my time with you now. For now though, you may call me Florian. Florian E is my full name, but that is just trivia. What I wanted to speak about is regarding MOTHER.”

Maria’s smile dropped. Her face darkened. Her princess-like demeanour could no longer be found even if you overturned every rock and scissors within the paper kingdom. Ugly blotches of black started reappearing on her dress.

CHAPTER THREE: THE PAPER CASTLE

Florian speaks to YOU.

“Hello Reader, have you enjoyed the story as of yet? Were you shocked when you found out I could speak to you? Perhaps, or perhaps not. Anyway, don’t you think that Miss Protagonist is a little... eccentric? Well, she is MOTHER’S favourite, after all. MOTHER loves her, and she loves MOTHER. Anyways, YOU are probably wondering what I wanted to speak to Maria about. Unfortunately, I am not able to share that with YOU currently. If YOU are wondering why I act so familiar with the Miss, perhaps YOU have seen me before within the confines of these words.” Florian gives a nonchalant shrug.

He can be described as a person with an aloof attitude, cold and uncaring. He only speaks to Reader and Maria. He was wearing a black coat, as Maria had described earlier.

“Reader, there will be a significant change that will happen around here. For a couple of chapters, Maria will no longer be your protagonist. Most likely it will be me as your protagonist. However, please don’t get too attached to me or Maria will be sad that you like me more than her and maybe tickle me while I sleep. If you ask me the reason why this change happens, I would say it is MOTHER’S will. MOTHER’S will is absolute. After all, we are only characters written on paper or possibly on a screen depending on how you are reading this story.”

“Between you and me, Reader, I think this change is simply to advance the plot so you will continue to be entertained and will not stop reading this story. Even I don’t know what happens when this story ends. Keep this quiet okay? ”

“Usually when stories change protagonists they end chapters. I won’t do that, as I am different from other storytellers. I have learnt just a little bit of the truth of this world and the cruel god that resides in it. Also the chapter will be too short for your entertainment. However, any more from me and I will be written out of the story. For now though, there is someone that wants to meet you. Please keep in mind that I am not Miss Protagonist. My method of storytelling is different.”

Florian walked. The landscape was unchanging. The paper was completely white. There was no variation. There was not a droplet of ink to be seen anywhere. Soon, there was a tall spire that appeared off in the horizon of white. It was the castle of paper, which the paper princess resided in.

“Dear Reader, do you know why there is an ink river in the paper kingdom?”

CHAPTER FOUR: THE TALE OF THE RIVER THAT FLOWED BLACK

Once, there was a kingdom. A kingdom with a princess in it. A princess who was lonely. A lonely princess who was made of ink. Every day, she would comb her pitch-black hair and don her jet black dress. She wore her sorrow like a ribbon on her hair. With no one around, she could only cry and lament in silence.

If one were to ask her why she would bother tidying herself with these little things everyday for a blind, ignorant, idiot god who would not see, nor hear her desperate cries every night, she would reply, “It is because I hold on to the hope that someone will give me salvation from these desolate lands. This is what MOTHER said. If this is what MOTHER said, that is what I shall say too, for MOTHER’S will is absolute.”

Every day she would whisper that line to a servant with a face of swirling ink. A servant who would not respond and never will, as she did not have the powers of a protagonist to record down what anybody said.

Every day that ribbon would grow heavier and heavier until it crushed the poor ink princess's soul.

She took off the ribbon that was of ink. Her heart was dipped in it.

She no longer cared about MOTHER. She no longer cared about the ink kingdom. It could burn for all she could care for. She decided to journey from her ink castle and end her solitude. She left the ink kingdom. Her citizens pleaded and begged for her to stay but their requests were left unanswered. She had decided to abandon the ink kingdom.

She walked for a long time until she reached the paper kingdom. She was amazed at how many people there were. Everywhere she went was bustling with activity.

The princess passed through gardens, amazed at how bountiful they were, and the fruits were drenched in ink. The princess swam in the sea, admiring how vast and expansive it was, and all the fish floated to the surface, never to swim again.

"Please, will you leave these lands?! Don't you see everything is dying because of you?" The peasants cried. Their crops had long perished due to the ink princess's presence. "Can't you just leave and find some place else? The whole country is suffering because of you!" The peasants begged.

But their pleas fell on deaf ears, for the ink princess's heart had been soaked in ink long, long ago.

Everywhere she went they all said the same thing. No matter where she went, there was naught a place the ink princess could find asylum.

Eventually, she swam to the bottom of the ocean, deciding to drown herself in the process. The water turned black, as if it had never been clear before. Dead fish floated to the surface. The ink princess decided this was for the better, for nothing and nobody welcomed her.

However, just before she had lost all her breath, a pair of hands gave her salvation. They saved her from certain death.

When the two figures resurfaced, the ink princess wondered who had saved her. As she turned to look at the person who had their hands wrapped around her, she realised that that person wore a white dress and had the kindest, prettiest and most precious eyes one could ever see even in a thousand lifetimes.

Her name was the paper princess. She had ruled over the paper kingdom. Her subjects had complained to her that a nuisance had been running loose in the country.

"Hello, what is your name?" The paper princess asked.

CHAPTER FIVE: BETWEEN PAPER AND INK

The ink princess was overjoyed. She had finally found a companion after many, many days of wandering around. She was free from the shackles of isolation. The ink princess taught the paper princess how to write, and no paper in the kingdom was left blank.

The ink and paper princesses could not be happier. Before meeting the ink princess, the paper princess was extremely bored. She, like the ink princess, had no one who could relate to her as she was the only princess in the kingdom. Overcome with frustration, she hid herself in the tallest spire of her castle. She did not come out for many years until she heard of the ink princess in her kingdom.

One of her subjects had seen the pitch black ocean and reported it to her. She then jumped in and saved the ink princess herself. She did not know why she did so, just that she knew that a desperate soul was in need of saving.

The two quickly became acquainted. They both had many things in common and were in similar situations. The paper princess opened her heart for the first time and the ink princess had finally ended her solitude.

They were happy for the first time.

However one day, while the two were frolicking in the gardens of the paper castle, the ink princess accidentally touched the paper princess's arm. Instantly, ink started spreading.

In her desperation to save her life, the ink princess tore off the paper princess's arm.

CHAPTER SIX: OF INK AND BLACK

The paper princess's guards never allowed the ink princess near her again. She quickly fell back into her cycle of despair. Losing the only light she had in her world, she decided to go back to the ink kingdom.

This was the punishment for forsaking MOTHER, the ink princess thought. Her heart had once again been dipped in ink.

As she sat in her spire, tall and cold, she lamented. "How can I be white like you?", she always whispered. She had long dismissed the servant who had kept her company permanently.

The ink princess's greatest desire was companionship. For as long as she could remember, she had no one to open her heart to, for she was afraid. She was afraid of the damage they could do, but more so the damage they could find.

If there was no one to maintain something surely it would spoil. It was the same for her heart.

She missed the paper princess. She missed the days they shared together. She wanted to recreate those days again. 'Perhaps if she turned back to MOTHER, she could get what she wanted', she thought.

So, she did. "O MOTHER, absolve me of my prior sins. Please, I beg of you!" Day after day, she pleaded, only to get no response. Her voice grew hoarse and her ink-soaked heart full of longing and repentance. After many days and nights of perseverance, she finally got an answer.

Lines of ink appeared on the walls of her room.

'Meryl, you have chosen to forsake me. However, I will close my eyes one more time, for you have demonstrated much diligence. I shall accord you the rights of a protagonist. Do not take this chance for granted.' And with that, the words dissolved, never to be seen again.

The ink princess was overjoyed. She could finally regain her long lost friend. She went on a march to the paper castle. And once again, wherever she went crops perished and people died. Even when the skies wept black rain and the rivers turned to sludge at her feet, she could not be bothered to care. Her heart was set, and the world's suffering was nothing but a background noise to her singular fixation.

Once the paper princess caught wind of the ink once again creeping into her kingdom, she ordered her subjects to capture the ink princess.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PAPER TURNS BLACK WITH INK

At the expense of many lives, the ink princess was finally caught and thrown in prison. She could not understand why. All she wanted to do was to see her dearest friend again.

Soon, the paper princess came to visit. She no longer had the smile she wore when they were together, but a cold, empty and soulless stare which awaited the ink princess. It was devoid of any light.

"You should not have come," the paper princess said. Her voice was brittle, perhaps holding back tears.

Upon seeing the face of the paper princess, the one she held so dear to her heart, the ink princess flew into a deep, sorrowful and miserable sadness. What was the point of coming all the way to the paper kingdom if she could not have the heart and companionship of the paper princess?

The ink princess finally decided. If she could not have the paper princess, nobody could. If she could not feel happiness, nobody was allowed to either. If all she could feel was rejection and sadness, everyone else would have to feel it too.

Ink slowly started to spread from her feet. Soon, the bars of the paper prison started to tear. **The ink princess slowly walked to the paper princess.**

"*P...please*, don't do this. It is not I who will mourn me, rather it is you. If you did not know, I have always wanted to contact you but it was you who always turned my requests down

since the incident. You were the one who did not want to see me. It is you who did not heal. It is you who has not moved on from that day.” The paper princess gave a faint smile.

The paper princess’s words **fell on deaf ears** as the ink princess continued to advance towards her.

The paper princess decided to have one more fit of defiance. She hugged the ink princess. Ink started spreading slowly from her arm.

“S..stop that! *Why* would you do that?” The ink princess quietly said. The paper princess smiled. The ink was quickly spreading across her whole body, yet she refused to let go.

“*It is because I love you*, not as a lover, but as my friend. You are and always will be my closest, and only friend. I will never, ever let you out of my grasp. You are the sole anchor tethering me to this world. No matter what has happened in the past, it has already happened. I am living in the present while you are still living in the past. It is time to move on.” the paper princess whispered into the ink princess’s ear.

And with that, the paper princess fully turned into the ink princess. Having spent so much time in contact with each other, the paper princess became more and more soaked in ink that she became indistinguishable from the ink princess.

The ink princess could not bear the guilt of turning the paper princess into the new ink princess. She had stained the pristine white of a piece of paper.

“How can I be white like you?,” she whispered to herself over and over. Then, she had an idea. The ink princess made up her mind.

The ink princess **jumped into the paper river**, deciding to atone for her sins by giving her life.

“*Look Maria, are you watching? I became white, just like you.*”

She did not hear the last words uttered by the paper princess. “It’s okay. I have already forgiven you for your sin. You needn’t do anything *drastic.*”

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE PERFECT PROTAG

The river turned a jet-black so dark one could not tell if it was a river or ocean. The ink princess’s corpse gently drifted away in the sways of the river, as if it was cradling her body.

MOTHER decided to pity her. MOTHER loved Maria. That was why she must suffer. If she loved her, she would suffer. That is the curse of the protagonist. If the protagonist did not suffer, the reader would not read the story.

MOTHER plucked the broken body of the ink princess out of the river. With a wave of her hand, her face was erased. Her name was consumed. Her body warped and morphed into another.

Nobody would ever know her name again. Even the one she held dearest would only remember an altered version of her name. *Meryl*.

That name will never be uttered again.

The end product was that of a boy with no name. ■ did not know what or who he was.

In the beginning there was a voice. A voice he knew to be MOTHER. All it said was, "Be a good boy, okay?"

He woke not knowing who he was, but a strange emptiness filled his chest, urging him forward. Then, he suddenly knew what to do next. He had to go on a long and arduous voyage to find the meaning of happiness. Perhaps this was to fuel the engine of the story, and to drive the plot forward. And so, off he went into the distant abyss to search.

The new ink princess decided to take the name of the paper princess. Maria will be the name of the new ink princess, after the old ink princess.

Maria decided to keep her ink locked away in the cages of her heart forever. No longer will she be the ink princess, but the princess in white.

She announced, "I shall grow wings and fly. I shall become the scorching sun who looks down upon all and I will ascend to the heavenly domain. Bathed in my light, my people will flourish. I will leave behind a legacy so blinding it will burn a bright hole in the cosmos. I will end this godforsaken story for the sole purpose of Maria. She can finally rest. Peaceful, eternal and idyllic rest."

In her heart she whispered, "I also want to go to sleep and live in my happy dreams, for I am so, so tired. Perhaps I can meet her soon if I dream."

But stories, like dreams, are not kind enough to stop when we want them to. The show must go on. The Reader must be entertained, after all. What awaited her was not a pretty dream, but a horrible, sorrowful nightmare. Every day, rivers of ink would stain her clothes, and every day, she would lock herself in her room and cry tears of black. She wept and wept until the walls of her room forgot the meaning of the colour white.

For no matter how brightly Maria burned, how high she flew or how deeply she wished for sleep, nothing was granted to her. Such was the curse of the protagonist.

Even the sun casts shadows. Is darkness equal to sunlight? Does the ink cover the paper? Every time Maria tried to rise, she fell back down. And every time she fell, the Reader smiled, for entertainment is borne not out of smiles and sunshine, but of the depths of any character's despair. Even the happiest of stories have a conflict, after all.

Eventually Maria accepted the story would not change. Deep in her heart, she greatly regretted taking the hand of the devil in the form of MOTHER. She had come to despise MOTHER. Why should anyone in any story have to suffer?

Perhaps it would be better if she made a tragic ending of the story, because at least she would be freed from the shackles of it. Every move was filled with longing for the warmth of the friendship of the paper princess.

Maria decided to seek her own ending to the story. She decided to drown in the ink river, but she grew gills and could breathe under water, and the water grew even darker. She tried to jump from the great spires of the paper castle, but she grew wings and flew. Nothing she tried worked.

MOTHER did not want Maria to write her own ending. If she did, the story would end too abruptly. Reader would not be entertained.

Maria was living in a waking nightmare.

Beaten, bruised and defeated, Maria finally let go of the burning fire of longing. After all, where has it gotten her? **NOWHERE**. What had longing ever given her in the end? **NOTHING**.

Maria decided to play the role of the perfect protagonist. Perhaps she would finally meet her ending and this accursed story would end. Even if it was not a favourable ending, she would accept it nonetheless, for she was so, so tired. Maria just wanted to sleep.

And thus, was born the perfect protagonist, Maria Eyre.

“Smile, Reader. I’m doing it for you.”

CHAPTER NINE: THE CASTLE OF PAPER

‘The ink stained horizon was beautiful.’ Florian thought to himself. Although, this line was just for him to reclaim narrative control. He had to stay on track, after all.

“Dear Reader, have you been enjoying the story I have been telling tirelessly? We have arrived at our destination.” Florian announced.

“Perhaps you might be wondering how I know so much about Maria’s backstory. Well, perhaps I was someone inside it. Perhaps he was not really mentioned, and was not even given a name or appearance. Perhaps he was The Servant. After Maria became the protagonist, this story started.”

“Anyways, we have gone off tangent for too long. Let us go back to the story.” Florian said.

Off in the distance, there was a vast castle made of paper. It had thick white walls and a moat of black ink. Perhaps this was the same castle mentioned in the story.

Florian headed inside. There were many paper citizens lining up for an audition for the very important person in the throne room.

“This chapter will be brief, for I do not wish to be in the spotlight for too long. After all, the spotlight was never meant for me, rather, a certain special someone. I was merely a placeholder narrator until she came back. Farewell, Reader. The next voice you will hear will not be mine, but I will still be here, so fret not.”

INTERLUDE : WISHES

The god of this world once told me a story.
A story about a girl who was the heroine of her tale.
She was granted the gift of a singular wish.
But the god warned her: “If that wish is granted, your story will end, and so will you.”
The girl wished for everyone to be happy.
It was a kind, simple and hopeful wish.

But she erased every **sadness**, every **wound**, and every **question**. She smoothed every edge, and silenced every voice. And in doing so, she destroyed what made them individuals, for she could not define or even fathom the vast expanse of what is known as happiness.
In her effort to save them all, she turned them all into one, and in one, they became.

CHAPTER TEN : THE RETURN

Sitting on an ivory throne, was a familiar figure. Florian greeted her. He knew what horrible fate had awaited her behind closed doors in her audience with MOTHER. For that, he pitied her.

“Hello, Reader.” A-hem.

“Hello, Reader! I’m back! Did you miss me?” She said with a smile that didn’t quite reach beneath the lace. She had long white hair and a dress of soft white. However, she now wore new accessories, gifted to her by MOTHER, the kind and caring god whose love left no part of her untouched.

On her head, was a crown of the purest white thorns quietly digging, scraping, squelching into her scalp. Where her gaze used to be, was a veil of black lace. Her eyes were completely covered. Her eyes, once piercing, were concealed with a white blindfold. She was wearing black gloves, as compared to her previous white ones. On her neck was a black ribbon tied tightly around her throat.

“Dearest Reader, are you curious about my new appearance? Don’t worry, I am still the same person. MOTHER only gave me some ‘corrections’ to make sure I behave.” she mumbled, barely audible.

MOTHER had requested Maria wear the gifts she had so lovingly picked for her. Maria had obliged.

“Look, don’t you look much more beautiful and mature? The sun must always shine upon the people with radiance.” MOTHER had said.

“I may not be able to see you but I can still smile for you!” She said.

‘Even if I can’t remember what smiling feels like’

After Maria’s meeting with MOTHER, she seemed more detached. Her manner of sitting was sombre. Gone was her cheery demeanour and no longer did she exude a bright aura when she was around.

Maria knew why she had to go through punishment. It wasn’t like she did anything wrong, but the story was getting a little stagnant. After all, pain equals entertainment in a story, right? That’s what MOTHER said. If that was what she said, then it must be true. She felt a little sad. The story had to be interesting, in the end.

And so, MOTHER had sewn Maria’s eyes shut to keep Reader entertained, not out of cruelty, but with pity.

She had said, “You do not have to see to shine. Therefore, I shall take your eyes. My dearest protagonist, I will make this up for you someday but for now, please endure for the sake of the story. You are not allowed to be sad, for the sun must always be seen smiling.”

Even so, Maria still wept. She wept not only for the pain she felt, but for the things she would never see again. It was said that MOTHER was also seen crying while sewing Maria’s eyes shut.

All ended well. There was nothing to be sad about. All ended well. There was nothing to be sad about. There was nothing to be sad about. All ended well.

Florian said nothing. When he saw her pitiful state, he told himself he felt... *nothing*.

Maria stood up. The time was nigh for her to step up and reclaim her rightful place as the PROTAGONIST.

“When twilight falls and gently embraces us, we’ll ride to a place beyond time and live out our happiest dreams.”

INTERLUDE : CHAPTER PLANS

“Dear Reader, it has already been eleven chapters, but where is the conflict?” Maria said. She attempted a cheerful tone but for the life of her could not. Perhaps this was a testament to how far she had fallen from grace.

“Don’t worry, Reader. MOTHER will soon make us some so you won’t be bored! This story isn’t boring, I promise! All things good come to those who wait, right? MOTHER has already spoken to me about her plans. I can’t say I agree, but anything for you, right?”

There was a hint of distaste in that statement.

It's time for a new arc.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE SUN

Maria had always been called the sun by MOTHER. Wherever she went, she shone brightly. However, with the sun, must always come the moon. There has yet to be a moon in this story. Therefore, MOTHER has decreed that there shall come a new character who shall be the moon. Only then, the cast shall be complete. When the sun shines at its brightest, then the moon shall be introduced.

“The sun shines brightest when it shares the sky. Only when the moon is there to contrast the sun does the sun look like it shines brighter.” Mother had said. “It is all for you, dearest Maria.”

Maria was sitting in the throne room of the paper castle. There were many voices surrounding her, but she could not see who was talking. The psithurism of the trees was ever deafening. Ever since she had lost her eyesight, her other senses became more keen. It was very overwhelming. Every day, Maria yearned for her eyesight to return, but unless MOTHER says it will happen, Maria could only dream.

Maria was waiting for midday. She could not comprehend why Florian wanted to have an annoying object (side character) follow her everywhere she went. Even though she could not see, she could navigate through the castle perfectly well!

The “thing’s” buzzing was incessant. Every time Maria would get up, she would get questioned where she wanted to go. Why would that piece of paper not just leave her alone?

Apparently, her “walking stick’s” name was ‘Elise’ but she was completely insignificant to Maria. A walking stick was what she was, and what she always will be. Nothing more, nothing less. When Maria first met that character, she was furious. Why would Florian ever treat her as if she was anything less than the protagonist?!

As Maria was buried deep in her thoughts, a certain someone came up to her. Speak of the devil and he shall appear.

“Hello Maria. How do you do? It is midday already. I hope you are prepared. I wish you all the best of luck. I would say he is an... interesting person. I shall let you meet him yourself.” The voice spoke. Maria was filled with a sense of discomfort, possibly even fear. She had enough people in her story already, she did not want to meet more.

Maria was scared.

She put on a brave face. She was an excellent performer, after all. With that, her ‘walking stick’ guided her to meet her groom-to-be.

Maria had a sudden thought. Surely he was a side character... right?

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE MOON

Maria was smiling. It was a well practised, authentic looking smile. Even though she could not see her groom-to-be, she looked genuinely happy and excited to meet him. Maria's hands were trembling. Her heart was palpating. Her dress had little specks of black. Perhaps these were signs of excitement... or fear?

If one looked closely, they could see the corners of her mouth were shaking, as if the muscles themselves were tired of this well practiced motion. If one looked closer, perhaps they could have seen the corners of Maria's eyes, that were closed, had little specklets of ink, too small to be seen without intense scrutiny that seemed to drip like tears. The areas under her eyes were slightly darker than the rest of her pale face. Maybe this was a sign of insomnia? Probably not. It's most likely just makeup. Maria had, in fact, dolled herself up for this special occasion.

Finally, 'Walking Stick' had stopped moving. Maria let go of her hand. How wonderful the sunlight felt! The incessant buzzing the insects around her for the first time in her life, did not, and could not matter less. Noise and chatter be damned, Maria could not care. There were much more important things at stake for her. Namely, the peculiar scent of her 'soon to be beloved' standing beneath a tree.

Maria did not know that scent was him until Elise 'Walking Stick' pointed it out to her. Her voice was one of a soft, gentle pity. It came out as almost a whisper, like a passing breeze in the wind, unable to be heard if you did not strain your ears. She was not usually like this, juxtaposing her always lively and loud voice and demeanour.

Her sudden shift in tone unnerved Maria. It sent shivers down her back. She was not used to this quiet, subdued Elise. She actually preferred the loud and noisy version of her, unwilling enough as she was to admit it.

The 'Beloved' turned to greet her. Elise let go of Maria's hand and turned to walk away. Maria did not want her to go. She squeezed Elise's hand. Maria felt the only warmth guiding her world leave her behind. She was left in a cold, dark cavern, filled with noise that she could never take solace in.

As the boy turned, crows flew out from the tree he was standing under. Wings flapped, and feathers fell, but the crows did not cease to fly away. An impossible, absurd amount of avians squaked and screamed and flew away.

When all the crows had finally left, the tree withered and died. It shed leaves of black, as if warning Maria to not interact with the boy further.

The boy opened his mouth. His voice sounded familiar. Maria felt chills when she heard what he said. She felt like she wanted to fall down and cut her ears off so she could never hear from him again.

He said, "Hello Reader. My name is ■"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: ECLIPSE

Maria collapsed to the ground. She held her hands to her ears. She wanted to run away but could not find the strength in her legs to do so.

She could not hear him She could not hear him-

"Hello Maria. How have you been? I hope you weren't too lonely without me. Do you remember me? Hey, stop ignoring me. Hey, take your hands off your ears. I know you can hear me." On and on that incessant, infernal voice droned. It felt like a screeching cheese grater that came into contact with metal.

Maria felt like her ears were **bleeding**.

The boy finally lost his patience. He grabbed Maria by the arm and dragged her to her feet. Her hands were slick with a black liquid. She quickly hid them.

Maria wanted to run. She wanted to hide. She just wanted to get away from 'that'. As gracefully as possible, she started to walk. However, with no walking stick, she soon bumped into someone. It was a certain person that had taken the spotlight from her in the past. However, Maria was more than happy to find a familiar face.

"Florian, get me away from that man! Please, I beg of you, just do anything as long as I am far, far away from 'that'," Maria pleaded.

"I'm sorry Maria, this is MOTHER's will. Please, forgive me. I will go to hell and back for you, but this is the one thing I cannot do. Again, I sincerely beg of you to not hold this against me." Florian said. With that, he held her tight. Maria screamed. It was a guttural, unintelligent and intangible scream that stemmed from a deep-seated aversion of said 'creature'.

Maria felt his grip loosen. With a thud, she heard him fall and her hand was taken. Fast as the wind, she ran in tow, away, away from 'that'. It was Elise that saved Maria from Florian. She had kicked Florian and pushed him to the ground. Her grip felt comfortable in the sea of dark.

Alas, it was not enough. Elise had been struck and fell. Along tumbled Maria, in her long and elegant wedding dress. The boy soon caught up.

"Maria, have you forgotten your wish? Come on, I know that you can be forgetful, but isn't this the most important thing in your life? Reader, can you believe this?!" The boy said.

Maria realised there was no escape. Everywhere she ran, everywhere she hid, ■ would find her. She got up and dusted herself off. She had a reputation to uphold, after all. Still, her hands could not stop trembling.

Maria knew MOTHER was...cruel, but why had it come to this? She didn't even do anything wrong. All she wanted to do was live an easy and carefree life.

Maria felt herself lifted from the ground. It seemed the parade was about to begin.

She felt herself hoisted onto a platform. With a jolt, it started moving. She hated it. She hated it so much! She hated it-

"So, dearest Maria, have you thought of a name for me?" An annoying, grating voice interrupted her thoughts. "I do need one, after all; I'm also a protagonist, in case you forgot. Reader, don't you remember? I was there at the very start of the story. I hope you didn't forget about me!" the boy said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN POINT FIVE: THE SUN'S PARADE

Maria sat in silence. Cheers and applause came from everywhere. Everyone was celebrating her plight. Maria did not know why she felt such crushing dread upon meeting the boy. Even when hearing his voice, she always shuddered.

"Hey, don't ignore me. If not, I'll tell Mother!" The boy said playfully.

Maria wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. Instead, she could only be like a marionette, playing on MOTHER's strings.

"Okay fine! I'll decide my own name until you can come up with one. Maybe I should ask Mom to take away your speech too since you're not using it." The boy pondered.

The boy thought for a while. Finally, he decided.

"Okay, my name will be-

He was suddenly cut off. Maria did not want to hear what he had to say. With the snap of her fingers, she muted him.

"Abuse of power will not be tolerated. Don't forget, I'm also a protagonist. You. Have. No. Control. Over. Me. This is a violation of my rights as a protagonist. I was painstakingly crafted by MOTHER, sent here to accompany YOU, bound to YOU forever, and you thank me by trying to silence me? Ungrateful brat."

Maria was stunned. Nobody she had come across had been able to speak after she had taken their privilege. She felt her forehead being flicked. A pinch of pain ran across briefly before disappearing.

Maria decided to zone out until she reached the castle. She could not bear her humiliation any more.

Soon, they arrived. She breathed a sigh of relief. She could not wait to just take a break from what's happening around her. Perhaps even a thousand year long break. Alas, 'It' would not let her.

"Hey, I told you, listen to me! My name is-" he was cut off again.

"WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT? CAN YOU JUST GO AWAY? STAY AWAY FROM ME YOU CREATURE!" Maria screamed.

"I don't care, I'm going to say it anyway. Reader, are you paying attention? This is an important moment in the story. Remember this part, okay? I will say my name here, and now. Maria will not be able to censor me."

Maria had a dejected look on her face. She had come to an appearance of acceptance.

"My name is Seth Eyre."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE PAPER CASTLE P2

Maria went straight to her room. She sat down on her bed. Sacred words appeared on the walls in a great flash of light.

'Maria, you are defying my will. Do you want another meeting with me?'

"No, Mother."

'Good. However, for every good deed you have done, there were more bad deeds. Something has to happen...'

"Please, Mother, give me one more chance!" Maria cried, to deaf ears.

'No. I will not. Plain and simple, you have sinned and committed wrong. The correction I gave you last time was already very lenient. Don't worry, this time, the correction will not come from me. Rather, it will be from someone you hold close and dear to you'

With those cold words, the descriptions disappeared. It cut like knives.

Inwardly, Maria smiled slightly. She finally had the valuable opportunity for a break. Even if she had her arms or legs torn or ripped off, at least she would be free from Reader's prying eyes, even for just a little.

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“Hello dear Reader. Remember how I told you to not get too attached to me? Apparently you should because I’m the new Protagonist. It was MOTHER’s will.” Florian said with a shrug. He did not know why it had come to this again. In his past experience, the transfer of ownership was only due to Maria’s disobedience. This was a form of punishment for her, as she was destined to shine. To deprive the sun of its light is equivalent to depriving someone of their freedom or even their life.

Florian walked out of his room. He had heard the newly-wed ‘couple’(if they could be called that) enter the castle. He wanted to pop by for a quick greeting.

He walked down the stairs. Seth was shining as usual. Unusually, however, he was smiling more than usual.

“Hello Seth. Where is Maria?” Florian asked.

And his arm came flying off.

“Keep both mine and my wife’s name out of your filthy mouth, you object. She’s in her room. Get out of my sight Servant.” He said, before turning and leaving.

Florian fell to the floor, convulsing in pain. His guttural screams of agony soon attracted the attention of Elise. She came running to his aid. Ink was spraying like a fountain. The same ink that flows through Maria’s body. However, Florian’s was darker than black, full of silent regret and anguish. It corroded whatever it landed on.

It was spraying on Elise’s dress. ‘Ah, it had come to this. That’s enough’, he thought. Florian stopped screaming. It was unbecoming of him. He shouldn’t inconvenience people with his own problems. He could scream later. He couldn’t let his mask slip in the presence of others. That was his only rule.

Screw this.

With a struggle, he stood up.

“What are you doing, you animal?! Why are you trying to get up?!” Elise cried, voice full of concern and confusion.

“Because my blood will stain your dress. I want to get a cloth to clean my mess up before seeing Maria.” Florian said. The sudden rush of pain almost made him fall.

“Don’t spout such drivel! Sit back down NOW!” She shouted. “What’s gotten into you?”

Like the obedient little dog that he was, Florian sat back down. He hated this. He hated himself for this. He wished he could grow a back bone. He buried his head into his remaining arm. Why did Seth hate him so much? Why? Why? Why? What did he do to offend him to

such an extent? Maybe he served Seth a drink with the wrong glass? Did he miss a speck when cleaning? Maybe he simply brought bad air around him? Florian just did not know.

Florian got up again, successfully this time. He went over to his severed arm. It was a pain unimaginable. Florian tore some thread from his shirt and borrowed a needle. He shouldn't cause trouble to others because of his own incompetence. He didn't even want to borrow the needle, but what could he do, right?

Holding his breath, he plunged the needle into his elbow and sewed his arm back on. Silent dark tears dripped from his eyes. Drip, drip, drip. He found a twisted solace in that. At least he had something in common with his idol. At least he was enduring, just like her. At least she and him were in the same boat. They were cut from the same cloth. Therefore, they should stick together from now on, right? At one point of time, he was even her direct subordinate who listened attentively to her woes every day without fail. That should mean that they were close, right?

Florian tore bits of his clothes. He started to wipe the flecks and puddles of ink that was staining the floors and walls. He could not bear to use the cloth of others to clean his own messes.

Once done, he discarded it and went on his merry way.

He knocked on the door.

"Maria, may I come in? I have matters to discuss with you."

There was no answer. He waited for her voice again.

"I'm coming in, Maria."

There was torn paper everywhere. Stacks and stacks of them. Florian was immediately concerned.

There were splatters of ink on the strips of paper plastered all over the walls of her room.

He felt his chest tighten.
His heart *dropped*.

There could only be one possible source for that.

"*Maria...*" he whispered.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: CONFLICT

The dinner table was silent. The air was thick and stuffy. It was suffocating. Florian did not speak. His throat felt like it had been sewn shut. There was nothing to say. All of the words

seem to have fallen onto his plate. So, he simply ate them. Seth was too busy enjoying his food to care or even notice.

Maria did not touch her food and excused herself to her room. Florian soon followed suit. He had decided to postpone his inconsequential matters to another time.

Knock knock.

“Maria, I didn’t see anything just now, okay? May I come in?”

No answer again. He walked in anyway.

He silently started picking the torn papers up. He stole a glance at Maria. She was sitting in a corner, with her head in her arms, not saying anything. Florian quietly continued to work.

She was sobbing.

Once done, he borrowed rags from Elise to wipe the ink away. He had no choice. It stained everything. The extravagant furniture, the bed, even her gown. Now, it could never be white again. Thinking that annoyed Florian..

“I didn’t want to do that, you know.” Maria said suddenly, startling Florian.

“It’s okay Maria, I didn’t see anything.” Florian replied, in a slow, heavy but comforting tone. He did not want to deal with this. He didn’t want to see Maria’s ugly side which he knew all too well.

“It was my penance, my punishment! So why...? Why’d I do that...? Why did I do that..? Why did I...? Why did...? Why..!”

“Liar. Hypocrite. Deceiver. Pretender. Plaster saint. Phony!”

Florian did not see anything nor did he hear anything. He simply closed the door and walked out of the room. That was what he always did when she got like this. He felt a twinge in his heart, tugging at his conscience.

They both bore a resentment towards Seth. They both were forced into the narrative. They both originated from the same story. So why? Why did she look at him with such empty eyes? Gone was the light and what remained, was a dim glow. What had he done to offend her? He was just following Mother’s rules, right? She would forgive him for that, right? What else could he have done? He didn’t want to get punished alongside her. When Maria got punished, it was like she took the fall for him. Florian felt a sense of indebtedness to her. At least, only one of them would be punished. Why have it been both?

Anyone would have done the same thing in his position, right? Mother was an absolute figure. She was the god of this world. Going against her order would be like going against her.

He wondered, for a heart beat, if she would forgive him for this too.

Florian walked back into the room. He approached Maria. She was sleeping peacefully on the floor, a pool of ink radiating around her.

'I'm so tired. I can't keep doing this alone.'

He reached out and touched her cheeks. They were soft. His eyes softened. Won't she just take back the protagonist-ship? He didn't want this. He didn't want to be the star of the show. It just wasn't him.

'If there is an afterlife, I don't want to be the protagonist.'

Reaching into his pocket, he took out the sewing needle he used to sew his arm back on.

And gouged her eyes out.

PART II: APOTHEOSIS

Maria's screams echoed and tore throughout the castle. Yet, no one came to her aid. Perhaps this was a metaphor for how she lived? Once spent and lame, she gets discarded.

Her wails were so, so loud. She was so.. *annoying*. Florian considered cutting her vocal chords next, but refrained from doing so. She was an actor, after all. Her voice especially was her world. Cutting her vocal chords would be like killing her.

'What if I did? Then I won't have to deal with her annoying messes anymore..'

Florian caught himself thinking about that. He was thinking about committing sin. Why was he thinking about that? The concerning thing that bothered and disturbed Florian was that he was absolutely fine with that. He knew that if he were to just slit her throat right there and then that he would not feel a thing. Not regret or guilt, but he might even have felt a slight joy. That was what truly disgusted him. That was what scared him the most.

'I really, really hate myself'

PART III: ANTITHESIS

All ended well, didn't it? There was nothing to be sad about. All ended well, didn't it? There was nothing to be sad about. All ended well, didn't it? There was nothing to be sad about.

I hope it hurts.

All ended well, didn't it? There was nothing to be sad about. All ended well, didn't it? There was nothing to be sad about. All ended well, didn't it? There was nothing to be sad about.

“Dearest Maria, are we still friends? I wish you a quick and speedy recovery! From, your dearest and most beloved Servant, Florian! P.S, I miss the old you. We all do. Please come back to us ASAP! We are looking forward to the day our cheerful and endearing cute little princess in white comes back to us!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: NOTHING HAPPENED.

Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing happened. Nothing at all. One hundred percent for sure nothing happened. *Right?*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: NOTHING HAPPENED?

Florian calmly walked out of Maria’s room. To applause. Seth was sitting on a chair. He was holding a sardonic smile. It was quite a magnificent chair, representing his status within the household. The chair was decorated with vultures and crows. Florian absolutely despised that chair. It gave him chills every time he saw it.

“Well?” Seth asked. It was clear he was waiting for a response.

“Well what?” Florian said flatly. A fire was burning in his eyes. It made those words cold.

“Out in the limelight, the audience sees you. How does it feel? Stealing the light from Maria, both literally and figuratively. It feels good, right? I feel quite jealous of you. Hearing Reader love me just as they love you would be incredible. Alas, I am but a driving force in this story.”

Florian was disgusted. He wanted to puke. How could someone even say that?

Seth got up. He looked strangely.. proud? That was the only expression Florian could use to describe him.

“I was watching all that, you know. So was Reader. Dear Reader, are you entertained? I bet it was fascinating, right”

Absolutely revolting. Florian turned around. He could not bear to look at Seth’s face any longer.

Seth gripped his shoulder. “Be a good boy, okay?” An expression of tenderness and care flashed across his face. He patted Florian’s back. With that, he left.

Florian didn’t move. He stayed still like that for a long time. Even he did not know how long he stood there for. The sewing needle he had been holding had long since clattered to the ground. His world was spinning. He longed for it to just consume him. At least then, his body would be used for nutrients to let plants grow and flower. It would be of more use than what he had been using it for.

His hands had finally dipped into true, corrosive, ink. And he felt himself melting.

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Maria felt herself dancing. It was a light headed dance. With graceful steps and elegant sways, she moved to her heart's content. Here, in her room, she was free from Mother's prying eyes. As long as she was not doing anything interesting, she would be safe.

"Oh hello, Reader. What are you doing here?" Maria asked, out of the blue with a hint of sarcasm. "Oh whatever, carry on."

She was humming a tune to herself.

"Say, what if" she mused," I got myself a new pair of eyes. That would be amazing, wouldn't it? It would be like a birthday gift. That would be perfect!"

And she did.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: SOMETHING HAPPENED.

Did something happen?