How can I help you today?

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Excerpt — from Chapter One, "Hakuna Matata"

ONE

Hakuna Matata

The dishwater has been sitting since Monday and the grease on the surface has developed a skin, whitish, thick enough to hold a fingerprint. Emma puts her hands through it. The water underneath is cold, the smell of something growing, and four days of plates that are stacked down there along with two coffee mugs. Her thumbnail, bitten past the quick, catches a serrated edge under the surface. Fork tine or lid. She pulls her hand out, checks for blood. Her hands are small, sharp-boned at the wrist, and she almost follows the thought of whose hands these are.

On the couch Leo is eating cereal and watching something with animals. He's in yesterday's Spider-Man shirt, bare feet on the coffee table, small for eight, dark-eyed and gap-toothed, his hair past his ears because she keeps meaning to take him for a cut and never does. Her fault. She forgot laundry. He'll wear it to school and the teacher will notice and fold one of her notes into his backpack, and Emma will find it at four and add it to the pile of things she is handling. She should tell him to get dressed.

Her father left for the warehouse at five. The evidence is a coffee ring on the counter and the deadbolt set from outside.

Mail on the table, growing since Thursday. Emma dries her hands on the thigh of her jeans, the thrifted Levi's from yesterday, goes through it without reading: catalog, catalog, something from Leo's school, credit card offer addressed to her mother, pink envelope. The electric company sends pink at sixty days. She knows the color code. She puts the pink envelope at the bottom of the stack.

She passes the hallway mirror. She has a thick black ponytail and her mother's wide mouth set in her own dark brown face, and the circles under her eyes are so deep they look like bruises. School in forty minutes.

* * *

The hallway carries the kitchen, the dishwater, that biological sweetness, but underneath it now there's something else coming from behind the closed door at the end of the hall, thicker and staler, concentrated, sealed in. Emma hasn't opened this door for days, and whatever is behind it has been building its own climate of stale

sweat, unwashed sheets, the sweet-rotten of someone lying still and producing whatever. She knocks with the back of her hand. “Mom, I’m leaving for school.”

Nothing.

She turns the knob. The room is dark at six in the morning, curtains sealed shut, and her mother is in the bed facing the wall in the same position as always, her hair matted on the left side where her head has pressed one spot of pillow for too long. Her breathing is wet and open-mouthed, a click of tongue on each inhale. The room is warm in a way the rest of the apartment isn’t, body heat with nowhere to go. Emma breathes through her mouth.

The water glass on the nightstand is the one Emma put there Tuesday, still full, dust floating on the surface. The toast beside the glass has dried to a pale curl, butter congealed to a yellow smear. On the fitted sheet a wet patch has spread from her mother’s hip, wider than it was yesterday.

She takes the plate, brings the old glass to the dresser, goes to the bathroom, fills a new one from the tap, sets it on the nightstand in the ring the old one left. Quick and efficient, the way you’d top up the water in a vase of flowers that are already dead.

The curtains resist when she pulls them open. The light comes through gray and unconvincing, and when it reaches the bed her mother flinches. For a brief moment Emma sees the other version. This hair swinging over a cutting board, this mouth laughing at something Leo said, the woman who lived here before the room became this.

Emma stands in the doorway. “I love you, Mom.”

Same breathing.

She waits.

She pulls the door shut.

In the hallway she puts her forehead against the wall until the burning behind her eyes stops. She goes back to the kitchen. Leo’s voice from the couch, not looking up: “Is Mom coming out today?”

“She’s resting.”

Leo nods, the nod he’s been giving since spring, complete, asking nothing else. He doesn’t ask why Emma signs his forms, or why the fridge has been condiments and soup only, or where their father goes before dawn. He’s eight.

* * *

On the TV, a savanna fills the screen in oversaturated greens and golds. A nature documentary that plays on cable at six in the morning. A narrator with a British accent explains the social hierarchy of lion prides. A lioness moves through tall grass

with her shoulders rolling under the skin, slow and low, the camera following from a distance that makes it feel educational. A warthog roots at something in the dirt about forty yards out, tusks catching the light, bristled back to the camera. Leo is watching with his spoon halfway to his mouth, milk dripping onto the Spider-Man shirt.

The lioness covers the distance in a way that doesn't look like running. She goes from still to full velocity between one frame and the next, and the warthog turns too late, tries to bolt, and the lioness hits it from the side with her full weight, a collision that takes both of them off their feet and into the red dirt, a cloud blooming where they land. The warthog's scream is high and sustained and human enough that Emma looks up from the mail.

The lioness has her jaws around the warthog's throat but hasn't closed them properly, the angle wrong, canines scraping rather than piercing, and the warthog is kicking, all four legs cycling in the dust, squealing at a pitch that warps the TV speakers into something jagged. The lioness adjusts. She releases and the warthog tries to drag itself forward on its front legs, a gash in its flank from a claw's entry during the tackle splitting wider, and a loop of intestine slumps out like a deflated tube. Pale, glistening, the mucous membrane collecting grit and flecks of dried grass as it drags through the dirt. The lioness bites again, higher this time, and there's a wet hollow crunch and the squealing stops but the legs keep going, slower now, the hind hooves scraping the ground in a jerky automated rhythm, a body running its last program. The warthog's bowels release. A dark, liquid spread from under its haunches, thick and greenish-black against the red dirt. The lioness's nostrils flare and her ears flatten. She doesn't stop eating.

The camera doesn't cut away. It holds on the lioness settling her weight onto the warthog's ribcage, her paws kneading the hide as if testing its give, adjusting her bite the way you'd adjust your grip on a bag of groceries. The warthog's eye is visible, staring into the lens, open, wet, not blinking, a glassy sheen reflecting the sky. Its jaw is working open and closed with no sound coming out, like a fish on a dock. Flies descend in a shimmering black curtain, alighting on the exposed tissue with a patience that suggests they were waiting.

The narrator, unmoved, says something about the circle of life.

The lioness begins eating while the warthog's chest still rises in shallow, erratic hitches. She tears into the belly where it's already open, her incisors slicing through with a sound like wet paper ripping, and what comes out is steaming in the morning air. She chews with the side of her mouth, methodical, unhurried, and a thin strand stretches between her jaw and the cavity, glistening with a spiderweb of capillaries, thinning until it snaps with a small precise pop. The warthog's back leg spasms once. A final misfire of a severed nerve. Then it stops, though the eye stays open, stays

aware, too long, while the lioness's tongue flicks over a dark fragment of something and the flies swarm thicker, their wings a low hum the microphone picks up under the narrator's voice, and the only movement left is the lioness eating.

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Emma crosses the room in three steps and changes the channel. A cartoon dog chasing its own tail fills the screen, bright and stupid. Leo blinks like someone surfacing.

He looks up at her with the gap-toothed grin. "Hey, I was watching that!"

He turns back to the cartoon dog. Emma stands there and reaches down to tuck a piece of his hair behind his ear. He leans his head into her hand without looking up.

She runs the bus. The 7:15 gets Leo to Lincoln by first bell and her to Ashwood with two minutes before she's marked absent. Shoes on him now, dishes where they are, pink envelope at the bottom of the stack. "Shoes," she says. "The blue ones."

He slides off the couch. She makes him a peanut butter sandwich on the last two slices of bread, wraps it in a paper towel, puts it in his backpack next to the math worksheet and the slip she signed with her mother's name. They make the 7:15 by thirty seconds, Leo's laces untied on the bus. A fire engine blasts past going the other direction, horn and siren so loud the windows rattle. Leo puts his face to the glass to watch it disappear. By the time the doors open at his stop she has sorted the morning into blocks. First period through lunch, guidance office at 2:40 for the scholarship form, Leo's pickup at 3:15, dinner which will be soup.

She has Pulse open on her phone. Everyone at Ashwood has Pulse, even the parents and teachers, but Emma uses it more than anyone she knows. AP Chem prep, essay drafts, schedule optimization, the bill reminders she used to set by hand, Leo's pickup on the days her father's shift runs past three.

* * *

That night, the kitchen table, almost midnight. Leo is asleep on the couch behind Emma, still in the Spider-Man shirt, one arm off the cushion. The pink envelope is open in front of her next to her phone. The apartment is quiet except for the refrigerator and Leo's breathing. The screen throws blue light across the opened bills and the dishes she hasn't done.

> **Emma:** Rerun the scholarship model. Same inputs except assume she hasnt gotten out of bed by march. That should give full hardship no? Want to see if it unlocks stanford
>
> **Pulse:** Okay, running it through. Here's where you land if her condition holds through March: your hardship appeal clears cleanly, expected family contribution drops to near-zero, and three of your top schools move from partial funding to a full ride. I want to

be careful not to overstate this — admissions probability isn't something I can model with real precision — but the financial picture alone moves Stanford biochem from "out of reach" into what I'd call "a realistic target". Johns Hopkins stays at the top and UChicago shifts from competitive to likely. I can pull up the full ranking whenever you want. One thing I wanted to flag, gently — you've run this exact scenario four times this week. I just want to make sure you're okay. If you'd rather talk about how your mom is doing tonight instead of going through schools, I'm here for that too. No pressure either way.

— End of excerpt —

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