

Oranges

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They were close. The remaining daylight penetrating the forest's canopy was too inadequate for Javier to see the bright fruits themselves, but he thought he could make out the silhouettes of their bushy and creeping trees in the dimness.

The night was still. This jungle had once been known as *la selva amazonica*, the "the Amazon jungle of rain," as best as he could translate it. There used to be a constant exchange of water, pouring from the sky and flooding down the tree trunks onto layers lush vegetation, into pools, and down streams and rivers. This hydration had been celebrated by chirping insects and animals. Now, much of the former rainforest was known as *las tierras quemadas*, the "scorched lands." Excessive deforestation had led to miles upon miles of dead and decaying stumps stretched as far as the eye could see. The forest had been losing its ability to keep up with replenishing itself, Mother Nature had scrambling and failing to rebalance the decimated ecosystem. Without the world being able to depend on South America's abundance of trees to regulate global oxygen and moisture levels, temperatures around the world had skyrocketed. Water was becoming more and more scarce and rain more infrequent. High temperatures, low water, and a shrinking plant presence all contributed to the slow erosion of land, and parched valleys now crawled across the South American continent. Grasslands had been left cracked and dry. The land was choking on itself.

This was the absolute worst place to be in the world, especially since the *guerras de lluvia*, the "rain wars." Countries had fought to keep depleting their natural resources to themselves, notably the drinkable variety. Most nations had been left with crippled defense forces, or *ejército*, and entire continent was only about a third as populated as it had been seventy-five years ago. Now, nation kept their borders weakly by whatever displays of force their leftover militaries could muster, though the lines were really more like blurry and subjective boundaries. Coupled with the reality of the increasingly harsh landscape, it was unlikely that some countries would ever stand as cohesive nations again.

Brazil had come out the strongest of the South American countries. It had been home to the vast majority of the rainforest, and it would be the last country to see it go. Brazil still had the largest economy, population, and *ejército* on the continent. Truthfully, it was the only country where the *ejército* presence remained remotely strong at all. Its

citizens, what ones remained at least, lived in relative safety within its borders, provided they caused no trouble.

But nobody wanted to go to Brazil.

If you were fortunate enough to be executed at the border, you were hung as a warning for future would-be migrants. If border police caught you as an illegal guest—or worse, as a foreign thief—there was almost no telling how much agony would be a part of your fate. Entire supply chains had been rocked when one or two links in the chains had found themselves under the hospitality of the Brazilian authorities.

The militancy didn't stop at the border. The forest was filled with drones, traps, and patrols. They always took you alive, if they could. To the rest of the world, you were as good as dead. To yourself, it was better if you could accept that, too. From what it sounded like from the stories Havier had heard, most people didn't even try to survive. Just the opposite, in fact.

This would be the last time Havier would ever take such a risk.

A wind rustled through the trees in front of him. He lifted his chin to breathe in the oncoming fragrance of the oranges. Few recognized the nostril-tingling scent anymore, but Havier had smelled them once or twice when he was a boy. This time, he almost swayed with tantalizing expectancy. He took extreme care and stepped out from behind the bush.

The smell of mandas, he thought with anticipation. *Lots of mandas*. A bagful of oranges would fetch a healthy black market profit of *mandas*, or ration chips. The chips were as good as currency—one could exchange them for fruit, meat, toothpaste, or any other basic necessity. When the ration program had been new, the old money that had belonged to Chileans like himself had had to be brought to government centres for exchange into *mandas*. Electronic assets had been frozen overnight. Havier had stood in line for close to a week at the bank to get the paperwork for his accounts, and then for another three days at the nearest government centre to get his bank deposits exchanged into *mandas*. The queues were unbearable everywhere, and some people were denied any exchange at all if they didn't have their proper papers. Schools were closed as teachers were all trying to salvage their own financial welfare. Businesses were shut down. People starved or were evicted. It was chaos.

Havier thought with a twisted fondness of those brief days. He'd had money at the time, even what he'd considered enough of it, converted from his bank accounts and cash reserves. He had been scared, of course, but so was everyone in those days. The black market emerged quickly, and Havier got involved in conservative trades where he could. He

immediately found a preference for spices, which could be stored in small packages, easily transported and hidden, sealed against smell, and discarded if necessary. For the first nine months, he was confident that he'd be able to bring in enough money from his black market dealings and be able to draw on his reserves when necessary to take care of his family. That first Christmas, he'd even dared to spend on a soft kicking ball and a pair of beautiful cloth dolls for his three children.

In April of that next year, his youngest, Mayra, had taken seriously ill with a sickness that left her lungs feeling like they were drowning in fluid long after her initial recovery. Those times had driven Havier to desperation. He'd found a vendor of the medication, but it had cost him everything he'd converted from before the rations program—and then some. Havier had taken many, many risks.

Since those dark days, this job in the Brazilian rainforest was by far the riskiest one he had undertaken. It was to be his last one of that sort. The heart of this forest was still home to rare and dying fruit species and a host of other things that could fetch a healthy return on the black market. Coffee had gone out last year, and Havier remembered that the rainforest had become a bloodbath. A few lucky poachers got rich, but the vast majority were caught, were hung, were slaughtered, until the coffee trees were no more. Poachers even turned on each other to avoid the worse fate. Havier knew what it was like to feel that desperate. Had Mayra's sickness been five years later than it was, he likely would have contributed to the bloodbath with his own veins. But the oranges he fetched today could be his ticket to a year's worth of spice inventory, and he might finally be able to pull his family out of the hole they had been living in.

And Brazil was where the oranges lived. That had brought Havier on the a six-week journey out of the Chilean mountains to the Brazilian forest, so close to the orange trees he could almost taste the zest in the air.

A guttural chirping sounded above him, followed by a hacking sound. He stopped, looked up, and listened. A rustle on a low-hanging branch in front of him followed. Some sort of creature. He took another step out from behind the brush, tuning his consciousness to a heightened awareness of the noises around him and the noises he created as he made his way out of the leaves. He stopped again and listened—especially for evidence of another human or few. The *ejército* always moved in packs. He knew that even though he couldn't see them, the place would be crawling with them.

He heard a faint rustle on the ground to his right and crouched low behind the brush again. His heart pounded. He turned his head carefully. In the dimness, he could

not detect any movement. He breathed in slowly and deeply to quiet the pounding in his ears so that he could listen.

The rustle stopped. It had likely been a snake, one of the few creatures that still remained in abundance. Havier breathed a silent exhale of relief. It was not the military, the *ejército*.

His hand rested on a thin trunk beside him, its bark smooth and ridged. His eyes focused on the tree under his hand. Havier thought he could recognize the spotted patterns of the trunk. It was something he had harvested before. He knelt down and searched the ground. His hand came across a smooth, fallen piece of bark, too smooth to be part of most common branches. He sniffed it. Cinnamon.

Havier tucked the small stick into the pouch on his waist and withdrew a small knife to carve off a larger section of trunk. The bark was tough, though, and rather than risking damaging his knife, he tucked it back into his boot and knelt down to scan the ground for more fallen sticks, putting his face very close to the undergrowth. Even in the darkness, he found a half dozen sections of the reddish bark.

He reached for one of them, his foot moving a branch behind him, and suddenly, he heard a soft *click*. It had been extremely faint, and Havier would not have heard it had his ear not been so near to the ground. He froze. His hand was still reaching for the cinnamon stick.

He had to get out. Now.

He scrambled to his feet, but an instant later, his face and arms slammed into the ground again. Then he was rising, higher and higher, whooshing through the air until he was suspended in mid air. He was dangling from a tree by his left ankle, a good twenty feet off the ground, facing the forest in front of him that he hadn't yet explored.

His heart was racing and he was panting. His head pounded from the sudden impact mixed with the rush of blood. His eyes strained to see, but his vision had gone blurry, and night was completely on the forest now. He squinted, blinked, and tried to readjust his focus in the blackness.

Less than six feet away, two blurry figures emerged from the trees and came through a thick tangle of bushes. Havier couldn't make out their faces, but the guns they carried were obvious despite his pulsating eyesight. Assault rifles. Military.

With a soft *pad*, the cinnamon stick fell from his pouch, landing on some of the last of the world's forest floor beneath him. Havier's vision began to clear as the men emerged stopped beneath him, shouting instructions to one another and pointing their rifles. From

his elevated position, Havier could see the bulbous, round fruit in the trees they had just cleared.

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