

The Island

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The waves are calling,

beckoning me.

As my blood turns to water

I bleed into the sea.

And the current of hope

will carry me home

No woman is an island,

and I am not alone.

Prologue

WHEN I step out of my bedroom door, mother and father are waiting for me in the hallway.

The clothes I'm wearing feel uncomfortable. They're grown-up clothes: rough-textured, scratchy, and of practical cut. Made to last for a long time.

"I go my own way," I say softly. The words that every child utters at age ten – the words my brother will say after me today – don't sound as if I'm sure of them. But I am, because I know this is right. I clear my throat and speak up. "I stand on my own two feet. No one takes care of me but me."

Father nods solemnly. Mother looks pale and is staring down at her hands. Why won't she look at me? Is this her way of saying she wants nothing more to do with me? I haven't even moved out yet. Dull disappointment grows in my stomach like a heavy brick.

The door next to mine swings open, and Colin steps over the threshold. My twin brother. He's wearing brown pants and a simple shirt. Slung across his shoulder is a bag containing a few possessions he doesn't want to leave behind. Almost all of our things will be destroyed after our departure, our rooms cleared, so we won't ever be tempted to return. Not that I would want to. I'm done here.

Colin coughs. "I go my own way," he says with a quiver in his voice. His eyes search our mother's. "I stand on my own two feet." A tear rolls down his cheek. He's having a hard time with

this. Oh well – he’s the youngest, after all. There’s a half hour between us.

“No one takes care of you but you,” father finishes the speech, when Colin can’t go on.

When I pass my mother, she suddenly puts a hand on my shoulder. “Leia,” she says, pulling a simple bead necklace from her dress pocket. It has a painted and glazed walnut for a pendant. “For you.”

My heart skips a beat. That’s the necklace my mother got from *her* mother when she moved out. And now she’s giving it to me.

“Thanks,” I whisper. Just for a moment, I imagine her giving me so much more than this. I feel this can’t be the end, but just then my father pushes open the front door for us. I walk out after my brother, into the early daylight, away from my mother.

Colin is waiting for me and grabs my hand. “You coming?” he mumbles.

We walk down the path without looking back. We’re going to the manor, where we will live until we get married and have children ourselves.

The front door slams shut. A new life has begun.

“HOW MANY *freaking* times do I have to tell you *not* to get damp wood?” Ben throws down the branches I hand over to him with a scowl on his face. “You can’t start a fire with that!”

“I’m sorry,” I mumble.

“You’re sorry?” Ben’s face turns red under his curly, brown hair. “What good will that do me? You have to make yourself useful in the wilderness, if nothing else.”

“Shut up, Ben,” Colin snaps. He’s busy next to me skinning a rabbit. “Like you never make mistakes.”

Ben smiles a superior smile. “Oh, really? Well, as far as I know I’ve kept us all alive so far. Who shot that rabbit? And who caught the two pheasants we ate yesterday?”

Colin raises a quizzical eyebrow. “And who got smacked in the face last night because he snuck into a sleeping tent he wasn’t supposed to be in?”

I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing nervously. Ben is a survivor, no doubt about it, but social skills aren’t exactly his strong suit. Last night, Mara made it perfectly clear she’s not interested in him. It was a good thing Colin heard her screaming – I’m not sure the blow to his nose would have been enough to get the message across otherwise.

“What are *you* laughing about?” Ben snarls, catching my almost-smile. “You think it’s funny?”

No, I don’t. Nothing to laugh about when you’re living in a world where the strong always win and have more rights than the rest of us.

Ben is Saul's younger brother, and Saul is the leader in the manor. He organizes fighting games between the strongest boys and the weaker members of our group to keep them perpetually afraid. You never know when your number is up. Only a few weeks ago Colin was beaten up by Max, a giant of a guy nicknamed The Bear.

Saul also decides who has to take hikes into the wild in order to learn survival skills – and if you're not in his good books, you're sent out every other week – and who gets to live in the manor house. He decides when to read The Book, and picks the chapters to be read during our assemblies.

"I think you should leave Mara alone," I reply feebly. "She's already told you a couple of times she doesn't want to get married to you."

Ben grins maliciously. "Who said anything about marriage?"

Completely shocked, I hold my breath. Everybody knows where babies come from. If you do... *that*... without taking responsibility of the child and raising it until its tenth birthday, you're pretty much a criminal. In the rare event that it does occur, the boy is obliged to marry the girl.

Something tells me that Saul won't oblige his younger brother to anything.

I turn around in disgust. The flints I was using to start the fire fall out of my hands and drop to the ground. I run down the forest path, through the trees, across the grassy fields, as far away from Ben as possible. I won't let him see my tears.

I keep running until I get to the beach.

The sand tickles my toes. I walk toward the sea. The surf bubbles and foams over my bare feet. Seagulls shriek above my head. The endless surface of the water extends to the horizon, whichever way I look.

Our world is small. If I turned around now and walked north, I'd be able to cross our land within a day. It would take me to another beach, and I'd be faced with another stretch of endless sea. Nothing but sea. We're on our own, and we only have the Force deep within us to depend on. It comes from the inside, not from the outside.

If I were to walk westward from here, I would come across a barrier – the Wall. Behind it, there are Fools. According to our forefathers, we are not supposed to cross it.

It's not difficult to cross the Wall, but nobody wants to. The Fools don't believe in their own Force. Instead, they believe in something outside of this world that will save them and come to their rescue. No one wants to mingle with idiots like that.

And they keep to themselves too. They leave us alone. To be honest, I wouldn't even have believed there *are* Fools, if not for the fact that I saw one of their ships once. It was far away in the distance, so far away from the island that it frightened me. Everyone knows there is nothing beyond the horizon. Ships that sail out never return.

And yet, it stirs something deep inside of me to see how brave they are. Our world may be safe, but it does make me feel trapped sometimes. Especially with a horrible leader like Saul. I know I should get married as soon as possible and get away from the manor and move back to Newexter, where the parents live, but I don't like anybody enough to want to get married.

Sighing, I spread my arms like wings and walk into the sea. When the water reaches my waist, I lower them and touch the water with my fingertips. The cold gives me goose bumps all over my body, but standing in the sea and touching the surf like this makes me connect with the Force. It's as though I'm closer than ever to the source that feeds the entire universe. It feels like I can take on everything – the hikes through the wilderness Colin and I have to endure because Saul claims we aren't 'embracing the Force' enough yet, the fear of never finding anyone to share my life with. My fear of being disappointed.

When I turned ten, I became a grown-up. Colin and I joined the rest of the youngsters in the manor house after our birthday. We had our own room, but we didn't stay in it a lot. Much more often, we were outside, making bows and arrows for the hunt. We were taught how to make fishnets. We learned how to make fire – although I never quite got the hang of that. And some time later, Saul claimed most of the rooms in the house as his own, but we no longer cared about sleeping indoors. We had our own tents and huts.

We learned how to take care of ourselves.

I startle when I see dark clouds gathering on the horizon. Thunder clouds are a bad omen. The stories of our ancestors tell us about rain burning the skin and causing sickness in their people. It has never happened in my lifetime, but we are still afraid of it.

It's time to find shelter.

WHEN I return at our camp after the downpour passing over the island, only Mara is still there waiting for me, a bag of camping gear at her feet.

“Oh, good, there you are,” she exclaims in relief. “What happened to you?” Her hand reaches for my jet-black hair, all matted with sea salt and tangled up because of the wind.

I shrug. “Nothing much. I ran until I hit the beach. Stayed there for a while to unwind. I really had to get away from Ben.”

“Yeah, who doesn’t?” Mara sighs. “He should be called to order, but who’s going to do it?”

“You,” I tease her. “I bet his nose still hurts.”

Mara stares hard at her feet. “Yes, about that – I’m not looking forward to getting back to the house. Saul will probably give me the shittiest job imaginable for giving his brother a left hook. I bet I’ll be scrubbing filthy bed sheets in the laundry house for the next three weeks.”

Together, we pack my tent and hit the road home, Mara walking silently beside me. “I really have to get out of here,” she breaks the silence after a while. “For all I know, Saul will marry me off to his brother, just to stop him from always harping on about me.”

“An arranged marriage?” I gape at her. “Come on, that never happens anymore! We have freedom of choice.”

“Yeah... in case you hadn’t noticed: Saul’s not freedom’s biggest fan. That guy is nuts. You think he comes from a line of Fools?”

I chuckle. “Did you cross the Wall and fall off? *Nobody* here is descended from Fools.”

Mara averts her eyes. “Aren’t you ever curious, Leia? About the people on the other side of the Wall?”

“No, of course not,” I deflect quickly. “We know how it is with those people.”

“Why? Because *Saul* says so?”

“No, because the parents taught us that way. And they were taught by theirs. Besides, it’s also written in *The Book*.”

“Yes, the part *we’re* allowed to read,” Mara mutters.

I come to a stop in the middle of the trail and stare at my best friend. “Mara, what are you talking about? Who told you these things?”

“Andy did,” Mara admits. “He says...”

“He says what?” I press on, when Mara bites her lip and stares at the ground. My best friend starts to blush under my inquiring gaze.

“I went on a date with Andy,” she stutters. “Right before we had to go on this hike. We were together all evening. And he told me a secret. About *The Book*. He says *Saul* is keeping things from us.”

Andy and Mara? My heart cracks a little. Admittedly, I don’t really like anyone, but if I had to choose, it would be Andy. Eighteen-year-old Andy with his kind, brown eyes, black hair and broad shoulders. But he likes Mara. My best friend with her slender, willowy body, chestnut hair and her fifteen years. For just a split second, I taste the bitter flavor of jealousy on my tongue, but then I see the look of insecurity in Mara’s eyes. She doesn’t want to lose me over this.

“So what did Andy say exactly?” I ask, not digging deeper about the date.

“That Saul knows things he doesn’t share with us. Important things.”

“And how does Andy get so smart?”

Mara’s voice drops to a whisper. “He saw it in The Book.”

“When?”

“He couldn’t read for long. Saul had left The Book on the table after one of his speeches, that evening we had to watch the fight between Max and your brother. Andy couldn’t resist sneaking a peek.”

“Really.” I give her a baffled look. And here I was, thinking Saul only had a say in the choice of particular chapters for certain days. Apparently, some chapters are *never* chosen.

What is he afraid of?

“The Book says that collaboration is the most crucial survival tactic,” Mara continues. “When you work together, you have the best access to the Force. We don’t need a leader at all.”

“But - but that’s not right,” I stutter. “It’s the law of the fittest that counts.”

“No, it’s not. A group is the strongest if we all contribute. Someone wanting to draw all power of the Force to himself will turn evil. And all who follow such a leader will lose the light themselves.”

“In that case, we have to do something!” I hiss softly, even though there’s no one around to eavesdrop on us. “If Saul’s been lying about this...”

Mara sighs dejectedly. “The burden of proof is on us. And we can’t prove anything. Andy only had a glance at that page – he couldn’t tear it out to show it around.”

The rest of the journey home has me dazedly putting one foot in front of the other without even looking. I can’t get Mara’s story off my mind. It would mean that we’ve been lied to by a power-hungry guy who sends us off into the wild looking for the Force that he himself is stealing from us. Maybe I should tell Colin about it.

Waiting at the gate of the fence surrounding the manor grounds is a woman. Someone from the village. Perhaps she’s here to bring us news from Newexter or to collect a letter from Saul.

It’s only when she turns around that I recognize her. Brown hair. Tired, blue eyes staring at me. Six years ago, those eyes wouldn’t look at me when I left my parents’ house.

It’s my mother.

“WHAT – what are *you* doing here?” I stammer.

Mara’s looking at my mother as if she’s seeing a ghost. In fact, this is about as strange an occurrence: parents *never* visit their children in the manor. Why would they? We don’t need them. We can’t rely on them anyway.

Mother reaches for me and touches my shoulder. “Leia. You’ve grown so much.” Her gaze lands on the necklace I’m wearing. Tears pool in her eyes. “How are you?”

“Fine,” I reply stiffly.

“And how’s Colin?”

“Fine as well.”

Her eyes never leave my face. “I’ve missed you so much,” she whispers. “I should never have let the two of you go.”

I blink. “What do you mean? That’s what we do.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t believe that anymore,” she mumbles almost inaudibly.

“What do you mean, you don’t believe it anymore?”

“It’s not right.” She wrings her hands. “It *can’t* be right to let your children go so soon.”

“What about father?” I ask, bewildered. “Is he going to show up next?”

“Your father is dead,” she replies in a monotone.

I swallow the lump in my throat in the silence stretching between us.

“Dead?” I repeat lamely.

My mother nods quietly.

I wasn't expecting this. I expected to run into my parents again in a few years' time. I would have seen them from afar, in the market square. I would have had a courtesy chat with them in the village shop. They would never have visited. They'd never have gotten to know my own children, but they would have been around.

I will never see my father again.

"What happened?" I ask softly.

"The flu took him. He was running a high fever and the healer was at the end of his rope. There was nothing to be done."

"I'm sorry," I choke out. "My condolences."

I have gone my own way. I can stand on my own two feet. I don't need my parents, and they won't be there for me. The Force is the only thing we can rely on. So why do I feel so terribly sad and empty after hearing this news?

"Thanks," my mother mumbles. "I hope you'll come home soon."

I nod grudgingly. "Once I'm ready to get married I'll come back. And not a moment sooner."

My mother looks from me to Mara and back. "Tell me – is Saul still running the show in the manor house? He never signs his newsletters."

"Yes," Mara replies, pulling an appalled face. "Together with Ben."

Mother frowns with worry. "So it's true."

"What is?" I ask.

She looks at me seriously. "Honey, Saul is twenty-one. He should have left a long time ago. Something's not right."

Twenty-one? The oldest age at which someone leaves the manor house is nineteen, and even that is more the exception than the rule. Puzzled, I shake my head.

“It’s time for an intervention from Newexter,” my mother continues. “I will tell the Eldest.”

“What?” I erupt. “An intervention? No way!” The Eldest may be of high standing because he survived the longest, but that doesn’t give him the right to decide things for us over here.

“We only want to help you.”

I scoff disdainfully. “We don’t need your help. We can take care of ourselves.” Before she can spout more nonsense, I push open the gate and pull Mara along. Inside, I’m boiling with rage. If Saul is indeed too old to stay here, *we* will call him out on it. The parents in Newexter should stay in Newexter and let us handle it.

And then I suddenly think of *her* again. Mother. She looked so lonely and pale. Was she really worried about me and Colin? Why would she?

Hesitantly, I glance back, but I don’t see her standing at the gate anymore.

Saul is standing in front of the house when we walk up the path to the side entrance. His strong hands are handling a knife he's using to cut a new arrow shaft. He's not looking at us, but my heart starts beating faster when we approach. I can sense his eyes on us somehow. He knows we're there.

Just as we are about to step onto the terrace next to the manor, he takes a deep breath. "Hold it," he says quietly.

I stop in my tracks. Mara glances sideways and the blood drains from her face when Saul turns around and puts his knife away. His dark eyes, dark hair and dark clothes look like a stain of ink against the backdrop of the white manor wall.

We stand there, like a pair of deer waiting for the wild hound to pounce. Trapped in Saul's black stare. One corner of his mouth curls up in a smile.

"You should probably make yourself useful," he tells Mara, still in a voice so quiet it is almost drowned out by the blood pounding in my ears.

"Use... useful?" she chokes.

"More useful than you were to my brother," he explains, that creepy smile still lingering on his face. "If you can't perform a woman's most important duty, maybe you should just stick to other tasks like doing the laundry. I happen to know there's a whole lot to be done. I expect it to be clean by tonight."

"Okay," Mara whispers, staring at her feet. "I'll get to it."

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