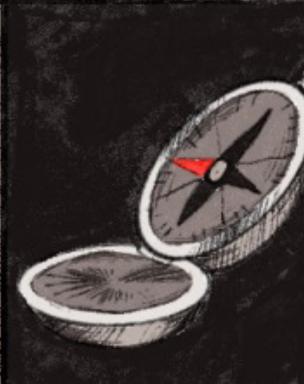
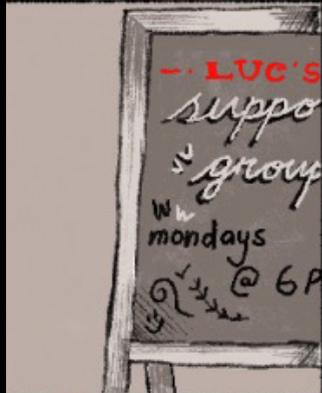


RUFESCENT.



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PART I



The ground shakes violently under Sanaa's feet. It trembles and quakes and she feels it reverberate inside of her—the weight of the night barely grounding her. In the distance, the train approaches, its presence made known only through the tremors that run across the ground and into Sanaa. The lights on the train are off, barely a sound made as it quietly but surely approaches the station.

Around her, people swarm to the front of the platform. Families try their hardest to stay as silent as possible as they push and pull. Children are held close to their mothers and fathers, fear and confusion gripping them by their throats and forcing them to hold in their cries. Sanaa follows the world around her just the same, lost amidst the crowd save for her father's hand held tightly around hers, the only thing keeping her from floating away. Her mind feels thick from the air around her—strained and full of the hopes of everyone else, full of wanting to be free, full of wanting to escape.

She feels it choke her. And at nine years old, she doesn't even know why.

She doesn't know why they ran from their home so late at night. She doesn't know why her father rushed into her room panicking and holding a suitcase half-filled with their clothes. She doesn't understand why her mother held her so close last night, begging her through barely choked back sobs as she asked her to take care of her brother. All Sanaa knows is she promised her mother yes, all she knows is she would never let her brother go.

On the platform, her mother holds her brother, Asif, he's 4 years old and knows far less than Sanaa. She can barely see him where she stands hidden behind her father, holding on tightly to her hand. The ground threatens to break apart as people run, their steps thundering almost as loud as the train as it finally stills on the tracks. People swell all around her and she feels her body fold as every inch of her world becomes people, it becomes arms and legs and eyes that follow her every move, her every breath, touched by someone just like her. Lost and confused around everyone else.

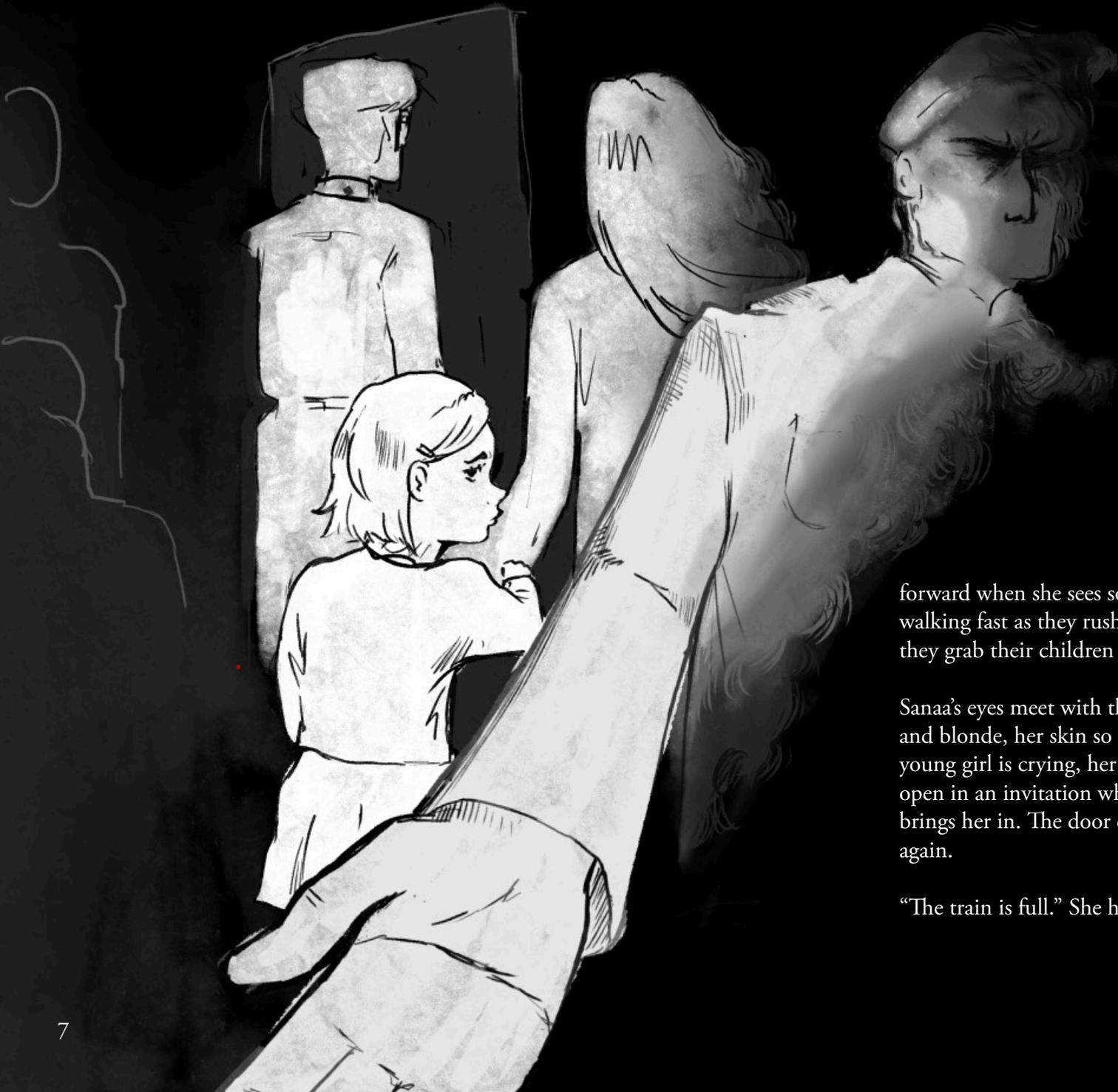




There's a harsh yank on her arm as she is pulled forward, and pulled out of her thoughts. Brought back into the present as her head suddenly fills with the hammering noise of people's whispers, her father tells her to come fast and Sanaa stumbles over her feet as she rushes forward, trying her hardest to keep up with her family. Behind her, Asif begins to snuffle, she can hear her mother whisper to him, trying her hardest to calm him down, before he can cry. Noticing her brother's discomfort, Sanaa pulls on her father's arm, pointing his attention towards her mother.

Her father nods, smiling at Sanaa before leading her to her mother and taking Asif into his arms. Once in her father's arms, he falls curiously silent, so overwhelmed by everything around them that he has fallen quiet. Not entirely sure why, she feels relief at her brother's compliance in their escape. Even if she doesn't fully understand, she knows they are running from their home.

Slowly the people around her begin to fall away, a space for her carves out as they approach the front of the platform. Her father grows clear in her view, and they step to stand closer to him. The train looms over her, it's large and quiet, the only promise of people inside are the smallest shifts she sees in the curtains by the windows. There are hushed whispers and scarce words exchanged so late at night, much less on the train.



It is only when Sanaa turns to peek from behind her mother's legs that she spots the guard, tall and terrifying; he stands in front of the train's entrance. One arm extended to block the entrance to the train, and the other at attention by his side. His face is dimly lit in the moonlight and the uniform cap he wears casts dark shadows that hides his face from Sanaa, leaving his face to be a terrifying mystery. It warps and smokes inside her head, the guard is an entity straight from her nightmares, the only thing standing between her and her family finding safety tonight.

The conversation her father has with him is lost on her ears, the words so quiet and so rushed that her mind races trying to keep up. Her mother's hand begins to tremble as the guard takes a step towards them, lowering his arm. Sanaa takes this as them finally being allowed on the train and is about to take a step forward when she sees someone come up from behind her. Another family, walking fast as they rush inside. They smile gratefully at the guard before they grab their children and bring them in.

Sanaa's eyes meet with that of a young girl from the family, her hair light and blonde, her skin so pale it seems to glow under the moonlight. The young girl is crying, her arm reaching out to Sanaa, her mouth about to open in an invitation when her father wraps a hand over her mouth and brings her in. The door closes behind them and Sanaa doesn't see them again.

"The train is full." She hears the guard say. Pointedly looking at her father.

“They are children, they are barely nine and four. Their whole lives are ahead of them. Please sir, do not let my children die tonight.”

Her mother bends to Sanaa’s height, and she feels tears build up behind her eyes, but she knows to stay quiet, she knows it is dangerous to make noise, she promised her father she’d be quiet. Sanaa bites down on her cheek, chewing on the inside to abate the tears. Her mother holds her face gently, looking back to the guard and her father. She catches a glimpse of the guard turning to look down at her before lifting his face back up.

“You should know the train is full.”

“They are small—they will not take up any space.” Her father says.

Her mother holds her face, pulling gently to shift her eyes from the guard to her. She smiles at her but it is sad. And Sanaa doesn’t know what to do, so she wipe away her mothers tears, she hopes if she keeps every promise it will be okay.

“My dear baby, you’ll be okay. You’ll take care of each other, you’ll always have each other.”

Sanaa wants to ask her what she means, but she just nods.

“Never let go of your brother, hold him tight and take care of him. He is your everything. The both of you only have each other now.”

“Mama...”

“It’s okay,” Her mom says, quickly cutting her off, “You’ll be okay, baby. You’ll always be okay.”

The guard has shifted to the side, and the door is open. Her mother stands, turning to her father who shakily puts down her brother next to her. Instinctively her hand reaches for his, grasping tightly around tiny fingers. She remembers her promise, she knows she will keep it





“We’ll take the next train.” Her father says, his face is stoic but Sanaa hears the way his words tremble. “We’ll meet you when you get off at the final stop. The train will run through twelve more stops, don’t get down, don’t listen to anyone. Don’t trust anybody except for your brother. Never let him out of your sight.”

Sanaa feels herself tilt, the train begins to rumble and the guard clears his throat. Her father sighs.

“I promise, Papa.” Sana says, her words barely making its way out of her throat. She fights to be heard but the ground starts to shake again. Her father smiles, and leans forward. She feels her feet lift off the ground, and when they come back down she is inside the train.

“We’ll take the next one.” Her father says again.

Do you promise? She wants to ask.

“We promise.”

The guard slams the door shut, and Sanaa’s world is flooded with darkness. Her brother squeezes her hand, and the two take small steps to a window, feeling their way through the cabin of the train as they find a seat and quickly clamber on, squeezing between other people. She lifts her head over the window, searching through the crowd for her parents. Next to her, her brother does the same, his eyes barely seeing over the bars.

“Where are they, Sanaa?” He whispers.

She catches her father waving, and a sinking feeling begins to crawl inside her chest. She points in their direction. “There,” she says, “Papa is waving. Mama’s next to him.”



Her brother waves back as the world begins to melt, the train speeds up, and her parents blend in with the crowd, swallowed by the people on the platform.

She knows her father would keep waving, she knows he would keep waving till the train disappeared through the tunnel. She knows he'd wave even if she couldn't see him anymore.

"Why didn't they come with us?" He asks.

"I...I don't know..." And Sanaa doesn't know. She was nine years old, there was so much she didn't know. "I'm scared, Asif." She admits quietly to her brother, "I'm scared of the dark."

Her brother grips her hand in his, squeezing tightly, "Me too."

They turn to face each other, tears brimming in their eyes. All around them, the world is pitch black. Sanaa feels as though they are floating, lost and untethered in a whole new world, her body feels weightless in the pool of black they have found themselves in. She holds on tightly to her brother's hand, only kind of mooring in the sea they were drowning in. Her eyes snap shut as she pulls him close to her, her mind haunted by the presence of the people around her. The air in the cabin felt thicker than the platform, she felt like she could reach out and grab it, so heavy with the weight of want.



Fear flooded the cabin just as much as the dark and Sanaa worried if she opened her eyes she'd see the people around them, floating just like her, bright eyes and faces hidden in the dark, all of them watching her.

"Will we be okay?" Her brother asks.

Sanaa opens her eyes. She sees her brother's earnest face, so open and so honest, so full of the promises she'd made to her parents. An anchor begins to tie itself around her ankles, a weight begins to ground her.



Her brother smiles, and Sanaa feels the smallest bit of light between the two of them.

"I'll never let you go. I promise."

Her brother nods, and settles down beside her, his head falling gently on her shoulders. She watches carefully for a while until he falls asleep, counting down from a hundred till his breathing evens out. When she is sure her brother is sleeping peacefully she peers out the windows. The rumble of the train is loud, and fills the air around them. Outside, the trees melt into one-another, day break glistens in the far south.



She carefully peers over the bars, craning her head to see if a train was following behind them. The wind licks at her hair, pulling on the ribbons as she stretches to see. She wonders if they're right behind them, she wonders if her parents found a seat. She wonders if they can see the same trees painted across the hills that she sees. The wind is strong and cold, and bites her skin where she leans against the cold bars. She doesn't realize it's pulled at her ribbons until her hair comes undone, pulling her ribbon out of her hair, and with the wind.

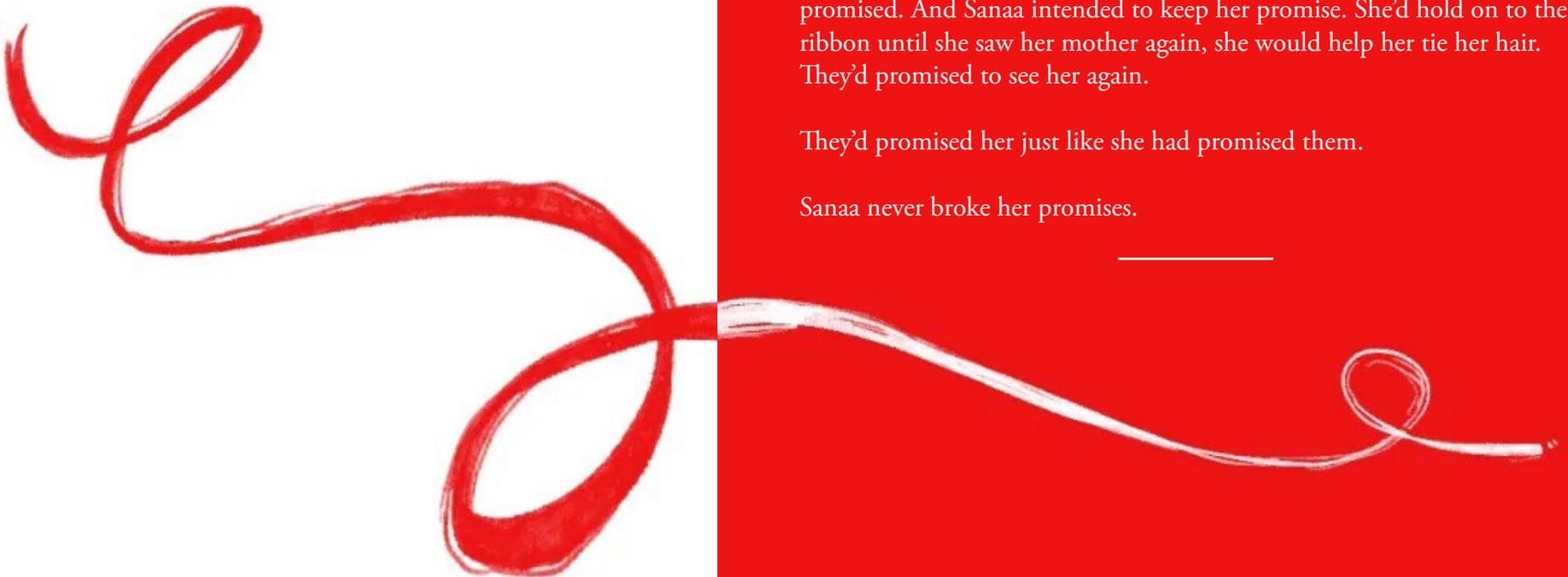
Sanaa gasps, jumping up to grab it as it slips between her fingers and is pulled away from her. She feels for the other one, breathing the softest sighs of relief when she feels silk between her fingers. She still had one. They were her mother's ribbon, the only thing she had to show from her.

She settles back into the seat, pulling her brother back onto her shoulder. She unties her hair, and carefully ties the ribbon around her wrist. She knots it tightly.

She would keep this ribbon safe. She would keep her brother safe. She had promised. And Sanaa intended to keep her promise. She'd hold on to the ribbon until she saw her mother again, she would help her tie her hair. They'd promised to see her again.

They'd promised her just like she had promised them.

Sanaa never broke her promises.





PART II



When Angus dreams, he dreams in technicolor, a landscape complete with hues that blanket him in a false sense of security. The sky seems that much more blue and clearer, the white of the clouds so soft that it almost feels like if he were to reach out and touch them they'd feel like cotton in his hands. The grass was so much greener, the world around him brighter. Safer. He's walking around aimlessly, a soft smile playing on his lips, the sound of bells ringing around him and when he looks up he's behind a large counter, the view of a bakery spread out before him—delicate pastries and loaves of bread on display to his side, carefully carved wooden furniture across from him, people seated chatting away, a lively tune echoes around the walls. The faint smell of coffee sticks to everything.

He turns to the entrance, his eyes softening and filling with tears as he takes in the sight of his father standing at the door. He says something to Angus, the words unintelligible and muffled. He struggles to understand what his father says, stumbling around the counter as he tries to get closer to him, the scenery around him melting away as he reaches for his father, his hand landing on the handle of the door. He frantically pushes it outward, stumbling forward as he leaves his bakery.

The music has all but faded, the smell of fresh bread and coffee no longer lingering on him, outside the world is at a standstill, the air stagnant and the sky a dulling blue. An eerie sort of peace overwhelms him and he finds his eyes drawn to a tree to the right of him. Its large branches overlook a circle of benches around its trunk, its leaves are accompanied by delicate white flowers, a sign of spring fast approaching. And yet, even in its tranquillity Angus finds himself at a knife's edge. His balance falters, he kilters forward as he feels the sharp blade dig into his feet.



There is something precarious about the peace in his dream. Everything stands so still he feels unnerved at the world's silence. He fears the motion of a single breath taken in. He steps forward, leaning further off the edge of the knife, below him is an endless abyss. He takes another step, and another till he has fallen off the cliff entirely. His heart begins to race, and his eyes close shut.

Before he can hit the ground there's a pause. A sharp intake of air. His dream stills and his eyes flash open, back in his room Angus feels the knife digging into him still. Yet now, it is not as jarring so much as it is numbed. The dull sort of flat pain that comes with having recently lost his left leg.

The dizzying effects of his dream cling to him sluggishly, weighing on his bones and sitting heavily on his chest. Every breath he takes pulls him under. Slowly, he sits up, inching backwards till his back hits the wall behind him, his eyes roam the barren room, the mattresses on the ground are flat and worn, the blankets that cover them thinning and frayed. The walls of the room are empty, ghosts of what life once inhabited the space. There is a single window in the room, and all he can see of the world outside is framed by it. He recognizes the tree, as tall and large as it had been in his dream, except no delicate flowers dotted its branches, rather, they lay fallen on the ground, brown and withered. Telling of the winter that would soon arrive. The benches that circled the trunk long since deteriorated, the wood broken in and burned, painted over with symbols of rebellion. A silent protest against the violence they were forced to endure.



Angus sits still, moments after having woken up, only beginning to string together to form a sense of time. The air is thick with the kind of silence that tells of a long fevered sleep, where his ears feel full of cotton and his mouth feels dry. There is barely a brief pause after he awakes, before the noise hits him—his sister is crying, her voice shrill and loud, his mother’s voice rising just barely above it as she yells. Angus barely makes out a few words, his mind catching up quickly. She’s asking for them to pack faster, to pack only essentials, leaving what they can behind. It is a procedure he is familiar with at this point, he pushes himself to the edge of the bed, close to the wall where his wheelchair rests. He begins to reach for it, his fingers just barely grazing the arm when his door swings open. His younger brother stands in the frame—at seventeen, Luca is tall. Taller. His hair had grown long brushing just past his ears and the glasses he wore tipped slightly to the right more than the left, leaving his younger brother with the kind of headache that never went away. He held himself with the same kind of posture and resignation that Angus had once seen in himself, the kind he saw in their father. He saw his brother’s eyes shifting quickly from him to the wheelchair, and without a word, he moved forward and pulled the wheelchair close to him. Angus belatedly realizes what is happening as Luca comes to lift him.

“Luca, I can do it, you should go help Ma—” his words swiftly cut off as his brother lifts him up and into the wheelchair. Angus looks up at him, and his brother looks down wordlessly. He had never been all that talkative growing up, he’d always been a quiet child, but the kind of silence that permeated from Luca felt heavy and intense. It felt guilty. Words and reassurance swirl inside Angus’ mind, all the things he wanted to say to him, all the advice and comfort he’d imagined imparting. Eventually, his brother speaks up, cutting through the thickness of their silence, “This is no trouble,” he says softly “Don’t worry about it, everything is under control. I just finished packing up all the food and I already tied up the bundles of clothes.”

He'd filled in the gaps that Angus left without so much as a complaint. He sometimes wished Luca had complained, that he'd whined, and cried, that he had told him it was unfair, that he was still so young. But there was no time to be young during a war.

There had been no time for Luca's childhood.

Angus stares at Luca, "I still need to pack mine."

"I packed it." Comes the gentle but firm response.

He bites his tongue. Lately, Angus felt more like a child than a man, at seventeen and twenty-one, Luca took up more than Angus could, he seemed to carry the weight of their family on his shoulders and it aged him in a way that sometimes if Angus looked too long at his brother's face he started to look more like their father than himself. It was a bitter sort of realization.

Angus shifts uncomfortably in the wheelchair, looking up at Luca. Resigning himself from putting up a fight he sighs, "When do we leave?"

"Right now. Ma said that you and I have to leave first."

Angus feels his heart drop, "No—Luca, we can't, you, you have to take the food and supplies and we can't leave Ma and Aida behind, you have to take them first."

Luca frowns, his eyebrows creasing as his gaze drops from Angus' face to the floor, he sways from right to left, his fingers scratching at his wrists, "I'll be carrying the food and blankets in a backpack and, Uncle Ben will help escort Ma and Aida along with our clothes. Ma's over there right now. So, we can leave. Everything's... everything's okay." His eyes peek back up, looking to Angus for approval, for some kind of signal that it was okay.

Angus nods, reaching forward to cup his brother's wrists, "You're right, you've taken care of everything well—we will be okay."

"So we can leave?" His voice is small. And Angus has to remind himself that his brother is small. No matter how tall, no matter how his eyes crinkled the same as his father, Luca was still so small.

Angus smiles, "Yes, we can leave."

His brother nods, quickly moving to the back of his wheelchair as he grips the handles and pushes Angus forward, they collect his backpack on their way out and once outside he sees Uncle Ben across the street. His mother's beside him, tying up a bundle, his younger sister clinging to the backs of his mother's thighs. They do not see him but he prays they will see each other soon.

He hopes for their safe arrival.



Luca pushes him carefully. The journey from their home to the new base is quiet and Luca makes sure to take the main streets, the ones that aren't buried in rubble and stone. And yet the silence puts him on edge, he feels the knife dig into him, dig into flesh that wasn't there.

"It isn't safe to stay on the main roads. We're far too exposed here and I don't want you getting hurt." Angus feels Luca's grip tighten behind him, his pace picking up ever so slightly. "We should take the one by the river. It's crowded by the trees and we won't be as exposed."

"No," Luca says, "Ma told us to take the paved roads, we can't risk something happening to your wheelchair."

Angus scoffs, "My wheelchair? Luca, my wheelchair doesn't matter as much as our lives—as much as your life!" He can tell he's said the wrong thing when they stop.

There's a sharp breath drawn, the faintest mumble of words, he barely catches what his brother has said apart from the word 'worthless' and even then he doesn't have the opportunity to inquire further when Luca starts to push him again. Except this time instead of moving forward they turn inwards, following a winding path that ahead quickly turns to dirt and pebbles.

"I will not argue with you over worth. If you are sure this road is safer, then we will take it."

Angus purses his lips, unsure how to respond to such a statement, but he resigns to accept the smallest of acquiescence from his brother. "As long as you are safe," he says, "That is all that matters to me."

Luca sighs, "...I know."

They fall silent after, words failing the both of them as they sink into their respective roles—roles that neither of them intended to take up and yet they did regardless. The weight of the burden Angus carries inside of him seems to weigh down on the both of them even harder in the moment, pushing down on the wheelchair and slowing them down. Briefly, he wonders if it would be easier if Luca had just gone ahead. But he refrains from voicing such thoughts, he doubts it would do much good to talk of how he truly feels, not when he could so easily be misinterpreted to mean he regrets pushing Luca out of the way. Angus wouldn't change a single moment from their past, even if it promised him being able-bodied, not when his actions ensured his brother was still here.



The housing is a large space, with wide walls and tall ceilings. The kind of place that once would have been a beautiful home. But now Angus found himself packed next to others, every inch of the house offering whatever shelter it could to whoever came looking. Tents were pitched inside with families huddling in groups, children hurried around in tattered coats and fraying scarves. And yet, even with the boundaries of the tents people were welcoming.

Luca led Angus to a corner of the room they'd entered, wasting no time in unpacking and setting up their own quarters. He doesn't ask for help, and Angus, caught in their whirlwind from earlier, keeps quiet. Once their tents are up and Luca has unpacked to the best of their abilities they see their mother and sister walk in, escorted by their neighbors. A knot that had tied itself so tightly in his chest begins to unravel at the sight of his family safe in front of him.

They sit down, weary and exhausted, their bodies pushed to their limits in their escape. Angus feels lost, unsure how to offer them any kind of comfort at the moment—he couldn't help ease the pain in his mother's feet. He couldn't hold his sister while she slept. He watches silently as Luca brings out their flasks of soup and they pass it around in small amounts till everyone has what they can. Angus makes sure to leave a share behind so Luca can have a little more. Feigning being full when pressed for more.

"I've had my fill, you should finish it so it doesn't go to waste." He receives a few glances of uncertainty but he holds firm. They don't believe him, and Angus does not argue besides to ensure Luca takes his share. They both know there is no fill to be had during the war.

His family goes to sleep soon after, all but his mother having succumbed to the pressures of their day. He was lying next to her now, Luca having helped him to their tent before lying down himself. He looks over at where his mother sits by the wall, her face darkened by the shadows of all she's been through. Angus wishes he could wash it all away for her.

Conversations with his mother had not always been so difficult, and yet lately it felt like they spoke different languages. Never able to understand each other and never able to speak without yelling. He wants to ask how the day had been for her, if it was tiring, if her feet hurt and if there was anything he could do to help. But the words are sharp as they form in his mouth, sticking to the sides of his throat and threatening to hurt. So he closes his eyes and swallows.

Tonight was not the night for difficult conversations.

His mother falls asleep sitting up, and Angus falls asleep watching her finally find peace in her sleep.



Angus' ears feel like they are bleeding, loud ringing echoes all around him, he feels it reverberating inside of him, shaking him to his very bones. He is barely half-awake when he is pulled up by his arms, Luca is yelling at him, and Aida clings to his back, tears streaming down her face as she cries. Angus stumbles upward before quickly falling back down, pain shooting upwards and dizzying him, made worse by the sound of the sirens.

"We have to go, Angus, we need to leave!" Luca is still yelling at him and Angus barely registers the fear gripping his brother by the neck as he is pulled over his shoulders. Their mother runs forward, grabbing little Aida and lifting her in her arms. "Grab him, we don't have time to pack up, we have to leave now," her words are frantic and hurried and Angus feels his world tilt.

Luca drags him forward and begins to pull him closer, his arms tuck behind his knees and it takes all of Angus' strength to push him away. "What are you doing?" He yells, stumbling away, and barely catching his balance against the wall.

"I—I'm lifting you like Ma told me to. We need to go."

Angus shakes his head, "We won't survive without food and water, grab your backpack it'll help us if you can carry it. Don't waste your strength on me!"

Luca falters, the color quickly draining from his face as he glances back to his mother, the both of them look so scared, and Angus almost regrets being so difficult, "Ma—you understand—have him carry the food and water, I'll take care of myself."

His mother frowns, "You are more important to me than a flask of soup, there will be no argument on this—Luca will carry you."

Luca steps towards him, his hands extending, but Angus doesn't feel like letting them push their safety away. Not again. Not for him. Not when he can't even protect them. He shoves Luca aside, "Carry the bag. Or I will not come at all."

"Angus, please, don't do this," Luca begs, his voice small. So small. But Angus doesn't falter. "A flask of soup will keep you alive. It will do more for you than I can. Carry the bag."

He sees the way Luca tenses, his body stilling as he takes a step back. As he does, his mother takes a step forward. "No son of mine will see themselves this way—you are worth more than you believe in this instance. Do not let your emotions cloud your judgment. Let him carry you."

"The food is more important."

His mother frowns, her brows dipping in the same way they used to when Angus would cry to her at night over a bad dream. Those nights seem so far away now. "Your father would hate to hear you talk of yourself like this."

"Well he isn't here to hear me is he? If he was maybe then Luca wouldn't have to break himself to do what I should be doing. I should protect you Ma—but I can't. So let me help in the way I can. I will take care of myself, let me take care of you the only way I can."

His mother purses her lips, she studies him, her eyes pleading with him, but they don't have much time left and Angus knows she has no choice if she wants them all to leave soon. She turns to Luca, "Do what your brother says. But help him into his wheelchair, and see to it that he is out of the building. He will take care of himself after that."

There's a sort of venom laced in her words that does not go unnoticed by Angus, nor by Luca who tries to argue as his mother turns to leave.

“He is still your older brother Luca. Do what he says.”

Angus stares, watching as his mother shares one final glance at him before turning around, he’s not sure if it had been the trick of the light or if she had really been crying. But he chooses to dispel the thought as Luca helps him into the wheelchair.

“Please, let me carry you,” Luca pleads once more.

“Everything I did was to protect you. But none of that matters if you do not want to live yourself.”

Luca frowns, his hands shaking where they hold Angus’ hands. “What about you?” He asks quietly, “What about your life—you deserve to be protected too.”

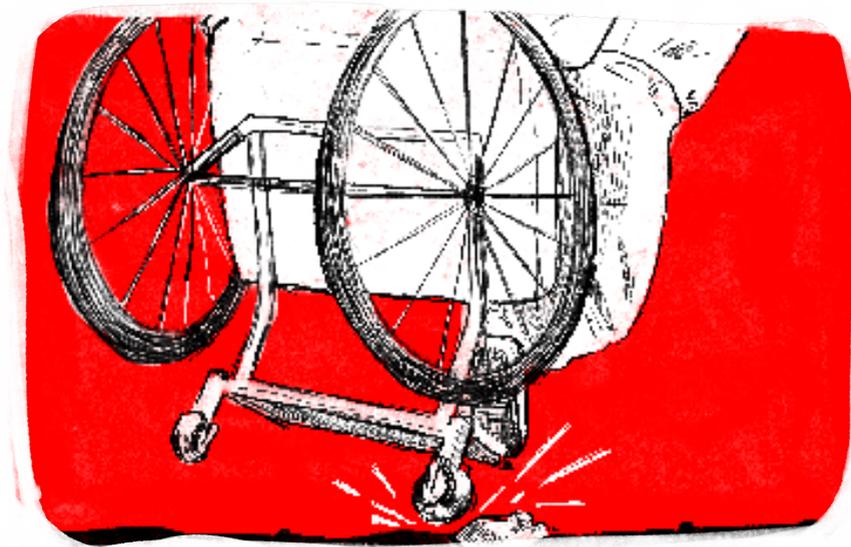
He lets go of Angus’ hands, reaching to the side where he grabs the bag of food and throws in the spare water bottles lying around their tent. There is not much food left inside, but any amount is valuable in times of need. Luca says nothing more as he throws it over his shoulder and moves to wheel Angus outside to the roads. They exit through the back, and Luca rushes them outside, they catch a glimpse of their mother and Aida with their neighbours, and Luca points towards them. “Follow us, Uncle Ben is leading us to the new shelter. It’s a bunker past the old park.”

Angus nods, his hands resting on his wheels, “I’ll be there.”

Luca doesn’t say anything, he simply nods and turns around, running forward to help their neighbours carry more. Angus tries his hardest to keep up, and for a while he does, he is right there whenever Luca turns around in search of him. And then the forest begins, the path by the river they’d taken on their way, a long winding dirt road littered with stones with dips along the way. His heart hammers louder than the haunting echoes of the sirens, beating loud against the bone of his ribs, the kind of fear that also signalled defiance. The cadence echoed his want to stand as his own guardian, to be able to protect his family in the ways he could.

However, determination is not enough to protect a person from the horrors of their reality.

A sudden dip and fracture in the road sends Angus and his wheelchair into the harsh mud. Pain etched itself into his features, it stung to even breathe.



His body was giving up and there was nothing he could do about it. Angus was exhausted, his hands hurt where they gripped the wheels and the journey had begun to take a toll on his body and mind. Fear crawls into the crevices of his being, the realization that he had failed washing over him. In that moment, laden with his worst fears and inability to keep his promise to Luca, Angus confronted the notion that perhaps the refuge he sought, the refuge he had sacrificed so much for, had never been his to live through.

Acceptance of this fact comes easily, it is the truth that he never got to say goodbye to his family that anchors him. His eyes begin to close as exhaustion seeps into him, his consciousness slowly slipping away. Faintly he hears people yelling, he isn’t sure who, all he knows is that soon it will no longer hurt.



Someone grabs him by his right arm, another grabs him by his left. He is lifted into the air and he feels his body drag across the floor. Someone is yelling in his ear, muffled words asking him to keep his eyes open, to breathe, in the distance he thinks he can hear his mother scream his name. When he's laid down on the floor again, he feels her arms wrap around him tight.

"You're okay, oh my poor child you're okay, why did you do that—Oh you're okay, he's okay, Luca, Luca he's okay Luca are you listening what are you looking at, Luca!" His mother's words are incoherent and his eyes find difficulty focusing, the first thing he sees as he begins to come to the ghostly paleness of his brother's face, he stares outside his eyes transfixed on something on the ground.

"It's father's compass," Angus mumbles, his speech slow and slurred. There's a pause between Angus' words and what happens after. Luca turns to face his brother. A shared glance. A look. A promise. And Luca runs. He runs forward, pushing past the groups of men that reach forward to stop him, slipping past them all, he runs as fast as he can to where Angus had fallen. Where his father's compass lay on the ground.

The compass his father had given him on his seventeenth birthday, the last birthday they'd celebrated together. Luca grabs it, sliding onto the floor, the sky lights up as he does so, dark smoke begins to envelop them and the doors to the bunker begin to close. Luca turns on his knees, stumbling as he stands. Angus feels himself yell, he thinks he's yelling, he's sure he's screaming but he can't feel the way his throat rips as he calls for his brother all he feels is fear. Fear that this time Luca wouldn't make it.



The compass is thrown forward, landing a few feet front of Angus, the glass case cracking where it hits the ground and still Luca doesn't move. The same fear that grounds his voice, grounds his brother outside.

"Help him," Angus whispers, "Somebody help him," he begs, his voice clinging to his throat, barely making its way out. There are seconds where nothing happens, where shock holds people in their place. Then there are seconds where commotion explodes. Two men rush to hold the door while others run forward, Luca is grabbed by his arms and pulled forward. Someone yells in his face to start running, and he is pushed through the doors in the last second.

Luca collapses as the doors slam shut behind him. Angus scrambles forward, pushing everyone aside in his path to his brother. He grabs him, pulls him close, holding him to his chest. The two of them are shaking, their bodies rattling from having just escaped the knife's edge.

"Why did you do that, that was so stupid," Angus scolds.

"I didn't want you to feel like a burden," Luca is crying, he is shaking, his hands fisting in Angus' shirt, "I'm so sorry you had to save me, I didn't know how to repay you, and you loved the compass father gave you. I—I didn't know what else to do!"

Angus holds him close, his ears ringing from his brothers admission.

“There is nothing to repay. Your life is my responsibility.” It seemed so obvious to Angus that it would be Luca he chose to save over and over again, no matter how many times it meant, it would end the same for himself. To Angus, it had been duty, but to Luca, it had been debt.

With Luca cradled in his arms, time seemed to warp around them, suddenly they were fifteen and eleven, they were ten and six, they could be any age throughout any point in their life and Angus would care for Luca just the same. In choosing to save him he knew this much to be true—the weight of his sacrifice had forged a connection that transcended duty and their shared responsibility, they owed each other nothing short of love and loyalty.

Angus, although haunted by the fear of being a burden to his family, and of shadowing his brother in the weight of the aftermath, had finally begun to see a light at the end of that tunnel.

“You were never a burden,” Luca admits through choked sobs. “You’ve always been my brother, you could never be a burden to me.”

Angus hides his face in their embrace; there is liberation to be found in the unwavering love a family offers. And he knew now what he did not want to know before. He was not marked by a disability or by what he endured. He was defined by the love, and care given to him by those around him.

He had never been a burden. He never would be. And Luca’s promise said as much.





PART III



The ocean is twelve-thousand, seven hundred and eighty-five feet deep. At a thousand feet deep, everything underneath the ocean is submerged entirely in darkness as sunlight can no longer penetrate. In waters that deep, fish of all kinds coexist. No matter the shape, size or color. The ocean does not care for such traits. All who inhabit the ocean, inhabit the space themselves, with little concern for the happenings of other creatures. Sometimes Marella wished she was a fish twelve-thousand feet deep, so far down that not even light could touch her, hidden so far in the Earth that she could exist far away from people's judgement, their peering glances, their eyes on her body that made her skin crawl and her stomach churn.

At twelve thousand feet deep, Marella would be untouchable. At twelve-thousand feet deep she wouldn't have to worry about making it through the night when war raged outside her windows, she wouldn't have to worry about making it out of her homeland where the lemon tree she planted with her father had been burned down when her family home had been caught under an attack. She wouldn't have to worry about learning a whole new language or figuring out why the way she spoke made people look at her differently.

At twelve- thousand feet deep she would be hidden amongst the gentle curtains of reefs at the bottom, not waiting in a line at an advertising firm, her palms sweating around the resume in her hand. Her skirt was too tight on her, and her hair stuck to the sweat on the back of her neck. Marella could feel people watching her, their eyes following her. She could hear their cruel whispering. She didn't feel like a person in moments like these— she felt like a rare species captured and placed in a tank for everyone to see and judge. She felt like she was on display. She felt like a fish out of water.



Her chest rose and fell with a rapid need to get air into her lungs, she tried to take deep breaths, and yet they felt too shallow, like they weren't enough. She was acutely aware of her presence in this office. The lights were a harsh white, bearing down on her, casting on her an uncomfortable spotlight. She was sitting on a cheap leather chair, the kind that reminded her of the chairs at her dentist's office her mom used to take her to when she was ten, the leather peeling and sticking to the backs of her legs. She awkwardly shuffled, trying to get the tiny scraps of leather off her skin.

Every single shift in her seat felt out of place, she couldn't tell if she was imagining the eyes on her, or if people really were openly staring. She couldn't tell if the things she was hearing were her mind being mean or if they were actually being said. Her breathing was getting quicker, and the leather stuck to her thighs wasn't coming off easily.

Someone was harshly whispering to her left, "I can't believe what our country has come to—I mean really, why do we need to let everyone in? Why do we have to sacrifice our safety for these criminals?"

She considered scratching the leather off, maybe that would help. And if she stopped sweating. She really wished she would stop sweating.

"I saw on the news recently that our government doesn't even want them here, they just cross the border illegally."

She wasn't sure why she was even in this waiting room, she didn't know a thing about advertising, it had been her roommate's idea that she apply here and it was entirely surprising that she'd even been called in for an interview. She wasn't even sure how that happened, seeing as how she barely had any experience. Definitely not as much as everyone else in this room had.

"And now look what's happening to the hard-working people of our country? We're losing our jobs to these low-lives, they ruined their own country and now they're here to ruin ours. If we're not careful, who knows what else they'll start taking, it's our jobs now, and it's only a matter of time before it's our lives."

She didn't belong here, she wasn't like these people, she didn't know what an elevator pitch was, she didn't even have a blazer, she was wearing her roommate's, and it was already a size too small. The cuffs barely came past her elbows. She stood up, the leather of the chair fighting hard to keep her seated, the heat and sweat pulling her down and making the worst noise imaginable. Marella cringes at the noise, she hears people snicker, laughing under their breath. She doesn't wait for another second as she turns on her heel and runs out, barely making out the interviewer calling for her name as she shoves the door open and stumbles outside.



In such a hurry she barely catches herself as she trips, holding up her weight on the door as her vision tilts. She sighs deeply, breathing in hard, pulling in as much air as she can as she struggles to ground herself. She despised being around other people. She hated the way they made her feel, she hated how she didn't fit in.

Too big, too loud, too opinionated, too dark, too dangerous. Marella could rattle off a hundred adjectives she'd heard used against her, what use was fleeing for peace when there was no peace to be found in a so-called 'better part of the world'. She could run as far as she wanted, and still she'd always feel on the verge of an exit, her whole life could be condensed into the enclosure of one suitcase. She was always ready to leave, always expecting a goodbye.

It had been five months since she'd moved here and there was nothing in her room to prove she'd been here for that long. When she moved in, her roommate had gifted her a welcome home plant. A tiny little cactus she kept on a shelf by her desk. Save for the cactus, her room was bare, she had a bed and a desk, no pictures, or posters, nothing hung up on the walls, and even her bookshelf was empty despite her love for reading. She hadn't even unpacked her suitcase, fear buried deep inside her telling her she'd have to do it all over again keeping her from truly putting down roots.

It was hard to believe that this was finally it, that she wouldn't have to move again, not when she didn't have a stable job, or a good education, she had barely finished college when she'd been forced to flee her home country. She felt so much like she was temporary, like she was only ever half-present, fading in and out of conversations and people's lives.

She realizes she hasn't moved away from the office she'd just embarrassingly run out of when she begins to hear people come out, she quickly gathers herself from the side of the road and starts walking down the pavement, not even entirely sure of the direction she was going in. She walks for as long as she can before her feet start to hurt in the heels she'd also borrowed from her roommate. She felt like a circus spectacle, in clothes that didn't fit her and make-up that made her feel like she had someone else's face on.

She sits down on the side of the pavement, her mind racing.

Several seconds pass where she doesn't move, eyes closed as she tries hard not to let the tears brimming behind her eyelids spill over. It's right as Marella feels like she's about to tip over when her phone rings, she pulls it out of her pocket, barely making out her roommate's name on the screen through bleary eyes as she answers.

On the other side, she could hear laughter, people talking over each other and soft music, she envied the way he was always around people so effortlessly.

"Hello?" She says, awkwardly into the phone.

She receives a loud hello back, so full of excitement that she has to pull the phone away from her ear, she wonders what had her roommate so excited. "Marella! You'll never believe it—they called me back!"



Marella winced, her head falling sheepishly between her knees, she knew she looked like a sore sight on the pavement but she couldn't care less, "Was it the library? They called back?"

She can hear the smile that's probably glued to his face as he responds, "Yeah! I got the job, I start on Monday!" She feels her face grow warm as tears begin to fall from her eyes, and her ears grow hot as her roommate continues, "I was so stressed out, I really thought the interview went bad and I was so sure they wouldn't even call me back, wow, I'm so happy they did, I'm so excited!"

Marella barely mumbles a response, her head spinning with embarrassment as she figures out how to break the news of how her interview had gone. If he thought his interview had been bad, wait till he heard that she'd run out of hers. "Allen..." she starts, her words stuck in her throat, "I have to tell you something." She's not sure he's heard him when he continues speaking, "I'm having a small lunch in celebration, and I wanted you to come, it's on me so don't even worry about it," Embarrassment tightens its grip around her throat, barely choking on a sob, she resigns from telling him how it really went, letting him speak instead, "I'd really appreciate it if you came—in fact, we could celebrate you going for your interview too."

Marella weakly responds with a soft yes, which is enough for Allen as he beams on the other side, "Great! It's at Luc's—the cafe on 7th Street, it should be just around the block from where you had the interview." Allen hangs up after that, and she immediately regrets agreeing to it at all. It's not that she didn't like her roommate, he was a great guy, and he helped her out in more ways than she'd ever thought anyone would when she'd moved here all by herself, he'd been so patient and welcoming, and Marella didn't know how she would ever pay him back for all his kindness; knowing Allen, he probably wouldn't want her to anyway. He'd even asked his sister for a blazer and heels, he'd found her an interview, and she'd wasted all his help by running out, like the coward she was. All she was good for was running away, it seemed like that was all she ever knew how to do.

Slowly, she gets up off the pavement, wiping her tears as she tries to figure out how to get to the cafe. She'd go for Allen, the least she could do was support him, maybe it was all she could do.



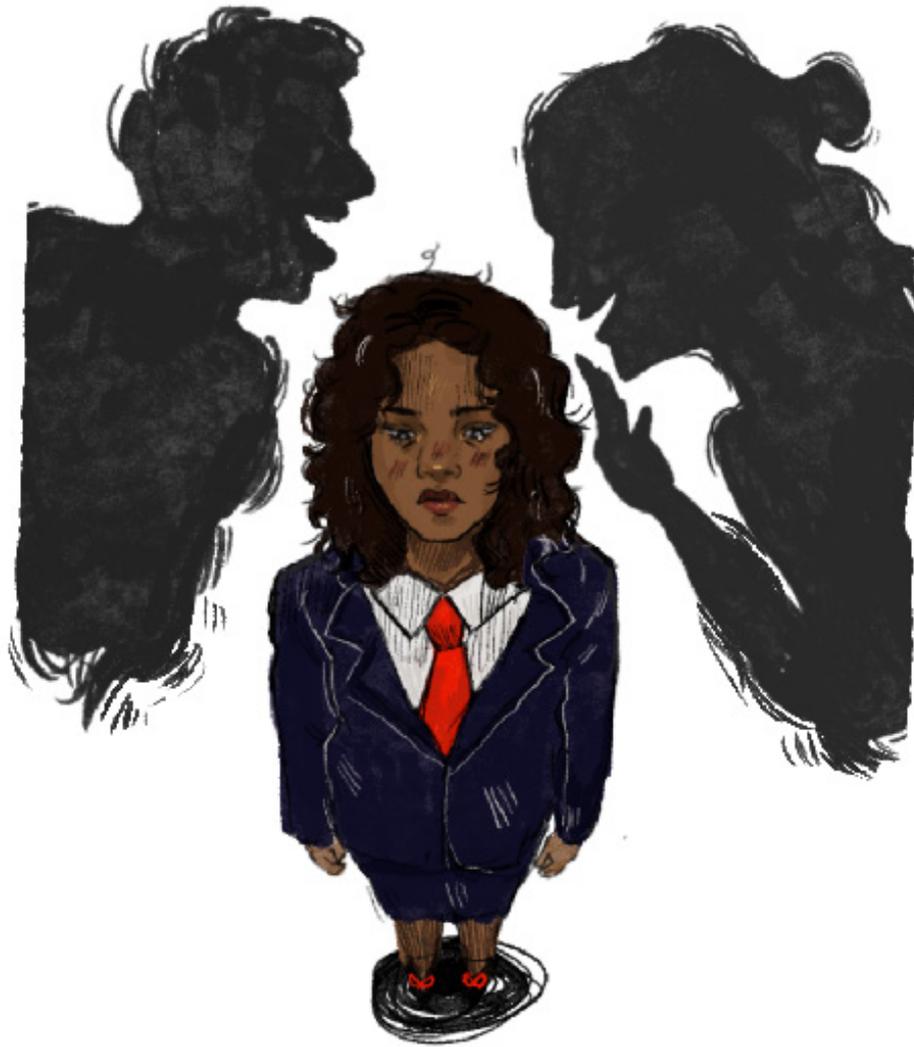
The cafe was a small little place hidden between a grocery store and an old boutique, the sign above the door was old and weathered with time, with the name Luc's almost carved into it, the door was a warm yellow, and the large windows on the outside invited Marella in with the promise of a hot mug of coffee and freshly baked bread. As she swings the door open, the bells above ring gently and the cashier looks up at her from behind the divider, a young girl no more than twenty. She gave her a small smile and a quiet welcome that was awkwardly returned as Marella turned around in search of Allen. Her heart drops when she catches him by a large booth, its seats already filled with his friends.

She wasn't lying when she said she liked Allen, she did, his friends however... She wasn't their biggest fan. She considers turning around and leaving just as Allen raises his head and spots her, anxiety bubbling up in her chest as he waves her over. She weakly returns his eager smile as the rest of his group looks up at her, she wants to crawl into a hole from their unimpressed glances at her. They hadn't even said anything and she had already started to sweat.

"Here, I saved you a seat," Allen says when she approaches the table, he quickly swipes his bag off a chair he'd pulled to the table, motioning for her to sit down next to him, she thanks him quietly, grateful that at least she wasn't sitting next to one of his friends. "You guys all know Marella right?" He turns to her, "These are my friends, you probably remember them from my birthday party last month."

Marella turns meekly towards the group of friends, there were five of them and gives them all a small smile and nods; she remembers them just fine, how could she ever forget the things they'd said to her and all the different ways they'd made her feel unwelcome. They give her a small smile back, and she thinks she's never seen something so forced before.

"Yes, we know her. You're Allen's roommate, right?" One of his friends asks, her name was Francisca, she was speaking to her yet looking at Allen, talking to her like she was a kid, Marella answers her regardless, "Yeah, I moved in around four months ago."



“You mean five months.”

Marella freezes, “I’m sorry?”

Someone in the group snickers, Francisca suppresses a smile, next to her Allen shifts uncomfortably, “Guys, it’s not really that big of a deal...” Allen says, in a weak effort to steer the conversation away, it seems to work however as Francisca rolls her eyes and settles back into the couch, a small frown

pulling on her lips. Allen gives her a short look before turning back to Marella, “How did the interview go?” He asks, and she wishes the ground would swallow her up, she almost wishes Francisca was talking to her again, anything besides this.

She gives Allen a weak smile, “Oh... it went fine...” she says, avoiding looking at him directly. She was sure if she did then it would all come tumbling out and she really didn’t need to have a meltdown over the interview in front of his friends, she didn’t need to confirm that everything they thought about her—that she was a freeloader, that she was taking advantage of Allen’s kindness, that was she was not to be trusted—was all true. Beside her, Allen speaks softly, “Hey don’t worry so much, I’m sure it went alright, and if it didn’t there’s always other interviews, I mean people rarely get one on the first try.”

Marella tries to give him a smile back, but it quickly falls as another one of his friends speaks up, “But like, did you even finish highschool—didn’t you like... run from war? You can’t get a job when you’re uneducated.”

“Leo, oh my gosh, you can’t say things like that,” someone else snickers beside him, and the group falls into bouts of hushed laughter. Her face grows warm, and Marella struggles to defend herself, the words ‘I finished my bachelors’ stick to the sides of her throat. Unable to climb out to her mouth, she swallows them down, shrinking in on herself.

“And God, don’t tell me you went in looking like that, nobody’s going to hire you if you look like that. Don’t you know that blazer’s way too small for you, or do you really think that’s your size?”

She wished she was small, so much smaller, the size of plankton, the size of a singular grain of sand on the ocean floor, she wished she was microscopic, so small that no one would be able to look at her, much less comment on the size of her body.

“I—It’s not mine... I had to borrow it from Allen...” She tries weakly to defend herself. Feeling tears well up, she tries hard to keep it down. She looks to Allen, and sees his face grow a deep red, slowly he turns to her, “Why don’t you go order your coffee? We already finished giving our orders, just tell the barista you’re with me and she’ll add it to the tab.”

Marella nods meekly, her head clouded as she slowly stands up. She tries her hardest not to run to the counter, as she approaches the cashier, she hopes she isn’t crying.

The young girl from before is still behind the counter, as she sees Marella, she stands up, offering her a kind smile as she asks her what she’d like to order.

“I’m not sure... I’ve never been to all that many cafes before. Um... is there anything you’d recommend?”

She sees the way the girl’s expression shifts, a kind of genuine confusion that Marella isn’t sure she has the calibre to handle well today.

“You haven’t been to all that many cafes? How?”

Feeling already on edge, Marella regrets her response as quickly as she says it, “Because I was too busy trying to survive a war.” Her eyes go wide almost immediately, and she clambers to apologize for her blunt response but the girl just nods.

“I was only nine when I left our home with my brother, we were still so young, and honestly I can’t remember a lot of it since I was just a kid, but I remember being so afraid. My brother and I moved around a lot after that, mostly in group homes, a couple of orphanages and foster situations. My parents put us on the evacuation train all those years ago, and we’ve just... been by ourselves ever since.”

Marella feels something inside her chest begin to give, like a knot being pulled apart ever so slowly.

“I don’t think I even knew what the difference between a cappuccino and a latte was until one of my foster parents took me to a coffee shop. I remember being overwhelmed by all of it too,” She looks up and smiles, wide and so assured, Marella felt a twinge of envy at how concrete the girl was in her own speech, “You’re not alone in that, so don’t worry; besides most people don’t care about the difference all that much either.”

Marella, blinks, surprised ever so slightly when she feels the tears that spill, she moves to wipe them away quickly when the young girl silently offers her tissues. She nods, offering her a weak smile as she takes them, “Thank you...” She glances at the name tag pinned to the girl’s apron, “Thank you, Sanaa.”

Sanaa smiles again, and Marella feels a sense of warmth she hadn’t felt in what had been a long time. “What did you get... the first time you got coffee? I-I’ll get the same thing,” she manages out between tears.

“Woah—that’s a lot of trust in my tastes, alright let me think, I think I got a hot chocolate, so actually it wasn’t even coffee,” She says, laughing.



“That’s alright, I’ll just take a hot chocolate.”

“Are you sure? Didn’t you want coffee?”

Marella smiles, “You can suggest a coffee the next time I’m here.”

“I like that, alright, we make the best chocolate by the way, it’s the owner’s recipe, he’s a whiz at this. I’ve never seen someone make a better hot chocolate than Angus.”

Marella, unsure what to say next, decides to settle into a comfortable silence, her eyes roaming the counter. They land on a chalkboard set up by the cash register, a date and time are drawn on the board, with the words ‘support group’ written in a pretty cursive on the top.

“Did you write this?”

Sanaa turns around, a steaming cup of hot chocolate in her hand, she glances over as she clicks the lid into place before handing it to Marella, “Oh? Yeah, I did! Pretty good, eh? I’m doing a small design course at the community college. We just went over lettering last week and I thought I’d jazz up our usual sign. Nothing too fancy but Angus really liked it, so he’s got me doing that now.” She rolls her eyes, but there’s a soft smile on her lips that tells of a sense of endearing warmth associated with whoever Angus was.

“You’re very talented, Angus made the right choice,” Marella says, before pulling out her wallet, only to be stopped by Sanaa who points towards the table behind her, “Your friend already put down his card, you should take the free drink.”

“Oh—I don’t know, I don’t want to take advantage...”

Sanaa waves her off, “I don’t think he cares, and besides the whole time you’ve been up here, he’s been glancing at you.”

Marella feels her ears grow bright red as she turns around, her eyes catching Allen’s who immediately looks back down at the table, facing away from her so quickly she wonders if she’d imagined it. Behind her, Sanaa giggles, “I’m telling you, he doesn’t mind.”

Marella smiles softly, she nods, thanking her for the drink as she turns to leave. Before she does, she’s stopped by the girl calling out to her, “Oh wait! One last thing, here, you should take this,” she hands her a piece of paper, with a time and date written on it, along with a phone number.

“What...”

“It’s my phone number, if you ever want to talk to someone, the city gets lonely sometimes you know, and it’s also the time and date of the support group.”

Her eyes widen, “Support group...?”



“You don’t have to come, it can be hard to show up at first, but it’s something Angus set up a couple of years after he got here, he said he met all kinds of people when he first started the cafe and so many of them were just like him, just like us, who just wanted to be heard and understood, so he carved out this space and all of us just meet up every week, we bring snacks and sit around and just listen and talk to each other.”

When she senses the hesitance in Marella, Sanaa places a hand over hers, “I’ll be there too. You should come with me, I’d like to see you there. It’s really refreshing to be around other people who know what it was all like,” then she tilts her head towards the table, motioning towards Allen, “You could bring him too, you know, a lot of people bring their friends,” Marella chews on the inside of her cheek, considering it, “...Or partners.” Her face bursts with red, and Sanaa bites down on a smile.

“He’s not my partner,” She clarifies.

“Sure, whatever he is, you’re invited. We’d love to have you.”

Marella nods, slightly overwhelmed by the invitation but grateful for it nonetheless, “I’ll... be there,” And this time she means it, she’s sure she will. Sanaa smiles and wishes her well as she turns around to return to the table with her hot chocolate. Filled with warmth from the conversation, she doesn’t realize the people at the table have dwindled until she moves to sit down. There are only two people left at the table, Allen and one of his friends, Francisca sits on the opposite side of the table, her expression sour like she’d sucked on a lemon. Allen smiles at her, gentle as always as he moves to make space for her in the booth, with everyone else having left.

“Where did everyone go?” She asks.

“There was a conflict of opinion after you left, so I asked them to leave. Francisca stayed back to apologize.” Allen says, waving towards Francisca.

Marella, confused as ever, glances towards the girl, “Oh, apologize for what?”

Allen looks at his friend, expectant, Francisca shifts in her seat, delaying it as long as she can before she sighs and looks up at Allen as she speaks.

“I’m sorry for—”

“Not to me. To her.”

She frowns, biting down on her lip as she turns towards Marella. The attention feels uncomfortable, but she holds her ground regardless, unsure what to expect.

“I’m sorry for the things we said. It was rude and inconsiderate, I’m sure you’re just as smart as Allen says you are. And we’re sorry for saying what we said.”

Marella blinks, her words lost to her in disbelief, she barely chokes out a thank you as Francisca gets up to leave, having done her part. She watches as she leaves out the door, the bells ringing as she does. Silence settles in her absence, and suddenly it begins to dawn on her that Allen had defended her.

“Thank you,” She says.

“I didn’t do anything, they just wanted to apologize.” He shrugs, brushing off the comment, “Show me what you got.”

Marella smiles, moving the hot chocolate towards him. “It was the barista’s recommendation.”

They sit there for the evening, talking between themselves, until the sun sets outside and they get up to leave, Sanaa waves as they walk up to the door, a quick ‘See you next time,’ as the door rings shut behind them. Marella barely catches a glimpse of the figure next to Sanaa behind the counter as she waves back, a man well into his fifties, he seems to be in a wheelchair beside Sanaa. She wonders if that was Angus.



The promise of next time carries her forward. The promise of a tomorrow, and a day after, of permanency in a new place, a promise of returning and not having to run away. She could belong here, she could put down roots, she could have longer relationships and there wouldn't be the risk of loss. Not like before. She didn't have to be a fish all by herself deep underwater anymore. She didn't have to hide or be far away from everyone.

Not anymore because now there was a next time. There was so much to be present for, so much to stay in one place for. She pocketed the paper with the number on it, she would call, and she would go to the meeting. She didn't want to be small anymore. For once, she was beginning to feel like she could take up space.

There was always going to be a next time.

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