

Smoke stains the horizon putrid grey as the city goes up in flames.

The tranquil bustle of the early morning collapses, giving way to something sharper: fear. Fires scorch parks, racing through roads, climbing buildings. Screens flare with harried news reports, calling it a repeat of 9/11, a terrorist attack, a meticulous hijack gone wrong.

Sirens wail in an apartment complex off the main road. Its residents pour down the stairs, wave by wave, lapping frantically at the doors. They surge out onto the open road, leaving everything behind. Something isn't right. Someone is missing. Kira shivers, watching the orange tendrils devour her home. Burning smoke lingers on the tip of her tongue. She hadn't even had time to grab a jumper, simply swallowed by the crowd and washed down the narrow stairwell. Splintered glass litters the road. Someone pulls her into the mass of people, and she is swallowed by the throng.

Kira doesn't see her best friend's face in the crowd. She might not have heard the sirens, or the stampede of people. Her friend is deaf. They've worked around it so many times; never had either of them imagined it could kill her. Ellie might still be sleeping, woken only by the smoke, eyes opening only when she could no longer escape. The thought fills Kira with dread. She turns to her neighbour. "Where's Ellie?" She curses herself for letting herself be carried by the horde like a plastic bottle in a stream, not thinking of her friend.

His brows knit together. He shakes his head. "Haven't seen her. Are you alright?"

"No," Kira breathes. No, she isn't okay. She grabs her sister. Panic rises in her, a cresting wave. "Did you get Ellie out? Did anyone wake her up?" In the corner of her vision, black smoke curls into the sky. Behind her, a screen displays cameras milling around a frantic reporter close to the site of the alleged plane crash. Nobody has seen Ellie. Her room is two floors below Kira's, and the fire storms slowly from the upper floors. There might be time. There has to be. Flashing lights sear her vision. An ache squeezes her chest, reminding Kira of all the memories she's spent with Ellie, smiles tossed like coins, the future she cannot afford to lose, what she can't let go.

She can't leave her. Kira lets go of her sister. "I'll be right back," she promises, wishing upon anything that it is true.

Kira plunges into the crowd. As she pushes at the press of bodies, parting the sea flowing around her, fear yawns open within her chest. It is a gaping chasm, thrumming with the knowledge that what she is doing is insanity. She slips through the fire door, racing up the stairs. Part of her screams to turn back, and the other part thinks of Ellie, her best friend, the other half of her soul, trapped in the apartment. Kira doesn't know which is worse – getting there to realise she's too late or the thought of Ellie facing the blazing inferno alone. She doesn't want to be a hero. She just wants her friend back. Her legs burn, her breath ragged by the time she reaches Ellie's floor. She opens the door only to be met with a cloud of choking smoke. Dropping to her knees, Kira covers her nose with the hem of her nightgown, feeling her way across the floor. She'd know the way to Ellie's apartment with her eyes closed, but she's never tried reaching it from down below. She doesn't want to know how much the smoke has destroyed. So far, she doesn't feel the heat of the flames. There is still time.

Kira punches in the code for the keypad. Her head spins, her eyes water, her nose stings and her ears echo with the alarms that failed to wake Ellie. She prays to whoever is listening.

When the door swings open, her heart tells her to bolt in, but her head tells her to keep crawling. "Ellie!" Kira screams, throat hoarse. She might not even have her hearing aids on. Ellie isn't in the

front room. Kira finds her in the kitchen, checking the appliances. Ellie turns when Kira taps her on the shoulder. “What’s happening?” she signs. “Why is there so much smoke?”

“Fire. We have to get out,” Kira replies. “Get down.”

Ellie’s eyes widen, but she follows Kira to the door. Kira cracks it open, only to be met with a plume of smoke, billowing grey and coughing embers. The way back is blocked. Ellie begins wheezing. They rush to the window, opening it as far as it’ll go. It’s much too far to jump, and there’s no other way out. Kira’s eyes burn relentlessly. Sweat drips down her back. She hears a deafening bang and she doesn’t want to find out where it came from. At least they’re together for the last time. The blaze screams through the apartment, spitting ashes. It is still rooms away, but the heat is suffocating and Kira feels like she’s melting. Ellie lunges for something on the nightstand. The flames devour ruthlessly. Kira doesn’t see what Ellie does—she can’t keep her eyes open anymore. She curls into herself. The world goes black.

---

Death looks remarkably like a hospital bed. A plastic mask sits over Kira’s mouth and her throat is a piece of sandpaper. A rustle of black hair catches her eye. Ellie is awake. At least her friend will join her, wherever she is.

“How?” Kira signs weakly.

“I called 000.” Somehow, she musters the strength to grin. A shiny pink burn stretches across her left collarbone. “You came back for me.”

“Of course I did.”

“Accessibility issues these days, am I right?”

Kira rolls her eyes. Ellie can still joke. But that’s what Kira loves about her. Perhaps some news outlet will call her a superhero, but Kira doesn’t care. They’re alive. Kira smiles. They’ll be okay.