Cord

"Incredible," muttered Cord Anderton, letting his hand skim lightly over the hood of the convertible. The antique, driver-run car was black: so inscrutably black that in the shadowed half-light of the garage, it became almost seemed purple. He glanced at Travis. "Where did you say you found that last part again?"

"Tokyo. Don't worry, I routed it through Sydney and then San Diego first," Travis assured him, though Cord wasn't really listening. He'd opened the car door and slid into the driver's seat, an eager nervousness prickling over his skin. Finally. Here he was, about to drive the convertible after six years of searching for those final few pieces.

Like it, Dad? he thought, as if his father were here right now, leaning back in the passenger seat with a grin.

Like always, the silent question remained unanswered.

Driving the convertible had been his dad's dream, not Cord's. Before he died, Jeff Anderton had collected these driver-run cars, and hired Travis to get them running again. Owning cars like this was definitely illegal, and as for driving them—to most people it would have been unthinkable. Far too dangerous, and crazy.

Cord's dad had driven them. A lot.

Not that Cord had known any of this the day his parents' will was read. He still remembered walking into the lawyer's office that afternoon: everything had felt cold and muffled and just a little bit distorted, like a dream. Or maybe that was just the Spokes he'd been prescribed.

He'd stood there the stuffy conference room, wearing that awful dark suit, surrounded by distant family members while the executor divided up his parents' estate in clipped, businesslike tones. The whole time, Cord kept thinking that this couldn't be happening; that his parents weren't gone, not really.

When the lawyer rattled off the Andertons' various vacation properties, Cord registered a moment of surprise at the "home in West Hampton, and all its contents," bequeathed to him and Brice. He hadn't even *known* about a property in West Hampton.

“We should sell that,” Brice had muttered, and then they’d moved on to the London flat, and the moment was forgotten.

Later, Cord would never understand why he’d gone out to the Hamptons one January afternoon. Maybe on some level he’d known that it was more than just another line item in his parents’ will. Whatever the reason, he’d gone—and saw the garage.

“If you want to sell, I can line up some buyers,” Travis had explained, as Cord glanced around at the cars lined up in neat, orderly rows. “It might take some time, but I’ll ask around, and—”

“No,” Cord said automatically. “I want to drive them.”

Travis had lifted a skeptical eyebrow. “Are you sure? This shit’s pretty illegal, and you’re… how old are you, exactly?”

Cord had insisted. If his dad had done this, he was determined to do it, too.

Now, five years later, he leaned forward to adjust the mirrors of the 2032 convertible. At a glance, Travis tossed him the keys.

Cord’s gaze drifted to the fuel gauge, and he frowned. “You only got a quarter tank?”

Travis reached down to manually lift the garage door. It wasn’t on loop with the electricity in the rest of the house: too risky, in case anyone came looking. “My usual guy got arrested, and I haven’t found someone new. At this point I learn to home-brew it myself,” Travis quipped, but Cord heard a distinct note of fear beneath the sarcasm. It was easy to forget how dangerous this was.

“Just don’t burn down the garage,” he called out over the engine, as he pulled into the residential street.

Most houses were sleeping through till next summer, but Cord saw lights on in a few of them; a family watching a holo, a porch streaming with floodlights. He hummed toward the turn-off. The highway extended silent before him, a dark ribbon leading in one direction toward the ocean and in the other, back toward the Tower. Cord paused only an instant before turning east and slamming the accelerator.

The world seemed to fall silent, or maybe it was impossibly loud; everything blurring into a roar of adrenaline and rubber and metal, the wind whipping fast around the windshield of the car. The convertible felt like a living thing, responding to Cord's thoughts almost before he knew them himself. The road curved slightly, and he barely even leaned before the car was turning with him, smooth and certain.

His eyes flicked to the speed, lit up in glowing yellow numbers on the dashboard. It was getting high. Still he pressed on the accelerator. He was going so fast that the wind brought tears to his eyes, or maybe they'd been there already. Cord wiped at them angrily.

This was the very last car his dad had been trying to reconstruct, before he died.

Cord knew it was selfish, but he'd never told Brice about any of this. He'd meant to, after the very first visit, except… Brice never asked about the Hamptons house; never followed up to see what had happened to it. And after the reading of the will, he'd just left town without warning. "I had to go," he later explained to Cord. As if the loss was Brice's burden alone; as if they weren't both struggling under the impossible weight of it.

The garage had acquired an almost sacred aspect in Cord's mind. He *needed* to drive, now; needed that numbing feeling of going so fast that everything else in the world shrank down to nothing. It was better than any drug, which Cord could say with some authority, given that he'd tried most drugs at least once.

What had his father been chasing, when he went out driving like this? Or maybe the better question was, what had he been running from?

Cord had spent years trying to finish this convertible. He'd become convinced that if he could finally drive it—could do what his dad had intended to do, but never got the chance—he might finally understand him.

The road curved sharply up ahead. He braced himself, his grip tightening on the steering wheel, but it seemed to fight against him. Something was suddenly clawing at his throat, something bitter and disappointed.

He'd been reaching so eagerly for a flicker of connection, just a brief flash of insight about his father. But his dad wasn't here.

Belatedly Cord realized that his turn was wrong—he was swerving too far to the side, the wheels skidding angrily on the smooth conductive pavement—

He pulled sharply on the wheel, trying to turn into the spin somehow, but it was too late; momentum had snared the car and thrown it violently out of control. The world outside was reduced to ribbons of variegated darkness. Cord braced himself for the impact, throwing his arm above his head. The edge of the old-fashioned seatbelt sliced into his stomach.

Then everything jolted to a sudden, loud, brutal stop.

Cord opened his eyes and saw that the convertible had smashed into a tree. The entire right half of the car was gloriously shattered. The passenger door was folded in on itself, fragments of metal and glass scattered over the ground in gleaming shards.

He fumbled for the door and released it, only to fall painfully to the ground with a yell. His palms were cut up with tiny shards of windshield. He looked down at them and realized they were shaking.

I had an accident, he flickered to Travis, and dropped a pin for his location.

What happened? Did anyone see? Travis replied. Cord didn't answer.

No one had seen, because the road was empty. There was no one here but Cord. No matter how hard he tried—no matter how many cars he rebuilt, how fast he drove—he wasn't going to bring back his dad. Nothing he did would change the fact that he was still alone.

He glanced at the clock in the corner of his vision and sighed. Fourteen whole minutes he'd lasted, with the car he'd spent years trying to build. Somehow he wasn't shocked. He was always breaking things, wasn't he?

He leaned his head back against the broken car and closed his eyes.

Cord

"No!" the image of Cord's mom exclaimed, illuminated on the Holoden wall in vibrant 3D. "Don't you dare!"

Holographic four-year-old Cord clutched at the garden hose, in the yard at his grandparents' house in Rhode Island. "Oops," he proclaimed, without an ounce of contrition, as he turned the hose on his mom. She laughed, her eyelet sundress drenched, her dark hair streaming with water down her back.

Cord swirled the watery remains of his drink as he watched. He knew it was weird, and probably melancholy, to sit here with old family holos after a party. But he was moody and drunk, and no one else was here to see, and who was to say what he could or couldn't do, anyway? He smiled a little as his dad began chasing a squealing Cord around the yard. God, even Brice looked happy back then, his arms outstretched as he played some kind of VR flying game.

Just as his dad scooped Cord into his arms, the door to the Holoden swung inward.

Cord looked up sharply, ready to let loose at whomever had broken the illusion—and paused.

There was something familiar about the girl standing there, though Cord couldn't exactly remember why. She was startlingly pretty, with delicate half-Asian features and bright green eyes. He wondered what she was dressed as, with her messy ponytail and low-slung jeans and her multicolored kaleidoscope of rubber bracelets.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm finished. So I'm heading out."

Shit, Cord realized belatedly, she wasn't wearing a costume at all. This girl was the maid. Mrs. Myers' daughter. What was her name again? He nodded slowly.

"I didn't have time to go home and change. You didn't give me much notice," the girl added, her voice stiff, and her name came to him in one of those rare drunken flashes of brilliance.

“Rylin Myers,” he said slowly, almost conversationally. “How the hell are you?” For some surprising reason, he gestured to the chair next to him.

For some other, equally surprising reason, Rylin took it.

“Aside from being groped by your friends, just great,” she snapped, tucking her legs up to cross them beneath her. “Sorry,” she added, with an exhale. “It’s been a long night.”

“Well, most of them aren’t my friends.” Even though he’d forgotten about her existence until five minutes ago, Cord felt newly angry at the thought of people harassing Rylin. God, he really *was* drunk and moody.

Rylin glanced around the Holoden, taking in its dark carpeting and oversized armchairs; the massive bar along the back wall, currently covered with snack-pack wrappers. After their parents died, Brice had installed a bar in almost every room of the apartment. *Always have a drink within arm’s reach*, he’d joked. Cord had thought it was funny—but now, seeing it through Rylin’s eyes, it seemed juvenile. He wondered why he even cared.

Rylin leaned back, her shirt slipping up to reveal the pale ribbon of her midriff. Cord forced himself to look higher, to where she was playing with something on a chain around her neck.

“What is that?” he asked.

Rylin seemed caught off guard. She quickly dropped the necklace. “It was my mom’s.”

“Why the Eiffel Tower?” he asked, because it seemed like a safe enough question.

Rylin bit her lip. “It was an inside joke of ours. We used to always say that if we ever had the money, we would take the train to Paris, eat at a fancy Café Paris.”

“Did you ever end up going?”

“I’ve barely left the Tower.” Rylin spoke the words matter-of-factly, not looking for sympathy. Definitely her mother’s daughter.

Cries of laughter flooded the room as the holo lit back up. Cord quickly muttered a few commands, and the room sank back into darkness.

For a moment they both just stared at the empty screen. Cord didn't know what to say. He hadn't meant to share that footage with anyone, it was *private*—but when he glanced over and saw Rylin's expression, his resentment faltered.

"It's nice that you have those vids. I wish we had more of my mom," she said, breaking the silence.

"I'm sorry," Cord told her, though he'd always hated when people told him sorry; though he knew they were useless and ineffective words. But sometimes he didn't know what else to say.

"It's fine," Rylin told him.

Cord knew she was lying. He'd told the same lie plenty of times. It wasn't fine, not at all.

A sudden growl came from Rylin's stomach. Cord glanced at the time: 3:21 AM. "You hungry?" he asked, unnecessarily. "We could dig into the leftovers, if you want."

"Yes." Rylin practically jumped up from her seat, following him along the hallway and back down the enormous glass staircase.

"Next time you should eat the catering. Sorry, I should have told you that."

Rylin nodded distractedly. Beneath the swoop of her ponytail, Cord saw a small, vicious red mark on her neck. It looked almost like a bite. His hands clenched imperceptibly as he wondered what—or rather, who—it was from.

It was only after he tried to open the refrigerator that Cord remembered he'd set it on output-restriction mode.

"Per the instructions of Muscle Regime 2118, your daily nutritional intake has been capped. Calorie count will reset after the conclusion of REM cycle," the fridge's automated voice informed him.

"Muscle regime," Rylin repeated, her eyes dancing. She was clearly struggling not to laugh. "I should get one of those."

"Guest override," Cord mumbled, the blood rising to his face. What was *wrong* with him? Maybe he'd had more to drink than he realized. Or maybe he was still

experiencing the aftershocks of wrecking that convertible. “Can you just put your hand on the fridge, to prove you’re here?”

Rylin placed her palm to the refrigerator door, and he pulled the door open to grab take-out containers at random. Rylin took a box of pizza cones from his hand and tore into one. “Mmm,” she exclaimed, through a mouthful of the cheesy fried crust. She had pizza sauce dribbled on her mouth, but was eating too ravenously to notice.

She was nothing like the other girls Cord knew.

“Oh my god! Are those Gummy Buddies?” Rylin burst out, looking over his shoulder at the box. “Do they actually move when you bite off their heads, like they do in the adverts?”

“You’ve never had a Gummy Buddy?” He and Atlas used to eat them all the time when they were kids. It was fun in a mindless, hilarious way; biting off half of the gummies and watching the other half squirm. Even more fun when you were high.

“No.” Rylin took an abrupt step forward, her eyes lit up with eagerness. She really was pretty. Not the way Avery was, all symmetrical and flawless; or flashy and sultry like Eris. No, she was different. He would have called it softer, except that he sensed a steely determination underlying Rylin’s every move.

“Come on. Try one.” He handed her the bag, wondering why he was doing this, what he really thought was going to happen.

Rylin selected a gummy and popped it whole into her mouth. She frowned in disappointment when nothing happened.

Cord barely held back a laugh. “You didn’t do it right. You have to bite off the head, or the legs. You can’t just eat it all at once.”

Rylin narrowed her eyes, as if she wasn’t quite sure whether to believe him. Then she took a cherry-red gummy and bit off the bottom half, revealing her row of small white teeth. The RFID chip in the remaining top part of the gummy abruptly let out a high-pitched scream.

“Crap!” Rylin exclaimed, dropping the gummy on the floor. It kept twitching near her feet. She sidled backwards, watching the gummy with wide, terrified eyes, as if it were an animal that might dart out and bite her ankles.

Cord burst out laughing. It was all too much: the gummy thrashing about on the floor; the fact that he was here with the daughter of his family’s former maid, a girl he didn’t know and didn’t understand. He felt oddly proud to have surprised Rylin. For some reason, he suspected she wasn’t surprised that often.

“Here, try again,” he suggested, holding out the bag of Gummy Buddies. “If you bite off the head, they don’t scream, just move around.”

Rylin crossed her arms. Cord found himself watched the quick rise and fall of her breath, his eyes drawn to the tiny stitches along the neckline of her shirt. They were fraying a little at the back. That red mark on her neck had grown even brighter with her flush of excitement.

“I’m good, thanks,” she said, and Cord heard the finality in her tone. She was about to leave. He realized to his surprise that he didn’t want her to.

Before he could think twice, he’d closed the distance between them and lowered his mouth to hers.

The kiss was hot and sweet and tasted like lightning. It was as disorienting as the car crash, out on Long Island, as if all Cord’s senses had been set on fire at once. He pulled Rylin closer, bending her backwards—

Dimly, he realized that her hands were on his chest and she was shoving him away.

He stumbled back. His pulse beat erratically under the surface of his skin.

Rylin took a shaky, careful breath. Then she raised her arm and slapped Cord across the face.

“I’m sorry.” Cord felt suddenly like the worst kind of ass. He’d thought—he’d been so certain that there was something between them—

“I clearly misread the situation,” he added, stumbling over his words in his confusion.

Rylin's expression was closed-off. "I—um, I should get going."

At first Cord couldn't think how to react, from the lateness and the bourbon and the swirling aftermath of that kiss. But before she reached the door, he'd realized that he had to say something, anything that would end the night on a better note than this.

"Hey, Myers. Catch."

He tossed the bag of Gummy Buddies toward her. She startled, but caught them in both hands. A sugary peace offering.

"Thanks," she mumbled, as the door shut behind her.

Cord stood there a while after she left, leaning back against the refrigerator. Its cool surface felt pleasant on his overheated skin. What would he say to Rylin Myers, when he saw her next?

Because he *would* see her, even if he wasn't yet sure when.

Cord

It had stopped raining.

That was Cord's first realization, as he swam slowly up to awakeness—that the rain had fallen silent. He kept his eyes closed, letting the events of the afternoon cascade over him: bringing Rylin to West Hampton, the breathless car ride, the storm on the beach. The way Rylin had turned to him with such calm surety, and kissed him, in the tiny square of shelter beneath their hovercover. Cord smiled indolently and reached across the warm sand toward her.

She wasn't there.

He sat up, running a hand through his hair as he glanced around, his heart calming an instant later when he saw her. She was sitting at the edge of the water, her legs tucked to one side, meticulously building a house of sand. In the watery light of the overcast sky, against the grey backdrop of the sea, her cranberry sweater was a vibrant splash of color. The wind lifted tendrils of hair off her shoulders.

She glanced up at his approach. Cord watched as she repeatedly scooped a palm of sand from beneath the water line, drizzled it over the walls, then scooped another handful. Her pale features were somehow delicate and fierce at once.

"Nice sand Tower," he remarked, taking a seat next to her.

"It's a sand castle," Rylin corrected. "People used to build them, you know, before all the self-generating sand Tower kits."

Cord and Brice used to have a kit like that. You poured the attractant liquid on the ground, and it caused the sand to self-form into cohesive bricks, marked with tiny colored labels so that you could stack them into a model Tower in a matter of minutes. Cord decided not to tell Rylin about that. He just reached for a handful of sand and began to copy her movements.

For a few minutes they worked in silence. Cord kept glancing at Rylin's wrists, her movements deft and quick. She would catch him looking and their eyes would meet

and they would both smile. Then Rylin would flush and let her gaze drop quickly back to the sand.

She was nervous around him; even, or maybe especially, after what had just happened.

Cord was suddenly hyperaware of everything—the cool breeze on his skin, the graininess of the sand in his fingers. Everything felt sharply drawn, like when he'd first seen the Tower from a helicopter, or drove a car for the first time.

"You do know that this will be destroyed in less than an hour, when the tide rises," he said, just to break the silence.

"I know. But the best things in life never last as long as we want them to." Rylin sat back on her heels. The hem of her jeans was dark with salt water.

"Is that a famous quote?" For some reason Cord felt like he'd heard it before.

Rylin blinked, startled. "Brice said it, in his speech at your parents' funeral."

What? "You were at the funeral?"

"My sister and I went with our mom. It's okay, we didn't come say hi to you or anything," Rylin said quickly.

Cord tried to shake off the sudden sticky, guilty feeling. But he and Brice definitely hadn't gone to Rylin's mom's funeral. He wondered if they'd even sent flowers.

"Thank you, for today," she added. "I had a lot of fun."

"You weren't scared?" he asked. Rylin looked up in surprise, and catching her expression, Cord hurried to clarify. "Of the car ride, that is."

"I loved it. *All* of it." Rylin's smile was bright and wicked with meaning.

At that, Cord put a hand around her waist and pulled her close, kissing her.

Rylin's breath caught and she shifted toward him, her hands snaking up around his neck as she kissed him back. She tasted like cherry lip balm and rainwater.

When they pulled away, she was beaming. Cord couldn't help smiling, too. He thought fleetingly of all the other girls he'd kissed—girls who didn't even know him,

who were only interested in him because of his last name—rushed and alcohol-fueled and careless, at parties.

But with Rylin, everything was just… easy, simple and uncomplicated and honest out here in the clean salt air.

"You really should stop working for me," he thought aloud, not for the first time. She was far too good to be working as a maid.

Rylin looked out over the water, her expression shuttered, and Cord knew at once that he'd said something wrong. "Maybe soon. I have a lot going on."

"I could always fire you," he suggested. He meant it as a joke, but Rylin didn't even smile. He ventured another try. "Rylin, I just want to help. And this—working for me—is so much less than you deserve." *You deserve to take on the whole world, on* your *terms,* he thought, but didn't say.

"Trust me, being with you is *more* than I deserve." She pulled her knees up to her chest and looped her arms around them.

He hated when she got all closed-off like this. "I wish you would—"

"Don't," Rylin interrupted, and now she sounded angry, "Don't offer me money again, okay?"

Cord nodded jerkily, though he didn't understand. God knows he had more than enough money, and she could use the help. But he knew better than to push her, and ruin what had been an incredible day.

He muttered at his contacts to call up the clock, and was startled to see how late it was. "Should we get going?" he asked, holding out a hand to help Rylin to her feet.

Rylin brushed the sand off her jeans as she stood, fiddling anxiously with something in her back pocket. She glanced down at the castle below them.

Then, in a single deliberate motion, she jumped on it. Its ramparts crumbled beneath her bare feet.

"Whoa, okay," Cord said, startled.

Rylin turned back, her dark hair spilling wildly over one shoulder. “Like you said, the tide will ruin it anyway. And if something of mine is going to be destroyed, I would rather end it myself.”

There was a cynical ruthlessness to her logic that for some reason frightened him. But then she jumped again, kicking the sand in an exaggerated motion, and the odd foreboding in Cord’s chest loosened. “Come on!” She gestured impatiently for him to join.

Cord gave up and stomped onto the castle. They both began laughing at the silliness of it. “I feel like a ten-year-old,” he admitted, but didn’t stop, because he wanted to preserve that light in Rylin’s eyes.

When there was nothing left of the castle, he took her hand and led her back toward the car, her grip warm and certain in his. He wondered if the leather seats had been ruined by the rainstorm, then decided he didn’t really care. His dad would’ve wanted him to *use* the car, not leave it pristine and untouched in the garage. And Cord knew for certain that his dad wouldn’t have told Cord to drive it alone.

He would have wanted Cord to share it, with someone special.

Cord

No one but Eris ever looked at him in quite this way, Cord thought, with a drunken, detached amusement. She stood before him now—both of them tucked away in the corner of Avery's party, beneath an abstract sculpture—a hand on one hip, her smile flirtatious and challenging. She looked sexy as ever, in her crimson dress and bold makeup, a designer scarf tied jauntily around her neck. But Cord wasn't fooled; he knew her too well. He could tell her heart wasn't in it.

Well, his wasn't in it, either.

"I've missed you, Eris. You and me, we kind of deserve each other, don't we?" He'd meant it to sound teasing, but it didn't come out right.

Eris deflating a little, tucking her hair behind her ears in a surprisingly vulnerable gesture. "Yeah. Maybe we do."

They were silent for a moment. Cord wished he had another drink. He wished he could shut up his stupid brain, make it stop thinking about Rylin. He wasn't going to see her again, anyway—

Except for some reason she was here. She stood there right now in the entrance to the library, looking at him and Eris, her expression raw with some painful emotion.

All night Cord had been thinking about what he would say to her, if he ever got the chance. That he'd cared about her, more than he'd admitted, and maybe not telling her that was a failure of his; but then, she was the one who'd stomped on his heart with the same casual violence that she'd unleashed on that sand castle.

He was hurt and pissed off, and yet he could say was "Rylin?"

"Oh," Eris breathed. "Is this her? Your maid?"

A wounded comprehension flickered over Rylin's face. Her eyes darted rapidly from Cord to Eris and back again, and then she spun around and fled back into the party.

For an instant Cord started forward, as if to chase after her; only to falter in his steps. Let Rylin assume he was with Eris now. He didn't owe her anything.

"Yeah," he murmured, in answer to Eris's question.

Eris tilted her head. Her earrings glimmered in the dancing shadows of the library, sparks against her fiery curtain of hair. “Why’d she run off like that?” Typical Eris; she had a habit of saying exactly what she thought in the very instant she thought it, and somehow, because she was Eris, it came off as cute rather than rude. He could only imagine what Rylin had made of her.

“You’re kind of intimidating to other girls. You know that, right?” Cord said wearily.

“Me?”

His gaze flicked around the party again, but found no sign of Rylin. *Stop looking for her.* He glanced back at Eris. After Rylin’s simple black dress, her face so naked with emotion, Eris’s beauty felt aggressive and overdone.

“Oh my god,” Eris pronounced slowly. “You *love* her. You love her even though she used you. After all your big statements about not believing in love, you’re as much a sucker as anyone.” She said it a little sarcastically, as if she wasn’t quite sure whether she meant it.

“Love and trust aren’t the same thing,” Cord pointed out.

Eris raised an eyebrow. He wondered suddenly if he’d wronged her, the way he cut things off with her so abruptly all those months ago. He knew Eris hadn’t loved him, but she *had* trusted him, and he hadn’t exactly proven worth of that trust. He shifted in discomfort. Maybe he owed her an apology?

Eris’s expensive amber-flecked eyes narrowed as she read a flicker, and she turned away, giving a little toss of her head to indicate that she was making a ping.

It had to be that new girl she was dating. Cord shifted in mild discomfort, a little embarrassed that he’d been about to apologize—how self-centered of him, to think that he mattered to Eris anymore at all.

“I mean all of it,” he heard her say, before her voice dropped lower.

Cord was vaguely aware of other people moving into the library, the hum of the party growing louder and wilder as the night wore on, but he tuned them out. He was

strangely curious about what would happen with Eris and the new girl. He knew it was bad form to eavesdrop, but what the hell.

He caught the moment when Eris's whole face lit up at something her girlfriend said. She transformed, relief strumming visibly through her system, as if she were illuminated by some private, personal sunbeam.

Cord leaned back and reached for a passing drink. He was happy for Eris, he told himself. God, at least one of them should have a good night. And yet some terrible corner of his mind felt *jealous* of her joy, which was so shameful and base that he tried firmly to shove it aside; but it was still there. He was jealous that Eris and her girlfriend could work things out, that their fight was the kind that could be fixed with an *I'm sorry* ping.

What Rylin had done… he didn't know how to begin repairing that kind of damage.

Eris ended her ping and turned back to him, and Cord knew she was leaving; going back to her lower-floor girlfriend and happily ever after. He started to make a joke, something about how it wasn't a party if you didn't even have a single drink, but the words died on his lips.

Eris paused, looking Cord up and down as if considering something. He found himself strangely quiet under her stare. He realized that she'd changed, recently—she was as incandescent and electric as ever, but that intensity was focused now; no longer impulsive and scattered.

"If you love her, go talk to her," Eris declared, as if it were obvious.

Cord's hand tightened around the drink, so tight that the shape of his fingerprints molded into the flexiglass. *We did talk,* he wanted to say, *this afternoon, when I learned the truth about who she really was.* But the words stuck painful and blocky in his throat. He didn't want to relive that moment, even with Eris.

Eris sighed and shook her head. "I'm getting her for you," she informed him.

"What? Where are you—"

"I'm getting her for you!" Eris repeated, her words snapping with a new excitement, and Cord knew there was no stopping her. There never was, not until Eris

either got what she wanted, or failed dramatically in the attempt.

Of course that she wanted to help, in her own, Eris-like way—but more than anything, he knew, she wanted to get Rylin here to prove him wrong. Eris never could resist the prospect of a good *I told you so*.

"Stop, Eris, you can't," he argued, except she'd already vanished into the crowd; the party melting amorphously back over her. Cord started off in pursuit, searching for a glimpse of her telltale red-gold hair, but eventually his steps slowed. What good did he really think he could do? Whether or not Eris found Rylin, it would end poorly for him.

He circled the party for a few minutes in a stunned haze, saying hello to people without realizing who they were. He picked up a shot off a passing tray and started to raise it to his lips, then caught sight of himself in one of this apartment's ubiquitous mirrors—his eyes red-rimmed; his hair disheveled, and not fashionably so. No wonder Eris had felt worried for him.

"Cord! Have you seen Avery?" It was Atlas, wearing a boring blue button down and an expression of concern.

"No, why?" Cord said lazily, and set the shot down onto some random antique. Why did Atlas always have to be such a buzz kill?

Atlas let out a breath. "I can't find her, and I have this feeling that something's going on…"

"Lighten up, Fuller. She's at a *party*." Cord didn't bother hiding his sarcasm. "Probably she's off hooking up with someone."

Atlas flinched at that, in a way that seemed strange to Cord—but the thought was wiped brutally from his mind an instant later, as the kitchen erupted in screams.

He and Atlas glanced at each other for only an instant before they both turned and started running toward that awful sound. The crowds were thicker than ever, all the drunk and curious people congealing uselessly around the kitchen.

Cord pushed forward in Atlas's wake. The screams had grown louder, making him want to clap his hands over his ears. He felt a sickening sense of foreboding—there was something so *final* about the sound, something that lifted the hairs on the back of his neck

and made him want to turn and run the opposite direction.

"What's going on?" he shouted, to no one in particular. There was a loud roaring in his ears, and at first he thought it was the roar of the party, but the party had gone silent as the screams grew even shriller. No one moved.

"Shit, *shit*." Atlas looked pale and wide-eyed. The screams were cracking now, rising and falling like an otherworldly orchestra. "Someone's on the roof."

"The *roof*?" Cord repeated, because it couldn't be possible.

He didn't believe it even when Atlas pushed open the door to the pantry, and he saw the ladder with his own eyes, stretching up towards a tiny square of midnight.

He watched as Atlas stumbled forward, his face a mask of pain, but someone was already coming down the ladder. The crowds backed up, the terrible magnitude of the situation finally settling over them. Someone had turned off the music, and now they were all murmuring in low tones, pulling together in stupid drunk curiosity. Cord wanted to shout at them to leave, but he couldn't find the words.

Avery came down first. She was crying in a way that terrified him; bent over and shaking with silent broken sobs. Even now she looked so beautiful, like some ancient goddess of grief and sorrow. Cord wondered if those raw screams had come from her.

"We called the police," she whispered, as Atlas pulled her into a brusque hug before stepping back. Cord saw his own fear reflected there in Atlas's eyes.

"Police?" Cord asked, since no one else seemed able to. "What? Why?"

Avery looked at him, and the anguish in her impossibly blue eyes, brimming with tears, made Cord feel sick. "She fell."

Cord wanted to ask what she meant, but his brain seemed to have broken, the entire world frozen and muffled. *Please not Rylin,* he thought wildly, incoherently; and he knew it was irrational to assume that Rylin had gone up to the roof at all, but hell, the *existence* of the roof was irrational. And he hadn't seen Rylin anywhere in the apartment —and she was so maddeningly unpredictable, who could say whether she hadn't seen this ladder and gone on up—

More footsteps clattered on the rungs.

Leda appeared next, tears streaking down her face. But she seemed somehow controlled beneath her grief, as if she'd taken a deep breath and buried all her feelings beneath the tightly-wound surface.

Cord's heart gave a strange lurch. *Please no,* he thought again, *it can't be her, don't let it be—*

Rylin appeared looking shaken and stricken and pale, and he let out an audible sigh of relief. He was still furious, still wounded, but now he wanted to yell and scream at her for going up on that damned roof on top of everything else.

"What do you mean, Aves? Who fell?" Atlas's question dropped gratingly into the silence.

And then Cord knew, with a terrible sinking realization. He craned his neck and looked around, hoping—wishing—he was wrong, but he didn't see her red-gold hair anywhere.

He wasn't surprised when Avery lifted her head and met his eyes with a small, pained nod. And it felt like she was speaking to only him, that it was just the two of them in this crowded space together, alone with their shared grief.

"Eris."

Cord knew in that moment that nothing would ever be the same.