

VOICES ON THE CITY WALLS





SEE? THEY JUST KEEP WALKING, LIKE NOTHING'S HAPPENING. EVERYONE KNOWS, EVERYONE THINKS ABOUT IT, BUT NO ONE SAYS A WORD. OUR CITY'S LIKE AN ART GALLERY, FULL OF BLANK CANVASES:

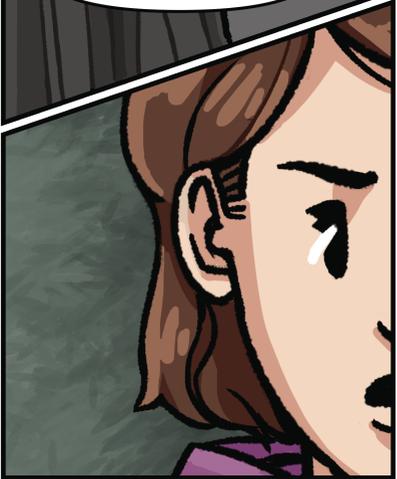
NOTHING'S REALLY HAPPENS INSIDE, BUT IT'S OVERFLOWING WITH UNSPOKEN THOUGHTS.

TALKING IS DANGEROUS THESE DAYS, MARIAM.

THEY SHUT PEOPLE UP AND LEAVE THEM NO CHOICE.



PEOPLE ALWAYS HAVE A CHOICE - THEY JUST GO FOR THE EASIEST ONE.



I WANT TO FILL THIS GALLERY, DAVID. THE WALLS WILL BE OUR CANVASES, AND THEY'LL SAY WHAT PEOPLE ARE TOO AFRAID TO SAY.



I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY PEOPLE HAVE A PROBLEM TALKING ABOUT AIR POLLUTION. THEY SEE THE AIR IS DIRTY...

BECAUSE THAT KIND OF COURAGE GETS PEOPLE HURT. WHY TAKE A RISK LIKE THAT AND STICK YOUR NECK OUT?



BUT IT IS NOT FORBIDDEN TO TALK ABOUT IT. STAYING SILENT ABOUT IT IS JUST ANOTHER SYMPTOM OF THE SAME FEAR THAT KEEPS PEOPLE QUIET ABOUT EVERYTHING ELSE.

THEY JUST THINK IF THEY DON'T SPEAK UP, PEACE WILL BE PRESERVED. BUT PEACE WITHOUT VOICE IS ONLY OBEDIENCE.

SILENCE MIGHT FEEL SAFE, BUT IT ENDS UP COSTING PEOPLE THEIR HEALTH AS THEY BREATHE IN POLLUTED AIR.



YOUNG LADY, THIS KIND OF WORK IS ASKING FOR SERIOUS TROUBLE.



WHAT KIND OF TROUBLE?

I'VE SEEN A LOT OF PAIN AND VIOLENCE, BACK WHEN I WAS YOUNG. PEOPLE WEREN'T JUST BROKEN PHYSICALLY — THEIR SPIRITS WERE CRUSHED TOO. THEY HAD THEIR WILL TO LIVE AND TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES TAKEN AWAY, JUST BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T CAREFUL ENOUGH, DIDN'T STAY IN THE SHADOWS, AND SPOKE THEIR MINDS.





PEACE IS IN
SILENCE

THIS WAS MY
WORK. HOW COULD
THEY DARE?..

MARIAM...



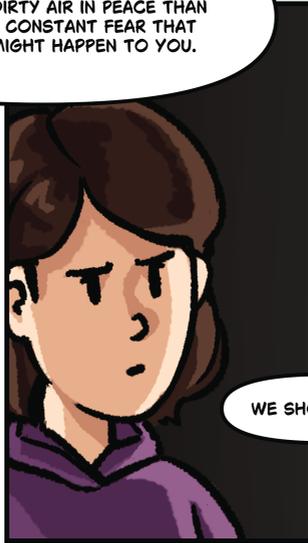
THEY DON'T
WANT NOISE! THEY
DON'T WANT US TO
THINK, EITHER. OUR
WALLS WENT AGAINST
THEIR RULES, AND
THEY ARE TRYING
TO SILENCE US!



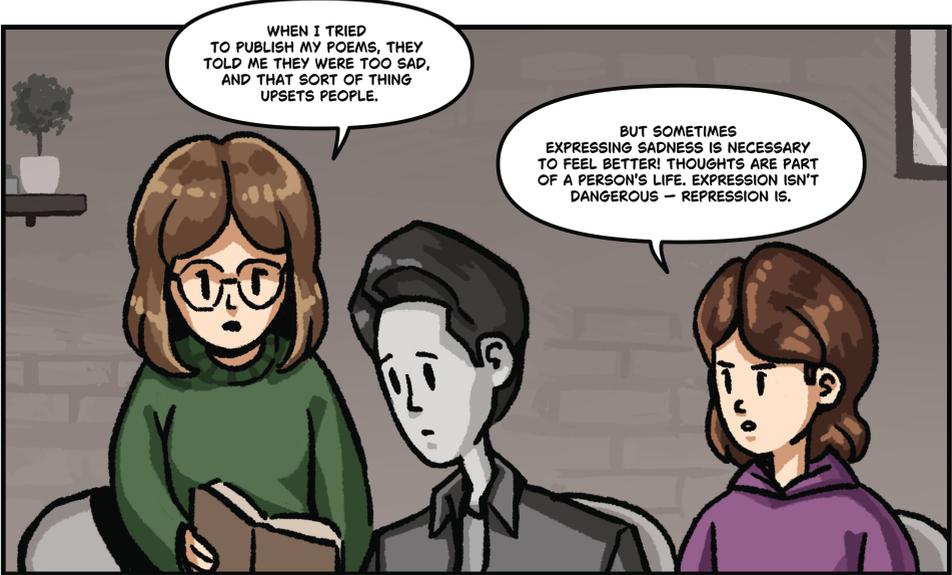
MARIAM, I'M REALLY SORRY THIS HAPPENED, BUT BELIEVE ME — IT'S FOR THE BEST. THEY ONLY PAINTED OVER IT, AND THE IMPORTANT THING IS THAT YOU'RE NOT IN DANGER ANYMORE.

IT DIDN'T JUST HAPPEN. SOMEONE DID THIS — PEOPLE DID THIS. WHAT'S THE POINT OF FEELING SAFE IF I CAN'T SPEAK UP ABOUT SOMETHING AS SIMPLE AS THE AIR I BREATHE EVERY DAY?..

IF YOU ASK ME, IT'S BETTER TO BREATHE DIRTY AIR IN PEACE THAN TO LIVE WITH CONSTANT FEAR THAT SOMETHING MIGHT HAPPEN TO YOU.



WE SHOULD GO...



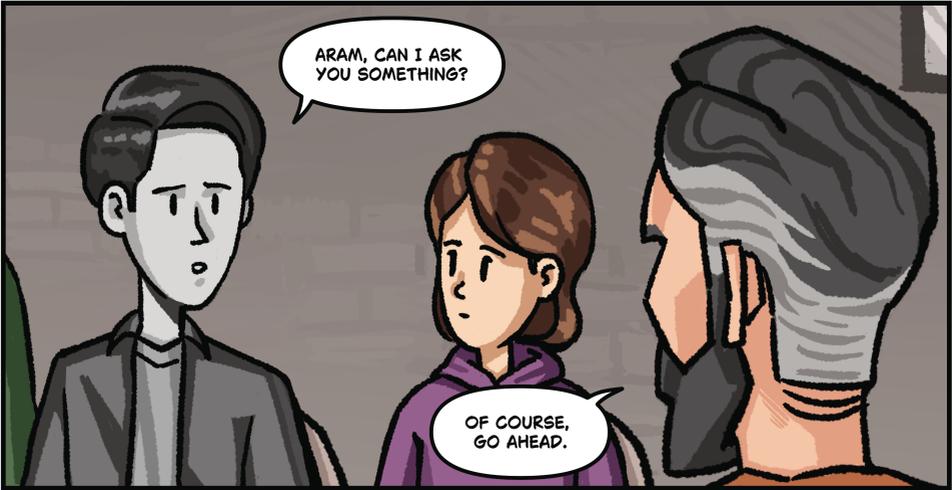
WHEN I TRIED TO PUBLISH MY POEMS, THEY TOLD ME THEY WERE TOO SAD, AND THAT SORT OF THING UPSETS PEOPLE.

BUT SOMETIMES EXPRESSING SADNESS IS NECESSARY TO FEEL BETTER! THOUGHTS ARE PART OF A PERSON'S LIFE. EXPRESSION ISN'T DANGEROUS — REPRESSION IS.



I LOST MY JOB FOR POSTING A QUOTE THEY SAID WAS "TOO CRITICAL".

THEY DON'T WANT US TO FEEL DIFFERENT EMOTIONS AND HAVE DIFFERENT OPINIONS, BECAUSE THEY KNOW EMOTION LEADS TO THOUGHT — AND THOUGHT LEADS TO CHANGE...





DO YOU REALLY MEAN TO DO THIS? WHAT YOU'RE PLANNING IS INCREDIBLY DANGEROUS!

WE WON'T GIVE UP. WE KNOW OUR VOICES ARE IMPORTANT.

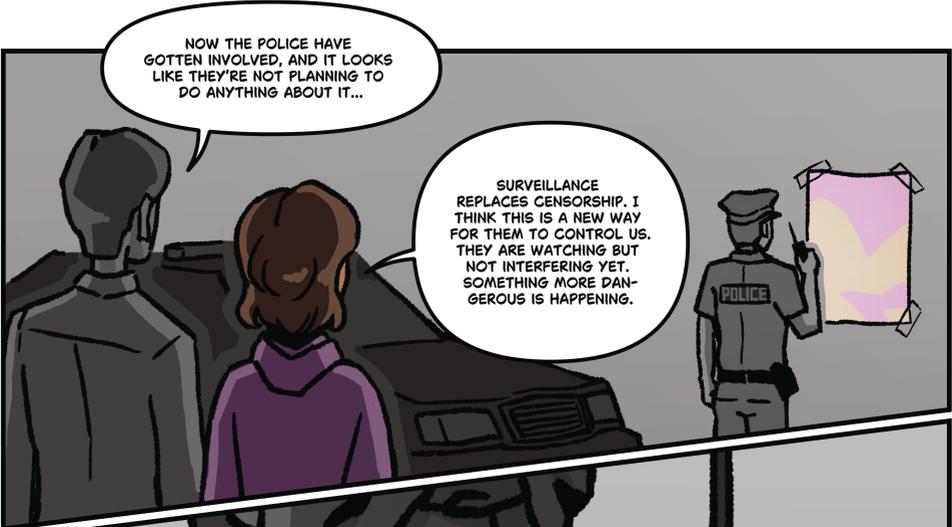
YOU DON'T HAVE TO COME WITH US IF YOU'RE SCARED, BUT YOU'RE RIGHT - IT IS DANGEROUS. WE COULD GET CAUGHT. WE MUST BE MORE CAREFUL, AND WE WILL BE. THIS IS NOT JUST A PROTEST. WE WANT TO UNITE. ONE VOICE CAN BE PUNISHED, BUT MANY BECOME SOLIDARITY. AND REMEMBER - FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IS A RIGHT, NOT PERMISSION.





WE HAVE THE FREEDOM
OF EXPRESSION; WE JUST NEED
THE COURAGE TO USE IT. FREE-
DOM EXISTS ONLY WHEN WE
DARE TO EXERCISE IT.

LOOK AT THE
STARS
THEY ARE BRIGHTER
AT NIGHT



NOW THE POLICE HAVE GOTTEN INVOLVED, AND IT LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE NOT PLANNING TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT...

SURVEILLANCE REPLACES CENSORSHIP. I THINK THIS IS A NEW WAY FOR THEM TO CONTROL US. THEY ARE WATCHING BUT NOT INTERFERING YET. SOMETHING MORE DANGEROUS IS HAPPENING.

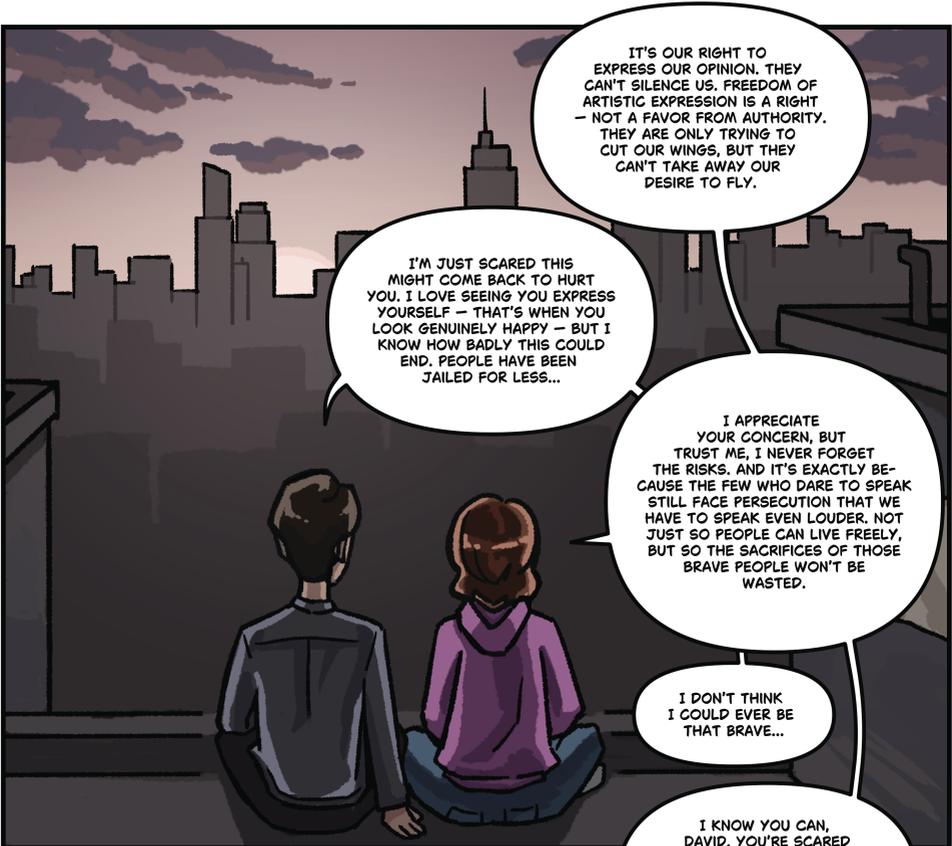


FOR NOW, THESE ARE JUST PEACEFUL MESSAGES - LEAVE THEM BE. THE CULTURE OFFICE WILL MONITOR.



THEY'RE JUST WAITING FOR THE RIGHT MOMENT TO CATCH YOU. I'M WORRIED ABOUT YOU, MARIAM. PLEASE, STOP. IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO BACK OFF - YOU'VE DONE ENOUGH, PEOPLE HAVE NOTICED YOU.

YOU DON'T GET IT. MAYBE A LOT OF PEOPLE AGREE WITH US DEEP DOWN, BUT THEY'RE STILL TOO SCARED TO SHOW IT. THEY CAN'T EVEN STOP AND LOOK AT OUR WORK OPENLY - JUST GLANCE AT IT SECRETLY. OUR GOAL IS BIGGER THAN ME, AND I'M WILLING TO RISK MY SAFETY TO REACH IT.



IT'S OUR RIGHT TO EXPRESS OUR OPINION. THEY CAN'T SILENCE US. FREEDOM OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IS A RIGHT — NOT A FAVOR FROM AUTHORITY. THEY ARE ONLY TRYING TO CUT OUR WINGS, BUT THEY CAN'T TAKE AWAY OUR DESIRE TO FLY.

I'M JUST SCARED THIS MIGHT COME BACK TO HURT YOU. I LOVE SEEING YOU EXPRESS YOURSELF — THAT'S WHEN YOU LOOK GENUINELY HAPPY — BUT I KNOW HOW BADLY THIS COULD END. PEOPLE HAVE BEEN JAILED FOR LESS...

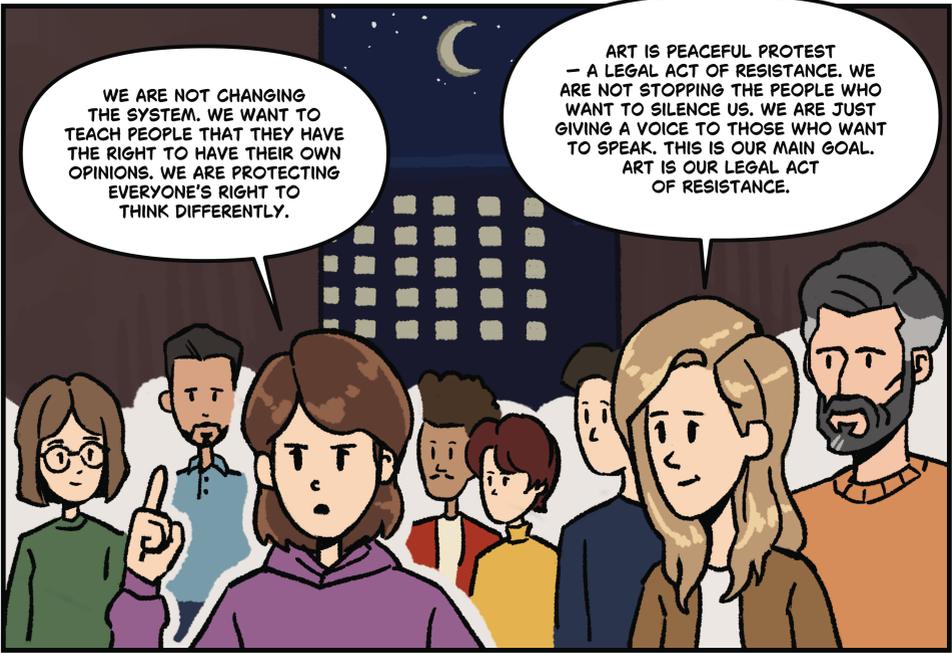
I APPRECIATE YOUR CONCERN, BUT TRUST ME, I NEVER FORGET THE RISKS. AND IT'S EXACTLY BECAUSE THE FEW WHO DARE TO SPEAK STILL FACE PERSECUTION THAT WE HAVE TO SPEAK EVEN LOUDER. NOT JUST SO PEOPLE CAN LIVE FREELY, BUT SO THE SACRIFICES OF THOSE BRAVE PEOPLE WON'T BE WASTED.

I DON'T THINK I COULD EVER BE THAT BRAVE...

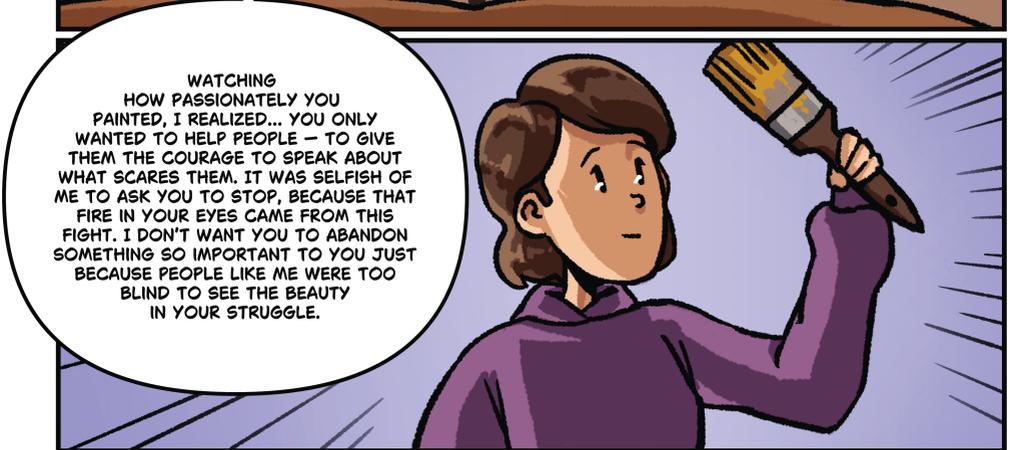
I KNOW YOU CAN, DAVID. YOU'RE SCARED TOO, BUT I'M SURE THAT ONE DAY YOU'LL BE READY TO PUSH PAST IT. YOU STILL CARRY THE EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS WITH YOU, DON'T YOU?



I DON'T KNOW... MAYBE YOU'RE RIGHT.

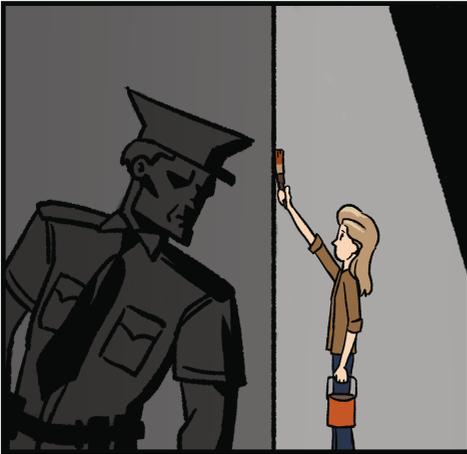




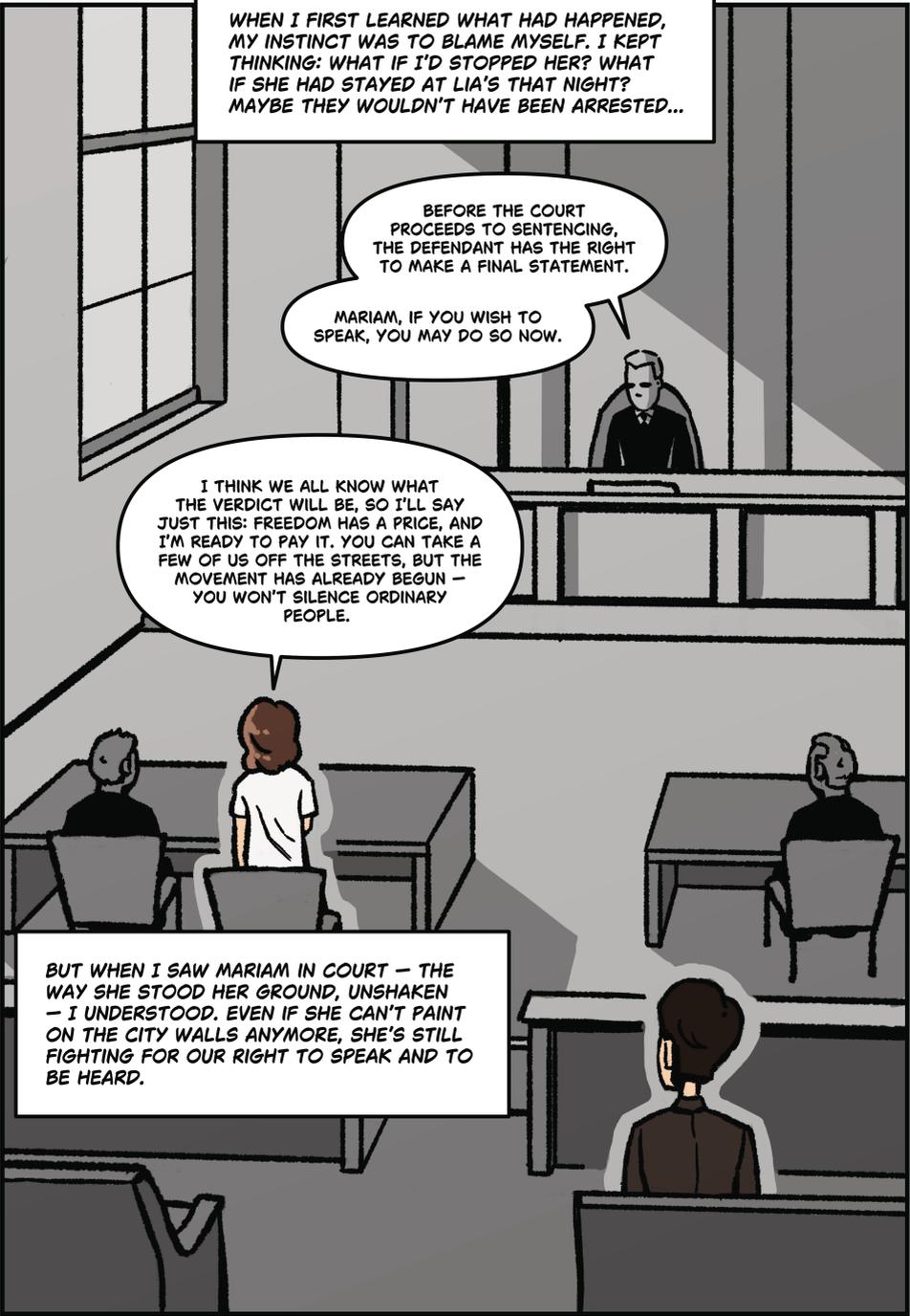




THEN WE NEED TO CREATE SOMETHING NEW - AND PUT ALL OUR ONCE-SILENCED THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS INTO IT. WE HAVE TO MAKE SOMETHING SO HONEST THAT PEOPLE SIMPLY WON'T BE ABLE TO WALK PAST IT.







WHEN I FIRST LEARNED WHAT HAD HAPPENED, MY INSTINCT WAS TO BLAME MYSELF. I KEPT THINKING: WHAT IF I'D STOPPED HER? WHAT IF SHE HAD STAYED AT LIA'S THAT NIGHT? MAYBE THEY WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ARRESTED...

BEFORE THE COURT PROCEEDS TO SENTENCING, THE DEFENDANT HAS THE RIGHT TO MAKE A FINAL STATEMENT.

MARIAM, IF YOU WISH TO SPEAK, YOU MAY DO SO NOW.

I THINK WE ALL KNOW WHAT THE VERDICT WILL BE, SO I'LL SAY JUST THIS: FREEDOM HAS A PRICE, AND I'M READY TO PAY IT. YOU CAN TAKE A FEW OF US OFF THE STREETS, BUT THE MOVEMENT HAS ALREADY BEGUN — YOU WON'T SILENCE ORDINARY PEOPLE.

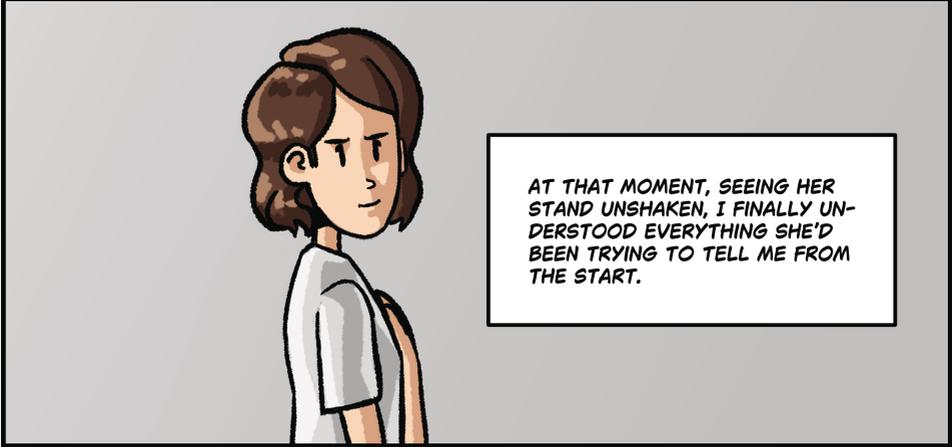
BUT WHEN I SAW MARIAM IN COURT — THE WAY SHE STOOD HER GROUND, UNSHAKEN — I UNDERSTOOD. EVEN IF SHE CAN'T PAINT ON THE CITY WALLS ANYMORE, SHE'S STILL FIGHTING FOR OUR RIGHT TO SPEAK AND TO BE HEARD.



OUR FIGHT WILL CONTINUE, AND SOONER OR LATER YOU'LL HAVE TO ACCEPT THAT WE REFUSE TO BE SILENT.



WHAT I FEARED MOST HAD ALREADY HAPPENED – YET HER SPIRIT NEVER BROKE.



AT THAT MOMENT, SEEING HER STAND UNSHAKEN, I FINALLY UNDERSTOOD EVERYTHING SHE'D BEEN TRYING TO TELL ME FROM THE START.

AFTER THAT, I KNEW I COULDN'T STAY SILENT ANYMORE — I HAD TO FINISH WHAT SHE STARTED. I MAY NOT DRAW LIKE SHE DID, BUT THAT DOESN'T MATTER; WHAT MATTERS IS THAT SILENCE IS NO LONGER AN OPTION FOR ME.



I GATHERED EVERYONE I COULD, AND TOGETHER WE FINISHED THE MESSAGE MARIAM AND LIA BEGAN. I USED TO THINK STAYING QUIET KEPT ME SAFE, BUT SILENCE IS WHAT BROUGHT US HERE — AND I WON'T LET OUR VOICES FADE AGAIN.



THE TIME WILL COME WHEN EVERYONE WILL HAVE TO FACE THE TRUTH: WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO EXPRESS OURSELVES FREELY. ART ALWAYS FINDS A WAY TO WIN — IT CAN SPARK A VOICE EVEN IN THOSE WHO'VE SPENT THEIR WHOLE LIVES WHISPERING.

This comic book was created by the participants of the Youth Democracy Exchange: Empowering Future Leaders in Armenia and Georgia project.

The project was carried out by the OxyGen Foundation in partnership with the Gori Youth Center (Georgia) and with the support of the New Democracy Fund.



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The limitation of freedom of expression through pressure and restrictive social norms, and overcoming this challenge through art and solidarity, civic courage and the reaffirmation of the right to express dissenting opinions.

Inspired by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects freedom of expression and artistic creativity against both direct censorship and indirect “chilling effects.”