

SISTERS OF ONE CORD
AND ONE HEART



SISTER
SPIRIT

EFUA
TRAORÉ

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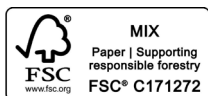
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PROLOGUE

A sharp gust of wind tore at her shawl, unleashing long dark curls. She slipped in her haste to get out of the window, scraping her thigh. A bruise bloomed on her pale skin, visible even in the feeble moonlight.

Ignoring the throb, she hauled her other leg off the ledge, ripping her thin nightgown.

Gathering the ruined dress at the skirts, she stumbled into the night. The urge was so strong she could hardly bear it. Her breath came in gasps, not from exhaustion, but from a need to be quicker. She padded swiftly across the lawn, through soft moss between trees and over sharp and wicked undergrowth, not slowing, until she felt the cold hardness of rock.

She could hear it. The roar ahead.

She was almost there.

Clouds shifted, and the moon lit a vast expanse of ocean. Cliffs jutted harshly out of the landscape. The force of the wind tore at her from all sides.

Feeling the urge more strongly than ever, she lunged forward, toes curling around the edge of the cliff. And with a searing pain in her chest, she stretched out her arms, and let loose a long, heart-wrenching wail.

'Jiimiii...!'



1

I glared at the poster stuck to the classroom door. It was faded, its edges discoloured, begging to be ripped off. I imagined tearing it down, strip after strip, skinning the door, until there was nothing left.

Chase your dreams.

I scoffed silently at the worn-out words.

What if your dreams were chasing you? But you had to step into them, night after night. No matter how badly it hurt to do so.

‘Tara Walther!’

I was jerked out of my thoughts by an angry voice.

‘Would you kindly give us a moment of your attention?’ Mrs Jacobs was standing in front of my desk, peering at me with eyebrows that grated together.

‘Sorry, Mrs Jacobs,’ I mumbled, shielding my notebook. The entire page was covered with sketches of the young woman on the cliff. The dream had long

since taken over my nights. It now threatened to take over my days. I closed my notebook with a sigh, trying to get the images out of my head.

Someone sniggered and I looked up to find Mrs Jacobs still staring at me. ‘We were at genealogy and family history. The history of your surname. Did you get that?’

‘Oh, ehm ... yes, Walther is an old Germanic name, as far as I know.’

A collective giggle rose up. Hot blood rushed to my face, flushing my cheeks. I knew I didn’t look Germanic with my curly afro and brown skin. In fact, there was no resemblance between me and my parents. But that was not surprising, since I was adopted.

Mrs Jacobs let out a gasp of exasperation. ‘I wasn’t asking for an answer now, I want a one-page essay and a family tree of four generations next week. It is the class homework.’

‘Oh!’ I lowered my head, realising my mistake.

Recently, I’d become so sensitive about ‘being different’. I knew why. It was the dream. The more I dreamed of her, the more I wanted to know who she was. Could the woman possibly be my—

The metallic ring of the bell sounded. Chairs pushed back abruptly and everyone began grabbing their books.

Maxine caught my eye. She was heading over with a rueful half-smile. I knew I could count on her not to

have sniggered. She would not say anything about what had happened, and we would have lunch and talk about everything and nothing. About TikToks, the next book on our shared TBR pile or season four of our favourite anime. Anything but our feelings. Then we'd walk home together, as we'd lived on the same street since we were little. That's how it had always been.

I didn't know how else to be. How do you talk about your feelings when you don't even know yourself?

Before Maxine reached my desk, I snatched up my notebook and my school bag and ran.



2

I tried slipping noiselessly into the house, but Mum called out, 'Hello, hon! Back so early?'

'Yeah! There was nothing good for lunch and I wasn't hungry,' I lied.

'I don't have anything ready yet.'

'I'm not hungry!' I called back, flinging my rucksack in the corner.

Previous generations of Walthers in stiff white collars stared down at me from the photos on the wall. I thought of our annoying family-tree homework and cringed.

I was definitely not submitting that one.

Agnes and Ludwig Walther looked disapproving so I glanced at Grandma Lisbeth and Grandpa Matheus, who I preferred anyway. I had memories of their cosy place surrounded by green hills, the scent of fresh scones wafting through a tiny kitchen with red-and-white

checked curtains. Grandma's arms holding me while she read aloud in her quiet voice. Dad and Grandpa taking me fishing. Had I felt more at ease as a child? Had I worried less about who I was? These wisps of memories felt so carefree.

I glanced at the photo of me sitting on Dad's lap and Mum leaning in with a smile. They looked ... proud. I must have been about four. I studied my face, trying to see past the sharp contrast of my brownness and full black hair and my pale, blond parents. I was smiling in the photo. So there must have been a time when I felt happier. But since the dreams began, my memories had become muddled. Most of the time, I felt numb.

'Should I cook up some pesto noodles?' Mum called.

'Goodness, Margie, she said she's not hungry! Could you please stop shouting across the house, I'm trying to work!' Dad's voice close by made me jump.

He was sitting at the dining table, his long, thin frame hunched over a mass of papers that spilled around him. Dad was an architect and often worked from home, turning the living room into a mess of construction plans, laptop and pencils.

Dad's greying hair half-covered his thick glasses, much too long in Mum's opinion.

'Hey, Tara, everything okay?' he asked, looking over his glasses and stretching out an arm. Normally we weren't hugging types but maybe he sensed something.

A craving for the safe comfort seeping out of the photos overcame me and without replying I walked over and folded myself into his embrace.



I sat up in bed gasping for air. This time the dream had felt so real.

Taking deep, ragged breaths, the wet, cold cotton of my pyjamas peeled off like a disgusting second skin.

My insides felt like a tight fist. The shadows in my room still resembled grey rock jutting like knives around me.

Suddenly the floor gave way and a gust of wind rushed in. The familiar roar of waves smashing against the cliffs tore through the air and an abyss loomed in front of me. I screamed and grasped the sides of my bed. But instead of soft mattress, my fingers scratched hard rock.

And there she was, a few steps ahead, arms outstretched to the darkness beyond.

Then a bright light and a rush of warm dusty air blinded me and the scenery rushed past like a fast-moving train. I held on to the sharp protruding rock, my insides jerking, as dark woods became lush green jungle and dank earth turned to red sand.

Everything went still. The rock beneath my sweaty palms felt warmer, smoother, more rounded. The grey

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ocean was gone. A strange tree stood tall, its roots tucked into hard stone at its base. The woman had disappeared, along with the grey cliffs, fading in the sunlight.

Sadness filled me, weighing me down. My limbs trembled and I tried to get a better hold, but my fingers slipped and I began to fall into nothingness.

I screamed and I was back in my bedroom, back on my pillow with my sweat-soaked neck, and Dad and Mum bent over me, with worried, sleep-drunken faces.



3

‘**M**axine brought your school work.’
I lay sprawled across my bed, trying to concentrate on a book.

Mum stood uncertainly in the doorway and Lulu slunk in between her legs. She purred at me, a fluffy red monster and I stroked her cloud-like fur.

Mum dropped the papers on my desk. ‘She said to tell you get well soon and that your homework is page sixty-five for maths and to read the article and answer the questions for English.’

‘Okay, thanks.’

Maxine had obviously not asked to come in. I sighed. What was I doing? Ignoring her messages, avoiding her in school, rejecting her efforts to keep up our friendship. I guessed she was finally giving up on me.

The doctor had also given up. Said there was nothing wrong, at least nothing physical. *It’s psychological*, she’d said.

Now, after one week at home since the last dream, the pain in my chest had eased and my breathing was normal. But the burning throb in my veins was there. The empty feeling in my insides, the yearning.

‘Well, I’ll leave you to your homework,’ Mum said quietly. ‘Is there anything I can do for you? Bring you something? A Coke?’ Her eyes were searching, anxious.

I shook my head and she closed the door.

I flung my book aside. Why couldn’t I be less complicated? Not have them worrying about me all the time. Sometimes I thought: *Did they regret choosing me?*

I grabbed my phone and began typing:

Thanks for bringing the homework, Max! Sorry for not replying. I know I’m not the friend I should be right now. I just need to sort myself out. Please forgive me.

I deleted the ‘Please forgive me’ part and pressed *Send*. Maybe the school work would help take my mind off things.

The sun had gone past my window, casting long shadows across the wooden floor. I switched on my lamp and sat down, rubbing my temples. My limbs turned heavy at the thought of night, the thought of the dream.

She wanted to tell me something, I could sense it. I had so many questions. *Who was Jimi or Jimmy? Why*

did she call him, with so much grief? Was he a son? A lost love?

What scared me most was that it did not feel like a dream. It felt like a memory.

I had never been interested in my biological parents. Mum and Dad had asked twice before if I wanted to talk about the adoption. The first time was when I was five. I had come home from school crying. ‘Why do I look different? I don’t want to be brown. I want to be like you.’ I still cringed at the memory. They’d stared in horror, not knowing what to say. When they’d finally found their voice and started telling me of another mummy, it made things worse. ‘I don’t want another mummy,’ I had screamed. It was bad enough being different from everyone else around me. But having another mummy or daddy was even more scary.

The next time was when I was ten years old. Some silly kid made a comment at a school summer picnic. ‘Look at that funny family! That girl doesn’t look like her parents. Why is she so dark and they’re so white?’ The kid’s mum had been embarrassed and shushed him. I would have loved to forget the whole thing, but that evening Mum and Dad asked if I wanted to talk. What they didn’t know was that I often heard such comments. It was nothing new. I had learned to ignore them.

But now things had changed. I had questions. Lots of them.

I had to know if the woman in my dreams was a memory. If she was my mother.



‘How old was I?’

Mum and Dad were cleaning the kitchen after dinner. My question came out as a half-croaked sentence, but I could see by their quick glances they knew what I meant.

Mum cleared her throat. ‘You mean, when we—’

‘Yes!’ I cut her short. ‘How old was I when you adopted me?’ I couldn’t look at them and slipped into a chair at the kitchen table.

Mum wiped her hands on her jeans.

‘Are you sure this is a good time?’ Mum began.

Dad raised an eyebrow, but Mum carried on. ‘Honey, does this have something to do with your nightmares? Is that what they’re about?’

I felt a twinge of guilt and shook my head. ‘I want to know about myself. I am ready now.’

‘Oh, Tara, of course!’ Mum said, fiercely whipping her ponytail.

Dad didn’t beat around the bush. ‘You were two years old,’ he said. He was doing his best to sound matter of fact, but I could see from his stiff shoulders that he was as nervous as Mum and I.

By delaying this conversation, I had allowed the crack between us to become a huge valley. And now I stood far away on the other side, trying to find a bridge back to them. Or was it a bridge back to myself?

‘I was only two?’

‘Is that a bad thing?’ Mum asked. ‘It was lovely to have you so young. We thought we could bond better.’

‘I have these memories sometimes and I kind of thought...’

‘They were from your previous family?’ Dad asked.

I nodded, fighting back tears.

‘Those memories,’ Mum began, ‘are they the nightmares?’

I nodded again and tried to ignore the worry in her eyes.

‘It’s not likely, though,’ Dad said. ‘Two is young.’

‘I know,’ I said, biting my lip.

‘We don’t know anything about your biological parents, Tara.’ Mum spoke carefully, as if trying not to wake a sleeping beast. ‘There was only your biological mother, unfortunately...’ She glanced at Dad.

‘She’s dead, right?’ I asked.

It was strange, but I knew. They nodded. ‘I’m so sorry,’ Mum said.

‘We have something of hers,’ Dad said, with a quick uncertain glance at Mum. ‘Do you want to see it?’



It was a slim silvery-blue book, worn around the edges. A diary without dates, just irregular spaces between entries. And they were not really sentences. More like words strung together without meaning. Bizarre sketches that didn't make sense, squeezed in at odd angles.

The more pages I turned, the more worried I became. There were skulls and bloody images. My breath caught at a hand holding a human head, fingers clawed into intricately woven hair, face contorted, blood dripping from a severed throat. I slammed the book shut.

My dreams could not possibly be memories because I had been too young. Now the only person who could have supplied answers was dead, her diary a grotesque mess.

Dad had warned me. After placing the book in my hand he'd drawn me into an awkward hug. 'Her notes might be difficult. We went through them looking for information.' He seemed embarrassed. 'We needed to know if there was anything about what you liked to eat or if you had allergies. There was nothing. I ... I think she wasn't well.'

An ice-cold thought crystallised in my mind. What if I was going crazy too?

I skimmed more pages, then threw the book on to my desk. But before the book closed, I saw something that

made me freeze. Something familiar. A word scribbled beneath a drawing of a rock, massive and rounded with a large tree.

I grabbed the book and flipped through it with trembling fingers.

I knew it.

I was right.

A rock I recognised. And the word... I stared at it, almost choking. Written in shaky letters and blotched, as if a tear had dropped and dissolved the ink:

... Ji ... mi ...