Free at Last

“Whatever you do,” I wailed at the aghast expression on Moonif’s face, “keep on running, and don’t look back! It’s going to be okay-” In the midst of being cut off- the last words ringing implausibly in my ears-, another explosive landed on a nearby landfill with a strident, echoing boom.

 This is how it all began, a few years ago, when chaos had nearly just begun. Now that war can be called a living hell for all matters, it contradicted me when I said things couldn’t possibly be worse. So to give this story some sort of purpose, let’s go back, back to the beginning.

**March 15, 2011- Salma, Al-Haffah District, Latakia Governorate, Syria**

 I sprinted down the village streets in a hurry to get home and finally be able to play with perky little Norbert, and my brand new soccer ball. I hurriedly passed by various fruit stands, boutiques, and locals, without paying much attention to what was going on in my surroundings.

Remembering that Mama was always careful to look at both sides before crossing the street, I paused briefly to look at the right, when my eyes caught a glimpse of a bright red announcement in the newspaper, just a few steps from where I stood. The column catching my attention, I took a few steps forward, noticing that the roads I’d just walked through were more crowded that they’d ever been. *It’s probably the protests,* I thought to myself. Focusing back to the paper, I saw that the adage was titled, “Is war coming?”

*Intriguing question,* I reasoned. I personally wasn’t interested in the whole topic of peaceful protests, and government issues, and the rush to get home beat my curiosity. So I took one more look at the press, and continued on my bounding journey home.

 Once I got home, I placed my book bag on the dirty floor and headed straight to the tight spaces of what we call a kitchen. To my surprise, I found Mama, who was wearing her usual headscarf and carrying my baby brother, Burhan, in her hands, while rocking the other one inside her stomach- she would be named Zeniah.  It seemed as if she were attempting to cook a decent meal for us. Of course I don’t blame her for not being around. The poor woman had two jobs, five kids, one incoming, and a house to manage! I didn’t know how she could handle it all; she really was a true warrior, and my inspiration.

 “Hi Mama,” I gently greeted her, “what are you doing here?”

“Hi, sweetie,” she replied. “The manager down at the marketplace said there was a lockdown, or some sort of evacuation because of the protests.”

In the living room sat my half-a-decade-year-old twin siblings, Rasha and Elyas; Moonif, the second oldest after me, laid sideways on the olive, rotten thousand year old couch. Nearby I found Norbert- a beautiful Damascus goat-, fooling around with my soccer ball. My attention was then focused back to the kitchen, where my dad had just come in to greet us all.

My father is a roughneck, just like I want to become.  I am the oldest of soon-to-be-six children, so I have to work hard.  I take my work very seriously.  No time to fool around. My mom and dad are always busy, working and taking care of us.

“Mohammed al-Namad, come help your mother in the kitchen; you’re fifteen now, and should be a lot more responsible than you are!” my father exclaimed.

My father isn’t a bad person, in fact, he’s one of the greatest people in the village. He just gets a temper after coming home from working on three different shifts, starting from early in the morning, till late at night. And apparently, he was dismissed from work for the same reason as my mom- the protests. *I’m not* *liking this whole protest deal. At all,* I speculated.

When it was about three-o'clock in the afternoon, I had finished helping my mom out. I went out onto the patch of dry grassland located behind our den to at last play with Norbert and  my soccer ball. For hours we played joyfully, until a broad hum resounded in my ears. Walking inside, I  desperately searched for my family. Then I caught sight of them all, sitting in the living room. They wore a nervous semblance on their faces.

I directed myself agitatedly to my parents, “Sabeen, Adnan what’s happening?”

“Violence is coming our way, son. We must leave soon,” my mother said. And that was enough for all seven of us to understand. It was the end of the discussion.

I set my foot out the house, and closed the door one last time. We carried all sorts of things in the backpacks hanging at our backs. They ranged from bundles of clothes, bulks of food, sheets, some personal items, and self defense stocks. I also slipped my soccer ball inside, and carried the Damascus goat in my arms. Having said this, we started walking.

We treked for hours nonstop until we reached a group of people from our village, trying to escape as well. As we got closer, I counted at least a few hundred people all staring at us.

My father seemed to recognize to the man leading the group, and said, “Ghaith, we are pleading that a good man like you helps us. Could we join you?”

“Adnan, as much as we would like to help you, there are already enough people we have to worry about. I’m afraid this will not be possible,” the man uttered.

“I promise you that we won’t be a bother. I’m begging you, Ghaith, please just let my family go with you. For god’s sake!” my father pleaded.

“Fine. But if and when your children start complaining, you’ll have no other choice but to leave the herd. So make sure they behave.”

Although I’m sure they would’ve loved to stay and catch up on life, they couldn’t, since bombs started to drop everywhere, frightening not only me, but the other 2,131 inhabitants of Salma. Their resounding boom when they hit the ground made me shiver. We heard gunshots and people screaming. That’s when we decided to run. All of us dashed as fast as we could, passing through near meadows. Eventually we got tired, so we treaded again. So we trooped, away from our homes, away from the violence. Then we found shelter and slept hostilely.

The following morning, after running and walking all day, the group took the main road and headed west, to the coast. I paced tiredly as I squeezed Norbert’s leash; alongside stood my mom, who held Burhan by the hand. Dad was behind us; he carried Elyas on his shoulders while rocking Rasha in his arms. Moonif walked ahead with his new friend.

“Mom,” I spoke, “where is it exactly that we’re going?

“Once we reach the border, we’ll get on a boat- a large, safe one. We’ll have to stop at Cyprus and Turkey before arriving to Greece. Once there, we’ll take the train, several buses and walk long distances to cross country borders. If all goes well, we should be in Germany in a matter of weeks or months,” she clearly explained.

Although my parents seemed to have my life under their management, I didn’t want the same things for myself as they did. But I’m under age, and their son. I had to follow.

After days of non-stop marching, we lastly reached the country’s border. There, we found boats ranging all sizes that had dangerous aspects; waiting to take us to Europe. Then, I spotted someone that made my frown turn into a big grin.

“Isaam!” I exclaimed.

“Mohammed?!” Isaam screamed joyfully.

“What are you doing here, alone? Where is your family?” I asked.

“They're gone, Mohammed. They left to Europe just a while ago. I told them I wasn't just going to leave my country without fighting. They didn't seem to care, and took my little siblings to the boat. Their last words to me were 'Take care, son.’”

I was dumbfounded by what Isaam had just told me. How could his parents leave him behind and have faith kill their own son?!

Isaam spoke again to ask, “Are you leaving me, too? Are you going to leave your country, abandon everything that's here?”

I couldn't speak, thus until now, I hadn't even thought about staying.

“I-” I muttered.

“Go ahead, get on the boat. I hope you live a happy life,” Isaam hurtfully cried.

And those were the only words he said to me. Then he turned and walked away.

Dumbstruck. I was dumbstruck. My best friend had not only been abandoned by his family, but he had returned to the bloodbath we once called home. Though he had changed my perspective completely about the war, I couldn’t leave my family. I had to make a choice.

I hustled to where my family stood inside the boat. “I’m staying. And there’s nothing you can do about it,” I firmly stated.

My dad let out a snort and replied, “Good one, son. But it’s no time for jokes.”

“I’m not kidding, dad. I have to say and fight; for you, for me, for my country and my beliefs. You taught me to stand up for what I believed. Well that’s what I’m doing.”

Following my words, the vehicle’s horn anticipated its departure. It was my time to go.

“Thank you for everything that you ever did for me. You were the greatest role models I could’ve ever asked for. I will truly miss you all. I promise I’ll come back looking for you someday. But for now, I can’t be with you. I love you,” I finished my uttermost goodbye. Then I realized, *this is my last time I’ll see their faces in a long, long time.* I shot one definitive glance at them, and left.

**September 19, 2024- Beirut, Beyrouth, Lebanon**

 It’s been thirteen years since I last saw my family. Thirteen years since I’ve been in this war. Thirteen years fighting for our freedom.

 I think it’s safe to say that Isaam and I are leaders of the Free Syrian Army. We survived hell and everything that came after. Death flashed before our eyes several times. But we lived.

Syria is now a safer place. Everything is back in control, thus war is now extinct here. A lot of refugees are coming back home, including my family. I heard of them a while back when a fellow fighter told me about a case he had handled while being a volunteer at a refugee camp.

 “It’s a family of seven,” he’d told me, “that are looking for his son who refused to go to Europe, and stayed fighting. It was back in twenty-eleven.”

It had to be them. I was able to contact them about five months ago, and told me they would come when the war was over. Now it was time to reunite.

Dad would be about sixty-seven years old; Mom, fifty-five. Moonif had to be twenty-two. The twins were nineteen. Burhan now had the age I was when I was first touched by war. And little Zeniah would soon become thirteen. Oh, how does time fly!

The boat docked at eleven in the morning, thousands of people desperate to touch their land once again. It was hard trying to scavenge for faces that I might not even recognize- I hadn’t seen them for over a decade!

But then, there they were, as my old self had once known them. It was shocking and amazing to get to see them once more for I didn’t expect to do so. They approached me, and along them travelled now grown-up Norbert!

A gleam made its way through my face as I extended my arms widely.

Then I gleefully shrieked, “Welcome back, guys. I’ve missed you.”