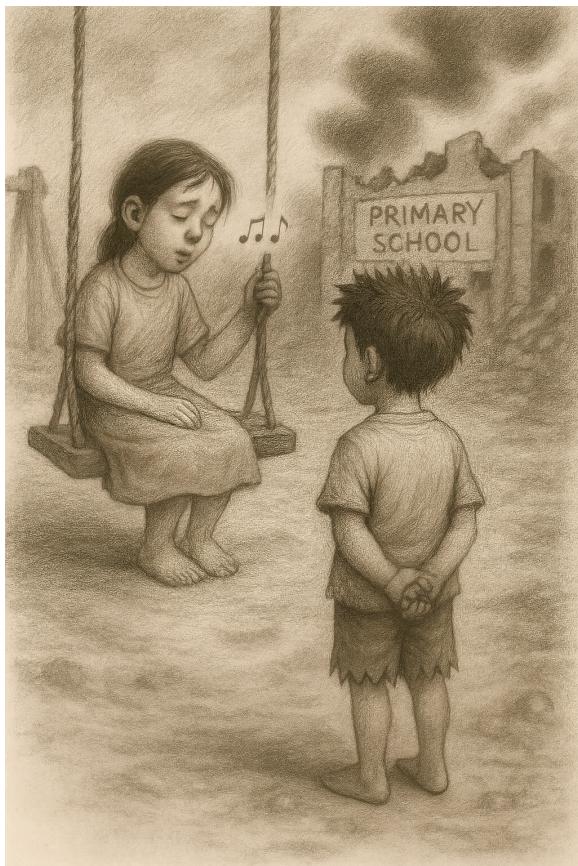


Chapter 1: I Decide



The playground was quieter that day.

Not silent. Handala's playground was never fully silent.
But softer, as if it had learned how to listen.

It was the kind of quiet that did not mind being interrupted.

The primary school stood broken behind it, its walls split open, its sign still clinging to a name it could no longer protect.

The ground was dry and uneven, marked by footsteps that came and went without asking permission.

Handala sensed her before she spoke.

Aisha entered through the broken gate with careful steps, measuring the earth beneath her feet.

She was small, eight or nine perhaps, her dress marked with soot and ash that would never fully wash out. A faded ribbon held her hair together. Her eyes did not search the ruins, but rested inward, where memory lived.

She was singing.

Not loudly. Not sweetly.

It was the kind of singing that keeps a person standing when everything else insists they should fall.

Handala shifted slightly so she would know she was not alone.

Her song faded.

“Who is there?” Aisha asked, calm but alert.

“Someone who listens,” Handala replied.

She tilted her head.

“I thought this place was empty.”

“It is not,” he said. “Not of voices.”

She stepped forward and stopped.

“I cannot see it,” she said. “But I hear the swing.”

Handala touched the chain, setting it gently in motion.

The swing answered with a sound that suggested it had been waiting.

“Sit,” he said. “It remembers children.”

Aisha moved carefully and sat. Her hands closed firmly around the chains. Not afraid. Anchored.

For a moment, only the swing spoke.

“You were singing,” Handala said.

“Yes,” Aisha replied.

“Why?”

She answered without hesitation.

“Because silence burns worse than fire.”

Handala did not interrupt.

“My brother played the guitar,” she continued. “He played when the power was gone. He sang too. He said music does not wait for permission.”

Her voice remained steady.

“They told us to be quiet that night. To hide. To wait. When the fire came, I lost my sight.

Everything went dark. But the song stayed.”

She lifted her chin.

“I sang so I would not disappear.”

“And you did not,” Handala said.

“No,” she replied. “I am still here.”

The swing creaked forward and back.

It did not sound convinced of much, but it kept going anyway.

Handala spoke again.

“Is there a singer you listen to. Someone who shows you how to continue.”

“Yes,” Aisha said at once. “Andrea Bocelli.”

Handala waited.

“He lost his sight,” she continued, “but he did not waste his talent. He did not give it away to darkness. He filled the world with it.”

She smiled, small and certain.

“My brother used to say that some people learn to see with sound.”

Handala nodded.

“Then you already understand,” he said. “Loss does not decide who you become.”

“No,” Aisha said quietly. “I decide.”

She drew in a breath and began to sing again.

Her voice was soft at first, then steadier, carrying echoes of strings, of a boy with a guitar, of a man who turned

darkness into song. The melody did not ask for mercy. It stood its ground.

The wind seemed to pause.

The swing moved in time with her voice, slightly off-beat, but committed.

Handala faced the horizon, guarding the space where a blind girl sang not out of sorrow, but out of choice.

When she finished, the playground felt fuller.

“I will keep singing,” Aisha said.

“You should,” Handala replied. “Music is a form of return.”

She stood, holding the sound inside her like a promise.

“Will you walk with me?” she asked.

Handala nodded.

“I already am.”

She took his hand.

And for a moment, the playground remembered what it was built for.

