



ILLUSTRATION: RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS

MEETING MARIA

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The bottles clanked. I hadn't met her in years. But I was no longer able to take what was happening to me. And so, I gathered the courage and asked Maria for the meeting.

This arrangement was meant to take the edge off. She chose something light for the occasion, but knowing the context of our meeting, I knew how much she must have thought about it. I was fine with, you know, whatever. Her existence neither made me happy nor sad. There were not two adjectives that I would ever use to describe my feelings towards Maria. She just was, she simply existed, albeit against great odds.

I never know how to begin talking about a crucial issue, obviously less so when it is life or death. There were only two people I could explain this to. One of them lived many hours' journey away (or so I thought), so I settled for Maria, my long-stranged friend.

I found the fact that there were only the two of us too revealing. I felt like if there was less sound to absorb her thoughts, she would see right through me. Undivided attention is burdensome.

"So, what brings you here?" she asked, and I hated how strong she was coming on already.

"I'm sure you know the answer to that," I said. I really thought she knew it or at least she would be able to guess. "I don't think I need to beat around the bush anymore. I saw it, you know. Five days ago,

before going to sleep."

"Wow! Are you sure?" she asked. I hated her tone. But Maria was not known to be insincere, especially in moments like this. So, I reassured her, I was sure I had a vision.

A look of great satisfaction swept Maria's face. From where she was in life right then, that was possibly the best news anyone could have given her.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Maria asked but she tried to keep the poker face on. I reciprocated her stunt; I had thought about this encounter for five days. While I hadn't lost much sleep over it, I definitely had all the possible scenarios covered in my head.

"I am sure everything will be fine," I said. When I was younger, if I ever said something that bordered on being ominous or worrying, adults would always tell me, "No! Don't say that, it will all be fine." Basically, they tell you always to manifest the best. Also, I did truly believe everything would be fine. They stopped hunting the *Tellers* long, long ago.

Maria looked a bit disappointed. The fact that I was so sure it would be all okay probably felt cruel to her, more than anything else.

"Do you know how long I have waited for this?" she could no longer keep it together. Maria used to be a *Teller*. She started out in 2196. Divination had been banned for about two decades by then. Maria's group was one of the insurgents.

But they were growing too fast and too loud. A lot of people were dying to annul

the painful prophecies about their lives. It was anarchy. The Handlers got to everyone in their group one by one. I always knew Maria was not brave. If it came to it, she would never be able to take the *Tablet*. Six out of eight people in her group took it. Maria was a coward and Romy was disloyal to their group's ideology. Romy successfully fled the *Territory*, or she would have also been kept in there with Maria.

When they captured Maria, she knew it was going to be a sentence more painful than death. She would have preferred dying but only she wasn't brave enough. Also, from what I knew of her, she loved living. She loved being an early bird and she loved being a night owl. There was positively no one else I knew who had ever wanted to be alive more than she. But at what cost? She was sentenced to solitary confinement for life. Well, she was only ever going to be allowed one meeting. One meeting, with any person. Then never again.

When I called the Handlers to let Maria know that I wanted to meet her, I knew what a momentous decision that would be for her. I asked to be her one meeting.

"I'm sorry about your mom," I suddenly remembered to take this opportunity to show her some empathy. "I think you should have met her. Why didn't you?" I asked.

"She never asked. I think she did not want to put me through this decision. She wanted me to have this one thing to look forward to," she said.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"Lonely. You know I can't *see* in here, right? It is a Platinum Grade facility, it must have cost billions to make it. Must have been in the news, right?" she was curious.

I didn't have the heart to tell her that I always avoided news about her or Romy. All I knew was that she was captured, and Romy was not found anywhere in our *Territory*.

"Maria, why did you agree to meet me?" I hoped that hadn't come off as hurtful. She never had a lot of friends growing up.

"I agreed because I knew you were telling the truth when you called the Handlers," she said, smiling.

"I thought you couldn't *see* in here?" I asked.

"No, but the last vision I had before I was captured was of us growing old together," Maria said. The guilt was so obvious on her face. But so was her happiness. She must have known someday she would have a friend come in here. I can't imagine the height of anticipation she has had to live through every day for the last 11 years.

The meeting was over. When I left Maria, she was ecstatic, for obvious reasons. Her confinement would be no longer solitary.

I signed the note to my dad and took a handful of pills. Only death annuls a prophecy.

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