

it's easier if you close your eyes

*Flies - On -
Paper - Wings*



Ashli Xenos

Flies-On-Paper-Wings

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Book Cover by Ashli Xenos

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*To any teenager who has spent too much time in hospitals and waiting rooms.
It won't always hurt this much.*

TWO MINUTES AFTER

I CLOSE MY EYES and flinch at the spark of lime light waiting for me in the dark.

Rain plasters my hair to my head and neck and makes the dollar store dye—or was this the drug store stuff?—run down my face like coloured tears. To be honest, it's a pretty good metaphor for the world outside my eyelids. A cheap, temporary rebellion that didn't stick like it was supposed to.

If I open my eyes—not that I want to—I'll see a road stretching out in both directions, highway lights reflecting off the water on the asphalt and lighting up the shadow cast by the building behind me.

I don't want to look. I don't want to see the body on the side of the road that used to be a person. A colour-splattered, dancing girl who carried feathers in her pockets. It's harder to imagine her that way now that I've seen her as a corpse.

“Fuck—” Dances takes my hand then lets go of it again when she realizes how bloody it is. “C'mon, Wings, we gotta go. And for fuck's sake, wipe the blood off your hands.”

I guess I can't keep my eyes closed forever. A car whooshes by and the headlights white-wash the blood soaking into the grass and the water alike. It makes the glassy eyes of the body glow. My stomach twists at the sight.

To an outsider, maybe it would make sense to run out onto the road and wave my arms for help. At least try. But it's raining and I'm looking at the dripping dye, bloodied hands, lights reflecting off the road world through

my eyes. And from that perspective, it's easy to wipe the blood off on the grass and follow Dances into the forest lining the highway, leaving the body behind.

TEN WEEKS BEFORE

MY CORNER OF THE art room is abnormally colourless. No paints or pastels. Just a large white sheet of paper with beige masking tape covering different-shaped pieces of origami pressed flat to the paper. If you squint, maybe you could see some of the brighter origami paper peeking through.

I painstakingly run an exacto-knife around the edges of the paper crane, peeling away bits of tape. The bell rings before I can finish.

Sighing, I gather up my supplies, spare origami balanced carefully on top of the paper, and wait as other students flock to the storage cubbies in pairs or small groups. I almost bump into Olivia as she leaves. We make awkward eye contact for too long.

I've about worked up the nerve to say something, apologize for what my dads did, but she gives me this terribly pitying smile, pinched at the edges, and hurries away to join her friends as they leave.

Sulking out of the art room and trying to not cringe outwardly, I drop my books in my locker and head out for the day. I shove my hands in my pockets, fingers brushing a carefully folded paper crane. It was supposed to be a peace offering.

As I walk, I pull out the crane and unfold the wings.

I'm pointedly staring at the sidewalk when I walk outside, so I see the shadow before I notice the person casting it.

"I like your bird."

I look up.

A smiling girl with a patch-covered jacket and no backpack stands in front of me. “It’s a crane, right? Did you make it?”

I don’t remember her name—if I ever knew it. D-something? But I’ve certainly heard about her. Some things more far-fetched than others. Skipped more classes than she’s been to this year? Probably an understatement. Changed every light in the gym to a different colour for a “grad prank” when she wasn’t even graduating? I don’t know how she did it, but I saw the rainbow lights. Hacked into the school’s system to only sign herself up for electives? Unlikely. Breaks into abandoned buildings to throw parties? I’d chalk that up to rumor, too, except that’s the only story everyone can agree on.

In short, I have no idea why she would be talking to me.

“Uh, yeah. I mean, thanks. But yes, I did make it.”

“Cool.”

She waits patiently. For me to say something, I guess?

“I, um, I like your hair.” Her box braids have streaks of bubble-gum pink and cotton candy blue mixed in with the black. “I’ve always wanted to dye mine.”

“Well, I do my own. I’d be happy to do yours. We can trade.”

“Trade?”

“Sure! I’d love to know how you turn a square of paper into a whole bird. Are you free tonight?”

I stammer a lot of nothing. I’ve seen her with a rotating group of countless friends. Why she’d be talking to me of all people—let alone asking to hang out—is beyond me. “I don’t even know your name,” I manage to get out.

Unphased, she holds out her hand confidently. “Dances-In-The-Streets.”

“Dances-In-The-Streets?” I frown, but still take her outstretched hand and shake it.

“You can call me Dances for short.” She grins and leans back casually, hands in her pockets. “If you want.”

My phone buzzes. I shift my bag so I can’t feel it. “Do you really?”

Dances tilts her head to the side, braids shifting with the movement. “Do I really what?”

“Dance—” My phone goes off again, twice back-to-back. “Dance in the streets.”

She throws her head back laughing. The sound cascades over the droning voices of students leaving or the day and sends a chill through me. “If there’s music, sure. But I dance other places, too.”

Toying with the tail of the paper crane, I hesitantly smile. “Right.”

“So, now that you know my name, what do you say?” Dances reaches out and flicks a paper wing. “I’ll help you dye your hair if you teach me how to make those.”

Before I can answer, my phone goes off again.

Sighing, I dig my phone out of my bag. Messages crowd the screen.

Are you on the bus yet?

Is the bus late?

I just checked, it says it’s on time.

Hello?? Raina??

Dances nods to my phone. “D’you need to answer that?”

“No, I—” My phone rings, Dad’s face boring a hole through me through the screen. Swallowing hard and turning away so Dances can’t see my face turn red, I pick up. “Hi, Dad.”

“What’s going on?” Dad’s voice comes through near-frantic. “Why weren’t you answering me?”

“I was talking to someone.” I glance over my shoulder at Dances, then cross my free arm over my chest. “I figured I could catch the next bus if I missed it.”

“That’s all well and good, but you didn’t think to tell me?”

“It was two minutes,” I mutter.

“Who are you talking to anyway? Did Olivia reach back out?”

“No, it’s someone new.”

“Name?”

“Um...” I glance back at Dances.

She shrugs. “Whatever you like. I’ve had a few now.”

“Danni,” I blurt out, trying not to cringe at the fact that if she heard that, she heard everything else, too. “She saw my origami project in art class and wanted me to show her how to do it.”

Not quite true, but I’m not about to tell Dad the girl who’s known for skipping classes and throwing very unsupervised parties decided to randomly talk to me.

“Anyway, I was about to call you and ask if I could go over to her house. I’ll be back before curfew.”

Dad sighs on the other end of the call. “And whereabouts is this?”

“I don’t know—”

“You don’t know? You want to go over to someone house and you don’t even know where she’s taking you?”

I wish I could curl up into a ball. “I was going to ask. I’ll text you the address before we leave.”

Dad grumbles. “You know your Papa and I like more notice than this, especially for someone new.”

“Please? I’ll, I’ll come home an hour before curfew if that will make you feel better.”

There’s muffled conversation as Dad presumably debates this with Papa, but eventually he says, “Fine. But I’ll be checking in every hour and you better respond.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Don’t have too much fun. Love you.”

“Love you, too...” I hang up and turn to face Dances, bracing myself for to tell me she’s changed her mind after all that.

Instead, she gives me a questioning thumbs up. “So, we’re all good then?”

“Uh,” I blink, then give my head a shake, “uh, yeah, we are. Just let me know your address so I can text my dads.”

Dances gives me her address, weaves through the crowd and walks down the street, hands in her pockets. “My place isn’t far. We can pick up dye and paper on the way.”

Typing as I follow her, I send the message and slip my phone back in my bag before Dad can respond.

“Who’s Olivia? A friend?”

“Oh. No, not really. Or... not lately, at least.”

Dances gives me another questioning tilt of her head, but just grins again. “I have good timing, then.”

A nervous laugh bubbles out of me. “I guess. By the way, I’m—”

“Ah!” Dances clamps a hand over my mouth with another grin. “Don’t worry about that, we’ll sort the name out later.”

I frown, but her smile sends another chill through me and I find myself grinning back anyways, pocketing my paper crane. “Okay...”

Dances takes my now empty hand, “C’mon,” and takes off running down the street, pulling me along behind her, our feet slapping the pavement.

We stop at a dollar store in a strip mall a few blocks from the school. I manage to find some square paper—primary colours clearly meant for children, but it'll work. When faced with a shelf of hair dye, I scan the boxes before hesitantly picking a lime green.

Dances insists on paying and then leads me down an alley to an apartment building a few streets away.

“Are your parents home?” I ask on the elevator ride up.

“I live with a friend actually, but she's away right now.”

“You guys live on your own? Already?”

“She's a few years older, big girl job and everything.”

“Wow,” I say after several seconds, beyond confused—shocked, even—how I managed to end up attracting the attention of someone so cool.

Dances gives me a playful nudge. “No one to crash our origami lesson.”

I don't have much time to conjure up what such an apartment might look like, but it's even better than I was imagining. One wall is entirely covered in vinyls, from probably vintage black to modern clear, tie-die, baby blue and pale pink. Strings of fairy lights wrap up lamps and hang between lights. A takeout container and a few dishes sit near the sink and a hoodie lies in a pile on top of some high-tops near the couch, but it's a comfortable mess.

“Make yourself at home,” Dances says as she sets the bag down on the small island in the kitchen and pats the stool next to her.

Excitement quickly becomes nervousness, but I try my best to hide it as I sit down.

“So!” Dances dramatically slams the packet of paper down in front of us. “How does one make a paper crane?”

I walk Dances through the steps, familiar folds taking on a clunky quality. She watches me and listens attentively. Genuinely, like she really cares. It's uncomfortable, but at the same time I don't want it to stop. I try and play it cool, internally hounding myself not to mess this up. I do my best

not to cringe when Dad texts me to check in for the first time and respond quickly before practically throwing my phone back in my bag.

It takes a couple of attempts before Dances manages to make a successful crane. She holds it up for me to see with a smile. “What do you think?”

The red bird is messy, its creases not very sharp and far from symmetrical. I nod probably too enthusiastically. “It looks great.”

Dances gives me a knowing tilt of her head, still smiling, but softer. “I’m not going to run out on you because you tell me my crane’s tail is crooked.”

“The wings are lopsided, too,” I say before I can stop myself, then feel my face heat and press my lips together like I could take the words back.

“Huh?” Dances turns the crane to face her, considers it for a moment, then laughs. “Oh wow, you weren’t kidding.”

Her laugh must be magic because soon I’m laughing, too. “No, I really wasn’t.” As we settle down, I find myself relaxing.

With a sigh, Dances sets the crane down next to mine. “I promise I’m much better with hair dye than paper.” She reaches for the box of dye, turning to me and drumming her fingers on the sides eagerly. “Shall we?”

I shrink, nerves tickling my stomach for a different reason. “I... I guess.”

“You guess?”

“I just,” I shrink further, “I don’t think my dads will be very happy about it.” As if on cue, my phone dings again. I scowl as I dig my phone out and respond.

Still doing okay?

Yes.

Just yes?

I look up at Dances. She reaches out and flicks the ends of my hair. “I know you’ll look great.”

We’re watching a movie. Could you hold off for a couple hours?

Text me when it’s done.

Taking a breath, I turn my phone to silent, pointedly put it face down on the counter and give Dances a conspiratorial smile. “Let’s do it.”

Dances beams, dancing in her seat before bounding up and dragging me to the bathroom.

When she pulls out the box of bleach, my resolve falters, just a little. “Maybe—Maybe just start small?”

“Totally.” Dances runs her fingers through my hair, which sends chills through me, and sections off a small strip near the front of my head on the right side. “How’s that?”

I nod.

Dances cracks the window and turns the fan to high then mixes the bleach. It stings my nose and makes my scalp tingle when Dances paints it on. She expertly brushes the chemicals on then folds the strip up in a section of foil. Putting a towel around my neck, she leads me out of the bathroom and plops me down on the couch. “Should be good to go in about forty-five minutes.”

I notice a map spread out on the table, along with a journal with rough drawings of dance moves next to song lyrics. Choreography? The journal feels too personal, but the map has a several locations circled, others scribbled out. “What’s the map?”

Dance gives it a quick glance, before winking. “Just something I like to do for fun.” The words sound like an inside joke, but I can’t bring myself to admit I’m not in on it and ask what it means.

“Oh. Cool.”

“It is cool.” Dances folds up the map then turns back to me with that same genuine look from before. “I’ve seen you hanging around the art classroom. What kind of art do you do?”

Time flies as I talk, Dances asking questions about my latest projects and then grabbing the journal to show me a dance she’s working on when I’m done. We repeat the same process with the dye and before long Dances is washing it out. She even gives my hair a blow-dry.

Dances covers my eyes as I turn to face the mirror before pulling her hands away. “Ta-da!”

I stare at the bright green strip of hair in the mirror, almost not believing it’s on my head. I run my fingers through it, the hair a bit coarser than the strands around it.

I must be making the wrong face because when Dances asks, “Do you like it?” there’s just the smallest hint of hesitation.

Slowly smiling at my reflection, I nod. “It looks great. Better than great. I love it.”

Dances squeals and wraps her arms around my shoulders from behind, bouncing up and down “I’m so glad.” She catches my gaze in the mirror. “It suits you.”

I turn my head to get another look at the new colour with a slightly more nervous smile. “My dads are gonna kill me.”

Another chill passes through me as Dances squeezes my shoulder and says, “Don’t worry too much, I’ll be here to resurrect you.”

EIGHT WEEKS BEFORE

ONCE I'M ALLOWED OUT of the house again, Dances is waiting for me. Even if I have to make up a story about Dances and I being assigned to a group project to convince my dads to let me see her again.

I spend more nights at her house than mine and for the first time in a long time, the time spent with someone else outweighs my time spent alone. When the dye begins to fade, I let Dances talk me into adding a few new streaks.

I check my phone, eyeing the time. "You're sure you'll be able to get this done before my curfew?"

"Totally." Dances gives me a sympathetic look. "That curfew really puts a damper on things, huh?"

I scoff. "You're telling me."

"You ever thought about, you know," Dances mimes walking away with two of her fingers, "sneaking away in the night?"

"Of course, I've thought about sneaking out, but that's not an option unless I suddenly become James Bond. Besides this," I gesture to the bleached section of hair Dances is dyeing lime, "already pissed them off enough the first time."

Dances chuckles and dips the fan-shaped brush in more dye before painting more onto my hair.

"I can't even tell what's worse: that they think the world is out to get me, or that I'm so fragile I need to walk around bubbled-wrapped." It's only today I finally persuaded them Dances wasn't going to kidnap me and

they stopped with the hourly check-ins. “And they have such a shitty track record with my friends I was just about ready to give up on having any, especially after—” I cut myself off. No matter how good a listener Dances is, I still have no desire to talk about the mess with Olivia.

Dances gives me a questioning tilt of her head.

I sigh and rest my cheek in my hand, simply saying, “Between them and being in and out of hospitals from grades three to ten, it really puts a damper on the whole making friends thing.”

“Hospitals?”

“You don’t know?” Dances shakes her head. “Oh. I kind of thought the whole school knew at this point.” My leg starts to bounce. I normally wouldn’t talk about it if someone didn’t know, but a faint chill runs through me and words come out. “I got sick as a kid and it kind of... didn’t go away. For years. I spent more time in doctors’ offices and waiting rooms than I did with people my age.”

After a moment of silence, Dances says gently, “Can I ask what was—Or, I guess, is wrong? If you’re comfortable saying.”

“Um...” I wring my hands as I consider whether or not to answer, but eventually say, “We don’t fully know. Not all of it at least. I have fibromyalgia. It’s a chronic pain thing,” I add at Dances’ blank stare. “And then some kind of auto-immune disorder, but we don’t know what specifically.”

“Even after all that?”

“After a while, figuring out what was wrong became less important than just figuring out a way to deal with it.” What I don’t say is that it got to a point where the physical toll of having panic attacks before every appointment was too much to keep trying when we weren’t getting any answers.

Dances nods thoughtfully, like she’s just put something together and says, “Not much of a childhood or... teenage-hood then.”

“No.”

“And hence the helicopter parents.”

“Yup.” I rub my legs, pain mostly phantom. “It’s not... gone, but it’s under control now. But my dads still seem determined to suck out any fun I might possibly be able to get from high school. I’ll be going to university next year and I’ve barely been out past sunset alone.”

“All the best things do happen after dark.”

“Exactly! And I’m never going to see any of it! I’m going to be stuck waiting until I move out to do anything fun and by then I’ll have to adult and there’ll be no time for that.”

“What about when you’re in collage?”

“No way I can afford to go anywhere but here.”

“You’ll at least be able to make some new friends though, right?”

Wringing my hands again, I shrug. “I don’t know. Making friends isn’t the problem, it’s keeping them. I’m always the one who gets left behind.”

Dances slows her work until she stops, looking uncharacteristically somber. “I know the feeling.”

I can’t help but laugh a little. “You?”

“You’d be surprised.” Dances taps her finger on the brush, the only sound other than the bathroom fan—a poor attempt to keep the chemical smell of dye from becoming too overwhelming. “What if I could get you out?”

“Huh?”

“Of your house. If I could James Bond you out, would you sneak out with me tonight?” She bites her lip, looking off to the side, thinking for a moment. “It’s a bit fast, but there’s someplace special I want to take you.”

I pass her the next chunk of hair. “If only.”

Dances brightens in a way I haven’t seen before, filled with sudden electricity. “I mean it—Oh, you’ll need a name.” She considers a crane sitting on the bathroom sink. One I made for her out of pale purple paper with pink and blue flowers printed on it. “How do you feel about ‘Wings?’”

I tilt my head. “As a nickname?”

Dances' smile widens and turns conspiratorial. "Think of it as a code-name. Names are important, you know."

I raise an eyebrow as she finishes with my hair, but in the end I shrug. "Sure, I guess. If you can sneak me out, I'm yours for the night."

I swear Dances' eyes flash purple. She leans in close, pausing before she breaks eye contact. "You can keep a secret, right?"

I scoff. "If I do manage to get out of the house, I'm definitely not going to tell my dads. And they're kind of the only other people I really talk to..."

"Good." Dances leans in and whispers an odd set of instructions, then sits back again. "Can you remember that?"

"Yeah, but... how's that going to—"

Dances covers my mouth, fingernails stained green. "I'm going to need you to put the cynicism away for this to work, okay Wings?" She winks. "Dress for a good time."

I chew my lip the whole bus ride home. It's true I've thought about sneaking out. Key word being "thought." By the time I get off at my stop and walk up the steps to my house, my feet are thoroughly cold.

"That you, Raina?" Papa calls as I shut the door. The smell of peanut butter and miso drifts out from the kitchen and I faintly hear water boiling. The telltale signs of Papa's signature ramen for dinner.

"Yeah, just me."

"Just in time. Your Dad's going to be a bit late tonight, so he said to go ahead and eat without him."

I sigh and drag my feet up the stairs to drop my bag in my room. Not the worst scenario. If I'm lucky, all I'll have to deal with during dinner is some disappointed looks and awkwardness, and Dad won't be home in time to give me a lecture. "Coming."

As I sit down at the kitchen table, I twist the end of a strand of green hair, fingers coming away faintly lime.

Papa's face puckers when he turns around, two bowls in hand, and sees my hair.

“Do you like it?” I try.

He says nothing as he sets my food down in front of me and busies himself with the pill bottles that sit at the edge of the table, pressed up against the wall. Mainly a concoction for dealing with the auto-immune stuff, plus a few supplements meant to help with fibro pain.

“I can do it myself. I could practically recite my meds in my sleep, I’ve been on them long enough.”

“I don’t mind—”

I pointedly snatch the remaining bottles and hold out my hand for pills he’s already gotten out.

Papa’s brow creases, maybe disappointed, maybe sad, but lets me dole out my own meds. Only half need to be taken with food, the rest are just done at the same time for convenience.

My freakish ability to swallow so many pills at once is as close as I have to a party trick, not that I’d be showing it off if I got invited to any. We eat in silence for a while until Papa asks, “Have you been keeping up with your physio exercises?”

Maybe it’s the tense silence, maybe it’s because he didn’t even pretend he liked my hair, but there’s a sharp twinge in my chest at the question. “Yeah,” I say flatly.

“Good.” He picks up the same beansprout and lets it fall from his chopsticks twice before he adds, “I just wanted to make sure, with all the time you’ve been spending with this Danni—”

“You know, most parents might just ask if I had a good time at my friend’s house.”

Papa starts at the sharpness of the words. He opens and shuts his mouth and for a moment, I think he might actually ask, but the front door opens before says anything.

“Hello, I’m home!” Dad calls cheerily from the front of the house. “Seems I overestimated how long that was going to take.”

I swallow a wince with the last of my noodles. *Damn it.*

Dad leans into the kitchen, still in his suit, but his smile drops when he notices me. He sighs heavily, lips pressed into a thin line. He adjusts his tie that doesn't need adjusting and says tightly, "Raina. We talked about this."

"*Talk*" is a strong word for what happened last time. "It's just hair dye."

"It's not about the dye, it's about you not listening."

"If you really were set on it, you could have at least asked us first," Papa tries more gently. "We would have taken you to get it done by a professional."

I cross my arms and slouch back in my chair. "I didn't ask because you would have said no."

"So you decided going behind our backs *again* was better?" Dad asks as he sets down his briefcase hard.

I throw my hands up in the air. "Why do you care so much?"

"Why do we care?" Dad comes to lean both hands on my side of the table. Not intimidatingly, but encroaching on my space nonetheless. "What if you'd had an allergic reaction to the dye or the bleach? You trust this friend of yours to know what to do if that happened?"

"Oh my god." I drag my hands down my face, exasperated. "That's your excuse? One, it was fine the first time. Two, even when I was in the hospital weekly, I never had any allergic reactions."

"The doctors said they could still develop," Papa says, wringing his hands. "They're a common co-morbidity—"

I stand up from the table sharply, responding to Papa's words, but planting my hands and staring down Dad. "They also said that I'm *managing great*. That what we're doing is *working*. What's the point of chugging pills and daily physio bullshit if you're still going to act like I'm about to keel over? I could do a lot worse than dye my hair. I thought you wanted me to make friends."

"We do," Papa says firmly.

"Well, it would be a lot easier if you could give me five minutes without breathing down my neck every now and then."

Dad scowls for a moment before his face softens. He tries to reach a hand out to my cheek, but I lean away. “I know this hard. But the reality is, you’re not like other kids your age.”

“I would be if you’d let me act like it!” I shout. Both my dads jump. I push my chair back further and duck around Dad, storming out of the kitchen and stomping up the stairs to my room.

I slam my door shut, huff and lean against it, listening to Dad and Papa’s muted talking.

Turning my focus to my room, my gaze lands on the pile of resistance bands and different sizes and shapes of foam and cork rollers. The aforementioned physio bullshit to keep the fibro pain down. “Strong muscles are pain-free muscles” as I’ve had drilled into me. I kick a rubber massage ball under my bed. It hits the back wall and rolls back out mockingly.

My gaze wanders to my closet. Weird and improbable as Dances’ instructions were... *Trying is better than sitting in here all night.*

I open my closet, scan the clothes hanging inside and grimace. Most of my wardrobe consists of sweatpants—or sweats-adjacent pants—and loose, shapeless tops. Looking at it now, it strikes me as depressingly utilitarian. Clothes meant for lying in bed, sitting in waiting rooms, giving easy access to draw blood, and adding as little sensory input as possible to an already painful body. And maybe it’s just because my hair dye is fresh and extra vibrant, but the soft pastels seem dreary in comparison. The brightest things I have are a few scarves, but they haven’t seen much use.

Sighing, I flip through all the hangers twice and eventually come up with a pair of stretchy jeans, the brightest top I have—still a very desaturated purple—and a green tie-dye scarf that I wrap around my waist in an attempt to give some form to the formless top.

Dressed hopefully as what qualifies as “for a good time,” I sit on the floor—only feeling a little silly—and close my eyes. “Dances-In-The-Streets, are you there? I want to come out and play. Dances-In-The-Streets, can you hear me? I need to escape today.”

Holding my breath, I wait. And wait. And wait. Cracking an eye open, I scan my room. Nothing. I sigh and stand, ready to flop on my bed and not come out for a week.

“Hey Wings!”

Yelping, I trip over my own feet and fall backwards into my bed, gaping at Dances’ head and shoulders sticking out of my closet. “What the hell? Where did you come from?”

Dances steps out of my closet, one of my scarves around her neck. “You’ve got some nice clothes in there.”

“Wha... There’s a *wall* behind there, how did you?”

“You called me here, didn’t you?”

“I said some words that rhymed, but I didn’t think it would really do anything!”

“You say that, but it worked so you must have believed it enough.” Dances pats my shoulder. “Ah, the skeptics are always the most fun.” Draping my scarf around me, she chuckles. “I came out of someone’s car trunk once. That was hard to explain to the person walking by.”

I blink at her as she walks around my room, hands on her hips, surveying the dark purple walls covered in drawings and pinned-up origami. “I don’t—How did you—I’m so confused?”

“Eh, don’t worry, you’ll figure it out eventually.” She grabs my hand in both of hers and pulls me back towards the closet, beaming ear to ear. “Now, come on! It’s getting late. We’ve already started.”

“Who’s already started what?”

“Come find out. And quick, before the Phase ends.” She steps inside the wooden doors, her body going in farther than it should be able to.

“Dances?”

The back of the closet looks different now. Translucent, with multi-coloured lights glowing as if on the other side of a sheet. Looking over my shoulder, I hold my hand out and press against it. It feels like ripping paper, and I fall through into a world of colours and loud music. Some kind

of warehouse. The air is hot from all the people. All around me other kids dance, some shouting over the song. The bass vibrates in my chest when I breathe.

Dances is already moving through the crowd, as easily as walking down an empty street. It's like those diagrams with planets and grids they showed us to explain mass in eight-grade science—the whole dance floor bends and warps around Dances' gravity. She waves me over. "C'mon, Wings! Don't you want to dance?"

I look behind me at the wall that used to lead to my bedroom—now just bricks—wondering where the hell I am. By the time I turn back to face Dances, I realize I don't care.

Dances beams and holds out her hand as I move towards her. "Atta girl!"

She takes my hand and leads me deeper into the crowd, letting me borrow her gravity to move through the people. I expect her to float away, find any one of the dozens of people here to dance with, but she doesn't.

Right away, I see where her name comes from. I've never seen someone look so comfortable in their own body, or move so effortlessly. I feel ten times as awkward and out of place next to her. Dances opens her eyes and sees me standing there like a dolt, but she just smiles easily and takes my hand again, spinning me around. As she pulls me closer, a chill runs over me and my muscles relax. It still doesn't feel as natural as Dances makes it look, but I'm dancing.

I don't know, I don't care how long later, Dances leads me to a collection of mismatched chairs in the back corner of the warehouse, out of breath and giggling. "Fun, right?"

Enthusiastically, I nod.

A boy sitting across from me looks me up and down once. "Nice hair."

I run my fingers through the lime streaks. "Thanks."

"Wings, this is Diamonds-For-Eyes—" Dances' eyes seem to glow purple the same way they did when she was dyeing my hair—like white fabric

under UV light. But this time, I swear the coloured strips in her hair glow, too. “Just a sec, One-Name calling.”

“‘One name’?”

She gets up and walks through a wall, vanishing.

“Newbies, like you,” the boy says. “That’s what she means by One-Names.”

I blink, then turn to Diamonds-For-Eyes. “You see that, too, right?”

He chuckles. It could be my own paranoia, but it sounds... just a little bitter? “First time?”

I nod.

“It’s called Phasing. Or at least that’s what Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown calls it. The Others can mess around in liminal spaces so we can sorta... jump between them.”

“Liminal spaces?”

“Abandoned places, spaces with closed doors, the like. And that’s how we do stuff like this, too.” He motions to the warehouse, the lights that don’t seem to come from any kind of bulb, the music that seems to just be a part of the air. “Space-Phasing.”

“Dances... made this place?”

“The inside anyway.” He shrugs, next words definitely a little bitter, “And technically her Other did it.”

“Her what?”

Diamonds-For-Eyes raises an eyebrow at someone behind me. “Did you explain anything to her?”

“Geez Diamonds, go easy on her, it’s only her first night out. No need to give her a lecture before letting her on the dancefloor.” Dances has reappeared, a girl in tow—

Wait, I know her. She’s in my English class. Amy.

“Wings,” Dances says, sitting back down next to me, “this is Feathers.”

“Feathers?”

Amy/Feathers pulls to a few feathers from her pocket. “Call it a hobby.”

A cluster of people call out to Amy/Feathers and she waves to Dances before joining them.

Diamonds-For-Eyes gives Dances a sharp look. “You’re seriously not going to tell her how this works? Queen-With-A-Queen-Clay-Crown isn’t going to—”

Dances groans and wraps her arms around my shoulders. “Why do you have to suck all the fun out of it? Can’t I just enjoy my One-Names while they’re still new?”

“Who’s Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown?”

Diamonds-For-Eyes’ look turns sharp. “*Seriously*, Dances? I know you’ve had a bad streak, but this is—”

“All in good time,” she says, unbothered, but she tucks herself behind me more and adds, “And that’s Dances-In-The-Streets to you.”

Diamonds-For-Eyes rolls his eyes and leaves. Dances watches him go, not darkly exactly, but certainty pointedly, still hanging off me.

Craning my neck to look at her, I ask, “Why can I call you by a shorter name if he can’t?”

She gives me a squeeze before letting go. “Because I like you and Diamonds annoys me.”

The night passes in a crystalline blur of colours lights and moving bodies. I don’t immediately place the golden streaks of light coming out of the walls as sunlight. Frowning and leaning to look at the wall at an angle, I can just barely make out the faint outline of windows covered by a phantom layer of brick wall.

I don’t realize I’ve frozen stiff until Dances put a hand on my shoulder. “Hey, you alright?”

“I just... I don’t want it to end yet.”

Dances leans her head on my shoulder, moving her hand to take mine. “That’s the best part: tomorrow night we can do it all again.”

The space warps and melts like a spell breaking, phantom bricks falling away to let sunlight replace multi-coloured lights, music trickling away like

a dying stream of water. Some people press their hands against the walls and they split open and walk through. Others just walk out the front door of the warehouse. Most cluster around Dances and she opens a tear—a Phase, Diamonds-For-Eyes called it—for them to walk through.

I hang back.

When it's just me left, Dances' eyes glow and through the sheet-like wall, I can make out the outline of my open closet door.

Dances' expression softens as she turns back to me. She waves me over. A chill running through me, I oblige. She takes my hand again, giving it a firm squeeze. "It's okay. They won't even know you've been gone."

I take a shaky breath, words spilling out before I can stop them, "I'm worried that if I leave it'll be like waking up from a dream. A dream I know I'll never have again."

"Hey, this was *real*." She winks. "And now I'm just a few words away."

"You—You'll... You'll still come if I call again?"

Dances lets her hand drop, eyes dimming and wall solidifying. She takes me by both the shoulders, looking very serious for a moment before giving me an easy smile. "Of course." Then, surprising me, she pulls me into a hug. "I'm glad you're here. I *want* you here." She steps back and adds, "I'll order us some takeout when you come over after school. And plenty of energy drinks."

I press my lips together to keep them from quivering, then nod fervently. "That, that would be great."

Dances smiles, eyes and hair lighting up as she re-opens the Phase. "See you later."

"See you later."

SEVEN WEEKS BEFORE

I SWEAR I YAWN the entire elevator ride up to Dances' apartment. She gives me a sympathetic smile as I slouch down onto a stool at the island, and cracks an energy drink, sliding it to me silently.

I've been at a party almost every night for a week and I've started sleeping during my spare and from after dinner until sunset when it's time to call Dances. After several long gulps from the cold can, I say, "I don't know how you do it."

She winks. "I have my ways." She seems to hesitate for a moment before smiling wider and adding, "If you stick around long enough, it gets easier."

Dances puts on one of her many records—not just for display, she actually has an ancient record player—and lets me half-doze on her couch until the caffeine begins to kick in.

I sit up with a groan, a higher level of functioning bringing attention to the uncomfortable burning, nerve-y sensation in my thighs and calves. Meds are easy enough to swallow quickly. The proper stretches and physio exercises needed to keep the pain at bay have fallen far below an extra thirty minutes of sleep on my list of priorities.

"You alright?" Dances asks as I massage my legs with the heel of my hand.

"Just a little sore." There's something exhilarating about letting myself put something else as the most important thing in life besides the tedious upkeep of my body. "It's worth it."

Dances gives my shoulder and squeeze, "Atta girl," then plops herself down on the couch next to me. She pulls her map of the city onto her lap

and twirls a sparkly pink gel pen in her fingers, giving me a mischievous grin. “Want to help me scope out a new location?”

“For?”

“For tonight’s party.” She quirks her lips in annoyance as she draws an “X” through one of the circled locations. “Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown told me the cops have been poking around the warehouse.”

“How does she know that?”

“She has her ways.”

A silence hangs in the air, not entirely comfortable. Slowly, I ask, “Who... *is* Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown?”

Dances looks up at nothing with a wistful look in her eyes and a soft smile. “She’s the one who started all this. The parties... the... everything.” She giggles and tucks a braid behind her hair in the most girlish gesture I’ve ever seen her make. “If you think I’m cool, you should see her.”

“Will I? Get to meet her, I mean.”

Dances pats my leg. “All in good time. She likes to see a certain level of... commitment before she meets anyone we bring around.” She nods knowingly to the fresh “X.” “We aren’t technically supposed to be doing this, after all. Speaking of...”

Smoothing out the map, Dances points with the end of the pen to other circled locations in succession. “An unfinished mansion, a defunct strip mall, and a condemned condo.”

My shoulders tense. “Condemned?”

“Yeah, exactly. So, probably not there.” Still, Dances only puts one strike through it, not another “X.” “The mansion will probably be the most fun, but it does mean rich people. Which means way more likely to call the cops. The strip mall probably won’t have that problem, but it might not be as nice of a layout...” Dances trails off when she notices me just staring at her. “What?”

“Why include me in this? Doesn’t it seem like something, I don’t know, something for someone who’s been here longer?”

Dances gives me a curious stare for a moment, then a smile. “Because I like you. I like having you around.”

My face gets hot enough I’m sure I’m paint red. “Oh.”

Dances laughs. Not mockingly, though, and nudges me. “Know of any other contenders?”

“Um...” Giving my head a shake, I consider the map, then straighten. “Actually, yeah.” I point to a spot just outside the city. “There’s an old apartment complex along the highway. My Dad works in real estate, his firm was trying to buy it a few years back.”

Dances leans over to take a closer look, then shakes her head. “That would probably be great. But it’s outside my territory.”

“Territory?”

She runs her finger along six different coloured lines, forming a lop-sided hexagon. The complex sits outside of it. “I’m sure I could get away with it because of impeccable charm, but it’s a respect thing. The Four-Names are supposed to be equal. I don’t want it seem like I’m... pulling rank.”

I blink, trying to take in all the words she just said and fit them together in a way that makes sense. If I had to guess, I’m about fifty percent successful. “How do you mean?” Dances straightens, pride unmistakable. “I’ve known Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown the longest.” She rolls up her jacket sleeve to reveal a tattoo of a dancing figure with her hands above her head. There are thicker, darker lines of a real tattoo gun, but inside them is a thinner, fainter line that Dances tenderly runs her pinkie over. “That one? A stick and poke she gave me herself when it was just the two of us.” Her dreamy expression falters for a moment, but recovers. “She still has the one I gave her, too, though I think it’s a bit more covered up than mine.”

“Wow... You two must be close.”

“We are. Some of the other Four-Names think it gives me special treatment. But lucky for them we have a fair and benevolent monarch.”

Still absent-mindedly rubbing my legs, I nod. "If I'm a One-Name, and you're a, a Four-Name..." I count on my fingers and mumble, "Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown... so that's because she the leader?"

"Pretty much!" Dances ponders the map, end of the pen pressed against her lips.

"So, Diamonds-For-Eyes has been around for a while then."

Dances' nose wrinkles. "Yeah."

"Not a fan?"

She sighs dramatically and sags back on the couch. "He's fine. He's just always been a bit of a wet blanket. And a stickler for the rules."

I start to say something else, the mention of Diamonds-For-Eyes bringing back to mind the conversation we had at my first party. All the half-answered questions. But Dances hadn't wanted to talk about a lot of it. I can't help but think of the look she gave Diamonds when he left. I decide if it means risking getting to keep coming to the parties, I'm happy not knowing. "I kind of got that vibe."

"Yeah, he's not known for his subtlety. Anyway." She places the map back on the table and stands. "The mansion and the strip mall it is." She turns to me. "Shall we?"

I blink at her.

She takes my hand and pulls me to my feet as well. "Go check them out!"

"You want me to come with you?"

"Of course! Why do you think I brought you over tonight? Now come on, we've only got an hour or two before dark and then you have to be home," she winks, knowing I won't be staying there for long, "and I'll have One-Names calling me."

Butterflies in my stomach, I let Dances pull me into the stairwell of the apartment. Her eyes glow ultraviolet and the concrete wall splits open with a matching seam of light. When I push through the Phase, instead of feeling like ripping paper, it feels like pushing through thick theatre curtains.

I step out into a very large but empty foyer. Dances is already several paces in, taking in the space in a slow circle. I jump, head whipping around to look at all the open windows, and press myself against the wall behind me.

“What’s the matter?”

I stammer nothing before managing to get out a squeaky, “*Inside?*”

“Well yeah, how else are we going to know what it looks like?” Dances says, completely blasé.

“What if someone sees?” Hair dye is one thing. Getting a call from jail is another and I’m pretty sure at that point jail would be the preferable option over my dads.

“Then we’ll leave.”

When I don’t move, Dances sighs, head lolling back. It’s gone by the time she looks back to me, but she looked disappointed. “Relax, Wings. I’ve done this before. It’s fine. Look.” She gestures to the window. Hesitantly I peek out it. A long driveway curves to disappear out of sight behind a wall of thick hedges. “These places are meant to be private.”

I weigh in my head which is worse: potentially having to call my dads after getting arrested, or Dances deciding it was a mistake to bring me along. Taking a breath, I follow after Dances as she wanders deeper into the mansion. But I do pull up my hood.

Our footsteps echo, no furniture or even carpet to muffle our movements. The whole place is full of unpainted white walls and pale hardwood floors, like walking through a massive blank canvas.

We finish exploring the first floor and head up back to the foyer to take the massive staircase up to the second. As we reach the top, Dances purses her lips with a quiet, dissatisfied, “Hm.”

“What?”

“I was hoping it would be one of those modern places. Open concept and all that.”

“Couldn’t you... change it?” I ask. “You hid the windows at the warehouse. Can’t you get rid of some walls?”

“I could, but...” Dances turns to the wall next to her, eyes pulsing as she runs her fingers along it. It disappears, but Dances is visibly straining. With a small gasp, she lets her hand fall and the wall reappears.

“Oh.”

She shrugs. “Only so much I can do. I want to have a good time, too, after all.”

I nod, but catch on something behind her. “Is that... an actual ballroom?”

Dances spins around, following my gaze through the open door behind her. She whistles as she takes in the high ceilings, columns and polished floor, shoes squeaking faintly as she makes her way into the center of it. “Okay... I could work with this.”

I trail a few steps behind her. “Seems a little excessive for your everyday though.”

Dances hangs off a column with one hand, spinning around to face me. “Would you ever want to live in a place like this?”

“An empty mansion?”

Dances rolls her eyes. “With like furniture and stuff.”

“I don’t know.” I wrap my arms around myself absent-mindedly. “I’d worry it would feel too big. Lonely.”

Dances nods thoughtfully, then smiles wistfully. “I wanted to at one point.” Her mouth forms around a word, but doesn’t say it, continuing after a brief pause, “Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown and I talked about it once.” She gives me a look like we’re part of the same inside joke. “We decided the apartments were more practical and low-key.”

I peer through another door as we leave the ballroom and keep exploring, asking over my shoulder, “Is Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown the ‘friend’ who you live with?”

Dances chuckles. “Yeah. Technically the apartment’s in her name, she’s the one who pays for it.”

My brows jump up. “How does she manage that?”

“She has her ways.” Dances leans over a railing overlooking a large room below, surveying the space intently.

In the silence, my mind snags on the plural in “apartments.” “Do you actually live together? You and Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown?”

“No, she has her own place, it’s just what I tell people.” She winks. “Part of my cover story.”

I snort and ask jokingly, “How long have you been doing this to have a whole cover story worked out?”

Dances looks up at nothing, expression uncharacteristically hollow. “A while.”

“How long is a while?” I press. “Like before high school even?”

Dances kind of winces, letting out a long stream of air. “Yes and no.” She waves her hands through the air, expression returning to normal. “It’s hard to explain, we’ll get to it later.”

Any thoughts I have of pressing further are cut off by the sound of a door swinging open.

Our heads snap towards the noise below us. Dances pulls me down into a crouch. A woman in a suit walks through a side door in the room below, humming quietly to herself. My face pales. I’m ninety-nine percent sure she works for the same real estate firm as Dad. And the one percent is me trying to delude myself.

I’m torn between trying to sneak away and staying still and hoping she’ll leave the room without seeing us.

Dances picks the former, but I pick the latter and when she tries to tug me up, she just tips my frozen body over. Dances winces at the muted thud.

“Hey!”

“Shit, shit, *shit!*” I hiss as Dances pulls me to my feet.

“This is private property, what are you doing here?” The woman disappears deeper into the house and while I can’t think of another staircase, I’m sure she’d know better than me.

I run after Dances, skidding around a corner and ramming my shoulder into the wall. She’s back in the ballroom, waving me in, hand on the door. I sprint in. She closes the door behind me and presses her hands against it. Running footsteps come down the hallway, closer, closer, closer.

With a flash, the Phase opens and Dances and I fall through the unseen curtains.

We burst back into the apartment stairwell, breathing hard. Taking in a long breath and letting it out slowly, I slide down the cold cement wall to the ground. Dances slides down next to me, looking at me out of the corner of her eyes, lips pressed together as she tries to hold back a grin. The grin escapes anyway. Then a giggle. Then laughter.

I take in the space around us, far away from the problem we left behind. A current of electric excitement at getting away with something builds in my feet and works its way up the rest of me until my own breathless smile erupts into laughter. The electricity crackles through my burning legs, replacing any pain.

Our entwined laughter ricochets off the walls, echoing until it fills the whole stairwell and it sounds like there’s a host of ghosts laughing along with us.

“Looks like that one’s off the table,” Dances says as she calms down, but it only makes me laugh harder. With a contented sigh, Dances leans her head on my shoulder, hand on my knee. “You up to checking out that mall?”

It’s not even a question.

We step out of the Phase into an empty storefront, windows covered in newspapers and cast in a sepia glow. The door to the outside is locked, but there’s an interior door that leads to the rest of the mall that swings open with a rusty creak.

Dances' eyes light up—metaphorically—as she takes in the space on the other side. We're on an upper level that overlooks a sort of interior plaza below, a dusty skylight hanging over an empty fountain.

Striding down the still escalator like walking onto a stage, Dances nods to herself, fully in her element. “Now this,” she holds her hands up by her shoulders, slowly drumming her fingers against her thumbs, “*this* I can work with.”

I hang back as Dances makes her way to center stage, struck with a sudden certainty I'm about to see something special. Or at the very least, something very intimate.

With a flick of her fingers on both hands, walls appear over the upper storefronts as well as the windows along the back wall. When Dances tilts her head up to look at the skylight, I can see her eyes glow a steady purple. “We'll leave that open.” The glow twists down the dyed streaks in her hair as a black and white checkered floor spills out from under Dances' feet like watercolour, covering the cracked tiles. She actually kicks up one foot and spins in a move far more dancer than casual, hands outstretched towards the walls. A uniform pattern of maroon bricks develops like a Polaroid photo. Dances hums, tracing designs in the air that appear as neon-coloured graffiti tags on the walls.

Dances walks around the edge of the space, repeatedly grabbing at air and pulling. The mismatched chairs and couches from the warehouse blink into existence like an old-timey TV turning on. On her outstretched arm, her tattoo glows, too. She gives the fountain a look over her shoulder and colour-changing water bubbles to life.

She turns her gaze upward, tilting her head at the railing surrounding the upper level. After a moment, she grins and flicks a finger through the air. Hundreds of pin-pricks of pale silver light weave through the wooden supports—which polish and repair themselves before my eyes—more intricate than any string of fairy lights.

With a final spin, Dances stills back in front of the fountain where she started, eyes walking over every inch of the space. Eventually, she looks up to the skylight again. I can actually see an idea take shape in her eyes. Smiling softly, she reaches a hand up. The glass seems to warp as if pulled to Dances' hand by increased gravity. As it snaps back to place, the skylight darkens like the night sky. Then, a galaxy blooms. Falling stars drip into the fountain below with bursts of light as they hit the multi-coloured water.

“What do you think?”

The air around me feels electrified and I swear I feel something like static run around my tongue and teeth when I open my mouth to answer. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve seen.”

Dances puts her hands in her jacket pockets and kicks at nothing, grinning as her glow fades. “It’s certainly some of my better work.”

Awestruck, I float over to the fountain, reaching out a hand to touch a falling star. A chill runs through me as my fingers graze the light. “I mean it.”

“Good. I gotta keep everyone entertained now, don’t I?” Dances loops her arm through mine. “Can’t have anyone getting bored.”

I give her arm a squeeze, stepping closer. Like some of her magic could rub off on me.

Dances sends me back to her apartment. On the bus home, I look up what time sunset is tonight, setting an alarm. I hurry past Papa, saying I ate at “Danni’s” and tumble into bed in my school clothes.

A blink later, my alarm goes off and soon, Dances is popping out of my closet to whisk me back to the celestial strip mall.

I’m one of the first there, only a small crowd of the people who can Phase themselves already standing around. A few more trickle in through a broken window on the upper levels as Dances flits in and out of Phases, pulling more people into the space like they’re just another part of her creation.

The falling star fountain is a huge hit. I sit on the edge of it, trying to subtly track Dances, waiting for her to guide me into the dancing crowd. She drifts over to me, offering me a hand. Smiling, I take it.

She dances with me for a few songs before tapping my shoulder and leaning close to talk over the music. "Will you be alright on your own for a bit? Got some new One-Names to look after tonight."

"Um, yeah. Sure." I try to ignore how my stomach drops. "Totally."

Dances gives my shoulder a squeeze. She searches my face for a minute, then leans in even closer to whisper, "Close your eyes. It helps." With a wink and grin, she vanishes into the crowd.

For a while, I stand still, dancing figures moving around me. Eventually, I take a deep breath. *She brought you here today. Before anyone else. That has to mean something, right?*

I close my eyes. The bubbling water mixes with the music and I can almost imagine that party is taking place somewhere in the woods. I sway in time to the music for a few moments before I try any bigger movements. At first, I'm self-conscious about bumping into anyone without opening my eyes, but after a while, I realize no one seems to notice or care. I lean into the motion of the crowd, letting it guide my movements. When the beat picks up and everyone starts to jump, I join in, adding my feet to the pounding collective heartbeat. I cease to be myself. It's almost like I stop having a body to worry about how it's moving and instead become energy that fills the whole space.

As I spin, several coloured specs of light appear on the backs of my eyelids.

My eyes shoot open.

When I blink again, they're gone.

Opening my eyes breaks whatever spell I was under and I'm very aware of how hard I'm breathing and the pulsing pain radiating up from my feet. Out of breath, I make my way to a chair on the outside of the space.

I drop into the plush armchair like a stone and lean my head back against it. The lack of sleep scratches at the back of my head like an animal wanting to be let in.

When I straighten, Diamonds-For-Eyes has appeared in the wicker chair across from me. He watches me with something like contempt.

I frown back at him. “Why are you here?”

He starts. “I’m sorry?”

I gesture to the crowd. “You never dance, you barely talk to anyone. You don’t *have* to be here.”

Diamonds-For-Eyes snorts like something about that is funny, then his expression sours—more—and he looks off to the side. “It’s more about not being ready to leave.”

“For the hard time you gave Dances, you’re not any less vague.”

“If Dances wants to keep you in the dark rather than risk scaring you off, that’s on her. I’m not getting involved.” Diamonds swipes his hands across the air as if to make his uninvolvedness visually clear.

My face heats, thinking back to the trip to mansion. “You think I can’t handle sneaking into abandoned buildings?”

“I think if you knew the dangers, you’d leave. There’s a reason most people do. But like I said: that’s on Dances.” He slouches back into the chair, crossing his arms tightly across his chest. “She’s bad enough on her own without me doing something to get Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown involved.”

Offended on Dances’ behalf, I ask, “What do you have against Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown?”

“None of your business.”

“Real mature.”

He drums his fingers on his arm, avoiding my stare. After a moment he gives me a sideways glance, assessing. He looks away again and says, “I dunno, I just never feel safe when I’m in the same room as her.”

I raise an eyebrow and say skeptically, “I’ve only heard Dances say good things about her.”

“Yeah, well, I’d hardly call Dances unbiased in the matter.” His tone turns the words into an insult.

I lean forward in my chair sharply. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Not poisoning the young minds, are we Diamonds?”

Diamonds-For-Eyes glares at someone behind me before standing. “Piss off, Needles.” He storms off.

The figure behind me has a buzzcut and a binder peeking out from under their oversized tank top. The sleeves are frayed at the edges, evidence of the homemade nature of the shirt. Under the blacklights, the fraying threads glow purple. They extend a hand to me and I can’t help but notice they are, put bluntly, buff. “Paintbrush-Of-Needles. They/them.”

I take their hand, grip as strong as their arms implied it would be. “Wings. Um, she/her.”

“Figured I’d better come rescue you from Mr. Sourpuss.” They lace their hands behind their head. “Don’t mind him too much.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

Paintbrush-Of-Needles smiles like I’ve just passed some sort of test. “Good.” They nod towards a small group of people with legs dangling through the railings of the upper level. “Want some better company? We’re about to get up to some nonsense.”

My dropped stomach from Dances’ absence rockets back up into my throat. They have three names, so they’ve been here a while, probably friends with Dances. Legs wobbly with a mix of nerves, giddiness and exhaustion, I nod eagerly. “Sure.” For good measure, I add, “Beats hanging out with the wet blanket.”

Paintbrush-Of-Needles chuckles.

I follow them up the unmoving escalator, bracing both arms on the rubber rails with every step.

Paintbrush-Of-Needles introduces me to the cluster of three, a mix of Two- and Three-Names that, if I'm being honest, I don't process over trying to act like I'm at a party not a job interview.

"So," I say once introductions are over, "I was told there would be some nonsense?" The words sound stilted to me, but the others just grin.

"We're thinking of having a little tightrope walking contest."

"Gotta keep them entertained and all."

I'm not sure who "them" refers to, but I nod along like I do. "Cool."

"Alright, who's up first?"

Paintbrush-Of-Needles answers the call and leaps up on top of the railing with an ease that makes me envious. They stay crouched for a moment, before slowly standing up, arms held out to the sides. "Whoever makes it farthest wins."

My heart stutters watching them walk along the railing. It's not the farthest drop on the other side, but it's enough to do some damage. Paintbrush-Of-Needles looks nothing but thrilled, smiling faintly as they focus ahead of them. They make it about ten feet before they tip too far to the side and bail, rolling onto the floor.

A small audience gathers below to watch the show. None of the other three make it more than half as far, the third one groaning as they jump off. "Of course the skateboarder wins."

"Hey now, we've still got one more." Paintbrush-Of-Needles nods to me.

I eye the drop warily, resisting the urge to massage my legs. Dances watches from below. Taking a breath, I stand and plant both hands on the railing.

My mount is nowhere near as graceful, but I manage to get up, soles of my shoes offering more grip than I'd have thought on the rough wood. Inch by inch, I straighten, holding on with my hands as long as I can. My mouth is dry as I hold my arms out to the sides and take a moment to get my balance, knees bent.

Floor to my left. Drop to my right.

The tempo of the song picks up as I take my first step and gives the feeling that I'm moving even slower. On my second step, I tip to the left, but pull myself back to the center and take a third. I feel my pulse in my fingertips and the backs of my eyes.

Letting out a slow stream of air, I take a fourth step. I tip more sharply to the left this time and I feel my ankle threaten to cave, but it doesn't. The sharp jolt of adrenaline tells me I should call it there. But my eyes catch Paintbrush-Of-Needles' and the feeling of connection waiting there is stronger.

I take a fifth step.

My balance fails again and my arms pinwheel wildly. But this time, I'm leaning right. It makes me panic and flail more wildly which just makes it worse. My throat closes up as I feel myself fall and what should have been a scream comes out as a squeak.

Instead of open air, I fall into a wall that feels faintly like theatre curtains. Below, Dances has her arms reached high, eyes like burning stars. Paintbrush-Of-Needles is there in a heartbeat, steady arms grabbing mine and pulling me off the railing onto solid ground. The false wall vanishes. They look at me with a "holy shit" expression, then a nervous laugh that isn't all that nervous.

I force myself to laugh along even as my whole body shakes.

"You good?" Paintbrush-Of-Needles asks.

"Y-Yeah..."

"Are you sure, Wings?"

Dances has appeared nearby, looking as close to mad as I've seen her, but even then, it's more of a pout than anger, lips pursed.

I nod, voice out of commission.

Paintbrush-Of-Needles lazily holds up their hands when Dances shoots them and the rest of the group a look. "We're just having a bit of fun."

“You have to be careful with the One-Names,” Dances says as she wraps her arms around me from behind protectively. “They’re delicate.”

“I’m not delicate,” I snap, hands steady into fists.

The others jerk back at the words, but Dances just pulls me close, leaning her head on my shoulder. “I didn’t mean it like that, Wings.”

I almost want to pull away from her, but can’t quite make myself do it. “Then how did you mean it?”

Dances takes a deep breath, chest pressing against my back. “It’s hard to explain. It’ll make sense eventually.”

I sigh back. “Right...”

Dances takes my hand and tugs me away. “Come on, Wings.”

I hesitate for a fraction of a second. I think I follow along fast enough Dances doesn’t notice, but her hand tightens on mine.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I said I’m fine.”

Dances searches my face, hers not... empty, exactly, but lacking that usual spark I’ve come to associate with her.

In an effort to bring it back, I offer, “Thanks, though. It might be a little hard to hide a broken bone from my dads.”

She blinks and the spark returns. “Well, it is my job to keep the fun *fun*, and broken bones don’t really play into that,” she says as she sits down on a couch and pats the seat next to her. “You took it like a champ.”

I yawn as I sit down.

“Do you want to head home for the night?”

Still yawning, I shake my head vigorously.

Dances scoots further away, but then pats her lap. “Want to lie down then?”

I consider the offer for a moment before I tuck my legs up and lie down. I swear I just blink, but when I open my eyes again, sun is streaming through the skylight in place of the galaxy and the space has all but emptied.

Dances gently runs her hand along my arm. “Time to wake up, sleepy-head.”

SIX WEEKS BEFORE

EVERYTHING IS FINE UNTIL I move to turn off my alarm. My spine lights up with pain and I wince as I fumble blearily for my phone. It takes me a moment to orient to the space, sort out why my alarm is going off. I squint at my phone screen in the dark. 8AM. Tuesday. School.

Letting out a puff of air, I plant my head back on my pillow. The pain no longer comes with the spike of terror it used to, just a dull, heavy resignation. A memory of Papa sits on the edge of my bed, holding my hand and trying his best to breathe me through a panic attack.

“It, it’s okay. They said this is... it’s just normal in the early days. A flare up, that’s all. It’ll go away.”

I was unable to take in enough air to voice my rioting thoughts. What if it didn’t go away? What if it got worse instead? What if it just got worse and worse forever?

“But maybe you should take a break from running. This has happened the next day every time so far.”

I wheezed in protest.

“Not forever. Just until you can learn to pace yourself.”

Turns out there’s no way to “pace myself” through an eight-kilometer cross country race. I still have my old running shoes from eighth grade when I had to stop. They’re long too small for me, but I can’t make myself get rid of them any more now than I could then.

Trying to shake off the memory, I gingerly stretch in bed, waiting to see if the pain will subside as I start to move around. My spine continues

to feel like there's rust between each vertebrae and my legs like someone lined them with live wires, even lying down. Not a good sign. *Guess the combination of the parties and ignoring physio has caught up.*

Sighing, I grab my phone again and text Papa.

Can you call the school and tell them I'm going to miss first period?

He responds almost instantly.

What's going on?

Flare up.

Oh, sweetheart. Do you need anything? I can bring breakfast up.

As much I want to brush off the offer, I know that until I get this settled down, stairs are out of the question.

Yeah sure. And the... ibuprofen on steroids. Whatever it's called.

You got it.

While I wait, I throw the sheets off and delicately lower myself to the floor to get a start on reminding my muscles and nerves there's no need to be in pain.

For so long, I hated the rolling and the stretching and the exercises. Even if they helped me feel better, most of it doesn't feel great while you're doing it. I hated trading one pain for another. I hated I had to do them in the first place. Even now, I'm not sure that I don't hate them, just learned to tune it out.

Sometimes I almost miss the anger and sadness that would surface. It was at least something to occupy my mind. Now, I autopilot through most of it, the movements so ingrained through repetition I'm sure if you peeled back my skin, you'd see them engraved on my muscles. It's like having to watch the same thirty-minute video every day and I wish I could just fast-forward through it all.

I'm balanced at my thigh over a foam roller, slowly moving back and forth when there's a knock and Dad opens my door.

I frown and switch sides. "Aren't you going to be late for work?"

"I didn't want to take the car." He sets down a bowl on my bedside table, oatmeal with dried strawberries and brown sugar. "I figured you might like a ride to school."

"I'm not going to be leaving any time soon."

"I don't mind waiting. And my work can be delayed an hour or two."

I cringe as I roll over a particularly tender spot. As much as I want to pretend everything is fine, I can't deny not having to walk and bus will make a big difference. Maybe so much so I'll feel okay enough to go to a party tonight. I offer Dad a small smile. "Thanks. That would really help."

He bends down to give me a peck on the top of my hair, then pulls out a bottled smoothie and a small container with a mix of pills from his pockets.

I roll off the roller, greedily grab the pills and crack open the drink. The sooner my stomach acid can dissolve them into my bloodstream, the better. "I'll let you know once they kick in."

"Take your time."

By the time I'm done eating and coaxing my body closer to normal, the meds have started to work, taking enough of an edge off to function. I pull on the baggiest, comfiest clothes I can still wear in public and turn the heat seat to high on the drive to school.

Leaning my head on my hand, I watch the streetlights pass by. I feel Dad watching me before he talks.

“You’ve been kind of distant lately.”

I shrug.

We slow at a red light, the ticking of the signal light filling the silence until he asks, “Are you still upset about what happened with Olivia?”

I tense.

Over the summer, I made up my mind that I wouldn't spend senior year totally alone. I wanted to befriend Olivia because I thought her abstract pastel drawings were really cool. I'd been so careful. When school started, I spent weeks testing the waters, finding excuses to talk to Olivia or the other girls she sat with in art class. Asking for art supplies I wasn't really going to use, looking for a pencil I hadn't actually lost and then trying to keep the conversation going for even a little bit longer. Eventually, I worked up the nerve to ask to sit at their table. And they let me.

The first time they invited me to hang out after school, I panicked and said I had a family dinner I couldn't get out of. But it gave me time to talk to my dads so when they asked again, I could just say yes. Still, I think it took a week and a half of convincing before my dads agreed to let me go over to a sleepover at Olivia's house with the others. It felt more like I was getting up and going to court every day instead of going down for breakfast. The hourly check-in texts were the only condition that they would okay it under, so I caved.

But they did let me go. And I was doing it. I didn't know what “it” was, but sitting in Olivia's basement, I felt like a kid riding a bike without training wheels for the first time. I was wobbly, but I was staying upright.

But I think, even then, I knew this normalcy I'd found with these girls was delicate.

Sticking my tongue in my cheek for a long moment, I say curtly, "No."
Only because I found someone better.

"Are you sure?"

"Yup, pretty sure."

"I know you were upset. We didn't mean to barge in like that—"

"The light's green."

I think that will be enough to end the discussion, but after we've made the turn, Dad continues, "This is hard on us, too. Never knowing if you're going to be okay."

"I don't want to have this conversation again." I stuff both my hands in my hoodie pocket so he can't see them ball into fists. "I said I'm not mad about it anymore, so just... leave it alone."

"If you're not upset, why don't you want to talk about it?"

"Because no amount of us talking will un-barge you in."

I blink hard, tears prickling at the back of my eyes from embarrassment, even now. My dad's done some truly blush-inducing things, but that was the first time I've been embarrassed to tears. "What's done is done, can we just drop it?"

Dad pulls up as close to the main entrance as he can and hops out to open my door for me. I stifle a sigh as the word "delicate" echoes through my head. "Thanks for the ride."

He gives me a side hug as I shrug on my backpack. "Text if you need us to come pick you up early."

"I will." I won't.

The clock in the halls tells me I have about seven minutes before second period starts. I choose to get ahead of the chaos of the halls between classes and just head for second period while there's no one to jostle me.

I slide down the wall beside the door to my English classroom, tile cold on my legs and vaguely gritty with dirt. My eyes fall shut of their

own accord, exhaustion coming in to fill the spaces taken up by pain this morning.

“It’s... Wings, right?”

I open my eyes to Amy standing in front of me, arms full of books. “Oh. Yeah. Hey, A—Feathers.”

The corner of her mouth turns up and she looks away for a moment before chuckling. “It feels a little silly in the daylight, doesn’t it?”

Her laugh dispels the awkwardness in the air and I let out a breath. “Just a little.” In an effort to fill the silence, I ask, “Did you get out of first period early?”

“I have a spare first thing. What about you?”

My smile probably looks more like a grimace. I’m sure gossip has made her well aware of my medical history. “No, just late because my body woke up and threw a fit.”

“Oh. I see.” She tilts her head to the side, soft red hair falling in her face before she tucks it behind her ear. “So. How long have you been going?”

Relieved to change the subject, I say, “A few weeks, I think. You?”

“Hmm. About... six months?”

I start. “That long? And you still only have one name? Wait—Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

She waves me off, “No, it’s fine,” then shrugs and I can tell she really means it. “I don’t go that often. Just every now and then.” Amy adjusts her hold on her books. “I take it you’re a more frequent flier?”

I start to talk, but pause, feeling oddly embarrassed to answer with how casual she seems to be about the whole thing. In the end, I just laugh nervously and say, “Yeah. Definitely.”

Amy picks up on the loose answer, an answer in its own way, and she gets a strange expression. Not judgment, it’s too soft for that. More like a noticing of the difference between us.

Hoping to steer the conversation somewhere else, I nod at her pockets. “Find any cool feathers lately?”

Her whole face brightens and she nods excitedly, immediately dumping her books on the ground to fish out some feathers from her skirt pocket. “I did! Look.” She proudly holds out two black feathers, twisting them to show off the shifting sheen of teal, navy and maroon. “Magpie.”

I lean closer to get a better look. “I’ve never seen a magpie with feathers like that before.”

“They’re from an adolescent.” She giggles to herself. “A teenage magpie, if you will. Their feathers have this really beautiful iridescent quality to them. They lose it as they get older, so they’re a lot harder to find.”

“I wish human teenagers had something so pretty to make up for the everything else.” It comes out grimmer than I mean it to, but Amy doesn’t seem phased by it.

“Well, you’ve got your hair, don’t you? That’s kind of the same thing.”

I rub the ends of my dyed hair between my fingers, the lime faded closer to seafoam. “I guess.”

“You made the sculpture that’s out in the art hallway, right?” she asks, tenderly tucking the feathers away. “The big origami fox with the butterfly on his nose?”

I blink at her. “Um, yeah. I did.”

“Is it actually one giant sheet of paper?”

I’m still a little stunned she even noticed something like that, let alone thought to ask about it. I give my head a shake and say, “No. It’s more like a paper shell, the inside is wire.”

“Ohhh.” She nods thoughtfully. “That makes more sense. Either way, it’s super cute.”

“Thanks. Yeah, uh, thanks. I like it, too.”

The bell goes off and I start to drag myself to my feet.

Amy holds out a hand. I consider not taking it for a moment, but her offer looks so genuine and un-pitying, that I do. She helps pull me upright. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” She falls into step beside me as we walk into the classroom and before we spilt up to go to our usual desks, she says, “Maybe I’ll see you around. If you know what I mean.”

“Yeah. Totally.” I shrug with a semi-awkward smile. “I’m there more than I’m not.”

With a final wave, Amy takes her seat and I try my best not to fall asleep.

By fourth period, I cave and text my dads to pick me up. It’ll turn them both into helicopters, but after three periods of mulling it over, I decide it’ll be worth it if I can sleep for a few hours before going out tonight.

I make the walk of shame out of class and through the empty halls to sign out at the front desk. The receptionist, who I know by name—Joanne—from all my other early departures, gives me a sickeningly sweet smile.

Dad’s finger taps nervously on the steering wheel as I get into the car. “What’s going on? You haven’t been this bad in a while.”

Leaning back in the seat, I close my eyes. “Can we just go home?”

“Of course,” he says as he pulls away, “but don’t you think we need to figure out what’s happening?”

“Do we have to worry about fixing it right this instant?”

“Should I make an appointment with your doctor?”

“I haven’t been sleeping. I kept pacing to pass the time. Guess that was too much walking.”

For a few blissful moments of silence, I think that’s satisfied him, but then he presses, “How come you haven’t been sleeping?”

“Dad, I just want to sleep.”

He sighs sharply, but stays quiet.

Papa is waiting at home with tea, a tray of snacks, and a worried expression. Dad has to hurry back to work, leaving with a quick pat on the back for me and a kiss on the cheek for Papa.

“Do you need help getting up the stairs?” Papa asks, voice a few pitches higher than normal.

“I can manage.” And I do. Slowly.

There’s an almost tactile sensation of coming home from school early. It feels like the scratchy blanket in the school nurse’s office and tastes like liquid cold medicine, lit by muted sunshine coming in through closed blinds. Sensations from a younger me who was sick in more normal ways, with an underlying feeling of nausea left by all the unusual ways I was sick after.

Papa trails after me to my room like a too-close shadow and sets the tea and snacks down on the bedside table. “Can I get you anything else?”

I shake my head as I tumble into bed. The blinds are closed and Papa’s set out a set of pajamas on the bed, like I’m once again too young to pick them out on my own. “I just want to sleep. So can you not check on me unless I text?”

He hesitates, but nods, wringing his hands. “Text if you need me.”

Face smooshed into my pillow, I hold up a half-hearted thumbs up. After he leaves, I kick the pajamas off the bed and pull the covers over my clothes, minus the hoodie. I look up what time sunset is today and set two alarms.

The second one barely wakes me up. I feel distinctly more like a person, but my legs are back to feeling like all my nerves are prickly.

I ignore the bolded letters on the bottle telling me “TAKE WITH PLENTY OF FOOD” as well as a doctor’s warning about stomach ulcers and burning a hole in my esophagus and down two more of the prescription painkillers with several gulps of cold tea. As I get dressed, I sneak a few handfuls of trail mix from the tray for good measure.

I sit in front of my closet and close my eyes. “Dances-In-The-Streets, are you there? I want to come out and play. Dances-In-The-Streets, can you hear me? I need to escape today.”

Dances pops out almost immediately, like she was waiting. “Hey, Wings!” The words are tinged with relief and the edges of her smile are a little pinched. “Glad to see Needles didn’t scare you off.”

I hold back a wince as I stand. “It’ll take more than that.”

Dances beams. "Atta girl."

I rip through the Phase and back into the strip mall. It's already full. Looks like I'm one of the last to arrive.

I expect Dances to wander off, but she keeps a steady hold on my hand and stays to dance with me for a long time.

Too long.

As much as I want to ignore my body and pretend I'm just like every other person dancing, my legs giving out would be a lot worse. It hasn't happened in a long time, but...

Leaning close to Dances, I say, "Don't feel like you have to baby me. Don't you have newer One-Names to look after?"

Dances stares at me, expression carefully blank. She loops her arm through mine and pulls me close. "Aren't you so magnanimous, offering to share me." She gives my hand a tight squeeze. "I'll be back later."

I nod and go back to dancing until she's out of sight. Then I stutter my way through the crowd to the fountain, easing myself down onto the cool stone.

For a while, I watch the crowd. But that old creeping sense of abnormality begins to seep out from my shoulder blades, invading a space where I finally could feel normal. I spin around and cross my legs to watch the stars fall into the fountain.

"Mesmerising, isn't it?" Paintbrush-Of-Needles leans their forearms against the edge of the fountain.

"Yeah." So much so that I hadn't noticed them until they spoke.

They nod to my legs. "Everything alright?"

I didn't even realize I'd been rubbing my legs and I flatten my palms against my thighs. "Yeah."

"We didn't hurt you, did we?" They jerk a thumb over their shoulder. "With the whole tightrope thing?"

I sigh heavily. "No, my body's just like this." Even I'm surprised at the amount of vitriol in the words.

“Oh. I gotcha.” Paintbrush-Of-Needles turns to brace the backs of their legs on the fountain, arms crossed. After a moment, they hold up one of their hands, bending and flexing their fingers. “You know, I had god-awful arthritis in my hands.”

“Arthritis?”

They let out a one-syllable laugh and give me a crooked grin. “I know, right. What am I, a grandpa? Lucky me you don’t need your hands that much to skateboard, but being a tattoo artist? It looked like that was out the window.” They cross their arms again and look around the space reverently. “But it got better after I started coming here.”

“Really?” It comes out more skeptical than I mean it too.

“I’m not gonna go all preacher on you and tell you,” they press their hands together in mock prayer in front of their chest, “if you just believe hard enough, you can be magically cured.” They let their hands fall. “But it does help, if you stick around long enough.”

“How?”

They lean their head side to side. “You kinda have to see it to believe it.” They playfully punch my shoulder. “But I’m sure you’re not too far off.”

“Are you going to be able to be a tattoo artist still?”

With a wide smile, they hold their arms out to the sides. “Been one for years now. Maybe you’ll even be coming to see me soon.”

I scoff. “I doubt that.”

Paintbrush-Of-Needles gives me an almost uncomfortably knowing grin. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

I cross my legs the other way, then frown. “Wait, a few years? How old did you say you were?”

They shrug, smile turning cheeky. “Technically seventeen.”

My frown deepens, mouth opening and closing silently. “What?” I finally ask.

Paintbrush-Of-Needles throws their head back laughing. “Hey, it’s Dances-In-The-Streets’ story to tell.”

With a two-fingered salute, they turn to leave, but I call after them, “How come it’s not ‘Dances’ anymore?”

They wince with the expression of a kid getting caught. “Call it trying to get back into her good graces.” They look me up and down before holding my stare. “She really likes you.”

My stomach flutters and I’m sure I’m blushing when Paint-brush-Of-Needles leaves.

The feeling isn’t helped when Dances materializes a few minutes later, taking a seat right next to me and wrapping her arms around my shoulders. She sighs. “I’m glad you came back.” She straightens, looking at me intently. “Are you free tomorrow after school? There’s someplace special I want to take you. Some... people I want you to meet.”

I blink, then shake my head. “Yeah. I mean, I can be, even if I’m not.”

Dances’ eyes flash—literally. “I can’t wait.”

Dances finds me after school the next day mid-argument with my dads. “I told you fifty times I feel much better today.”

She winces sympathetically as I wave with the hand not holding my phone to my ear. I notice she has a backpack on for once.

“That’s all well and good, but what happened yesterday wasn’t nothing.” Papa’s voice is pitched up again.

“Whatever is was, it’s done now.” More or less. “Can I get on with my life? It’s not like we’re going to run a marathon. Just hang out.”

There’s muffled shuffling as the phone gets passed around. Dad comes on. “What if you brought Danni over to our place tonight? I’d like to meet her anyway.”

My toes curl at the thought. Turning my back on Dances, who’s been silently watching in one-sided conversation, I hiss, “Do I really need to explain to you why I don’t want to do that?”

“I thought you said you weren’t still upset about that.”

“Not upset is different than trusting you won’t do something like it again.”

The speaker crunches against fabric, muting whatever discussion Dad and Papa are having without me.

I turn back to Dances, shaking my head at her in a silent “Can you believe this?”

Hands in her pockets, she nudges me with an elbow. “I could come over after. If that would make things better.”

“Absolutely not.” *I’m not giving them the chance to ruin another friendship. Especially not this one.* Dances is taken aback by the words and I quickly add, “It’s not you, it’s them. I promise.” I laugh bitterly. “Trust me, I wish I could have friends over, it’s just—”

Papa’s voice cuts me off. “You can go.” His words are level, but clipped. “But we’re having a talk when you come home.”

“Whatever.” I hang up before he can respond and turn my phone on silent. Letting out a sharp sigh, I look to Dances. “Shall we?”

Dances takes a deep breath, and for moment I swear she looks nervous, but then she smiles. “We shall.”

I follow Dances on the same path to her apartment, but we go past the street we usually turn off at. She leads me to a road bridge over an empty creek bed, then begins making her way down into it.

“So, who are these friends of yours that we’re meeting?” I ask as I trail after Dances down to slope to the underside of the bridge.

Dances skids down the hill with ease. “In a way.”

My feet scatter the small rocks making up the dry creek bed when I get to the bottom. Maybe it’s just the lingering frustration from my dad’s or the flare up, but I can’t help asking, “Are you always this vague about everything?”

Tossing a grin over her shoulder as she steps under the bridge, Dances asks, “Doesn’t the air of mystery make things more fun?” She laughs, invisible bubbling water to fill the empty stream. With a chill, it sends my frustration down the stream, too. “Don’t worry, Wings. No more mystery after today.”

I gasp as I follow after her, staring up at the central support. The whole thing is covered in brightly-coloured graffiti, smaller paintings making up one bigger picture. A diamond with an eye in it, an hourglass full of flower petals, a paintbrush with what looks like needles instead of bristles, two different coloured eyes, a honeycomb with shards of glass in it. All of it somehow connected to or overlapping the dancing figure with her hands above her head that stretches from the ground to the underside of the bridge. The same one Dances has tattooed on her forearm.

“It’s beautiful.” I turn to her. “Did you make this?”

Dances shrugs. “It’s a collective effort. I just bring all the pieces together.”

“What is it, though?”

“A record, of sorts.” She drops her backpack to the ground and pulls out rattling cans of spray paint, biting the inside of her cheek. “I used to love this part, but lately I’ve been putting it off for as long as I can.”

“How come?”

“Usually, it’s the part where people start running if they’re going to.” She infuses levity into the words, but the way she wraps her arms around herself dampens the effect.

“Um, do I want to know why?”

Dances looks around the space, hands on her hips. “Well, not everyone can see them...” She gives me a crooked smile. “But I have a good feeling about you, so I figured I’d better get it over with one way or the other. Here.” She motions for me to turn around and covers my eyes when I do. “Do you see them?”

“All I see is black.”

“Just wait.”

We stay like that for long enough I’m beginning to think she was wrong about me, whatever exactly that means. I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, like that’ll help, wanting so badly for her to be right.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see something—like a sunspot except it’s blue and moving. I turn my head, Dances’ hands moving with me. It’s a little floating ball of blue light. Another one appears, this time cherry. And another, lilac. And another. And another until my vision is full of sparks of light. “What... What are those?”

It’s so faint, but I swear I actually hear Dances smile. “We’re not sure, really. We just know they like to hang out in abandoned places. ‘Liminal spaces’ if you want to be fancy. Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown calls them the Others.”

Dances takes her hands away, but I keep my eyes closed, dazzled by the lights. The Others. When I do open them, the lights disappear and Dances has her eyes closed, too, lost in a reverie. I quickly look away when she opens them, but she just smiles.

“Well. The cat’s out of the bag now.” Dances holds her arms out, hands still in pockets so her jacket becomes wings. “I’m an open book. Anything you want to ask me, fire away.”

“Uh...” I blink several times, mind suddenly flooded with a jumble of questions I can’t even begin to untangle.

I must make a face because Dances laughs. “It’s okay, take your time.”

Like undoing a knotted cord, I start at the end and work my way back. “You said not everyone can see them.” Dances nods. “Why? What determines who can and who can’t?”

“We’re not entirely sure, but we do have some ideas. Age is a big part of it.” Dances counts on her fingers, looking up to think. “We’ve had one or two as young as thirteen or fourteen who can see them, and a handful of people who are nineteen or twenty. But most are between that range, and we haven’t found anyone outside of it.”

“But even in that age range, still not everyone can see them?”

Dances shakes her head, then looks off to the side. “If you ask Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown, she’d say it has something to do with the

mind having a balance of ‘awareness’ and ‘malleability.’” She does physical air quotes as if the vocal ones weren’t enough.

“And if I asked you?”

Dances straightens slightly, face going blank for a moment. Then she kicks a rock down the creek bed, looking around the space again with reverence. “I think it’s about being in the right state of mind.” She slides down the support opposite the graffiti. “You have to *want* there to be something more.”

After a moment, I take a seat next to her. “Is that how you found them?”

“Yeah.” She loosely pulls her knees to her chest, hands laced around them and I watch her get lost in a memory. “I mean, we were sleeping in doorways, stealing slices of bread out of the bag in grocery stores to eat. We wanted *anything* more than what there was.”

“‘We’ meaning you and...?” Dances hesitates before answering and I quickly add, “It’s okay if that’s too personal. If the open-book thing only applies to questions about the Others.”

“No, no it’s alright.” She shifts in her seat, moving her hands to run a thumb over her tattoo. “Meaning me and,” again, the ghost of another name passes by her lips before she says, “Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown.” Her smile turns nostalgic. “We were both in foster care and ended up in the same group home, which wasn’t much better than where we’d been before.”

“Really?”

Dances stares off at nothing, more memories running cross her eyes like an old film reel. It doesn’t look like a very good movie. “The food was locked up. If you missed meal time, you just didn’t eat. And how was that any better than not eating because there was no food in the house? It was,” Dances shudders, “rough, to say the least. So when we found the Others, figured out what they could do, we didn’t look back.”

“Oh. Wow.” My problems with my dads seem like a cakewalk by comparison. I pretend I don’t feel the flicker of jealousy under the wave of

thankfulness that at least I've never had to worry where I'd spend the night or where my next meal was coming from. "You two must be really close then, after going through that."

"Yeah. Yeah, we—are." Her spark goes out for a heartbeat before she brings it back. "You can see why the other Four-Names think I might be able to get away with some special treatment."

I start to nod, then stop, frowning.

"What?"

"Why don't you have five names then?" Dances stares at me blankly and I take it for confusion, so I clarify, "Unless I'm misunderstanding, you two found the Others at the same time. So, why aren't you two equally in charge?"

"Oh. Yeah, we found them together, but..." Dances stares down at her knees, expressionless, before putting on a smile again. "She's the one who really figured out what they could do—and she's still learning more. She's the one who made all of this," Dances gestures to the graffiti, "it was her idea to bring other people in, how to structure it." Dances shrugs. "I'm happy to let her have the crown. I'm more interested in being boots on the ground anyway."

"I see."

Dances scooches close and nudges me with a grin. "If you stick around long enough—and Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown likes you—maybe you'll have a graffiti place and One-Names of your own one day."

I close my eyes again, looking around. One of the lights—a pink one—circles the place where I know Dances sits, like an electron orbiting an atom. "Why does that one seem so attached to you?"

"Because it is. At the end of the day, the Others just want to have a good time. To be entertained. If you can do that, they'll let you do all kinds of fun stuff." She giggles. "You think I can just Phase through space or turn an empty building into a dancefloor by myself?"

I laugh back, only a little awkward. “Well when you put it like that...”
Guess that’s what Diamonds-For-Eyes meant the first night when he said “her Other did it.”

Dances puts her arms around my shoulders. “Come on, I didn’t mean it that way.”

I lean into the embrace, resting my head on top of hers. Every time I blink, my vision is swarmed with colours. “Why would people run?”

Dances stiffens, but says without breaking stride, “Would you believe anything I said if you couldn’t see them?”

“Seeing you pop out of a closest isn’t enough for some people?”

She sags. “You’d be surprised.”

After a moment, I stand to take a closer look at the art.

“Any other questions?”

I run my fingers over the paintbrush, then look over my shoulder, Dances now on her feet, too. “Paintbrush-Of-Needles said something kind of weird.”

Dances rolls her eyes, shaking her head, but both good naturedly. “Needles...”

“They said something about the parties helping them physically. I assume that’s got something to do with the Others, but I don’t get how.”

Dances takes a deep breath and doesn’t let it out right away, eyes widening. “There is something else the Others do.” She presses her hands together in front of her, holding my gaze. “So, like I said, they live in liminal spaces. Limbo. If one attaches to you, it,” Dances trails off, searching for the right word, “pauses you. You stop ageing. As far as the world is concerned, you’ll keep getting older, but not physically.”

“As for what Needles said, it won’t ‘fix’ anything, and if the Other left, things would come back. But while you have it,” Dances shrugs, “things are... paused.”

“Why would the Other leave?”

“If they get bored. You have to keep them entertained if you want them to stick around. What do you think the parties are for?”

“Fun?”

Dances laughs.

“What?”

“Nothing, that’s... that’s just a perfect answer.”

I smile, playing with my fingers, a chill washing over me. But my face falls. “What happens if the Other leaves? Do you... age all at once?”

Dances shakes her head vigorously. “No. No, you just carry on from where you are.”

Nodding, I relax. Then, quietly, “How long have you been ‘paused?’”

Dances opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. She rubs the back of her neck, then says with a pinched smile, “Do you mind if I don’t answer that one?”

“Sure...”

“That’s why I brought you here.” Dances closes the distance between us and takes my hand. “For you to get an Other of your own, so you can be one of us, too.” For the first time since I’ve met her, Dances looks unsure. She reaches down, grabs a can of bright green spray paint and holds it out to me. “If you wanna stick around, I’m sure my little collection would look even better with a paper crane added in.”

Shutting my eyes, a lime Other spins around the paint can curiously.

Dances tightens her hold on my hand and I open my eyes. “We can be your friends. Ones who won’t leave you behind.” She runs her thumb over the back of my hand. “Make up for lost time.”

Lost time... A pause to make up for all the missed parties and sleepovers and late-night talks. That would be enough on its own. But a pause on my body, too? A break from the drudgery without the consequence of a crash? A chance to feel normal, feel like a real teenager?

“That,” I tighten my grip back, nodding my head, faster and faster, “that sounds like a dream come true.”

Dances jumps with an excited squeal, throwing her arms up before throwing them around me and pulling me into a tight hug. She pulls back, holding me at arm's length with a smile. I can't help but think something about it looks old. She squeezes my shoulder, "Atta girl."

Closing my eyes to watch the tiny moving lights again, I ask, "Anything else I should know?"

There's a pause.

Then, "Nope, that's about it." Dances lightly shakes the spray paint. "Looks like you've got someone interested, too."

In the dark, the lime light is still hovering around the paint.

"So, um, how does this work?"

Still grinning ear to ear, Dances whispers another string of words for me to say, then leans back, holding out a hand. "Now just close your eyes and watch."

Taking her hand and a breath, I close my eyes.

Dances' pink Other spins around her, more sparks of light in the background. The lime Other hovers in the edges of my vision. In the dark, Dances' glowing eyes appear, ultraviolet. Then the streaks in her hair and finally her tattoo. The lime Other jumps, then leaps from the paint to spin around Dances.

"Go ahead."

I adjust my fingers in Dances' grip and plant my feet more firmly on the rocks. "Dances-In-The-Streets, are you there? I like the games we play. Dances-In-The-Streets, can you hear me? I've decided I want to stay."

The lime Other spins faster, almost excited. It makes one more rotation around Dances, then spirals down where her arm is and up mine. As soon as it crosses the threshold of our hands, I feel a sensation on my skin like cold static. The feeling travels up my arm and cascades over the rest of me. My heart beats faster and my chest tightens, almost like a panic attack coming on, but if that could be a positive feeling. More like overwhelming excitement.

And just like that, there's a lime light orbiting me, crossing in and out of my vision.

Dances sighs contently and lets go of my hand. "Now you just need a second name." She tilts her head to the side. "How does Paper-Wings sound?"

Paper cranes flutter in my stomach, ticklish and a little sharp. "It sounds great."

Dances offers the spray paint to me again. "Want to make it official?"

Giving Dances a small smile, I take the paint and face the picture. "Anywhere specific?"

"Wherever you like."

I stand on my tiptoes and paint a paper crane sitting on the dancing figure's shoulder. As I work, I say over the hiss of the paint, "You know, I've been thinking about adding another colour to my hair."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." I give her a shy smile over my shoulder. "I was thinking maybe some pink?"

Dances blinks, then twirls a braid with bubble-gum pink running down the middle with an even more shy smile. "I think that would look great on you."

FIVE WEEKS BEFORE

I MANAGE TO DODGE whatever talk my dads wanted to have with a well-placed lie about needing to study for a test and then feigning sleep. But it gnaws at me through all my classes the next day.

So when Dances is waiting for me after school, I'm all the more happy to see her so I can put it off further.

Dances looks giddy, bouncing on her feet. "How are you feeling?"

"Good? Yeah, good."

"Mm." She nods with a comically mischievous smile.

I snort, but grin. "You care to elaborate?"

"I don't want to spoil it." She bites her lip, looking off to the side, still beaming. "It sometimes takes a day or two for the Other to settle. But you'll feel it when it happens." Before I can press further, she loops her arm through mine and pulls me towards the sidewalk. "I've got something planned for today."

"Yeah?"

"A last little step to make everything official." She gives me a conspiratorial wink.

Paintbrush-Of-Needles leans against the chain-link fence around the school, skateboard propped up next to them. Unlike the other times I've seen them, they're in shorts that show two legs heavily inked with tattoos. They're getting some looks from other students, some curious, some... appreciative. Paintbrush-Of-Needles doesn't seem phased by the stares, even

returning some of the more appraising ones with a flirty wave, regardless of the looker's gender.

They kick their skateboard into their hand as Dances and I approach. Paintbrush-Of-Needles gives me a satisfied once-over. "I told you you'd be coming to see me soon."

My stomach flips. I shoot Dances a look.

She sighs dramatically. "You don't *have* to get one right away. But," she runs the back of a finger over her own tattoo, "it is kind of a tradition."

I hesitate for a moment, before the eagerness in Dances' face wins me over and I shrug. "Why not?"

Paintbrush-Of-Needles lackadaisically skates next to us, occasionally pushing the board forward with a casual ease. As we walk, I close my eyes, letting Dances guide me. Sure enough, a silver bundle of light orbits around Needles.

Paintbrush-Of-Needles' laughter pulls my eyes open. They sigh contentedly. "I fucking love fresh Two-Names. Walking around with their eyes closed." My face heats and I shrink, but Needles adds, "Oh, don't worry, I did it too."

"Ran into a lamppost if I remember right."

"C'mon, Dances, you don't gotta make me look bad in front of the person I'm about to stab repeatedly." I silently note the return to "Dances." Paintbrush-Of-Needles holds a hand out for me to shake again. "By the way, Paper-Wings," they say with special emphasis on the name, "since you're a Two-Name now and all, feel free to call me Needles."

We bus closer to downtown where Needles unlocks a small tattoo studio with a key from the carabiner on their shorts.

I'm slow to walk inside.

Dances waltzes in ahead of me and holds out a pinkie finger to me. "I pinkie promise it doesn't hurt as much as you think it's going to. Plus, Needles is great with first-timers." Dances winks and Needles rolls their

eyes so far back they disappear into their skull. “Oh, come on, Needles, that’s a classic.”

Not sure I get the joke, I take the offered finger with mine and let Dances pull me in.

Sensing my confusion, Needles clarifies, “It was *a while ago*, but I had an infamously poor experience with a “first-timer” and Dances has yet to let me live it down.” Needles pulls supplies out from a stack of drawers next to a padded table and then wipes everything down with a spray that burns the air with alcohol. To Dances, they add, “I don’t know how I’ve put up with you this long.”

Dances giggles, “You know you love me,” and Needles grins.

“You own this place?” I ask.

“Sure do.”

“I see what you mean about being technically seventeen then.”

“Heh. Yeah.”

I look around the space, drawings in two distinct styles pinned to the walls. Some intricate line art of different bodies and objects, others more traditionally styled animals. “Did you do all of these?”

“Nah, just the line art stuff.” They sit down on a stool next to the table and their shorts ride up enough for me to catch a tattoo of a paintbrush with needles instead of bristles on their outer thigh. “Sapphire-Nails did the rest. He’s apprenticing under me, but I let him put his stuff up since it’s just the two of us.”

I shift on my feet as Needles grabs the... well, the needles. “So... he’s one of you, too?”

Dances clicks her tongue and shakes her head. “No, no, no, Paper-Wings. One of *us*.”

I dig my toe into the tiles bashfully.

“So, what did you want?” Needles asks, pulling out a tablet and stylus.

“Oh. Right. I mean, I painted a paper crane at the graffiti place.”

Needles nods and starts drawing. “I’ll admit, I’m impressed,” they say as they draw. “A month or so to be a Two-Name? That’s quick.”

“She’s very dedicated.” Dances looks at me with a close-lipped smile that makes me stand taller. “Hardly missed a party and found an Other on the first try.”

Soon, Needles turns the tablet around to show me an elegant sketch of a paper crane at a three-quarters angle so you can see both the wings. “You like?”

I nod.

“Where d’you want it?”

Somewhere easy to hide... “Can you do the back of my neck?”

Needles nods, then pats the table. “Hop on up.”

Taking a deeper breath—the air stained with the smell of ink—I lie face-down on the cushioned table, pulling my hair off the back of my neck. My Other spins around me faster, like it’s excited. Lime streaks fill my vision when I blink.

Dances takes my hand and squeezes it as Needles turns the tattoo gun on. “Atta girl.”

The stencil itches a little and the first line stings the worst, but after that, it dulls to something almost familiar. A hot, prickly pain.

Mostly to distract myself, I ask, “So, how do you become a Three-Name?”

“Time,” Needles says over the hum of the gun. “Young people are known for their impulsiveness, not their commitment.”

“Am I not going to learn to teleport any time soon then?”

“No,” Dances says through a giggle. “You need another name for that.”

A while into their work, Needles pauses to refill their ink. “Remind me, has she met Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown yet?”

Dances pauses running her thumb over my knuckles for a moment. “No,” she says, resuming the repetitive gesture, “not yet.”

Resisting the urge to turn my head—in case I mess up the tattoo—I ask, “When will I get to meet her? I want to, she sounds amazing.”

“Don’t worry, Wings. You’ll get to meet her soon. We all do eventually. We mustn’t disrespect our monarch, after all.” After a moment, she adds, “I suppose I should ask: I can still call you Wings, right?”

We. A warm feeling runs down my neck through my whole body, like the ink being injected into my skin is putting it there. Our. I smile to myself. Us. “Of course.”

There’s something almost meditative about getting a tattoo and I’m quiet for the rest of it. It’s almost a jolt when Needles turns the gun off and gives their work one final wipe. “All done. Wanna have a peek?”

Dances helps me sit up as Needles grabs a handheld mirror and holds it up so I can see the back of my neck in the larger mirror next to the table.

My skin is flushed red and raised along the lines in way that makes my toes curl just a little. But it’s beautiful. Simple, but beautiful. “It’s fantastic.”

Needles sits taller as they put the mirror down and plaster a thin sheet of plastic they call “second skin” over the tattoo. Lastly, they give me a small pamphlet about aftercare. “All the boring stuff’s in there.” They spin on the stool to start cleaning up, then give Dances a frown over their shoulder. “Has her Other kicked in yet?”

“I don’t think so.”

Needles turns back to me. “Maybe take it a little easy tonight.”

I nod gingerly, the second skin pulling at my first skin with the movement.

“Oh!” Dances gives us both an apologetic wince. “No party tonight. The other Four-Names and I are meeting up.”

Needles pauses mid-wipe. “Everything alright?”

Dances waves a hand through the air with the kind of bravado that makes it look like a dance move. “Lights-On-The-Ocean had a,” she

scrunches up her face, waving her hand harder, “run-in with the cops and we have to help clean up his mess.”

“Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown involved in the clean-up?” Needles asks with a cringe.

Dances’ bravado dims. She puts her hands in her pockets and pops her lips twice. “Yeah. That kind of mess.”

I rub a hand up and down my arm. “Yikes.”

Needles rolls their eyes again, going back to cleaning up. “I swear that boy is lucky he’s pretty.”

The laugh I try and hide comes out as a snort, and Dances exclaims, “Needles!”

“What? You know I’m right.”

I laugh harder as Dances visibly struggles to counter them. “He is very capable.”

“He is, and I mean this as nicely as possible,” Needles steepled their hands, “pure of heart, but dumb of ass and gets most of his One-Names through good looks and bad flirting and everyone knows it.”

Dances tries admirably to defend someone who’s not here and I laugh until my sides hurt. I’m almost crying by the time they call a truce and only some of it is from the laughing; I don’t remember the last time I felt this comfortable, this welcome around two people.

Every jolt of the bus ride home makes the back of my neck prickle and I pull my jacket tighter around me as I walk from the bus stop home.

My dads are both waiting expectantly in the living room, peering at me as I come in the door. Swallowing a groan, I sigh and close my eyes for a moment. My Other flashing past and the lingering warmth from the tattoo studio dull the sharper edges of my annoyance. *Let’s get this over with.*

I drop my bag, kick off my shoes and plopp down defeatedly on the chair across from the couch where my dads are perched.

Papa is straight-backed, fingers drumming against each other in the way they do when he's preparing to play peace-keeper. Dad has changed out of his work suit, but still holds himself like he's going into a business meeting.

I slouch further back into the armchair and cross my arms. "Well?"

"Why don't you start?" Papa offers.

"I don't have anything to say, I don't want to be here in the first place."

Dad stiffens.

Papa rubs his eyes. "Raina, please."

"I don't know what you want me to say." I shoot Dad a look. "I told you I'm not upset about what happened with Olivia any more, I don't get why you're keep trying to bring it up."

"You wouldn't be wrong for being upset still." Papa cocks his head apologetically. "We're sorry. We... we know we didn't handle that as well as we could have. We let our worry get the better of us."

I scoff. *That's an understatement.*

We heard the pounding on the front door even from Olivia's basement. All of us looked at each other and I was just as confused as the rest of them. It was loud enough it woke up her parents.

There was talking. Muted at first, then clearer. I felt an icy stab of dread in my stomach before I even consciously recognized the voices. Olivia's parents were still trying to explain everything was fine when my dads barrelled down the stairs.

Dad was rambling to Olivia's mom about how everything was somehow not fine. Papa actually made it worse and came over to me, crouching down and putting his hands on my shoulders, asking if I was alright. I might've mumbled something. I say "might've" because I don't know that I was able to talk at all. Olivia and everyone else was staring at me and why wouldn't they? I barely remember leaving and what memories I do have of packing and the drive home are blurry with tears and burning with embarrassment.

"You just seem distant lately. We," Papa's eyes dart to Dad, "I thought maybe this was why."

Dad leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “Unless there’s something else you’re not telling us about?”

A bitter smile creeps across my face and I nod to myself slowly. “There is it.” *Damn, I thought I was doing a good job of acting normal...*

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dad asks, more accusatory than I’d like.

“If you thought I was up to no good, I’d rather you’d just come out and say it instead of trying to hide it behind fake concern.”

“Our concern isn’t fake,” Papa protests. “But it does feel like there’s something you’re not telling us.”

Dad purses his lips in a way that means he has something more to say.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “What? We’re here to talk, aren’t we? So let’s talk.”

He straightens, mirroring my crossed arms. “I find it... concerning how cagey you’re being around this new friend of yours. And I don’t want to assume the worst, but at a point it starts to feel like you’re hiding something.”

Papa shoots him a sharper look, then smacks his arm.

“She’s right, we’re here to talk.” Dad gestures to me. “Let’s get everything out in the open.”

Papa crosses and uncrosses his legs several times, before looking to me. “Raina? Do you have anything to say to that?”

I press myself harder into the chair behind me, watching my Other when I blink. “I’m not upset about what happened with Olivia, but only because I’ve found a new friend.” My words are clipped, mixing lies and buried emotions. “But if you ruin that, too, I’m going to be upset.” I grab my arms. “Really upset.”

“If you brought your friends over here, we wouldn’t have that issue.” Dad almost immediately winces at how the words come out, but he doesn’t take them back.

I roll my eyes. “So you can find an excuse to check on us every five minutes? No thanks.”

“We wouldn’t do that,” Papa says.

“You drove halfway across town in the dead of night because I didn’t reply to a text.” They start to protest, and I cut them off. “Olivia won’t even talk to me anymore. None of them will. I just—”

Swallowing a lump in my throat, I tell myself the Other and the tattoo and the new name mean I’m safe now, even if my dads did something like that again. But deep down, I’m still not sure.

“I’m finally getting to feel normal again.” I look off to the side, then glance at my dads out of the corner of my eye. “And not to be harsh, but you guys have a really hard time being normal about me.”

I expect the words to get some kind of reaction. But Papa just turns sullen, staring at his hands in his lap.

Dad gives me a pitying smile. “I know this isn’t what you want. This isn’t what any of us wanted, and it’s not what we wanted for you. But you just have to,” he splays his hands out, “play the hand you’re dealt.”

My shoulders creep up to my ears and my lip curls. My Other’s orbit becomes shaky, like it can feel my agitation. *Not if I have anything to say about.* “Can I just have this one thing?” I hold up a hand, I don’t even know what for. “I’ll do the curfews and the physio and the meds and whatever. But let me have this one thing.”

“Can you try and be more specific about what you mean?” Papa coaxes.

I lean my head back, tattoo stinging with the motion, and take a breath. A strange kind of carelessness slowly washes over me. *Why am I trying so hard to fight this? It’s not like they can stop me Phasing out of my room.* My Other levels out. *Paused.* Calmer, I say, “I just want some space for me and my new friend. That’s all.”

Papa and Dad exchange a look. Dad half-heartedly throws his hands up. Papa gives me a strained smile. “We’ll talk it over.”

“Whatever you say.” I stand. “I have homework to do.”

Alone in my room, I stare longingly at my closet, wishing more than anything Dances was coming to whisk me away in a few hours. But she isn't. Instead, I give in to my more responsible impulses and trudge through my physio and some of the mountains of homework I've been ignoring. When I've done all the sensible things I can stand, I spin in my desk chair and scan my room for something else to occupy my time until I can sleep.

My gaze lands on my personal sketchbook, which has been sorely ignored in place of school art projects, my body's limitations forcing me to pick between the two. I grab my headphones and put on an old drawing playlist I made when I was fourteen. My Other hovers curiously around my pencil as I flip to a blank page and start to sketch. The motions are absent-minded, vague at first. But soon a rendition of Dances stares back at me in lines of graphite and eraser smudges. Then Needles. And the moving, pulsing crowd in the strip mall. The fountain full of falling stars. The dry creek bed and the graffiti place.

The light in my room flips on and I jump. I whirl towards the door, pulling one headphone off. Dad leans into my room, hand by the light switch. He frowns. "What are you doing sitting here in the dark?"

"Um..." I look out my window. The sun set without me realizing it and I'd been working in the glow of a streetlight coming in my window. "Just got caught up in my drawing, I guess..." I give my head a shake. "Did you need something?"

"You didn't come down to take your evening meds."

"Oh. Sorry." I take the pills and the glass of water Dad offers. "Thanks."

"Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Night." Alone again, I check the clock. Nearly four hours have passed. When I flip back through my sketchbook, I realized I've filled four whole pages. I haven't been that absorbed—haven't had the energy to be that absorbed—in my art in ages. Instead of excited, I feel a creeping sense of unease like I do anytime I'm doing too well.

Hoping to stave off any potential crash, I throw on pajamas, turn my lights back off and get into bed. My Other is more than a bit distracting, but its orbit is predictable enough that it becomes background noise eventually.

But I can't sleep. And it's not even that annoying thing where you're tired and you want to sleep but your brain won't make the right chemicals. I'm just not tired. More than that, I feel awake. Energized.

My Other stops in front of me. It bounces back and forth, like it's pleased I've finally noticed the extra energy. I think back to what Dances said about the Other settling and wonder if this is what she meant. I definitely feel... different. Like I've re-opened some long-closed door to all the energy I used to have. To all the energy I *should* still have.

My mind wanders back to my closet, but not to Dances.

Tense with a kind of nervous anticipation, I open my eyes and turn my head to look at the time. 1 AM. Hesitantly, I sit up. Swing my legs over the edge of my bed. Pause, listening for any sounds of movement from the rest of the house. My Other spins faster with a much more excited anticipation as I crack open my door and listen again.

Silence.

Taking a long breath in and out, I square my shoulders and step into the hall. I tiptoe towards my dad's room, to the two panels that sit just outside their bedroom door. An alarm keypad, and the wall-mounted tablet that controls the cameras. The alarm is easy enough to get around as long as I don't open an outside door or a window on the main floor. The cameras I've never dared touch for fear my dad would notice.

But as I tap the screen, squinting in the light as it wakes up, and type in the password, I decide the risk is worth it tonight.

I think about only turning off the one that covers the driveway, but that seems way more suspicious than all of them turning off. So that's what I do. I turn them all off, shut down the tablet and sneak back to my room to change.

The only runners I have are my old ones that are too small, and I don't really have any proper running clothes anymore either. But I make some sweatpants and an old t-shirt work, and just throw on the canvas high-tops I wear to school.

Heart pounding, I unlock my window and slide it open. Carefully, I slip out onto the roof above the garage. The shingles are more slippery than I'd like and I try not to think of my failed tightrope walking as I make my way to the edge of the roof closest to the fence. Precariously lowering myself off the edge of the roof, I feel around blindly until my feet touch down on the flat top of the fence. My descent is far from graceful, but I make it to the grass below. Checking over my shoulders, I dart down the driveway and down the street.

Out of sight from my house, I stop under a streetlight and do some quick stretches and warm-ups. Straightening, I face the open street before me. *Keep your expectations tempered.*

Hesitantly, I take the first step, stomach lurching an embarrassing amount as my foot lands square in the middle of a sidewalk crack. I wrangle down the worst of my nerves—*Flare up* and *tomorrow's gonna suck* and *what are you doing?*—and move into a light jog. I half expect to get winded before I make it to the end of the street, but I don't.

After a few blocks without keeling over, I quicken my pace into a proper jog, arms bouncing lightly at my sides. The night air is cool and despite it being spring, there's enough of a chill that it reminds me of fall. Cross country always started in the fall.

A few more blocks pass and I turn down onto another street. I'm breathing heavier, but steady. It takes me a few blinks before I notice my Other hovering stationary in front of me. It wiggles side to side, impatient. It almost feels like it's saying *let me show you what I can do.*

I break my stride to shrug. "Fuck it," I breathe, and kick it into high gear.

The very un-padded soles of my shoes make the pavement hit my feet with an extra sting as I break into a full run. I pass in and out of streetlights,

light and shadow seeming to spin around me as I tear down the sidewalk. Wind kisses my face and catches on my knuckles as I pump my arms. I'm breathing hard now, but there's none of that sucking, airless feeling of being dangerously out of breath. And my muscles burn, but with the feeling of working, of being used fully, not nebulous pain. I feel a smile stretch so wide I'm sure I'd look deranged to anyone who saw me.

I finally slow to a stop at the edge of a park at least three kilometers from my house. The soles of my feet vibrate from the repeated impact. I brace my hands on my knees and for a moment and panic as my vision blurs, waiting for the floating feeling of passing out to sweep over me. But all I feel is light streaks of water on my cheeks. "Thank you," I whisper. "Thank you."

Breathing evening out, I wipe my tears and straighten. My Other spins around me faster. Excited. I push my hair back off my face, beads of sweat catching on my palms, and look around. Alone with the streetlights, it's peaceful. I close my eyes, tilt my head back and say to no one in particular, "I knew all the best things happened after dark."

Too soon, I turn back for my house. But I still relish the run back. I slow to a creep as I reach the end of my driveway. The house is still dark and there are no cop cars out front, so it seems my dads didn't notice. I clamber back up the fence, crawl across the roof and back in my window. Half holding my breath, waiting for the lights to come on and my dads to be standing in the hall, I make my way back to turn the cameras on.

Nothing.

I reset everything to how I found it. Cameras on, shoes by the front door, window closed. Still not tired, I decide to treat myself to a long, hot shower. I bring my phone in and point the flashlight at the ceiling instead of risking turning the full lights on.

Emboldened by the continued silence from my dads' room, I walk downstairs and steal a few treats for myself from the dessert drawer in the

pantry. I pop a gummy in my mouth as I head back to my room with a grin. *I could get used to this.*

I spend the rest of the night drawing and re-watching old cartoons.

When the sun reaches its fingers in my window, I stretch my arms above my head. Another jolt of nerves attack my stomach when I stand, but...

I'm stiff. And my shoes certainly didn't do my ankles any favours. There's definitely an uncomfortably familiar prickle running up and down my legs. But it's distant. No burning pain, no headrush, no shaking. Just a body that went for a run last night.

I fall backwards into bed, still full of energy and beaming. Paused. I lightly run my fingers over the plastic covering my tattoo. I have no regrets. Because I want to stay like this for as long as possible. Until I've wrung every drop of youth I didn't get to have and then some. But until then, I make a promise to myself I'll do whatever it takes to hold onto this.

The high from the night carries me through school and back home and lets me have a civil—pleasant, even—conversation with my dads over dinner before I hurry up to my room to call Dances. As I get ready, I grab a large clip from the bathroom and put my hair up to show off my fresh tattoo, only a little blurry through the plastic. Streaks of lime and magenta frame my face like a built-in diadem. I smile at my reflection and take a seat in front of my closet.

"Dances-In-The-Streets, are you there? I want to come out and play. Dances-In-The-Streets, can you hear me? I need to escape today."

Dances pops her head out of my closet a few moments later. "Hey, Paper-Wings."

"Hey, Dances-In-The-Streets."

"Ugh, if you're going to do that, I'll just stick with Wings." She looks me up and down as she steps into my room. "How are you feeling?"

"Good." Smile growing wider, I nod enthusiastically. "*Really* good."

A knowing grin breaks out across Dances' face, barely contained. She wraps her arms around me as I stand. "I'm so happy for you." Taking a

breath, she steps back. “Okay, so. Before I bring you through. We’re in that mansion tonight. Only for one night, and I asked for a few extra Three-Names to come keep watch.”

I shrug, whatever hesitation I had about the mansion before seeming almost silly now. “Okay.”

Dances blinks. “Okay?”

“Yeah. Sounds good to me.”

“Well, alright then!” She offers me a hand and pulls me through the Phase.

There’s no music on the other side, at least not the dancing kind. Quieter, I hear talking and what sounds like... soundtracks? I frown a little as I look around the space. Dim lights slowly fade between soft colours and the ceiling and walls are covered in plastic, glow-in-the-dark stars and moons.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Movie night.” Dances shrugs, hands in her pockets with a quiet smile. “It’s something I like to do a few times a year. Let everyone have a break, have some time to talk to each other without music blasting in the back.”

As we move further into the space, I see different pillow forts set up throughout the halls and rooms, each with a telltale rectangle glow of a projector and shadowed bodies inside.

“What movie?”

“We’ve got a few. Have a wander. And we’ve also got some sleeping bags set up in that ballroom, if you just want to hang out and talk.” It might just be the light, but as Dances faces me, she looks just a little tired.

After some debate, I ask, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just,” she rubs her eyes, other hand on her hip, “Lights-On-The-Ocean really undersold the situation last night.”

“What happened?”

Dances gives herself a shake and my shoulder a squeeze, any dregs of tiredness vanishing. “Nothing you need to worry your freshly-tattoo self about. Enjoy yourself. I’m gonna go help keep watch.” She winks. “Make

sure you all can have a good time. I've seen all the movies too many times anyways." As she leaves, she adds, "Your hair looks great like that, by the way."

Alone, I scan the different pillow forts and stick my head in the nearest one. Something with very fast cars and a lot of guns. *No thanks*. Needles is in the second one, some kind of horror movie if I had to guess by the church and the tense strings. I'm about to leave, but Needles notices me and waves me over.

As I step inside, I notice there's not a projector, the movie just plays on the wall. But Needles' eyes are glowing silver. "Are you doing that?"

"Neat trick, huh?" They pat the pillow next to them. "Care to join?"

"Sorry, I'm not really a horror fan."

They hold their hands up, unbothered. "Fair enough. How's the tattoo feeling?"

"Good. A little sore, but good."

"And the rest of you?"

Despite the music telling me I should feel scared, I just feel elated all over again. "I went for a run last night for the first time since eighth grade. And I'm not even sore today."

Needles' expression softens. "Beautiful." They clap me on the shoulder, "Let me know if you ever want to pick up skateboarding," then nod me out. "You also might want to skedaddle if you're not a fan of horror. Things are about to get bloody."

"Oh. Thanks." I hurry out and back into the hall.

The third fort I peek into is playing *My Neighbor Totoro*, right at the first cat-bus scene. I step inside fully and settle onto the pillows at the back, not wanting to disturb the others. With all the energy, I was hoping to dance tonight, but this is fun in its own way. Even if I can't stop my leg from bouncing.

"Have you slept?"

I turn towards the voice. Diamonds-For-Eyes sits cross-legged at the very back of the fort, eyes glowing a cold blue. I frown. "I wouldn't have pegged you for such a whimsical movie."

He rolls his eyes, but persists. "I mean it. Have you slept since you got your Other?"

"The first night, I guess, but not since. I'm not tired."

He frowns. "Okay, but you still need to sleep. You'll go squirrely otherwise. Your brain needs time to reset, even if your body doesn't."

Instead of finding him annoying, I can't help but giggle. "How am I supposed to sleep when I feel this good? It's hard enough to sit still and watch the movie."

"Melatonin works. You can get it over the counter." He shifts where he's sitting. "I can probably get you something stronger if that really doesn't work."

I frown and sit up, turning to face him fully. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I'm serious. It's nothing illegal, don't worry."

"No, I mean, you go from being, frankly, kind of a dick, to so concerned you're offering to get me sleeping pills?"

Diamonds-For-Eyes shrugs, brings one knee up and wraps his arms around it. "You're in the know now, I don't have to watch what I say. And I don't want anyone to lose their minds because they forget to sleep." His eyes narrow. "And Dances seems to be rather lax about telling you important things."

"Dances-In-The-Streets. She told you that."

I expect him to roll his eyes again or snap at me, but he just sighs heavily with something like pity. "You really need this, huh? What's your story?"

Leaning away from him, I wrinkle my nose. "First of all, what's that supposed to mean? And second of all, why would I tell you anything so personal?" I gesture flippantly at him. "How about you start?"

He shrugs. "I don't have a good excuse. I was just bored and before I knew it, it was too hard to leave."

“Too hard?” I raise an eyebrow. “I really don’t think Dances or anyone is keeping you here.”

His expression hardens. “No, but it’s not so simple to go back to reality. If you stay a year or two, sure. But three? Five? Ten? After you’ve had to cut off almost everyone who knew you before when they start asking questions about why you’re not aging? By that point, you’re on your own, the world thinks you’re in your mid-twenties and how are you supposed to explain you’ve been a teenager for a decade?”

“That sounds like a you problem. I mean, Needles has a whole tattoo studio.”

“Yeah, well not everyone has a sob story good enough to convince Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown to just drop a tattoo studio into their lap,” he snaps.

And if the snapping didn’t get the attention of everyone in the fort, the movie flickering and dying certainly turned head towards the back.

Under the annoyed eyes of the small space, Diamonds-For-Eyes gets to his feet and storms out, muttering, “You know what, forget it. Lose your mind for all I care. I tried.”

I watch him leave, then look back to the others still inside. We all share a collective look of “Well, that was weird.” Maybe it makes me a bad person, but I can’t help but relish being on this side of the stare for once.

Fort going dark, we filter out in search of another movie. I’m debating going and looking for Dances instead when—

“Hey, Wings!” Feathers waves from a doorway down the hall.

“Feathers, hey!” I don’t know that I’ve seen her at a party since our talk at school. “And it’s actually Paper-Wings now,” I say, standing taller as I move closer.

“Cool! Your movie finished?”

I glance back at the fort, Diamonds-For-Eyes nowhere to be seen. “Something like that.”

Feathers waves me into her room. “Come sit! I heard they’re watching the whole *Indiana Jones* trilogy in here.”

I could take or leave *Indiana Jones*, but it’s still exciting to be invited to anything, even something as small as this. My Other floats closer to Feathers as we find a seat among the blankets and pillows, checking her out, before returning to its usual orbit. I expect to see the other people Feathers has hung out with at the parties before, but it’s just her tonight.

A Two- or Three-Name with orange eyes leans back in an armchair that barely fits under the lofted sheets and waits for a few more people to get settled before starting the movie.

I only half pay attention to the movie, lying down and stretching out. Half the time I just close my eyes and watch my Other. But Feathers keeps quietly laughing at parts where nothing funny is happening. The fifth or sixth time it happens, I open my eyes and turn my head towards Feathers to whisper, “What do you keep laughing at?”

Her attention snaps to my sharply. “I didn’t realize I was doing that out loud...”

“It’s fine, I’m just curious.”

“Just,” Feathers gestures vaguely at the movie, “inaccuracies.”

“Oh?”

Feathers lies down next to me and continues in a hushed voice, “My mom’s an archaeologist. Like, a real one. When I was a kid, I wanted to watch these movies because the other kids in my class had seen them.” She holds a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. “She spent the whole time mumbling to herself about how inaccurate everything was.”

I snort. “That’ll really kill the vibe, huh?”

“I loved it.” Feathers toys with her fingers with a wistful smile. “We’re both collectors. She collects her artifacts and I collect my feathers. She’s actually in Türkiye right now on a dig.”

“Woah, that’s so cool.” I turn onto my side to face her fully, propping my chin up on a hand. “Has she found any... tombs?”

Feathers laughs loud enough someone shushes her. “*Tombs?*”

“I don’t know what archaeologists do, alright?”

“She’s at Göbekli Tepe. It’s this megalithic structure that we’re still not fully sure what it was. She’s helping excavate some of the buildings around it.”

“Damn. I wish my dads were a fraction as cool as your mom. What’s your other parent like?”

Feather gives me a smile, but it’s tight-lipped and she looks off to the side. “He’s alright, I guess.”

“Oh.” I take the hint and leave it alone immediately. We watch more of the movie in silence.

At the part where faces start getting melted, Amy says quietly, “He’s... He’s less than alright. He really sucks actually.”

I weigh saying something or leaving room for her to say more—or not—but eventually ask, “What brand of suck?”

“The kind of suck the courts overlook.” Despite the body heat and blankets, Amy shivers. “He doesn’t live with us anymore, but they’re not officially separated.”

“Why not?”

Amy shrugs, then twists a strand of hair around her finger. “Mom’s way of trying to keep me safe. She’s worried because she travels so much he’d get custody if they formally separated.” Amy sizes me up before leaning even closer and whispering, “She’ll never admit it, but I’m pretty sure she bribed him to stay away.”

“Damn,” I breathe back. “Who are you staying with right now then?”

“As far as everyone else is concerned, him. But,” she shrugs again with a small smile, “it’s just me.”

Hesitantly, I take her hand and give it a quick squeeze before letting go. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

The gesture feels awkward and clumsy, but Amy gives me a wide smile back.

As the movie ends, I sit up and stretch, stomach growling. I look around and ask no one in particular, “Are there any snacks around?”

“I think I heard there were some somewhere.” Feathers nods towards the door to the fort. “Want to go foraging?”

We duck back into the hallway and wander through the massive rooms, catching bits of soundtracks and dramatic confrontations as we go. Eventually, we learn the snacks are in the sleeping bag-filled ballroom upstairs.

Needles leans against the railing by the main entrance, someone from their tightrope group talking to them in a low voice. Whatever they’re saying, Needles looked peeved. Feathers gives me a questioning look as we make our way up the stairs, but I just shrug.

The door opens behind us and Needles’ expression sharpens. “Hey, you got a problem with me?”

“No,” Diamonds-For-Eyes says flatly.

“Are you sure?” When Diamonds-For-Eyes ignores them, Needles saunters over to the railing on the other side, following Diamonds-For-Eyes’ path. “You know, I always thought you just didn’t like me, if I’d known you were jealous—”

“I’m not jealous.” Diamonds-For-Eyes slices a hand through the air as if to cut that train of thought off. “I’m pissed some people get special treatment.”

The laugh that comes out of Needles sends shivers down my spine, and not in the good way. More of the horror movie kind of way. “Oh yeah, because my life has famously been such a walk in the fucking park.”

Feathers and I remain frozen on the stairs, caught in the middle of the exchange. After that laugh, I’m almost scared to move and Feathers isn’t looking much braver.

Diamonds-For-Eyes scoffs. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“It’s got everything to do with it!”

“Enlighten me.”

Needles cocks their head to the side sharply, gripping the railing. “*Some* people have parents who will let them crash in their basement for years on end and *some* people,” the snap their head to the other side, grip visibly tightening, “get ‘Sorry kiddo, but think of what the congregation will say.’ Or,” Needles holds both their hands up in some kind of sinister jazz hands, “better yet, ‘Get your shit and come back when you straighten out.’”

The raised voices have called more people to the entrance.

Diamonds-For-Eyes is unmoved by the words, unless you count more irritated. “So you think you deserve handouts?”

Needles leans so far over the railing I’m convinced they’re going to leap over it, eyes glowing silver and every tattoo on their legs lighting up, too. “Yeah, actually, I think I do deserve some help.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Not my fault you got access to indefinite youth and still managed to squander all of it.”

I don’t know what nerve that strikes, but Diamonds-For-Eyes’ eyes flash icy blue. I’d never considered the Others as being able to do something... violent, but as both Needles and Diamonds-For-Eyes move towards the stairs, I decide I don’t want to find out the hard way. I grab Feathers and pull her the rest of the way up.

Needles holds their arms out to the sides. “Go ahead. I’d bet I know which one of us has been in more fistfights.”

I’m convinced Diamonds-For-Eyes is going to take the bait when Dances bursts in the front door. “Hey!” She strides purposefully up the stairs and puts herself between the two of them, physically pushing them to take a step back from her and by extension each other. “Knock it off.”

Diamonds-For-Eyes throws a hand out over top of Dances head at Needles, who just waves. “They started it!”

“I don’t care,” Dances says, annoyed. “I said knock it off.”

Needles just crosses their arms, eyes and tattoos still brightening and dimming in waves.

Diamonds-For-Eyes looks like he's about to say something, then shakes his head. "Fuck this. Fuck all of this." He backs down the stairs, jabbing at finger at Dances, "Fuck you," earning an outcry for the gathered crowd, myself included. Then Needles, "fuck *you* in particular."

Needles just silently flips him off.

Without me realizing, Feathers has latched onto my arm, hiding behind me. Now that I've noticed, I put a hand on top of hers. *One-Names are delicate.*

Diamonds-For-Eyes casts an accusatory glare around the whole room, ending uncomfortably on me. "You're all living in a delusion."

It's quick, but I think I catch ultraviolet in Dances' irises. She descends several steps as Diamonds-For-Eyes reaches the main floor. "Why don't you head home. Cool off," she says evenly. "You're running everyone else's night."

Diamonds-For-Eyes looks at Dances with such disgust it makes my head heat. "You want to talk about ruining things? Why don't you tell them where you were last night?"

"I have," Dances says, unphased. "I was helping Lights-On-The-Ocean with something."

"Yeah, I bet you were."

"If you have a problem with me, why don't you take it up with Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown?"

Diamonds-For-Eyes recoils. "I'd rather take my chances with you than that manipulative bitch."

Dances' hair electrifies, the glow-in-the-dark stars and moons turning from soft green to a sickly red as her hands clench into fists. "Get out." The steps under her feet ripple with electricity like a barely contained thundercloud. "I'm done with you."

Diamonds-For-Eyes' expression falters, anger giving way to dread. "Wait, Dances—"

“Don’t call me that, and get *out!*” The whole room flashes with ultraviolet lightning. “See if another Four-Name will take you, I don’t care. But you’re not setting foot in a party of mine again.”

For a few moments, Diamonds-For-Eyes stammers helplessly, but none of the gazes he meets offer him any sympathy, least of all me. Finally, his expression hardens again. “Forget it. I was done with this bullshit anyway.”

He’s barely out the door, a tense silence just settling, when Dances’ eyes glow again. She sighs dramatically before opening a phase in the stairs under her, “What—” getting cut off as she sticks her head through.

The room darkens before Dances re-emerges, causing a wave of confused voices not just from this room, but the whole mansion. When the lights come back on, the colours have been replaced with regular off-white, like she turned the actual house lights on.

Dances stands, making pointed eye contact with Needles, but says loud enough to be heard throughout the room, “Three-Names, start Phasing everyone home.”

Needles nods solemnly and takes the stairs two at a time to disappear into the upper floor, other Three-Names that had gathered splitting off in different directions.

“Two-Names, gather everyone up to someone who can Phase them home.” There’s more murmured confusion, but the calm authority in Dances’ voice leaves no room for argument.

“What’s going on?” someone asks.

“Nothing to worry about.” Dances gives an easy smile, even as she opens a Phase and ushers someone through. “Out lookouts are just doing their job and let us know our party’s going to get crashed soon.”

Sounds like cops. I turn to Feathers. Her eyes are wide, terrified. “If they try and call my mom or—”

People scatter as Dances makes her way up to me. She puts a hand on my arm, brows upturned. “Do you need to get out of here?”

I open my mouth, but then look back to Feathers, still holding me tightly. “No, I can help. But,” I gently push Feathers towards Dances, “Feathers needs to go.”

Dances gives me arm a squeeze and a proud smile before she puts an arm around a shaking Feathers’ shoulders and leads her to a Phase in the nearest wall.

Feathers mouths a silent “Thank you” over her shoulder as she steps through.

“What do I do?”

Dances quickly scans the space, the flurry of motion as people move around. “Sweep the upper floor. I assume Needles went to the ballroom. Bring people there.”

My Other spins fast enough I can see it every time I blink, a flashing light in time to my pounding heart. I throw open doors and duck into rooms, telling people it’s time to go and pointing them towards the ballroom.

I pull up short as a Three-Name with red eyes pops out of the wall in front of me. She looks around, then gives me a long blink before asking, “How close are we to getting gone?”

“Um,” I glance back the way I came. The sounds of people moving and talking are still coming through loud and clear, “I don’t think that close.”

She presses her lips together, sticks her head back in the Phase, talking muffled, then steps inside the mansion. “Tell anyone you see to get away from any doors, move towards the center of the place,” she says quickly as she takes off.

“How come?”

Over her shoulder she calls, “It’s not much, but it might buy them a bit more time.”

My heart skips a beat and my resolve falters. I shift my weight between my legs, one to search for more people, the other to run towards the ballroom and a way out. *I got Amy out. And I did get some other people.*

That's enough, right? Cupping my mouth, I shout half-heartedly, "If you can hear me, we gotta go! Get to the ballroom or someone downstairs!"

Without waiting to see if anyone responds, I run for the ballroom.

There are still more than a dozen people inside. Both Needles and the red-eyed Three-Name open Phase after Phase in the walls.

Panting, I jog over to Needles. They give me a quick nod and go back to shoving people out of the room. I'm about to say something when a door slams from downstairs, followed by heavy footfalls. Panic stabs my stomach and I back farther away from the door, some others in the room yelping.

"C'mon, get a move on!" Red Eyes shouts over the rising panic, grabbing the nearest person.

Needles gives me a crooked grin as they press their hands against the wall again. "Be real convenient if you knew how to Phase right about now, huh?"

I'm too frozen in place to even respond. Another door slams, but the voices that cry out next are distinctly adult-like and more confused than alarmed. I frown. "What was that?"

"I think that was Dances trying to buy us some more time." Needles winks. "The cops don't know the new walls are fake."

I relax for a fraction of a second before a radio crackles somewhere nearby. Needles tenses. They close their eyes, scan the room, lock eyes with the other Three-Name, who just gives a curt nod before jumping through a Phase. There are still a handful of teens inside when the door bursts open to reveal cops.

Before the alarm has time to finish moving through me, Needles grabs me by the back of my shirt and drags me through a Phase, closing it behind us.

We both spill out of my closet and tumble to the floor. I suck in a breath through my teeth, head snapping towards my door, bracing for my dad's to react to the thud.

Needles groans and sits up, looking confused. “Whoops. I meant to take us to my place.”

Catching my breath, still tensed, I ask, voice coming out strained, “What about everyone else?” The words feel like more of an obligation than genuine.

Needles pushes themselves up, rubbing their shoulder. “It was just some One-Names. We got everyone with an Other out from the looks of it.”

“Are they going to just let them go? Isn’t breaking into a house, like, a *crime crime*?”

Needles holds their hands up, unbothered. “Probably just get trespassing, if anything at all.” When I just stare at them, alarmed, they lightly punch my shoulder. “Don’t worry, we’ll go bail out anyone who doesn’t have parents to call.”

We sit in silence for several long moments before I say, “Thanks for taking me with you.”

“Of course.” Needles claps me on the back. “You’re one of us now, remember?”

I lie down on my bedroom floor, smiling quietly in spite of myself, and close my eyes to watch my Other dance on the backs of my eyelids. It certainly seems like it enjoyed the excitement. When I open them again, Needles has pulled their knees to their chest, expression blank but heavy.

“You okay?”

“Figures Diamonds manages to dip out right before everything goes to shit.”

“You don’t—You don’t think he called the cops, do you?”

“No, he doesn’t have the nerve,” they admit, though the words are bitter. “But I certainly won’t miss him.”

Feeling a little clumsy, I brush my knuckles along their arm. “He’s an asshole, don’t let him get to you.”

Needles rests their cheek on their knees. “It’s not him. Some memories just have a way of lingering once you bring them up.” Their eyes, still faintly

silver, dart around the space, seeing something I can't. "I miss—" They scrunch their face up, shake their head and straighten, eyes going dark. "Actually, I don't miss shit." Needles stands and offers me a hand up.

I let them pull me to my feet, still unusually steady even after everything.

"What are you grinning about?"

I take a breath and let it out in a sigh. "Just enjoying being able to stand on my own two feet."

Needles nods, then glances at my closet. "Well. I should probably get going." They give me a two-fingered salute as they step inside. "You handled tonight like a pro."

A nervous laugh bubbles out of me. "Thanks..."

Before they leave, they add, "Just remember self-preservation isn't a crime." Then I'm alone in my room again.

The words barely have time to process before I'm distracted by my room getting bathed in lime light. I start, blinking, and catch a glimpse of myself in the reflection of my window. My irises glow lime green. And there's this... not quite a pull, more like this feeling of someone pushing their hand up against a wall I'm leaning on. Without thinking, I reach back.

My eyes dim and Dances peers out of my closet a second later. She looks worried and wraps me up in a hug. "Thank you for picking up. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I say, a little dazed. "Yeah, I'm fine. Needles got me out."

Dances pulls back, looking me up and down. "You're sure?"

"Yeah, but what... what was that?"

"Since you have an Other now, the calling is more of a two-way street." She shrugs. "Nice, right?"

"Yeah. Nice." Hesitantly, I ask, "How did things shake out?"

Hands still on my shoulders, Dances sags, suddenly looking exhausted. "I really thought it would be okay," she mutters, then straightens. "It's fine. Lights-On-The-Ocean owes me big time anyway. Guess I'll be calling that in sooner than expected."

Dances seems tired, but not worried, not alarmed. I try to settle my own unease and I put my hands over hers. “Are you... Do you want some company?” I nod towards my bed. “I’ll wake you before my dads get up.”

She looks towards my bed longingly. “Are you sure?”

“I won’t be using it tonight.”

Dances leans her head against my shoulder for a moment, then squeezes my hand, kicks off her shoes and curls up on top of my duvet. “Thanks, Wings. I owe you one.”

“Don’t mention it,” I say as I sit at my desk and pull out my sketchbook again. But Dances is already out, breathing softly. Sleep washes her face with a child-like light. I erase the lines of whatever I was going to draw and decide to immortalize this version of Dances instead.

THREE WEEKS BEFORE

I'M UP BEFORE MY alarm, something that's become common. I stretch in bed, smiling to myself and still relishing the experience of waking up not being in pain. It's like the whole world has been washed in a light that's softened all the painful edges.

I've been sleeping every three or four days and that seems to be plenty to keep me from going "squirrely," whatever that's supposed to mean. As I get ready, I kick the clothes I wore running the night before under my bed, in case my dad's notice and ask questions. By the time I'm finished, I still have a bit before my dad will expect me downstairs, so I take some time to draw. I've started working on a comic. Nothing serious, just playing around with different panels, disjointed and mismatched scenes.

Dad is on his way out the door as I come down the stairs. He pauses to give me a wave and smile that's still a little forced. "Bye, Raina, see you tonight."

I give him a cheery wave. "Have a good day." I will say, having the Other makes it much easier to be nicer again.

I swear Dad does a double-take before he walks out the door with a mildly confused, "Thank you."

Humming to myself, I get breakfast and sit down at the kitchen table to eat.

Papa is still making his tea and he watches me almost curiously as he removes the tea leaves. "You seem happier lately."

When focus my attention on him fully, I realize it's not curiosity, but something closer to suspicion. I frown. "I'm confused."

"Confused?"

"You're saying a good thing, but you're looking at me like I've done something wrong."

"Well—" Papa sighs, looking up as he dumps the tea leaves in the garbage from memory. "It just seems like a sudden shift is all. I guess I just want to know what happened."

I shrug, but still smile, feeling the wind rushing over my face as I run. "I just feel like myself again for the first time in a long time."

"How so?"

"Having friends. More energy." When his frown deepens, I add what I hope is innocently, "Maybe I've been doing all the meds and physio long enough it's starting to really help." His expression doesn't change. "Shouldn't you be happy too?"

"I," he shakes his head, but his suspicion doesn't fully leave, "I am. If you're feeling better, that's good. Just make sure to pace yourself so you don't crash."

I roll my eyes and try not to smile. *Don't need to anymore.* "I know." I quickly finish my breakfast and head to school.

Even the bus ride feels different, songs hitting in a way they never did before. I've been trying to listen to new music to keep my Other entertained. I think it likes some weird subgenre of EDM that the playlists call "synthwave."

I'm in the library during English, half-pretending to look through books for a book report, when a shadow passes over the pages in front of me.

"Mind if I join you?"

I look up to see Amy with a few books clutched to her chest. "Go ahead."

Letting out a small breath, she sits down across from me. We read in silence for a few moments—Amy more sincerely than me—before she says, "Thank you. For the other night."

I pause, feeling a mix of pride and unease. “Glad you got out safe.”

“You too.” Amy taps a finger on the back of a book twice. “I heard not everyone did.”

Silently, I just nod.

Her finger starts tapping again and doesn’t stop until she leans over the table and says in a low voice, “Can I ask you something?”

I start, but say, “Uh, sure.”

Her brows pinch. “You’re Paper-Wings now, right?”

“Mm-hm.”

“So... then you have one of them, right?”

Despite her serious tone, I can’t help but get a little excited. “Did Dances take you to see the Others, too? Did you get a second name?”

Amy studies me the same way she did the first time we spoke in the hallway. Without judgment. “She did take me to see them. Yesterday. But I said I wanted to think about it first. So, I wanted to ask you: what’s it like having one?”

I sigh deeply, smile coming easy and wide. “It’s incredible. I’m so happy I did it. It—It feels like I have endless energy. And...” I thumb through the book in my hand, thinking about Needles making sure I got out of the mansion okay. “It’s really nice to have friends who have your back.”

“Doesn’t it scare you? Even a little?”

It hadn’t even crossed my mind to be scared, but I guess the idea of being paused could be unnerving. I shrug. “I want some extra time.” I put my hands on my lap to hide them clenching. “I think I deserve it after everything.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make it seem like I think you made a bad choice—”

“No!” I hold my hands out, then wince at how loud I sound in the otherwise quiet library. “That’s, that’s not how I took it at all. It’s,” looking to the side, I drift off to hospitals and waiting rooms, “it’s me a thing.”

“Oh, good.” Amy sits back up, hair falling as she tilts her head. “It doesn’t feel weird? Your Other doesn’t bother you or anything?”

“Nope. Well... when it first attaches itself to you it feels a little overwhelming. But in a good way. And it passes fast.” I snort. “The worst I felt was restless from all the new energy.”

“I know you haven’t had it for long, but no regrets so far?”

“None. And I mean,” I hold my hands out to the side, “if you don’t like it, you can always stop. Let the Other get bored and leave.”

“That’s true.” She hesitates before asking, “Do you think it’s worth taking what that boy said into consideration? The one who got into a fight?”

“Diamonds-For-Eyes?” I scoff, nose wrinkling. “Forget him. He went from asking if I’d slept to chewing me out in the span of ten minutes. Hardly what I’d call reliable.”

“Did he really?”

I nod.

“Rude.” Amy shakes her head, then her expression softens and she gives me a grin. “Thanks for talking to me about everything. I really appreciate it.”

“Yeah. Totally.” I playfully kick her under the table. “Let me know what you decide.” After a moment’s hesitation, I add, “If it means anything, I wouldn’t mind if you stuck around.”

Amy laughs, but takes the compliment with more ease than I think I’ll ever be able to. “Aw! Thanks.”

At the end of the day, Dances is waiting for me outside. She loops her arm through mine as soon as I’m in looping distance. “Want to come over to my place tonight before the party? I’ve got takeout on the way,” she adds with a wink, “and I ordered enough for two.”

“The sounds great.” I toy with the dyed ends of my hair. “Maybe we can touch these up, too.”

“You got it.”

As we walk to her place, Dances talks about a dance she's working on, but I struggle to listen fully over the thought that this is the first time we've been on our own since she slept over at my place. She hasn't been around as much—outside of the parties—since then. Or at least not around me. I look for a break in her speech to ask, “Can I ask something?”

Dances pauses mid-word, attentive. “Of course.”

“Was... Was offering for you to sleep over... too much?”

She cocks her head. “Too much?”

“I don't know, like... overstepping?” I half shrug, half cringe. “I didn't really think about it, you just looked tired and it seemed like you were stressed and I don't like being alone when I'm stressed so I offered—” I pause to take a breath, but find the words gone when I let it out.

Dances considers me for a moment before she loops her other arm through mine as well and leans her head on my shoulder. “No, it wasn't too much. It was sweet. And I did need it.” Our pace slows as she briefly turns her face into my shoulder. “There's... There's been a lot of heavy things going on lately.”

“Heavy how?”

Dances lifts her head up to look at the sky, her usual spark dimming. “Do you ever feel like you're just watching the same movie over and over again?”

My shoulders creep up, my newfound energy and body still too new to feel comfortable thinking about the before. “Yeah.”

“Heavy like that.”

“I'm sorry.”

Dances shakes herself off and quickens our pace, brightening again. “Don't be. You've done plenty to help.”

The takeout is waiting out front of Dances' apartment, the smell of Indian food drifting up from the plastic bag. Upstairs, Dances grabs some utensils and we eat curry and butter chicken straight out of the containers.

“What movie did you end up watching?” Dances pointedly pouts at nothing. “Before our party was so rudely crashed.”

I think about asking after the people who didn’t get out, but instead just say, “Well, I tried to watch *My Neighbor Totoro*, but Diamonds-For-Eyes stormed off in the middle of it.”

Dances rubs her temple, like just saying his name gave her a headache, making a face to match.

“Has he tried to... talk to any of the other Four-Names?”

“No,” Dances says, face relaxing into a mix of relief and surprise. “No, he’s gone. Back out into the real world once his Other leaves.”

“Could he keep it around somehow? Like if he kept it entertained other ways.”

“Maybe for a bit. The Others don’t like to be on their own.” Dances’ brow furrows. “I know he sucked, but I feel a little bad.”

“Why?” “When people leave, especially when they’ve been around a while, they usually go in pairs, or a group. Makes it a bit easier.”

I nod and take another bite, mulling the information over as I chew. “Anyway, I ended up watching *Indiana Jones* with A—Feathers.”

“You sh—” Dances presses her lips together, but smiles, shifting to cross her legs. “You two know each other?”

“Sort of. We’re in English together.” I push around some rice, but smile cautiously to myself. “But we’ve been talking more since we started coming to the parties.”

“Good! I like when all my people are friends.”

“She said you took her to get an Other.”

Dances toys with a takeout lid. “I did.” Her brow wrinkles and she bites her lip, looking off to the side. “Sad to say, but other than you, she had one of the better reactions I’ve had recently.”

“She came to ask me what it felt like. To have an Other.”

Dances’ snaps her attention to me, then tries to act like she didn’t. “Oh? And... what did you tell her?”

I give her an easy smile and lean back into the couch. “I told her to go for it. I’ve got no regrets.” Just as quickly, I sit up straight again, too excited and vibrating in my seat. “I’ve been taking my phone on my runs to keep track of how far I’m going. I ran ten kilometers last night.”

Dances squeals and leans over to wrap her arms around my waist, ducking to avoid hitting my fork. “I’m so happy for you!”

A phone rings.

Not my phone, but one from somewhere in Dances’ apartment.

I look around the space, frowning. “You have a landline?”

“Sort of.” Dances looks equally as confused and I follow her gaze to a worn beige corded phone hanging next to the front door. “It’s just for the apartment. If someone needs to be buzzed in.” She gives me a look. “But I have no idea who it would be.”

“Someone from the parties?”

“No,” Dances says as she stands, apprehensive, “anyone who’d be coming over would just Phase into the stairwell and knock.”

I shrink deeper into the couch cushions and ask quietly, like saying the words louder might make them true, “You don’t think it’s the cops, do you?”

“No.” Dances says certainly, but then pauses, mouth still open. She shakes her head. “No, there’s no way they’d be able to find me, even if they knew what name to look for.” She pauses, hand over the phone as it rings, insistent. “Only one way to find out I guess.”

The phone clicks as she picks it up, back to me. “Hello?” It’s too quiet for me to hear the other end of the conversation, but Dances tenses right up, back going rigid. “If she is here, she’s not with me.” Her head almost turns towards me, but stops at the last second. “No, I haven’t... Yeah, sorry about that. Best of luck.”

The phone clicks as she hangs up.

Leaning to try and catch Dances’ eye, I ask, “Who was it?”

She waits too long to turn around and when she does, it's with a wince. "I think it was your dads..."

I feel like I got the wind knocked out of me. I grip the arm of the couch. "You're not serious."

"It was two very high-strung men asking if I'd seen their teenage daughter who has streaks in her hair." Dances holds her hands out to the sides. "You're not the only one in the world, but here..."

I'm on my feet before I realize, backing away, but I don't know from what. *This can't be happening.* I look around Dances' apartment, seeing what my dads would see if they come up here: a teenager living on her own with no parents in sight. *Not* the kind of place they're going to let me come back to once they know. If they're planning on letting me come back in the first place.

"Hey, hey. It's okay." Dances closes the space between us, putting two steadying hands on my arms. "They can't get in. It's a locked building. It seems like they're just," she forces a smile that looks more like a grimace, "calling literally every apartment."

I press a hand to my head. *I can't believe this is happening.*

"No one else is going to know who you are. They'll have to leave eventually."

The burning stares of Olivia and everyone else feel as present as if they'd leaked out of my memories into the kitchen behind me. "I think you're underestimating my dads."

"It'll be alright." Dances gently coaxes me back towards the couch. "C'mon, the food's getting cold."

I let her pull me back down, but keep my gaze fixed on the landline and my ears listening for my phone. I'm just beginning to relax when the landline rings again.

Burying my face in my hands, I sink back into the couch, hoping the cushions will swallow me whole. *This is really happening.*

With a huff Dances stands and marches over, answering with a much sharper, “*Hello?*” Her finger taps on the receiver. “I already told you, no. *Defensive?*” Even though they can’t see her, Dances put her free hand on her hip, drawing herself up taller. “As far as I know, you’re two random men calling my apartment. Sorry if I’m not very talkative and a little annoyed. You’re interrupting our meal.” With that, Dances hangs up.

When I dare to peek out from behind my fingers, red from my neck to my ears, she’s still staring at the phone, both hands on her hips. When it rings *again*, she simply takes it off the hook, letting it dangle. “There.”

I sigh into my hands, muttering nothings to myself.

Then my phone starts going off.

“Oh my fucking god!” I throw my hands up and don’t even bother answering, I just grab my bag and start putting on my shoes.

“Wings? Where are you—”

“It’s done,” I snap, amazed I don’t rip my laces as I tighten them. “It’s ruined. They’re not going to leave me alone until I go out there.” As much as I don’t want to leave, I want my dads to find a way in here even less.

“You can turn your phone off.”

“Yeah, and then what are they gonna do?” I gesture sharply between us. “I know neither of us want to get the cops involved, especially after the mansion party.”

Dances bites her lip, but doesn’t contradict me.

I resist the urge to slam Dances’ door open only because she’s not the one I’m mad at and I don’t want to dent her wall. “Unbelievable,” I mutter to myself, taking the stairs so I can stomp all the way down them.

I hear Dances following me, but I don’t turn around. “Please don’t.” Her footsteps stop. “Just... I promise this will be easier if you let me handle this.”

“Are you sure?”

I can't handle anyone watching this again. Straightening, I blink furiously. I still keep my gaze ahead. "Yeah." I force a smile into my voice. "I'll see you tonight."

After some hesitation, she says firmly, "You will," and I hear Dances' go back up the stairs and the stairwell door close.

I will, I will, I will, I chant with each step, reciting the words like a promise, a spell.

Dad is talking into the intercom and Papa is hovering over his shoulder nervously when I reach the lobby. Papa notices me first, right as I approach the doors, and taps Dad's shoulder, who looks up, then hangs up.

I swing the glass door open forcefully, hovering in the doorway. Propping the door open with my foot—on the very, very, *very* off chance they let me go back upstairs when this is done—I throw my arms out to the sides. "Uh, hi?"

Dad just silently stares me down, arms crossed.

Papa starts rambling, "I know you said you wanted space, you wanted this one thing, but you didn't let us know where you were going after school today."

"And you show up instead of," I give an overexaggerated shrug, looking around at nothing, "I don't know, texting me first?"

Still tripping over his words, Papa continues, "We didn't trust you to be honest with us."

I raise an eyebrow and try not to start. I haven't been, but they should have no way of knowing that. "What gives you that idea?"

Dad finally speaks up, "We know you've been out of the house at night."

I'm so convinced they're bluffing to try and get me to confess to something and so genuinely confused that it doesn't even feel like a lie when I say, "No?"

Papa looks hurt, but Dad is just cold as he pulls out his phone, flips through a few things and then holds out the screen for me to see. "Then why does your phone put you at the park at midnight last night?"

I blink at the screen, not convinced what I'm seeing is even real. It's a screenshot from a location-sharing app, showing me at the park last night on my run. But I haven't had that app turned on on my phone since I started high school. "My location isn't even on—" I take out my own phone, only to find my location is, in fact, on. A blue beacon on a map. "How—When?" I blink harder, like that will make it go away. "Did you guys go through my phone? What the hell!"

"We didn't want to," Papa protests. "But you've been so cagey with us and then this past week or so you've been acting strangely but you insist nothing's going on." He holds out his hands pleading. "You said you wanted space, so we didn't want to press you."

My heart pounds in my chest, thinking what might have happened if I took my phone to the parties. "So you spy on me instead?"

"I really hoped we wouldn't find anything. It would just be to ease our worries and you never would have known."

I open and close my mouth several times. My Other spins so fast it's distracting and makes it hard to think. Finally, I take a long breath in and out. "Okay. Fine. Not fine, but for now, *fine*." My hands curl into fists at my side. "Why did this have to happen now? *Here*? Did you have to *barge in* and ruin my afternoon?"

"When you didn't tell us where you were going, with you being out at night, I'm sorry for assuming the worst—"

Dad cuts Papa off, "I wanted to be sure we caught you before you left."

I press my hands together, swallowing down what I would have been an unhinged laugh. "To recap. Because I've asked for some privacy and I've been acting 'strange,' you go through my phone, see me leave the house at night *once* and decide this can't wait. You need to come drag me home by calling *every apartment in the building*."

"Well, where were you last night?"

"I needed some air. I went for a walk."

Dad gives me a skeptical glare. "Is that the best you can come up with?"

I throw my hands up in defeat. “Why bother? It doesn’t matter what I say, you’re already convinced yourselves I’m lying.” *And it’s not even that far from the truth.*

Papa glances upwards and I turn red as I realize more than one person is staring at us from their windows. I lie to myself that Dances isn’t one of them.

“We’re going home,” Dad says when the silence stretches on. “Now. And you’re grounded until further notice.”

My anger fizzles out into something sadder, so, face still burning, I let the door close and follow after my dads back to the car. In true panicked fashion, they’ve got their hazards on, parked in a no-parking zone. Papa opens the back door for me in what I guess is meant to be some kind of olive branch. I pointedly ignore him and slam the door shut after me.

I plant my elbow on the window and prop my chin up to stare out it so I can avoid looking at them. As we drive away, I twist my hand to cover my mouth. I don’t mean to start crying.

It’s not that I’m grounded and that means I can’t see Dances. I can get around that. It’s that *they don’t know that*. As far as they’re concerned, they’re willing to isolate me from the one friend I have for nothing more than their own paranoia. So even though I know it doesn’t really mean I can’t see Dances or anyone else, it still stings.

A lot.

The car ride home is silent and I shut myself in my room the second I’m in the door. I face-plant on my bed and let out a muffled shriek into my pillow.

I end up lying on my side, staring out the window and watching the sun set, too laser-focused on leaving tonight and too emotionally volatile to cajole myself into doing anything else.

One of my dads knocks at some point. I think he opens the door, but by that point I’ve put my headphones on and turned the volume up as loud as I can stand.

An eternity later, the sun dips below the horizon and the house settles. All but throwing myself out of bed, I get dressed and put my hair up again to show off my tattoo, now almost fully healed. I don't even bother to sit when I call Dances and she almost hits me when she opens my closet door.

She gives me a pained smile and pitying, "Hey—"

"Let's just go."

Dances seems to understand and just silently takes my hand, giving it a squeeze. I squeeze back hard.

The strip mall is just as glorious as I left it, full of pulsing music and falling stars. It seems just a little... not emptier exactly, but there seem to be more new faces and less familiar ones. *I wonder if the mansion incident scared some people off...*

Dances gently stops me when we get to the top of the escalators. "Do you want to talk?" she asks softly.

My lip quivers. "I want to dance." My Other brightens at the words.

After a moment, Dances nods firmly, face set in an expression of deep understanding. She pulls back up her usual spark. "Then let's dance."

I practically drag her down to the dancefloor. She reels in her usual gravity and lets us get entwined in the crowd, the music switching mid-song to something fast and bass-y. Thanks to my Other, I can throw myself into the movements like never before, no longer having to worry about what it'll mean tomorrow. I jump and turn and throw my arms above my head until my muscles burn, I'm dizzy and covered in sweat. In an electric haze, I drift between the lights of the strip mall and the lights when I close my eyes, able to see everyone with an Other in the whole building. A multi-coloured constellation brought down to Earth.

Every time I re-emerge, Dances is there, fingers in mine. Hands laced behind my neck. It's euphoric and painful all at once.

Until one time I open my eyes and I'm convinced everyone is staring at me. I can't even see most people's faces clearly between the dim lights and the constant motion, but I can still feel all of them on me.

Dances notices the shift, turning me to face her fully. “Hey, what’s going on?”

I’m already breathing so hard that it doesn’t get any faster, just harder to pull in air. All I can do is shake my head.

“It’s okay, you’re okay. C’mon, let’s get you some air.” Like magic, Dances turns her gravity back on and the crowd warps to let us detangle ourselves with ease. “I think Needles found a way onto the roof.”

The rungs of the maintenance ladder are rusty and cold against my palms. It’s not a far climb, but Dances keeps a hand on my back. I’m slow, almost dazed at first. But then I’m climbing faster, faster to get outside.

I burst out onto the roof, suddenly able to hear something other than the roaring in my ears. The night air is the perfect temperature and there’s a faint breeze that whistles as it catches on a vent, and rustles loose paper somewhere.

Chills pass through me in waves. I sit down—more fall down, really—hard and slowly come back to myself while I catch my breath.

“Atta girl.” Behind me, Dances’ eyes glow for a moment and the hatch we climbed through disappears. “There. Some privacy for you.”

“Sorry.” I wipe my eyes. I’m not crying. “I don’t know what that was.”

“It’s okay. I don’t blame you. This afternoon was... a lot. I’m sure.”

I wince, hiding my face behind tucked up knees and shaking my head. “Why did it hit me now?”

“Who knows.” After a moment, she adds, “And *I’m* sorry. It sucks. Feeling like your parents don’t care about you.”

I scoff, almost laugh. “I think the problem is they care too much.”

Dances starts and stops several sentences before finally saying slowly, “I don’t want to pry, but it kinda seemed like you... knew what was coming. Have they,” I can hear her own wince as she asks, “done something like that before?”

Sucking in a long breath, I crane my neck to look up at the sky—no stars, just clouds reflecting light pollution—and sigh. “Yeah. Yeah, they’ve done that before.”

Dances looks a little horrified. “More than once?”

I shake my head. “Just once. Right before I met you. I’d kind of made friends with this girl in my art class, Olivia.” I shake my head again, resting my chin on my knees and looking off to the side. “It was like... 1 AM. I was at her house with a few other girls for a sleepover.” I force a laugh. “How sad is it that I was seventeen before I had my first sleepover? I thought my dads would’ve gone to bed by then, so I left my phone somewhere.”

It’s weird, but the thing I remember most vividly was that, right before, I was eating popcorn. I can still feel the salt and butter stuck to my fingers.

“It never even crossed my mind that it was my dads knocking because,” I laugh again, less forced, more bitter, “what an unhinged thing to do. I mean, her house was on the other side of town.” I wipe my eyes again. I’m crying this time. “I know it sounds dramatic, but in that moment, I just wanted to curl up and die.” My hands grip the fabric of my pants. “Even with so many nights spent in hospitals not knowing why I was in so much pain, or on the bathroom floor too exhausted to sleep and too sick to eat... I still really think if you asked me what the worst night of my life was, I’d say it was that night.”

I didn’t mean to talk that much.

But Dances doesn’t look overwhelmed or put off or ready to bolt. She just nods and moves a little closer, dangling her legs off the edge of the roof.

“I know what you mean. Like,” she looks up and snorts softly, “don’t get me wrong, the night I got carted off to foster care was,” her expression tightens, eyes going wide, “not good. But if you asked what *hurt* the most... I think it was the first time I was supposed to see my mom and dad for a visit. They...” Dances doesn’t even finish the sentence, just shakes her head and shrugs with a watery smile. Her eyes flash ultraviolet. “No one would ever tell me anything, but I’m pretty sure they skipped town.”

“Oh, Dances...”

She blinks away tears before they can fall and shrugs. “It was a long time ago. And L—Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown got dropped off at the group home not even two weeks later. And a month after, we were gone. But hey,” her spark flickers as it tries to come back online, “I got all this out of it.”

The words don’t sound as sure as they should.

Still, she reaches for me and I move up to take her hand and dangle my legs off the roof beside her. Dances laces our fingers together and brings our hands up to sit between our faces. “I’ve got you.”

Teary-eyed again, I just tighten my grip on her hand and nod.

“And I’ve been thinking,” Dances grins, “I’m going to talk to Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown and see if she’ll make an exception for you.”

“For me? For what?”

“To let me can teach you to Phase before you’re a Three-Name.” Her nose wrinkles as her grin grows. “So you can still go running or whatever the hell else you want to do at night.”

My stomach flutters. “Really? You... You’d do that for me?”

“Of course.” She puts her arms around me in a sideways hug. “I’m not gonna let your dads cheat you out of what your Other gives you.” I swear she tenses. Just a little. “There is a catch.”

Butterflies swarm my stomach. “Oh?”

Dances pulls back, face far less serious than her words had me braced for. “You’ll probably have to meet her.”

Far more nervous bugs tickle my insides at that. But the promise of a way out of my house—a way *I* can control—overrides any nerves. “I guess I was going to meet her at some point, right?”

“Right.” She sighs, eyes un-focusing for a moment so quick I can’t parse out what emotion they’re showing, then focuses back on me. “And this is as good a reason as any.”

ONE WEEK BEFORE

“WHAT IF SHE DOESN’T like me?” I stare into the open Phase in Dances’ stairwell like it will have the answers. I’m breathing far harder than I need to, the lingering burn of fresh hair dye coating my tongue. “And I know it shouldn’t matter, but one time, Diamonds-For-Eyes said something about not feeling safe in the same room as her and for some reason that’s all I can think about right now.”

“Relax, Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown is going to love you.” Dances loops her arm through mine and pulls me into the phantom theatre curtains of the Phase. We step out into a gravel parking lot, shoes crunching as we walk. “Really, she’s not as scary as Diamonds tries to make her sound.”

My head whips between Dances and the building in front of us. It’s different from the warehouses and abandoned strip malls Dances’ parties take place in. A crooked sign reads “Piano Manufacturer,” but the name of the company has faded away. “So, there’s no reason for him to feel that way?”

Dances sighs. “Diamonds likes to talk. And I will listen to a lot more nonsense before I get annoyed than Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown will.”

“Right. Got it. Don’t run my mouth.” The pressure of looping thoughts—*I need this, I can’t mess this up, don’t mess this up*—is almost giving me a headache.

Jazzy music scatters out from the windows along with the chatter of voices as we approach the doors.

A buff woman stands in front of the doors and holds up a hand. “Two-Names only.”

Dances holds out her tattooed arm. “Dances-In-The-Streets.” I’m sure it’s more for my benefit than anything; surely everyone in here knows who Dances is.

I pull my hair back—freshly dyed for tonight with added streaks of cyan “For confidence” as Dances put it—to show my crane. “Paper-Wings.”

Nodding, the woman opens the door and lets us pass.

I let out a breath as Dances pulls me into a side hug. “You’re running with the big girls now.”

The piano factory is filled with people sitting around tables, with a smaller group slow-dancing to the jazz pouring out of a beat-up piano. There’s still the faint tinge of paint in the air if I take a deep breath—which I do, several times—and the floorboards shift and squeak under my feet. Different parts of pianos or half-assembled ones are scattered throughout the room, like pieces of art, and unused metal strings hang from the roof. Painted on the back wall is the outline of a lop-sided crown. Dances’ figure tattoo is inside, along with five other pictures.

My eyes dart around the room, trying to guess which of the girls is Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown.

“Here I was thinking I’d gotten too boring for you.” A girl with a leather jacket hanging off her shoulders comes up alongside Dances, bleached hair spiked up. “Or maybe you’d just run off on me.”

Dances spins to face her fully and I rotate to keep my place at Dances’ side. “Never.”

The girl tilts her head lazily to the side with a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes, but still seems genuine. She tucks one of Dances’ braids behind her ear. “Good.”

Dances reaches up to twirl the end of that braid around her finger, smiling a smile that I know for a fact means she has butterflies.

Silently, this girl looks to me, then back at Dances.

“This is Paper-Wings. The Two-Name I told you about. Paper-Wings, this,” Dances pushes me closer to the girl—and I don’t even fall on my face—then steps back, “is Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown.”

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown turns her gaze back to me. Her irises glow white in the way Dances’ glow ultraviolet purple. When I blink, I see a white Other spiralling up and down her body. A chill, no, a proper shiver runs through me as she leans closer, staring at me intently. Her jacket shifts, revealing a tattooed sleeve on one arm that pulses and shimmers in time with the piano notes. It almost seems to move. A crown is on her shoulder, the rest of the sleeve made of different pictures. Some I recognize from Dances’ graffitied bridge, but most I don’t.

Don’t mess it up, don’t mess it up, don’t, don’t, don’t. “Um, hi.” My voice comes out as a squeak. “I’m glad I finally get to meet you.”

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown holds a finger to her lips and my jaw clamps shut of its own accord. She puts her hands in her jeans pockets and walks around me in a slow circle, never taking her eyes off me. When, despite my best efforts, I start to fidget, she murmurs, “Stand still,” and my body does. It makes my stomach lurch and I think if my mouth weren’t glued shut, I would have let out a very unhinged laugh because *what* is happening? She pauses to brush the hair off the back of my neck. “Hm.”

When she gets back around to the front of me, my body goes back to being mine and she looks to Dances. “I need to talk to you about the accident that happened at Lights-On-The-Ocean’s party. A few loose ends.”

Dances’ face falls. Not sad exactly, but suddenly very solemn. “Right. Of course. You can talk to Wings and after she goes home—”

“I’ll talk to you first. I’m sure your little birdy can handle herself for a while.”

I’m not sure if it’s the nickname, the challenge behind the words, or the very desperate need for her to like me, but I nod. Firm and steady, and give Dances an encouraging smile.

Dances squeezes my hand as she passes to follow after Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown, who notes the gesture. Dances mouths, “Atta girl,” then squares her shoulders and trails after Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown through a door in the back of the room.

I take in the room again, looking for something to do. A few people glance my way, but none linger. When I scan the space again with closed eyes, every body has an Other orbiting them. Shaking myself off and even rubbing my arms when that fails to get rid of the chill, I wander between the different piano “sculptures.”

There are noticeably less people here than at any of Dances’ parties. Maybe a couple dozen, if that. I’m nowhere near bold enough to try and join any of the tables and there are too few people dancing for me to not feel completely self-conscious. I end up staring up at the mural on the back wall. It takes up the whole wall, floor to ceiling. Standing at the bottom of it, the history contained in the images, I feel terribly small. But after looking long enough, I notice a small paper crane perched on Dances’ figure.

Raised voices come muffled from the back room. Not everyone seems to hear the noise, but I notice more than a few heads turn towards it. The music gets louder until it drowns out the voices.

A few minutes later, Dances steps out from the back room, lips pressed into a thin line. The open door blocks most of her, but I see Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown’s hand shoot out and grab Dances’ wrist, gently tugging her back. Dances visibly sighs, but turns around. I can’t hear what’s being said over the jazz, but another hand runs down Dances’ cheek and under her chin, tilting her head up. Dances’ expression softens, but her eyes remain pinched. Even as she reaches a hand out behind the door, maybe to run her fingers through Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown’s hair, judging by the height.

Dances catches me watching. I feel my face heat, but she just smiles her easy smile and gestures for me to go inside.

My heart skips a beat.

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown tracks my every movement as I step into the room and shut the door behind me. She's cross-legged, her arms stretched out along the back of a red leather couch, jacket folded over the back next to her. Her shimmering tattoo is mesmerizing now that it's on full display.

The couch is a big semi-circle and I sit down opposite Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown, straight-backed, hands clasped tightly in my lap. *Don't, don't, don't.*

"Want a drink?"

"Sure."

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown flicks a finger and two short glasses and a stout bottle of brown liquor levitate out of the solid middle of the table next to her. She pours herself a glass, then one for me. Our fingertips brush when I take it from her. I swear I feel a jolt of that overwhelming electricity from the day I got my Other. I wait for Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown to drink before I lift the glass to my lips.

The smell tells me it's not going to taste good, but I've taken enough truly terribly tasting medicines to drink a long sip with a straight face. This seems to impress Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown. Or at least her eyebrows raise a little bit. Glass dangling from one hand, she considers me. "Why are you here?"

I try not to start. "Dances didn't tell you?"

"I want to hear it from you."

Shifting, I swallow hard and resist the urge to tap my finger against the glass. "I'm here because I want to learn how to Phase before being a Three-Name."

She leans her head back, expression unreadable. Her eyes are almost glassy. "Why?"

"I want to be able to leave my house at night and my dads are making it hard."

“So? Lots of kids have parents who don’t want them sneaking out. They figure out ways around it.”

Panic rises in my throat, pushing the burning liquor back up with it. “The ways I have aren’t working.”

“Convince me.”

I blink. “I’m sorry?”

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown uncrosses her legs and leans forward, stare intensifying. “*Convince me.* You want to break the rules? Convince me why I should let you.”

I’ve argued my case to my dad’s dozens of times over the years, but I get the feeling that she’s not looking for bargaining or compromise. I take a moment and picture myself back in my room, watching the night pass me by from my bedroom window. The feeling of observing the world through a glass box.

“There are cameras. They cover the whole house. And even if I turn them off, the gap will tell them I left.” My grip on the glass tightens. “And they used my phone to track me without me knowing, I-I-I still don’t know when they turned it on or how they got into my phone. They got mad. And-And I’m scared they’re going to somehow take this away from me.”

“Scared?” Her head cocks sharply to the side, stare somehow intensifying even more. “Why scared?”

I shift the glass to one hand, the other rubbing my thigh too forcefully. “I was sick a lot as a kid. Really sick. I didn’t get to do kid things.” My hand becomes a fist. “I kept getting sick and before I knew it, almost all my teens were gone, too. And,” I take a shaky breath, mouth dry, “I know that I’m paused now. That I can wait it out.” Jaw set, I shake my head. “But I’ve already given up too much time and they’ve ruined what little time I’ve been able to steal back. I deserve this. I want this, and I want it now.”

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown slowly swirls her glass, rolling her neck out once, ending staring up at the ceiling.

Frantic to keep what little bit of her attention I still have, I carry on in a rush, “Here I finally feel *normal*.” Rocking back and forth faintly, I look off to the side, breathing shallow. “My body doesn’t hurt. I have this endless energy you’re supposed to have as a teenager. I can stay up late and go to parties in abandoned buildings and go running and draw without getting tired or waking up in pain the next day. And I can do it for as long as I want. *I* get to be in control of my body for once.”

Mouth hanging slightly open, Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown flicks her gaze to me. She studies me in silence for a long moment before her eyes flash white and my arm holding the glass shoots out from my side, glass shattering as I throw it again the wall. The force of the motion pulls me off the end of the couch and onto the floor.

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown watches me through the bottom of her glass as she takes a long drink and empties it.

Heart pounding, I clench my jaw and pick myself up, whole body tense.

“And how do you feel about that?”

Through my teeth and still looking at the shattered glass and dripping wall, I say, “I don’t like it.” After a moment, I add, “Honestly, it kind of scares me.”

“You don’t look very scared.”

“I’m used to my body doing shit out of my control. It loses its teeth after it happens enough times.” I hold Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown’s stare and my chin high. “Going back to how I was scares me a lot more.”

Her glass disappears into the table as she sets it down. “Okay. You can break the rules.”

I suck in a sharp breath, then let out a breathy, “Thank you.”

Wiggling her fingers in a lazy wave, Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown gives me that same emptied-eyed but genuine smile. “Don’t mention it.” She looks at her tattoo sleeve. “Guess I’ll have to go see Needles and add to this.” With a final once over and a close-lipped grin, she says, “Enjoy the music.”

I take that as my cue and walk out of the room.

Dances sits at a table by herself and jumps to her feet when I step back into the main room, brow furrowing. I give her a somewhat shaky thumbs up and she breaks out into a smile, pumping her fists once in a silent “Yes!”

My legs wobbly, Dances closes the distance and loops her arm through mine. “Uh... what was that?”

Dances laughs. “Yeah, she’s just kind of like that.”

“No, I meant the... body controlling... thing.”

“Oh. Yeah. I,” she bites her lip, “didn’t want to freak you out so I didn’t mention it.”

“Is that her Other?” I ask as Dances sits me down at the table. “Can you do that?”

She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. “Well...”

I raise my eyebrows and tilt my head down to look her in the eyes.

“Kind of. There’s a way to have your Other con—influence another and if the Other is attached to someone... But I don’t,” Dances shifts in her seat, looking almost uncomfortable, a state of being that clashes with her as a person, “use it like that. I just use it to help people relax. Calm them down a little. We only teach it to the Four-Names and even then, not the way Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown does it.” She puts on a smile. “She is our queen after all, it makes sense we have to listen to her, right?”

Frowning, I run through my memories of Dances. “Is... that what that chill is?”

“I’ve heard it described a few ways but,” Dances shrugs, “a chill is one of them.”

I nod to myself, discomfort outweighed by the relief I’m going to be able to get out of my room at night. “Okay...”

“Anyway.” Dances laces her fingers together and rests her chin on them. “What did you think?”

“Of?”

“Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown, obviously.”

“Uh, I mean, yeah. She seems really cool. Her tattoo is fun to look at. But,” a nervous laugh escapes me, then I clear my throat, “was I supposed to get anything from that? Because,” I hold my arms out to the sides, “I really didn’t.”

Dances laughs. “She likes you.” She stands to wrap her arms around my shoulders from behind. “I knew she would.”

“How can you tell?”

“She said yes, didn’t she?”

I consider Dances as she sits back down. Bubbly, electric Dances. She’s about as stark a contrast to the cold, intimidating Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown as I can think of.

“What?”

I lean over the table and lower my voice. “Was she always like that?”

Dances blinks, face going blank. “What do you mean?”

“Just,” I gesture to Dances, “you two are kind of polar opposites.” Looking up, thinking, I add, “I guess I just have a hard time seeing you gravitating towards her, especially with you two meeting how you did.”

“Well...” Dances lines up all her fingers on the edge of the table, tapping them one at a time. “She wasn’t—” She scans the space before looking back to her tapping fingers. “She was always intense. But in a good way. She’s spent a lot more time with the Others than I have.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

Dances bites her lip, then covers her mouth with a hand, looking away. “It’s the best way I can explain it. We don’t hang out as much as we used to. And it feels like every time I see her, she’s a little more...” Instead of finishing the sentence, she gives me a sad smile and says, “Yeah, I guess she was different before.”

“I’m sorry.”

Dances shakes herself off. “Don’t be. Since you’ve started coming around, it’s been... easier than it used to be.” Standing, she offers me a hand.

“Do you want to get a head start on learning to Phase before the night’s over?”

Eagerly, I nod and let Dances lead me back out into the night. It might just be in my head, but I breathe easier as the piano music fades.

Nodding back and forth, I ask hesitantly, “What were you guys talking about? Is everything okay?”

I nearly run into Dances she stops so abruptly. Her mouth hangs open for a long time before she answers flatly, “Just an accident. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Dances Phases us to her graffitied bridge. It’s dark, but she makes a string of fairy lights hang themselves across the underside of the concrete. She rolls out her neck, shakes out her arms then gives me a conspiratorial grin. “Alright.”

“Alright.”

“So, the first thing you’ve got to learn is how to connect to your Other.”

I chuckle. “More than it being attached to me?”

Dances rolls her eyes, still grinning. “Yes. All that space between you and it? You need to get rid of that for it to do anything. Here, close your eyes.”

I do. A small cluster of Others hover nearby. In the dark of my eyelids, I watch Dances’ Other’s orbit tighten until it becomes a vibrating ball of light hovering in the center of where her chest would be. When I open my eyes again, Dances’ are glowing ultraviolet.

“See?”

I nod. “Okay, so... how do I do that?”

“You need to give it a memory.” I must make a face because Dances adds quickly, “It doesn’t keep it or get rid of it or anything. We’re pretty sure it’s the emotions they’re interested in, not the memory itself.” She giggles. “It’s not the easiest thing to feel an emotion on command in a total vacuum.”

My feet crunch against the creek bed as I shift. “Any memory?”

“One with a strong feeling.” She bites her lip. “You... *can* use bad memories. I know some people do because they have stronger emotions. They say it makes it easier.” Her face up scrunches up. “But I don’t do that.”

“Right. Okay. A good memory.” I suddenly become incapable of thinking of any memory at all. To fill the silence while I think, I ask, “What memory do you use?”

“Oh. Um...” She rubs the back of her neck, then straightens and winks. “If you get this tonight, I’ll tell you. But,” she sits down and motions for me to do the same, “you might want to sit.”

“Challenge accepted.” I sit and close my eyes. The initial memory that comes to mind is the first night I went running after my Other settled, feet pounding on pavement. My Other keeps a steady orbit around me. *Okay, something else...* I think of dancing with Dances in the strip mall, the body heat and the thrilling burn in my muscles and the change lights of the fountain. My Other dips towards me for a moment, but then pulls away again.

I sigh sharply, nose wrinkling.

“It’s okay, it’s hard to do the first time.”

Aside from wanting a way out of my house as fast as possible, I want to know what Dances’ memory is. *Really* want to know. I run through memory after memory. Dyeing my hair the first time. Getting my Other. Watching movies with Feathers. Getting my tattoo.

My Other drips sharply towards me before steadying.

Sitting up straighter, I try to sink deeper into the memory. The stabbing vibration of the tattoo gun, Dances’ hand in mine, the smell of ink. Warmth running through me at being in a room with two people and finally, finally not feeling like they’re just waiting for me to leave—

“Hey! There you go!”

When I open my eyes, a lime green mixes with the warm glow from the fairy lights. It doesn’t feel as intense as I thought it might. Almost like there’s a spinning top in my chest, maybe a faint humming, but that’s it.

Dances looks so genuinely happy for me, I feel a little bad when I raise my eyebrows expectantly. Her face drops into a faint “oh shit” expression. After a moment, I cave and say, “You don’t have to if you don’t—”

“No, no. A deal’s a deal.” She sighs and grabs her calves, leaning back to look up at the bridge.

“Mine was of the day I got my tattoo,” I offer.

“Aww, shucks.” She grins. “I always feel so special when I get to be a part of it.”

“It was the first time I felt connected to... to anyone in,” I take a shaky breath, “a really long time.”

Dances reaches out to squeeze my knee, then sits back. “Well... Among all the other bullshit in the group home, they were very strict on what music was allowed. And let me tell you, you couldn’t dance to any of it.” A dreamy smile spreads across her face. “After L—Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown and I left, I managed to,” she clears her throat, “get my hands on a CD player and some CDs. Some good ones. One night, we snuck into this school that was under construction. She went to sleep, but I went to the gym and had the whole place to myself to dance.”

“Was that before or after you found the Others?”

“We’d found them, but we didn’t know what to do with them yet.” Dances tries to hold back a smile, but fails. “My dancing was actually how we started to figure out what they liked.”

“Wow.” I cock my head, light shifting. Only half joking, I ask, “And you’re still not the one in charge?”

Dances just shrugs. “I get what I want out of it. I don’t need the glory.”

The green light dims and fades away, snapping me back to why we’re here to begin with. “Right. I have a memory to give my Other. Now what?”

“Ah, of course.”

Dances and I stand, me with my hands pressed against the one of the bridge supports.

“Okay, so you’re trying to match frequencies.”

“What?”

“You need to use liminal spaces to Phase, right? So you need to ‘tune in to’ this one, then ‘tune in to’ the space you want to travel to, and *then* tweak the frequencies to meet.”

I strain my ears, like I could actually hear something in this space. “Is that how you come to my bedroom?”

“Kind of. That’s like you singing or humming the frequency. It makes it easier for me to ‘hear.’”

For as quickly as I was able to get my Other closer, I’m completely unable to find these frequencies Dances talks about. Eventually, I step back from the bridge support, hands numb with cold. I glance around to see the sun is rising and clench my jaw.

Dances puts a hand on my shoulder. “You’ll get it. You can practice on your own.”

I sigh. *More nights locked in my room.*

After a moment, Dances adds, “You draw and paint, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe... Maybe try looking for the, the like... colours of the spaces instead, and then mixing those.”

I frown, but nod, all of this feeling very... cerebral and abstract. “Right... I’ll give that a try.”

Dances Phases me back to my room. Before she leaves, she pauses halfway out of my closet. “Hey. You did really well tonight. Queen—She didn’t—” Dances frowns, then shakes her head at herself and gives me a crooked smile. “I know... I know Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown can be a lot.”

My stomach drops a little as our interaction replays. But I square my shoulders. “It’s worth it. Whatever it takes to keep this is worth it.”

THREE DAYS BEFORE

I'VE BEEN USING MY lack of sleep to eat breakfast before my dads wake up. The house is still tense. They tried a few more times to get me to explain what I was doing out of the house, but they gave up on that after I simply refused to say anything. Now, Papa's opted to pretend everything is normal, but the conversations are stilted. Dad and I have barely spoken.

Papa is sitting on the couch when I come down for my breakfast.

I ignore him and go get my cereal.

"Are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me?" he asks from the living room.

Even a room over, I throw my hands up. "I told you: I just went for a walk. How many times do I have to say that?"

"Not about that, about anything else."

"Uh, no?" I grab my bowl and hop up on the counter, trying to drown out anything else he might say with my crunching.

That gets considerably harder when Papa comes to lean against the kitchen doorway. "I'm worried about you. You seem... happier lately."

I raise an eyebrow and pointedly chew and swallow before answering. "You're worried that I'm happy?"

"I didn't mean—It just seems like a very sudden change, that's all."

"Why does everything have to be a crisis? Can't something just be good?"

He doesn't come up with a response before I finish shoveling food into my mouth. I leave the bowl in the sink and dart upstairs to get my bag. If he's awake, I don't want to be here any longer than I need to be.

I run into Dad coming out of my room as he heads into the bathroom. He frowns as I shoulder my backpack. "Where are you going?"

"School."

"This early?" he calls after me. When I don't answer, "Do you want a ride?"

I just walk out the door and close it behind me.

The school field is still dewy when I get off the bus. I stuff my hands in my hoodie pocket as I cross towards the main building. It's not even eight yet, so nothing will be open, but there's at least a bench to sit on.

I'm halfway across when I notice someone else out walking the mowed grass. They bend down and pick up something, then hold it up for inspection. A feather.

"What are you doing here so early?" I ask as I get closer.

Amy jumps, then relaxes into a smile when she sees it's me. "Collecting. There's a family of jays that lives in the trees around here, I've been coming to check the field before anyone else shows up and tramples them."

"Find anything?"

She holds up a long, white feather, then lets it drop. "Just some gulls."

"Mind if I join you? I've got time to kill."

"Sure!"

I fall into step alongside Amy as she continues her careful search, eyes focused on scanning the ground in front of her.

"Why are you here so early?"

"Oh." I force a shrug. "Hiding from my dads, honestly."

Amy bends down to pick at something, but it's just a lost pen. "How come?"

"We had a fight."

“I’m sorry.” We walk in silence for a few minutes, Amy leading us around in a careful grid. “If I’m honest, I’m hiding, too.”

“Is everything okay? Your... other parent isn’t causing problems, is he?”

Amy shakes her head. “My mom’s just been gone too long. The house starts to feel too empty without her after a while.” She gives me a playful nudge. “But it does mean I’ve been going to the parties more.” With a sigh, Amy laces her hands behind her back and looks up at the sky. “I think I’m going to do it. Get an Other, I mean.”

I can’t help but grin. “Really? That’s so exciting!”

She gives me a shy smile. “It was you who convinced me.”

“With what I said in the library?”

She shakes her head. “At the sleepover.” Picking at her nails, she continues, “None of the friends I started going to the parties with have even been told about the Others. Most of them don’t go anymore. I didn’t want to pause myself if I was going to be alone.” Amy steps a little closer with a soft smile. “But I thought, if I had you to hang around with, it might be fun.”

I hadn’t thought of that. I mean, I have Dances. And maybe Needles, though not quite in the same way. But thinking about it, I would be happy to have Amy around longer. It’s very different than Dances, but I like how I feel around her, too.

My silence must make her nervous, because she quickly adds, “If that’s something you’d want.”

“I’d like that.”

She starts. “Really?”

“Yeah, really.” I’m not sure how much my Other understands of what we’re saying, but I’m pretty sure it’s spinning faster now. “Dances is actually teaching me how to Phase now.”

Amy’s eyes go wide. “Woah. Cool.”

“Once I figure it out, I can come make your house feel less empty, if you want.” I laugh. “Help you ride out your Other settling.”

“Ride out?”

“It’s not a bad thing, but it is,” I smile what feels like a very Dances smile. Knowing, in on a secret, “an adjustment.”

“That would make me feel a lot better, actually.”

I offer my hand. “It’s a deal.”

Amy shakes it, fingers still damp from the grass. “Deal.”

NINETEEN MINUTES BEFORE

MUSIC PULSES AT MY back, distant but just close enough to make it harder to focus as I try uselessly to open a Phase. With a frustrated sigh, I let my hands fall and open my eyes, the wall flashing green before the light dims. I thought maybe it would be easier somehow at the strip mall since I've spent more time here. More memories.

Apparently not.

"What're you doing up here by your lonesome?"

I glance over my shoulder to see Needles peeking at me from around the corner closer to the dancefloor. They're in their characteristic over-sized tank top, and shorts that show off their tattooed legs.

Sighing again, I turn back to the wall. "Trying to learn magic," I say dryly. "I'm really shit at it apparently."

They laugh. "Don't stress, it'll come. Besides, you've got all the time in the world, right?"

I run my hands down my face.

Needles leans against the wall I'm facing, hands in their pockets. "So. You met Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown, huh? What'd you think?"

"Um..." Before I can stop myself, I say, "Dances paints a different picture of her than what I got."

Needles throws their head back laughing again, harder. "It's just me, you can say she scared you."

"She didn't scare me," I protest, but I frown, rubbing the hand she made throw the glass.

“She pull the glass throwing thing with you?”

I flinch, snapping my hands apart. “Did someone tell you about that?” I have no idea who, unless Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown told some who told someone...

“Nah, she does that to all the new people the first time she meets them.” Needles shakes herself off, maybe even suppresses a shudder, but gives me a crooked grin. “The whole thing’s just a game of chicken. To see who’ll back out.” They nudge me with the toe of their shoe. “Good on you.”

I sit straighter. “My body’s done scarier shit without warning.”

“Amen to that. Now c’mon. Come dance. It’ll feel good.”

Needles is right. Getting lost in the music and the movement of the crowd does feel good. Dances appears by my side at some point to dance with me.

A few songs later, she leans in and says, “I’m to see if I can find Feathers. She became Carries-Feathers this morning and I owe her a dance.” Dances’ expression softens and she gives me a hug, resting her chin on my shoulder. “I’m told I have you to thank for that.”

I’m a little stunned from the gesture and the words and can only manage a thumbs up and what I’m sure is a very goofy grin.

Dances laughs and it sounds like a trill in the song, then squeezes my shoulder and wanders off into the crowd.

A while later, I push my way through the moving bodies to the edge of the room, out of breath and sweating. Flopping into a chair, I watch others dance. And then I spot Feathers on the edge of the crowd. “Feathers!” I shout, holding an arm up. “Dances is looking for you!”

She doesn’t hear me.

I spot Dances walking along the wall, scanning the crowd. Flagging her down, I point towards Feathers. Dances nods and quickens her pace.

But Amy moves further into the dancing mass.

“Hey, hold up,” I call. “Amy!”

She pauses—No, it’s more than that. She stops moving completely. Frozen. I can’t even see her chest moving.

Somewhere behind me, Dances hisses, “Shit,” then shouts louder, “Everyone back up!”

Heads turn and people move away as Amy starts twitching, hands coming up to cover her ears.

“Feathers?” Dances asks, taking a tentative step towards her.

Amy’s head turns at an almost unnatural angle to look at Dances, a too-big smile on her face. She laughs. I jump to my feet. It’s not Amy’s laugh.

Dances’ eyes go wide. “Of, *f*—”

Amy stumbles forward a step, looking like she’s forgotten how to walk, muttering, “Amy, Amy, Amy, Amy, Amy,” under her breath.

“Someone grab her!” Dances lunges for Amy, but she falls over backwards out of the way.

Still laughing hysterically, the ground under Amy turns translucent and she falls through it. Without thinking, I dive through the Phase after her. I pass through what feels like a fake feather boa and land on damp plywood, music giving way to rushing traffic and falling rain.

We’re in some kind of unfinished apartment building. The walls between the units and the hall behind me are missing, and the windows lack glass. Streetlights paint Amy’s face in shadow, but her eyes pulse yellow. Two flickering lightbulbs. It’s then I notice she’s sitting straddling an empty window, one leg in, one leg out.

Something about it makes my stomach drop. “Hey, Feathers, just hey, why don’t you come back inside?”

She just laughs and tips out the window.

With a yelp, I rush forwards to stick my head out, rain drenching me in seconds. I let out a shaky breath when I see she’s landed on a balcony a floor below. Bruised probably, but okay. We’re up at least three stories so it

could have been a lot worse. She picks herself up and fixes her gaze on me, still smiling too big.

“Okay, very funny,” I squeak. “But let’s get back in the building now.”

In an un-fluid movement, Amy waves me down. “Join! Fun!” Her voice is just shy of unnaturally high-pitched.

I have no idea what to say to that. My brain has become white noise and a pounding heart. Amy climbs up on the balcony’s railing, giggling as she almost slips off the side, then leaps to the next one.

“Stop!”

Amy—Amy?—rocks back and forth on the slick metal, then tilts her head and drops down on the *outside* of the railing to hang from the edge of the balcony with one hand. I’m so distracted watching her dangle herself over open air, I don’t notice the feeling of someone pushing frantically on the other side of a wall.

Just as frantically, I reach back. Dances bursts out of the wall behind me, jaw set, but eyes wide and breathing hard. I just mutely point out the window. Dances pushes me aside to get a look, then lets out a small breath. I’m not sure what it means that what she sees makes her relieved.

I look over Dances’ shoulder. Amy looks up at the two of us. Too sharply. Her grip slips. Dances shoots both her arms out, eyes glowing, and a phantom floor appears beneath Amy. It dips like a stretched bedsheet as Amy lands on it and she staggers to one knee.

Frowning, Amy points an accusatory finger at Dances, “Cheat!” and starts trying to get back to her feet.

Through her teeth, Dances says, “Wings, I need you to go grab her.”

“Huh?”

Dances’ arms are shaking, eyes glued on Amy. “I can help her, but I need her to stay still.”

“Right. Right, okay.” I bolt out of the room and look for stairs. There are some a few absent doors over and I race down them, using the railings to swing myself down two or three steps at a time.

The pair of feet dangling in front of a window tell me where Amy is. Before she can move away, I run and grab her leg, but she pulls it up as she climbs to the windowsill above. I watch in horror as, still laughing, she gives up jumping to the balconies and starts tightrope walking along the windowsills, barely wide enough to fit her whole foot.

And now she's on a different floor. Dances pulls up another wall from thin air to follow along under Amy. I run back up the stairs.

When I stick my head outside again, Dances has climbed out the window herself. She hangs precariously for a moment, before looking under her and dropping onto a balcony. Staying crouched, she jerks as Amy wobbles and steps onto her fake floor. Dances' eyes and hair keep a steady glow in stark contrast to Amy's flickering eyes.

I sprint a window down and try to wrap my arms around Amy when she passes, but she twists, dancing out of my way and forcing Dances to catch her again. Even from here, I can see the strain echoing across Dances' body. Her floors and walls grow transparent holes.

Amy stops and rounds on Dances, one foot on the windowsill, one foot on the phantom floor. She stomps once. "Cheat! No! Join! Fun!"

Taking the distraction, I make another grab for Amy and manage to get a fistful of wet shirt. I try and drag her in the window, but she fights me. Bracing my feet against the wall, I lean my full weight back. Amy struggles, but eventually tumbles inward and we crash onto the plywood. Before I get the chance to be relieved, more fake feathers tickle my skin as Amy opens another Phase. We fall through the floor onto the wet concrete, back outside. Rain pelts down on me and blurs my vision. I try to shake my head, but it's secondary to keeping a hold of Amy.

That becomes the last thing on my mind as I feel my head fall back against open air.

Both Dances and I shout. I clear my vision enough to realize I'm not on the ground, but several storeys up, head dangling off the edge of a very wet balcony with half the railing missing. Amy's still trying to wriggle out of

my grip and I want to keep a hold of her, I do, but the ground far below swims in front of my eyes.

“Dances!”

“I know, I know!”

Amy’s thrashing twists us and I catch Dances taking a running leap to land on the balcony two away from us. She makes another jump. Her legs buckle when she lands.

Amy has noticed Dances now. She stops twisting and instead starts pushing. I scream as my shoulders slide off the edge. I let go, rolling to desperately grab the window to pull myself back on.

Balancing on the railing, Amy grabs the bottom of the balcony above her and pulls herself up, laughing hysterically again. Dances struggles to her feet. I want to make myself do the same, but all my limbs have turned to goo. I feel sick and I can’t tell if it’s from getting too close to falling or watching Amy climb higher. She looks so sure of the movements, I can almost believe she might just make it to the top. Amy swings her leg up to the next balcony and reaches for the next railing—

Her grip on the dripping metal slips.

All that appears below Amy are wisps.

The fall is quick. She laughs the whole way down.

A wet crack.

Then silence.

Time is suspended, weightless and unmoving in the air, until a car drives past below and the hiss of tires on slick asphalt reconnect us to the rest of the world.

Almost beyond my control, I sit up, inching closer to the edge to look.

“Wings, don’t—”

I ignore her, limbs re-solidifying as I climb back inside and tear down the stairs.

Amy lies in a pile on the ground. Shaking and dazed, I drop to my knees next to her. Her hands, limp, are red and raw. I turn her head, trying to wipe

the blood away to gauge the damage. But she's gone still again. Frozen. Not even breathing.

At some point, Dances ends up on the grass next to me. She pulls me away from Amy's body, saying something I can't hear.

I can't look away, so I close my eyes.

ELEVEN MINUTES AFTER

WE BOTH HAVE PINE needles clinging to our arms and legs when we stop running. The air I gulp down is filled to the brim with their scent. Only the tops of the trees are illuminated by the streetlights on the other side of the hill. Down where we are, the world is shrouded in shadow. The pitter-patter of water on underbrush overtakes the splashing of cars driving by until the tires on pavement are nothing more than whispers.

I push my hair back off my face. My hands come away a painter's palette of lime, cyan and magenta. The streaks of blood almost blend in alongside the dye. For a moment, I just watch as they mix with the rain and drip off my fingers.

The first time Dances says my name, it reaches me like from underwater. The second time, it gets cut up by the blood roaring in my ears. The third time, "Wings?" my heart tries to jump out of my chest through my mouth and drags my stomach along with it.

I stagger back, one hand pressed to my stomach, the other pressed over my mouth. The chemically sweet and metallic scent from my hand makes me nauseous all over again. Ripping my hand away from my face, I frantically scrub anything that might have gotten left behind with the sleeve of my jacket.

All the adrenaline leaves at once and I collapse, crashing through a fern on the way down, soaking any part of me that managed to remain even remotely dry. I wildly scrub my hands against the moss and fallen leaves on

the forest floor, stray rocks and sharp twigs cutting my palms and I don't care as long as the blood gets *off*—

“Easy, easy, Wings.” Dances crouches down and moves to take my hands.

I yank them away and scuttle back from her. “*Easy*? That’s all you have to say?”

Dances gives me space, face pinched. “I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“Hurt *myself*?” My head is spinning too fast for me to articulate why the statement seems so absurd, but it does. Shaking my head—I don’t even know at what—I stumble to my feet, still backing away from Dances. “After all that you’re worried about me hurting myself—”

Dances lunges forward, grabbing my arm as I trip backwards over a fallen log. Waves of chills run through me as she rights me, keeping a firm but gentle hold on my arms. “Wings. Wings, listen to me. Listen. This-This was an accident. Alright? That’s... That’s all it was.”

“An accident that got someone killed!” I shake my head harder and try to back out of Dances’ hands. She holds strong. “I—She—” Amy’s flickering eyes, her too-wide smile flash in front of me. “And you want me to be *easy*—I’ve never seen a dead body before!”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry you had to see that. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re *sorry*?”

Dances nods. “It’s... It’s horrific, but it was just... an accident.”

“What happened?” I look her up and down, suddenly terrified she doesn’t know what’s going on any more than I do. That we’re just alone in the woods with two things that made someone do *that*. “Do you even know what happened?”

Several more waves of chills pass over me as Dances runs her thumbs back and forth on my arms. Eventually, she takes a careful breath. “I know what happened. It’s not going to happen to us.”

Blood and a cracked skull and broken bones swim in the edges of my vision and make me dizzy. “Why are you so *calm*!”

Dances' eyes go wide and her grip tightens. "Because you're doing this and someone has to keep it together." As my own shaking starts to come in waves instead of all at once, I'm able to feel Dances' hands trembling in the spaces where my body stills. "I know it was an accident, and you know it was an accident, but anyone else who finds her isn't going to know that."

A new, colder horror sweeps through me. I look around the forest frantically—waiting for police or Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown or my dads to jump out from behind a tree—then back to Dances, terrified all over again. In a shaky whisper, I ask, "Dances? Am I going to get in trouble for this?"

"No." There's no room for argument in the word. "This wasn't your fault."

Shoulders rising, I slowly turn my head to look back in the direction we came. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Because I know what happened."

I'm too scared to ask her more.

Rain fills the stretch of silence until I ask, "What do we do now?"

Dances straightens. "We go find Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown. She'll know what to do." She offers me a forced grin, edged with dread. "She always does."

I start to say something else—I don't even know what—but the words feel more like bile, so I swallow hard and nod. "How're we going to get back? She Phased us pretty far from the looks of it."

Reluctantly, Dances steps back from me. She closes her eyes, murmuring under her breath. The dyed streaks in her hair and the dancing figure tattooed on her forearm flicker weakly, then go out again. She clenches and unclenches her hands. "Alright—Okay. It's fine. We'll just start walking back and hope we find someplace abandoned on the way so I can Phase us—"

Sirens fade in over the downpour. The lights colouring the tops of the trees turn from white to alternating red and blue. A pang of panic and something like guilt stabs my stomach. The kind of guilt less concerned that you've done something bad and more worried that you're going to get in trouble for it.

Dances grabs my hand, "No time to waste, Paper-Wings," and drags me back into a run.

THIRTY-THREE MINUTES AFTER

BRANCHES SNAP UNDER OUR feet as we walk. I always think it's someone looking for us. But it never is.

Dances is quiet, shoulders set and intermittently muttering under her breath or shaking her head at nothing.

The rain and the walking have numbed me from the outside in. I still flinch half the time I blink and see two lights on the backs of my eyelids.

“What happened?” I ask finally.

“Don't worry about that right now,” Dances says without looking at me.

My voice pitches higher. “Don't worry about it while we still have two of the things that did this floating around our heads?”

Dances presses her lips together, but still doesn't look at me. “That can't happen to us right now. Trust me”

“I—I'm sorry, but I'm going to need a bit more than 'trust me' right now.”

“It doesn't—”

“We just watched someone *die!*”

My words bounce off the trees. Dances keeps walking even as I stop.

I throw my arms out to the sides. “I'm waiting.”

With a noise of frustration, Dances grabs at her head then spins around, arms thrown out to mirror mine. “We literally could not do that to each other if we wanted to.” She holds herself stiff. It briefly crosses my mind that she might be trying to be intimidating. It doesn't suit her and she knows it. “I don't know your name. You don't know mine. We're safe.”

When I just keep staring at her expectantly, her expression eventually caves and she curls in on herself. Dances looks up at the sky with a big sigh, then braces her hands on her knees. “Her name, Wings. You said her—Remember how I said names are important?”

I blink at her, brows raised, and say incredulously, “Yeah?”

“With the Others, names are really, *really* important. Knowing our names give the Others control over you.”

“But,” I frown, mouth opening and closing uselessly, “my dads call me my real name all the time. And-and teachers, hell even other kids at school. Why don’t I do that?”

“It’s like...” Dances grabs at air, brow furrowed as she thinks. “The Others are all... connected. We think. Or something like that. And they can hear each other, but not much else. Except when they attach to someone... then you become connected to the network. And they can hear you.”

I blink at her, catching a flash of pink and green. “Doesn’t that seem like kind of an important thing to tell someone?”

It could just be shivering, but I think I see her lip quiver. “I didn’t—I—” Dances looks away, hand pressed to her mouth, other arm wrapping around her stomach, face pinched. “I’m supposed to explain how it works when you first join I just—The day I took you to get an Other you,” despite everything, she smiles at the memory, “you were so excited. So happy.” Dances takes a shaky breath and then looks back to me, ashamed. “Before you, I’d had a long string of people backing out once I explained it. I just... You were so nervous that day I took you to the mansion, so nervous about that risk, I was worried what you’d think of this one and—And I wanted you to stay.”

I think there might be something wrong with me. Because despite the rain and the memory of what just happened, I’d be lying if the words didn’t fuel a warmth in my chest. “Why did she do that?”

“The Others don’t really understand the concept of a body that can get hurt. And if given total control, they’re,” Dances holds out her hands

and shrugs, both gestures tired, “thrill seekers? Sadistic, even? Their idea of ‘entertaining’ is... different. It just,” Dances lets her hands fall, “doesn’t matter unless...”

“Unless you mess up and they make you do *that*.” I recoil, wanting to crawl out of my own skin, like I could escape what I just saw by leaving my own physical form behind.

“Doesn’t it scare you? Even a little?”

My stomach lurches at the memory of Amy’s question. *Is that why she was scared? And she thought I knew and I told her—*

Dances closes her eyes for a moment and schools her expression back into careful neutrality. “It was just an accident.”

“You keep saying that—”

“That’s what Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown calls it,” Dances snaps, throwing her arms up in a jerky motion. She looks off to the side and visibly controls her breathing. “She’s usually the one who deals with it. I’m doing my best with what I have, and all I have is her. How she handles it.”

I stare at nothing, eyes widening. *Tracks with what I’ve seen of Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown...* “How often do... accidents happen?”

What little composure Dances had gained back just as quickly cracks. She wraps her arm around herself again, pressing her other hand harder to her mouth. “We’re careful. We try to be,” she says weakly, like whatever memories she’s watching are sapping the energy from her. “But there’s always a few. Every year or so.”

The words hang heavy over us.

Dances breaks the silence. “We should keep moving.”

Mutely, I follow after her.

The rain slows and eventually stops, leaving only droplets falling from pine needles. My shoes squelch with each step as my wet socks press against my wetter soles. I’m not as cold as I should be. I wonder if that’s my Other, too. Paused.

Ahead of me, Dances slouches from resolute to tired to downright anxious. The nerves let words seep out loud enough for me to hear. “Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown is gonna kill me,” Dances mutters, biting her thumbnail. Wincing at the choice of words, she quickly corrects, “Okay, she—She’s not. But she’s not gonna be happy.” An uneasy laugh trickles out of Dances. “She’s definitely not going to let me bring around any new One-Names for a while.” She takes a shaky breath. “Probably is going to ban me from the parties outright. For a while at least.”

Trying to shoulder the burden of holding it together for a moment, I quicken my pace to hold a branch aside for Dances. “What’s that going to mean for you?”

“Depends how long she makes me stay away.”

“She can do that?”

“She’s done it before...” The words are a window to something far too intimate that I can’t name other than it makes me deeply uncomfortable. “Maybe nothing will happen. I’ll go away and come back again. Maybe she’ll keep me away until my Other gets bored and leaves—” Her voice breaks and her legs actually give out.

With a yelp, I dart to catch her and help lower her to the ground. She’s breathing hard. “Hey, you don’t know that’s going to happen.”

The spark I think of as Dances’ is fully dead as she grabs her pant legs and stares glassy-eyed at the undergrowth. “Would that be so bad?” It feels like I’ve caught a performer backstage before they’re ready. I don’t know that I like it.

I shake my head, moving to crouch in front of Dances and take her hands. “You don’t want that. To walk everywhere instead of Phasing, to be stuck with whatever space you find as is, for,” I wrinkle my nose, shaking my head harder, “for things to be dull again.”

Dances gives me a sad smile. “Don’t worry about me, Wings. I’ve seen it happen enough times. It happens to everyone eventually. We’re just putting off the inevitable.”

“Well, what about me?” The words come out sharp, grip tightening on Dances hands until she winces. “What’s going to happen to me?”

I watch Dances struggle to reignite, flint striking against steel. She offers me a shrug, “I don’t know,” then a crooked smile. “But hey, if we gotta go, at least we’ll go together.”

Something sharp and jagged jabs into the base of my skull, hot and needle-thin. Three words. *That’s not fair*. I clench my jaw, then try and subtly roll my shoulders to shrug off the sensation.

“You know—” She hesitates long enough I think she’s going to keep the thought to herself. “I used to get annoyed when people ran. But now I don’t blame them. There’s a reason people run once they learn the truth. I know that. All it takes is one slip up... And I complained about it, but I think part of me kind of wanted them to run.”

“Why?”

This time, Dances’ hesitation stretches on until the words remain unsaid.

An indeterminate amount of time later, lost in my thoughts, I walk into Dances when she stops.

“Sorry,” I mumble.

Dances doesn’t respond. She just stares at the skeletal remains of some kind of shack or small house. “Well.” Her voice cracks. “That should work.” She hesitates before walking closer.

I find myself rooted to the spot.

“Wings?”

I brush wet strands of hair out of my face. “If—If we’re coming up on the inevitable,” *That’s not fair*, “do you want to just walk back?” I offer her my hand and a weak smile. *Not fair*. “Prolong the inevitable as long as we can?”

Dances’ shoulders sag, but she gives me a crooked grin and takes my hand. “Great idea.”

My steps after that take on a different quality. Each one precious and fragile, each movement finite. In a few weeks—days?—will I be back to waking up with rust between my bones and walking in pain?

The sun is starting to rise when we get to the city's edge, orange light reflecting off the windows like fire. Plenty of empty buildings here.

This time, it's Dances who pauses. "Can I ask something of you?"

"What is it?"

Dances' eyes flash and music spills out of one the buildings behind her. "A few more dances?"

Frustration claws at the back of my head at the finality in the words, but I push it down. *Not, not, not.* "Of course."

Dances sighs, then tilts her head back, laughs and starts to dance. She lifts her arms up and spins, braids splaying out in a halo. I join her, throwing myself into the movements in a way I might not be able to for much longer. We splash in puddles, our clothes stuck to our bodies. The scraping of our shoes on concrete echoes off the abandoned buildings. We could be the only two people in the world.

Eventually, the songs fade.

Dances and I face each other, panting. There's none of the anger I feel in her expression. Her eyes are sad, but her smile looks almost relieved. If she notices the difference between us, it doesn't stop her from wrapping her arms around my neck and resting her head on my shoulder. "Thank you."

"No problem." The words come out bitter.

Dances pulls back, searching my face. She puts a hand on my cheek, running her thumb back and forth across my cheekbone. "It'll be okay."

She picks a building and I follow her inside. Dances takes a deep breath and lets it out again, closing her eyes. Her hair glows properly. I close my eyes and see Dances' Other perk up, brightening from a broken Christmas light to a neon sign. The wall behind her turns translucent.

With one more sigh, she takes my hand again, "Can't put it off forever," and we step through.

Not forever, but I wanted to put it off for longer.

FIVE HOURS AFTER

THE STRIP MALL IS deserted when we Phase back, except for Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown sitting on the edge of the empty fountain. Her leather jacket's next to her, tattoo sleeve on full display. She just raises an eyebrow.

I make myself as small as possible, hiding in Dances' shadow. Like if I can shrink enough, Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown will just ignore me.

Dances' next breath catches. "We had a... an accident."

"I heard."

Swallowing hard, Dances says, "I'm sorry, we tried to grab her, but she Phased out—"

"Relax, I'm not mad."

Hesitantly, I straighten. A small part of me whispers I should find it concerning how little she cares that someone just died. But a larger part just shouts that maybe this means I won't have to leave.

Dances blinks. "You're not?"

"Not at you." My heart drops to my feet as Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown turns her gaze on me, impassive expression darkening. "You on the other hand..."

Both Dances and I start to say, "Wait," but only she gets to finish the word. My mouth clamps shut and my muscles immobilize me. It's freezing cold and I feel my body trying to shiver, but it can't.

"We don't have a lot of rules," Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown says coldly, "but I like to think the ones we do have are for good reason."

Dances puts herself between us, not that it does anything. “Hey, stop. There no need for all that.”

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown ignores her. “This is why I don’t like letting people break the rules. Because then they just want to break more and more.”

That’s not why I did it, I didn’t know, I was just trying to help. I can’t even blink, so I don’t know why I think I’ll be able to get the words out, but I shout them in my head all the same.

“I said stop it!” Dances’ eyes glow and all the sudden my ice-cold body feels like it’s been dunked in hot water. Burning pins and needles. My fingers twitch as they try and move, my jaw clattering in bursts. But it *hurts*. Maybe it should scare me. Maybe in some way it does. But mostly it just reminds me that this pain is not unfamiliar and I can’t go back to that world. Not yet. “Why do you always have to make a show out of it? There’s no one even here!”

“You’re here.” Dances’ back is to me, but Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown watches me spasm. She still doesn’t let me go. “And I don’t think that’s doing that you think it’s doing.”

Dances spins and my face has moved enough to show some kind of pain. Two tears run down my cheeks. One feels like it’s frozen, the other burns. She sucks in a breath then sets her jaw, eyes glowing brighter. I still can’t move, but it stops hurting, warmth bleeding across my body instead.

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown slides her eyes from me to Dances. “I said stop getting in the way.” The warmth vanishes, cold coming back twice as frigid.

“Hey!” Dances takes several jerky steps back, then stops moving, visibly straining against nothing. “Let go of me!”

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown ignores her and starts towards me.

“Layla, *stop!*”

My heart skips a beat, the past several hours playing rapid fire in my mind. Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown staggers and falls to one knee, eyes

flickering white. Her hold on me releases. I crumple forwards, head spinning, and gasping. She presses a hand to her own face, eyes peering out between her fingers, but only one flickering now. Every few seconds, half of her body twitches, one side of her face a too-big grin and the other fixed in intense concentration.

Shaking herself, off, Dances takes Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown's free hand. Dances' hair and tattoo brighten and Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown's irises dim as she stops twitching.

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown doesn't take her eyes off me, even as Dances helps her stand, still holding her hand. "Queen, stop. This wasn't her fault."

"That's not what everyone else said."

Dances' grip tightens. "She didn't know."

"Really?" The word is incredulous.

"Yeah, because I didn't tell her!" Dances shouts.

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown finally looks at her properly. For a moment, the blank expression on her face is replaced with confusion. "Why?"

"Because I was sick of getting attached to people only for them to run away when I tell them the dangers of having an Other. And I like her and I wanted her to stay." Dances' face crumples, then hardens into a frown. She throws Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown's hand away—not that it gets a reaction from her. "Because unlike *you*, I care when people walk away and I'm tired of having to constantly watch people leave while I have to stay by myself."

"By yourself?" Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown reaches out a hand to run down Dances' cheek. "I'm still here, aren't I?"

Dances' face turns pained, but after a moment, she shakes her head and steps back from the touch. "*You're* still here? We barely speak and when we do, I hardly recognize you! I—" Dances shakes her head again and takes a larger step back, breathing hard. "I can't. I can't do this anymore."

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown doesn't react. She asks flatly, "After all these years, why does this death bother you?"

"They *always*—" Dances cuts herself off, hands grabbing at air then curling into fists. She stares at the floor before meeting Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown's eyes again. "I meant I can't watch you become less and less of the person I used to know with every year."

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown's nose wrinkles. The gesture looks so out of place on her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Dances throws her arms out to the sides and shouts, "I only stayed for you! For *you*, *not* Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown. And she's not even here anymore!"

Unphased, Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown just leans back. "Okay. Leave then. And take your little birdy with you."

Dances press her lips together, then forms them into a bitter smile and nods. "That's what I thought." She turns on her heel and helps me stand. "Come on, Wings. Let's go."

When she tries to walk away, I stay rooted to the spot, hand pulling out of Dances'.

Dances looks at me over her shoulder. "Wings?"

My stare darts between her and Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown, heart skipping several beats. *Wait, wait, wait—No, I'm not ready, that's not fair.* Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown tilts her head, ever so slightly.

It's all the invitation I need.

I face her fully. "That's not fair." My voice comes out strained, but stronger than I thought it would.

"Wings? What are you..." Dances reaches for me.

Keeping my gaze on Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown, I step away. My whole body is tense, braced for I don't know what. I swallow the lump in my throat. "That's not fair," I repeat. "I didn't know the rules. You heard her: she didn't tell me. Why am I getting in trouble?" Dances' stare burns into

the side of my face, but I can't look at her or I'll cave and I know I'll regret it.

Head tilting further, Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown asks, "You want to stay?"

Setting my jaw, I nod.

"I'm not going to let you run off to another Four-Name. You'll have to stay here with the people who saw what happened."

"Then I'll tell them what really happened." The words taste bitter and burn, but that doesn't stop me from saying, "If Dances is gone, that would say something."

Hands in her pockets, Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown rocks her head slowly back and forth. Eventually, she says, "Don't tell me. Tell her." She nods to Dances.

I turn my head farther away from Dances for a moment, then square my shoulders and face her. I'm glad I didn't look sooner. The hurt there would have melted my resolve in an instant. It still threatens to.

She reaches for me. I pull away. Her voice shaky, she steps closer and says, almost a whisper, "Hey, Wings. Come on. It won't be so bad. We can still—"

"Maybe you can," I snap. "If you leave, you can still go dance and do normal things. I can't. I lose the dancing and the running and the energy and-and having a body that doesn't hurt just existing."

Dances blinks back tears. "Wings—Please. Please don't leave me alone."

My own eyes start to burn. "Then stay," I plead. "You're the only one talking about leaving."

Dances searches my face, then looks at Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown. She shakes her head. "I can't. I'm sorry. I can't watch the same movie again."

I take a shuddering breath. "Okay then. That's your choice. But I won't let you ruin this for me."

Dances takes a step back, then another, gaze fixed on the ground. Slowly, she nods. When she looks up again, it's not at me. "You know, I liked her

so much because she reminded me of what we had. I guess I was a little too right.”

Then, she turns on her heel, a motion more dancer-like than anything, and walks off the stage, phantom theatre curtains of a Phase closing behind her.

As soon as she’s gone, I feel my legs threaten to give out and have the overwhelming urge to burst into tears, but I know either would be a very bad thing to do in front of Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown.

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown watches the spot on the wall where Dances’ Phase closed for a long time, face unreadable. Without another word, she heads for the door.

I hesitate, before calling out, “Wait! I... I can stay, right?”

“Yes.”

Sagging, I let out a breath. “Um, how do I get home?”

Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown pauses and looks over her shoulder at me as she opens the door, early morning sun casting sharp shadows on her face. “Walk.” Almost as an afterthought, she adds, “You’ve got nerve, though.” Then she’s gone.

And I’m alone.

I walk home in a daze. The dye dries in coloured streaks down my face, but my clothes are still wet. By the time I trudge up my driveway, my skin feels like it will be damp and clammy forever.

The front door is locked. I glance up at the window to my room, then at the camera lens pointed at the driveway. Sighing, I just knock.

Papa’s almost in tears when he opens the door. “Oh, Raina, there you are!”

I flinch at my name. But nothing happens. Papa pulls me inside and into a hug and I limply let him.

Dad’s face is furious when he runs down the stairs, camera tablet in hand, but his voice comes out cracked with worry. “Where the hell were you?”

“I went for a walk and locked myself out,” I mumble through Papa’s arms.

“You do expect me to buy that?”

“No.”

Papa steps back, looking me up and down. I fight the overwhelming urge to check my hands to make sure the rain washed away all the blood. My palms itch. “Why are you wet?”

“It rained.”

“What?”

Behind Papa, Dad stares at the camera tablet, face scrunched in confusion as he presumably tries to find when and how I left and can’t. He lowers the tablet and looks at me. “Alright. No more games. Tell us what’s going on.”

If I wasn’t so numb, I could laugh at the ridiculousness of the demand. When I just stare blankly at him, Papa bends down to look me in the eye. “Are you okay? Did something happen?”

I’m too tired to lie and argue why it’s true. I just deadpan, “Danc—Danni... and I had a falling out.”

“Oh.” To his credit, Dad doesn’t look happy about it, though I’m sure part of him is.

“Was it... something we did?” Papa asks slowly.

The entirety of the walk in the rain and the conversation in the strip mall barrels through my head in stop motion, each frame paused on Dances’ face. “No,” I say flatly. “No, this was between us.”

“Clearly something more than that happened.” Dad gestures to my soaked and dirty clothes. “And you’re grounded until you tell us what.”

The flash of lime when I blink gives me the promise of a way out, comforting enough to say, “Okay.” They both look at me expectantly, so I add, “Ground me then. I have no one to go see anyway.”

Dad shakes his head in disbelief. “This is getting out of hand. From now on, we’ll be driving you to and from school, and I expect you to keep your

location on. When you decide you want to tell us what's going on, we can discuss what you can do to earn back our trust.”

“Can I go shower?”

Papa silently puts an arm around my shoulder and walks me up the stairs like he expects me to drop at any minute. For once, his worry isn't that misplaced.

ONE DAY AFTER

I BLINK AND WATCH my Other spin lackadaisically around me as if nothing's wrong. Physically, I'm at school. Mentally, I'm still shoving pine needles down the shower drain, scrubbing dye off my face, and triple bagging my clothes before throwing them in the trash.

Until I get to English class.

There, I am sharply brought into the present. I stop dead in the doorway so abruptly the person behind me runs into me. Mumbling an apology, I manage to step aside enough to get out of the way, but my gaze is locked on an empty desk. An empty desk that will remain empty.

Fixing my eyes on the tiles, I walk faster than I should to sit down, books spilling out of my arms uncontrolled. The teacher isn't here yet and I can't take sitting doing nothing so I doodle random scribbles in the margins of my notes. They all look like flickering eyes.

I try not to—I know I shouldn't—but I look over at Amy's desk again.

Empty. Waiting. Unassuming.

No one else pays the empty desk any attention. And I guess why would they? People miss class all the time. But the teacher's late and I become more convinced with every minute that passes that it has something to do with Amy. With me.

But when she finally does arrive, she doesn't say anything. Just wakes up her computer and flips through the book we're reading to the most recent chapter. *Does the school not know yet? Someone has to know, there were cop cars. Did her mom not tell—Oh, her mom—*

I clench my hands into fists until my nails dig in and brace to hold back tears. But they don't come. I keep my breaths steady. With a last look at Amy's desk, the corner just catching some sunlight coming in the window, I close my eyes and look away.

Even being so out of it—or maybe because I'm so out of it—I find myself scanning for Dances as I leave the school. If she is here, I don't see her. Not that I would expect her to come find me, but... I frown as I walk to the front gate, grinding my teeth. *If I could just... just explain to her. Tell her I'm...*

I don't finish the thought because I don't know what I am.

Dad's waiting for me and I silently get into the car. When we get home, it takes Dad putting a hand on my shoulder before I realize he's still there.

I start and blink at him. *Did he ask me something?* "Huh?"

"I said Papa's out with friends tonight so it's just..." Dad's brows turn up, his hand sitting heavier on my shoulder. "Raina, are you alright?"

I jump at my own name. But still nothing happens.

"I know you're not happy about the new rules, but they're in place because we care about you. And this, whatever it is, seems quite a bit more than falling out with a friend."

"Um..." Shocker, I didn't manage to sleep between getting home yesterday and now. Not that I think that would have made much of a difference. But in either case, I don't have the brainpower to even tell a white lie. "I'm just thinking about Da—Danni."

Dad presses his lips together, then sighs and sits me down at the kitchen table. I let him. "I'm sorry. I know you might not believe me, but I am. I don't like seeing you upset like this. Do you want to talk about it?"

The question rockets me back into myself and I shake my head vigorously. Definitely too vigorously.

Dad internally argues with himself, face shifting between different expressions of frustrated. But in the end, he just says, "Okay," and I know I must really be a mess for him to leave it alone. "Well... You're still grounded."

And I still expect you to talk to us eventually.” Dad glances around the kitchen, looking a little lost. “But can I make you a snack at least?”

I have never felt less hungry in my life. “Sure.” While I sit and wait, my mind catches and replays the word “sorry” over and over again. By the time I make my escape to my room, my head pounds with it.

Setting the food down on my desk. I shut myself in my closet and press my hands against the back of it. I call up the memory of getting my tattoo, but I don’t need to open my eyes to know they’re not glowing.

I let out a frustrated sigh. “Come on.” I don’t know who I’m talking to, me or my Other. “Just,” I dig my nails into the wood, like I could pry open a Phase that way, “open!” With a groan, I press my head against the back wall. *I need this to work, I just need to talk to her. Just the two of us.* The thought pulls up scenes from last night again. The closet glows green.

Quickly, I shake the memories away. But...

Setting my jaw, I straighten and press my palms against my closet again, forcing myself to sink into whatever image comes up first. It’s Dances reaching for me as I step away.

I don’t even have to sink into it for long. And I can already tell it’s more powerful than what I was doing before. In the green light, I try and listen for the frequency of the room. And after a while, I don’t hear it exactly, but I do feel a vibration in my chest different than the feeling of my Other being close. When I turn my focus back to Dances’ apartment, I get the feeling of putting two opposite ends of a magnet together, a force moving me somewhere slightly off-center. A different vibration picks up.

The longer it takes me, the more I feel it slipping away. I drag up another memory. Amy jerkily waving me down to join her deadly game.

After that, it’s effortless to make the two vibrations match. The wall in front of me splits open, translucent. I push through like ripping paper.

On the other side is the stairwell of Dances’ apartment. A pang of anxiety stabs my stomach when I realize it actually worked. Bracing myself on both sides of the railing, I make my way up to her floor.

I don't know how long I stand in front of her door before I knock. But eventually, I raise a hand and tap a knuckle on the door.

Nothing.

I rap harder, just once, but with my full fist.

Silence.

"Dances?" I call out shakily. "It-It's me. I just want to talk. I'm—"

Still no response. In a last-ditch effort, I try the handle.

It's open.

I jump back, overwhelmed by the feeling that I shouldn't do that, that I shouldn't be here at all. But I swallow hard and crack the door open, peering in. "Dances—"

The apartment is dark, all the blinds drawn. And it's empty. Totally empty.

"No, no, no," I breathe, darting inside and closing the door behind me.

Her vinyls are gone off the wall. The strings of fairy lights have vanished. The maps and journals have been cleared from the living room table. We didn't spend much time in her bedroom, but all that's left is a bedframe and a mattress without sheets. Even the bathroom has been cleared out. The only lingering hint of Dances is the faint smell of hair dye and bleach.

I back out of the bathroom until I hit the kitchen island. For a moment, I have the strangest thought that this was all just some kind of dream. A long, exhilarating, multi-coloured, nightmarish dream. But I brush my fingers over the still not-quite settled lines of my tattoo. Real. I brace my hand on the counter and my pinkie finger brushes against paper.

My breath hitches. I whip around. In the dark, I can just make out a flat square of paper and an upright shape of something else. I fumble my way to the closest light switch, which happens to be the bathroom. The light spilling out from the door illuminates three things.

A note, a box of lime hair dye, and a pink and blue paper crane.

With shaking hands, I pick up the note, written on what looks like a torn journal page in Dances' handwriting.

I get it.

I hope you get all the time you want.

I hope it's everything you dream it will be.

I really did like having you around. You made it fun again. So thanks.

At the bottom, it's signed in Dances' handwriting, but it's not her name. At least, not the one I know her by. I set the note down. I start crying before I can touch the crane.

Sinking down to the floor, I curl into a ball, back against the island, sobbing until I can't breathe. Over Amy, over my role in her death, over Dances, over meeting her, over being with her, over her leaving, over getting to stay, with relief that I get to stay, that tomorrow I won't have to wake up and wonder if I'll be able to get out of bed.

"I'm sorry." Again and again and again. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

When my eyes and throat are burning and raw, I take a shuddering breath. I sit up, wipe my tears and push my hair out of my face. Gingerly, I take the note and fold it in quarters and slip it in my pocket. Even more delicately, I fold the paper crane flat and tuck it beside the note. The dye I pick up and clutch to my chest like a very boxy stuffed animal.

When I feel someone pushing up against the other side of an internal wall, my heart skips a beat, wondering, daring to hope, maybe... But before the thought is finished, I know it's not her. I don't know how I know, but I do.

Tucking the box of dye under my arm, I wipe my face again and go to leave the apartment. I pause in the doorway, looking over the space one last time. Blinking back more tears, I close my eyes and turn away.

The pushing on the wall is more insistent and I hurry back to the stairwell before reaching out and letting it open.

Needles pops out of the Phase. They look around the space. If they recognize it, they don't react. I press myself against the wall, not sure what they want, but dreading it already.

Needles steps out fully and looks me up and down. "You good?" I wipe my face again. "Yeah."

Nodding like they don't believe me, they walk over to the railing and lean their forearms against it, looking down to the bottom. "I heard about last night."

Tense, I press my lips together. "Which version?"

Needles frowns at me over their shoulder. "I have no clue what that's supposed to mean, but I talked to Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown if that helps."

"Oh. Uh, yeah. That helps." My voice comes out scratchy. I stare at the floor, starting to shake. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean for that to happen."

"*You're* sorry? I'm sorry for *you*." Needles shakes their head, mouth hanging open. "I-I can't believe she didn't tell you about the names."

"But I still—" My voice breaks and I don't finish the sentence.

"Hey," Needles reaches a hand towards me, but lets it fall when I don't move toward it, "you didn't know. She didn't tell you. This isn't on you."

Looking off to the side, I wrap one arm around myself, edges of the dye box digging into my chest. "I didn't know, but I did convince her to do it. Get an Other, I mean. She wasn't sure and I told her she should." I blink back more tears. "I didn't know her that well, but... we were going to change that."

"She made that choice herself."

Despite Needles' words, I still feel Amy's blood on my hands. And I don't think any amount of washing is going to make it go away.

Needles finally stands up and takes me by the shoulders. "Hey. You get to stay. You want to stay, right?"

With a shaking breath, I nod. "Yes." The word is raw with want.

"Good. You deserve to." Needles lowers their head to look me straight in the eye. "We deserve this."

I nod again, more intently, and roll my shoulders back. It's a different kind, but I'm used to carrying around pain. I don't know if it's a fair trade, but I'll take it. "Did, um, did you need something?"

Needles makes a face between a grimace and a smile. "Yeah, I'm making the rounds to all the Two- and Three-Names." They rub the back of their neck, eyes going wide. "I'm Paintbrush-Of-Shining-Needles now."

"Oh." A flame of anger licks the inside of my throat. Not at Needles though. *She certainly moves on quick.*

They laugh nervously. "Temporarily. *Very* temporarily." Needles wrinkles their nose, waving a hand. "I don't want any of that responsibility. I'm just here for a good time. But until we figure out someone else, I'm going around letting everyone know the situation."

The colour drains from my face. "Am I included in that situation?"

"Yes, *but*." They give me a pointed stare. "I'm making a point to let everyone know what *actually* happened."

A marble of guilt rolls around my stomach. It feels wrong to let Dances take the fall like that. But I don't tell Needles not to. I press a hand against the pocket with the crane and the note. "Thank you." *Even when she's not here, she's looking out for me.*

"Only because I like you. And hey," they clap me on the shoulder, "I didn't get the specifics from Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown, but after whatever you did to convince her to let you stay? It sounds like you can handle any numbskulls that want to come after you."

The marble of guilt dissolves into acid and I swallow down bile. I scoff. “You make a scary good point.”

Needles claps both my shoulders again and steps back. “Anyway. Like I said to everyone else, anything you can do to get the word out to the One-Names to call someone else from now on is appreciated. But I’ll see you there, right?”

I blink. “What?”

“The party tomorrow. My very first.” Needles shrugs. “It’s done now. What else is there to do but dance?”

TWO DAYS AFTER

THERE WAS AN ASSEMBLY at school this morning to tell us about Amy's death. They didn't go into any details, which is good because I know they're gory. As we all left the gym, they passed out these little yellow ribbons, "to wear in support of Amy's family."

I dropped mine in the grass outside in exchange for the feather I twirl in my fingers now. Sitting on my bed with an arm wrapped around my knees, I turn the feather back and forth in the light of the setting sun coming in my window. Black, with teal, navy and maroon. Magpie. An adolescent.

Not long after the sun disappears, I feel a push against a wall. Needles, presumably, telling me where to Phase for the party. With a sigh, I close my eyes and lean my cheek on my knees. My Other pauses its orbit to hover in front of me. When I don't move, it bounces side to side with impatient excitement.

I laugh. A jagged, bitter, ecstatic noise. *Who am I judging for moving on quickly?* I knew my answer before Needles had even finished asking if I would come. And in the darkest parts of me, I'm excited to throw myself right back into it. Because I know dancing, moving, existing the way I can now is going to feel very, very good.

Setting the feather on my windowsill, I get dressed for a good time. I clip my hair up to show off my tattoo and frame my face with dyed streaks. As I pull on some shoes, I make a mental note to Phase to get some hair dye soon.

My Other spins faster as I shut myself in my closet and press my hands against the back. The memory that comes up first is Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown pinning me in place and her frigid stare.

In the second it takes for me to rip through the Phase, I panic that I'm going to step out into the strip mall again.

But I don't.

It's some kind of industrial-looking loft with big grids of windows along one wall. The floor is covered in shaggy carpet, long swaths of bright green ivy climb along the walls, and multi-coloured light emanates from thin air. In place of the usual mismatched chairs and couches, there are piles of cushions and bean bags scattered around the edges of the room.

And the music is loud. The beat pulses against my eardrums just shy of painfully and the bass buzzes against the soles of my shoes with each step. A crowd dances wildly in the center of the room.

It's perfect.

It pales in comparison to Dances' falling star fountain.

I spot Needles across the room, eyes flashing silver, disappearing in and out of Phases to get One-Names. As I make my way around the edge of the space towards them, I catch snippets of conversation from people lounging on the bean bags or cushions.

Someone with an Other orbiting them talks quietly to a boy and a girl without Others. The pair both go wide-eyed as they listen. The person with an Other notices me, looks me up and down and then leaves as I pass, giving me a wary look over their shoulder. They mouth something as they turn away. I don't catch what. I deserve it anyways.

The boy gets up and moves towards the dancefloor, but pauses when the girl doesn't follow. "You coming?"

She gapes at him. "You really feel like dancing after hearing someone died at one of these a few days ago?"

"All the more reason to make the most of it. I don't think I'm coming back."

I fight the urge to cross my arms across my chest and shrink. Instead, I let the promise of the dancefloor keep me moving forward.

Two of the people from Needles' little tightrope group lean against the wall, too absorbed in their conversation to notice me.

"What luck. I mean, a day earlier and it wouldn't have mattered."

"I know. Didn't even get a full twenty-four hours with her Other. Shame to go so quick."

Those words are harder to shake off, but I curl my hands into fists, draw myself up straighter and keep walking.

Needles' back is to me when I reach them. They're talking to the Three-Name with red eyes from the mansion. "I might go. You know. See her—"

"See her?" the Three-Name asks incredulously. "No way in hell is it going to be an open casket. Do you know what falling from that height does to—" She cuts off abruptly as she makes eye contact with me.

Needles spins around with a face that clearly says "Whoops" before they wipe it away and replace it with a crooked grin. "Wings! Glad you came."

The Three-Names takes a few steps away, but keeps an eye on me.

I breathe in and let it out slowly then offer as much of a smile as I can muster. "Like I'd miss your first party, Paintbrush-Of-Shining-Needles."

They give an over-exaggerated shiver.

"How's it feel?"

"Like I'm already excited to not be in charge."

"Um, excuse me?"

Needles and I turn towards the pair that's approached us. The boy and the girl from before.

"What can I do for you?" Needles asks.

"We'd like to go home," the girl says.

Needles blinks. "Already?"

The boy shrugs. "We heard about..." He trails off as the girl, still staring at me, leans in to whisper something in his ear. They

both fall silent, watching me with horrified expressions. Compared to Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown—or Dances—it barely feels hard to hold their gaze.

Needles sighs. “No worries. C’mon.” When they don’t follow, just continue to look at me, Needles adds sharply, “You want to go? Let’s go.”

The pair jumps and hurries after Needles.

I close my eyes and let the music wash over me for a moment.

When I open my eyes, the Three-Name has stepped closer. “What are you doing here?”

I stiffen. “Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown said I could stay.”

“No, I just meant... even seasoned Three-Names usually leave after seeing what the Others can really do. You want to stay after that?”

My Other flashes in front of my vision. Even after everything, I’m standing here in no pain, not even really tired. I have a way out of my house whenever I want, no matter what my dads do. I get to be here and dance and do it again tomorrow and tomorrow as long as I want. “Yes. I want to dance.” And I do. Desperately.

Before she can say anything else, Needles comes back. “Sorry about that, Wings.”

“It’s fine. Like you said: I can handle any numbskulls.”

They look me up and down before they nod. “Do you need anything?”

“Nope.” I give them another smile, less forced the longer I spend under the music and coloured lights. “I just wanted to say hi. I came here to dance.”

Needles claps me on the shoulder and gestures towards the dancefloor. “All yours.”

I make my way into the moving crowd, with just enough of Dances’ gravity lingering around me to clear a path to the center without much shoving. Craning my head back, I let the music wash over me again and block out anything else.

As I sway with the music, I feel the papers I tucked in my pocket before I left shift. A phantom hand in mine, I press my palm over the note and the crane.

Close your eyes. It helps.

So I do. The lights overhead bleed through my eyelids and paint the space the Others float around in darker shades of the colours outside. I spin and throw my arms in the air as the beat picks up. If people stare, I can't feel it and I don't care. I become just another body in the crowd, another note in a song. Eyes closed, I dance and dance and dance until sweat drips down my back, I'm breathing hard and my old body would have long collapsed.

It feels even better than I could have wished for. By the time I Phase myself home, I don't have to force my smile at all.

ONE YEAR AFTER

“ARE YOU SURE THIS is... safe?”

“Oh yeah,” I say as I climb on top of the blocky air conditioning unit behind the school. From there, the retracted maintenance ladder is just in reach. “I come up here all the time.”

Once solidly on the ladder, I turn around and offer my hand to the sophomore student I picked up at lunch a few days ago. She eyes the ladder warily, but I manage to coax her up it and help her onto the roof.

She trails after me as I sit down on the roof’s edge. “What do you do up here?”

“Think. People watch.” I pat the space next to me. “I thought you’d like it.”

The words have the intended effect and she smiles bashfully and comes to sit next to me. “I don’t think I ever got your name.”

“You can call me Flies-On-Paper-Wings.”

“Flies-On-Paper-Wings?” she frowns. “That’s your name?”

I give her an easy grin. “What, do you not like it?”

“No, no! I like it! It’s just... unusual. But-but I like it.”

“I do, too.” Dangling my legs over the roof’s edge, I watch the other students leave the school. A different school than the one I graduated from last year, courtesy of Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown pulling whatever strings she holds. It’s not like I could stay at mine without raising questions.

After a lot of debate, I decided it was easier to lie to my dads than try to disappear like Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown suggested. As far as my

dads know, I'm enrolled in a university across the city, not answering texts because I'm in class. Needles even got dressed up and put on a very good responsible-older-student act to convince my dads to let me "move into the dorms" with them. I actually moved into Dances' old apartment.

I think Queen-With-A-Clay-Crown finds it funny.

The wind picks up, blowing strands of hair in front of me. It colours the world in stripes of lime and cyan and magenta and teal and rose. "I worked hard for that name."

Tilting her head to the side, the student laces her fingers around her curled up legs. "What do you mean by that?"

My smile widens and I wink. "Stick around long enough and you'll find out."

"Alright, then..." I watch her reaction. She looks confused, but intrigued. Looking for something more. She shivers and I know it's from me, not the wind. "By the way, I'm—"

I hold a finger to my mouth. "Shh." I can't make the grin as easy this time. "It's more fun if I don't know."

She frowns, but smiles, moving closer. "What's more fun?"

I blink slowly. My Other drifts closer to her, curious and excited by someone new. "If you can keep a secret, I can show you tonight."

As I wait for evening to take hold, I wander the city streets. Even now, watching the sun go down without having to worry about running home to my dads hasn't lost its thrill. I put my hands in my pockets and my fingers brush the two pieces of paper I put in my pants pockets before every party.

I'm pondering if I have time for a run when I catch a flash of purple in a window next to me. I do a double take, then stop mid-step. My heart leaps up into my throat and catches my next breath before it escapes at the familiar face through the glass.

Her smile is exactly as I remember it, when I can remember the good times without the last night we saw each other intruding. But her hair is different, tight curls with the ends dyed a deep purple held back from her

face by a thick headband. She looks older. I know she's only aged physically a year, but I wonder if all the rest didn't leave a mark in their own way.

Standing in front of the window, I rock back and forth on my heels several times, heart pounding despite the rest of me feeling oddly calm.

She looks at home in the hair salon and in herself as she works on the girl sitting in front of her. At the moment, she's painting red onto strips of the girl's hair and folding them up in foil with practiced ease. She smiles as she talks to the girl and when she spins around on one foot to grab more dye, it still looks like a move in a dance. Even now, she has a gravity to her and pulls the room in.

I stay rooted to the spot, not knowing what to do, but not willing to leave. Do I go in and talk to her? What would I even say? *Your hair looks beautiful. How long have you been working here? I miss you. Are you still dancing? I want you to come back. Who are your friends? I carry your crane with me every day.*

She puts her hands on the shoulders of girl in her chair, resting her cheek next to hers, and says something that makes the girl grin. When I blink, the only light on the backs of my eyes is mine.

It's not that I would want her to be sad or something. But when I pictured her more grown up, working a job, I didn't picture her looking quite so happy. It's not the breathless, breakneck joy of the Others and the parties, but it's still happy. Content. Just enough that it lets in a pang of longing for the kind of happiness that seems more stable, instead of always one bad night of slipping away. But as uncomfortable as that pang is, I'm so bittersweetly glad she's happy.

With one final, long look, I turn away and keep walking, towards a night of neon lights and burning muscles and getting lost in the music. Before I know it, the moon peeks out from between buildings. I take a deep breath, the world electrified and miserable and alive. As my first One- and Two-Names begin to call, I close my eyes.

*“Flies-On-Paper-Wings, are you there? I want to come out and play.
Flies-On-Paper-Wings, can you hear me? I need to escape today.”*

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