

Time Can Be Still, But it is Also Loud

THE AIR AROUND Aminta feels moist and hot against her dry skin. The sun in its full capacity is visible to those on the ground, bright and full as it burns heat past the buildings that tower above the forest. She dips her toes into the rocking lake before her and leans back against the rocks. Her skin soaks up this treat from the universe, and she shuts her eyes, letting the air deflate from her lungs. *Peaceful*, she thinks to herself, in a way that feels comical. How a world on the brink of ruin and destruction could elicit such moments of tranquillity. It amused her.

She laughs, the sound of her voice echoing against the silence of the forest, dancing in between the stagnance of the leaves on the trees she mentally notes will probably be submerged in water within a year. Ilias would have clicked his teeth at her morbidity, probably nagged her for being so negative and told her to have some faith. It's been 387 days since his passing. Her chest still tightens when she thinks of him.

Aminta rubs the sweat off her brow and wiggles her toes. The water in this area is clear, almost completely transparent. She assumes that the Uppers wanted to adapt this area into a tourist attraction and had the rivers cleaned out for trash. It's fascinating what ambition and resources can do when profit is involved. How it is manufactured, implemented and conducted. How it can change lives. Save lives. Make lives. Destroy lives.

She tilts her head up and glares head on at the sun. She hasn't been able to do such a thing in ages, probably in the last few years. That's when the Uppers began constructing their new lives up in the sky with roads that kissed the trees and buildings that danced with the stars. It created a whole new form of light pollution she never knew could exist and only robbed those who still lived on the ground of actually getting to experience what was up above in its most natural state. Apartment complexes and office buildings, cafes, and theatres, basic fundamentals

of civilization inhabited the sky like martians. And while they lived their lives of carelessness and oblivion, those down below were left trying to learn, trying to adapt to a world that one day just might be under water.

Her stomach twists in a pit when a small tidal wave crashes between her legs, splashing the very bottom of her shorts. *I want to enjoy this view forever*, she thinks. *I want to be able to absorb the sun until I die*. But soon she will have to return to her base and prepare for her venture tomorrow. By the time Aminta reaches the hobble she calls home, the sun will have begun to descend and it will no longer be visible. She sits for a moment, pondering on whether she should stay longer and enjoy the luxury of nature's blaze and trek home at dark. It doesn't take her long to make a decision.

Aminta decides she will have both.

Taking a deep breath in, she brings her hands a few inches above her legs. Slowly, she rotates her hands clockwise and breathes gently through her nose. A light breeze brushes past her. Her stomach untwists and her eyes fall shut. "Freeze," she mumbles, keeping her hands steady and in motion.

When she opens her eyes, everything is still. The trees above her stay set in their motion, the water between her feet halting mid wave. The clouds that once idly glided through the sky freeze like a painting or photograph. The only noise Aminta can hear is the sound of her heart thumping in her chest.

With care, she dries her feet and sets up for her journey back home. The sun, bright and full, beats down on her neck as she stretches, a wave of serenity and guilt washing over her. The guilt never outdid the peace which made for her walks and moments of solace bearable. She ties the strings of her backpack across her stomach twice over and begins to make her way north.

She makes a mental note to reset the universe when she finishes making herself some dinner.

Aminta wasn't always so self-serving with her powers. She actually saw them as a gift that could restore balance in a world that held itself up on an anixs of unfairness and devastation. As a child, she used them to help a friend foresee a mark they were to get on a test or redo a moment that originally ended with embarrassment. Some people asked her to tell them when or how they would die, who they were going to end up being 20, 30, 50 years down the line. Others wanted her to help undo mistakes they made in the past. The older she got, the less she wanted to alter reality, feeling as if she was defying God and the wonders of the universe. It sent icks down her skin that made her want to find a scientist mad enough to rid her of this ability all together.

Then, Ilias was murdered. Though, that's not how the headlines recalled it. They referred to it as a "tragic accident" caused by a minor earthquake; the maintenance on the building's structural foundations had been delayed due to tax cuts that went towards rebuilding a society above ground that did not want to deal with the rapidly changing climate. The reporters identified it as an incident no one could have foreseen or prevented. Except, it could have been prevented by the Uppers and it could have been foreseen by Aminta.

By this point, she and Ilias were 22 and working as Op-ed interns. Their town was already 15% below the waterline and construction for the Upper neighbourhoods was well underway. They were lucky the apartment they shared hadn't been affected by the environmental disasters, and were thankful for it. On that day, Aminta had fallen ill and didn't go to work. She wished Ilias a good day, told him to be amazing and to watch out for water in the streets as he made his way towards the city. Two hours later, the building of their internship collapsed, with Ilias and over 60 employees, leaving no one but 4 survivors.

Ilias was not one of them.

Aminta didn't cry. She didn't scream. She didn't move.

She just sat on her couch, frozen in place as she watched the building fall over and over again.

Her first instinct was to undo it all. To reset the day and convince Ilias to stay home, to stay somewhere safe, to stay with her. But then, that would leave 55 other lives dead and separated from their own loved ones. She thought of trying to go back and make sure the repairs for the building were done, so that no one would be harmed. She thought of going back to when she and Ilias were 5 and they had first met.

Then Aminta felt anger, and this anger stayed buried deep inside her.

It ate her from the inside out. It became all she was. Until all she was left with was despair.

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Aminta rarely used her powers for anything anymore. If she did, it was to always go back. She didn't care about what the future had in store. She only yearned for what was implied by the past.

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"You cheated!"

"I did not," Ilias grinned as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. "You just suck."

With a scowl, Aminta threw her up her middle finger in annoyance, walking towards the park benches to take a sip of water. They were 15 and playing soccer. Aminta was trying to get to first string but hadn't made very good friends with any of the girls on the team, so she had no

one to practice with. Luckily for her, Ilias had been playing soccer since before he could speak and was someone who enjoyed her company enough to help her play.

“You’re so stiff. Soccer is kind of like dancing. You just have to let your body move with the rhythm of the ball.”

“Please, don’t make it sound so easy, it’s insulting.”

“Look,” Ilias walked over to Aminta, placing his hands on either side of her shoulders. He pushed on them, rolling them back to release the tension she was building up in her muscles. “It is *just* a game. All you’re doing is kicking a ball.”

“I know that.”

“So, chill out. You made the team. Now all you have to do is be awesome.”

Aminta groaned, falling to the floor with a cross of her legs. When Ilias noted how that’s the sort of movement she should be aiming for, she threw her ball at him. “Or, I could see whether or not I’m moving up and save myself all this time and bodily torture.”

Ilias laughed, ruffling Aminta’s hair with a tender roughness that felt like summer. “Now *that* is cheating.” She stuck her tongue out at him. He took a seat next to her, throwing an arm over her shoulder. “Besides, I thought using your powers made you feel icky.”

“Your arm sticking to my sweaty neck is making me feel icky.”

“You know you love me.”

They sit in silence for a moment, but with Ilias around, silence never lasted. He pushed Aminta down by her shoulders so they lay side by side, staring up at the clouds. The sky was clearer than usual, not a luxury to many who lived below, intense and blue. “Do you think all of this will be gone? When we’re old?”

Aminta didn't answer right away. She just shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe. I never thought to look. Kinda breeds eternal misery, you know?"

Ilias laughed, shoving her shoulder gently. "No, you crypto. I'm not asking if you've seen anything. I'm asking what you genuinely think. Do you think life down on natural surfaces will cease to exist?"

"I hope not," she paused, heart thumping in her ears before continuing, "Mom and dad think if we do, nothing down here can be changed. They can't be the only ones who think so."

Ilias hummed, pulling grass out from beneath him one at a time. Then he sat up. "Do you think it would be better? Living up there? Like, away from everything we've known?"

"I think it might be easier. Less major disasters to worry about ruining your life. Wouldn't exactly say it'd be better."

"Hmm," was all he said. He then got up, pulling Aminta with him. They ran across the field until dusk, when the sky became coal and the moon poked out and said hello.

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"This tastes amazing, Marina. Thank you for making it for us."

Marina grins brightly, knee bouncing in excitement. "Oh, of course! It was nothing, really. I used the berries we found out west to saute the fish. Thought it would be nice to eat like kings, you know? All things considered."

Daniel nods with a pat to her head and presses a gentle kiss to her temple. Marina blushes, but leans into his touch. Aminta just sits across the two, picking at her food. She thought the berries made the fish taste off and that it was undercooked, not that she would say anything. She knew that what they had or could get their hands on wasn't something she could really

complain over. It was either poorly cooked fish that came from polluted waters or tree bark and yellowing grass.

Aminta met Daniel and Marina 3 months ago, on a campsite of runaways looking to make an effort in prolonging the sea water levels however they could by living as anti-modernist as they possibly could. She'd heard about these groups before the storms got bad, before the accident, but also found them dangerous. Now, the unknown was the least of her fears.

Marina, just 21, was diagnosed with a fatal lung condition that she acquired from growing up next to a mining factory and was given until her 24th birthday to live. When she heard that the world was collapsing right in front of her, she felt hopeless just standing by while ruin happened around her. She knew she was going to pass at some point, that this was something she could not control or change. Daniel, just 23, has been by her side since they were toddlers – neighbours, like Aminta and Ilias once were. Aminta wasn't sure if they were in love or just close. She didn't think it important to ask.

“So,” Marina starts, resting her chin on Daniel's shoulder. “I was thinking we could move laundry day up from Sunday to tomorrow, since it might rain on Saturday. That way we'll have dry clothes!”

Daniel hums. Aminta nods.

“And then, we can spend the rainy days collecting fresh drinking water for cooking and for our hikes! Doesn't that sound exciting?”

Daniel hums. Aminta scoffs.

“What?”

When silence falls between them, curious eyes boring into Aminta, she clears her throat. “Oh, yes. *So* very thrilling, Marina.” The silence begins to sink deeper between the trio. Aminta feels warmth spread across her face, but she continues. “I just don’t see why all the enthusiasm.”

Marina tilts her head to the side, grin less wide but still visible. “Because, silly. We’re giving back! Making changes! We are saving the world.”

“Sure.”

“What do you mean, ‘sure’? These are things our ancestors did,” Marina takes the final bit of her fish with a deep sigh. “It’s like we’re time travellers, sent from the past to restore the future. Why doesn’t that make you feel good, Ams?”

Aminta laughs, short and sour. She puts her food down in front of her and pushes her hair behind her ears. Her chest feels heavy, but her gut twists with frustrations. With anger. “I hardly think rescheduling *laundry day* is grounds to claim we are ‘saving the world’,” she points above them, towards the buildings that tower around them like bars on a prison door. “You know what *they* are doing right now while you gush over getting to drink water that falls from the sky out of 5 week old bottles? *They* are spending their 5th million dollar on some expensive jet to fly them to the moon for when we are all neck deep in water that’s been flooded with feces and oils and urine. *They* are not giggling and grinning over spending countless hours in the wilderness because they think it will prevent us all from dying in a world that is going to collapse beneath our feet.”

Marina’s neck tightens. Aminta knows she is hurting her feelings, but she finds it hard to care. With a sharp sniff, Marina mumbles, “Well, at least I’m doing something! We can’t just sit here while horrible things are happening.”



Aminta scowls, her jaw setting as she snaps, “Watch me.” Sitting back, she picks at her fingers and forces her face to relax. “The state of the world is not my burden to bear. And it’s not yours either. The sooner you realise that, the sooner you’ll stop being disappointed.”

Daniel shifts uncomfortably, taking everyone’s plates and making his way over to the small pond that ripples softly by their campsite. Marina sits with her hands in her lap and with her bottom lip quivering slightly. Aminta only feels a little bad. The two don’t speak, just stare with emotion that makes the air feel hot and sticky that is different from its usual thickness of the rising temperature. Aminta knows she is being unfair, but she can’t help it. Her heart pangs when she sees a teardrop cascade down Marina’s cheek, but still, she sits there silently. Marina quickly wipes her face, rushing up with a mumbled, “I need some air”, which Aminta found incredibly ironic. Daniel tells her to return before nightfall.

*How does no one see what’s happening? She thinks. Why am I the only one who sees that nothing we do can undo what’s been done?*

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“You are not being fucking serious right now, Ilias.”

“I am. I really am, Nita. Think about all the possibilities that are out there.”

“Are you not reading the news? They are finding bodies of people who go on these exhibitions every other day. Cold, mamed, and *dead*.” Aminta’s chest scrunched with agony and rage. “You can’t seriously see any joy in going on one yourself.”

Ilias rested his head in her lap, drawing shapes into her skin. She could feel his heartbeat against her knee, rough, quick and steady. “Don’t you want to do something about all of this?”

“All of what?”

“*This*,” he threw his hands up and out, pointing towards her window. “You’re telling me you aren’t the least bit curious about what’s out there or if it can be saved?”

“Well, of course I’m curious but,” she paused a beat, wanting to choose her words carefully. “I don’t want it to change anything. We’re all going to cease to exist one day. Why make what we have left filled with sadness and disappointment? Plus...if *I* really wanted to know, I could find out. ‘Cause well, ya know.”

“I guess.” Ilias continued to draw his shapes. His eyebrows came forward as he thought. He only sits in silence for a moment before asking in a quiet voice, “Wouldn’t you feel responsible though?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, if we just sit around, and do nothing, while the planet is hurting...are we not responsible for its pain?”

Aminta’s fingers twirl themselves around Ilias’ hair. “Maybe, but what can we really do? We’re just two people.”

Ilias shrugged. A beat. Then a sigh. “I like to think two people are far better odds than no one at all.”

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Marina does not make it back before nightfall.

She does not make it back at all.

She tried to climb a tree to get a better look at the stars. A branch weak from lack of sun exposure broke beneath her and she cracked her skull.

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Ilias did not make it back home.

He did not make it back at all.

He tried evacuating an elderly woman from the building as the earthquake ravished the floorboards beneath them. The building gave out and began to fall and he cracked his skull.

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*Beauty can be woven in the ugliest of places, with the most unexpected materials.*

This is the first thing Aminta thinks when they find Marina. The sight of her body, still and dimming is alluring in a way that feels unnatural. In all the months Aminta knew Marina, stillness was not something she ever knew to be possible. Her arms lay above her head like she is a goddess, displaying her beauty. The blood that leaks from the back of her head forms around her in a circle, drawing a halo of red above her skull. Her eyes are still open, blue and soft and her lips are upturned every so slightly. The green beneath her is blinding, against the red, against her skin. It feels sickeningly purifying. It feels tantalising. It feels...peaceful.

Daniel is the first to walk away. Aminta stands still, but hears him retching and crying uneven sobs. They make her skin tighten, and she shivers— or is it the wind? After what feels like an eternity and back of standing and staring, she follows the sounds of Daniel's crying until she is standing above him. The rain starts slowly, drizzling down the leaves on the trees, cleansing the atmosphere of heat and anguish. Riding the nature of death and sadness from all around them.

Her tongue gets caught in her throat. Aminta struggles to form the words and takes a moment to let the air properly fill her lungs. "I'm—I'm so sorry. About Marina."

Daniel lets out a noise, something mixed between a sob and choke, and just shakes his head, his shoulders, his hands. He sits against her leg and screams in agony, his throat most likely raw with despair and anger. Aminta rests her hand against his hair and runs her fingers

through it in soft, gentle strokes that says she knows how he feels, that she sees his pain and that she's hurting with him. That she will hurt with him until he doesn't want to hurt anymore.

"I can," her voice is small when she speaks. "I can try to bring her back. So, that you can say goodbye or say how you feel or-or something." She crouches down to his level so that they are boring through each other's souls with their eyes. "I can bring her back to you. I can make this right."

"Nothing about this is right." Daniel's eyes are solemn. They are solemn and red and resemble a child who has just lost their favourite toy. And that is exactly what he is. He is a powerless child whose thoughts and feelings cannot change the world. Whose thoughts and feelings feed the joy of those who do not have to worry about losing their loved ones in the most wicked way. Who are able to hide behind a shelter of resources and wealth. "And nothing about this is your responsibility."

Aminta's stomach twists in guilt. Her skin flares in emotion she can't pinpoint. Her heart feels heavy. "She left because of me."

"Aminta..."

"But—"

"No! No! I do not want you to bring her—to undo her fate. I do not want that, do you understand?" When Aminta pulls her lips into a line, Daniel shoves her, rough and hard. "You aren't responsible for my Marina. You are not God, you do not take and give as you please. You aren't responsible."

Her jaw sets at his words. Frustration bubbles in her chest as she screams, "The fuck I'm not! Do you not see what's happening? We are dying! We are being hunted by the universe, by those fucking sociopaths in the sky who are watching us burn and starve and drown while they

sip on Mai Tais and feast on gold. While they get to live and let live because they have power up and away from danger while those down here are targets. *You* may not be responsible for this but I am because I can change it! I have a gift that can fix all of this and I'm not using it!"

"You are not God, Ami."

"I'm the closest damn thing to Him!"

"But you are not!" Daniel pushes her again, causing her to trip on a branch and fall on her back side. He trudges towards her, face screwed up in sadness and rage as he shoves her shoulders into the wet grass. The rain hits them harder as he shouts, "Are you thick? You are *not* responsible for this! For any of it. You know who's responsible for this? The fucks in the sky who feast on gold! The ones who hunt and let be hunted. The people who can do more than switch to biodegradable detergents and who cut back on their dairy intake. Is it shitty that you have this power and use it selfishly sometimes? Yes. It really fucking is. But *you are not God*. You can't be the only person with an amazing gift that can change the world that refuses to use it. So, stop your whining. Stop your pouting. Stop your self-pitying bullshit and shut the hell up. You are no more responsible for any of this than me."

Aminta's eyes burn with anger and with sadness but she does not speak. She stares into Daniel and searches for an answer for how, an answer that will explain why, but all she sees is a human being who is just as lost as she is. She curls her hands into his wrists and lets out a breath that is shallow and raw. A tear escapes past the brim of her lashes and slides down into the grass like it is a drop of rain; like she is crying along with the sky.

"I know it hurts," Daniel continues. "I know it's easy to take that hurt and craft it into rage. Believe me, I am enraged. I want to take all my anger and destroy mountains with it. But that won't bring Marina back...it won't bring Ilias back."

Aminta's chest gives out and a sob creeps up her throat. She squeezes her eyes shut.

"Aminta," Daniel says just above a whisper. "The world may seem cruel, but that does not mean it is unkind."

The tears stream down her face and become one with the rain.

Aminta cries along with the sky.

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After the burial, they part ways. Daniel is not ready to return back home, but he is not ready to stay at their campsite either. He tells Aminta he does not know what he wants with Marina, that he needs to figure it out on his own. She hesitates to give him advice of her own, to tell him about Ilias and how she felt. But even then she didn't know. All she did was give him a hug, a kiss and told him they would find each other again when the moment was right. Then she was alone again. Alone and angry.

She sat with this anger for days. She stirred in her sleep and found her brain pounding against her skull with a rage she couldn't subside. Aminta wanted to scream. She wanted to go back. She wanted to see Marina again. She wanted to see him. She needed to. But what would that solve? Who would that help? They'd still be gone. They always will be. And Aminta would still be alone.

She sits under the tree Marina passed under for over a week and thinks. She sits and thinks and is angry and alone. She glances towards the sky, sun peeking through the buildings and the trees. Marina would have grinned and danced in it. Ilias would have suggested they go sunbathing. Her throat feels tight. She follows the beams of light around her, exhaustion washing over her. The sun's beams shine obnoxiously over the water to her left, the grass beneath her

fingers and on the bark on the trees, like a spotlight in a theatre. Aminta follows each one and admires how it highlights the colour, the life in everything around her.

Her eyes rest on a flower, one she is unfamiliar with and looks to it with a desire she doesn't fully comprehend. A part of her wants to pick it up and twirl it in her fingers, another wants to tear it apart and destroy it. She thinks of Ilias and feels her throat close. Tears well in her eyes when she thinks of his laugh, how he'd scold her morbidity and encourage her to just admire it. She thinks of how much curiosity filled his body like they were cells and how he always saw the brighter side of a dark situation. She thinks of his death and how she felt angry and how that anger festered into resentment. She thinks of his passion, how he saw the cruelty in the world and how he was determined to change it. She thinks of dreams of touching the sun and dancing with the stars, of living to be 103 and living in the forest. She thinks of what he would think of her now, how he probably wouldn't recognise her. How disappointed he would be.

A sob creeps up her throat. She does nothing to stop it, exhaustion turning into desolation. The world around her feels still, but it is not her doing. The water is still ripping and the trees are still waving but she is frozen – she likes the movement, the noise, the activity. *Peaceful*, she thinks to herself. *How a world on the brink of ruin and destruction could elicit such moments of tranquillity.*

She never wants it to stop.

**THE END.**