

Veneka's hands hovered above her laptop, the cursor blinking expectantly. She glanced at the word count in the corner of the screen. Her heart sank when she saw only five thousand words—six hundred of which were added today, far below her goal of seventy thousand.

She imagined the success she'd achieve once her book was finally published: her wrist aching from signing copies at book events, landing movie deals and television interviews.

She couldn't wait to gloat—she could almost taste it, but if only she could get the words onto the screen. She had done endless research, and curated multiple writing playlists, yet the words wouldn't come. When they did, they felt inadequate.

Frustrated, Veneka slapped her laptop shut. She promised herself she would continue later as she crawled out from under her heavy tiger-print blanket and opened the curtains, recoiling instinctively as the searing light flooded the room.

A ping from her phone interrupted her thoughts. It was her longtime friend Naomi:

*Wanna hang? ;)*

Veneka's fingers flew over her phone as she texted back.

*Umm, let me check my schedule.*

*Okay :)*

Veneka opened her Google Calendar. She was free today—indeed, she was free every day. She hesitated, counting to forty before she responded.

*I'm available today from 9 to 2 pm.*

*What were you thinking?*

*Just wanna chat. Over coffee, perhaps?*

*Plot Cafe? Let's say... 10?*

*Sure, I'll be there. Can't wait.*

*Me neither! Coolios, chat with you later. (^^)*

Veneka hurriedly got ready. It was already eight a.m, meaning her parents were at work, so she wouldn't have to endure their agonising lecture.

“Vene, why don't you get a real job? One that actually pays,” she mimicked their condescending tone, waving her hands as if they were there. They'd even forwarded job listings on WhatsApp and left newspaper vacancies by her door.

It was less than a ten-minute drive to the Plot Cafe, which was a quaint thatched stone building overlooking a garden. Upon entering, she was greeted by the earthy aroma of sunburnt thatch, mingled with the rich scent of coffee. The furniture was vintage, and fortunately, it wasn't too busy. She plopped onto a couch and checked in with Naomi.

*I'm here!*

*Cool, I'll be there in a few. Just caught in traffic :-|*

*Cool.*

She opened Twitter and saw an article about T. Kunaka. His new book had sold over a million copies worldwide, and he was only twenty-three. Just five years shy of her. Veneka rolled her eyes and scrolled through his Instagram, her mouth twitching as jealousy gnawed at her like a dog digging up a bone.

A waiter then approached and set a cup of coffee on the coffee table before her.

“Oh, no,” she said, raising her hand, “I haven't ordered yet.”

The waiter smiled. “Oh, we know, ma'am. The twentieth customer gets coffee on us,” he said, pointing to a chalkboard with the menu written in decorative typography. Today's promo was the Svegliati. She didn't know what that was, but she was happy to accept.

“Thank you,” she said, gratefully accepting the coffee. It smelled rich, with each sip her mind gradually drifted. The café around her blurred, and she blinked, finding herself seated on a couch across from an

interviewer on a podium in a crowded dark theater. Camera flashes illuminated the audience's silhouettes.

"Miss Chimoto?" the interviewer called. Veneka raised her eyebrows; the waiter was now dressed in office attire instead of the previous casual wear.

"S-sorry?" she asked, as her heart raced.

The interviewer smiled. "How does it feel to be the most decorated author in the world right now?"

Veneka looked behind her and saw her book, *Dragon's Breath*, projected on the wall with the words "New York Times #1 Bestseller" in bold.

"It feels... it feels unreal," she managed with a weak smile.

"You have your face plastered on multiple billboards, celebrities praising your work, social media is buzzing about you. What advice do you have for all the budding authors out there?"

Veneka's gaze drifted back to the audience. "What I'd say..." she began, her voice gaining strength, "is that the journey to success is rarely straightforward. Pursuing your dreams can feel like you're Sisyphus, constantly pushing a heavy boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down when you're almost at the top."

The audience cheered, and the interviewer nodded in agreement. "And why should they listen to you, when you haven't followed your *own* advice?"

Veneka's mouth went dry. Her seat suddenly felt hot and itchy. "Sorry?"

The interviewer's smile faded. "You heard me," he sneered. "Did you really think all this was actually yours?"

He gestured around. "This is what you *could've* achieved," he continued. "You mentioned Sisyphus but do you even know what it means to truly fight for something? To struggle every day and still find the strength to keep going?"

The audience murmured in agreement.

“I—” Veneka’s hands trembled, her heart racing as she struggled to swallow.

“Of course,” he scoffed as he rolled his eyes, “why don’t we take a look at your... *journey* to success?”

The projection behind them switched to a time-lapse of her life: lying in bed, waking up, scrolling on her phone, and sleeping, all on repeat.

Veneka’s stomach churned. Her world tripled as boisterous laughter filled the room. Her chest heaved erratically as she stood up and ran off the stage, struggling to hold back tears.

“You may run all you want but soon you’ll have to wake up and smell the coffee!” he shouted as she fell back into reality, screaming as she spilled hot coffee on herself.

She immediately grabbed napkins, patting at the burns that were beginning to sting.

She was ready to leave when Naomi arrived, who’s eyes widened at Veneka’s tear-streaked, smudged makeup.

“Oh my god?! Are you okay?” Naomi asked, but Veneka brushed past her and ran out. Naomi looked around, puzzled, and saw the waiter shrugging his shoulders, equally bewildered.