19 part 2

Through a hatch in the ceiling, a ray of light, thick as a pillar, descended. Dust motes danced in it, and the air smelled of ozone and old paper.

Kai stepped into the light. The ceiling was low, the walls were lined with shelves that had long ago been picked over by people who knew what they were looking for. Most of the books were gone. A few were left.

Kai's phone buzzed.

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Kai stared at the screen.

Lyra was alive.

Lyra was in Sector 7. Lyra was in a holding cell. Lyra was being questioned by people who had been asking questions about Kai for three weeks. Lyra was the reason Kai had come back to the surface. Lyra was the reason Kai had spent three weeks in the dark, learning how to be quiet enough to survive.

Kai typed: Where exactly?

The reply came in seconds: Sector 7, Holding Cell 4. They don't know we know. They think she's just a witness. They're wrong about everything else.

Kai typed: I'm on my way.

The reply came: Don't. The extraction team is already in the building. They arrived this morning. If you come here, you will be in the same cell. Stay where you are. We will get her out tonight.

Kai typed: How?

The reply came: We have a plan. It involves a diversion and a fire alarm and a very tired guard who owes me a favor. Do you trust us?

Kai looked at the ceiling. The light was still there, thick as a pillar, and the dust was still dancing in it, and the city was still above them, and Lyra was still below them, and three weeks ago Kai had been alone in a tunnel with a broken leg and a map that was wrong about everything except the one thing that had brought them back to the surface.

Kai typed: Yes.

The reply came: Then be ready. We will send the coordinates in the morning. Get some sleep if you can. You look like you haven't slept in three days.

Kai did not sleep. Kai sat on the floor of the library and ate the last ration bar in the pocket of the jacket and read the map that was wrong about everything except the one thing that had brought them back to the surface.

The map was wrong about the tunnels. The map was wrong about the distance between the market and the river. The map was wrong about the number of people who had been underground when the collapse happened.

The map was wrong about Lyra.

Kai folded the map and put it back in the pocket and looked at the ceiling and thought about the diversion and the fire alarm and the tired guard who owed someone a favor and thought about Lyra in a holding cell in Sector 7 and thought about the three weeks in the dark and thought about the light that was thick as a pillar and thought about the dust motes that had danced in it and thought about the city above them and thought about the people who had been asking questions about Kai for three weeks and thought about the people who had been asking questions about Lyra and thought about the fire alarm and thought about the diversion and thought about the tired guard who owed someone a favor and thought about Lyra and thought about Lyra and thought about Lyra.

Kai did not sleep.

Kai was not tired.

Kai was not tired because Kai was not in the dark anymore and Kai was not in the dark because Kai was not alone and Kai was not alone because Lyra was alive and Lyra was alive because the map was wrong about everything except the one thing that had brought them back to the surface.

Kai typed: I'm on my way.

The reply came: Stay where you are. We will send the coordinates in the morning. Get some sleep if you can. You look like you haven't slept in three days.

Kai typed: I'm fine.

The reply came: You're not. But you're a liar and you know it. Stay where you are. We will send the coordinates in the morning.

Kai typed: Lyra is my sister.

The reply came: We know. That's why we're doing this. Stay where you are.

Kai typed: I haven't seen her in three years.

The reply came: We know. That's why we're doing this. Stay where you are.

Kai typed: What if she doesn't remember me?

The reply came: She remembers everything. She's been waiting for you. She told us so every time we asked her why she was willing to wait in a holding cell for three weeks. She told us so every time we asked her why she was willing to lie to people who were asking questions about her brother. She told us so every time we asked her why she was willing to do anything we asked her to do. She's been waiting for you. Stay where you are.

Kai typed: Okay.

The reply came: Good. We will send the coordinates in the morning. Get some sleep if you can. You look like you haven't slept in three days