

"So how do you know the gay Alexes?" Francis asks, not the best at conversation, a fact someone else exacerbates.

"You can't call them that." Robin? objects. She doesn't look pleased, watching from between black coils of hair the way a big cat does from reeds. Francis makes sure to keep track of Robin?'s nails just in case.

"I don't have a problem with it. It's just, I mean they are. And this is, well, this is their engagement thing, isn't it? It's hardly irreverent."

"Who even are you?" Asks Robin? hypocritically.

"I'm Kalade's friend."

"Oh, is she here?" The first-time Robin? doesn't sound annoyed for no apparent reason.

"She will be here soon; we were supposed to meet but she's been delayed."

"So do you know anyone here, other than Alex and Alex?"

"No, just them. So are they engaged?"

"Hell no, god no, bureaucracy is to romance as hydrogen fluoride is to, well anything but Teflon basically." Message is received. "Plus, they'd never do that to each other's identity."

"So what's being celebrated?"

"They're starting a hivemind, so I've heard."

Francis takes a minute to think of the perfect excuse not to talk to Robin? anymore, then doesn't, walking away without a word and half hearing her mutter *rude* from behind. A quick tsunami-subtle look at his phone shows no new messages from Kalade. She'd said she'd be here soon, significantly longer than soon-ago.

"Hey! How is guy?" Someone either enjoying the party and/or intoxicated tries to force eye contact. "Don't think I've seen

you before. The name's Vaudaline." She's still talking, not stopping despite Francis' growing unease. "Aw, don't be afraid, it's only me. You need someone to hang out with." Yes! Not her, though. "It's cool, baby. I'll stick around."

Francis finally finds the words, "That sounds nice." The wrong words, that is, followed by platitudes, "So how do you know the Alexes?"

"Oh me, I just sort of know people. Everyone really."

"Do you know Robin?"

"No Robins actually. Why? Who's that?"

"Oh, nobody. I don't know any either, really. I know Kalade, though."

"Oh, then that makes you... Francis, right? No need to tell me, she describes you verbosely and vividly, maybe too vividly. No offence meant, but you know how she is." Francis does, but doubts Vaudaline knows what she's talking so excessively about. "You okay without her here?"

"I heard something about a hivemind." He interrupts, not liking Vaudaline's assumption that he needed help.

"Isn't it the most romantic? I mean, why just be with someone when you can actually be them?"

"Like literally?"

"Well, what would be the point of doing it figurative?" As confidently as she says it, Francis isn't fooled into thinking that's a thing.

"So how's this work?"

"Well you know, one mind shared over multiple bodies, duh."

"That's not what I mean. How do they actually...?" He'd have to be obscene to mean anything, so stops. "I'm going for a drink. Be back soon." Soon in the sense Kalade meant it.

The drinks are, thankfully, on a table in a room too small for dancing and with walls to block the blaring beat. Unfortunately, there's still one person there, asymptoting up to the cheese pieces.

"Hello." It takes Francis quite the time to pick that to say.

"Oh hello. Who's you?"

"Kalade's friend. And you?"

"Lerronix. Francis, right? Pleasure." Francis has no idea why he's holding out a hand. "Well quite. What's Kalade up to then? I heard she was on to live ones now?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Not much of a conversationalist, are you?"

"Not much of an eater of dairy, are you?"

"Not If I want to make it through the evening uninverted. Then again," he leans in closer to Francis. "If you want to know a secret, I tend to keep one or two on me. In case I need to suddenly leave somewhere. Doesn't help that these things are as delicious as they are dangerous."

Francis takes a step back. Not sure what to make of Lerronix, other than an exit.

Out in the hall, to save committing to one room or another, he stumbles upon Robin? again. It's cramped but less crowded than anywhere else, so he'll have to put up with her. She's not noticed him anyway. Instead, she's paying attention to a painting, framed on the wall in a golden waterfall. It's of a woman laying down in the desert, back against an hourglass of ivory sand with her reflection below. She's draped in a dress that just keeps going overflowing. But it's her face that has Robin? so wrapped, the way her eyes are closed as she knows something she's not telling Robin? a reason she's so relaxed perhaps.

"Between yellow and blue, equally endless." Robin? says to no one in particular.

"Is it from something?" Francis feels compelled to ask, more from curiosity than caring.

"Oh, it's you again. Kalade's... person she knows." Robin's entirely true reply.

"That's me. What was it you were saying?"

"Oh, just admiring the art. Wondering what she's thinking."

"I do that a lot, too. When they're more real, though. But that bit about yellow and blue?"

"Oh, the painting just reminded me of it. It's from a story I read when I was younger, but it's nothing really."

It's a while before one of them starts. "About earlier." And the other replies "Don't worry. It's okay."

"So the Alexes?" Francis asks.

"Yeah?"

"Are they already... *together*?"

"I think the correct term is 'one;' but no, not yet. I mean, they should be soon. But I imagine they'll make a show out of it. You know them, but can you blame them? It's a pretty big moment."

"Sure sounds like it."

"Can you imagine?"

"Not as a rule, no."

"Oh, I meant... never mind."

"Why aren't you with everyone else?"

"There's an ex marking the spot where I'd have to dig up something better-left-buried in the main room."

"Didn't go well?"

"No it didn't. He'll still be dying to show me the second most phallic part of his anatomy, after his personality." Francis does something charitably-intended as a laugh before Robin? continues. "I guess it is funny when it's not you. I don't think he knows it's over, either. He called me up, last month-- the first thing he'd said to me all year."

"Which words?"

"`Happy Birthday.' I was partying the night away at the time, and out of nowhere he just dropped all this past on me. Ruined my mood."

"Everyone come in!" There's a call from the sitting room, followed by persons being secreted from the various rooms they'd ended up invading. Soon enough too many people have converged together. The Alexes are standing centre stage, high on the amphetamine of attention.

"Hello! So you should all now know what we're here for. Am I right?" There's a cheer Francis didn't feel comfortable committing to. Alex continues. "That's right, this is a big moment for me and Alex. Or should that be for *me and me*? But let's not get ahead of ourselves. And it sure is ourselves, because we wanted to share this with everyone. But first, Alex, my love." The two Alexes stand in the centre of the room, eyes locked. Very publicly having a private moment.

"This is what you want?"

"What could I want more than you?"

"Only to be *one*."

Then they embrace. Francis feels compelled to ask someone, so settles for Robin?.

"So how does it happen?" This time at least remembering to whisper.

"I don't know exactly." Robin? replies. But before they can go further, the Alexes come apart for an announcement.

"Thank you everyone. I hope you enjoy this evening. There are snacks in the kitchen, and the music is-- well, as long as you like it loud." Most people leave the room, rather confused,

having expected more of a show. They return to partying sans the pomp and circumstance. Likewise, Francis expected something to see but doesn't do any dispersing just yet.

"Excuse me, Alex." There's only him and Robin? and the two Alexes left for now. The two Alexes turn simultaneously then one greets.

"Hello."

"What just happened?" Francis feels offended no one else thought it worth asking, taking this nonsense as read.

"Oh, we started a hivemind. Didn't you read the invitations?" Alex replied matter-of-factly.

"Well, okay then. Except not at all, because that's not okay." Robin? puts her arm on Francis's, to which he recoils. "Get off me. I'm trying to get things straight."

"It's okay, it's natural to have questions, just as what happened just now is completely natural." Alex begins. Francis was not at all fond of how which mouth each word came out of is seemingly random.

"But it doesn't make sense," is Francis's rather weak reply.

"Love doesn't make sense, but it happens," Alex replies in the same irritatingly selves-assured tone they keep using.

"But how?"

"Pheromones, I think." Robin? adds, being decidedly unhelpful. Alex elaborates.

"You see, it's more a case of-- wait, sorry. I need a moment. I'll be back." One of the Alexes leaves while the other continues. "Don't worry I'm just going to the bathroom. Now, where was I? Yes, so, it's just about having a connection with someone, being so close that eventually you just... *bond*, until you can't tell what parts of you as a person are you and which parts are them."

"Wait back a bit." Robin? stops them. "Are you talking to us

from the bathroom? That's just... *gross.*" She has a point.

"No, I'm talking to you from here. It's just that I'm also elsewhere, fulfilling an entirely natural need."

"No, I'm not having it. It's just too..." Robin? looks for the right word before Francis finds it for her.

"Intimate. It's just wrong."

"Well, apologies if I've not yet coordinated all of my assholes, assholes." There's a pause, and a flash of regret across his face like distant, embarrassed thunder. "No, sorry, that was uncalled for. I shouldn't have called you that. You're welcome to join me if you like."

"Isn't it a bit loud or crowded with both of you in there?" Robin? asks.

"No, it's only me. But I can see how someone without personal experience would be confused."

"So what's it like then? Suddenly being two people at once." Robin?'s curiosity has overcome her embarrassment

"One person."

"One person, sorry. I mean what's it like being one person, at once?"

"Well, you know when you remember something you didn't know you'd forgotten? It's like that, but with a life as opposed to where you left your lunch."

"But what about when you have memories on top of each other; isn't that all cognitive dissonance?"

"Well you know how you remember Tuesday and Wednesday differently? It's like that, but they're both Tuesday."

"So how does it feel?"

"Honestly? Wonderful! Better than I could have hoped. It's funny to think part of me doubted doing this. But I'm glad I

talked myself into it now. It's doing wonders for my self-confidence. I get to see myself through the eyes of someone who genuinely loves me, see all the things they think are cute." The other Alex returns. "Like here, see this body? I mean, I don't think from the inside looking out I ever got a good angle on it-- but now? Damn, am I right?" Francis really wishes Alex wouldn't high-five like that. "Now, go have fun, you two. I have guests to greet. Who knows, maybe there are others who might take a dip within me?" Alex leaves.

"Weird, right?"

"So weird." Francis is glad to have Robin? here as a confidant who wasn't at all taken in by whatever is going on.

"Like, I'd never--"

"No, me either."

"But we should totally follow them and see what the hell happens with them and the other people right?"

"Totally, but I should try and call Kalade first, see where she is." No answer.

Alex has stumbled onto Lerronix, so stands on either side of him.

"Hey, guy. Why are you eyeing up my snacks so funny like?"

"Oh hi, Alex, and Alex."

"Just the once is fine, friend."

"Well, I'm trying to decide how much of a bad reaction is worth the taste."

"Oh, *same!* I mean, I never got to eat it when I was younger," Alex spoke out of one mouth while the other stuffed itself. "But of course now I can have all the cheese I want, and damn does it taste as good as I remember."

"Are you trying to talk me into a meltdown?" (meltdown is maybe the wrong word here. Do you mean into gastric distress?)

Meltdown isn't as meaningful a word to NTs)

"Could be, big guy. Or, you're always welcome to join me. What do you say?"

"Intriguing, but how exactly?"

"All you need do is talk, get to know me, and I get to know you. Start with what it's like not being able to eat what you want."

What follows is quite an extensive conversation neither Robin? nor Francis follow. It's surprising how dull other people's problems can be when you've no sense of it happening to you. Snapping back into focus when Lerronix walks away past, Robin? feels the need to ask him.

"Lerry, what happened exactly?"

"Oh not much, just talking to myself. You should eat something. It's good food."

"Francis, a word?" Robin? does her best to stress the importance of the situation.

"Which?" That having failed, pulling him into the nearest closet proved much more effective.

"You and me should leave. This is just... just *wrong*, isn't it? Please, tell me that I'm not the only one who sees it."

"Well, I can't say I'd be any judge. But, I mean, I assume this doesn't happen so often, at least not around people I know. But I need to wait. I'm only here because Kalade is coming, and I couldn't let her walk in here alone."

"Can't you call and warn her?"

"And say what?"

"Try the truth."

After listening to the voicemail message for a third time--
"Hi, this is Dr. Kalade Thethry speaking. Sorry, but I'm busy, which means someone's probably dying, but hopefully only a

little. Leave a message and I'll get back to you soon."--
Francis shoots Robin? a worried wobbling sort of stare.

"Why don't you leave a message?"

"Her voicemail has messages from the last person she dated. Anyway, if she's on her way over, she'll be out in the open and won't want to listen in public."

"Ok Francis, I get it. You want to be loyal to her; that, at any other time, I'd applaud. Maybe we could go back along the route she'll take to get here. Would that help?"

"No, no, we might miss her. She could go the way she's gone every time since I've known her, or she could decide to go some other way, or there could be a change to the tube schedule, or there could be roadworks, or..."

"The point's been made, and it's okay. If you're staying, I'll stay too. But we're not leaving each other's sight. Is that okay, Francis?"

"Yes."

There's a knock on the closet door and an all-too-familiar voice.

"I can tell you it's not exactly comfortable in there. Now come out, enjoy yourselves, mingle. You might meet someone. Quick, before I get my hands on them." Alex manages not to make that sound like a threat at all. Silently Robin? nods.

"Okay, we'll come out. Mind giving us some space?"

"Not at all." Alex obliges. Robin? and Francis get out of the closet while people obviously pretend not to pay attention.

"Do you think anyone noticed?" Francis asks.

"One or two, sure. then again how many of them are the same person by now?"

"You assume I work faster than I do." One of the crowd speaks.
"Oops, sorry. Wrong mouth." The Alex that asked them to leave

the wardrobe takes over talking. "You know, I'm not forcing this on anyone, right?" Specifically addressing Robin? this time. "This could be what helps get our relationship get back on track. Remember..."

The sentence is interrupted by a punch that sounds almost as satisfying as the sound of it causing several different people in different rooms to simultaneously blurt *OW* or equivalent expletives. Francis makes a mental note to be more careful what he says around Robin?. Alex reels back before being caught by several of the spectators. "Now that..." But Alex thinks better of continuing before giving Robin? her say.

"For the last time, we broke up, or don't you see that now? Isn't it obvious why? Why would you ever let him be inside you? Why would I?"

"Now I do, thinking about it from the outside. I see what you mean. Damn, I can be an ass, can't I?" Robin? doesn't say yes. "But really, I'm not trying to fight you. This thing, this hivemind, it's just a chance to be a better person, like, I'm more self-aware, more experienced. My previous lack of understanding of both sets of genitals is not as devastating now. Just imagine. Why be yourself when you can be the best of so many people? Anyway, at least three of me could take you in a fight. But that's beside the point. I'm not going to fight you. You can go, both of you. I'll tell Kalade you went home if that's what you want." Robin?, about to leave, stops when hearing Francis start to speak.

"No."

Robin Sighs. "You hear that? No! We're staying. To keep an eye on things... I guess."

"Thanks." Francis says with an all-wrong inflection.

"Sure, if you'd rather. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll go get some ice for this eye of mine. The fact I have so many now doesn't make me any less keen on keeping these peepers. You get me?" Several other people laugh. "Hive mind humour. I guess you wouldn't get it." Someone brings Alex ice as Robin and Francis find somewhere else to be.

Francis breaks the silence once they find their way out into the garden. "Can I get you a drink? Punch maybe?" Further down on the grass some people are playing blindfolded beer pong suspiciously well.

Robin waits to respond. "While I'll give you points for the pun, I maybe don't want to be any drunker than I already feel sober. I can be a little, effervescent, with my fists. I'm sorry about that. It wasn't cool of me."

"I thought it was kinda cool, actually."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. But no, I'd still rather not drink."

"Me either. I could tell you some good juices to try but they spend so much on alcohol, no one ever buys them. Can I ask something?"

"Has a *no* ever stopped you? But, yes."

"What's keeping you out of it? I mean I know why it makes *me* uncomfortable. It's just so personal. It's like being so close to someone you're in the same place, like you can't cut them off if you just need some time to yourself. But I get that that's not normal, at least as far as I can tell from tonight since it's only us making a fuss."

"No, just because everyone else has gone crazy doesn't mean you're wrong, and just because everyone else has gone comfortable, that doesn't mean you're wrong either. I'm sure Kalade will agree with you. But if you want to know why I'm not up for it-- well, let's just say I don't think someone as--" She looks for the right word, before settling for. "--as much *myself*, should have multiple bodies to throw at a problem, let alone each other-- a fact I think I just reminded Alex of, so I can't imagine them repeating the offer."

"And if they do?"

"First instinct is to keep reminding them. But maybe we should at least try and talk again. After all, if we wait too long, it'll just be us left to talk to and we don't want that."

"Oh, don't we?"

"Not what I meant, but I'd like to at least get to know some people first. You can follow me if you like. I'll stop thinking of it as stalking."

"Thanks. I'd like that."

"But feel free to bail when your girlfriend gets here."

"I like you, if you couldn't tell. You're preferable to anyone currently here."

"You know, I bet Vaudaline is still herself. She'd not buy into this."

Sure enough, Vaudaline is rather blatantly Vaudaline. Sprawled on a sofa like a she's on a gurney for the over-partied. Either halfway undressed or halfway dressing, showing a lack of taste as characteristic as a fingerprint.

"Oh hi, guys. Just a moment." She sits up, smiling about something. "You know it's pretty funny, you'd think a hive mind would be better at multitasking, but no... apparently if you get one too hot under the collar the heat conducts all the way through to the others. You should see their faces, all of them. Heard one or two's extacy echoing clear across the property." She gave a wry look to the nearest nobody, presumably an Alex.

"I guess this one here's just better at keeping things under wraps. Still, shame to stop half way through." Neither Francis nor Robin have anything to say in response. "If Kalade were here, she'd laugh. Now, what can I do for you if I can't do for myself at the moment?"

"Well, me and Francis just felt like checking in on you. Making sure." Robin is the first to speak.

"I'm right here as well," An Alex interjected.

"Making sure you stay yourself. Keeping an eye on all these Alexes."

"All one of me?"

"Yes. All one of you."

"Nah, don't worry, I don't buy into it." Vaudaline reassures, "I'd already know anyone intimately anyway, and I've promised to keep so many secrets from people that I can't let my brain become public record."

"Alternatively," Adds Alex, "You've promised to keep secrets for me, not from me, and I'd be able to absolve you of any obligation you might otherwise feel. But, you'll at least hear my pitch?"

"Oh, I'll hear you, dear. I'll even be nice and listen."

"I'm sure this'll be good." Robin? rolls her eyes.

"Why the change of mind?" Not that Francis noticed.

"Talk then." Robin? prompts Alex.

"So you see-- well, I was thinking, since you know so many people, and more specifically know how to please so many people..."

"True, I do. Continue," Vaudaline flattered, relaxing back and stretching to smuggle a yawn through before admiring how claw like her nails had come out for the evening.

"Well, maybe you could help settle a few disputes. There have been a few entirely minor disagreements. Growing pains. I haven't always been aware who I'd be sharing with, and maybe I'm feeling a little like I was tricked, despite knowing that this won't always be an issue. I'd like to hear it from someone else. I thought if I were more diplomatic, more empathetic, I could more easily figure out how I was feeling."

"Oh. I see." Vaudaline considers. As usual, figuring out what she's thinking isn't easy for anyone. "Well, I can see how that'd be tricky, but you aren't exactly selling me on the whole deal. What do you make of this?" She asked Robin? and Francis.

"Don't listen. Alex isn't the most trustworthy. You know they

tried to get back together with me before coming to you?"

"Well, not *strictly* before." Alex isn't helping. "Vaudaline, just imagine what you could be. How many times have you expanded my horizons? But haven't you always been held back by other people's restraint? Imagine how much potential there'd be if you had more bodies at your disposal. You could sample yourself from the other side of the skin. I can tell you from experience, I'd no comprehension of how it would feel being someone else."

"I'm listening." Vaudaline lilted apathetically, still playing hard to get.

"No! You aren't! You can't be! Did you forget the whole deep internal division problem?" Robin? urged, keen to keep that in Vaudaline's mind.

"Well, we've all been there, and I'm capable of making my own choices. Sure, higher planes of existence will have a few kinks to work out. I'll even add a couple of my own, I think."

"No, I don't have to watch this. I'm going before I feel like fighting someone again." Robin? leaves. Francis follows.

Soon enough, they're in the hall by the door, Robin? searching for her coat. "I'm sorry Francis, but this place, it's just getting crazier. I get if you don't want to leave. I'm happy waiting outside with you for Kalade to come if you need."

There's a knock.

"Hello? Can I come in?" Francis opens the door.

"Kalade! You came?"

"`Course I came. I wouldn't miss this for the world. Sorry you were alone for awhile."

"Oh no, it's fine. I had someone to hang out with."

"Hi, funny seeing you again. I must say, my replacement is a pretty decent guy." Robin? waves to Kalade.

"Now come on, he's not your replacement. He's himself, aren't you, Francis?"

"I am."

"See? Autonomy and everything."

"You didn't tell me you used to date Kalade." It's not exactly an accusation, but more a statement of curiosity than a question.

"No, I didn't. I mean, I *did*. I'm not denying doing it, or denying not telling you. But you'll forgive me for having other things on my mind. Like, for the sake of example, this whole hivemind thing." Robin? asserts, having a polygon's worth of points-- so at least three.

"Oh good, glad to hear that's gotten going." Kalade hangs up her coat. "I am terribly sorry I'm late, but I guess it gave you more time to get along with people. And for that, I'm glad. I think you're finally coming out of your chrysalis, honey. How do you feel about joining me?"

"Wait! I was going to warn you about this. I don't think we should be here. It's just not right"

"Look, sweetie, I know that socialising isn't exactly the easiest for you, but we've been making progress, we can get a little extra vert into you. Look in nature, there are these weird animals, but they're actually like a pile of animals. The thing is you can't tell because of how interdependent they are. If you separate them, they'd die, but together these things just thrive. Together. Think what they could do for you? Do for *us* as a couple. We'd actually be able to communicate."

"Shut up, Kalade!" Robin? leers, even to Francis, clearly holding back salt or slaps. "You don't get to do this. Francis, just because you're awkward, and yeah you are-- but that doesn't mean you need to *fix* anything. You are, legitimately, not just in a because-he's-trying or an in-spite-of-his-condition sort of way-- you are cool. You know, sometimes the most comforting thing is someone who's also

clearly uncomfortable, and that meant a lot to me tonight. Look, if you do whatever it is they're doing, they'll be cooler for it, but you'll lose out. I should go, I waited for Kalade like I promised, but I can't be here any longer. Look me up later, maybe." Robin? leaves, not letting anyone else say anything.

As soon as she's gone, "And *that*, that is why we broke up. She thinks it's ok to glorify people's problems, like it's somehow poetic or beautiful to be ostracised, but that just stops people from getting the help they need. The help I want to give you. I want to be the part of you that helps you get through this Francis. Please. Me and Alex have been talking about it for a while." Speaking of, Alex is quick to come down the stairs, this time someone significantly more attractive.

Alex greets her, "Kalade, glad you could make it finally! I hope the delays weren't too bad?"

"Not at all. How many are you?"

"Just one, but I know what you mean. At my latest count, 20 or 32 or so. Everyone else is either asleep or they left, I think. You know, that's the weirdest feeling-- when part of you is in a dream, but other parts are wide awake. I tell you it does things to your sense of time. But now, do you think you're ready?"

"I think so. Are you okay, Francis?"

"I'm not, no. I can't, I... I don't."

"Breathe Francis, it's okay, it'll be okay. I'll go in, and you can see how it's fine. And then, it'll be me. We've done more mind-altering things before, after all. Remember our first time, how we just sort of stumbled through it, but we got so much better? Think about how far we've already come, and that was an uphill battle. I know it's hard, but I promise I'll make it as easy as I can for you. I can be that part of you that understands people. You can be *better*."

"Okay, I'll follow you anywhere. You know that, and I want that. I want to change for us."

"Wonderful! Oh, you two will just love it." Alex celebrates. "I'll have myself bring in some snacks for when you're done. And trust me, if you thought the first time was good... well, just you wait until you try the first time without having half of the experience happen to someone else. Kalade, when you're ready."

"I'm ready."

There's a pause.

"Is it my turn? Can I join you?" Francis ventures.

"Francis. I'm so sorry." Kalade takes a breath, flailing for the right words. "I didn't think, didn't have all the information together. I meant it when I said you could come join me even knowing what you were like, but I didn't understand how things worked. I understood how things worked, but I wasn't honest with myself about you, didn't think... but you can't... I can't. Someone like you, in here, you couldn't be part of this. You'd risk the whole structure. What I am, what I've accomplished-- it would fall apart within here. I'm sorry, I don't even know how we could really connect, thinking about it. You're just not someone I can bring myself to be."

"But Kalade, you promised."

"I promised myself. We've both been lied to."

"But only one of us has lied. Fine! Alex, do whatever you want; but Kalade, please come back."

"There is no coming back. Even so soon, it'd be like trying to cut the milk out of tea. And who knows what damage it could do? What if we ended up with any parts of a mind and body that didn't match? I couldn't risk doing that dysphoria to any of myself."

"But you..."

"I never said there was any undoing this. That wasn't something I lied about. I'm still, I'm still your girlfriend. I still wanted you to be here, to be with me."

"Still? Even though I'm damaged goods, and fixing me would be beyond your empathy? No, I'm gone. You kept me waiting, kept me here all night. I need to find Robin."

"Please, I deserve for you to be angry at me, but at least at me. Please stay."

"Why? Aren't there enough people here already?"

"I don't want to be by myself right now. I feel like I'd be bad company."

"That's observant of you. I could learn something... if I cared to stay."

"Please. Francis, I'm lonely."

But Francis is already running. He doesn't know where to, but he's covering ground fast. He figures maybe if he's lucky, he'll catch up with that silhouette that's agonizingly approaching escape velocity from him. He regrets not getting fitter. She effortlessly steps out of and over the of depth each of his desperate breaths with a confident stride and carries on oblivious.

Painful as calling out is, he has to squeeze his chest tight enough to spit up the words far as he can manage. "Hey, Robin!" But she doesn't stop.

"ROBIN!" She stops, as if caught mid-thought before stepping forward.

Last try. "ROBIN!" Nothing.

Or not. Robin? turns on her heels pointing at herself as if to ask if he's talking to her. "Hey, Francis?"

"It's still me! I'm still me."

"I know. I figure anyone else would have known my name."