

The Sanctuary

March 19th 1921

Dear Diary,

I still remember those fateful few weeks. It has been a year now since we set off on an adventure to reach the Sanctuary. When I was young my mother told me stories of how a group of her friends journeyed to find this utopia and never returned. How foolish it was of me to assume that they were never seen again because they had fallen in love with such a mythical place and its values and people. How foolish.

I have not yet looked back on my diary entries from last year, as I had hoped to keep the memories locked away forever. I have kept to myself the things I witnessed during my stay at the Sanctuary, as I feared no-one would believe me if I told them what really happened. I feel that I am now ready to acknowledge the truth behind the events I encountered during those fateful weeks, which now feel like some kind of fever-dream. I shall return to the time when it all began; one year ago today.

March 19th 1920

(1 Year Ago)

After weeks of travelling over vast oceans, and trekking through sand and mud and reeds, we have finally arrived. Jane dropped her bags onto the ground and moved a hand towards her face, shielding her eyes from the scintillating sun. I watched in disbelief as a landscape of vibrant greens unfolded before my eyes. "We're here," Zara exclaimed. Jane and Zara were my travelling

companions and best friends since childhood. We had dreamed of this moment since we were little girls, having heard stories of a land of luscious tropical scenery and skies as blue as the ocean. No amount of stories could have prepared me for this moment though. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" My travelling companions nodded in agreement. Since the war had destroyed the beautiful lands my mother had described to me, trees and greenery were not something I had grown up around. "Come on then, lets keep going," Jane insisted, grabbing her rucksack and heading towards the viridescent shadows.

Whilst we began to near the treeline, Jane suggested that we might stop for a moment to have some water. "What do you think we will find on the other side of those trees?" Zara asked me, her brows furrowed with worry. "Somewhere amazing I hope." She nodded and gave me a small smile. In all honesty I had no idea what we were going to come across. My mother had said to expect a completely different way of life to the one which I was so accustomed to, but in a positive way. "Women there are equal in every way imaginable. They share labour, grow their own fresh produce, and share their money and belongings. Greed is a dangerous thing which has plagued us for many years since the war, but it does not exist there", she had told me. I wanted to believe my mother. If what she was saying was true, then we would stumble upon a perfect world beyond these trees.

After a few hours of walking it began to get dark and we decided it would be best to set up camp for the night. I had a strange dream that night; I was racing through the trees with bare feet and dodging under branches. I turned my head to look back and all I saw were faceless women brandishing torches, chasing after me. I tried to shake off the strange ominous feeling and prepare myself for what would be one of the most eventful days of my life.

March 20th 1920

After setting off on the last leg of our journey at the crack of dawn, we had finally made it. The Sanctuary was situated in a valley between two mountains, and you could not miss it if you tried. Everything my mother had said about its beauty was true; the village was surrounded by an oasis of wildlife and lush vegetation. The sounds of birds chirping filled the air and grew louder the closer we got to the village. “Is this really it?” Zara could not hold back her smile; the atmosphere induced laughter and joy amongst us. The scenery was so naturally beautiful and bright that it left me speechless. “Is it just me or does this place seem too good to be true?” Jane muttered under her breath. I could hardly blame her for being sceptical, as this was like nothing I had ever seen before.

“Look, people!” Zara cried with joy, wagging her finger at the figures in the near distance. I could just about make them out, but they were definitely women. As we grew closer they must have seen us, as a crowd started to form before us. They were all dressed in identical cream coloured gowns, seemingly crafted from cheesecloth. Some of the women wore straw hats, lined with a cream-coloured silky ribbon. Their outfits were simple but suitable for the warm climate of the island.

“Welcome, friends!” One of the women stepped forwards, holding out a hand. Zara was the first one to shake it. Jane held back, so I greeted the blonde lady with a wary smile. “I am Lily, it is so lovely to meet you,” she said with a huge smile.

“I’m Zara, these are my friends Cleo and Jane. We have travelled for many miles to find you.” We were currently standing in a field at the bottom of the valley. Further up small, quaint houses with thatched roofs were dotted about. There were a few women sitting in front of a cluster of bushes, collecting fruit and placing it in straw baskets.

“You must all be starving! It is almost lunch time, I will show you to the dining hall,” Lily urged, hurrying us up the set of stairs craved from stone. Jane glanced back at me, an undistinguishable

look in her eyes. Before heading inside, I managed to look back for a second. All of the women who had greeted us were nowhere to be seen. How strange this land and its people were. I did not have a chance to stop and consider my thoughts before Lily ushered me into the dining hall.

To my surprise, the large room was empty. It was filled with wooden picnic benches, each neatly set with a chequered table cloth and four pairs of silver cutlery. There were wine glasses sparkling beside the plates. "Where is everyone?" Jane asked.

"They are all busy enjoying the sunshine. I am sure they will be joining us momentarily," our guide reassured us. We chose a bench to eat at and waited in silence for everyone to arrive. It seemed that they all ate lunch at the same time, which I couldn't help but find strange.

A few minutes later a bell rang throughout the hall and it soon filled up with people. Someone in a cream apron carried four plates of food to our table. Lunch consisted of a salad with boiled potatoes and freshly smoked salmon. "Do you grow all of your own food?" Jane asked, poking the salmon with her fork. "Yes! We wanted to have a sustainable way of living so we grow our own food and make everything here ourselves," Lily enthused. She filled our glasses with red wine and waited for us to drink. "Thank you, this is delicious," Zara said, offering her glass up to be clinked.

After lunch was finished we were offered to be taken on a tour of the Sanctuary. I glanced back at the dining hall before brushing off my uncertainties and heading outside, where the sun was still beaming. "Firstly I will show you where we grow and catch our food." Lily led us down some steps and over to some fields where they were growing wheat and corn. She then took us down towards a large river where some women were untangling fishing nets. "We are very proud of the fact that we grow all of our own produce and farm our own animals. We are aiming to be able to live off the land completely," Lily informed us.

“What fruits do you grow?” Jane asked, staring across at the fruit tree meadows.

“We have a wide variety... citrus fruits, berries, apples.”

“Do you have a vineyard?” I asked, suddenly remembering that they seemed to produce a large amount of wine. Lily shook her head. “No, sadly the climate won’t allow for it. It is much too arid as we barely get any rain,” she told me. How could they possibly produce their wine then?

Lily also showed us to the infirmary, the mill, and then the library. “Here we keep all of the secrets behind our history,” she stated whilst pulling out a thick, burgundy hardback. Jane reached for it and quickly flicked through. “We lost many of our men in the war and the others were taken captive, so we retreated to the valley here and used the terrain to our advantage. We haven’t seen any men since, nor have we needed them,” Lily said in an enthusiastic tone. Zara picked up a book and noted that it was written in strange symbols. “That would be our language Lurian, we created it when we first inhabited this land,” Lily stated before she wandered off.

“Something about this place is off. Doesn’t everything seem almost *too* perfect to you?” Jane whispered. I nodded. How had they managed to build everything here so quickly if they had moved here just after the war. How had they got all of the materials they needed? Where were they sourcing the grapes for their wine and the crystal for their glasses and-

“Time to go,” Lily announced, appearing out of thin air. She guided us out of the library.

“Do you have a leader or someone who is in charge here?” Jane asked boldly.

“We have a council and we meet every week to discuss important matters,” she said quickly, clearly wanting to change the subject. We heard a bell ring and a group of blonde women suddenly appeared, forming a line in front of a building which we had not yet seen. “What’s in there?” I asked, watching Lily’s expression change. “That is where we hold our council meetings. I am actually going to be occupied for the next hour so I will show you to your rooms and then meet you later for dinner.”

March 27th 1920

The next week flew by, as we spent most of our time in the library studying their language, or helping to pick fruit out in the meadows. I was just in my room getting ready for dinner when Jane burst in, breathless and panicked. I closed the door and invited her to sit on my bed. “What’s wrong?” She gave me a terrified, wide-eyed look before explaining.

“I was bored so I crept outside to check out that council meeting they have every week, you wouldn’t believe what I heard them talking about in there! They were talking about brainwashing, and solicitation, and trading illegally with men! We have to get out of here now!” She grabbed my backpack, heading into the bathroom to fill my bottle with water. “Listen, calm down. There is something creepy about this place but we should at least eat before we go, it’s a long journey home,” I reminded her. She nodded, taking a deep breath before following me downstairs for dinner.

We sat without our guide for the first time, as she had told us there was an issue she needed to attend to. “Have you noticed that they do everything at the same time too?” Jane asked me quietly. I stared up at the wall, searching for a clock. There wasn’t one. “They all listen to that bell. It controls everything they do, watch.” Sure enough everyone exited the hall promptly once the bell started to ring. Jane grabbed Zara and me by the arms and dragged us out of the hall. “We are getting out of here, now! Go and grab your backpack and fill up your bottle.,” Jane ordered.

“What, why? It’s perfect here, why would you want to leave?” Zara huffed.

“They’re hiding things- we aren’t safe here. No time to explain.” Zara shook her head.

“You guys carry on but I actually like it here. The weather’s always perfect, the food is good, and the people here are really nice. I am going to stay,” she stated. With that, she turned her back and walked off.

“We can come back for her another time, but for now we *have* to get out of here,” Jane insisted. We both hurried along whilst trying not to attract any unwanted attention. I spotted something shining underneath the bushes and headed towards it. “I think it’s a door. Could be a way out,” I suggested. Jane came over to examine it before hauling the doors open. We headed down the cracked stone steps into the unknown. It was pitch black underground and we had to follow the walls with our hands so that we did not trip and fall. My hand landed on something cold and smooth, maybe a handle? I pulled, hoping it would not open but it did. We both peeked into the room, scanning it for people who could possibly see us and catch us. We definitely should not have been down here; everything about this place screamed secret.

The walls were completely white, as were the lights, which made it hard to see. It looked like some kind of hospital in there. As I took a step forward, I noticed that there were women strapped up on medical beds, with IV drips beside them. What was this place and why was it hidden away? As if the atmosphere was not already morbid enough, the air was filled with screams and cries. Jane pushed past me, entering the forbidden room. Strangely enough, nobody seemed to notice her.

“What are they doing to these women?” She asked, approaching one of the beds. The woman attached to it had dark skin and hair and was clearly subdued. She had a faint smile on her face and her eyes were open but blank. She had a huge bump for a stomach, as did the woman beside her. “They’re all pregnant,” Jane muttered under her breath.

I heard the doors open behind me; Lily had found us. “I knew I should have kept a closer eye on you two! What are you doing down here?” She stormed towards us, arms folded and voice accusatory. “What is this place? What are you doing to the women here? Why?” Jane bombarded her with questions. Lily sighed, “did you really think our economy could survive in isolation? We’re an island, we need certain things which cannot be produced here,” she revealed.

“So you really just force these women to do your dirty work for you and then you lock them up down here?” Jane scoffed.

“How do you think we source our wine; our crystal; even the bricks you see that our buildings are made from. They have all been supplied by men, for a small price in return of course.”

“You people are sick... I bet none of these women knew what they were getting into, did they?” I could see Jane eyeing the doors we came in through. A small group of women wearing cream dresses appeared and began heading towards us. “They are doing this island a great service. We send them away to men of faraway lands, and when they return they do not even realise that they have been gone.” Lily yelled defensively.

“So that’s what this place is. You’re essentially brainwashing them so they forget it has ever happened, then you ship them off again to different men,” Jane gasped in realisation.

“I can’t believe I ever thought this place was perfect,” I muttered. A few more women dressed identically to Lily filtered in through the doors. “Perfect? Perfection doesn’t exist, it’s just an illusion. When we first found this land we thought it was something special. People were willing to work to make this place truly a sanctuary of nature and life,” Lily explained, beginning to get hysterical. “Well what went wrong? It seems like you have everything you need here to build a great community,” I shrugged.

“What went wrong, you ask? The weather is hot but we have no rain to grow certain crops, and we ran out of the materials that we needed to thrive here. The women who are down here became fed up of manual labour, so we had to find a different way for them to contribute towards the greater good of the island.”

Jane scoffed, her eyes focusing on the exit. We were surrounded by the women dressed in white. They were glaring at us, forming a semi-circle around us. “You people are sick!” Jane grabbed my

hand and we started sprinting past the women in white. “Perfection doesn’t exist! Stop looking for it because you will never find it!” I heard Lily call after us. The sky outside suddenly turned grey and cloudy and the plants began to wilt as we ran past them. I took one look back at the island as we reached the top of the hill, finally nearing safety. The women were now small dots in the distance, watching us leave.

March 19th 1921

(Back to the present day)

Thinking about the week we spent on that island brings back so many mixed emotions. Sadness because we had to leave Zara behind; anger because they fooled us for so long, and hope. I hope that one day someone else will discover that island for what it really is. So many women were trapped there; I hope one day someone will be able to free them.

Now, I sit with my mother and share stories from my time on the island. She came to the realisation that her friends who used to write to her from the island are now all gone. The Sanctuary was supposed to be a land where women could thrive. Instead, it is a place where dreams are dispelled and hopes are crushed. Perfection does not exist. I was wrong to think that it ever did.