

soulless
(A Story of Soulmates)

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Spacially Displaced

Lyra didn't remember how she died.

It mustn't have been terrible because she had no trauma regarding the experience, or maybe the dead just didn't recall their ends by default. She thought that was what one would naturally assume given that the main school of thought was that death was the end in one way or another. Even if the soul stayed the same, in the case of believing in reincarnation, past lives weren't remembered.

Not the way she remembered hers, which made her situation all the stranger.

She remembered. Everything, to her knowledge, although if she were missing pieces it wasn't like she'd ever know the difference. She'd been born again, memories intact, and into a reality that felt stranger than fiction sometimes.

Here, like in fantasies of her old life—Before—there was a phenomenon called 'soulmates.'

If she was honest, when she first was able to read her words when she was three in 1993—like Before, but no words then—she thought they were kind of funny. *'Rise and shine, sunshine. It's your turn.'* The situation in which she would find her soulmate was obviously going to be a strange one, made even less conceivable by the fact that it sounded like she was going to be waking up from some kind of drug- or alcohol-induced haze. She was never going to drink or drug again, despite her new genetics. She wasn't going to tempt fate; in fact, she was even going to keep her same sobriety birthday on December 6th, 2017—twenty-seven years in the future—and keep counting from birth.

So the words didn't make sense. She had decided at the time not to worry about it.

She was born on October 21st, 1990 in Portland, Oregon to Jake and Kendall Sykes and named Lyra Ophelia Sykes. In the parallel universe that she seemed to have crossed over from, she was born on October 21st, 1990 in Boulder, Colorado to Paul and Anne *something* and named... *something*.

That had been one hell of a sucker punch. No matter how she'd tried over the years, she simply couldn't remember her original name. She could remember everything else about her family like they were embedded in her soul: faces, voices, names, events; everything. Perhaps the memories were, since they had transmigrated with her to another universe.

She remembered everything, but not her first name or their last name.

So, she was born, though like any human child, she didn't remember much in the beginning. The implantation of an old soul in a baby did not deus ex machina human biology. She had very few memories before the age of three, but she was considered a prodigy because of how quickly she developed.

"Clearly, you had a lot to say," Kendall told her once she was old enough to understand.

"And you've never stopped talking since," Jake had joked immediately after.

She called them 'Mom' and 'Dad' just like any other child, but privately, they'd always been just 'Jake' and 'Kendall' to her. She did it partially on instinct—she didn't fully "cohere" until around twelve and had called them the societal norm long enough that she got used to it, and also because they would be terribly hurt if she was to suddenly change it.

Until she was twelve, she was a mix of prodigious, wealthy young girl and the person she had been before. She didn't bond well with children her age because of her grades, the two years that she had skipped, their youth, and her emotional maturity. Unlike most other

children without friends, though, she wasn't bothered. She didn't want anything to do with other children. They had nothing to offer her.

However, when she reached twelve, she was fully realized in who she was from Before with only little bits of the preteen daughter of wealthy parents who were the great-grandchildren of the founder of Maker, Inc., something similar to Hasbro from Before. It was hard to really look at them as her parents at that point; they had had her the same age her soul was when she was born. Mentally, spiritually, she was older than them.

Lyra was called gifted and left to flourish. She only went to the best private schools. She received accolades; she won awards; she was on the swim team, a missed opportunity from her past; she had, by all accounts, the perfect life. Her genetics in this incarnation were astounding, dear god. Black hair, pale skin, classically attractive features and a societally-approved figure; she knew this description was self-indulgent, probably, but while she didn't feel romantic love like other people, she wasn't asexual or blind and she knew she looked good. It was a blessing after her last life.

The strangest thing, though, were her gray eyes. They didn't run in the family; no, that was blue eyes and the occasional brown. Her parents had no idea where they had come from, and it had almost led to an argument about unfaithfulness between Jake and Kendall. They wouldn't listen to her when she told them it was okay, and really, how could they take her word for it? They did not, and could never, know the truth.

She had the exact same eyes, down to the little black streaks in the irises, that she had had in her past life. A little bit of the old her carried over. Obviously, there really was something to the saying, "The eyes are windows to the soul."

To be honest, while she had a lot of good things going for her in her life, the first sixteen years were lived in a mild form of ennui. She was happy, or at least as happy as she could be knowing that she had left behind all the people who actually *knew* her. The people here

knew Lyra Sykes, who, while not a farce—she tried to live as truly to herself as possible—was not her whole story. She couldn't tell people that she had struggled with drugs or trauma or any of what a part of her still felt was the real 'her.'

That person lived on, but she didn't exist. All her triumphs and losses, the love and the pain, the knowledge gained and wisdom earned—all of that was gone. She only had the end results and was thus lauded as something special, when really it was just the advantage of a do-over.

All of that changed when she met Nelly.

Nelly was a girl on scholarship to Yale, where Lyra had decided to attend when she graduated high school at sixteen. Nelly was eighteen but a sophomore and intelligent in a way Lyra recognized, that was achingly familiar. Lonely, too, as Lyra was growing to be as she aged, and not just because of some unheard First Words.

She asked Nelly to tutor her in math, because while this new brain accommodated different strengths than her old one, she still struggled with it more than she'd like to be when going to medical school. She didn't really *have* to work with her family's wealth, but she wanted to take full advantage of everything she had missed out on in her last life, and this was something she'd always knew she'd be good at if the chance hadn't passed her up because of the circumstances of her past life.

They talked. They became friends. And after time, hinting, and testing the waters extensively, she told Nelly about a life she'd had in a dream. That felt real. That might *be* real.

And Nelly was the same. A girl who was born a boy who, in this new chance at life, was born a girl and finally happy, but struggled with the same things Lyra did. She had the same kind of isolation and lack of bonding that Lyra had experienced, though Nelly was significantly more unhappy with it than she.

There was only one big difference between them: Nelly was absolutely enchanted with this novel idea of *real* soulmates and Lyra was distinctly unimpressed. She'd always had little time and no interest in romance where Nelly had struggled with it immensely in her past life, wanting and not receiving.

Nelly's Words were '*What a sad face*' in Portuguese. She was fluent in it now, having learned at a young age and determined to keep up with it for when she met her soulmate. This was precious to her, and Lyra understood to the degree that she could. Nelly had died young, though like Lyra, she didn't know what had happened to her. She had told her, under the cover of stars on a camping trip with the small friend group Nelly had absorbed her new friend into, that she was pretty sure she'd killed herself.

Lyra told her that that might have been her story once upon a time, but she had no memories of that kind of unhappiness before the sudden end.

So Nelly had lived a hard life Before, and so had Lyra, but unlike Lyra, some things hadn't gotten better for her. She had a new lease on life and was making the most of it—they both were—but not everything was bright and shiny the way Nelly had hoped for after being born 'right.'

By the time Lyra had died, she'd decided that she was better off alone, no relationships outside of family and friends, and not out of bitterness or any such thing. She had been happy, had had dreams and love and a future, but any time she thought about trying to work a man into her life, it felt like a huge hassle more than anything. Not something repulsive, just effort that she didn't feel the need to expend.

It was shortly before Lyra died that she had come to unsurprisingly revelation that she was, in fact, incapable of romantic love.

Not love in general, though: she had deep love for her friends and family, deeper than anything she'd felt in her scarce few and unhappy relationships. She loved, and loved deeply, just *not that way*.

Nelly wanted, needed the kind of love that Lyra spurned. It was embedded in her soul, perhaps deeper than someone who hadn't been reincarnated, and it left her pining.

They said, in this world, that soulmates were your other half; it was implied that they were the other half of your *soul*. But how did that apply to someone with a whole souls like she and Nelly? In their Before, there was no true evidence of souls; Lyra had only believed in them in the vaguest of ways. Now, however, they were both in a world where there was hard, concrete proof that the soul did in fact exist, and that everyone was only ever born with half of one—leading to the soulmate phenomenon.

They had discussed it at length. Nelly was convinced that her soul hadn't been whole in her past life, and maybe it wasn't. Maybe that was what had gone wrong with her genetics Before. Lyra knew she was whole, had stayed whole through the transmigration, and it was proved that Nelly wasn't, because as they reached twenty-three and twenty-five respectively, Lyra stayed happy and well and Nelly was just... wilting. She withered like a cut flower.

Meanima mortus, it was called, or more commonly, 'Soul Disease.' Nelly got the diagnosis at twenty-four but the symptoms had started slowly when she was around twenty-two, which was uncommonly early in life. They speculated it was because of the soul migration of her half-of-a-soul, though never mentioning such to Nelly's doctor, and that it didn't affect Lyra because she wasn't missing half of herself.

"The doctor says I need to start seriously looking for my soulmate," Nelly had said that fateful spring morning. *"The words are in Portuguese, so I'm going to head to Lisbon and make my way from there."*

"It's dangerous to go alone," Lyra had joked. It was a quote that only the two of them could appreciate; entertainment in this world were completely different from any of the ones Before.

But she had been serious about it being dangerous to go alone. Lyra talked to her parents about it, who were friendly to Nelly on the surface but didn't actually like her, and convinced them that it was high time for her to start looking for her soulmate, too. (It was not. She still had no interest in finding hers.)

They agreed when she expressed her interest and decided to pay for Nelly to come with her, but Lyra knew it was an act of selfishness because in this case they simply saw Nelly as a plus-one who would keep her safe, like traveling in a pack. They also suggested her cousin Patrick and his soulmate, Jessica, come along, and she didn't argue despite the fact that Patrick was the ultimate douche and Jessica was, in the kindest way possible, a bit shallow. She was sweet and kind and had a heart of gold, and she wasn't stupid or anything, but she just didn't have depth. It made sense; Patrick had absolutely no depth either. They were Barbie and Ken made real.

After that, Neil, Patrick's best friend, somehow got an invite. Then Neil wanted to bring his girlfriend-not-soulmate, officially titled soulfriend in this world, and suddenly they were packed and ready, flying on a private jet to Lisbon because it was 'just easier.'

She'd never get used to the kind of money Jake and Kendall could throw around, even after more than twenty years of life here. It was nice, but it wasn't natural for her and part of it never wanted it to become so.

So it was Lyra and Nelly searching for Nelly's soulmate, Lyra's cousin and his soulmate, and her cousin's best friend and his soulfriend, all on a plane to 'vacation' in Lisbon for two weeks. It had become about something completely different from what Nelly and she had planned even though they weren't going to be sticking with the others all the time. After all, Nelly's soulmate probably wasn't staying at Olissippo Palace or would be doing all the touristy things that Patrick et al. were, and Lyra wasn't even going to be looking. Chances were that Nelly's other half was native to either Portugal or Brazil, and as they'd chosen Portugal as a starting point, the only

logical thing to do was to hang out around the city, talking to people and enjoying the locale.

And so on July 16th, 2014, they boarded Jake's private jet and flew to Lisbon, Portugal, and the beginning of the rest of their lives.

The Island

Nelly flopped back on her California king-sized bed in their bedroom of the penthouse and sighed. “Tomorrow’s the last day and I haven’t found him. I’m not going to be able to afford to do this again, Lee.”

Lyra laid back on her own double and turned her head to look at her friend. “We’ll figure it out,” she said. “I’ll ask Kendall for an extension.”

Nelly shook her head, chuckling bitterly. “I can’t let your parents pay for my soulmate hunt. That’s not right.”

“If I told them that I still haven’t found mine, they’d do it,” Lyra insisted.

“Yeah, but school starts soon. If you were actually looking for your other half, you could just come back whenever. No need to cut things close when you have money like your parents do.”

She scoffed at the thought. “I’ll tell them that finding your soulmate is deathly important to my happiness and you’ll get sicker and sicker without yours.”

Snorting, Nelly said, “You think they care about me? I’m sorry, but they won’t do that. What else would you do, tell them? About *us*?”

Lyra laughed but with a note of defeat. “I don’t know what to say. The doctor said SD isn’t lethal, but what happens long-term? If you don’t find your soulmate soon, that is.”

Nelly sighed and Lyra knew she’d asked the question before. She didn’t know why, but it felt like if they just *talked* about it enough, they would magically come up with a new, perfect solution.

“Well,” Nelly began, “It starts with what I have now. Depression, listlessness, and fatigue. Longer it goes, worse those get; I’m relatively okay at the moment. Then I start getting agitated and angry, which

eventually goes into extreme anxiety and fear to the point of not leaving the house. Worst case scenario, it drives me mad.

“You’re right, technically it isn’t lethal, but if I don’t find him soon enough, I’ll end up in a home for people with SD. They bring in volunteers every day to meet us until we find our match and have a miraculous recovery or languish until we die, but what are the chances of some guy showing up speaking Portuguese as his First Words to an American woman? So yeah, it won’t kill me, but most people don’t live for much longer than a couple of decades without their soulmates after getting diagnosed. It’s like... as amazing as it is to have soulmates be real, there are some pretty bad catches to the deal. Like madness and death.”

Every time Nelly told her, it was the same blow to the gut. She’d only had Nelly for seven years, and Nelly had only had her dream life for twenty-five. Already it was starting to slip away from her.

“It’s not fucking *fair*,” Lyra hissed, punching the bed.

“Life’s not fair,” Nelly replied dully, picking at her nail.

She grabbed Nelly’s hand. “Hey, don’t start.”

“Lee,” she chastised, “The anxiety doesn’t start to develop for at least a few years.”

“Oh, fuck off,” she grumbled, releasing her. They laid in silence for a little while, Lyra’s mind whirring, trying to figure out a fix for this disaster. “We’ll come back,” she said at last, thinking up nothing.

“Like I can afford that,” Nelly said with a snort.

“I will use every penny of my inheritance to get you your happy ending,” she told her friend seriously. “Who needs that when you’re an orthopedic surgeon?”

“Brat,” Nelly said, and Lyra got a reluctant smile out of her.

“Want some music? I’m fucking sick of Patrick’s R&B, holy shit.”

“I wouldn’t mind one of the local channels,” Nelly said. “I like the music here.”

“Me, too,” Lyra replied, getting on her phone to load up her radio app. She didn’t understand the words the way Nelly did, but she still liked it. Nelly knew all about her bad habit of listening to K-Pop without speaking Korean Before.

The radio had just gotten to a good song when Patrick and company burst through the suite’s front door, laughing and whooping and generally being *loud* nuisances.

“Heyyy, Lee!” Neil called drunkenly, stumbling into the room’s cracked door and whipping it open. “We’re goin’ on a ‘venture!”

“It’s Lyra,” she corrected sourly. She hadn’t known Neil very well before the trip and she now had the unfortunate knowledge that that had been a good thing. He was your average frat boy from a rich family studying economics and going to work for his dad’s company as soon as he graduated. Spoilt, bratty, and *handsy*.

Lyra didn’t like him at all, and Nelly liked him even less. He’d tried to make a pass at Nelly’s Words when they were introduced. *God*, everyone knew you didn’t try to read other people’s Words. It was a huge violation.

“Righ,” he slurred. “Leeeee-ra.” He laughed.

His soulfriend came up behind him and pulled him away from the door. Natalie was considerably more sober. “C’mon, babe,” she said. “Let’s get you some water.”

They left, Neil stumbling with Natalie’s arm supporting him. “I’m gonna go see what’s up,” Lyra told Nelly, getting up from the bed. The tagalong—“baggage,” as Nelly liked to call him out of earshot—had mentioned an adventure and she couldn’t help but be curious if her cousin and his friends had managed to be somehow useful for once. Nelly nodded and pulled out her phone, starting to scroll idly.

Venturing out into the living room, where it appeared that Patrick was only a little less drunk than Neil, she assessed the

situation. It appeared that Jessica hadn't drunk at all. That was right—she didn't like the stuff. “Neil said something about an adventure?” Lyra asked.

Patrick nodded, a kind of flopping motion. “Yeah. Talked t’this guy, he says there’s a real cool island w’can visit. Do anythin’ ya want.”

“We literally leave the day after tomorrow,” Lyra replied with a roll of her eyes.

“Neil called your parents,” Jessica said with a huge smile. “We’re staying an extra day!”

That *was* good news. She’d have to tell Nelly. “Great, that’s great. Well, you guys have fun, alright?”

Neil made a reappearance, staggering from the kitchenette into the living room with Natalie chasing after him. “Nonononono! You guys’re comin’ too!”

“I mean, I thought Nelly and I could try to—”

“Ugh,” Neil groaned. “Jus’ shaddup ‘bout that s’mate stuff. Jus’ have some fuunnn.”

There was no repressing her glare and Jessica frowned at Neil, which was impressive because she was generally nonconfrontational. But Patrick wasn’t on the same page.

“Ser’usly,” he said, head flopping to the right a little. “You shud come. It’ll be funn.”

“Yeah, I’ll just ask Nelly,” she said pleasantly enough with no intentions of actually encouraging her to come. They’d keep looking for her soulmate.

“Nell?” she said, coming in. Her friend was sitting up.

“I want to go,” she interjected before Lyra could say anything.

Lyra blinked in surprise. “Yeah?”

“I don’t see why not,” Nelly said with a shrug. “Another day of finding nothing or getting a good experience out of this? It’s not really a choice.”

Well, if she wanted to go... “This whole thing has been for you, even if we do have the baggage. If you want to go, I’m down.”

“Yeah, why not? Maybe I’ll meet him there.”

Lyra grinned. “Never say never.”

She should have realized when Jessica called their destination an abandoned island. ‘No one’s there! You can do anything you want!’ Parachuting to the shore with your luggage, no supervision—no *backup*, no *defense*. Nothing but a bunch of rich young people making their way into ‘uncharted’ territory.

She should have realized the discrepancies, so why hadn’t she?

It was a different universe, but some things stayed the same. Just because love and souls were taken much more seriously didn’t mean the world had escaped the human condition. There were still bad—terrible—people out there, people who didn’t give soulmates any credence, who didn’t care about killing two people with one stone. And if there was money in the black market, there was more money in human trafficking and slavery.

Still, if she’d even taken a minute to wonder, to think... It was suspicious. She would have thought it too good to be true. All this, for an affordable, almost egregiously low price? A helicopter ride to and from, free gear for parachuting and snorkeling and spelunking, alcohol provided essentially for pennies, and it all cost less than \$100 per person? For people like Neil and Patrick, sheltered as they were, there was no suspicion to be had, only great excitement.

But Lyra wasn’t sheltered, not Before. She knew the signs of something being too good to be true.

She should have realized that something was wrong. She shouldn't have trusted her naïve cousin and his friend. Nobody thought this was perhaps not what it seemed, even her, because she didn't *think!*

She should have known!

Beginning of the End

According to Patrick, they had been told to take their luggage with them. It seemed a little strange, but supposedly the guy who had suggested the trip—some nameless bartender—knew what he was talking about, was trustworthy, so they all complied and boarded the helicopter at a little launch pad at half eleven.

The helicopter itself was cramped with all six of them and their luggage, although that might not have been the case if Jessica and Natalie hadn't brought two suitcases each. At the time of departure from SeaTac, Lyra had tactlessly asked if the girls really needed that much and had been met with vehement protest that they couldn't leave a single thing behind.

Lyra had wondered if they were aware that laundry could be done for them at their ridiculously expensive hotel or if they were determined not to wear the same article of clothing twice. To her dismay, she had met girls her age at her private schools who seemed to feel similarly. "Daddy" this and "Daddy" that and "Please, Daddy," for every single materialistic 'need.'

It was hard to have any sympathy for either Jessica or Natalie when they struggled to haul their suitcases into the helicopter until their partners stepped up. Any hinting, nudging, or prompting outright didn't convince the pilot to come help; Lyra didn't think he spoke English at all because every time someone asked him something he just smiled and nodded brightly with two gold teeth, pointing at the cabin and saying cheerfully, "Yes!"

She and Nelly, of course, had no trouble. They were simple packers, aware of and willing to use the laundry services. What mainly weighed Lyra down was her laptop. It was a big fancy thing that she used to write and game on. Gaming wasn't happening on this trip, but her word processor was getting well-used in her downtime. She was documenting the trip as well as working on one of her novels. The story was only for her at this moment in time, just something to sit down and

enjoy. She'd given thought to publication—maybe she could have managed it—but she wasn't sure it was something she wanted. A lot of the things she wrote for didn't exist here, not the same themes and not the implicit understanding of her old culture. Sure, everyone here was American just the same as last time, but society was different in so many ways that as she grew older, she found it was just about unrecognizable.

For example, you couldn't find a single novel without the concept of soulmates as at least a plot point. Soulmates were par for the course for everyone, everything here. They weren't for her, not someone who had originally grown up without, but there was no escaping them. Nelly seemed to meld with this change a lot better than Lyra had; even after two decades, Lyra's default was Before with no chance of romance on the horizon and even less desire to be completed by an 'other half.' Mostly because she didn't feel she needed another half. She was whole; she was fine. Life was good.

But she had a sneaking, not-quite-sad-but-close feeling that while Nelly could attune herself to this change of universe, Lyra herself wasn't going to be so lucky. She had been happy enough Before and Nelly had not. It made an unsurprising and enormous difference in their adjustment to this second life.

Thinking of Before and the precious secrets hidden on her hard drive, Lyra had considered leaving the laptop at the hotel, and before that, back in Portland. Cloud drives were a thing here, too, so she could technically be safe from losing everything, but she had no intention of losing or breaking the computer she already had and unnecessarily buying a new one. Jake and Kendall could get it replaced in a heartbeat if that were to be the case, but it was always so aggravating getting things just the way she liked them all over again, even if she used the exact same model, and it felt like a huge waste of money.

But more than inconveniences regarding lost or damaged property, there was the ever-so-important documentation of Before. Nelly had hers on it as well as her laptop at home and Lyra had her own, both on hers and Nelly's, and each one was so deep in protections from prying eyes that no one would ever bother to crack them. The documents were backed up to multiple USB devices, but the cloud drives available

weren't secure enough for their equivalent of state secrets. These two singular documents, long though they were with their every memory from Before recorded, could have them in the loony bin or locked in a federal lab for the rest of their lives. It didn't read like fiction and couldn't have been mistaken for it.

So in the end, the laptop came with them to the island. This turned out to be so dearly, so unfortunately relevant.

The flight itself was a little turbulent, but the views were worth it. Lisbon, gleaming in the distance as they crossed the sea; the glittering blue ocean beneath them; the white sands and green forests of the small country were passed; there were clear skies with nary a cloud. It was a peaceful trip, though longer than expected and crossing over more land than she had thought they would, heading to an island.

But Lyra loved this, the nature, the ocean glimmering below. She loved water and swimming; had in this life, had in her life Before. She had been supplied goggles and flippers and had her bathing suit under her clothes so that the moment they landed she could dash into the ocean.

They had been handed parachutes upon arrival at the landing site before taking off. It was pretty much the only time the pilot had interacted with them of his own accord, though he'd be friendly enough despite the language barrier. Now, they were fully suited up for the jump and still waiting to see this abandoned island.

It felt like hours and might have been; they'd been told to turn off their phone while on the helicopter and everyone had decided to stow them in their luggage. Eventually, though, they flew far enough and started to hover over a specific, very isolated island.

The pilot motioned for them to get out, saying in heavily accented *English*, "Jump! Jump! Now, time!"

Personally, Lyra had thought he was just faking the language barrier so he wouldn't have to deal with tourists constantly pestering him. How did you *not* speak Portuguese in Portugal and live there? It was a little strange to her but not alarming.

Neil, the most reckless idiot amongst them, whooped and jumped with nary a second thought. While Patrick and Jessica followed, Lyra went up to the pilot and asked, “What about our luggage?”

He looked at her, smiled, pointed, and said, “Jump!”

“Our luggage,” she enunciated clearly, even though she had a feeling he could understand, and pointed at their suitcases stacked in the back of the cabin.

His brow furrowed in confusion for a split second before he nodded and smiled. “I will bring!”

She didn’t want to think that he was dumb, but it was either that or find something suspicious about this. It was too late to want to feel like she was making a mistake, so she decided to shove the thoughts away. In for a penny, in for a pound and all that.

“Lee! Let’s go!” Nelly called over the roar of the engine.

Forcing herself to forget about her misgivings, she grinned and followed her friend to the ledge.

Before her was a wild jungle island—but it wasn’t as uninhabited as they had been told. She could see some bits of civilization cropping up around from how high up they were, but it all seemed primitive compared to what she was used to. There apparently were locals and they must be friendly enough if people like that bartender were inviting people to the island, even though he had lied about its population. He wouldn’t send them here just to get them killed, right? ...That was a thought too dark to contemplate, but she knew that people like that existed. Were paid for it.

It occurred to her that she had no idea what Neil and Patrick had actually been told. She hadn’t been there. Neil, who was the likeliest to be responsible for this trip, was a sheltered white boy and had never had anything worse happen to him than losing his wallet. He wouldn’t be suspicious of just about anyone if he felt his money was safe.

Her grin faltered as a plume of smoke erupted from the far side of the island. Nelly noticed nothing and jumped.

Lyra glanced back at the pilot warily, wishing she didn't suddenly have such an acute gut feeling that something was wrong with this scenario. "Go, go!" he cried. "Jump! Time to jump!"

He was so *eager* for her to get to the island. Eager like he'd been about literally everything on this trip (with the exception of the luggage). Was it genuine friendliness when he wouldn't help them so much as buckle in for the ride, or was it something more sinister?

Hush, self. He just wants to get us out of here so he can land. Or something.

Though she still had damnable but unshakable misgivings about this whole thing, she forced them down, decided everything was going to be *just fine*, and jumped after Nelly.

The view was once again gorgeous. She didn't have the same interest in it that she'd had before, though, unable to ignore her misgivings entirely.

Lyra fell for a little while before activating her parachute. The *whump* and sudden jerking motion of her fall being suspended was a little jarring, but Neil and Patrick had already landed with their freely-given goods—snacks and alcohol—and were cracking a couple of beers open. Natalie had taken off her clothes and put them in a pile while she sprawled out on the beach in her skimpy bathing suit; Jessica had done the same and was wading in the shallows, looking at the seashells and silvery fish darting around with great enthusiasm.

As she lazily floated to the shore, Lyra glanced up and noticed the helicopter flying further inland. Surely he wasn't expecting them to be able to come find him, right? They were equipped for the beach, not hiking through untamed jungle. Most of them only had flipflops, much less the gear to deeply traverse the terrain on the island.

It occurred to her that not once had anyone mentioned how they were getting back, just that they would be. She'd just assumed her cousin and his friends had enough brains that there probably was *some* kind of plan in place, but she felt a desperate need right then to know exactly how they'd be getting back to the hotel after this.

“Hey, Pat, do you know—”

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat—

Suddenly, the sound of gunfire and smell of gunpowder filled the air. Dirty men, all in red shirts and various pants with sturdy boots and *lots of guns* flowed out onto the beach, surrounding the group in moments.

No, she thought, and it was the only coherent thing she could think as she ducked out of the parachute, freeing herself with trembling hands.

The parachute weighing her down made her a huge and easy target, one that she was trying to escape from, but two tall, burly men were running toward her, waving semi-automatics and shooting at the sand around her feet. Like it had been rehearsed or well-practiced, her friends were quickly surrounded by the red-shirted men, who paired off to subdue them with pointed guns and yelling.

She saw Nelly. She was splayed out on the ground, staring up at a singular black young man in shock. She was uninjured but crying; Lyra was going to murder the sonofabitch who had hurt her.

No, she thought as she turned away from Nelly, her friends, and the men, and dashed into the water.

Fight, flight, freeze.

Throwing the bulky nylon parachute at them slowed them down briefly and she dove into the shallows as fast as she could. Trying to swim away was futile when there was nowhere to actually go, but her fight or flight instincts had decided on flight and nothing was going to change that.

The water stung her eyes, but she kept them forced open so that she could see where she was going. Staying underwater for a longer time than normal was possible because she had been on swim team her entire academic career and still practiced at Yale’s swim club, but she nevertheless had to come up for air at some point.

Lyra managed a fair distance before she heard the rumble of an engine coming near quickly. She dove back under but a jet ski cut her off

and she was yanked from the water by her hair. She screamed, hacking and spitting out seawater, struggling with the man's grip and cursing her hair's grabbable length. In the end, she still was hauled over the back of the seat and a strong, hairy arm was wrapped around her waist to keep her in place.

No, she thought, and refused to surrender to whatever horrors awaited her.

She hadn't learned how to fight, had never seen the need for it, though she was taught to shoot as a pastime before guns were made illegal in 2008. However, she was muscular from swim team and her upkeep for it (really, swimming had so many benefits), so her next instinct was to wrestle the jet ski away from the asshole who'd grabbed her and take off. *Get help.*

Fight, flight, freeze.

She both over- and underestimated him. He was strong and big and she was lithe and small, and he had all he needed to keep her down, but he underestimated her, too, because of her size and looks. She managed to nearly force him into the water before he pulled out his trump card and pointed a gun at her head, growling out, "Stop fucking moving," in a thick accent. She froze, her life now hanging in the balance of her next decision. Comply or die.

She didn't want to die.

And then his hand moved forward. She tried to push away, back to the safety of the sea. It kept coming though, like in slow-motion, and she couldn't get away fast enough.

Time abruptly sped up.

"No!" she shouted, and he pistol-whipped her.