

JP

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### Survivor

The sunlight graced the town with a soft, golden glow, people moved about the streets with deliberate steps, the occasional honk of a car echoed in the productive place. The sky was a clear, cerulean blue that indicated no signs of bad weather. It was a peaceful day.

Akua walked the streets with calculated steps, his subconscious mind taking awareness of his surroundings. Buildings with recognizable cracks stood on either side of the street, their dilapidated appearance reminding the citizens of Mogadishu, Somalia of the ongoing war in their country. The sidewalks held visible traces of bombs that once went off in this town, the cracks and dark spots stood out starkly on the concrete ground.

Everyone was still reeling from the events of these past few decades: the civil war that swept the ground of the world's feet, the lives lost in the crossfire, and the aftermath that wrecked the country and tore its foundations apart. The fear and grief in the air were so palpable that anyone who would step foot on Somali soil will immediately feel it.

Akua's heart was still heavy with grief for his family that he lost during the gunfire exchanged by the rebels and the government. He hoped that one day, he could live a life of normalcy without carrying an anguished heart; he longed for a nation wherein he would no longer keep looking behind his back.

Akua headed for a cafe, grabbed a cup of coffee and sat down on one of the metal chairs that no one ever seemed to occupy. Constant bombings never allowed you to stay stationary in one place for so long. He took the morning paper from his duffel bag and began reading, *Kenyan Court Blocks Plan to Close Dadaab Refugee Camp*, and sipped his coffee at regular intervals.

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A loud bang resonated in the town, and Akua and the majority of the Somali people ignored it. Growing up in a place torn by war lets you get accustomed to the persistent, loud noises of firearms. What got their attention was another deafening boom followed by an explosion of concrete.

Akua ducked for cover underneath the steel coffee table, the morning paper forgotten in his hand. Fear enveloped his heart, and his breaths began coming out in staccato gasps as screams were heard. Reeling with vertigo, he regained his balance and stood up, laying a hand on the table as he let his dizziness subside. Adrenaline coursed through him as he shot upright and began running to the first place he could think of—the hospital.

Akua fought through the mob of desperate people, wails, and cries coming from every direction. Paramedics rushed in, followed by stretchers carrying bodies of the individuals that were injured. A maelstrom of red and white blurred past his vision, and he took note of the doctors and their focused eyes and steady hands.

Nurses rushed about, assuring forlorn family members that everything will be fine; the doctors were doing everything they can. This brought a surge of cold anger in Akua because those were the same words that let him hope that his family would make it out alive. They were empty promises that will betray hearts if the truth was not shined upon them.

Akua headed to the family and friends of people in the emergency room and sat beside them. Their eyes fixed on his face, filled with queries of why he wasn't weeping like they were. He mustered up the courage to look them in the eye and said, "I do not weep because I cannot. I do not have the capability to submerge in an ocean of tears again."

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For a nineteen-year-old boy, his words carried a certain maturity that can only be developed when someone had undergone enormous burdens, "I am not certain that your friend, your son or daughter, your brother or sister, or your mother or father will make it out there alive," Akua continued with a voice that did not match his hollowness. "I understand what you are going through, for I have experienced it as well." Sniffles and silent cries were his only responses. The *hijab*-cloaked heads of the women were faced downward, and their ebony skin was stained with tears.

Akua fought the lump in his throat and said in his rumbling bass, "But I am here to tell you that you will surpass this grief, and if whoever that is important to you that's in there makes it out alive, you are extremely blessed. If not, trust me, you will recuperate. It may not be easy, but you will." Tears were streaming down his cheeks, and an elderly woman with a purple *hijab* held his hand in her wrinkled one.

Her eyes were the shade of burnt caramel, possessing years of knowledge in those depths. "Thank you for that, my boy. You are wise beyond your age," she said. Akua nodded, giving her hand a squeeze, "It was nothing, ma'am. My name is Akua." The old lady smiled in a sad sort of way. "That *was* my brother's name," she replied in a wistful voice, "He fought and died in the war," Akua said nothing because there was nothing to be said. A man who fought in the war was a brave man; a man who fought and died on the battlefield was a hero. Silently, he prayed for the old lady's brother that he may find his way in Heaven and rest peacefully.

They all sat there in silence, waiting for news concerning the injured. The television that was mounted on the wall showed journalists on the scene, interviewing officials and asking for a number of people that were dead or hurt. A police officer that seemed to be in his late twenties

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appeared on the screen and voiced his opinion that the government was certain the terrorist group, Al-Shabaab was responsible for this bombing. The Al-Shabaab was a ruthless terrorist group that planted fears deep inside the Somali people's hearts since the collapse of the government. Akua shivered.

"We advise the citizens to be more cautious because this attack was the first since Mogadishu's efficient progress," The officer said, "There is likely to be another attack."

The screen suddenly went off, and this caused panic inside the hospital. No electricity meant no survival of the injured. Akua looked around him as chaos erupted, and just as he stood, a bomb went off. It blew the hospital's concrete walls and a colossal fire began.

The world was thrown into pandemonium as people rushed out of the hospital, Akua one among hundreds. It was a massive diaspora of the Somali people. Akua took cover in one of the shops lining the streets and took a moment to clear his head and analyze his situation. As much as he loved to see Somalia flourish into a stable country again, he was tired of being caught in the war zone. There were other places he could find a job, start a new life.

It was time to leave.

Akua rushed to his apartment, just a block away from his current location. His legs acted of their own accord, running as fast as he could until his muscles were screaming in protest. People dashed by, fleeing for safety as gunshots from every direction resonated in the city.

By the time Akua reached his apartment, his muscles were leaden and his heart was beating loudly. He fumbled for his keys and stepped into the building, locking the door hastily behind him. Akua dashed up the staircase and grabbed a duffel bag stowed underneath the center table of the living room.

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His duffel bag already contained three days worth of clothes and all he had to do was to secure his stash of water and food and get a hold of important documents that could change his entire life. Once he felt properly packed, he sat at one of the loveseats in the living room and thought of where he could go.

Mogadishu was in southern Somalia, and it wouldn't make sense for him to trek northwards towards Ethiopia. "*Kenya it is, then,*" he thought to himself. He thought about the article he read in the morning paper; about the refugee camp and how it was still open. It may not be a very good start, considering a number of refugees there were in that camp, but it was worth a shot.

He searched inside himself for the courage to leave his country and somewhere, buried under the sorrow and burdens, he found it. He could be selfish this time; he will not let his love for his country get in the way of his self-preservation. He slung the duffel bag over his shoulders and headed out of his apartment that had been his home for his whole life.

He headed west of Mogadishu, towards the rolling landscapes of southwest Somalia, towards the border that separates Kenya and Somalia with a feeling he hasn't felt for so long: *hope.*

It was a five-day trek to Dadaab, Kenya under the sweltering heat of the Somali climate. Akua met fellow refugees along the way, four adolescent boys and a mother with her child. They didn't have any supplies, so Akua rationed his stash of water and food among them. They huddled together at night near a campfire Akua kindled to scare off wild animals that may harm them.

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During their journey, Akua felt like he was part of a family. Adika, the mother, and her daughter, Dalili, were from Kismayo. Nefertari and Dakarai were orphans from Kismayo, while Adio and Abuo were from Merca.

Three days into the trek, two of the boys, Nefertari and Adio, could not make it any longer. Dehydration and hunger got the best of them, and though Akua hasn't known them for a long time, it was with a heavy heart that he let them go.

On the last day of their trek, Akua, Abuo, Dakarai, Adika and Dalili ran out of water and food. Akua was fatigued and he longed for shelter and actual food to eat, but little did he know that they were already over the border of Somalia. A few kilometers away, atop a hill, Akua saw a glimpse of white and green roofs.

He dragged himself up and felt a whirlwind of emotions settle in his heart as he saw the thousands of people inhabiting this place. He read the lopsided sign hanging from a tree branch, *Dadaab, Kenya*.

He was in Kenya. He made it.