

I Was
Born for
This.

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'children say that people are hung sometimes for
speaking the truth'

– Joan of Arc

MONDAY

'i was in my thirteenth year when i heard a voice from god'

– Joan of Arc

ANGEL RAHIMI

‘I’m literally dying,’ I say, putting my hand on my heart. ‘You’re real.’

Juliet, having just escaped my hug, is smiling so hard it looks like she might tear her face in half.

‘So are you!’ she says, and gestures to my body. ‘This is so weird. But cool.’

Theoretically, this shouldn’t be awkward. I have been talking to Juliet Schwartz for two years. On the internet only, yeah, but internet friendships aren’t that different to real ones nowadays, and Juliet knows more about me than my closest school friends.

‘You’re a physical being,’ I say. ‘Not just some pixels on a screen.’

I know almost everything about Juliet. I know that she never falls asleep before 2 a.m. and her favourite fanfic trope is enemies-to-lovers and she’s secretly a fan of Ariana Grande. I know she’s probably going to grow up to be the sort of wine-sipping middle-aged woman who calls everyone ‘darling’ and always looks slightly like she’s giving you evils. But I still wasn’t prepared for her voice (posher and deeper than it sounds on Skype) and her hair (she genuinely is ginger, as she’s always said, even though it looks

brown on camera) and her size (she's a full head smaller than me. I'm seventy feet tall so I should have been prepared for that one, really.)

Juliet flattens her fringe and I adjust my hijab and we start walking out of St Pancras station. We're silent for a moment, and I feel a sudden wave of nerves, which is a bit irrational, since me and Juliet are practically soulmates – two beings who found each other in the depths of the internet against all odds and, just like that, we were a duo.

She's the sharp-witted romantic. I'm the whimsical conspiracy theorist. And we both live for The Ark, the best band in the history of the world.

'You're gonna have to tell me where we're going,' I say, smiling. 'I have no sense of direction at all. I get lost on my walk to school sometimes.'

Juliet laughs. Another new sound. It's clearer, sharper than on Skype. 'Well, you are visiting *me*, so I think I'm supposed to be in charge of directions anyway.'

'Okay, *true*.' I let out an exaggerated sigh. 'I genuinely think this is gonna be the best week of my entire life.'

'Oh my gosh, I *know*, right? I've been counting down.' Juliet pulls out her phone, clicks the screen on, and shows me a countdown timer. It says '3 Days Left'.

I start babbling. 'I've been, like, freaking out. I don't even know what I'm gonna wear. I don't even know what I'm gonna *say*.'

Juliet flattens her fringe again. It makes me feel like she knows exactly what she's doing. 'Don't worry, we have today, tomorrow and Wednesday to formulate a plan. I'm going to make a list.'

'Oh man, you *will*, won't you?'

Neither of us have any friends in real life who like The Ark, but that doesn't matter, because we have each other. I used to try to get people to talk about The Ark with me – my school friends, my parents, my older brother – but no one really cared. They usually just found me annoying, because once I start talking about The Ark, or anything really, I find it kind of hard to stop.

But not Juliet. We've spent hours upon hours talking about The Ark and neither of us get tired or annoyed or bored with each other.

And this is the first time we've ever met.

We exit the station and step out into the air. It's pouring with rain. Tons of people. I've never been to London before.

'This rain is so horrible,' says Juliet, wrinkling her nose. She unhooks her arm from mine so she can put up an umbrella – one of those fancy plastic ones.

'True,' I say, but that's a lie, because I don't really mind the rain. Even weird August downpours like this one.

Juliet continues to walk without me. I'm just standing there, one hand on my rucksack, one hand in my pocket. There are people smoking outside the station and I breathe it in. I love the smell of cigarette smoke. Is that bad?

This week is going to be the best week of my life.

Because I'm going to meet The Ark.

And they will know who I am.

And then I will be worth something.

'Angel?' Juliet calls from a few metres away. 'You okay?'

I turn to her, confused, but then realise that she's using my internet name, instead of my real name, which is Fereshteh. I've been going by Angel online since I was thirteen. I thought it sounded cool at the time and, no, I didn't name myself after a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* character. Fereshteh means 'angel' in Farsi.

I love my real name, but Angel feels like a part of me now. I'm just not used to hearing it in real life.

I hold out my arms and grin and say, 'Mate, I am living.'

Despite our first-meeting nerves, it turns out that real life really isn't that different to the internet. Juliet's still the cool, calm and collected one and I'm still the loudest and most annoying person in the world and we spend the whole walk to the tube station talking about how excited we are to meet The Ark.

'My mum freaked *out*,' I tell her as we're sitting in a tube carriage. 'She knows that I love The Ark, but she just said *no* when I told her I was coming.'

'What? Why?'

'*Well* . . . I'm kind of missing my school leaver graduation thing for this.'

It's more complicated than that, but I don't really want to bore Juliet with the details. I got my A level results last week, and *just* scraped the already quite low grades I needed to get into my first university choice. Mum and Dad congratulated me, obviously, but I know they're pretty annoyed that I didn't do better, like my older brother, Rostam, who got at least an A on every exam he's ever taken.

And then Mum had the absolute cheek to demand I *don't* go to The Ark concert, just so I can go to a pointless school leavers' ceremony, shake hands with my headteacher and awkwardly say goodbye to the classmates I'm probably never going to see again.

'It's on Thursday morning,' I continue. 'The same day as the concert. My mum and dad were gonna come.' I shrug. 'It's stupid. Like, we're not American; we don't *have* school graduation. Our school just does this stupid little leavers' ceremony that's completely pointless.'

Juliet frowns. ‘That sounds like the worst.’

‘Anyway, I told my mum there was no way I was going to this thing instead of seeing The Ark, but she just kept saying no and we had this huge shouty argument, which was weird, because, like, we *never* argue. She kept finding all these excuses for me to go, like “Oh, it’s not safe in London”, “I don’t even know this friend”, “Why can’t you go another time?”, blah blah blah. In the end, I just had to leave, because obviously there was no way I was gonna take no for an answer.’

‘Jesus,’ says Juliet, but it sounds like she doesn’t really get it. ‘Are you feeling all right about it?’

‘Yeah, it’s fine. My mum just doesn’t understand. I mean, all we’re going to do this week is sit at home, watch movies, go to one fandom meet-up, and then go to the meet-and-greet and concert on Thursday. It’s not exactly dangerous. And this school thing is absolutely pointless.’

Juliet puts a hand dramatically on my shoulder. ‘The Ark will appreciate your sacrifice.’

‘Thank you for your support, comrade,’ I say in an equally dramatic tone.

Once we reach the top of the Notting Hill Gate station steps, my phone buzzes in my pocket, so I take it out and look at the screen.

Oh. Dad’s finally replied to me.

Dad

Mum’ll come around. Just check in with us when you can. I know this school event isn’t very important ultimately. Mum just worries whether you’re making good choices. But we understand you want your independence and we know you only make friends

with good people. You're eighteen, and you are a strong, sensible girl. I know the world is not so bad, whatever your mother thinks. You know she was raised with different values to me; she respects tradition and academic achievement. But I had my fair share of youthful antics when I was a boy. You must be allowed to live your life, *inshallah*!! And you must give me some writing material, boring girl!! Love you xx

Well, at least Dad's on my side. He usually is. I think he's always hoping I'll get myself into a mildly unfortunate situation so he can write about it in one of his self-published novels.

I show the text to Juliet. She sighs. '*The world is not so bad*. How extremely optimistic.'

'I know, right?'

We are spending the week at Juliet's nan's house. Juliet herself lives outside London, but Juliet suggested it'd be easier for us to go to the fandom meet-up and the concert if we stayed in London for the week. I didn't have any complaints.

The house is in Notting Hill and Juliet's family is rich. I became aware of this not long into our friendship when she bought over £500 worth of The Ark merch in an attempt to win a giveaway competition and then didn't even bat an eyelid when she lost. Over my many years of being in The Ark fandom, I've just about been able to save up enough money to afford an Ark hoodie and a poster.

And, of course, a meet-and-greet ticket to see them this Thursday at the O2 Arena.

'Mate, this is fancy,' I say as we walk through the door and into a hallway. It's tiled. Everything is white and there are actual paintings on the walls.

‘Thanks?’ Juliet replies, a slight lilt in her tone suggesting that she has no idea how to reply. Most of the time I try not to bring up how much richer she is than me, because that would be awkward for both of us.

I take my shoes off and Juliet lets me dump my stuff in the bedroom we’re sleeping in. There are a couple of other rooms that I could sleep in – a spare bedroom and an office room – but half the fun of staying at a friend’s house is those late-night deep conversations while you’re tucked up in bed with facemasks on, eating Pringles, with a terrible rom-com on the TV in the background. Right?

After that, I’m introduced to Juliet’s nan, whose name is Dorothy. She’s short, like Juliet, and looks much younger than she probably is, her hair dyed a sandy blonde and kept long. She is wearing designer wellies while sitting at the kitchen table typing away at a laptop, glasses perched on the end of her nose.

‘Hello,’ she says with a warm smile. ‘You must be Angel?’

‘Yep! Hi!’

Okay, yeah, people calling me Angel in real life feels weird.

‘Excited about the concert on Thursday?’ asks Dorothy.

‘*So excited.*’

‘I bet!’ She closes her laptop and stands up. ‘Well, I’ll try not to get in your way too much. I’m sure you and J have lots to talk about!’

I assure her that she definitely wouldn’t get in our way but she leaves the room anyway, which makes me feel a bit guilty. I never know how to behave around grandparents, since mine are all dead or overseas. Another thing I don’t bring up around anyone, ever.

‘SO!’ I say, rubbing my hands together. ‘What food do we have?’

Juliet swishes her hair and slams her hands down on the kitchen counter.

‘You’re not ready,’ she says, raising one eyebrow.

She takes me on a tour of all the food and drink she bought for this week – pizzas and J2Os being the main features – before asking me what I want right now, and I go for a classic orange and passion fruit J2O, because I feel like I need to be holding something. I hate not having anything to hold while I’m not talking. What do you do with your hands?

And then Juliet says something else.

‘So, if we head out again at around six, I think that should give us enough time to get there.’

I scrape the J2O bottle label with my thumbnail.

‘Er – *whheeeere* are we going?’

Juliet freezes, standing over the opposite side of the counter island.

‘To pick up – wait . . . have I not told you about this?’

I shrug exaggeratedly.

‘My friend Mac is coming down as well,’ she says. ‘To stay. To see The Ark.’

I immediately begin to panic.

I don’t know who Mac is. I haven’t heard of Mac. I don’t really want to hang out with someone I haven’t met before. I don’t really want to have to make any new friends when this week is supposed to be dedicated to Juliet and The Ark. Making friends is effort, making friends with Mac will be effort, because he doesn’t know me, he isn’t used to me and my incessant talkativeness and my deep passion for a teen boy band, and this week isn’t about Mac. This week is for me and Juliet and our boys – The Ark.

‘Did I really not tell you?’ asks Juliet, running a hand over her hair.

She sounds like she feels pretty bad about it.

‘No . . .’ I say. I sound rude. Okay. Calm down. It’s fine. Mac is fine. ‘But – it’s fine! More pals! I’m good at making new friends!’

Juliet puts her hands on her face. ‘God, I’m *so* sorry. I could have sworn I told you. I promise he’s really, really nice. We talk on Tumblr, like, every day.’

‘Yeah!’ I say, nodding enthusiastically, but I feel guilty. I want to tell her that I’m not really okay with this, and I hadn’t been expecting this, and to be honest I probably wouldn’t have come if I’d known I’d have to spend the week socialising with some guy I don’t know. But I don’t want to make things awkward when I’ve only been here for ten minutes.

I’ll just have to lie.

Just for this week.

Hopefully God will forgive me. He knows that I need to be here. For The Ark.

‘So, we’ll head out at six, back here for pizzas, put a film on, then the awards start at two, yeah?’ I say, words tumbling out of my mouth.

It’s 5.17 p.m. We’re staying up tonight to watch the West Coast Music Awards, which start at 2 a.m. UK time. Our boys – The Ark, that is – are performing there. The first time they’ve appeared at an American awards show.

‘Yes,’ says Juliet, nodding decisively. Nodding is starting to lose its meaning. I turn round and start pacing the kitchen and Juliet takes out her phone.

‘Looks like the boys have arrived at their hotel!’ she says, staring at the screen. Probably on @ArkUpdates on Twitter – our usual source for everything Ark-related. It’s incredible I haven’t checked it in the last hour.

‘Any pics yet?’

‘Just a blurry one of them getting out of their car.’

I lean over her shoulder and look at the photo. There they are. Our boys. *The Ark*. Blurry, pixelated smudges, half blocked by huge bodyguards in dark suits. Rowan is leading them, Jimmy in the middle, Lister behind. They seem connected. Like the Beatles on Abbey Road, or a group of toddlers holding hands on a preschool trip to the park.