

Azure's eyes bolted open as she finally came around. For a moment, all she could see was utter darkness. Her mind and body were far more concerned with the acceleration of her heart rate than anything else. It took her a good few minutes to come back to herself and remember what had happened.

What had happened? What happened with the storm? What happened to the Dome? Where was she? For a fleeting moment, Azure questioned her memories and existence. Was this the culmination of her journey of life? Had her life's journey led her to this ethereal void? She closed her eyes, trying to recollect the events that had brought her here, but her memories remained fragmented and weak, like wisps of smoke fading into nothingness.

The questions spiralled around her head, almost pounding her mind with pain. She breathed in a deep breath, trying her very best to calm herself down as she ran her fingers through her hair. But as her fingers followed her hair, she realised it was floating above her. She was floating in the air. What? Was she upside down? Her eyes were open, but everything was dark around her. Then again, that very well could've been as a result of whatever caused her to pass out. Or get knocked out. She still couldn't quite piece together what had happened. But a peculiar sensation enveloped her. She felt weightless, as if she were floating through the ether, carried by some unseen force. Panic surged through her as she assumed she had met her end, and her spirit was now adrift in the afterlife. The gentle caress of wind against her skin only heightened her disorientation, making her wonder if she had transcended into some mystical realm.

As she continued to follow her hair, she realised that her heart rate had lowered dramatically. Her breathing became much easier, as she just allowed herself to float in the air. Whatever had happened to her, she didn't want to fight it. She just wanted to enjoy how quiet her mind was. It was too much to figure out in that exact moment. She felt the air lift her up, allowing the wind to just take her wherever it intended it to. For the first time in a long time, Azure just allowed something else to take control. And she enjoyed it. The stress and trauma of the storm and having to take care of everything and everyone had very much taken its toll on her. So she somehow found solace in not knowing where she was or what was going on. All she could feel was the softness of the wind, pulling her gently and swaying her from one place to the next. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to feel at one with *real* nature, finally.

As she floated, a sense of serenity began to wash over her. The air felt pure and cool, and a distant warmth seemed to envelop her. As the seconds turned into minutes, she began to realise the distant warmth was, in fact, more than what she thought. Slowly, she opened her eyes once more

She exhaled deeply, overwhelmed with all the questions she had rushing around her mind, only to see the glimmering light of a sun ray glistening on her hands. And then it hit her.

She wasn't floating in the air.

She was floating in water.

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As she watched the light glisten in the waters, it looked as if the light itself was seeping into Max's hand, somehow conjoining the glow from his body with that of the ball. As if they were somehow connected.

Max held his gaze firmly on the ball, unable to take his eyes off it. As Azure edged closer to see what was inside of it, she found her eyes searching manically for a sign. She had some extremely, if not life saving, information from the last time the ball glowed. Would this time be the same?

As the two of them looked into the gleaming, warm light, a figure suddenly appeared into the ball. At first glance, it was difficult to make out who it was. They looked young, had good posture. The outline of the face suggested it was male. Slowly, long dark hair was uncovered, as the face showed up clearly, facing the brother and sister.

Azure's brows furrowed as her jaw dropped in shock. She knew that face. She knew that face very well.

"Malyk?" she uttered under her breath.

No, it couldn't be. Could it? He was alive?

She placed a hand on the ball and looked closer.

It was definitely him. That empty stare in his eyes, his pale skin radiating nothing at all.

His hair looked as if it was blowing in some sort of wind. Where was he? He paced backwards and forwards slowly, appearing as though he was catching his breath. Suddenly as he became smaller and his background became bigger, Azure could see that he was in some sort of cave.

How did he survive? And how did he get to the cave? Where was the cave? Did he have powers too?

Before she could even process the questions, the others had seen the light from the ball and had swam over as fast as they could.

"Wow, what is that? Is that Malyk?!" asked Lucas.

"Yeah," Azure replied softly, still confused.

"Where is he? That looks as if he's out of the water, right?" Nadia added.

As they all watched their arch nemesis, Max suddenly started glowing even stronger than before, the light from the crystal ball seemingly having fled into his entire body until it came out of his eyes.

"Max?" Azure shouted in worry, grabbing hold of him. "Max? Can you hear me?"

"What's happened to him?" Cora asked.

"I...I...I don't know. His hand was sort of connected to the light from the ball, then all of a sudden the light just grew to be a part of him!" she replied, tears in her eyes and a lump in her throat.

Her main concern had always been to look after her little brother. She felt her chest tighten with panic, having no clue whatsoever as to what was going on.

Out of nowhere, the light snapped itself out of Max, as his whole body returned to his natural state. He looked around wide-eyed at everyone, feeling in shock.

"Wow, what was that place?" he asked in awe.

"Max, where was where, buddy?" Azure asked as she gently placed her hands on his cheek. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but there was this...place. It had some water crashing around it. Like a big rock."

“A cave?” Azure jumped. “You went to a cave?”

“Yeah. Like the place you saw in the ball. The boy with the dark hair, Malyk, he’s there.”

Everyone looked at each other in shock. He was in a cave? How did he survive the storm?

“Max, honey, was anyone else with him?” Azure added, trying to get as much information as she could out of him.

“Yeah. A whole community. Just like the Dome.”

“What?” his sister added. Nadia swam in closer to them both.

“Maybe Max is a bit confused. We should probably leave him for a bit to really process what he saw...or thought he saw,” she reassured.

“But...no,” Max said, seemingly confused as to why she had announced that. There was a stern tone to his voice as he continued, one of confidence. “There’s a community of people. They lived just like us, except it’s much darker. There’s a lot of them there. I didn’t know anyone.”

“Wait, did that magic ball take you somewhere?” Lucas added.

“Yes. Sort of. It’s weird. My body was here, but I could see somewhere else.”

“You lit up, Max. You and the ball seemed to have a connection,” Nadia explained.

“We have to look into that. But what else did you see, Max?”

All of a sudden, tears began to fill up Max’s eyes. With his bottom lip trembling and his sister’s hand holding his, he struggled to get the words out.

“I think they’re coming after us.”