

Look Within

A leaking rowboat rocked gently on the waves, slowly drifting towards a sliver of pale gold in the darkening horizon.

A thin wail issued from the inside of the small boat, breaking the silence.

Flickering candlelight bobbed on Tehih Bay, drawing closer and closer to the water's edge. A shadowy figure in a black woolen cloak stooped at the dock, squinting into the darkness of the rowboat.

Another cry. The figure flinched back. Then, cautiously, she reached her arms into the boat and pulled out a bundle of rags.

Quietly returning to where she came from, the person cradled the rags in her arms.

There was a distant sound of a baby laughing and sobbing at the same time.

A door clicked shut, and the sounds faded away.

Maia spread a thick layer of orange marmalade over her toast, listening to the radio.

"Gran," she called. "The radioman just said that the island is going to be evacuated because scientists are coming to test nuclear bombs!" As she uttered the very words, her mind was going haywire. *No more staying on this tiny island. We're moving!*

"Hm?" her grandma replied while pouring milk into a pan for their cat, Luna. "Oh, no, are we going to move to the mainland? By airplane?"

Gran was a very elderly woman – in fact, she had already had two teenagers as grandchildren when she found Maia alone in a tiny rowboat.

The main reason why Maia wanted to move was because she thought the island was too little to be a nice home.

The island was BORING. All Gran wanted her to do was homework, origami, and reading. She had said that Maia was a “big kid” now.

With a sigh, Maia sat up in her seat and finished the last bite of her toast. “Yes, we’re traveling by airplane,” she told Gran.

“Then we can’t bring Luna.” Gran’s eyes filled with tears. “We’ll have to put her to sleep, rather than make her experience the terror and radioactivity of a nuclear —”

“Off course we can’t bring her!” Maia interrupted impatiently, before she could feel sad (but too late). “That’s just something... we have to do... in order to move to the... mainland...”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she brushed them away hastily.

Gazing around her newly cleaned bedroom, Maia felt a surge of pride. She had tidied it up very well, making sure to stuff every sock under her bed in a position that won’t be seen from above.

Now that she thought of it, she didn’t really need to clean it. She was leaving in a few weeks’ time.

Maia had already packed three whole suitcases of her belongings, and that was only half of everything she needed. (Unsurprisingly, Gran had crammed all her necessities into a single duffel bag.)

Frowning, Gran scrutinized Maia’s new school uniform. “I don’t know why the district would even bother to assign uniforms when students only attend a week or two of school before leaving.”

Gran scoffed. “Why would scientists come *here*, out of all the islands there are in the world? Why pick *us* to leave *our* homes and allow a nuclear bomb detonation on *our* island?”

Maia hurried to the bus stop the next morning, dressed in a gray V-neck and a matching brown skirt.

"*Bar lo eok!*" Gran called after her in Ralik.

"*Aaet*, see you later," Maia answered.

A snow-white cat sidled into the kitchen. Sensing that something was wrong, Luna padded over to Gran and settled into her lap, round blue eyes questioning amid a fluffy cloud of white.

"I'm so, so sorry," Gran whispered mournfully. Picking up Luna and lowering her onto the floor near the pan of warm milk, she blinked rapidly and turned away.

Maia boarded the bus happily and chose a seat at the front. When the school bus reached the school, she jumped off and hastened to the front office.

"Maia Terese Huti, fifth grade," she told the volunteers who were helping students find their classes.

"You are in... room 139 with... Ms. Christina."

As Maia skipped inside the classroom, she collided with a girl who was sharpening her pencil.

"Slow down," the teacher called. "What's your name?"

"Maia Terese Huti."

Maia plopped into a seat – the only empty seat, which was located right next to the girl she had accidentally bumped into.

"*Jɔlɔk bōd*," Maia apologized. "I'm always extremely excited to go to the first day of school, so I keep bumping into things."

"That's fine," the girl replied in an easygoing voice. "I knock into things all the time on the first day, too. *Eta in Sophie*, by the way. *Etaŋ?*"

"Maia."

"Nice to meet you!" Sophie said.

Maia whispered to Sophie all the time throughout the day. On the bus (Sophie rode it to and from school, too), Sophie announced, "I'm going on a children's protest march against the scientists when I get home. Want to join me?"

Maia regarded Sophie with surprise. "A protest against the scientists? Why?"

Sophie explained that she loved the island and didn't want people destroying it.

When Maia stepped off the bus, a light breeze played against her cheeks. Maia closed her eyes, enjoying the coolness.

She wondered about why Sophie wanted to drive the scientists off the island. Sure, she felt a bit depressed to leave the place she had lived in for ten years, but really... what good is living on a miniscule island?

Maia stood at the window of her bedroom, observing the protest on the streets.

Gran had "ordered" her to finish her afterschool class homework before doing anything else. Now, Maia was confined to her oval-shaped room with a packet of algebra problems.

Pressing her nose to the glass, she stared at the tiny figure of Sophie walking alongside a green car with a banner on its roof. Suddenly, Maia wished she could be protesting out in the streets.

Even she felt surprised at herself. *What am I thinking? Why would I want to protest?*

Maybe it was because Maia was recalling the time when she could play all day. Gran would bring her to meadows on the island to pick wildflowers and sometimes would take her to the beach with Luna. Maia had felt free and worriless. She remembered the tickle of shells under her feet as she ran through the golden sand, the waves crashing against her ankles. Maia woke up every day feeling light-hearted, hearing birds chirping sweetly in the treetops. That was

probably the only good part about the island. Everything was very clear in her head but also seemed to happen so long ago.

Maia gazed up with a mix of emotions and watched pearl-white seagulls swooping in and out of sight beyond the golden tree line.

"The AQI has decreased dramatically on the mainland," the weatherman reported on the television. On the huge screen behind him, a video of a busy street flickered to life. Cars were honking on a road for miles along it, and there seemed to be fog.

Maia's eyebrows raised as she understood that it was actually pollution.

"I wouldn't want to live there," she muttered. "It seems just like the nuclear bomb testing of Castle Bravo that I watched on TV." Maia shuddered. "Traffic, pollution, and radioactivity are the worst."

Jumping off the couch, Maia clicked the "OFF" button on the remote control. She felt sick.

What might happen if the protest doesn't work? Would I leave my life behind and move from a sunny forest island to a traffic-full and polluted city? Without Luna, my childhood friend?

In a haze of thoughts and emotions, Maia walked absentmindedly out the front door. Ignoring the call from Gran, she joined the protest group.

While she was pushing through the mass of children, trying to find Sophie, Sophie was circling the group outside, trying to find Maia.

Maia burst out of the crowd, gasping for breath.

Sophie saw Maia.

Maia saw Sophie.

For a split second, they stared at one another.

Then –

“Sophie,” Maia panted. “Sorry, I’m a bit late.”

Sophie gulped in fresh, salty air. “You’re – not – late – at all.”

Shading their eyes from the low afternoon sun shining down on their beautiful island, they continued walking down the street, but this time together and with a purpose in their hearts.

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