

Today I am covered in dust and spider webs, a dry, acrid feeling in my throat. My joints are stiff and aching. The smell of musty wood fills my nose.

I am hiding under a table.

I'm sure there was a time when I would have considered hiding under a table to be stupid. It *is* stupid. There is not even a table cloth, nothing to actually conceal me—just a scraped-up, filthy sheet of wood over my head and four damaged legs standing guard beside me. But I don't leave. I feel my breathing speed up again, my heart rattling so hard against my ribs that it aches. I draw my knees up to my chest and bury my head in my arms. *No. No. Don't panic. Not now. You are safe. You are here under this table, and you are safe.*

There's a rumbling whine as a plane zips overhead. They've been doing that all day, but I shudder every time. There's a small, private airport nearby, nothing scary. It doesn't matter; my fingernails are digging so hard into my arms from the sudden noise and tension that I'm surprised there's no blood. I've grown to hate airplanes with a vengeance.

Get up. I can almost hear a siren in my head alongside these words, the buzzing and clanking of iron doors, the flashing of lights, and the smell of fear, sweat, and boot polish. I do not have good memories of being told to *get up*. But, I will do it anyway. I have to.

I'm on my hands and knees as I crawl out, the floor gritty and dusty, the farmhouse abandoned by the occupants in years past. When I arrived, I found an old vintage tintype lost in a corner. It was of a woman in a summer dress, her white hair tied back in a severe bun. She wasn't smiling; no one really did in photographs then. But wrinkles rippled her cheeks along the lines where a person would smile, and I could tell it was something she must have done often. I had the picture in my breast pocket. I'm not sure why I wanted to keep it.

The house creaks as it settles. I'm already on my feet, tight as a bowstring. *It's nothing, it's nothing,* I repeat inwardly. I force in several long, painful breaths meant to fill my lungs and quiet my mind, like my grandfather taught me. Breathe in. Out. In. Out.

My mind, though, will not go silent. I was starting to collapse under the pressure of the chase, crawling under furniture like a child, like crawling under blankets would save me from the boogeyman. No, I made it this far, and I was safe here. For now.

I had to pull myself together.

One moment of weakness, you may live. Maybe. Two will see you dead. The matter-of-fact words fluttered up unbidden into my mind from someone who was a lot smarter than me. He should have been here too. Really, he should have been here *instead* of me. I missed him terribly. Martin.

His sad blue eyes quickly filled my mind.

Commented [LM1]: Your genre is YA, which usually goes for a little more of a smooth and informal sound, especially when spoken from first-person perspective. Thusly, you'll probably want to shorten many of your phrases that could be contractions to actually be contractions.

Here: "I'm"

Commented [LM2]: I'm

Commented [LM3]: There's

Commented [LM4]: Make em dash (—) with no spaces on either side

Commented [LM5]: Suggestion to change to "My breathing speeds up again..."

Phrases like "I feel" and "I think" can add an layer of distance, and often are not necessary.

Commented [LM6]: Earlier you mention she's just wearing a women's blouse, but typically they don't have breast pockets.

Commented [LM7]: Unnecessary; recommend deletion

Commented [LM8]: Unnecessary adverb; delete

I realize I'm compulsively flexing my right hand. I've been doing that so often lately that it's almost a wonder to me that my grip strength doesn't qualify me for a black belt. I pause to stare at my right palm. I know what I'm going to see. It's not as if I liked looking at it, but it couldn't be helped. And, because of it, I couldn't be helped.

There was a thick, bright blue outline of what looked like the letter 'C', one end closed, the other end open. It made my skin crawl - the symbol glowed, as if I had tattooed it with phosphors into my hand. The light was strong enough that anyone could have picked me out in the dark if my hand was open, an easy target. This was why I had taken to clenching my fist shut. I wouldn't be surprised if the aching fingernail dents in my palm were permanent.

Since the tattoo had appeared three weeks ago, it felt as if my hand was a foreign object, something I had to compulsively stare at and flex, as if eventually the mark could be worn off through use. It didn't feel like mine. I really didn't know if it was. I didn't want it.

I wanted none of this.

One year ago

"Why don't you start from the beginning, Miss..." the airport security agent glanced at his clipboard, clearly forgetting the "foreign" name before he finished his sentence. "Miss Abusir?"

It was the third time I'd been asked. I was starting to resent the question, and having to answer it over and over again for different people. I could smell the agent's piercing body odor from over the table; sweat was seeping out from under his arms and staining huge balloons into his white button-up shirt. He had clearly doused in cologne, meaning to hide his perspiration problems, though it somehow made it worse than just the stink of sweat alone, made the odor sickly sweet. His clean-cut face was not hostile however, just completely blank, as if anything I said would go in one ear and out the other so another agent could ask me again.

My temper was coiling, ready to lash out, but I squelched it and swallowed unhappily. What could I do? I was trapped. I had a name like Akila Abusir. I had dark hair and Arab skin. I'd been pulled off of a plane for reasons no one would say, though I just wanted to go home. The second I stopped being meek and pitiful looking, I knew it was possible I would be taken the wrong way... a very, very wrong way. I was afraid of what these men could stamp on my record.

Commented [LM9]: I understand this line right up until it reaches "one end closed, the other end open." I'm not sure how to visualize a "C" with one end closed. This description may need to be made clearer.

Commented [LM10]: Replace with an em dash or semicolon, or start a new sentence here.

Commented [LM11]: How could this not be hers? This line is a little confusing at this juncture.

Commented [LM12]: I couldn't find this as an example of a last name in-use in Egyptian society today—rather, just as the name of both a village and an archeological site. This may or may not come off as strange sounding on the ears of people actually from this culture. If you're not already entirely certain of this name, I'd recommend asking some Egyptians online how it sounds to their ears.

Commented [LM13]: Like phrases such as "I feel" and "I think", this "I could smell" can add distance. Revision example: "The agent's piercing body odor wafted over the table; sweat was..."

Commented [LM14]: Missing word, "himself"