

Anastasia Whitmore danced with fear, cold sweat dripped down her spine as her brain produced images before her closed eyelids. Her mind's depiction of her greatest fears finally lurched her into consciousness as she sat up, breathing heavily. She tried to regain serenity but it was too late, her younger sister had opened her tiny, bright eyes.

"Ana? Are you okay?" Maria questioned groggily. Her face still pressed into the pillow.

"I'm fine, kiddo. Just a nightmare."

She forced herself to lay back down and attempt to go back to sleep.

As she stared at the ceiling in the dark, her memories began to plague her again. Her breathing remained steady even though her body was having an internal earthquake. She argued with herself, angry for letting her emotions and fears trouble her yet also anxious and terrified from all the stress she was under.

Conclusively, steamy tears rolled down her face, seeping into her pillow. She hated herself for showing emotions, she wanted to be tough. After a brief period of silent sobbing, her internal scolding finally deterred her from letting any more teardrops loose. Strictly following the motto she lived by, she reassured herself that self-pity was the most dangerous of all passions and went back to sleep.

Her view on self-pity was just one of the many lessons she had forced herself to learn from a young age. Her life was plagued by constant anguish, yet she refused to let herself wallow self-pity.

The product of an unintentionally loveless marriage, Anastasia lived an average childhood; it wasn't until after many happy years that her mother's constant criticism drove her father into alcoholism and everything started to fall apart. On one of the rare nights where the couple seemed to get along, Maria was conceived.

When she learned that she was going to have a younger sibling, Anastasia was already eight years old. She wanted to be infuriated, it seemed only natural for an only child to not want to share their parents with the next installment of the family, but Anastasia knew that the her younger sibling would have it far worse than she ever did. Anastasia had at least engaged in some of her parents more patient, enjoyable years; Maria would know nothing of a happy family. Her mother's pregnancy period foreshadowed what would come, as even in the womb, Maria experienced several drunken fist fights. Thus the day that Maria was born, Anastasia vowed to

herself and the little baby whose eyes shined up at her that she would give her own life to ensuring that Maria had the best one possible.

After falling into a blissfully empty sleep, Anastasia was awoken by her sister gently shaking her side.

“Wakey, Wakey” Maria sang in her sister’s ear.

A smile lit across Anastasia’s face as she pulled herself out of bed. The sisters pulled the covers up on the bed that they shared and neatly tucked the edges of the comforter in. Then Maria sat on the bed while Anastasia sloppily twisted her sister’s blonde hair into a braid. At age sixteen, Anastasia was a failure to the image of a stereotypical girl as her interest in beauty was synonymous with that of a child’s interest in politics.

Throughout the years, Maria came to know the sacrifices that Anastasia gave for her. She noticed the way Ana would always talk loud enough to drown out the sounds of their parents fighting, how she was always the one who came running whenever she was hurt, how a normally quiet girl would grow an iron backbone and become vicious whenever her sister was threatened; Maria noticed all of these things yet she pretended not to. She thought it would make Ana feel better, knowing that she had managed to shield Maria away from the pains of the world. After Maria had grown to be about five, Mr. Whitmore divorced Mrs. Whitmore. His actions made Mrs. Whitmore bitter and depressed and as always, an insufficient mother. It didn’t matter to Maria that she no longer had a father or that her mother didn’t love her; it only mattered that she had Ana.

“Can I go see if everyone else is awake?” Maria asked excitedly as she hopped up and down on dilapidated bed, showing the true charisma of a happy eight year old.

Anastasia watched her enthusiasm and refused to brake it.

“Alright, go wake the others” Anastasia whispered.

Although the sisters had grown strong enough in their bond to outlast the effects of spiteful parenting, they were powerless in the world surrounding them. War had engaged between the girl’s home country of Dollerin and its bordering country, Liliqua. At first it seemed to be just another war, fought somewhere distant where no one seemed to care, until Liliquan tanks rolled though the center of Anastasia and Maria’s hometown, which was near the border of the two countries.

The town was placed under military rule and life carried on. Those who took action against the troops were placed in prison camps, anyone who resisted a soldier's orders were killed on the spot. Fear maintained order throughout the town. Mrs. Whitmore, who never knew how to take instructions, was one of the many who were dragged off to imprisonment and never seen again. The girls grieved but feared more for their safety; raiders were known for kidnapping orphans and selling them into slavery. Fortunately for the girls, the priest of the town church ran an underground orphanage and offered to take them in. Even amidst terror filled times, it was the first time the girls had known family outside each other.

Anastasia watched as Maria ran into the various bedrooms which held all the members of the great orphan family. Underneath the church, there was a small feeling of security; sometimes it seemed like it was possible to shut the world out.

Eventually, Maria had woken up all the church's inhabitants including the pastor.

"Good morning, Maria" Father Joseph said with a radiant smile. He had grown used to Maria's energetic nature and appreciated that Anastasia had somehow managed to keep hope in a girl who life constantly did the worst to.

Maria ran around with the younger children, playing games and engaging in other youthful activities while the older children, including Anastasia, made breakfast. Anastasia enjoyed the company of the teenagers but her eyes never left Maria, she knew all too well that it only took a second for tragedy to strike and the vow she had made on the day that Maria was born was always at the front of her mind. Still, she engaged in conversation with the other kids.

"What's up, sweet stuff?" quipped Brett, an overly gregarious boy who had grown particularly close to Anastasia. His daily romantic remarks had become expected from Anastasia. Even though she would never admit it, she liked the dorky boy.

"You really need to get better pick-up lines." She said while rolling her eyes dramatically.

The boy theatrically bit down on an apple and continued speaking.

"Did you hear about the search the soldiers did the other day? It was only a few blocks from here, they took an entire family...put 'em all in a refugee camp. At least they didn't get hauled off by raiders."

"You really think the soldiers give prisoners to raiders?"

"course they do, probably split the profit with them after."

Anastasia took in a deep breath, she couldn't let thoughts of Maria being taken into her mind. After arguing with Brett for fifteen minutes about who was better at flipping pancakes, Anastasia and all the other children sat down at the small table to eat.

Before they began to eat, Father Joseph preached his usual pre-meal prayer.

"Dear Lord, thank you for this food and all that we have. Thank you for letting us be in each other's company. Thank you for our safety in these troubled times. No matter how little time we have left on this earth, thank you for giving us the gift of life. Amen"

"Amen" repeated all the children.

Forks dove into food and teeth chomped as the children gorged themselves with food. A great deal of them had suffered many nights of starving before the priest had taken them in, making them appreciate every meal.

Maria, who had now retaken her place by Anastasia's side, spoke quietly.

"Oliver said that the soldiers were nearby. Do you think they would take us...if they found out we were orphans and no one would miss us?"

Anastasia looked down at her younger sister, it pained her deeply to see the slightest hint of fear on the child's face.

"No, Maria. I wouldn't let them take us. I've already told you, no matter what happens to me, you are going to get out of this country and live a good life. You're going to fall in love and have children, do work you love and you're going to be happy, I promise."

Maria didn't look satisfied by the answer.

"I wouldn't be able to live without you, Ana" she whispered

"Yes you would. If the day comes where I have to die to protect you, I would do it without thinking about it for a second. I swear that I'm going to protect you." Her sister replied gravely. Maria knew it was impossible to argue with Anastasia, what scared her most was that she knew the seriousness of Anastasia's words.

After all the kids finished eating their food and the older kids had finished cleaning dishes, they started their day. Father Joseph went to the upper part of the church to give religious services, leaving the children to do mostly whatever they wanted. The younger children made up their own games to play while the older children played with a decaying deck of cards.

"Choose wisely" Brett said as they engaged in a game of Old Maid.

Anastasia stared at the cards for a moment, knowing she would either win or lose, and then boldly made her choice. She peeked at the card she had chosen and smiled as she was triumphant.

Brett sighed, as he had lost for the fifth game in a row.

Just as he had begun shuffling the deck to engage in another game, the door at the top of the stairs hastily opened and Father Joseph came plummeting down the stairs.

“Children, the soldiers are upstairs! You must hide!”

The younger ones knew enough not to scream but the looks of terror on their face embodied true fear. Anastasia nearly exploded from the table as she ran to Maria and scooped her up in her arms. Both girls were shaking.

The children scattered in various hiding spaces. Anastasia and Maria hid under their bed. They interlocked hands and squeezed each other.

“We know they’re here, old man” a soldier yelled, as he and his comrades entered the basement of the church.

It wasn’t long before the soldiers discovered the orphans as the basement allowed for minimal hiding places. Anastasia watched, petrified, as a pair of combat boots appeared before the end of the bed. With one aggressive push, the soldier who stood next to bed launched the entire bed frame and mattress onto its side, revealing Anastasia and Maria.

He grabbed the sisters by the arm and corralled them with the other children, they had all been discovered.

Anastasia looked to Brett who had tears in his eyes, they both knew that the worst was yet to come.

The soldiers marched the children out of the church and into the street where they were loaded onto a military vehicle. The church’s neighboring residence peered out their windows to watch the children be hauled away to some forsaken place. No one could save them now.

Anastasia took notice of her surroundings. There were only three or four soldiers, each armed with an automatic weapon. She assumed they wouldn’t use the weapons on the children; if they were going to be given to raiders in order to be sold, they would need to be alive.

The military truck lurched forward after all the children were loaded onto it. Anastasia continued to shake, no longer from fear but from immense rage. She knew what horrors Maria would endure if the soldiers brought them to a prison camp or sold them into slavery.

She made her decision instantly, today was the day she fulfilled her vow to protect Maria at all costs.

She didn't know how or when but she knew she had to do something if Maria was going to get away.

The drive to wherever the truck was going was extremely long. Anastasia guessed that they were heading towards the border, meaning that the soldiers planned to give the children over to raiders.

After about an hour, the truck pulled over. Anastasia's heart nearly stopped until the soldier stationed in the back of the truck with the kids shouted "What's the hold-up?"

"Almost out of gas" another soldier replied as he appeared with a red gas can.

"I'm going to pee" the first soldier replied, jumping off the back end of the truck and marching a few feet into the woods.

Anastasia saw her chance. No soldier was watching the children. She knew she had to do something. Desperation slowed the blood pumping through her veins.

She grabbed Maria by the hand and ran off the truck.

The night sky gave them cover, they wore it like a mask. Hiding from all that could go wrong, the two girls just ran, they ran endlessly and with desperation. They ran like lambs running from the slaughter. They ran for all those who could not, they ran to be free and they ran for each other. They ran for the children back in the truck, for Father Joseph. They ran for their parents, to prove them wrong and show that they didn't need them to survive. They ran with unyielding ambition. They ran for their lives.

And throughout the duration of their run, Anastasia made sure that Maria was directly in front of her so that when bullets were fired, they would hit her first and Maria could keep running.

In that frozen moment of time, Anastasia experienced it all. The bullets rocketed through the air, deafening the world around them. She felt relief, knowing her task was done. She would die but Maria could keep running and get away.

She looked down, all while still running, and to her horror her torso remained unscathed. She kept running while Maria fell to the ground, pierced by bullets. Anastasia fell to the ground with her, clinging to her sister's body. She let out the cry of a beast, of a mother bear who just lost her cub. She threw herself over her sister's body instinctually and wept.

She would have given anything for her sister's life, but she didn't get the chance. Perhaps it was unavoidable fate or God's will, but Anastasia couldn't live with the fact that Maria's life ended in tragedy; after all they had survived together, it seemed only just that they deserved a life of happiness and a normal death.

In that frozen moment of time, Anastasia experienced Maria's death as a vision, a nightmare like sequence. She saw the tragic death of her sister and no matter how badly she wanted to, she could not prevent it. But a vision was all that she would see of the tragic event, because when it ended, her sister still gripped her hand and ran with her through the night.

The sounds of bullets echoed through the deserted woodland area, yet they came nowhere close to the sisters because of one boy's actions.

Brett watched as Anastasia and her sister got off the truck and ran into the night. They would not get far enough fast enough and Brett knew it.

"Those two are running away!" one of the soldiers shouted, warning his comrades. Another held up his gun and pointed it at the two silhouettes running into the forest.

"I've got it" He said calmly, his finger closing in on the trigger.

Brett couldn't bare it. He couldn't bear to see the two girls experience the highest level of tragedy. He couldn't bear it to see Anastasia give her life for her sister, as he knew she would. He couldn't bear it to see the way Anastasia would be torn into a vacant shell of being if her sister was dead. He couldn't bear to see both girls, shot and killed.

Bearing only his courage, he threw himself into the gunman, knocking him down and letting the two girls run free. The soldier launched himself up off the ground and tried to fire at the two figures running away but they were out of sight. He turned to the boy, whose courage spared two lives, and fired several shots into his chest.

Anastasia would never know that Brett gave his life to save her and her sister. She would never know how deeply he cared for her, because he never got the chance to say so. She would never know how he listened to all her long travesties of self-pity and refrained from telling her that she was being completely ridiculous. She would never know that he had tears in his eyes on the day the soldiers came, not because he was afraid for his life, but because he was afraid that he would be separated from her. Anastasia never knew these things, but she did have her sister.

Anastasia and Maria Whitmore escaped the country, evading war and death. They made a new life for themselves. Maria graduated school, got married, had children, and built a distinguished career for herself, but most of all Maria was happy because she had her sister.

Anastasia also moved on with her life and became successful, but she never took her time with her sister for granted. She bought a house next-door to Maria and made sure to talk to her at least once every day.

She knew that the day the soldiers came for her, her sister should have died and she should have been helpless, but even though she wasn't quite sure who to thank, she was everlastingly grateful. Most importantly of all, Anastasia never forgot the young boy from the orphanage who was her closest friend. She never forgot Brett.