

Julissa's feet couldn't seem to decide whether to run or walk to the school auditorium. Her heart raced as she passed the empty classrooms. Most of her classmates had already gone home for the day. She took a shaky breath when she reached the entrance, her hand resting on the door handle. Finally, she mustered up the courage to push open the door.

Once inside, she saw a group of dancers all dressed in traditional Vietnamese dresses, complete with fans. A few of them glanced at her as she walked in.

"Are you here for the cultural festival rehearsals?" One of them asked while walking over.

Julissa nodded her head.

The dancer smiled in understanding. "Well, the Vietnamese group booked the auditorium for today, but if you're looking for the Mexican group, they booked the music room."

Julissa opened her mouth to correct her, but decided against it, and instead let out a small "thanks" as she opened the auditorium door to leave.

After a few minutes of aimlessly wandering around to try and find where she belonged, she sighed in relief when she finally spotted Chanlina, or Lina, which is what she told everyone to call her.

"There you are!" She said walking over. "We almost started without you! Come on."

Lina led Julissa over to an almost empty classroom. About four other people were there, including Lina.

Julissa quickly took a seat at the table they were sitting at, avoiding any eye contact in fear of social interaction. Lina checked her clipboard before smiling.

"Alright! Everyone's here. Since this is our first rehearsal as the, um, *miscellaneous*, group of the cultural festival," The walls of the room suddenly became very interesting to gaze at for everyone in the room. "-let's get introduced! Name, then country. I'm Lina, and I'm from Cambodia."

Lina glanced to her left, where a girl with dreadlocks and glasses flipped through a red folder. The girl looked around the table.

"My name's Kamali, I'm from Ethiopia." She stated, pulling a thick math packet out of her folder. The girl to her left gave a shy smile before introducing herself.

"My name is Noor, I'm from Lebanon." She said. She spoke with a pleasant lilt to her words, especially around vowels. Next to her, a girl with curly black hair glanced up from her *elote*, her mouth full. She gave a quick greeting.

"Uh, hi, I'm Alejandra," She paused for a second to swallow, "-and I'm from Ecuador, and no, Alejandra is not spelt with an "h", it's spelt with a "j". Yeah, that's it." She quickly

returned to her food. Judging from the slight accent, Spanish was probably her first language.

Julissa gave a nod of greeting to everyone. She tried her best not to start biting her nails.

“Um,” She paused. “I’m Julissa, and I’m from Belize, which is its own Central American country. What I mean is, it isn’t Mexican, or Brazilian or something. And we don’t speak spanish there, ‘cause of what the British did, and um... yeah.”

She bit her nails, feeling the heat of embarrassment in her chest at the rambling.

*Jesus Christ, you’re an absolute disaster,* she thought.

Lina quickly segued into the actual rehearsal, much to Julissa’s relief.

“So! Today we’ll decide what act we’re going to do. We’re getting three minutes of the show to work with, which is better than what happened, uh, *last year.*” Alejandra nodded. Noor, Kamali, and Julissa looked up with questioning looks. Lina continued on. “Oh, and the teachers said we’re in charge of finding our own costumes. Isn’t that just great?”

Julissa thought she heard slight sarcasm in that last statement, but decided she just misheard.

“So, any ideas?” Lina looked around the room. Kamali shifted in her chair a little before speaking.

“Well, we *could* just choreograph a dance routine.” Kamali said, flipping through her packet.

Alejandra set her *elote* down. “I’m not that great at dancing” she admitted, crossing her arms. The rest of the group nodded in agreement.

Kamali shrugged, looking a bit disappointed. “Well, what else could we do?”

Noor tapped her chin in thought for a few seconds before flashing an excited smile.

“Oh! I know! We could sing a song.” She said, leaning on the table.

This time, it was Lina who shot down the idea.

“I don’t know, Noor, we would have to find a song that’s inclusive of everyone’s country, and I don’t know if there’s a song like that.”

“Besides,” Kamali said, “I’m not that great at singing.”

Lina’s smile started to shrink at the lack of ideas. She scanned the table, her eyes finally landing on Julissa.

“Julissa!”

The girl in question stared ahead blankly, which she was used to doing during group discussions, and wondered what her dad would cook for dinner. Hopefully something Belizean. She paused her staring contest with the wall to face Lina.

“Julissa, you’ve been awfully quiet,” Lina said. “Do you have any ideas?”

Julissa, unused to being put in the spotlight, froze for a second, then spoke.

“Well, I’m good with whatever you guys choose.” She said quickly.

The group looked at her with an expression that said *“That wasn’t the answer we were looking for, but good on you for doing your best”*.

The rest of the rehearsal carried on with the group bouncing around between ideas. Kamali’s dad called her about forty-five minutes in. She flinched when she answered. Julissa could hear a stern sounding voice on the line. Kamali quickly packed up her books and packet and left, saying something about “having scholarly responsibilities” and “no time for a rehearsal”. Julissa wondered what that was about.

A while after Kamali’s sudden exit, Lina checked her watch.

“Oh boy, look at the time. I guess I’ll see you guys next time!”

The group said their goodbyes and left their separate ways.

Julissa’s dad did, in fact, cook Belizean food for dinner.

Julissa crammed her face full of *escabeche*. The savory, almost sour soup fogged her glasses.

Her parents, like usual, were talking about something or other in Spanish. Julissa had always meant to learn Spanish, but in reality she knew it would probably never happen. She didn’t really mind being left out of their conversations anyway. Really, she didn’t.

The next rehearsal started on the same note the last one ended on. The conversation trailed on, and Julissa began to worry that nothing would happen this rehearsal either.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Principal Mekonnen walked in. He signaled for Lina to follow him. Alejandra looked away. The group sat together in silence for a few minutes before Lina came back. She closed the door slowly, leaving her hand on the door handle for a few seconds before turning around to face everyone.

“Oh.” Said Alejandra. “Principal Mekonnen cancelled our act again, didn’t he?”

Lina nodded. Any traces of her optimistic outlook had vanished.

“Every year.” Lina said, looking nowhere. “He does this every year.”

Alejandra ran a hand through her hair. “Lina... I’m so sorry. You’ve been running this group every year since you were like...ten years old! And he has the nerve to cancel it every time?” Alejandra’s hand fell down to her side in defeat.

Lina sighed. “Well, at least he didn’t give me any time to get my hopes up this year.”

Noor folded her fingers together and spoke.

“I was so happy that I would get to represent my country...I never see anything familiar on TV or in movies. So finally getting to share the beauty of my culture with people...” She trailed off.

Kamali crossed her arms. She remained silent, but looked upset.

“I can’t believe he would do this.” She said after a few seconds.

Julissa looked around the room trying to digest the news. She had been ready to just chalk it up as just another instance of being left out, but she realized that this time, she wasn’t the only one to be left out. It was her entire group.

Everyone had agreed to meet at lunch the next day. Julissa looked around to try and find the group, and finally spotted them in one of the corners of the noisy lunchroom.

Lina greeted her as she sat down.

“I’m glad you all came.” Lina said. Her tone was sobering compared to her usual peppiness.

The group talked about nothing in particular for a few minutes.

“You know,” Kamali said after a while. “They’re going to give *school food* at the festival.”

Alejandra gagged, while Lina and Noor snorted.

“I’m glad I’ll be at home that night enjoying my *abuelita’s* cooking.” said Alejandra.

Julissa looked around the table. Each of the girls had brought home lunch. Lina was enjoying a spicy smelling soup that made Julissa’s mouth water. She mentally kicked herself for forgetting her lunch at home.

Just then, an inkling of an idea began to form in her head. It was pretty out there, but it was an idea nonetheless. Slowly, she stood up.

“Hey guys,” She said quietly. The attention was turned to her. Then, she continued on a little louder. “Ah, well, what if we did food stands?”

“What do you mean, Julissa?” Lina asked.

“Well I mean... if we can’t be in the show, we could at least bring some of our cultural, um, you know, food, to the festival. That way we don’t have to compromise with each other, either.”

The group thought about it for a few daunting moments. Then, Lina grinned.

“That’s a great idea Julissa.”

Alejandra nodded. “The students deserve more than stale pizza and cold hotdogs.” She said.

Julissa smiled.

Outside Principal Mekonnen’s office, Julissa paced back and forth. She had volunteered to pitch the idea to him, which would have usually been a terrifying thought, but now she had the validation of a group behind her.

The door swung open, and Principal Mekonnen appeared behind it, his face blank.

“Come in, Julissa.”

Julissa sat in front of the big mahogany desk. The principal calmly sat behind it, waiting for Julissa to speak.

“Um,” Julissa started.

“My group was, well, removed from the cultural festival show, and um... I was just thinking, if we can’t be a part of the show, could we do food stalls?”

Principal Mekonnen pondered for a second, then looked at Julissa with indifference.

“Well, I’ll think about it, but nothing’s for certain.” He said, standing up.

Julissa knew what adults meant when they said “nothing’s for certain”.

“Wait! Principal Mekonnen, please, let us do this. Lina has been working towards letting students at this school express the cultures that are unique to them in this festival for years. We won’t even need any money!”

Principal Mekonnen opened the door, and gestured for Julissa to leave.

Julissa broke the news to the group the next day at lunch.

“Let me guess. He said *nothing’s for certain*, at least once, didn’t he?” Kamali asked. “Oh who am I kidding, of course he did.”

“Thanks for trying, Julissa.” Noor said.

Julissa stared off to the side, occupied with her thoughts. She couldn’t let everyone down. It was one thing to feel left out on your own, but to know that your community got left out as well? She had to do everyone justice.

“We’re doing the food stalls.” She said. “He can’t stop us. We have a week to prepare. Are you guys with me?”

The group got to work over the next few days.

They worked at lunch, designing signs out of paper and cardboard, everyone adding a unique touch to theirs. Julissa got her dad to agree to cook *escabeche*, and Alejandra had gotten her *abuelita* to make *ceviche*. Lina was going to bring the same spicy soup she had brought to lunch, which Julissa learned was called *Samlor Korkor*. Noor said she would bring *kibbeh*, which she looked pretty excited about, so Julissa figured it must be pretty good.

Everything had fallen into place, except for the tables. Since they were all fourteen, and thus, had no money, they would have to get the tables from school on the night of the festival.

At last, it was the day before the show. The girls were reviewing their plan during lunch. After a while, Noor spoke up.

“I just wanted to thank all of you for everything. It feels so good to be able to share some of my culture, even if it’s only... a *taste* of it.”

Noor grinned as everyone giggled and rolled their eyes.

The next day was the day of the festival.

“Ok, everyone’s in the auditorium rehearsing, so the storage room should be clear.” Julissa said to Kamali.

Noor and Lina would stay behind with the food while Julissa and Kamali got the tables.

The two girls quickly made their way over to the storage room, passing the colorful flags and streamers that lined the halls in preparation of the festival. Julissa pushed open the wooden door, and one by one, they carried the folding tables over to the auditorium entrance. When they went back for the last one, they were greeted with an unwelcome sight.

“Kamali, what are you doing?” Principal Mekonnen demanded.

Julissa looked at Kamali in confusion. Kamali took a deep breath.

“Listen *dad*, I know you just want the best for me, but I have other interests besides school work. My friends and I went through all this trouble. Can’t you just let us do this?”

Principal Mekonnen looked between Kamali and Julissa for a few tantalizing seconds. Finally, he sighed.

“Fine. But your grades had better be the same as they were before all this.”

Kamali smiled in relief.

“I can’t believe your dad’s Principal Mekonnen.” Julissa said on the way back.

“Oh, believe me, it’s a curse, not a blessing.” Kamali said.

The rest of the night went on without a hitch. People started filing inside the school, and chatter erupted over at the food stalls as people gushed over the dishes. Julissa smiled with pride every time someone complimented her dad’s cooking. Mexican music blasted from the auditorium. The scent of Onions, meat, and pepper filled the air.

As the night drew to a close, Julissa looked around at her friends. They all smiled at her. Lina walked over to Julissa’s stall.

“I’m so proud of you! You were so shy before, I didn’t know you were so cool!” Lina clapped Julissa on the back, which caught Julissa by surprise.

Julissa tried to suppress the smile that was breaking out on her face, to no avail. It was such a simple victory, but she knew that it meant everything to her friends. It meant everything to Julissa, too. Not just to feel included, but to feel intertwined with people and to achieve something together, no matter how small.