THE MIGRATION: A NOVEL

By Jay Porcelli
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Abstract

This thesis consists of the first ten chapters of the novel *The Migration*, along with art and maps describing the world in which the story takes place. The novel, which could best be described as a science fiction backpacking story, takes place in an alternate world where people evolved from birds rather than apes. This alternate world also has the Link, an empathic connection between every living thing on the planet. The story is told through the perspective of Kaz, a nonbinary freshman in college who is embarking on the Migration, a two-month flight that follows the path of migratory birds.

The process of writing the first ten chapters, part one of three in the novel, took place over two semesters. The first semester mostly involved brainstorming, world building, and writing down ideas in non-chronological order. In between semesters, I wrote in chronological order and solidified some of my ideas. During the second semester, I continued writing in chronological order until I reached chapter ten. I also revised and fine-tuned my work, and worked on making maps and solidifying my world building.

In the future, I plan to write parts two and three of the novel. Part one is week one of Kaz’s journey, part two is weeks two through four, and part three is weeks five through seven. I plan to complete about thirty chapters total.

Keywords: English major, novel, science fiction, backpacking, hiking, nature, nonbinary, transgender, gender identity, LGBTQ, sexuality, coming of age, alternate Earth
# Map Key

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Chapter 1: Goodbye

My heart is racing—I’m finally here. After almost nine months of preparation, I’m on the Great Migration, following the path of my ancestors, the birds we evolved from. I fly north over the rainforest, the city becoming more distant with each flap of my wings.

I’ve already come farther than most people, much farther than most people thought I could. I barely survived birth, let alone a two month frontpacking trip across the world, and I’m an unusually small albino white hawk. With parents like mine, I would’ve expected to have an easier start. Unlike me, they have large, strong wings, and their bodies are tall and somewhat muscular. My wingspan, on the other hand, just barely reaches eight feet, and I’m under five feet tall, which means in addition to being underestimated, I get mistaken for a kid instead of a college freshman.

I’ve had to work hard—really hard—and now I’m going to be flying distances that most people can only imagine. The Great Migration isn’t something that just anyone can do, and I’m doing it.

I wish I could be more excited than this.

The thought feels like a stain across my chest. Be excited, Kaz, I tell myself, more adamantly than I should need to. This is everything I’ve worked for, and yet there is a deep, awful sadness pooling in my chest and an anxiety that comes in short, frantic jolts.

I try to push it down, but it swells back up and I have to look behind me, just once. I can’t help it. I see the distant outlines of my friends—Quinn, Stephanie, Juan, Liam—hovering above the trees, watching me as I disappear from view.

Liam is far away, but I’d know his silhouette, 6 feet tall with large sprawling wings, anywhere. I’d know his body anywhere—his long arms and legs, the back of his neck, the place where his wings protrude from his back, his lips, his… everything. And now he’s fading away.

Are my friends all still waving? I can’t tell, but either way I’m happy they decided to wait. I didn’t know I would be so relieved to see them still there. Turning around and not seeing anyone would have been too much to bear.

I can feel them too, through the Link. It’s moments like these that make me grateful for my unusually strong connection to it—I can feel their pride, and hope, and sadness to see me go, in a way that can’t be expressed with words. The Link is all around us, a nearly imperceptible background static humming through the entire world, an intangible force of life that connects
every living thing on the planet. It connects our emotions, our energies, our hopes and anxieties, bridging the spaces between us. I can feel everything my friends are feeling, and they can feel everything I’m feeling.

I wish I couldn’t feel Liam’s Link, but I can’t ignore the regret radiating off of him. He was supposed to be here with me. I try to ignore it, but my heart, my chest, my whole body is filled with a terrible ache. _He was supposed to be here. With me._ Just a few weeks ago, I kissed him on the cheek before leaving him to study for his astronomy final, and now it hurts to remember him. I don’t want to think about him, or school, or the loneliness, or anything else that I’m running away from.

A month ago, I thought I was running _towards_ something, but now I’m not so sure.

*Get it together, Kaz.* Where’s that infamous stubbornness my mother and Bethel are always complaining about? I’m the most stubborn person they know, the most stubborn person _I_ know, and I will not let some boy ruin this for me, even if it’s Liam. He’s not just some boy, but right now that’s what I need him to be.

I don’t have time to sit around and wallow. I turn around and keep flying, feeling the Links of my friends and the city fading behind me. The brilliant green canopy of the rainforest zooms by underneath me, the trees blurring together. The wind blows against the back of my neck, strange and unfamiliar—for the first time in my life, my hair is too short to cover it. It was only last night that I sat in front of the mirror, watching as my long white locks fell into the sink as Stephanie cut them. She left the top a little longer, but the rest is almost completely buzzed off. I keep running my hand over the back of my neck, expecting to feel something, but every single time, without fail, my heart skips a beat—it feels like something is missing, like a phantom limb, and the emptiness both excites and scares me.

Everything feels different now, not just my hair. I’m used to flying with my friends and the rest of the Outdoor Club, and now they’re also missing. I’m alone, and I won’t be coming back to the city of Esmeralda and our familiar patch of forest for a long time. There’s also the thirty-pound frontpack strapped to my chest, which is full of gear and food and water and everything else I’ll need for the next two months. Before leaving, Juan and I went over my checklist: fire starter, synthetic wood, maps, a flashlight, stove, pots, pans, utensils, clothing, first aid kit... There’s a lot to remember, which was why Juan and Liam forced me to make lists and get organized. I didn’t appreciate it at first, but I do now.

For some reason, it’s the realization that I’m done preparing that makes me grin. Planning was a slog—I’m here to fly!
Thinking about the trip ahead stirs up the feelings hidden under the anxiety; the freedom, the determination, the relief, the daredevil kind of anxiety all come rushing back. And when I finally get far enough from Liam that I can’t feel his Link—which unfortunately takes a while, since my Link sensitivity is stronger than most people’s—I feel completely free.

I’m here, flying deeper into the wilderness, a pair of white wings in the blue sky.
Chapter 2: Beginning

It’s been a couple hours, and the excitement has faded into the even repetition of physical exertion. The wind is gusty and against me today, so I have to put in more effort with each flap and focus on navigating the air currents. I pay attention for trail markers, small Link beacons attached to trees that I can sense every mile or so. They’re rectangular devices, each about the size of a watermelon, and they have the name of the trail—the Jade Trail—engraved on them. I will be following this trail until the Convergence, then change to the Halcyon Lakes Trail and travel through the Elmsric Forest.

In between markers, I navigate using my internal compass, making sure I’m oriented within the range of northwest directions that are on the map. I also watch for landmarks on the map, like the Culebra River, and keep the position of Esmeralda in the back of my mind.

I don’t do this often, but if I focus, really focus, I can tap into the innate sense that pulls me to where I was born—Lavendaria. It’s something left over from early on in our evolution, and it takes a lot of practice to access it. As part of my training for the Migration, I decided to learn how. I would sit cross-legged on my bed, screwing my eyes shut and contorting my face as I tried to connect to the Link, until Juan suggested that I do it while flying instead of forcing myself to sit still (I’m not very good at sitting still). I’ve had more success that way, but it’s not consistent yet.

We don’t really know that much about the Link. There is a whole department at my college devoted to studying it, but the Link is mysterious and elusive. We don’t know if we were the chicken and it was the egg, or vice versa, or if we both came about simultaneously, and we also don’t know its full extent or limitations. For many people, that’s fine—they take it for granted the way they take breathing for granted—but I’m curious. My Link is much stronger than most people’s, which means I can connect in ways that other people can’t. Sometimes that doesn’t feel like such a good thing. It’s frustrating, sometimes, and it’s always in the back of my mind, haunting my thoughts—when will I meet someone who can understand me the same way I can understand them? I wanted Liam to be that person more than anything, but he’s not and will never be.

I turn my attention away from the Link and back to my body. Beneath me, the rainforest has been more or less the same, flat and green with rivers cutting through every now and then. Soon, I’ll be reaching a large river that I’ll follow for a while.

Flying with the extra weight is more difficult, but the landscape and the feeling of long distance flying itself is familiar. My wings are straining, but I’m not sure if I would call it “pain” at this
point. It’s on the way to what I would call “pain,” but I also wouldn’t call it “not pain.” Either way, I can keep going. I’m at a steady, familiar pace that I know I can sustain.

Flying is monotonous, but in a good way. Maybe it deserves a better, less biased descriptor. It’s an experience of constancy and continuation, or something like that. Maybe it’s repetition, too: every few seconds, I flap and push myself forward, and then I do it again, and again, and again, push down... and back up, push down... and back up. Some people call it “getting in the groove” or “getting in the zone,” or they might say it’s a meditative state. I don’t really like these names, so I don’t know what to call it. Whatever it is, I love it.

I can’t pinpoint the exact moment it becomes pain, or even how long I’ve been flying, but I know that it is pain for sure now. I’m sweating and panting, and my pack is heavy on my chest, sinking my whole body down.

*Settle in. Push down... and back up. Push down... and back up.*

The burning radiates through my wings, the brief intervals between wing beats too short to let it dissipate at all. My lungs are also burning, but I try to keep my breathing steady so that I don’t get a cramp. That would suck right now.

Every inch of me wants to stop and take a break. *Push down... and back up. I continue. Push down... and back up. Continue. Push down... and back up.*

Sometimes, privately, I think of this as a masochistic state. People say “no pain no gain,” and they believe it, but no one ever says the word *masochism.* Aren’t they similar, though? You can’t be an athlete if you can’t handle pain or don’t know how to embrace it. It’s times like these when I think my mother is right, and my father too by association, even though he never said it out loud. When I was younger, my mother told me that pain is one of the most beautiful and powerful ways to experience the Link. She also told me that she and my father were martial artists before I was born, which involves the one thing you’re never supposed to do: cause physical harm. I was so resentful—it made us outcasts, and went against everything I was ever taught in school—and now I get it.

I understand, at least a little bit, why they were willing to break the rules and risk everything for this feeling. I don’t really know what they were feeling, but maybe it was something like this—the burning, all-consuming pain that makes me feel alive.

*Push down... and back up.* My head is nearly empty, vacant except for snippets of thoughts and this mantra I repeat to myself when things get hard. If I could put all of my stubbornness into
words, it would only be this string: *push down... and back up.* I feel blank but not dead, empty but not dull. There is something beautiful about the edge of my limits.

And then the familiar feeling of wonder starts to blossom up in me, tingling through my body and sending relief throughout my nervous system. I’ve reached a cardio high, and I can’t help but grin—I’m here, in my body, and it feels sublime. I feel transcendent, like nothing bad will ever happen again. I bet someone could feel my Link from miles away, bursting with everything inside of me.

Then the high tapers, and I’m left with a steady contentment. The pain has mostly subsided, and I feel like I could continue on like this for eons if I wanted to.

*This* is why I’m here. It’s why I started flying in high school—the catharsis, the freedom from sadness and doubt. Back then, though, I was a lot more reckless. I’d fly out with no food or water, using only the collective Link of my hometown to find my way back home instead of a map. I had no sense of time or regard for the weather, getting caught in storms and ending up flying in the dark. My parents weren’t so concerned, but Bethel always was, so I tried not to tell her when I messed up. She’s basically my grandmother, and I don’t want her to worry. I had some close calls, but it always worked out.

I only realized in college that maybe I should start thinking things through. It was the second week of school, I had flown out three hours from campus with no food or water, and I was extremely dehydrated and hungry. Coming from the four-season plains in the north, which is near the end of my Migration path, I hadn’t adjusted to the humidity of the rainforest. I mean, I still haven’t, but it was worse back then. If Liam and the rest of our friends in the Outdoor Club hadn’t shown up, I’m not entirely sure what would have happened.

Luckily, I had been following the Culebra River (just to see where it went, you know), which happened to be an established route for long distance flyers. There are a couple platforms and stopping points built into the trees along the path, since it’s dangerous to go down to the rainforest floor. According to Juan, the guidebooks, and apparently common knowledge, the rainforest floor is a wild, untouched place full of predators and huge animals. I should probably have a healthier respect for it, but after living in the plains for so long, the ground being dangerous feels strange. The ground, not the trees, was my home for the first 18 years of my life, especially because I started flying late—my wings and body were too small and weak to start flying when the other kids did. With the whole city and college campus built in and around the trees, all genetically engineered to better support civilization, I haven’t touched the ground since leaving home.
Regardless of my views on the forest floor, the platforms that were built to keep people from feeling like they need to go down are extremely convenient. It was at one of these platforms, where I had stopped for what was supposed to be a short break, that I realized I was in over my head. Once the adrenaline from flying was gone, my head started to spin with hunger and dehydration.

I laid down, one arm draped over my eyes to block the sun. My throat burned, and there was both pressure and lightheadedness behind my eyes.

I was just starting to get worried about how I was going to make it back when I saw a group of people, who I would later learn were members of the Outdoor Club, flying towards me. There were eight of them: Juan, Stephanie, Liam, Quinn, and a couple other people I don’t know as well. I think the vice president Erika was there, along with Rafael, Juan’s cousin.

They landed and said hello to me, and I said hello back as nonchalantly as I could. Usually, I can tell exactly what everyone around me is thinking through the Link, but I was so exhausted that I couldn’t feel anything specific—I wondered if this was how people with middle or lower level Link sensitivity felt. I was putting all my energy into suppressing my own Link, because I was too embarrassed to ask for help and I didn’t want anyone to know that I needed it.

Fortunately, Juan was there. Being the club president, he was quick to introduce himself. He’s a red-tailed hawk with rusty brown feathers, and at the time I could see that he was older than me, though not by too much. Compared to my mother, who is 150, and Bethel, who is 275, his 50 years aren’t much in the grand scheme of things. Still, he has an air of maturity and leadership ability that landed him the club president role all three years he’s been at this school, and I wouldn’t be surprised if the same was true at his two other schools. He’s really cool; most people attend college at least three times in their lives, but not many do that before they’re 50 like Juan.

“Hey, I’m Juan, president of the Outdoor Club. Hot day out, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I croaked out, my voice cracking a little from the dryness. I cleared my throat. “I’m actually a student there.” At that, some of the other club members turned to look at me. I stared at their sandwiches.

“Oh, you should join our club then!” he said, though I could feel a growing concern from him. I focused on our Link to get a better sense of it. He could tell I wasn’t feeling well, despite my best efforts to hide it—he’s good at that—and he was scanning the platform for something. I didn’t know what it was, but I could guess: a pack, food, water, literally anything to show that I hadn’t come empty handed. Obviously, he wasn’t going to find anything.
“Do you have enough water?” he asked tactfully.

There was something about him that made me want to answer truthfully, something that I would discover more of as we became friends over the next year. “Actually,” I admitted, “I didn’t bring any.”

Everyone’s eyes were on me; my skin prickled. “No food?” Juan asked.

“I, um, didn’t bring anything,” I replied.

At that, Liam stood up. “We’re three hours out from the city and it’s 90 degrees!” he exclaimed. I blushed in embarrassment.

Juan shot him a look that clearly said shut up, and Liam instantly complied. Juan turned around to grab some food and water from his pack—he always carries extra—but Liam beat him to the chase. I could tell he felt kind of bad.

“Here,” he said, holding out his water bottle, his cheeks a little pink.

I didn’t want to accept help from someone who had basically just called me an idiot, but I was really thirsty, and also Liam is really attractive. He’s a great horned owl, with gigantic brown-spotted wings and amber eyes. He’s tall and beyond beautiful, and thinking about his face makes my entire heart ache. At the time, I wanted him to like me so much that it embarrassed me.

Liam was never actually upset with me, just worried. He’s a planner; he doesn’t just do things without thinking about them, which is exactly what I do all the time. He studies, and makes lists in his perfect handwriting, and squints at the numbers and formulas in his homework until they make sense.

On the way back to campus, Liam told me about all the gear I’d need and how to plan things out, and then Quinn told Liam to stop boring me and started a less one-sided conversation. I found out that he and Liam were friends from high school, and that they were also 18-year-old college freshmen. At the time, Quinn hadn’t started trying to get to know Stephanie, so I didn’t talk with her too much.

When we got back, Juan pulled me aside. “Our next meeting is Tuesday at 8 pm,” he said. “You should really come.” He knew how embarrassed I was, and he was being genuine. And I did decide to go. It’s funny—halfway to the meeting, I almost turned around, but then I decided that I wanted to see Liam, just to prove him wrong. Definitely no other reason, I told myself.
Now, almost a year later, I’m on the Great Migration, and I have enough gear to last me a few months and enough food to last me at least four days. For once in my life, I’m actually prepared for something. Instead of having to basically rescue me, my friends waved me off a few hours ago. They were the ones who taught me how to fly like this. Over the past two semesters, we’ve gone on flying trips almost every week, sometimes staying places overnight and camping out, sometimes going out for a few hours and other times closer to eight.

For the first time in a long time, I’m flying alone. I used to always fly alone in high school, but now it feels different. I wasn’t planning on being alone. I’m used to flying in a group, scattered across the sky and surrounded by other people’s Links, the sound of their voices drifting in the wind. Now, I can’t hear or see or feel anyone.

Well, there’s still the city’s Link. By now, the rest of my friends would have stopped feeling it, but it’s going to be in my periphery for at least another few hours. I don’t know anyone else but my mother (and, according to her, supposedly my father) who has a Link strong enough to do that. When I finally get far away enough, I will be completely alone.

I wasn’t supposed to be alone—Liam was supposed to be here. It was only a few weeks ago that told me he couldn’t come, when we fought and I...

I don’t want to think about that. I want to fly.

He’s always been in the back of my mind, even before we broke up—I saw someone wearing a blue shirt earlier that I thought he would like, and just a few hours ago I saw a cloud that reminded me of his nose—but now it hurts. I don’t want to think about him, or the fight, or the break up, or what he’s doing now. He’ll probably be starting that stupid summer internship within the next week, the one he chose over me and the Migration. I’m full of anger, and sadness, and longing, and guilt, and what I really want is to run away and hopefully find myself.

What better place to do that than here?
Chapter 3: The Shelter

When I arrive at the first shelter, there are still a few hours of sunlight left. There are three people already there, standing on the platform and hanging up their portable nests under the overhang. I see a third, unoccupied nest on the other side of the shelter with a pack sitting next to it.

The shelter consists of a large wooden platform with a roof covering about a third of it. The covered section has three walls with hooks on them, and there are five beams stretching between two of the walls. The hooks and beams are used to hang portable nests, though a person can also sleep on the floor. Nestled just below the tree line, it would be easy to miss the shelter if it weren’t for the wooden pole sticking about 30 feet into the air. There is an old, ratty piece of cloth attached to the top like it’s supposed to be a flag, and the pole is covered in carvings, mostly names.

It’s a familiar place. I’ve stayed here before with Liam, I remember, and suddenly I’m wishing that I could have stayed somewhere else.

Trying not to think about it, I land on the platform. I’m not used to the extra weight on my chest; my feet hit the ground a little harder than I was expecting, and I stumble for a second before catching myself. Embarrassed, my cheeks flush a little.

One of the people, a blue bunting not much older than me, notices and turns to look at me. “I did the same thing,” he confesses with a sheepish smile, and I smile back. At his comment, his two companions also turn towards me.

One of them is a round robin, a short, rosy woman with bright orange patches on her wings that set her apart from northern robins. The other, a young woman, is a blue bunting that looks similar enough to the man to be siblings. Their wings, hair, and skin are all a brilliant shade of blue. Usually, people’s skin colors are shades of white, brown, and black, sometimes with hints of brighter colors mixed in or spots, so it’s rare to see someone with blue skin. At this point I’m mostly used to it, but before coming to the rainforest, I had never seen anyone with colorful wings, let alone colorful skin.

I undo the straps on the pack, and dump it on the floor despite my best efforts to set it down normally. Without the extra weight, I feel light and floaty, like if I spread my wings the wind would carry me off without me even trying. I stretch my wings and sigh contentedly.

The man stands up and approaches me. “Hi! How’s it going?” he says cheerfully. He has such a warm, beaming smile and radiant Link to match that I’m temporarily taken aback.
“I’m, uh, good,” I say a little awkwardly, my tone way less friendly than I want it to be. “I’m Kaz,” I offer, trying again.

“I’m Ariel,” he says, unperturbed. “This is my sister Octavia,” he continues, gesturing to the other blue bunting, “and this is her girlfriend Maple.”

That’s another thing I had to get used to. It’s not like people in my hometown didn’t like gay people, we just didn’t really talk about them. When I first got to college, Liam and Quinn had to explain a lot of things to me. Well, it was mostly Quinn. Liam was worried about getting something wrong, and Quinn had a lot of gay friends in high school, so he took the lead, though he always said that he couldn’t speak for other people’s experiences.

Octavia and Maple introduce themselves to me. Octavia is a tall, muscular, severe-looking woman, with a similar build to Ariel, while Maple is much softer looking, with a sweet voice and a calm brightness about her. They’re not too much older than me, all of them in their late thirties.

“I’m going to go start on the fire,” Maple says, squeezing Octavia’s hand before she goes.

“I’ll finish up with our nest,” she replies, then turns to Ariel. “We should let Kaz get set up,” she says briskly, then heads over to their stuff. Octavia isn’t very outwardly friendly, but I can tell she doesn’t dislike me. She’s just task-oriented and likes getting stuff done. Before Ariel follows, he invites me to come hang out once I’m done.

I lug my pack over to the shelter and pull out my portable nest, which is like a hammock but made specifically for sleeping outdoors in any weather conditions. They have internal pockets for more padding and warmth, are completely waterproof, zip shut—there is bug netting and ventilation so that it doesn’t get unbearably stifling—and have a ton of hanging configurations. The hanging versatility requires a whole lot of ropes, knots, clips, and fasteners, and it’s easy to get confused if you’ve never done it before.

Juan was the one who showed me how to set up a nest and use most of my gear. Without him, I don’t think I would’ve made it nearly this far. My other friends in the Outdoor Club helped me and Liam research, but Juan was the one with the actual experience, the one who talked us through which gear to buy, which route to take, when to leave, what we should expect. He’s never done the whole Migration himself, but he’s done plenty of long frontpacking trips.

Before joining the Outdoor Club, I had never even used a map before. I remember going up to him after one of the club meetings, absolutely bursting with overconfidence, and telling him that I was going to do the Migration and that I wanted some tips. Juan had looked me up and down,
amused but trying not to show it. He tries not to be discouraging, especially to new members. *Everyone starts from somewhere*, he’s told me many times.

“When which route are you taking?” he asked.

“Umm... there’s one starting from around here, right?” I replied, less sure of myself.

“There are two main routes close to here, though the Jade Trail is the closest. Once you get to the Convergence, though, there’s a lot more options. You can choose to follow the coast, or go through the plains, or stick to more forested areas. The most popular one is the Westwater Path, which goes by the coast.”

At that point I was already lost.

“Have you ever been frontpacking before?” he asked, and I shook my head no. “Okay, so you’ll need to borrow gear from the club so you can train. What kind of gear do you have?”

“Some water bottles,” I mumbled. “And I guess also a pack and a flashlight. Oh, and a knife.”

“Well,” he grinned, “you’re gonna need a bit more than that. Let me get my checklist, and we can start going through the basics. I won’t overwhelm you anymore.”

I spent a lot of time talking with him and feeling very overwhelmed. There is just so much to know, and Juan is like a living encyclopedia.

Well, if there’s anything I can do, it’s set up a nest. Standing here, in the present with the ropes and nest in my hands, I feel confident. I’ve done it plenty of times, so I don’t have to focus too hard on it. I might not do so well with another model, but I have this one, so why worry?

As I’m finishing up, I hear someone landing on the platform behind me. I turn around and see a macaw, with mostly white wings that have bright yellow streaks along the tops. Her hair, sticking up like a half-formed mohawk—that’s just the way macaw hair grows—is the same shade of yellow as her feathers. She looks like she might be 100, much younger than my parents but still much older than me, and she has an air of confidence and ruggedness. She nods at me and the other group and says hello, and we do the same.

While the woman goes to set up camp, I join Ariel, Octavia, and Maple at the fire pit, which is near the center of the uncovered area and built out of non-flammable material. There are a few benches around it, and Ariel scoots over on one of them to make room for me.
When I sit down, Octavia is talking about mileage for the next day, and the way she’s talking, it seems like they’re doing the Migration. Maple is whittling a stick with her knife as she listens, though I can tell she’s more interested in the sound of Octavia’s voice than anything. Ariel is also listening, but he seems like a “we’ll get there when we get there” kind of person, and is content to leave the details to his sister. Octavia seems to be the Liam of this group. Someone has to do it—otherwise nothing would ever get done, and nobody would ever get anywhere.

“Are you also doing the Migration?” Maple asks me, and I nod.

“That’s great!” Ariel says excitedly. “We’ll be seeing you on the trail then.”

Octavia also seems to find this to be pleasant news. “Which route are you taking?” she asks.

Back when Juan first asked me this question, I had no idea, but now I actually know what I’m talking about. “At the convergence, I’m heading through the Elmsric Wilds to Aria, then heading up to the Halcyon Lakes,” I tell her.

“We’re taking the Westwater Trail and following the coast,” she says, and I feel a little disappointed that we’ll have to part ways.

“The Convergence isn’t until about the halfway point, so we’ll be on the same path for plenty of time,” Ariel says cheerfully.

The Convergence is at the bottleneck about halfway up the continent, where five of the thirteen major Migration paths in the Western Hemisphere come together. Unlike Ariel’s route, mine is less-traveled, but I have to go—it passes near my hometown. It’s not required, but a lot of people include the place of their birth in their Migration, the way our ancestors did thousands of years ago. I’m not sure how I feel about visiting Lavendaria again, but I want to see Bethel, and can’t imagine not going.

We talk a little longer, and then the macaw woman approaches us with a bowl and some cooking supplies. “Mind if I join you?”

“Of course, go ahead!” Ariel tells her, and she sits down.

I’m a little intimidated by her, but I try not to show it. Naturally, Ariel strikes up a conversation, which makes me less intimidated but more awestruck by her. Her name is Val, and she’s a photographer following bird migrations. Although we’re much more evolved than birds at this point, and our biology is very different, there are vestiges of our ancient anatomy, like our precise sense of direction and feathery wings, that remain. There’s a lot we don’t know about our
bodies, or our early evolution, or how the Link relates to any of it, and studying birds might be
able to help us. Anyways, they’re beautiful creatures. Their migration routes follow our own
closely enough that Val is able to track them by following the Migration frontpacker routes. For
ten years, she’s been doing large segments of the Migration, but this is the first time she’s
decided to do the whole thing in one shot. I have not a doubt in my mind that she will finish.

I also find out that she’s taking the same path as me after the Convergence, which is how I enter
the conversation.

“How old are you?” Val asks.

“I know I look young,” I say, embarrassed, “but I’m nineteen.”

Val laughs. “You are young!” My face gets warm, but she doesn’t mean it as an insult. “You’ve
got guts,” she says. “Keep doing what you’re doing.”

After talking a little longer, Val goes to bed first, and then the rest of us also settle in. I hear a
bunch of giggling and tumbling from within Maple and Octavia’s nest as they try to get
comfortable. Liam and I could have shared one to save some weight and room in our packs, but
we both agreed that we wanted some personal space. Eventually, they go silent, and all I can hear
is the ambient noise of the rainforest.

The background hum is peaceful, but there’s a heavy feeling sinking through my body. I was
supposed to be here with Liam, our nests hanging close enough for me to hear his breathing slow
as he fell asleep. His absence feels cold. Maybe we could have been the ones giggling and
tumbling around in one of our nests. He was my best friend and my partner, and now he’s... not.
I’m never going to joke around with him again, or tell people the story of how we first met, or
roll my eyes at him when he does something stupid. Seeing Octavia and Maple hurt more than I
realized. The awful ache in my chest intensifies.

Before I go to sleep, I have to call Quinn. He made me promise to let him know everything was
okay, which led to everyone else teasing him about being my mother or something.

I fish around my pack for my Link amplifier, stopping when my fingers brush against its smooth
wooden surface. Being round and about the size of my fist, I’m able to get my hands around it
easily and pull it out. I pull it close to my chest and focus on it, feeling the life inside of it, the
tiny little bacteria that are just enough to connect to the Link. The mechanism inside the wooden
sphere starts to hum and get warmer, amplifying the Link until I can reach out towards Quinn’s
amplifier.
I can’t even begin to comprehend how the amplifiers work, though maybe Stephanie could, being a biology major and all. They’re designed to be user-friendly for the general public, so I don’t really need to know. They’ve got restraints and barriers built in, only being able to connect to amplifiers they’ve been attuned to. The process involves holding the living devices together and bonding them through the Link, either alone or with another person. The amplifiers are bonded to each other, not the people who own them.

There are ways to increase their capabilities, however. Someone with a strong Link, or someone who practices a lot, can send strings of letters through short and long pulses. Bethel made me learn how, as an exercise to teach me how to control my Link. Not much good that did. It’s also possible to modify the amplifier itself, either physically or through the Link, though both of these methods are extremely difficult. This can open up the amplifier to more of the Link, and could theoretically connect a person with the entire planet, though no one has ever done it. Modifying amplifiers is generally discouraged—such a vast connection could dissolve a person, making them lose their sense of self.

After what feels like a millisecond, I feel Quinn on the other side. He must have been waiting for me. He is like translucent, swirling bubbles in the sun’s rays. My sadness immediately melts—I was worried I’d have to hide it—and I send back the excited tumble of butterflies vibrating through my body, the exhilaration untempered by loneliness or loss. I can tell it makes him happy.

For a second, the line goes cold, and then I feel Stephanie. She’s colorful and fiery, almost giddy, her feelings more similar to mine than Quinn’s, which had an air of relief that I was okay. I send back the brightest, most beaming smile—I’m so happy they’re both here.

One more time, the amplifier changes hands, and it’s Juan. He is full of a satisfied pride, a feeling that surrounds me like warm fog. My happiness gets watery and fluid, flowing out like a tide.

A part of me is waiting for a fourth person, and then I realize that he’s not coming—Liam isn’t there. Juan tells me, with an emptiness and bittersweetness that shows me it was very intentional. They weren’t going to spring that on me. Juan sends me comfort and hesitation—if I want to call Liam, I need to do it myself, but I shouldn’t. Even though I’ve never had an ex to call up until a month ago, I know that it’s never a good idea. Shaking off the thoughts, I send back gratitude.

My friends pass the amplifier between them one more time, their fingers overlapping so that there is almost no delay between their Links, each of us saying goodbye. I think we’re all equally reassured. Quinn and I linger a bit longer, and then I put the amplifier down, causing our Link to
thin out, stretching until it separates like raindrops, getting smaller and smaller until it reintegrates with the world, waiting for us to feel it again.

I had resolved not to call Liam, but after a restless half hour of laying in the dark, I’m not so sure. It’s a bad idea. I know it is. I’m not even drunk—I don’t have any semblance of an excuse.

The Link amplifier sits tantalizingly in one of the nest’s pockets. I can call him. I can do it right now. My heart speeds up until I can’t hold myself still, and I dig the amplifier out of the pocket and clutch it to my chest.

I’m ashamed at how quickly I give in and grab the amplifier. I’ve always prided myself on my willpower, but I guess it’s not that strong after all. I focus, the Link gradually growing in thickness, or something like thickness, and am surprised when Liam connects right away. Our feelings reverberate, so strong that I almost gasp. He was waiting, just in case, and it hurts, and the hurt keeps compounding until I start regretting everything—and then the connection ends, abrupt like Liam dropped his amplifier. In the last millisecond, I could tell Liam regretted answering the call, and that knowledge makes me feel like glass quivering in a high wind. I shouldn’t have called.

It was selfish of me.

The back of my throat prickles with tears, but I keep it in. I don’t want to cry, and I don’t want anyone to hear me crying either.

Curling up into fetal position under my blankets, I push down the ache and force myself to go to sleep. I’m tired from flying today, so I’m not awake too much longer. A part of me resists sleep—after the breakup, I started having nightmares again, just like the ones that started after the incident five years ago—but slowly, I fade into uncomfortable, half-waking dreams.

I see my parents sparring viciously in the air, showing more emotion than I’ve ever seen from them in my life—they’ve never been the expressive types, especially my father—and everyone I’ve ever known is watching them, with me as a faceless piece of that crowd. I hear a chirp, and turn to see the person next to me change into a cricket. The change is infectious, spreading like a wave through the whole crowd, until I am entirely surrounded by crickets and their deafening collection of sounds.

It’s too loud—why won’t they be quiet? Be quiet! Be quiet! A bright wave of energy explodes from my body, blasting everyone away from me. No, no, no! It’s happening again, just like it did before. Maybe I’m just a bad person. Maybe I’m destined to repeat my mistakes, over and over again.
Then my parents turn into leaves and flutter away into the trees that have suddenly appeared, small flecks in a dark and endless forest.
Chapter 4: Wandering

When I wake up, everyone else is gone and the sun is higher in the sky than I’d like. It’s only the second day and I’ve already overslept. Well, overslept is a strong word. It’s not like I’m on anyone’s schedule but my own. What difference is an hour or two going to make? I’m just embarrassed that I’m the last one here, even though no one is even here to see me. I guess I was more tired than I thought. Groaning, I sit up. I feel pains in my body that weren’t there yesterday, my wings cramped and stiff, and there’s a crick in my neck from sleeping wrong.

I haven’t woken up this exhausted and disheveled in a while, not since first semester. Back then, I hung out with Liam and Quinn a lot, which meant my sleep schedule was garbage. The two of them are owls from a semi-nocturnal community and were still adjusting to day life, so if I wanted to hang out with them I felt like I had to stay up late. At the time, I had been too insecure to ask if we could hang out earlier in the day—they were my first two friends at college, and I’d never really had close friends like them back in high school—but later Liam told me I could’ve just asked.

Even if I could go back and salvage my sleep, I don’t know if I would. There’s something magical about those late-night early-morning hours after 1 am, when it feels like anything could happen. I don’t think I could give up those nights when we’d lay on Quinn’s bed, drinking and writing incoherent poetry and giggling deliriously at things that weren’t funny in the morning, my arm brushing electrically against Liam’s. One minute we’d be talking about the meaning of life, and the next we’d be playing 52 pickup after someone decided to be a sore loser and throw cards everywhere after a heated game (usually Quinn).

One night, we were silly drunk on cupcake vodka, sprawled out crookedly on Quinn’s bed, and Quinn pulled out a notebook and started tearing pages out.

“What are... you... doing?” Liam asked, struggling to form a coherent sentence.

Excitedly, Quinn handed him a piece of paper and a pencil. “Poetry!” he exclaimed as he handed the same thing to me. “We’re writing!”

“I’m a disability studies major, not an English major like you,” I scoffed. “I wouldn’t really call myself qualified. And Liam is an astronomy major.” I turned to look at Liam, who was staring down his piece of paper like it was full of secrets. He had a surprisingly serious look on his face.
“Oh, Liam writes,” Quinn said, leaning towards me and raising his eyebrow conspiratorially. I laughed at his exaggerated expression. “He just doesn’t like people to know,” Quinn continued, fake whispering. “He’s repressed.”

I looked over at Liam to hear his rebuttal, but he was still transfixed by the piece of paper. He picked up the pencil and started dragging it across the page. I say dragging and not writing because he wasn’t actually forming any words—it was just fluid scribbles that vaguely resembled letters.

I watched him curiously, until Quinn prodded me with the eraser end of his pencil. There were some words on his own page. “Come on, write,” he urged. I rolled my eyes and picked up the pencil, glanced at the page for a half second, unsure of what I even had to say, and decided to just go for it.

I have no idea how long I was writing—it could have been twenty minutes or an hour and a half, who knows. I lost track of time, lost track of Liam and Quinn’s individual presences, their Links, lost track of where and who I was.

The words felt absolutely coherent and sublime, and then I fell asleep mid-sentence and woke up the next morning to gibberish.

“I like it,” Quinn told me after reading it. “The lonely land evaporates my wasteland—very cool.”

“It doesn’t make sense though,” I said. “It doesn’t mean anything, and if it meant something last night I don’t remember it. Yours is actually good.” Liam was just waking up, his eyes half shut with sleep. I noticed the paper crumpled in his fist—he’d fallen asleep with it. “Anyways, what did you write, Liam?” I asked.

“I don’t wanna tell,” he groaned, clutching the words closer to his chest and curling up like an armadillo. I jumped on top of him, trying to grab it from him, and we both giggled and tumbled around until finally he gave up.

“What’s it say?” Quinn asked, leaning over my shoulder to see.

It was... strange, and I loved it. I could tell Quinn felt the same way. “You know, if you fix this up a little, I bet you could submit it to the literary magazine on campus,” he told Liam seriously.

Liam smiled and shook his head. “I only show you what I write because you make me,” he said. “And Kaz... Kaz is an exception.” That last part made me blush a little.
“Just think about it,” Quinn insisted, and I nodded in agreement.

Liam never did submit anything to the literary magazine, or show his work to anyone else, for that matter. Me and Quinn are—were—his two lucky readers.

I suddenly realize that I might never read his work again.

I miss him. I miss those nights, too, even though my sleep schedule is much better without them. After Liam and I started dating, we started spending less time with Quinn, and then Quinn started spending more time with Stephanie, and then the two of them eventually became a couple.

A part of me wishes I could have those nights back. If Liam and I had stayed as friends, would we still have those nights, or at least had them for a little longer? I think they would’ve had to end at some point. Quinn would’ve still gotten close with and dated Stephanie, and my body couldn’t keep up, anyways.

Juan has told me that the first year of college is usually the wildest, and that people tend to settle in as they get older. Did I play it too safe? Should I have held on to that feeling more? It was less than a year ago, but I’m filled with the kind of nostalgia that other people have for their childhoods, which I have felt but never experienced myself. I don’t want to remember a time of innocence or ignorance—I want to remember a time of wonder.

You’re on the Migration, dumbass. If this isn’t going to inspire wonder, I don’t know what is.

It’s time to get up and stop dawdling in my head. I roll out of my nest, wincing a little from the soreness, and start packing everything up. I decide to skip breakfast and just eat a protein bar. I’m not too hungry, and I want to get flying right away.

As my heart rate starts to pick up, I realize that I’m not in a rush just because of peer pressure (more like peerless pressure) but because I’m excited. When I strap my pack on, my muscles and joints let out a wordless groan under the weight, but I don’t care. I’m finally here. Getting a completely unnecessary running start, I leap off the platform and into the air, jetting up into the blindingly blue sky. I try to pirouette, forgetting that I have thirty or so extra pounds with me, and end up flailing and losing altitude instead. It’s fine—I pick myself back up and start for real this time.

Yesterday was exhausting, but after a few bumpy patches at the beginning, the wind is steadily at my back. I spend most of the time soaring languidly, only needing to flap every so often, until I forget what I was upset about in the first place.
My thoughts wander, drifting through memories of old song lyrics, and comebacks for arguments I had months ago, and fantasies, and worst case scenarios, and unaltered replays of conversations, and of course... Liam again. I guess I can never escape him for long—I was probably free of him for thirty minutes.

I really, really don’t want to think about him. Haven’t I thought about him enough today?

I know most people don’t mate for life, having multiple long-term partners and broods—I mean, 300 years is a long time to be with one person—but I thought he was the one for me.

When I called Bethel and shared my feelings about him a while ago, she was supportive but hesitant. “You’re so young,” she’s always saying, which was the exact sentiment she sent through the amplifier. She never thought me and Liam would stay together for long. I was immature to think that we would.

I know Bethel was only supportive because she knew I wanted to be different from my parents. I wanted to fall in love, not be stuck in an ambivalent, loveless relationship that ended the second my kid went to college. After I graduated high school, my father moved back north to Aria, the city where he and my mom lived before having me, and my mom came with me down south to school. Aria is where my Migration ends.

According to my mother, they were in love once, but that’s hard for me to believe. My whole life, my father has had one of the dullest, weakest Links I have ever felt, but supposedly he has one of the strongest. That means a lot coming from my mother, whose Link is so strong that she can practically read thoughts. Apparently, the reason my father lost his Link is because when they moved down from Aria to the ground-level suburbs to have me, as many people do when they have chicks, my parents were forced to stop practicing martial arts. Fighting, physically, just isn’t something that people do.

It’s because of the Link—when you hurt someone else, you can feel it too. It’s sadistic, masochistic. Every time my parents’ fists made contact, they’d feel their opponent’s pain like it was their own, and yet they continued. My mother said it was beautiful—ecstasy—but to my father, it was the whole world. He’s expressionless without it. He needs to spar, to exchange pain, both giving and receiving it, for his Link to be strong. Being stuck like him—I can barely imagine it—would be a cruel fate. Now that he’s back in Aria, he’s probably sparring again. I wonder if he smiles more now.

Sometimes I try to imagine him up in the air, passionately throwing punches and wide kicks as he launches through the air, his wings beating down on his combatant—but I can’t fully visualize
it as him. I’ve never seen him be truly passionate. Well, there was that one time, after the incident. I remember him shouting. **What did you do, Kaz?**

It’s the one piece of evidence I have that maybe he does have a strong Link after all. It’s hard to believe—can a person really change that much, just because of sparring? I’ve heard stories from my mother and Bethel about his incredible Link, about the infamous trial where he convinced the town council to let my parents keep me. My parents had been caught sparring, and the council wanted to take me away. The whole situation seems so otherworldly and strange, but I know for sure it happened. Most people couldn’t lie to me even if they wanted to.

My parents seem incredibly mismatched. My mother’s Link lets her see through people like glass, and my father seems oblivious to emotions most of the time. Liam and I also had a strength disparity between our Links, but I’d thought it was something we could work through.

On the day we broke up, when he told me that he wasn’t coming on the Migration and I did that terrible thing, I realized that I was wrong.

I don’t know what I should’ve done. Should I never have dated him in the first place? Should I have broken up with him when I realized we had major communication issues, instead of pushing them down because we loved each other? Should I have tried harder to communicate with my words, like Bethel always says? I’m too ashamed to tell her what happened, so maybe that’s a clue. There’s a part of me, though, that doesn’t think talking would have helped.

I remember our first argument. It was over something stupid: Liam had been trying very hard to get my “real” name, pestering me constantly for a week.

“Come on,” he said. “What’s Kaz short for?”


“I’m gonna have to go ask your professors or something,” he joked. “They all have our actual names on their attendance sheets.”

I still don’t know why it made me so upset—it’s just a name, isn’t it? But when I think of my “real” name, it doesn’t feel like mine. It’s not something I want people to think of when they think of me, and once they know it, they can’t unknow it. My actual name is Kaz, no matter what’s on the attendance sheet.
“Can you please just stop?” I snapped, and Liam went quiet. The anger had been building up inside of me, and now it was trying to burst out. My vision was a little blurry, and in the back of my mind I wished I had said something sooner, so I wouldn’t have exploded like this.

“I’m sorry,” Liam said after a moment. “I didn’t know it bothered you so much.”

Without thinking, I replied angrily, “Maybe you would know if we could actually Link,” and immediately regretted it.

An awful, sour feeling spread through Liam’s chest. I’d hit him where it hurt; he had never Linked with anyone the way he had with me, and I’d just told him it wasn’t enough.

“I’m not a mind reader like you,” he responded, his voice quiet and cold.

I remembered Bethel telling me the same thing when I was 13. If she knew what I’d done, she’d be disappointed in me. After years of spending time with and learning from her, I’d thrown it all away in college? Because I couldn’t keep my head on straight when I was with this boy?

“I-I’m sorry,” I apologized, my face twisted in shame. “I’m supposed to—I need to use my words. It’s not up to you to know how I’m feeling.” I paused. “I don’t even know why it made me so upset. It’s something stupid. But I care about it.”

Liam just looked at me. Our Link was weaker than it had ever been, and the feeling of him being far away terrified me. “Okay,” he said. “Just... be upfront next time.”

“I will,” I promised.

For the most part, I did do better, but that didn’t make the problem go away. There were times when I wished that Liam was like me. There were times, late at night, when he was asleep next to me, that I felt like our relationship would never last, no matter how much we loved each other. I wished he could just feel my feelings the way I could feel his. And then I ignored those feelings, pushing them down as deep as I could. Why couldn’t I have fallen in love with someone else?

I’d notice every slight shift in his mood, every time a flicker of a thought passed behind his eyes, and sometimes he wouldn’t even notice when I was upset. It could be something stupid, like me feeling stressed about my anthropology exam, something that didn’t really matter in the long run—but I would have noticed if it were him, and that was the part that made me feel alone.

I told myself earlier that I wasn’t going to think about him any more, yet here I am.
I force myself to think about other things, though there’s a lot of topics to dodge. I remember Stephanie posing for everyone in her new lab coat and silly looking goggles that she just bought for her summer research project, but then I remember my final grade in biology and quickly switch to something new. I feel like I’m swimming around in a sea of jellyfish that are just waiting for me to bump into them.

Sighing, I try to clear my head, doing the centering exercises Bethel taught me. *Name five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, one thing you can taste...*

Usually, I’m indoors when I do this, but outside it’s much better. The greenness of the rainforest is soothing, and the smell of warm, humid air is pleasantly familiar. I even love the sweat dripping off my face, falling and hitting the treetops long after I’ve flown away. It’s a relatively easy day, the wind mostly at my back, so I’m able to enjoy it until it starts to get dark and I need to make camp.

The next shelter is too far away to reach in one day, so I’ve decided to set up in a tree tonight. I pick a spot, find a branch large enough to sit and eat comfortably on, then hang my nest nearby. Before long, I’m in my nest, too tired to even think about the nightmares waiting for me.

The nightmares come whether or not I’m prepared for them. Tonight, I’m back in the crowded stadium, my parents locked in an airborne battle, but something’s different. I look at the person next to me, and their face, their body, transforms into my own, and I can see out of their eyes now. Like a wave, my consciousness spreads through the crowd, dominating and overtaking them, and I scream out that I want it to stop, but it’s too late—the screams come out from all of our mouths, because we are all me. And then we turn into crickets, loud and meaningless.
Chapter 5: Accompanied

When I try to sit up the next morning, my muscles protest so much that I’m only able to get up on the second attempt. My body is sore. Wincing, I drag myself out of my nest.

My wings and back muscles ache, and the straps of my pack have left bruises and chafing marks on my shoulders and waist that will undoubtedly get worse. The more I fly, the stronger I will get, though there isn’t much to be done about the bruising. I put on some ointment and athletic tape for the chafing and get ready to go.

When I start flying, my wing muscles burn and struggle against the wind, but after a few minutes the pain recedes and I feel steady again. Moving around helps with soreness, as much as it hurts at the beginning.

About an hour in, through the Link, I feel someone approaching me from behind, from the south. I turn around, but I don’t see anyone—they’re too far away. I keep flying, focusing all of my attention on them. It’s unusually easy, and I realize it’s because there aren’t any other Links to distract me. I’m not used to this; It’s not often that I’m completely alone. In the city, it’s impossible to be alone, and when I’m out flying, I’m usually with other people.

In other words, these are the perfect conditions to push myself. I want to see exactly what I can do.

I land on a branch so I don’t have to think about flying, then close my eyes. At first, I can only sense the person’s presence. Focus. The person is calm, and not at all in a rush, but they’re still flying faster than me. I’m a little jealous. How many miles away are they? How long until they get here? I have no idea, but maybe I can know in the future. I make a mental note of how far away the person feels, then start counting. As they get closer, I realize there’s something familiar about the person, like I’ve met them before. They have a warm, friendly Link that I can’t quite place—Ariel! I realize who it is seconds before he comes into view, then realize I’ve lost track of my counting. Was it closer to three minutes, or four? Or five, or six? Oh well—I’ll leave doing calculations to Liam and Stephanie for now. I’ll figure it out at some point.

I return to the air, groaning under the weight of the pack, then steady myself and wait for Ariel to approach. He waves and greets me cheerfully, and I do the same.

“Nice seeing you again!” I say, smiling. “Where are Octavia and Maple?”
“Oh, they’re back there,” Ariel says, gesturing vaguely behind him. “Octavia’s hanging back with Maple, and I decided to fly ahead. Sometimes we fly together, and other times we fly at our own paces. We’ll meet back up eventually!”

I wish I could be as carefree as him. Some people describe me as carefree, but I think a better word might be reckless, like Bethel says. I do care, I just don’t always think. Ariel’s whole demeanor is carefree—he doesn’t even look tired, hovering in place like he’s standing. He must have done some kind of insane training.

“I won’t keep you then,” I say, a little embarrassed by my own flying, which is much less precise than his, my wings straining and my face flushed. “Maybe I’ll run into Octavia and Maple!”

“I’m not in a rush,” he replies, and I can tell he means it. “Mind if I fly with you?”

I’m a little nervous, but I say yes. I don’t want to slow him down, but I do want to talk with him. “What kind of training did you do for the Migration?” I ask as we set off, wondering what he did to get so strong.

“I didn’t train specifically for the Migration,” he tells me, making me balk. He laughs and continues. “For my job, I’ve always needed to be in shape. Well, needed. I was part of a natural disaster rescue team, mostly specializing in dealing with forest fires, up until recently. It was about thirty years, I think. Octavia started a while later but she still works there, she’s just taking some time off.”

I’m seriously impressed. It’s a dangerous job, and in order to do it you have to be incredibly tough. “Why did you stop?” I ask.

“I don’t really know, though I’ve been thinking about it,” Ariel says. His smile seems sad, or maybe wistful or bittersweet. “I’ve saved countless lives over the years, and seen amazing things and been on amazing adventures, but I wanted a change. It’s a demanding job, and you’re always on call. When Maple started talking about wanting to go on the Migration, I realized that maybe I could take a break to think about where I want to go from here. This is all I’ve ever done since I was fifteen—maybe it would be cool to go to college or something, though that might be too boring for me.”

“That’s really cool,” I say, awestruck. “I bet you could do whatever you set your mind to.”

“Thank you!” he replies, beaming at me. “Okay, enough about me—why are you here?”
“Me?” I say. All the hours, days, weeks spent pondering why I’m here suddenly escape from my mind, and I’m left with the befuddling feeling of not knowing anything at all. “A lot of reasons, I guess,” I tell him. “It’s kind of hard to say. I think I knew my reasons better before, but at the last minute things kind of changed.”

“What happened?” Ariel asks, listening intently.

I don’t really want to get into this, but now I’ve opened the can of worms. “I was supposed to go on the Migration with my boyfriend, but we broke up a couple weeks before we were supposed to leave.” *There, I said it.* Somehow, it feels relieving to hear it out loud instead of listening to it rattle around in my head. I can tell Ariel wants to know more, and the words come tumbling out. “Liam applied for a really prestigious internship about six months ago,” I continue. “It was a long shot—I mean, thousands and thousands of people applied, and they only accepted three—but Liam is really, really smart, and he got it. The place he’s going to be working at is trying to send people to space. It’s crazy! It’s not my thing, but Liam is an astronomy major, and this was too big to pass up.”

“That’s impressive,” Ariel says. “I bet it was a really hard choice.” He’s upset on my behalf, but he’s being diplomatic because he doesn’t know the full situation and doesn’t want to make assumptions. I appreciate that.

“It was a choice he didn’t have to make,” I say quietly. “We’ve been planning to go on the Migration together since last October, before he applied for an internship he knew he wouldn’t be able to go to. He didn’t think he’d actually get it, but the fact is that he applied.”

In my head, the break up is clear as ice.

A few weeks ago, I went to Liam’s dorm room when I knew his roommate would be out, double checking through the Link that Liam was the only one there, then banged angrily on the door. I could tell that Liam was startled, but he didn’t move. He was ignoring me, though he hadn’t realized it was me yet. My frustration emanated off of me hotly—*I know you’re in there*—and spread out from me like sunlight, reaching Liam and then going farther than I intended it to, down the hall and probably into adjacent rooms.

Liam very clearly received the message. Reluctantly—so he was avoiding me—he came and opened the door. Even though it was 4pm, his blonde hair was tousled and standing up in places, and he was wearing pajamas.

“Why have you been avoiding me?” I accused, stepping inside and closing the door behind me.
“I—” he started, but he didn’t have any words to finish the sentence with. I looked into him and saw sadness, fear, indecision, and most of all, guilt, and it definitely had to do with me. Did he cheat on me? No, that didn’t seem right.

“Tell me,” I said, my voice sounding a little more desperate than angry now.

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you this for the past couple days,” he said quietly. He paused, but I wasn’t taking any silence.

“Then tell me,” I repeated.

He took a deep breath. “I was accepted for an internship with [company]’s space program. It’s like a dream come true—they’re going to send people into space, and I can be part of it.”

“Is there a catch or something?” I asked, impatient.

“It’s this summer,” he replied. His face was contorted in guilt, eyebrows furrowed and the corners of his lips curved down.

It took a few seconds to process what he’d said. “But... we’re going on the Migration this summer. We’re leaving in a few weeks,” I said, the shock making my speech slow.

“I know,” he said. “But this is too big of an opportunity to pass up—I won’t get another chance like this. Thousands of people applied, but they only accepted three people. I can be part of something bigger than myself, something really important.”

There was no point in persuading him, I realized numbly. This was all he’d ever wanted, something I knew from our conversations as much as I knew it from our Link. I realized, just then, that when we went out at night with our friends, sitting around a campfire and looking at the stars, Liam and I had never been looking at the same sky. He saw the void and the vastness, the nebulas and star clusters, the black holes and white dwarfs, all of it an endless frontier to explore, and I saw nature—the sky is as much a part of our planet as the soil, isn’t it?

I was only sad at first, but then I started wondering how this happened in the first place, and my numbness began building into anger. “When did you apply?” I asked.

“It was December,” he answered. At least two months after we decided to go on the Migration.

“Why the hell did you apply for a summer internship when you knew you couldn’t do it?” I asked, my voice raising.
“I didn’t think I would get it!” he burst out, his composure breaking. “It was a one in a million chance, I never thought—”

“You applied because you wanted that chance!” I yelled. “You applied because it was too good of an opportunity to pass up, and you wanted to have that chance, however slim, even if it meant leaving me! What did you think was going to happen?”

“I’m sorry—”

“That’s not enough!” I shouted. “You committed to this, to me. Do you remember when I first asked you out? We decided to go on the Migration together during the same fucking conversation. It’s the thing that’s tied us together since the beginning, and now you’re backing out?”

He didn’t say anything—he knew I was right.

“I’m doing this because I want to be part of something bigger than myself, and I thought that was what you wanted too,” I continued, “but I guess this wasn’t fucking big enough. Our relationship started with the Migration, so it might as well end with it too!”

Something started to well up inside me, my vision going blurry and white and my breaths coming in short, panicky bursts, and then... no, no, no, I don’t want to remember. I don’t want to remember.

“Are you okay?” Ariel asks me.

“Yeah,” I say unconvincingly. I try to give a better answer. “It’s just... still a lot. To think about, to process. I’m... sorry for putting this on you. I mean, we just met yesterday.”

“That’s okay,” he says gently. “If we never talk about why we’re feeling lost, we’ll never find ourselves.”

“Yeah,” I say, my smile a little watery. It did feel good to talk about it.

For the first time since leaving, I feel like maybe things can get better.
Chapter 6: The Violin

Later, when we’re all sitting around the campfire at a shelter, Ariel tosses a marshmallow at me. He, Maple, and Octavia have been trying to throw them and then catch them in their mouths, with Maple having the most success. Caught off guard, the marshmallow hits me in the nose and falls to the floor, making all of us laugh.

I wasn’t planning on staying at a shelter tonight, thinking I could fly a few more hours before setting up camp, but I decided to stop a little early when I found out Ariel and the others were staying here. It’s nice not being alone.

We’ve been at the shelter for about an hour, and no one else has come yet, though I’m sure they will. The Migration always has the most people near the beginning, since a lot of people drop out. For now, we’re just sitting and talking. I feel a little awkward—they all know each other already and have their own dynamic and inside jokes—but I know I’m welcome.

I spend a lot of time watching Octavia and Ariel interact, laughing and then pretending to bicker, and I wonder what it would be like to have a sibling, or even any step siblings. Unlike most people their age, my parents don’t have multiple broods—it’s just me. Even Stephanie, an only child within her brood like me, has six step siblings. I also watch Octavia and Maple, who will sometimes lean over and squeeze each other’s hands, and sometimes I wonder what that would be like too. Then there’s Ariel and Maple, who somehow seem more similar than Ariel and his own sister. I can tell he approves of his sister’s choice.

While Ariel and Octavia go to look for some twigs, so we can roast our marshmallows instead of eating them raw, I sit and talk with Maple as she uses a plate to fan the fire, which is unfortunately pretty weak, burning off a tiny block of synthetic wood. Normally, the Outdoor Club brings enough synthetic wood to make a substantial fire, but that’s because we’re only traveling for a few days. On the Migration, we can’t afford the extra weight, and we need to make it last.

“Oh, I could never do something like that,” Maple laughs when I ask if she’s on the natural disaster rescue team like her girlfriend and Ariel. “I’m a writer. I do local news stories and advice columns, though I’m trying to work on publishing some of my own creative work too.”

“I never would have guessed,” I say. “Though I guess I shouldn’t have assumed in the first place—I mean, look at me. I don’t look like someone who could do long distance flying at all.”
“People are surprising,” she tells me. “It’s why I like writing about them. I actually met Octavia for the first time when I was interviewing her, and I was fascinated by how different she was. I went to college, got my degree in English, did some writing and traveling and other stuff, but she was completely different. She went to college and got a math degree, but once she graduated she went to work with her brother. Her life isn’t always glamorous—she has to work hard—but it is full of adventure, and to her it’s worth it.”

“I can tell you admire her a lot,” I say, smiling.

“I do! You’ll have to excuse me if I talk about her too much,” she says with a laugh. “Tell me about yourself! You’re a college student, right?”

I nod. “I’m a disabilities study major at Esmeralda University.” Usually, I leave it at that, but I can tell Maple wants to know more. “My grandmother Bethel—well, she’s basically my grandmother—is disabled and can’t fly, which means she’s spent most of her lives in the suburbs, around kids who are still learning how to fly. There’s really no accessibility in most cities, and I think that should change. I’m also really interested in prosthetics, which could really help a lot of people.”

“That’s great that you know what you want to do!” Maple tells me. “I really had no idea at first—I just knew that I loved writing, and that I was going to follow my love for it as far as it could take me.”

I fidget in my seat a little. I don’t know if I can anymore is what I want to say, but I don’t. Then Octavia and Ariel come back, and I let it go.

I stare at the fire for a while, not really paying attention to the conversation. I’ve been trying not to think about the fact that I failed biology, but now the thoughts are bubbling up. If I can’t even pass the introductory biology class, how am I supposed to get through the rest of it?

Stephanie wouldn’t have this problem. She gets straight A’s, studies more than she procrastinates, and thought organic chemistry was fun. Most of her fellow bio majors don’t even enjoy that class. Since she’s a sophomore, she’s already taken (and aced) all the classes I took this past year.

Sometimes we study together. It’s usually me, her, Quinn, and Liam, either laying on Quinn’s bed, sitting at the desk, or splayed on the floor with a blanket. I’m usually the one on the floor, my homework scattered around me, encircling me like a trap. In his typical slouch, Liam sits at the desk, a textbook open in his lap and his notebook of choice on the table next to his many other notebooks, which are aligned so perfectly that you’d think he used a protractor to get them
just right. Then there’s Quinn, who sits cross-legged on the bed with a book in his lap, and Stephanie, who sits next to him with her back against the wall, her textbooks in a neat stack by her side.

Stephanie isn’t much of a procrastinator, but the rest of us are, so we need each other for encouragement, with Quinn and me being the most desperate for motivation. Liam also procrastinates, but inconsistently. When he gets interested in something, he’ll become completely absorbed in it, sometimes forgetting to eat and sleep. They’re all so smart—if only the Link could transfer knowledge, maybe I’d have a chance at catching up.

I’m thinking about those study sessions like they’re ongoing, but they probably won’t happen again. I mean, it’ll be pretty awkward now that Liam and I aren’t together. Will it be just the three of them? They were Liam’s friends first, weren’t they?

I frown and try to shake the thoughts off. I know my friends care about me; I’m scared they’ll stop.

I feel like an outsider all over again, the way it felt in my hometown. It seems like everyone knows each other already, and whether they’re childhood friends or just met each other first, I’m still late to the game. I was able to make friends when I came to college, but what if that’s all I can do? What if I can’t be someone’s closest friend, the person they have history with, the person they’d choose above everyone else? I thought I had that with Liam, but I guess I was wrong.

“Are you okay?” Ariel asks, bringing me out of my spiraling thoughts. I realize that it’s the second time he’s asked me that today. In my hesitation, I feel a group of people approaching right before I hear them, a flurry of beating wings getting louder and as they get closer. I was so distracted that I didn’t feel them earlier.

“Looks like we have company,” I say as the group appears, all five of them landing on the platform with loud thumps.

We all say hello and introduce ourselves, but I feel like I’m in a daze. Their names float through my head and disappear like I never heard them, and then everyone starts talking while I stand there and listen, their Links all swirling together in an overpowering way. I feel overwhelmed, far away from everything and everyone, and I really just want to be alone. It’s taking all my energy to hold my Link close to me instead of projecting it to everyone.

I tell everyone that I’m tired from flying and that I’m going to my nest for a bit, tell everyone it was nice to meet them and all that, and then I go lay down.
I’m sure there were some interesting people I missed, people who Ariel, Octavia, and Maple will talk about later—another thing they share that I don’t—and I’m upset at myself for not being out there.

I feel myself sinking into frustrated despair, and then I get mad at myself for feeling that way, and the familiar cycle begins—but then I hear music coming from outside my nest. It’s a violin. From Ariel’s hands—I know it must be him—comes a wistful and transfixing melody, flowing through everything and everyone around him. Music intensifies the Link, making it shine like a field of shooting stars. We are all here together.

I relax my shoulders and let out the breath I didn’t know I was holding. In the back of my mind, I’m wondering how Ariel has room in his pack for a violin, and I’m thinking that maybe it’s a smaller instrument, or some kind of travel version... but I’m falling asleep, soothed as if Ariel’s song is a lullaby. Vaguely, I remember going to the orchestra with Liam and the others, and seeing his face and his Link light up from the connection. The two of us felt giddy and high and bold afterwards, taking off into the night to look at the stars. It was just the two of us, and that was when I kissed him for the first time. I remember how warm I felt.

Then Ariel finishes his song, and I remember how it ended. As I drift into sleep, the memories turn into dreams, and then the dreams turn into nightmares, the objects of my fears materializing like wraiths.

I don’t want to remember.

The next morning, I push the nightmares away and set off on my own.
Chapter 7: The Forest Floor

The sun is high in the sky when I feel something slip out from the bottom of my pack. At first I’m in denial—*not here*—but my pack is noticeably lighter. I pull the top of my wings back and the bottom forward, sharply slowing down, then circle the area. With growing anxiety, I feel around my chest pack. My water bottles are there, my camp shoes are carabinered to the straps, and all my zippers are closed, but then I feel the spot where my nest should be—and there’s nothing.

I start to panic. The next shelter is too far away to reach today—how am I going to sleep? At a shelter, I’d be able to sleep on the platform, but in the rainforest there’s nothing but branches. Could I tie myself to a branch in case I fall? I shudder at the thought. Even if I do that, I’ll have no protection from the elements. *Shit shit shit.*

I can’t afford to panic right now; *I need to find the nest.* Pushing the flurry of anxiety away, I shoot down towards the trees. From up high, the forest looked like a green blanket passing below me, but now the individual leaves are taking shape, turning from small specks to dinner plates. I crash through the canopy, thwacking myself with a branch that stings against my cheek, and find the nearest spot to perch.

I unstrap my pack, still hoping that maybe it’s all a mistake, but it’s not—I’ll have to go down if I want the nest back.

The thing is, I’m not supposed to go down there. In the rainforest, the trees are hundreds and hundreds of feet tall, and once you fly through the canopy, you’re in a different and dangerous world. Amid the tree-shadowed rays of sunlight are tigers and cobras and all kinds of animals I’ve only seen pictures of. Even though I live in the rainforest, it’s the domesticated kind. Our trees are genetically engineered to support a society; they are resistant to disease, and parts can be hollowed out to make living spaces without killing the tree. They’re more efficient at converting sunlight to energy, and have bulbous growths near the top to allow more living space. The city is much different from the wild, untamed rainforest.

I shouldn’t even be considering going down to get my nest. All the guidebooks say it’s a bad idea, to put it lightly. I can imagine Juan’s not-mad-just-disappointed face and Liam looking at me like I’m crazy.

You know what? Maybe I am crazy. I need that nest.

Yeah, I can do this.
I hook my pack to the tree I’ve landed on, wrapping a cord around a thin part of a branch. Luckily, I don’t have to stake it in and damage the tree. Then I take a deep breath, unfurl my wings, and jump down into what looks like a tangled green and brown abyss.

As I soar down, I become more anxious. The trees are closing in on me, and it’s getting darker the deeper I go. The tree trunks are massive, the largest ones being maybe fifty feet wide. Nervously, I fly closer to the tree I came down from. It feels like forever, but finally I reach the ground. Right as I’m about to land in a patch of brush, I change my mind and veer upwards. What if there’s a snake or something? I look for another place to land, and settle on a spot of bare ground near some roots.

Gingerly, I let my feet touch the dirt. I’m terrified, but now I’m excited too. Almost no one comes down here, and here I am. I look around at the huge trunks and sprawling roots amid the dark green foliage, which are barely illuminated by the sunlight that has managed to trickle down through the canopy. I’m in awe.

But then I begin to wonder how I’m supposed to find anything in all of this. I take back to the air again to get a better view, but after about ten minutes I realize that it might be impossible to find my nest. I don’t even know when it fell.

Then a branch nearby snaps, and a chill of fear runs through me. I don’t know what it is, or if it’s seen me, but I shoot up into the air and fly as fast as I can, speeding towards the sunlight until I am up above the trees and in the sky. I take a shaky sigh of relief.

Wait—where’s my pack? My breath quickens. I don’t know where I left it. Where the hell is that tree? I start to circle around the area, my eyes fixed on the trees, but they all look the same to me. Shit. This was a stupid idea. Why do I always have to do things the hard way? My vision starts to get blurry, but I shake my head and push through. I’ll find a way.

I wrack my brain for anything that could help me. So far, I’ve been navigating using my internal compass, the Link, and my map, but I don’t think any of those things will be useful, especially since I don’t have my map on me. Shit.

Wait, maybe the Link could work—but there’s nothing alive for me to latch on to. Think, Kay! Then I remember that I left my Link amplifier in the side pocket. That might actually work.

I focus as hard as I can, squeezing my eyes tight, searching the nearby area. I’m used to Linking with people, so Linking with the forest feels strange to me at first. I focus harder, letting myself float through it, and feel a calmness wash over me.
And there it is: the amplifier is picking up the background Link of the forest ever so slightly, like static. My eyes still closed, I turn and follow it, flying blindly until it's right below me, and then I drift down and land next to it. As fast as I can, I unlatch my pack, strap it on, and take off.

I feel so stupid. Why didn’t I listen to Juan and the hundreds of people who did this before me? Why didn’t I attach my nest correctly in the first place? What am I going to do?

Right now it’s warm out and the sky is clear, but I think I feel a storm coming. It’s very far away, but I feel the wetness of the trees. It’s strange. After Linking with the forest so intensely, I am hyper aware of it. It’s everywhere, humming with an imperceptible pitch that reminds me of bird song, much different than the lower-toned white noise that comes from people. There is so much life and variety and overwhelming greenness.

The forest floor was beautiful. I’m not sure yet if it was worth it, but I guess I’ll figure that out later. It led to tracking my Link amplifier; I wonder if anyone has ever done that. I’ve never heard of anyone doing it before, but as I have now become painfully aware, there are hundreds, thousands, millions of people who came before me. I’m sure someone has done it at some point.

That’s why I’m here in the first place. My ancestors were flying here thousands of years ago, following (approximately) the same route. I experience the world as an individual, but I am part of a whole that is much bigger than myself and just keeps getting bigger. I am making it bigger just by existing.

Right now, I need to focus on keeping up the pace. The storm is rapidly approaching, and at this point I need to make it to the shelter, even if I have to fly in the dark.

I resolve to never tell anyone about what happened, especially Juan, who would be disappointed, and Bethel, who would probably worry the most out of everyone. If I make it back in one piece, does it really matter?
Chapter 8: The Storm

Thunder cracks in the distance, and I remember again how stupid I was earlier. The gray clouds that used to be behind me are now slowly getting ahead, and I feel like the storm is sucking me in. Every now and then I look back at the storm out of morbid curiosity, watching the forks of lightning strike down, and then immediately regret it. But I always have to look again—despite my fear, or maybe even because of it, I love it. I love the telltale smell of rain and the humidity on my skin, the change in air pressure and the encroaching darkness.

Unfortunately, as the edge of the storm creeps farther and farther ahead of me, my fear, which already outweighed my excitement, begins to grow. I fly as fast as I can, my lungs burning from the effort, but there’s only so much I can do—I have 35 still-unfamiliar pounds strapped to my chest. When the hell am I going to reach the shelter?

What happens if I don’t?

*Shit shit shit.*

I’ve been trying not to think about it, but I need to at least entertain the idea. I can’t sleep on the ground—I’m not going down there again. Maybe I can find a wide branch to sleep on and then tie myself to it so I don’t fall. There must be some kind of string in my pack, right? Yes, I remember, there’s the paracord bracelet clipped on to the outside for emergencies, a gift from Quinn. He made it for me.

I feel a little less anxious now, but the seconds between the thunderclaps are getting shorter by the minute, and I’m now getting misted by a light rain. My pulse is heavy in my throat.

If Bethel knew what I was doing right now, she’d be freaking out. She always worried about me flying off on my own, more than my parents, and she was terrified (but still supportive) of me going on the Migration.

Back in high school, I tried not to tell her about my close calls and moments of poor judgment, but she always managed to get it out of me. I can’t keep secrets from her, even though she doesn’t press. She has a strong Link and can tell when something is going on, but if I don’t communicate it to her with my words, she won’t ask about it—though sometimes she gives me one of her piercing looks and makes me crumble instantly. Unlike my mother, who thinks the Link is always enough, Bethel is all about verbal communication. The two of them couldn’t be any more different.
When I was still living in Lavendaria, Bethel didn’t usually know the full extent of the trouble I was getting myself into, but there was one time when she found out; I was supposed to go to her house at 6 pm, and I didn’t get there until 9, which was after dark.

“You need to be careful!” she exclaimed, taking my coat and ushering me to sit down in my usual spot on the couch. I felt bad about it because I was sweaty and gross after flying for so long, but she was insistent. “What do you mean you lost track of time?”

I looked down at the floor sheepishly. “I made it home eventually...”

She sighed and sat down across from me. “That’s not the point,” she said, her tone a little more restrained now. “I know you’re an impulsive kid, but you can’t be so reckless all the time! We’ve talked about self-destructive behavior before.”

“I swear, it was an accident—”

“Don’t make excuses,” she said, interrupting my protests. “I can’t stop you from doing what you want, but please be careful. You’re not invincible.”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to meet her concerned eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I promise I’ll try to be more careful.”

Unfortunately, I haven’t been very good at keeping that promise. Case in point, the storm on my tail.

The wind and rain pick up, buffeting me around in the sky. By the time I see the flag signifying the shelter, I’m exhausted and completely soaked. Thank fuck. With renewed energy, I dive into the canopy and land on the platform. There are six nests inside the shelter, all occupied and pushed to the back, some of them with sleeping people inside. When I walk inside, my footsteps cause some of the people to stir—they’re probably wondering what I was doing flying in the storm.

The storm is so bad that the shelter doesn’t protect me from the rain as well as I hoped it would. I change out of my wet clothes and curl up on the floor, but soon I’m shivering and starting to get wet again. I can feel the people in the nests starting to get concerned, and I’m starting to agree with them.

Next to me, I hear a zipper open, and a woman’s head peek out of her nest. I get a closer look, and see that she’s a peregrine falcon with smooth auburn hair and sharp cheekbones. She doesn’t
look too much older than me. “Do you not have a nest?” she asks kindly, whispering so she
doesn’t wake anyone up.

“I, um, lost it,” I reply, embarrassed.

She thinks for a moment, then unzippers her nest a little more. “Listen,” she tells me, “I know
we’re strangers, but you look really cold, and I don’t want to leave you out there. If you want,
you can share with me.”

Taken aback, I don’t respond right away. My first instinct is to refuse her, but then I hear my
teeth chattering. She seems genuine, but I’m still nervous.

“O-okay,” I stutter. I get up to go in, then realize I don’t know if I should put my head by her
head or her feet. Awkwardly, I decide to put my head by her feet and clamber in.

As I’ve said before, portable nests aren’t made with personal space in mind. My body is pressed
right up against hers, and it makes my heart pound—I realize that I’m holding my breath.

“My name is Amber, by the way,” she whispers.

“I’m Kaz,” I reply. I want to shift around but I’m too nervous to move.

“Nice to meet you,” she says. For a person who invited a stranger into her nest, she seems
relatively comfortable.

“Nice to meet you too,” I return, and then we’re silent.

It’s taking all my energy not to project my feelings out to her. Will I be able to sleep like this? At
least I’m not cold. Amber’s body is soft and warm, and a part of me wants to relax my muscles
and lean into her. I don’t want to make her uncomfortable, though. I’m laying stiff as a board,
resisting the urge to scratch the itch on my shoulder. My face feels hot.

What’s this feeling?

After a painful amount of time, I feel Amber fall asleep, which makes it easier for me to relax.
People’s Links change when they’re asleep, and hers feels like honey. Eventually, I drift to sleep.
I dream that I’m in a warm cocoon, not yet ready to metamorphosize, the nightmares locked
outside where I can’t see or hear them.
But then I hear a slash, and my cocoon is torn open. I’m thrust out of it and into the sky, but my wings are wet and unable to catch me—I fall, plummeting down towards a sparring ring with my parents at the center, and then the ground turns into the rainforest canopy. Then I crash through the leaves, falling into the wild darkness that looks much scarier in my dreams than it did in real life.

And then I’m back in my cocoon.
Chapter 9: Rained In

The next morning, I wake up to Amber shifting around next to me. My eyes are closed, but I can feel her scooting up and pulling the zipper of the nest open. I have more room now, but the place where we were pressed against each other feels cold and empty now.

Outside, people are murmuring, staying quiet since it’s early in the morning. Their voices blend into the pitter patter of rain, which has lightened but not stopped. I should probably join them—I don’t want to sleep in a stranger's nest any longer than I have to—but after yesterday’s flight I can’t even get my eyes open, and I fall back asleep.

When I wake up again, the voices outside have gotten louder, and I smell something like pancakes. My mouth watering, I pull myself up and force myself out of the nest.

There are six people, all busy and in various stages of taking down their nests and making themselves breakfast. It’s still raining, so everyone is still huddled inside the sheltered area.

“Good morning,” Amber says. She’s holding a plate with a pancake on it.

She opens her mouth, probably to ask what I was doing out in the storm last night, but two men step forwards and beat her to the chase.

“Good morning is right!” one of them says, slapping me on the back. “You had me worried there last night!”

“You gotta tell us what you were doing out in that storm,” the other adds excitedly, not missing a beat. “What happened?”

Amber rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling. “Stop bothering Kaz,” she says. “Why don’t you introduce yourselves before starting the interrogation?”

Grinning, they introduce themselves: Evan and Ivan. They both look about 100, and they have the same boisterous energy and habit of finishing each other’s sentences.

I tell them the story of what happened before the storm, leaving out the part where I fled from the forest floor in fear, and the longer the story goes on the more people start listening. I try to make myself seem a little less stupid and more brave, but I’m not good with words like Quinn. I get a mixture of raised eyebrows and small noises of surprise—everyone is impressed, thinks I’m crazy, thinks I’m a dumbass, or feels a combination of these things.
When I get to the part about not being able to find my bag, the old man sitting by the fire scoffs. “How did ya make it this far in the first place?” he asks. He starts asking if I even have a map and other basic equipment, until Amber interrupts him.

“Come on Gramps,” she says good-naturedly. “Leave Kaz alone!” The man grumbles but I can tell he’s just worried about me. Amber turns back to me and says, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah, me too,” I reply.

The old man starts asking me more questions, and the conversation naturally shifts away from the storm fiasco. I learn that the old man, whose name is Fredrick, is the organizer and main planner of the group, which consists of Amber, Evan, Ivan, and some of the other people. They’re on the Migration, like me. From what I can tell based on where they started, they seem to be flying a lot faster than me, which is surprising given Fredrick’s age. It makes me a little embarrassed.

“We’re also stopping in Cerulea,” Ivan says excitedly. “Home of the Blue Divers!”

“I can’t wait to see them play,” Evan says, grinning. “They’re going to get crushed by the Aria Bears.”

“No way!” Ivan replies. “Not with Kehlani on offense.”

“The Divers have shit defense and you know it, there’s no way Kehlani is enough to make up for that,” Amber butts in.

I know absolutely nothing about Skyball and can’t follow the conversation too well, but after a couple minutes of arguing Ivan turns to me for my opinion. “Come on, tell them I’m right,” he begs, while Amber and Evan urge me to do the opposite.

“I, um, don’t really follow Skyball,” I say. Seeing their disappointment, I add, “Well, I think my mom used to be on the Aria Bears, probably 75 years ago.”

“No way!” Ivan gasps. “What’s her name?”

“Selena Larkin, though she used to be called Selena Agiston. She changed her last name.”

“Oh, she was a legendary player,” Ivan replies, his hands moving enthusiastically. “Great defense, it was like she could get into everyone’s heads. How come you don’t know anything about Skyball with a mom like that?”
I shrug. “She never really talked about it,” I say, leaving Ivan and the rest of them aghast.

I know my parents had many different lives before having me, and even before meeting each other, but neither of them ever really talked about it. When I asked, my mother always said that the past wasn’t important. I only found out about her being a Skyball player because one of our neighbors was a fan. Even after quitting and changing her name, she couldn’t entirely escape her old reputation.

The other thing I know about my mother is that she worked for the Criminal Investigation Agency. People that commit crimes, who are mostly Link-deficient people, make up a very small part of the population, but someone needs to deal with them. I don’t know exactly what her job was, but I learned she worked for the Agency from a slip of the tongue by Bethel, who somehow knows everyone and everything in Lavendaria, including information from my mother’s background check during the Trial.

My father is also a mystery. I know he had one of those suit-and-briefcase management jobs that makes a lot of money, and also I know that he used to be very good at using amplifiers. The second part I found out when Bethel was teaching me how to use amplifiers, as a way to practice control. I’d brought home a pair of amplifiers and handed one to my mother, who surprisingly, after a pause, handed it to my father.

“Come on,” she said to him. *Teach Kaz.*

My father hesitated, then gripped the amplifier in his fist and turned to me. “Show me what you can do,” he said. He was... angry? Nervous? Determined? I could feel it stronger now that we were connected.

Palms sweaty, I sent over a message, shaky dots and dashes spelling out “hello.”

He was unimpressed. “You have to learn the basics first,” he said, “but someday you’ll be able to go further, without the dots and dashes.” Then, after mentally clearing his throat—that’s the only way I can think of to describe it—he sent a message back.

It was rusty, janky, like an ancient language spoken by someone who’d known it as a child. It infuriated him. He pushed harder, trying to get the message across, as fluid and concise as he used to, until our amplifiers were **burning**—and then my mother snatched the amplifier out of his hand. I wasn’t sure what exactly he’d been trying to say.

“Don’t break it,” she said sternly. I remember thinking, *They can break?*
My parents had other lives, and I think those other lives were... strange. Sometimes I forget how strange they are, because it’s weird to think of them in any other context, a context without me and our old home. I can’t imagine my mother famous, or my father working at a job in Aria, and the only reason I can imagine them sparring is because it appears in my dreams.

Amber snorts as she tries to hold back a laugh, and my attention is brought back to the conversation, in which Frederick is in the middle of a long-winded story about his childhood. “Back in my day,” he drones, and Amber desperately tries to hold back another laugh. He clears his throat and continues. “Back in my day, we didn’t have all this fancy equipment, no amplifiers or nothing! Me and my cousins and uncle, we’d fly off for weeks into the woods, living by our wits! You kids have it easy. Oh, I remember this one time, we stopped by the Arganic River to go swimming, and a giant turtle nearly chomped off our toes! You kids have no idea!” He looks at Amber, who is trying not to giggle. “What are you laughing about?”

“Nothing, Gramps,” she says innocently, and he rolls his eyes.

“Are you his granddaughter?” I interject, curious.

“No, actually,” Amber replies. “He’s my neighbor—all of our neighbors, actually.” She motions around at everyone in the group.

“Well, neighbor of a neighbor,” Evan says. “But I guess the difference doesn’t really matter.”

As much as they joke around, I can see now that Frederick is at their center, the one they look to for direction. “Somehow, I got stuck with a gaggle of kids,” Frederick says, pretending to grumble, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s something Bethel would say, only she would smile when she said it.

Amber laughs, then asks if everyone wants to play cards. We’re still waiting out the rain with nothing else to do, so we all agree. It’s nice, just sitting here and taking a break, laughing easily and getting my ass kicked by Amber, who is really good at ERS. I’ve been stressed.

Eventually, the rain slows, and everyone begins to pack up.

“It was good to meet you,” Amber says, smiling, and I know that I probably won’t see her again—there’s no way I’ll be able to keep up with their group. We’re both a little saddened by this, so Amber goes to her pack and pulls out her amplifier. “If you’re ever in Calipha, you’ll have a place to stay. And this time you’ll have your own bed.”
I laugh nervously—of course I’d want my own bed, why wouldn’t I? I wonder how Amber feels. I mean, I already know—she’s calm, joking around, sorry to see me go but not particularly emotional—but I wonder if there’s something more. It’s not like I’m hoping for it though. I focus on our Link.

To her, I realize, I’m just another girl, someone she can invite into her bed without a second thought, because we’re both girls, aren’t we? The thought makes my stomach curl. I’m about to pull away when I notice something else, something buried. She’s curious about me. Her curiosity is unnamed, untouched, and it reminds me of my own. It makes me think of Liam. My stomach goes from queasy to downright nauseous, and every feeling I’ve ever had for Liam goes tumbling through it—the lust and longing, the love of the intricacies of his mind, the desire for his flesh, the guilt, the sadness, the loss, the staggering weight of it—and then I push it down.

Hurrying to my pack, I go get my own amplifier. Me and Amber place our amplifiers in our palms and press our hands together, my palm facing up and hers down, our fingers brushing while we attune the amplifiers to each other. The feeling of attunement is a blossom that grows, becoming warmer and lighter as it expands. It’s the feeling of a deep breath, of filling my lungs up with air.

The group takes off, everyone waving and wishing me luck. It would’ve been nice to fly with them for a little bit, but I need to make it to Verdera, the nearest town, as quickly as possible so I can get myself another nest. The town is close enough for me to feel its Link and fly directly towards it.

Time to go—there’s no time to waste.
Chapter 10: Verdera

When I first approach the small town of Verdera, all I can see are the landing towers. They peek out from under the trees like iceberg tips, five wooden structures spread out above the town, the only visible sign of the community hidden below. Although I can’t see the town, I can feel its Link clearly, an amalgamation of its people that will become less cohesive as I approach them as individuals.

I land on the top of the nearest tower. It’s about twenty feet across in both width and length, and it has a staircase leading down into the town, which I descend. At the bottom, I step out on to a walkway and finally see the town itself.

Although Verdera is small, it’s still a lively place. Both its walkways, which stretch between the large tree trunks and the homes built into them, and its airways are relatively full for a town this size. Verdera is right next to a Migration trail, making it an easy place to stop for frontpackers. Mixed in with the locals, there are a few people with frontpacks. I don’t recognize anyone, but I will probably run into some of them at a shelter within the next few days.

I walk over to a brunette woman who I assume is a local. “Excuse me, do you know where I can find a frontpacking nest?” I ask. Most small towns wouldn’t have the kind of nest I’m looking for, but I’m hoping that Verdera is accustomed enough to frontpackers that it will have something.

She stops to think. “Hmmm, you might want to check Pedro’s. You just have to keep going straight there, make a left, keep going until you see the red house, then make a right, and you’ll get there no problem! Can’t miss it!”

Already having forgotten the directions, I smile and thank her. I’ll get there eventually, right?

On the way there, I ask for more directions, and find out that I should probably go to Broadleaf Outfitters instead. At some point, I stumble upon Pedro’s by accident, and am met with a large sign that reads “CLOSED.” I sigh and continue on.

Still, I’m glad that finding a nest is my biggest concern instead of how much it’s going to cost. In the weeks before I set off on the Migration, I wasn’t sure if I was going to have any money at all. It’s thanks to Juan and the rest of my friends that I’m even able to be here.

About four days after the breakup, Juan came to my room with some food his grandmother had made me, as he had been doing. Usually Stephanie was with him, but on that day he was alone. I
could tell he had something to say to me, so I let him in despite the awful mess piling up in my room. I sat on my bed, which was covered in empty snack boxes, and he took my desk chair, sliding it over so we could face each other.

“Kaz,” he started slowly. “I know it’s only been a few days, but I need to know, for logistical reasons—are you still going to do the Migration?”

It was the question that had been hanging over me, haunting me. My throat tightened. “I... I don’t know if I can,” I said, my voice wavering.

“It’s not about can or can’t,” Juan said seriously. “I have no doubt you can. It’s about whether or not you want to.” I was taken aback—it was the first time he had ever said something like that. All this time, he’d been telling me not to slack off with preparations, to keep better track of things, to plan my schedule so I had time for both training and my finals, to eat more and drink less, and now he was telling me that I was ready. For a split second, I didn’t believe it, but then I felt it, in all its sincerity.

“I’ve barely left my room in days,” I said. “What makes you think I can do it?” I was fishing and we both knew it.

“We both know you can’t sit still for long,” he replied, smiling a little. “And you’re stubborn beyond belief. I’ve never seen you give up on anything, ever.”

_I might give up on school_—I pushed the thought down and focused on Juan’s Link. This wasn’t the time to think about school. The Migration was important, and I couldn’t just let it go.

I smiled back at him. It was probably a weak, sad looking smile, but hopeful too. “Well, you’ve convinced me,” I said.

“Oh, come on, it didn’t take that much convincing,” he retorted. “You’ve had your mind made up for a long time.”

Juan didn’t want to ruin my sliver of a good mood, but he had more to say. Firmly, like he was forcing himself to say it, he told me, “Unfortunately, we have some logistics to figure out now that Liam isn’t going with you, specifically the money.”

The money. “Shit,” I said, but the expletive was weak and watery.

Liam and I had both applied for grants to do the Migration, which was something the school offered. The money could be used for buying food, supplies, and lodging, and as expected, Liam
got the grant. He’s a straight A honors student who’s going places, so of course he was going to get it. I, on the other hand, am barely scraping by. Needless to say, Liam was the only one to get the money. We had planned on sharing it.

“The grant isn’t transferable,” Juan told me as gently as he could. “We’re going to have to think of something else. I haven’t talked to anyone besides Quinn and Stephanie, since I wasn’t 100% sure you were still going, but I’m planning on doing some kind of fundraiser, maybe a bake sale.”

I knew then that Juan was one of the most amazing people I had met, probably one of the most amazing people I will ever meet. I think I will be grateful forever.

The next day, Stephanie and Quinn came to pick me up. “Come on,” Stephanie said. “We’re making cookies! Juan is letting us use his kitchen at home.” I ran over to hug her and Quinn, putting one arm around each of their necks, and they both laughed and hugged me back.

And boy, did we make cookies. With the help of Juan’s grandmother and aunt, we spent the entire day baking until every surface was covered with them like moss. At the end of the day, Juan’s grandmother slipped me $200 when no one was looking. I tried to give it back, but she was stubborn. “Usually, I only give this to my grandchildren,” she whispered with a smile, “but for you I’ll make an exception. Juan has told me so much about you, and I want you to do well just as much as he does.” I would do absolutely anything for Señora Ramirez.

I didn’t know about it until later, but Liam was responsible for a considerable chunk of the money the club raised. Nobody really talked to him for a week—they were all upset—but it wasn’t like they were going to stay mad forever, and Liam helping with the money made them more sympathetic. For a couple weeks, Liam tutored other students—everyone wants a last minute tutor before finals, it seems—and being the teacher’s pet that he is, convinced a decent amount of his professors to donate. We are both plagued by guilt, but at least Liam was able to do something about it.

I don’t know what I would have done without my friends. I’m full of a kind of love I never knew I could have, the kind that makes me ache in a sweet way.

I’m still thinking of them when I make it to Broadleaf Outfitters, which is thankfully open. It’s small, but it does have some stuff. There are some flashlights, cheap rain ponchos, first aid stuff, synthetic wood, matches—but no nests. Shit.

“Come on, this nest is worth more than that,” I hear a man say angrily, his voice coming from the front of the store. Hearing the word “nest,” I turn around and see a man and a woman, a couple,
standing across the counter from the shopkeeper. The frontpacking nest in contention is resting between them.

“Honey,” the woman says, putting an embarrassed hand on his shoulder, but I can tell she agrees with him. The two of them radiate exhaustion and hopelessness, a choking cloud of a feeling that nearly snatches my breath away. They’re ending their Migration early.

“Sorry, it’s a used nest,” the shopkeeper says. “I can’t give you much more than that.” He notices their distress, but he acts like it’s routine. It probably is—lots of frontpackers drop out at the beginning. By the time I reach the Convergence, more than half of the people who started will be gone.

I’m angry that he doesn’t care—the hotness within me inadvertently spreads throughout the room, and it catches the shopkeeper’s attention.

“Can I help you, sir?” he calls across the room. I look around—is he talking to me? There’s no one else nearby. “Sir?” he repeats, and I realize that he is talking to me. I walk over to him, pulling back my Link, and when he sees my face he corrects himself. “Sorry, ma’am. What can I help you with?”

For a second, I’m dumbfounded and overcome by an indescribable emotion. Why was I uncomfortable when the man corrected himself?

My hair is short now, I remember all over again. I remember Stephanie cutting it, a bit too gleefully for my liking, and telling me it was a rite of passage. She’d suggested it (and I’d agreed to it) to make it easier to take care of my hair on the Migration, but of course she had ulterior motives.

“Come on!” she said, huge chunks of my hair already in the sink and a maniacal grin on her face. “Everyone needs to suddenly dye or cut their hair in college. I gave myself bangs last year—I mean, it was a disaster, and I’m glad you weren’t around to see it—but you need this!”

“I’m having some doubts about your skills now,” I said, raising my eyebrows, but I was smiling. I had already committed and wasn’t going to back out.

“It’s also a post-breakup haircut,” Stephanie continued as she snipped. “Liam is great and all, but you’ve got to show him that you’re your own person! Trust me, it’s gonna feel so good.”

When it was done, I looked in the mirror and almost panicked. Stephanie felt it and started panicking too, scared that she’d made a mistake, but I interrupted her before it could go too far.
“I... I don’t think I’m ever going back to long hair,” I said, my voice quiet. There was a strange lump in my throat.

Stephanie reached down and hugged me from the side, squeezing me and making me momentarily lose my breath. “Thank goodness,” she sighed.

When I’d cut my hair, I hadn’t foreseen people mistaking me for a boy. And now I’m stuttering through a conversation with a person who has done just that.

After a pause that is much too long, I say, “I-I’m looking for a nest.” The couple and the shopkeeper are confused by the strange feelings emanating off of me, but I focus them away from it. I need to get that nest. I’m immediately slammed by guilt—I’m not supposed to influence people like that with my Link—but it’s just so easy, so reflexive sometimes. The dark pit in my stomach grows when I remember what happened a few weeks ago. I can’t—

I clear my throat and loosen my grip on our Links as I keep talking. “I’ll buy the nest from you,” I tell the couple, more confident this time.

The shopkeeper seems like he’s about to object, or at least try to find a reason to object, but the man beats him to the chase. “How much are you offering?”

“How much is he offering?” I ask defiantly, motioning towards the shopkeeper.

The woman rolls her eyes. She’d much rather give the nest to me than this guy who just low-balled them, and she’s tired of her partner’s antics. I can’t tell if this is how they normally are or if they’re just both feeling terrible. “Let’s go discuss this outside,” she says, grabbing the nest, and I follow her out the door. Her partner hesitates, but he also follows.

I’m not exactly sure what to say to the woman once we get outside—I’m not sure how to talk about the Migration or anything related to it with someone who’s ending their journey early—but the woman speaks first. “On the Migration?” she asks, and I nod. “We were too,” she says, gesturing towards her partner, who is only glowering a little now that the shopkeeper is out of sight, “but it just wasn’t in the cards for us.” She says it good naturedly, outwardly cheerful, and I can tell she’s trying to save face.

I don’t know what to say—what does she want to hear? I concentrate on our Link. She feels tired, hopeless, weak, a failure, wishes she could be a good sport about it... but she also knows that this feeling is temporary, that it’s not the end of the world. It just wasn’t for her, and she’ll come to terms with that. She’s trying to brush it under the rug, doesn’t want to be pitied, but she also wants acknowledgment.
“Well, you made it farther than most people!” I say brightly, and I see from her reaction that I’ve chosen correctly.

Her partner, on the other hand, feels like a grown man being condescended to by a kid. What does he want to hear? Right now, he’s angry, but that’s only because he feels like a failure, unmasculine despite this having nothing to do with masculinity.

“I’m glad I came into the store when I did,” I say, turning to him. “That guy was really underselling you.”

Immediately, he’s on my side and full of indignation. “Yeah, I can’t believe it,” he scoffs. He grumbles a bit more, then asks, “How much are you offering?”

“Oh come on,” the woman says. “They’re just a kid! I can’t make them pay for this.”

I should be quiet, but my stupid pride gets in the way. “No, it’s okay, I’m more than capable,” I blurt out. “I got myself into this mess, and I’ll get myself out of it.” The two of them look at me curiously, and I realize it’s the first time I’ve been real with them instead of hyperfocusing on their feelings. I continue. “I... had a nest, but it fell out of my pack while I was flying. I went down to the forest floor to look for it”—at this they look baffled—“but that didn’t go super well, and it was a whole thing, and to be honest I really need this nest.”

The woman, who was already an emotional wreck, is on the verge of tears. “Did you come out here with anyone?” she asks. I shake my head. At this, she hands me the nest. “Please, take this,” she implores. The man, who is also looking a little watery, grunts in approval. “A little bit of trail magic from us to you.”

When they look at me, I know they see me for who I am, but they also see someone else, I realize. Maybe they have a child, or niece or nephew, or someone in their life who’s young and brash that they would do anything to protect. I never knew a stranger’s love could be so warm.

A little teary-eyed, I accept their gift. I find out their names—Katherine and Dennis—and then we part ways, both of us a little lighter than we were before.

As usual, Bethel was right. The Link isn’t everything, and it’s not a tool either. She was the one who taught me that, and now that her teachings are being put to the test, I feel like I’m relearning them all over again.
With renewed determination, I return to the Migration. I fly for a few hours, exhausted but unyielding, until I reach the next shelter. When I land, I’m met with a familiar sight.

“Ariel!” I exclaim, leaping towards him and hugging him. He was setting up his nest when I surprised him, but he smiles and hugs me back. Then I remember that I’ve only just met him and quickly back away, embarrassed. He doesn’t mind. Maple and Octavia come over too. Maple also gives me a hug, and Octavia gives me a friendly nod, and I realize how happy I am not to be alone.

“You are not going to believe what happened,” I say, and then I tell them the story.