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## Saffira

Stefani Nellen

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STEFANI NELLEN

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## SAFFIRA

- Winner: Montana Prize in Fiction -

JIP JANNEBERG, THE only woman in the group, was finishing her warm-up, 200m strides with her teammates. Coach Eddy told them to focus on technique in the curve and to speed up on the straightaway, as a form exercise, not a race. But as soon as they were out of the curve, they were sprinting at full speed. You could tear a muscle that way, and no one cared whether you killed it in training. Still, they did it every time.

Jip lifted her knees and chin. Finish with pride, Eddy said. If she couldn't beat the guys, she could at least finish as part of the group instead of being dead last.

As a schoolgirl, she used to spend long summers getting up at five in the morning to run to the track for the first training of the day. She kept a log of all her training times, mapping them out so she could see her progress at a glance. She counted calories in these days, and did core stability exercises every night before going to bed. Whenever her parents and sisters went anywhere by car or by bike, she insisted she'd run, unless it was very far. Later, Eddy taught her that training logs and racing weight were only part of the story. You win the races with your head, he'd say. Jip had a good head, and she did win some races, but she never broke through into world-class times. Her PB in her best distance, the 1500 meters, was 4:04,

and after that perfect season four years ago, she had never come close to that shape or time again. There had been injuries and a lack of thrill; her study of history proved more interesting than she had expected, and by now she was a graduate student and already thinking about job applications. Lately, she had rehearsed telling Eddy that she wanted to retire from running.

When she got her breath back, she saw that Eddy was talking to a girl she had never seen before. The girl was small, dark-skinned, her black hair tied in two braids. Next to Eddy she looked tiny, hunching up her shoulders, her hands in the pockets of a bright blue jacket with the Team 4Mijl logo. She reminded Jip of the Kenyans and Ethiopians at the 4Mijl race each October: track stars and Olympians who came to Groningen for a payday after the track season was over. They barely talked before the race except, in whispers, to each other. They only removed their sweatshirts and long pants minutes before the start, rubbing their hands and shivering. Jip and the other Team 4Mijl runners also started in the elite corral, being the local heroes and all, but “the Africans,” as everyone called them, pulled away quickly and finished minutes ahead of them.

“All right,” Eddy said when the team gathered around him. “This is Saffira.” The girl flashed a smile, as if trying to convince them she was harmless.

“Saffira is from Ethiopia, from Addis Ababa. Did I pronounce that correctly? She came to the Netherlands when she was fourteen, first to Eindhoven, then to Leeuwarden, where she was too fast for the local track club, and now she’s found us. As you’ll see, she is very, very talented. Oh,

and she's also a student of nursing science at the university hospital, so we have someone on hand should anyone get injured. Welcome to the team."

Everyone shook hands.

"Okay, Jip," Eddy said. "You're not the only ponytail anymore."

During the form drills in pairs, Jip and Saffira ended up together. Jip was taller and probably twenty pounds heavier. Saffira moved easily, but also with a certain hesitation, as if she wasn't quite convinced the drills made sense. The main workout would be long repeats, each a little faster than the previous one. "You want to get used to the pain," Eddy said. This kind of training was Jip's specialty. She knew how to pace herself and run close to her limit, but never too fast. This time, however, she couldn't disappear inside herself the way she usually could. She was aware of Saffira's breath and the rhythm of her steps, trying to gauge how hard she was working. Jip accelerated. She wanted to find Saffira's breaking point so she could slow down generously and finish the training together. But Saffira stayed right there at her shoulder. With three more reps to go, Jip had nothing left and had to slow down. Saffira pulled up next to her, hesitated for a brief moment, and overtook her. Within seconds, she was out of reach.

While the others were trotting to the changing rooms, Jip leaned on the fence next to the track, waiting for her legs to stop shaking and her stomach to settle.

Eddy stood next to her. "You let her get to you." He had gone to the Olympics once, in 1992, but he got injured before the final, and had the tendency to reminisce about the golden age of Dutch athletics, whenever

that might have been. “I’ve known you for a long time, and I know you’re very, very good. You’re tenacious. But when I look at Saffira, I see an Olympic champion. You beat yourself today, and you know it.”

Jip straightened her back, still holding on to the fence. “So what’s the plan?”

“I want you to help each other. Not just as athletes. She’s new to the city, and I think she had a bit of a rough past. Her mother’s still in Ethiopia, her father doesn’t seem to be in the picture, that kind of thing. I tried to ask, but she really doesn’t want to talk about it. She needs a friend.”



BIKING HOME AFTER dusk, Jip recognized Saffira in the distance and sped up to catch her. Saffira’s bike was too big for her. It was a men’s bike with a rusty frame, and someone had painted BEAST on the crossbar in red letters.

“Great bike,” Jip said.

“Thanks.” Saffira wore a parka and a knitted green cap. Her steering was a little clumsy.

“It doesn’t have lights, though. You need lights when you bike in the dark. If the police catch you, you have to pay a fine. It’s super annoying. They got me twice, so I bought these clip-ons. Want to borrow them?”

“The police?”

“Not the police-police. It’s no big deal.” Jip forced herself to speak slowly. “I was just offering...Never mind.” She couldn’t bring herself to repeat the bit about the clip-on lights. It just didn’t seem worth it. “So, where

do you live?" she said after a while.

"Paddepoel."

"Nice. I live close to Wouter's place. Did he tell you we're having dinner there?"

"Yes. I'm on my way."

"Good. It's a regular thing. It's our way to celebrate we survived training."



WOUTER LIVED IN a former villa that had been split into small apartments for the city's increasingly numerous students. There was a party on the first floor. People were screaming and laughing and dancing to Kung-Fu Fighting. A girl in a chef's hat was roasting walnuts in a large pan in the kitchen, beer bottles and wine bottles and a kitschy hookah were arranged on the couch table just so, and a group of people in cheap princess dresses were playing a board game using pieces of chocolate.

Wouter lived in the attic, in a small room with a hot plate, a toaster-oven, and a half-sized fridge that served as a night table. When Jip and Saffira arrived, he was cooking spaghetti, barely able to stand upright under the slanted roof. Jelle and Menno were sitting on the bed. The water was boiling, and condensation covered the single small window.

Wouter pulled a beanbag from under the bed. "Here you go. Have a seat."

Saffira sat down, unzipped her jacket and took off her cap. Jip sat

on the bed between Wouter and Menno.

“Saffira beat you up pretty good,” Menno said.

“She sure did,” Jip said. “I’m hungry.”

Wouter handed out bowls of pasta and then walked around with the saucepan and a bowl of grated cheese and served everyone in turn. He ate standing up, leaning against his desk. “So, did you ever meet any of the greats?” he asked Saffira. “Bekele, or the Dibabas?”

“No. I never used to run in Ethiopia. Only here.”

“What’s your favorite distance?” Wouter asked.

Saffira stirred her pasta. “I like the 1500. It’s the right distance. Not too...long.”

“Oh, it can be long,” Jip said. “I was running an 800 once, in Belgium, I think, European Juniors, and they sold frites right next to the track. You ran past, and you were literally running through a mist of grease. All I could think was, thank God I’m not running the 1500.”

The others added memories of their best races and their worst, and then started talking about their goals for the season ahead.

“I want to break my PR in the 5000,” Wouter said. “It’s time.”

“I want to win Nationals,” said Jelle. “That’s right, I put it out there.”

“Fair enough, because I’ll beat you,” said Menno.

“I just want to stay injury-free,” Jip said.

“What about you?” Wouter asked Saffira. He now sat on the floor opposite her, his crossed arms on his knees.

“I want to run the 1500 in under four minutes.”

“Okay,” said Wouter. “That’s going to be fun.”

“Eddy said I can do it.”

Jip said nothing. The 1500 in under four minutes—it was the kind of goal she used to have as a schoolgirl. Saffira probably thought it was a modest goal.

When the others were gone, Jip stayed behind and helped Wouter clean up the kitchen. “I feel like spending the night.”

“I was hoping you would.”

They had started spending the night about a year ago. Wouter was twenty-two, four years younger than she was. He was the age Jip had been when she’d run her PB.

“I don’t know about Saffira,” Jip said when they were almost asleep. “Eddy wants me to be her friend.”

“So be her friend. She seems nice.”

• • •

JIP AND SAFFIRA agreed to meet at a café in the shopping district. Jip ordered a cappuccino and a slice of banana bread, Saffira had a cup of tea. Jip mentioned a play—a dance, really, inside an inflatable tent at the Noorderzon festival, it was about the human subconscious, but also about men trying to control women. Really beautiful. Saffira nodded and stirred her tea. Jip remembered that Saffira was a student, too. Wasn’t the new library website a joke? Yes, Saffira agreed: it was confusing, and the library itself was poorly



stocked. With effort, they kept talking until Jip had finished her meal, then they went to Jip's favorite store. Saffira touched the garments with fascination, as if she couldn't believe someone would pay money for them. She always wore jeans and a sweater. Jip put the clothes she had wanted to try on back on the rack and said she was out of money for the month, anyway.

"So what do you want to do?" Jip asked when they were back on the street.

"I need some vegetables," Saffira said. The market was crowded, but Saffira darted from one stall to the next, and put the bags of beans, carrots, and potatoes into her backpack. The vendors greeted her; some had already put aside a bag with her stuff. Her final stop was the soup wagon. The old woman poured chicken stock into a container Saffira gave her and gestured at Saffira's hair with comments in a language Jip didn't understand. She sounded disapproving. Saffira handed the container to Jip while she put the change in her wallet. The dull yellow chicken stock was still warm, with pieces of carrot, onion, and herbs.

"For after running," Saffira said. "With a loaf of bread."

"What did the woman say to you? She sounded upset."

"I know her from back home. Every time she sees me, she tells me I should wear a headscarf. If I don't, I'm a bad Muslim."

Jip handed back the container. "I didn't know you were a Muslim."

"You see? I'm a bad one. The headscarf bothers me when I run, so I don't wear it at all. Maybe later."

They were weaving through the crowd to where Saffira had chained her bike.

“I don’t see how it makes you a bad Muslim,” Jip said. “It’s only a piece of cloth.”

“It’s about more than that. It’s about what I do. My mother is Muslim, too. If she saw me running, she wouldn’t like it. She would say, help others. Be kind. Do something useful with your life. Running isn’t useful. I do it only for me. To win.”

Jip felt there was a counterargument, but she couldn’t find the words. “I think I know what you mean.”

“So there. We’re both bad.”

Saffira put her groceries in a crate attached to her bike’s handlebars. The crate hadn’t been there the other day.

“Now you have a real Dutch bike,” Jip said.

“Yes, it’s very handy,” Saffira said. “Wouter made it for me.”

• • •

WOUTER WAS CLEANING his fridge with Windex and a brush. “I gave her bike an upgrade. And I think she’s cute. That’s all.”

“You obviously have no issues with her being a teammate.”

“None.” He sprayed more Windex into the fridge. “Look, I know this isn’t about me. Ever since she arrived, you extended your claws. It’s only natural. You’re both athletes.” He put down the brush and reached for a towel to wipe out the fridge. “I think it’s stupid that Eddy asked you to be

her friend because, you know. You're both girls!" He raised his hands in a fake Oh my God gesture. "I asked her to come to the *intocht* tomorrow."

"The arrival of Sinterklaas? You're kidding."

"You're worried she'll think it's racist?"

"It is racist."

"So? It will be all over town. She won't be able to ignore it, anyway. And if she's pissed off, we can all talk about it. That's good, isn't it?"



AS ALWAYS, SINT would arrive by ship. Families with young kids were lining the canal despite the cold rain, the children in Piet and Sint costumes too excited to feel the cold, the parents shivering in their rain jackets. The ships carried mountains of cardboard presents and they flew the Spanish flag, because Sinterklaas lives in Spain. Jip couldn't help feeling a little festive, remembering the years when she had believed that good Sint was traveling from house to house at night to leave presents in the shoes of the children who had been "good." Before bedtime, she and her sisters put apples in their shoes and sang songs together, and in the morning the apple would be replaced by candy or chocolate or a small toy. Finally, on the night of December fifth, a heavy knock would come at the door; no one would be there, but a bag with presents would be on the doorstep, sometimes under a thin layer of fresh snow...

But now at the canal, Jip felt ashamed. On the ships, next to the brass bands and the choirs singing the songs she remembered from her

youth, were the Zwarte Pieten, the “black Petes” – Sinterklaas’s helpers. Jip watched them wave and somersault and hang from the ropes with their curly wigs and their painted red lips and black faces. After a while, she dared to look at Saffira, who observed everything with a neutral expression. A group of Pieten was canoeing down the canal, zigzagging between ships and handing out crayons. “I know these guys!” Wouter called. “Hey! Over here!”

“That must look pretty strange to you,” Jip said to Saffira.

“I’ve been living here for a while. I know it is part of Dutch culture.”



WOUTER WAS RIGHT: Jip and Saffira were not meant to be friends; they were rivals. They didn’t try to go shopping anymore. Sometimes, they all went out as a team. When they went to a bar, Saffira wore boots and a leather jacket, even a shade of make-up. Wouter started to leave when she did, and sometimes the two of them arrived at the track together. The easy and consistent tone in which both of them denied being more than friends told Jip all she needed to know.

“Congratulations,” she once said to Saffira when they were in the dressing room, getting ready for a hot shower after a very long training session. “Wouter’s a nice guy.” She said it in the voice in which she used to congratulate competitors for winning a race early in the season. Saffira appeared not to understand, and Jip wanted to say something else to coax

a confession from her, but right then she thought she noticed scars around Saffira's wrist—silver bands of tissue, as if she had been tied up. Jip wasn't sure she had really seen this; it was dark, after all, and Saffira squeamishly turned away to continue undressing.

• • •

THEIR COMMUNICATION WAS as easy on the track as it was awkward in real life. Jip took the lead, and Saffira followed her pace. They pretended to be evenly matched, and waited for the day when they would have to race each other. They knew it was coming.

• • •

AT THE BEGINNING of the new year, Eddy took Jip and Saffira to the clubhouse next to the track to discuss their goals for the season. "You two are working together beautifully. You're going to run fast times this summer. But be patient—Amsterdam is only next year." He was referring to the world championships. "I think you can both qualify next year—if you play it smart this year. Run fast times, yes, but above all: stay healthy."

"Sounds good," Jip said. Saffira drank orange juice through a straw.

"I want both of you to race at a bunch of smaller meets in the spring, Lisse and Hoorn. Just to test the waters. I want you to work together, and make sure the race is fast. The faster you run, the stronger your case

with the selectors next year.”

“Got it,” Jip said.

“Our goal race this year is at the FBK Games in Hengelo. There’s going to be a strong international field. You can kill each other in that race, but not before that. Okay?”

After Saffira left, Eddy opened a plastic bottle of water and drank half of it in one gulp. “There’s another reason I’m asking you to work together,” he told Jip. “I’ve been talking to some of Saffira’s old coaches from back when she was a teenager. Her tactics are bad, really bad. Either she keeps it late and gets stuck in traffic, or she’s going out too fast and crashes at the end. Not that she isn’t good enough to win anyway. And that’s part of the problem. She never had anyone challenge her.”

“Now she has me.”

“Yes.” Eddy finished his water. “Now she has you.”

“You don’t want me to race her. You want me to teach her.”

“She needs to learn how to pace herself.”

“Be honest with me,” Jip said. “Do you think we can both qualify for Worlds? Or do you want to use me to get her there? Is she even a citizen?”

“She’s been here legally for years.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“If she shows promise this year, the Athletics Federation will file a request to expedite her citizenship application. And by showing promise, I mean good enough for a medal. That’s the standard these days.”

“So. And what if I’m better than her?”

“Then you’re better.” Eddy closed the bottle and put it in his backpack. “You asked me to be honest. With the funding for athletes the way it is, we’ll probably be lucky if the federation sends one distance runner to Worlds. And if that’s the case, I hope it’s her.”

“Okay.”

“It’s not because she’s the better talent. It’s because not too long ago, you didn’t care anymore. You missed training, you had all these excuses, then you started grad school. It’s a natural process, believe me. I’ve seen it before. And now, all of a sudden—”

“In other words, she’s the poor refugee, and I always had everything, so the least I can do is pace her to some fast times and make sure she goes to Worlds. And I go back to grad school. In short, I should let her win.”

“Look, I’m an athlete too. Asking you to let her win would be bullshit.”

“That’s right. It is bullshit. And she would agree.”

• • •

THEIR FIRST RACE was in Lisse, in May. The few spectators were mostly friends and family of the athletes, and reporters from the local paper. It was cool and windy. Saffira, in long pants and a long-sleeved jacket, hugged herself and frowned. “Come on,” Eddy said. “Some strides to warm up.” Jip’s legs felt sluggish, as if she’d had mild anesthesia. After the first set, Saffira sat

down next to her bag, took out a textbook, and started to read.

“You think that’s a good idea?” Jip said.

“It’s too cold to run fast, anyway.”

The meet organizers had hired a pacesetter, a former 800m runner from Lithuania. She hit the splits perfectly, and when she dropped out with 1.5 laps to go, Jip took over the lead. She tried to speed up, but the track felt magnetic and her legs made of iron. She wished Saffira would take over for a bit, but Saffira was hovering just behind. Then, as they were approaching the finish line, she overtook Jip and won easily. Instead of celebrating, she looked at her watch and walked away.

The sun came out as they were cooling down running through the streets.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Jip said.

“It was slow. I have no speed at all.”

“We got the first one out of the way. The time was okay for a rust buster,” Eddy said.

Saffira had her jacket on again and pulled up her zipper. “The time was bad.”

“If you thought it was too slow, you could have taken the lead,” Jip said.

• • •

TWO WEEKS LATER, it was raining in Hoorn, and the wind was even stronger than it had been in Lisse. But training had been going well, and now that



Jip had raced on the track again, she remembered how it felt: the queasiness and dry mouth, the contained aggression of lacing up the spikes, the desire to stride up and down her lane and roll her shoulders, even spit in the grass the way sprinters did. Saffira seemed different, too: no books this time, and her running shorts and black top looked like business. They had a greed on a new strategy: Eddy had told them to switch the lead. It would be more fair, and good for both of them.

The starting gun went off. The track was slippery, and the few remaining spectators were hiding under umbrellas they had to hold with both hands. Jip ran in front; there was no pace setter this time. She squeezed her eyes shut against the rain, imagined the water steaming off her face. She ran faster than in Lisse, her sluggishness gone. Her clothes were so wet she didn't feel them anymore. Despite the weather, the spectators were cheering. About halfway through the race, Jip felt lightheaded and signaled for Saffira to take over, but Saffira stayed right behind her. So much for working together. Jip started to slip off the pace, still light-headed, flailing. But she had dealt with this before, and knew better than to panic. Still in the lead, she settled into a slower pace that would bring her home in good form: knees up, chest out. Finish with pride. But in the final curve, someone was next to her, challenging her – Saffira, of course, doing her usual trick of sprinting past her in the final meters. Jip moved to the outside of her lane to make it harder to pass, and stuck out her elbow. She hit Saffira's arm, the two tangled, and Saffira held on to her. Jip tore her arm out of Saffira's grasp, heard her fall down, and sprinted ahead to the finish.

When Jip turned around, she saw Saffira lying on the track clutching her knee. Officials and a medic hurried towards her with blankets. Jip waited for an official to tell her she was disqualified, but nothing happened. Eddy ran up to her. “I told you to work together.”

“She didn’t stick to the plan.”

“So you decided to trip her?”

“I just made it tough for her to pass me. I didn’t want her to fall.”

The officials carried Saffira away on a stretcher.

“I should probably check on her.” Eddy loosened his scarf. “When I told you to help each other, I really thought I wasn’t asking a lot.”

They drove home together in Eddy’s car. The doctor had told them Saffira’s knee was probably fine, but that she should go to the hospital the next day for some tests. Saffira pulled up the hood of her sweater and listened to a podcast. The bandage was so thick she couldn’t bend her knee.

Eddy dropped both of them off at Saffira’s place, where Jip had left her bike. Saffira picked up her bag and limped a few steps.

“Let me get that for you,” Jip said. Saffira let her take it and unlocked the front door. She had dark rings under her eyes.

“Does it hurt a lot?”

“It’s fine.”

Saffira’s apartment had one room and a closet-sized kitchen, white walls and a tile floor. A travel closet stood against the wall, and a single mattress lay on the floor, blankets neatly folded. A small table with two chairs stood in front of the window, and a bright green IKEA teapot (Jip had the

same one) sat on the table. A large tapestry hung on the wall above the mattress, showing a mosque in a garden. The walls of the mosque were also white: warm white in the sun, dark white in the shade, its roof patina green, the sky blue with fluffy clouds, the earth burned clay, and all of it framed by a braid of little golden, red and orange flames.

“It’s beautiful,” Jip said.

“It’s from home,” Saffira said. “It’s the only thing I took.”

Jip put Saffira’s bag down next to the mattress, and Saffira sat at the table and carefully felt her bandaged knee. “I hope it’s not serious.”

“I’m really sorry,” Jip said.

“It’s okay. It’s part of the sport.”

“Why didn’t you stick to the plan? I signaled you.”

“I don’t remember a plan.” She got up and put her jacket in a laundry bag. “Sometimes I find it hard to understand Dutch. It’s a confusing language.”

“You speak it very well.” Jip turned to the tapestry. “So you took this with you.”

“My mother gave it to me. We had to pack in a hurry. She wanted me to be safe.”

Eddy had told her Saffira didn’t want to talk about this. She was probably hearing more now than Eddy ever had. “You must miss her.”

“Yes, sometimes. But I have a great life now.”

“If you make it to Worlds, you’ll be on TV. Your mother will see you.”

“She won’t like it.”

“Come on. She’ll be happy to see you. She’ll be insanely proud.”

“Of course she’ll be happy to see me,” Saffira said, as if Jip had said something unbearably self-evident, which of course she had. “But she won’t approve of what I do.”

Jip’s mother had driven her to competitions, cheered for her when she won and consoled her when she lost, kept track of her results in a leather-bound notebook, and baked pancakes to take along to the track. But there had been moments when Jip had done things that in the eyes of her mother had been reckless or selfish: stayed up late at places her parents didn’t know, hitched rides with strangers, jumped into the lake at night from the same pier as this boy who had hit a shallow spot and broken his spine. In her defense, Jip brought up the trophies she’d won, her good grades, and her common sense; she said she’d be fine, she could take care of herself. Her mother let her talk. The she said, “I love you, but that doesn’t mean I approve.”

“I think I know what you mean,” she said to Saffira. “A little.”

• • •

A MONTH LATER, in June, Jip and Saffira stood at the starting line of the women’s 1500 meter run at the FBK Games in Hengelo. The weather was finally perfect: a cool blue sky, sunshine, no wind. Jip was in great shape, better than during the miraculous summer four years ago. If she lost today, it would be because she made a mistake. Saffira stood next to her. Jip no-

ticed a scar on her knee. She had slicked back her hair and twirled it into a tight bun and jumped nervously in place.

A few steps into the race, Jip knew her good shape would hold. She felt her strength in every muscle, and in every effortless grip-and-push of her toes. Some of the other runners in the field were faster on paper, and Saffira would be right there at the end, but Jip could win this. It would be the best win of her career. She didn't think further ahead than that.

Jip tucked in behind the two pacers. The pace was fast, the other runners striding in formation around her. A couple of suits stood next to the finish line; Eddy had said they were scouts for Worlds next year. Screw them.

Saffira was on her outside, running much too wide in her inexperience. Good. She's wasting energy.

After 800 meters, the stadium announcer called out a time, and the audience cheered: they were on pace to break four minutes. The pacers dropped out and Jip took the lead, Saffira still on her outside. She waited for the pack to swallow her, but it didn't happen—the pace was too fast. She just had to hold on. This was the race she had dreamed about four years ago, in this big stadium filled with fans, all of them surprised to see a Dutch girl in the lead. She heard the announcer say her name, and the public cheered, all of them for her. Three hundred meters to the finish, two hundred, and she was still leading. Spit ran down her chin, and she remembered what Eddy said: Relax your facial muscles as if you're asleep, it really helps. She felt the emptiness, the lack of presence at her shoulder, and it felt wrong,

disorienting. Where was Saffira? She slowed down—only a notch, a blink, nothing anyone would notice—and there she was. Saffira. Beside her. They were sprinting side by side now. *Shit*, Jip groaned out loud. Dumb! She threw herself at the finish line.

As they waited for the finish photo, Jip and Saffira were walking around the track. Jip didn't know what she wanted the result to be. Her throat hurt; maybe she was getting a cold. She felt pain in her legs she thought would never be as bad again in her life. No matter the outcome, she had done her best. She had shown all she had to show.

Saffira stood on the grass, her hands on her hips, still gasping. The time finally showed up on the results table, but without a name next to it: 4:01:43. The officials huddled over the computer; the difference between the top two would come down to thousandths of a second. Jip smiled—even if she got second, she had run a PR by three seconds. Not bad for someone who, just months ago, had been almost retired. Saffira, on the other hand, lowered her head. She had hoped for more.

Then Jip knew which result she wanted. She walked up to Saffira and put her hand on her shoulder. “I hope you get it.”