

“Hey! Where’re you going?” A familiar voice called out from the roadside. The girl to whom it belonged was sitting on the edge of the old stone fence, dangling her legs playfully and holding a small book. She grinned when Amber met her gaze.

Amber brought her bike to a stop and leaned on one leg. “Lira! I was hoping to run into you. I was just going to the hill to watch the sunset, you wanna join?”

Lira tucked her book into her coat, then hopped down from the fence with a flourish like a gymnast finishing a routine. “Well of course, dummy. Let’s go.”

Amber chuckled. Lira had never had any inhibitions toward silliness, and it was terribly fun to be around her for that reason. “Here, hop on.”

Lira arranged herself precariously on the back of the bike, sitting on top of the metal rack over the wheel. She wrapped her arms loosely around Amber for stability, and when she did she felt Amber jolt.

“Oh, is something wrong?” She let go immediately.

Amber looked away. “Oh, uh—no, I’m fine. C’mon, sun’s setting already.”

Lira held onto her again. Her body felt warm in her arms, a contrast to the early-spring air, still cooled by snowmelt. This was Lira’s favourite time of year, when the chill of winter shook itself off and life blossomed forth to envelop the world once more. The epiphany of sun on frozen ground, the meandering affair of thaw, evaporation’s hushed breath releasing into the warming air. It reminded her of falling in love.

The bike was a sturdy thing, bright red and silver and well-loved through many years of use and innumerable crashes and repairs. The steady rhythm of pedalling helped distract Amber from the strange thoughts running through her head; she could tell herself that her rabbit-heart’s beat was only from exertion, that the flush in her face was only from the wind. She didn’t say anything for a time, just focussed on keeping the bike balanced. The road down to the hill was quiet, most people in for dinner at this hour, and as they sped along they gained glimpses of farmland through the saskatoon-berry bushes and poplars that lined the snow-filled ditches.

They had been neighbours since they were kids, and the friendship was immediate, as it often is at that age. In high school they stayed close, but since graduation they had fallen out of touch—with Lira out of province for university and Amber busy with part-time work, words had been few and far between. But since Lira was back in town for the spring semester, they had been spending time together again, and Amber was glad for that. There was something special about Lira, the way the air shimmered when she breathed, the way her hair fell in her eyes when it got too long, her humour and energy. She was a good friend.

She felt something press into her back; Lira, leaning closer in against her, her head against her shoulder to shelter from the wind. A rush of warmth swept through Amber's body, and when she regained her focus she did *not* regain control of the handlebars, which twisted out from under her and sent them careening off into the ditch. She slammed on the brakes, foolishly, and the impulse sent them both tumbling forward—she called out to warn Lira, but it was all too late. They impacted into the snow with a surprisingly cushioning *crunch*. Amber landed hands first, and was uninjured, but lay facedown in the snow. The weight on top of her, which it took Amber a moment to realize was Lira, groaned and shifted, then released slightly. Amber pushed herself up just enough to turn around and lie on her back, and found Lira prone overtop of her, their bodies so close, her face just inches away. Her eyes looked a little startled. Amber was startled too, with the adrenaline of the moment but also with another feeling, some sort of nervousness from being so close to her. She tried to clear it away.

Lira rolled off to the side, and lay down in the snow next to her. She sighed into the cool air. “Wow,” Lira said. “Hey, I’ll just lie here so people will think we’re chilling instead of being crash-survivors, yeah?”

“Pff. Ugh, I’m sorry. I wasn’t paying enough attention.”

“Nah, that’s my fault, maybe riding on the back like that wasn’t a good idea. You ok?” Lira rose, and offered Amber a hand. The fading light rimming her silhouette against the sky made her look like an angel.

“Yeah, I think I’m fine. You?” Amber took it, and pulled herself to her feet. Her grip lingered a little longer than necessary, before she realized, let go, and shook herself gently. Lira’s hands were gentle, but strong when they needed to be.

“I think I caught my leg in the gears but I am also largely fine,” Lira deadpanned.

Amber looked down, and saw a trickle of blood running down Lira’s leg where her calf was exposed by the long blue skirt she wore. ‘Fine’ was an understatement.

“Lira, you’re bleeding! Here, I think I have some bandages in my bike kit.”

“Oh, don’t worry too much. But a bandage would be nice. You’re always the prepared one, eh?”

Amber gingerly walked over to the discarded bike, and opened the little bike-and-apparently-also-human repair kit she kept attached to the frame. “Don’t be so nonchalant about it, seriously. You have to take care of yourself.” She gave a frown of true worry at Lira, while she pulled a handful of medical supplies from the bag.

Lira just smiled. Then, she brushed the sparse snow off herself, sat on the side of the road beside the bike, and lifted her skirt a bit to expose the wound. Amber came over with the bandages and her water bottle. She had laser focus, like a surgeon, and went right to work: washing the cuts with water from her bottle and daubing it dry with a bit of gauze, then rubbing

in ointment, and covering it up neatly with the bandages. Lira watched calmly while she did, admiring the careful expression on her face, her steady hands, her light fingers.

“That’ll do for now, I think,” Amber said with a glance up at Lira, while she tucked the supplies away.

“What would I do without you?” Lira said, with an odd tone in her voice which Amber didn’t recognize.

“Probably suffer death by a thousand *untreated* papercuts.”

Lira snorted. “That’d better not be a threat.” She rose, and tested her leg. “Well, I’d rather not repeat that, so how about we walk the rest of the way? It’s not too far.”

“You sure you’re good to walk?” Amber asked.

Lira nodded. “With you to patch me up I think I’ll do just fine.”

Amber gave her a careful glare.

“No, really, it’s not so bad. Thank you,” Lira reassured her.

Amber pushed the bike beside her while they walked the remaining distance—it wasn’t far at all, but walking beside Lira made it feel like forever, the glimmering sunset air held in stasis between them, every step an eternity. At least, she wished it could be. They didn’t speak; just enjoyed each other’s company. It was nice to be able to spend time together in silence, sometimes. At the end of the road a rough path ran through a little wood which then opened into a broad hill with an ocean of grasses. The hill was home to a radio tower; a majestic thing, soaring its metal wings and wires into the sky. The hum of energy filled the air under the cables as they passed. Past the tower the hill careened steeply down to a road, and the vista was dominated by rolling prairie dotted with little clumps of forest before the far mountains. Amber set down the bike and they found a spot to sit together in the grass.

The sun spilled over the horizon, setting the thin clouds aflame in pink. It was beautiful. But all Amber saw was the reflection of it in Lira’s eyes, that warm light glittering as she gazed off into the distance.

“Hey, can I...” Amber trailed off, unable to find the words as she lost herself in those eyes, then frozen as Lira turned toward her and noticed her eyes drift down to Lira’s lips. Those lips parted gently as Lira leaned back slightly and gave her a chaotic look.

“Wow, are we really gonna kiss right now? That’s so cringe.” Lira grinned, cocking an eyebrow.

Amber burst out laughing. “PFFF, LIRA—” Then her protests were silenced, her breath stolen as Lira gripped her shoulders and pressed her lips against hers. Amber tried to stifle her laughter and lean into it, but ended up coming up in gasps instead, releasing bouts of laughter between messy kisses, drowning in Lira and the feelings of the moment. As she relaxed and

pushed forward, Lira's hands slipped up her neck, cold and thrilling against her bare skin, then tangled in her hair, pushing it back and sending electricity running across her scalp. Amber lifted her previously paralyzed arms and wrapped her hands around Lira's waist, holding on like a drowning man to a piece of driftwood. Then, the passion spent, they parted slowly, lingeringly, enjoying the gentle heat left melting between them.

Amber leaned back, let out a shaky breath, then met Lira's satisfied eyes, and grinned widely. "Fuck you."

Lira smiled, looked down and away, then half-whispered, "I love you."

"I—" Amber paused, surprised at how calm she felt. "I love you too." And she meant it. "But you chaotic dumbass, what a weird thing to say!"

"Sorry, you just looked so nervous and strange. I can't help it sometimes," Lira said.

"Mm." Amber looked off into the distance, mind wandering. "I think I know where you get it."

"Where?"

"Don't you remember? We saw that show on TV that one day and you couldn't help but pick up the weird sense of humour! You watched it every single week after that. You even cried when we were on the sleepover trip with school and you missed it."

Lira laughed, a light and pleasant thing, like bubbles in champagne. "No—well, yeah, but that's not what I mean; it was just because, that day, I heard you laugh for the first time. Really laugh, not afraid to let it out, just joyous and bright. And I wanted to hear it again. I loved to see you so happy, and I wanted to make you laugh again and again. That's the thing I couldn't help." She paused, and looked at Amber with a gentle smile. "I just bonded onto the show because I didn't understand my feelings, and that's what kids do, heh."

"Lira...that's so sweet oh my god. Really? I—" Tears formed in Amber's eyes. "You make me so happy, Lira, you really do. Thank you." Amber reached out for Lira's hand—holding her hand was still exhilarating, but after this, surely it was okay?

Lira reciprocated, and then pulled her close again. In her arms Amber felt like a little puddle of dappled golden sun, wavering and fluttering. She cuddled up, nuzzling her face into Lira's neck. She smelled like sweet-peas and tea, and where their skin met warmth blossomed. They stayed like that for a time, tangled together in warmth, and watched the light fade from the sky. As the cool air gathered about them, their warmth persevered, a little seed ready to burst forth in the days of sun to come. It felt right.

Lira had always loved spring.