

Chapter One: A Faint Hope

I went to sleep at an uncertain time and woke up with the realization that I was 26. Today is yet another day in my worthless life. I got off my bed and looked at the window. The 8am Sun broke through the curtains, illuminating streaks of floating dust particles. Actually, the entire room reeked of dust and mould. I'm fairly sure the weird Nazca rune patterns that have appeared right above the bathroom door are a termite infestation. I would've called the landlady to complain, but I'm 2 months behind on payment so I really can't. She's a kind woman and I am misusing her kindness. Outside, the morning traffic had begun, the chirping of birds replaced by the blaring of horns. All kinds of people trampling over each other to go to work. Not me though.

I'm a NEET.

No, not the medical exam. NEET stands for Not in Education, Employment or Training. It is a polite term used to describe the dredges of society, worthless humans who leech off others. For a long time, I resisted this terminology, but now I have accepted it. It's true. I'm a failure.

Even though I did everything right. I did well in studies, moved to a city for engineering, appeared for JEE, did my degree from a decent college and then...nothing. I've never had a job. Turns out despite the constant construction and road repairs, there are no jobs for civil engineers in India. Most people from my batch ended up getting into IT fields, some got into government service. I couldn't. I'm not blaming anyone though.

Me becoming an unemployed loser was ordained, by the gods themselves. It was an unchangeable fact, an absolute event in the world's timeline. I'm not even complaining. Let me tell you the truth, being a NEET absolutely rocks. I get to wake up whenever I want, do whatever I want, and live my life on my own terms. Working people are slaves. I despise them. I am the master of my own domain. The only issue is, my domain is not exactly flourishing right now. The treasury is depleted and the lone citizen is suffering from a severe cash crunch. I've been eating fried rice for days now, and it tastes hideous. There's more artificial flavour than rice in this thing. Even my face is turning orange after a week of eating this. I've been renting an apartment in the shittiest part of the city, two blocks away from the red-light district. Now I have no money to afford even that. This of course, is a result of post-liberalization capitalist influence. The world revolves around money. I'm not blaming anyone though.

I need to buy new clothes. The last pair of shirts I bought was two years ago. I need to clean my room, but I just can't get the motivation to do so. I know I know. I'm a NEET, at home all day, why can't I just clean the room? That would cut into my internet scrolling and anime schedule. I need a job. But even if I had one, I don't know if I'd be able to keep it.

From a young age I noted a discrepancy, a distance between me and others. I never knew how to interact, how to talk to people. Maybe it was fear. Maybe some ability which others possessed but I didn't. I had difficulty understanding people. One thing led to another and I ended up becoming a recluse. I never had any close friends, never had a girlfriend. If you have no chance at winning in society, then it's better to just quit. I resent these people, but I secretly wish I was one of them. I'm not blaming anyone though.

I flipped over my mattress. This is another trick I use to minimize the number of times I need to wash them. 1 week the correct way, then another week inside out. I also do this with my clothes. It's called water conservation. Today's schedule was clear for anime. I was trying to decide whether I should rewatch Madoka Magica or finish a new show from my watchlist when the doorbell rang. It was the landlady.

I opened the door and stared blankly. Lack of human interaction had made me forget that I was supposed to smile, or at least welcome her inside the house. Inside her house.

"Rakul, payment."

"H-hi, uh, I mean, please ma'am, come inside!"

I tried to force a smile which would have creeped out anyone else, but she was unaffected. Her presence was unnerving. She was somewhere around 40, but you wouldn't know unless you looked at her Aadhaar card. She didn't look a day above 30. I attribute her good looks to being unmarried. She always wore thin low neckline kameezes with no dupatta, which combined with her cute face was rather distracting. But she was completely indifferent to it. She was quite a klutz. And a woman of few words.

"Room, mess."

"I'm sorry I was just going to clean it up."

"Ceiling, termites."

For a moment I thought she was calling me a termite but then I saw her pointing at runes above the bathroom door.

"Should have told me."

She was right, but I couldn't because I hadn't paid the rent.

"Can you call someone for this?"

"I will. Payment."

I had to say something to avoid incurring her wrath. You know, hell hath no fury et cetera. But the situation was truly beyond hopeless. I felt like Sayaka in episode 8, or like Homura in episode 12 right before Madoka saves her. But there is no Madoka coming to save me. I have no money, no prospects, no talent, no skills, no future.

I had to be honest with her.

"I had completely intended to pay my rent. In short, I have no money."

Upon hearing this, she sat on the bed, right where I was sitting a while ago and took a deep sigh. She then cocked her head to her left, and said,

"Job?"

My strategy at this point was complete humility and surrender. I had to appear as pathetic as possible to evoke sympathy, which wasn't a difficult task given the circumstances.

"When I came to this city I had hopes, dreams and aspirations. But they lie in ruins. I wanted to make my family proud, but now they hate me. My parents no longer pick up my calls. I am without a friend in this cruel world. Nobody to rely on for emotional, or more importantly financial support. I am but a person of poor means. I have no job. Never had any."

"Bank balance?"

"327 rupees, and 89 paise."

"Education?"

"I did a BTech in Civil Engineering from xxx, which wasn't my first choice, but owing to my JEE scores it was the best I could get."

She leaned forward, rubbing her chin with her thumb, seemingly deep in thought. She then looked at the room, which was in a state of disarray. Finally looked at me, scanning me from head to toe. Wait, maybe she was asking me these details (which I had already told her when I joined as a tenant a few years ago) because she was going to get me a job! I would be eternally grateful if that were the case.

She began to speak, but then stopped, as if she were struggling to find the right words. After a couple of false starts, she spoke,

"You are a man?"

I am, I do not have a beard, or a deep voice, or a muscular build, but I am a man.

"Too bad, woman could sell body to make money."

Upon hearing this my heart sank. My landlady, having seen my present condition saw me as fit for nothing more than prostitution. Worse, even that wasn't possible. The faint glimmer of hope I had had disappeared.

"Ma'am, is there any way you can help me?"

She rested her elbow on the bed, and then her face on her palm, staring out the window. She was probably thinking about ways to extract rent from me. She let out a big yawn, possibly realising that I was a non-performing asset whose arrears should be written off. Her attention went to my dust-laden desk, with a pile of textbooks in the shelf attached to it. She probably wanted to sell them. She observed them with curiosity, until a glint sparked in her eyes.

"Math."

"Huh?"

"You know math?"

"Yes, I uh studied it at an engineering level, I'm very good at it actually".

That was a lie, in case it wasn't obvious. I had several KTs in math and had to take re-exams to pass, but I was honest enough to not cheat in them.

She got up, smiled and pointed a finger at me.

"Job."

"Job?!"

"For you. Teacher."

"Teacher?!"

"At school. Will you do?"

"I don't have any experience, but I can try. I'm qualified enough to teach school children, at least on paper."

"Good. I will talk to principal."

When she said that I felt like a child being admitted to school rather than a teacher. But I was happy. Very happy. So happy that I had tears in my eyes. She was my saviour. She gave me a handkerchief to wipe my tears. In a moment of exuberance, I grabbed her and hugged her, all while thanking her and promising not to disappoint her. This was going to be the moment I fixed my life and became a functional member of society.

But after she left, I realised that I had no experience working a job. Also, dealing with kids? Oh no. I hope the school she was talking about is one of those IB schools with rich kids, or one of those convent schools that maintain discipline and have strict teachers. In my desperation for a job, I didn't bother asking her what school it was and what my salary would be. Maybe I'll have to appear for an interview first. But how do I prepare for the interview! And clothes, oh I need to buy new clothes, at least a new shirt. But what if-

Beep!

I got a notification on my phone. It was the landlady.

"You start Monday.

Brijnath High School.

18k."

I looked up the school on Google and it's apparently some local state school. Well, can't be too bad. 18k isn't much, but it's a start. In fact, I would say that teaching is perfect for me. It isn't physically exerting, and the kids will listen to you because you're older than them. There are more women in teaching than any other profession. Maybe I'll get a girlfriend too (among the teachers that is, not the children). My NEET days are about to be over. A new era begins. All I have to do is teach 2+2 to a bunch of kids for 5 days a week. How could I possibly fuck this up?

Oh, I had no idea.