

PRESENT DAY  
AMAZON RAINFOREST

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AURORA

I'm in Australia.

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The arid wind blows through my hair so ly.  
I stare at the house in front of me, one I had called home not so long ago.

Dread seeps into my system. I look around the desert, the wind picking up dry dirt in the distance.

The front door open.

"Aurora!" His voice booms through the silence, filling my heart instantly with comfort.

"Gil!" I shout back in his same enthusiasm, breaking out into a smile and running up to hug him.

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He envelops me in a bear hug, picking me up from the ground and twirling me around. I hug him back, laughing at his energy as he puts me down again.

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"Look at you!" He marvels, smile flashing his white teeth. "You haven't aged a day"

I roll my eyes at his corny joke, but I can't help but admit that I'd missed them.

I'd missed him.

He picks up my luggage, hoisting it up like it's nothing and leading me into the house.

"Come on. Thena's at her tree, but she'll be back in half an hour" He puts my suitcase on the entrance of his house, motioning around to the inside.

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It was the coziest place I'd ever been in. Decorations lined the walls, and I could see a fire going on in the living room. Even though it was probably a hundred degrees out there, in here it felt cozy and warm.

"Gil, your place is beautiful" I admire in amazement, taking everything in.

"I try" He shrugs, making a beeline for the kitchen. He opens some drawers, searching for something. "Have you eaten?" He asks.

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I shake my head, my stomach rumbling on cue. He looks at me, raising an eyebrow.

"I'll take that as a no. You're just in time. I'm making dinner" He explains. He points to the dining table with a spatula. "Go on, sit"

I pull out the chair, sitting on the le side of the table.

"How's Thena been?" I ask, looking up at him as he takes food trays and places them in front of me.

I grab a fork, the reality of how hungry I actually was sinking on me as the smell of the food hits my nose. I don't waste another moment, taking one of the plates and digging right in.

"She's coping" Gil says. I nod, continuing to eat. "You know, she hasn't been the same since you killed me"

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I go still, my fork filled with food pausing before it enters my mouth. I swallow, frowning before turning to look up at him.

I scream as I see him, stumbling out of my chair and into the ground as I take him in.

He stands before me, his skin no longer warm and filled with color, but gray and rotting. There's dried bloodstains on his tattered clothing. His teeth are yellow and his eyes are pure white.

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I heave for breaths, looking around and scrambling back as he walks around the table to where I am, his face void of any emotion.

"You killed me. You killed Ana." He starts, his voice deepening as he speaks. "You'll end up killing Druig and you'll drag the rest of the team down with you"

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He laughs an evil laugh, shaking his head. His corpse-like body moving still towards me.

"You'll be the death of all of us, Aurora"

"Aurora"

"Aurora"

"Aurora"

I awake with a start. I'm heaving for breath, tears streaming down my cheeks. I look around in panic, not really understanding where I am.

I'm not in Gil's house. I'm not in Australia.

Instead, I'm in a bed.

I feel a warm hand touch my back, rubbing soothing circles. I turn to the person, almost crying in relief.

Druig. He's looking up at me, crouching beside the bed, worry inked on his features.

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"Hey, you're fine." He assures, nodding. "It was just a nightmare. You're alright"

I shake my head, leaning over to hug him. My face goes to the crook of his neck, and instantly I'm feeling more at peace.

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"Gil-he-" I stammer out. He shakes his head, shushing me so I don't continue speaking.

"It was just a dream, Aurora"

I nod, pulling back and wiping away my tears. There's a dull throbbing in my shoulder, but I feel the bandages that they'd put on me while I was asleep. I'm still feeling exhausted, but a lot better than what I'd felt like before I passed out.

He grabs both of my hands, still crouching down beside the bed and staring up at me.

"The ceremony's about to start in a few minutes," He purses his lips. "But I can tell them you're still asleep if you're not ready"

I consider it for a second, dread building up inside me at the thought of having to see Thena.

But then I brush it away.

It was Gil. I needed to be there. Thena needed me to be there.

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I shake my head, telling him I want to go and then starting to stand up when he places his hand on my chin, forcing me to look at him.

"It wasn't your fault" Druig tells me. Even a er all this time apart, he always seems to know what I'm thinking. "The Deviants would have come inside one way or another."

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"But-"

"It wasn't your fault" His tone is decisive. "Repeat it, Aurora"

I breathe, blinking away tears.

"It wasn't my fault" I finally breath out weakly. He nods, o ering me a small smile.

"I need you to repeat that until it sticks, you hear me?"

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"Okay"

He grabs my hand, standing straight and helping me up from the bed. He watches as I get ready, adjusting my hair and washing my face from all the dirt before holding my hand and leading me to the river where they were holding the ceremony.

The air is fresh as I step out of the cabin, the crickets chirping in the night.

He leads me through the forest until we near a river.

The team stands in a semi-circle, all of them looking at the middle; a giant fire sticking up like a sore thumb in the dead of night.

Thena sees me first. Her eyes are brimming with unshed tears.

I dread for. amoment what's going to happen, understanding her if she despised me.

Instead though, she holds out her hand for me, her face knowing.

I resist the urge to break out in sobs. I let go of Druig's hand, walking over to her and taking hers.

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"He was the best of us" She whispers, staring straight into the fire.

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I nod, biting my lip. I can't speak. I know that if I do I'll break out into tears.

I feel Druig's presence beside me, standing close to me in reassurance that he was there if I needed anything.

All of us watch in silence as Karun recites in arab, his tone quiet and somber as well.

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When the ceremony's over, I watch the fire dim down as the sun rises, and then I watch as Karun gathers his ashes and puts them in a small vase.

Druig grabs my hand again, leading us away from the fire. Still, I refuse to go.

We wait there, standing up and staring as the sun rises into the sky, and as Karun hands Thena the ashes.

If Druig gets tired of standing for too long, he doesn't complain. And as much as my shoulder is killing me, and I'm so tired I can sleep for a thousand years, I force myself to stay standing. To stay awake.

The both of us stand there, watching as Thena steps into the river, the ashes held close to her chest.

"When I le " Druig starts quietly, staring straight at Thena. I turn to him, my eyes droopy with sadness and sleep. "I thought about taking over their minds." He pauses. "every human on this planet"

He sighs before continuing.

"The violence, fear, greed" He faces me. "All gone. You know why I didn't do it?" He asks.

"Why?"

He smiles, beautiful as always.

"Because of you. You taught me that without their flaws they wouldn't be humans. You showed me how kind and caring they could also be. How even if there was bad, there was also so much good"

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"That's who you are, Aurora" he continues. "You see the good in people. You see the good in everyone, even if they might not have the best history, or the best intentions." He purses his lips. "You believed the best in me, and in the team, and I thank you for that"

I take a moment to smile, a tear rolling down my cheek as I stare as Then drops Gil's ashes into the river.

"It wasn't your fault. You can't blame yourself over something you had no control over" He tells me so ly.

I nod, even if I don't fully believe him. I still fear that if I speak I'll break out into tears and never stop.

Instead, I turn to him, holding out my arms and wrapping them around him like I'd done so many times.

He hugs me tightly, as if it were the last time we were hugging.

"I forgive you, Druig" I finally whisper, not being able to hold back my tears.

"I forgive you for everything"

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a/n sorry for the short chapter but, I had a busy day. Tomorrow I'll update again!

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