

The African Stars

AROMA AMARAU

Dear Sahara,

I took your diary from your desk before the cops could get to it. I didn't read it, but I probably know most of the stuff that's in it 'cause we're BFFs and everything. I'm writing in it because you'd want to know everything that's been happening while you've been sleeping. I know the newspapers say you're in a coma, but I like to think that you're taking a very long sleep.

It was funny when the cops came into class today because you could tell Miss Hall liked one of them. She went all red like a plum. I turned to you to laugh and forgot that you're not here. That happens a lot. It was good to see Miss Hall in a good mood 'cause she's been very sad lately. I think she blames herself for what happened to you. I overheard her tell the cops that she should've picked up on the signs. But you know that we're good at hiding what's been happening to us – you with

your bruises and me with my stuff. Derek hasn't touched me since you went to hospital. I suppose he's feeling sorry for me 'cause of what's happened. It won't last though. I miss you. We always knew the right things to say to each other to make things better.

I wish I could come to the hospital to see you, but only family members are allowed to see you. That makes me angry 'cause we know it was those mongrels that put you in there in the first place. I tried to sneak in by telling the nurse that you were my sister, but she didn't believe me. Maybe because you're dark and I'm a waka blonde. It was worth a try. I can't wait until you wake up so you can tell everyone who did this to you. Mum and Derek are being weird too. They are hiding the newspapers from me and making sure the TV is off when the news is on. Your picture is everywhere. What's worst, the picture they're showing on TV and in the newspapers is the one where you're wearing that pink Pokemon shirt. The one your mother had as her Facebook profile pic and you begged her to take it down 'cause you didn't like the way you were smiling. I try not to read about what you went through. I don't need to know the gory details. I can only imagine what happened from all the stories that you've shared with me. All I need to know is that you're asleep and soon you'll be waking up.

I'm at the park at the moment. I'm writing this at our spot just behind the swings. I've been doing this every night since you've been gone. Soon the stars will be out and I can continue our nightly ritual of looking up to the night sky and dreaming of Africa. It was still light when I spotted the first star of the night.

I got so excited that I turned to you and forgot that you weren't here. That happens a lot.

Sweet dreams.

Tunisia xox

Dear Sahara,

The cops returned to the classroom today and wanted to question us. Miss Hall wore a new outfit. You would've liked it, although it didn't have any Pokemon pictures on it... haha. They wanted to speak to me first 'cause I'm your best friend. Miss Hall was really supportive and told me to be honest. Derek really wanted to come into the room with me, but I told the cops I only wanted Miss Hall to be my support person. She was extremely happy since the cop she fancied was the one doing the interview. He asked how we became friends. That brought back memories. I told him how we met when we were five years old at kōhanga. How we were the only two in the class without Māori names. Actually, not only did we have non-Māori names, but we were also both named after African deserts. He asked if our parents loved geography, but I told him we got our names because our parents thought they sounded cool, not because they had a connection to Africa. I told him how the other kids who lived in Marmite Village wouldn't play with us because of our weird names. He asked me why I called our neighbourhood Marmite Village and I told him that's what everyone calls it. He must be new in town. Then he started asking me really hard questions. I didn't want to answer them, but Miss Hall told me that anything that I said might help bring the mongrels that

did this to you to justice. I can tell you what I didn't tell him. I didn't tell him about the first time I saw the bruises on your thighs and how you told me that your mum's boyfriend did that to you. How when you mentioned your stepdad, it made me open up to you about what my stepdad was doing to me. How you were being hurt a different way to how I was being hurt and how we had a lot more in common than being named after African deserts. How the things that we shared with each other, we had never shared anyone else before and that's why we were lucky to have found one another. I didn't tell him about how we both love Africa and how we loved the stories about the exotic and faraway land. How we would sneak out at night and lie at our spot in the park, right behind the swings. How we would gaze up to the stars and dream of Africa, sharing our hopes, our dreams and our pain. How your mum's boyfriend and his mongrel relatives would do horrible things to you. How Derek would come into my room and treat me like the woman that I've yet to become. How they left scars on your body that were getting harder to hide. How what Derek was doing to me didn't leave any physical scars but I was still able to know the pain that you had endured. How at only nine years old we were going through stuff that no one our age should be going through. How we would look up to the stars and dream of Africa. Imagining that there'd be other little girls just like us in villages in Kenya or Zimbabwe. Imagining that they would look up at the exact same night sky and think of us. Sahara and Tunisia from Marmite Village – we found each other and discovered a way to connect to the world.

You're probably thinking what information I did share. Don't worry, I only told them enough to help their investigation and didn't tell them anything that would break our bond and betray your trust. I told them that you were living in an unsafe home and that the mongrel that was probably responsible for putting you in hospital was your mum's boyfriend.

Miss Hall said she was proud of me for what I did today. After the interview she gave me – and the cop – a big hug. Derek picked me up afterwards. He kept asking questions about the interview, but I didn't tell him much. He's starting to be touchy feely again. Mum still hasn't noticed, even when I think he's being obvious.

After this long day I went back to our spot in the park. I looked up to the stars. They were shining brightly. It's going to be a good day tomorrow.

Sweet dreams!

Tunisia xox

Dear Sahara,

The cop who interviewed me yesterday pulled some strings and let me and Miss Hall come and see you. Did you feel me hold your hand? You looked peaceful. You looked safe. Miss Hall told me that sometimes people in a coma are still conscious but they just can't respond. It was nice because Miss Hall and the cop left the room so we could have some private time. I'm not sure if you heard me, but I really needed to talk to you, 'cause you are the only person I could talk to about these kinds of things. I told you how last night Derek came into my

room again. I knew it wouldn't last. But this time it was different. It was like he knew I was sad, that I was vulnerable and that seemed to make him more determined. When he does it now, it hurts less. He even told me last night that when I start getting my period he'll stop. I can't wait until that happens.

When it was night, I opened the curtains and lay next to you. The stars were out in full glory. I closed my eyes and I dreamed of Africa. I pictured us on a safari. I pictured us watching elephants and lions. I pictured us cruising down the Nile and fighting over who was going to be Cleopatra. I realised that you are in a safe place, asleep in this hospital. No one can get to you, especially those mongrels. When you wake up, you're going to be protected. You're going to be happy. You deserve it. We deserve it.

Sweet dreams

Tunisia xox

Dear Sahara,

Great news. They arrested the mongrels that did this to you. There were five of them! They even arrested your mum because she knew what was happening to you and didn't do anything about it. Miss Hall said she was proud of me because everyone who gave interviews helped the cops. I avoided reading the newspaper and watching the news because I didn't want to know the gory details. I saw you in hospital and saw how you suffered. The police also said they have enough evidence to charge the mongrels. You don't have to testify in court. So you can sleep as long as you need to. By the time you wake up, it will be over.

I looked up a new word today, shujaa, it's the Swahili word for hero. That's what you are Sahara. A true shujaa.

Tunisia xx

Dearest Sahara,

I can hardly hold the pen to write this. I'm feeling numb as I try to find enough courage to write these words.

My dear, Sahara. You died today.

I thought writing those words in your diary would make it easier for me. But it isn't. Miss Hall told the class you passed peacefully in your sleep last night. The pain must've been too unbearable for you to handle. Weirdly, I knew the exact moment when you died. It's hard to explain, but I could feel it inside of me, like you were giving me a nudge, like you were asking me for my permission to leave this earth. I resisted, and I didn't want to let you go, but I realised that it was selfish of me to hold onto you – that I had to let you go.

I was lying on our spot in the park, behind the swings. I felt you lying next to me and I didn't feel so lonely. I looked up at the stars. I noticed one star that was shining more brightly than the others. Sahara, I can feel your presence.

Rest in peace my shujaa.

Tunisia xx

Dear Sahara,

Your tangi is tomorrow. I've decided this is going to be my last entry 'cause I'm going to place the diary in your coffin tomorrow. There'll be a little piece of both of us with you when you take your final journey.

I haven't been able to sleep since your death. It's weird Sahara, but I can feel your presence and know that you're watching over me. Everyone has been paying tribute to you – our school, the newspapers, our town. The entire country is in mourning. You've moved and inspired so many, but I can't help but feel that I've been the only one who has truly been by your side, that we've been through our struggles together. That's why I did what I did today, because of you.

I told Miss Hall today what Derek has been doing to me. I should've told my mum first, but I had this feeling that she wouldn't believe me. Besides, Miss Hall has been very supportive during this time. Miss Hall was shocked and very upset. I told her that's why me and you were best friends. How we kept each other's secrets. She told me that I was brave to open up to her. She called the cops and social services, and I've been staying with her since. They won't let me stay at home until they feel that it's safe for me. The cops questioned me about everything. Miss Hall told me that this is just the start and that it will get harder. Mum's upset and Derek? Well, I don't care what he thinks. He can rot in hell and hopefully I won't have to see him ever again.

Throughout this I could feel you next to me. I could feel you holding my hand and showing your support. Although you're gone, I can feel your presence more than ever before.

I went to our spot tonight, right behind the swings. The stars looked perfect. I closed my eyes. I thought of Africa. I thought of you, and I knew that everything was going to be okay.

Tunisia x

The Crystal Caves

STEPH MATUKU

Chapter One

Monday

My name is Jake Winiara. I'm in Room Twelve at Westingmere Intermediate in Wellington. Mrs Atkins is making us do journals because she says it will improve our English. I said it was a waste of time because I am going to live in France with my dad when I leave school. She said they speak English everywhere, even France, and I wasn't going to get out of it that easy. This is actually lucky because the only French I know is 'Parlay voo ong glay' which means 'Do you speak English?'

I don't know what else to put.

Mrs Atkins says to write about something that happened today, which is dumb because it's only ten o'clock and nothing's happened, except that I nicked five bucks out of Mum's handbag