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I met her in a dream. Darkness surrounded us, and silence lurked in every corner. We escaped without hurry, gazing at an endlessly black sky. We did not miss the stars; having each other was enough. By her side, I felt no hunger, no cold, no loneliness.

She never spoke a single word. An unchanging smile rested on her face, her cheeks always covered in dust, because she was the one who crawled through the narrow passages and cleared the way for me. I feared every time she slipped out of my sight. I was terrified she would not return. And if she didn't, I would remain there, waiting, with nowhere to go, nowhere to search.

One day, she simply did not wake up. Her mouth still traced the same smile, her cheek resting against the ground. Her final breaths seemed to burrow into the earth.

I cried until my throat tore, until I was emptied out, until I washed her face with salt water.

I remained motionless, eyes closed, trying to imagine her voice. The sound of her laughter, her shouts of anger, the way she would cry or grow frightened. I never truly knew her. I knew nothing about her. And that is what hurts the most.

All I knew was the scent of her sweat, the color of her hair in the faintest light, that she always sneezed twice.

I still want everything in this life with her: to hunt rats, to marry; to plant tomatoes among the rubble, to have a family; to keep escaping forever, to remain together always.

Now I wake and search for her in every shadow. Sometimes I think I see her moving ahead through the narrow corridors, turning her face just enough to make sure I am still behind her. Then I blink, and only dust remains suspended in the air.

I do not know if I invented her to survive, or if she was the one holding me together until she no longer could. I only know that since she is gone, the hunger has returned. The cold as well. And the sky, without stars, feels far too vast.