

KEEP RUNNING *from As Alive Journal*

*We grow up on stories of stars. These distant sparks we can't
see through the clouds we've made. You look up and imagine
constellations.*

Until you can't ignore the neon lights.

*The sky's always lit up, even at night—the multi-colours bleed
onto the clouds like a psychedelic dream projected on the sky.
And for a moment, it's beautiful. But then you're left with the
realization you'll never see the stars. And then it's gone.*

So, if you get out: keep running.

END OF BROADCAST 98

The words are everywhere. Sides of auto-delivery rigs and pipes, synthesizer factory smoke stacks, cyber body-mod shops, pulse-tattoo parlors, carved into club tables. Or, in this case, mixed in among graffiti. And unlike the rest of the tags, they're written like they're meant to be read.

"Keep Running."

I tap the circular link on my temple, stopping another broadcast from starting, and shake my spray paint. The *rattle-tick-tick-tick* echoes down the alley. Pulling my mask back into place, I flick on the zero-G generator sitting next to me and push myself up to reach the top of my picture. The paint's *hiss* lulls me into a comfortable trance as I work. After a while, the sweet but chemical scent leaks through my mask.

I'm dizzy by the time I kick off the wall to admire my work. The face made of stars looks to the sky. It's staring at the "Keep Running," too.

Blue pings for my location, and a few minutes later the alley's filled with a low thrumming as she pulls up above me in the hovercar. She sticks her head out the window, neon blue hair peeking out from under her hood, and grins. "Get in!"

"Am I going to like this surprise?"

Blue giggles from behind me, hands covering my eyes. "You damn well better. It took long enough." The headphones hanging around her neck are turned up loud enough I can hear the broadcast she left running.

A city of a million people, surrounded by an endless wasteland.

The eye of a storm no one can remember.

"Okay, reach out and open the door."

Blindly, I grasp at air until I find the handle. In tandem, we step into the room. The air is stained with paint, hair dye and blueberry tea. "You flew me all over the city just to take me back to our apartment?"

"Well—I didn't plan on you realizing where we were the moment we walked in the door!"

And like we had some great need for cosmic symmetry, our man-made clouds stretch all the way to the horizon because, hey. We're all that's left. We can be as selfish as we want, so long as we survive.

"Just stay here. Keep your eyes shut!" Blue disappears.

I obligingly cover my eyes.

A switch flicks. Violet light peeks through the cracks between my fingers.

"Okay. Open."

Our apartment is lit up with black lights. And on the ceiling and every wall are stars. Thin lines connect them, plotting out constellations. A whole fabricated night sky—a bedtime story brought to life.

I turn in a slow circle, slack-jawed.

Blue watches me with a hesitant grin. "Do you like it?"

Lacing my fingers behind her neck, I kiss her. "I love it."

"Good. Because the second part's better."

"Better than this?"

A techy friend told me almost 5300 people listen to these broadcasts. Zero-point-zero-zero-five-three percent of the city.

With a knowing grin, she nods. "Mm-hm. It's the real thing."

I tilt my head, frowning. "I don't follow."

“Stars.” She takes my hands. “*Real* stars.” Blue swipes the remains of last night’s dinner off the kitchen table, cleaning nanobots swarming the discarded meal.

Ignoring the whirring nanos, Blue spills a handful of datachips onto the table. “We’re going to leave.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The city. The lights, the clouds, everything.” She puts an order into the panel next to the apartment’s delivery pipe, then turns back to me. “We’ll have to walk. After we disconnect our links, nothing will listen to us, including the hovercar—”

“Woah, slow down. Are you serious?”

“I finally found it.” Blue gives me a manic grin, her pulse-tattoos strobing with her heartbeat. “Hidden in the audio files of Cassiopeia’s last broadcast. Instructions, maps... She figured it out and left it for us.”

But how many would come with me if I found a way out? Who would leave on their own if I showed them how? Who would run into a wasteland for the promise of stars?

The longer her grin sticks around, the sharper the weight in my chest gets. “Blue, no one’s actually ever left the city, including Cassiopeia.”

“Then where did she go? Why did she disappear?”

“She probably just got bored of broadcasting. Every week some random is broadcasting something new, and someone else gets bored and stops.”

Blue shakes her head with a dreamy smile. “No. Cassiopeia got out. She kept running. Other people followed her. And we can, too.” The pipe plays a three-note jingle and a data reader drops into the apartment. “Just hear me out, okay?”

Zero-point-zero-zero-five-three percent of 5300 is only twenty-eight. I bet it wouldn't be many more than that.

Blue sets up the freshly-synthesized data-reader, “It took forever to decode all the audio files,” and starts plugging the datachips into it and unplugging them again. Most of them only show garbled code. One displays a nearly featureless map overlaid with a constellation chart, and an encoded text document. “But I found this. The text tells you how to use the stars to navigate, and this,” she points to a circled area of the map, “is where Cassiopeia went. It has to be.”

“What if there’s nothing out there?”

“I believe there is.”

When I find a way out, I hope you're one of them.

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I stare at her. “So, we just wander out of the city and follow stars we can’t even see yet to X marks the spot.”

She laughs, not hearing, or ignoring, the disbelief in my voice. “Pretty much. Once we’re far enough from the city, we’ll be able to see the stars and then—”

“Blue, what you’re talking about is crazy. The broadcasts

are a... living urban legend. Only fanatics are stupid enough to follow them out into a wasteland."

"You've listened to the broadcasts just as much as I have." Her smile falters, replaced with hurt. "Why bother – why bother with *me* – if you thought it was all bullshit and I was crazy?"

"That's not what I think at all! I—" Taking a breath, I lace my fingers behind her neck again. "'Bothering' with you is my favourite thing in the world. Real or not, I'm eternally grateful to Cassiopeia for leading me to you. I've loved chasing this mystery with you—"

"So chase it with me further." She takes my face in her hands. "Chase it with me all the way to the end."

"You're talking about taking off into a wasteland with *no* guarantee anyone's out there anymore, if there ever was. For what? Stars?"

"Yes, for stars." She takes my hands. "We can see them together."

"Just stay here." Blue starts to say something and I cut her off with a kiss. "Stay with me."

Blue searches my face, then storms into our bedroom, slamming the door shut.

Blue's half of the bed is cold when I wake up. *Probably gone somewhere to cool off.* I tap on a broadcast to fill the silent apartment.

There's nothing really wrong with the city. That's the trick.

We don't have to worry about destroying the world, so we can make as many disposable things as we want. Anything you need can be made and delivered to you on demand.

I sigh as I wait for the pipes to spit out breakfast. That dreamy look in Blue's eyes last night... The first time she looked at me like that was when I fell in love with her.

The people in charge let you do what you want. They probably won't stop you from leaving.

Why would they need to? Who would leave? We know there's nothing out there.

Except there is. There's a whole world out there.

We had to know about stars from somewhere.

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Neon lights replace muted sunlight and Blue still isn't back. Worry creeps in like a chill. But when I open the front door to go look for her, a datachip falls to the floor.

Her plans. And on the side, written in blue ink, "Keep Running."

I realize Blue's not coming home.

I tick-tick-tick a can as I mope my way to paint something – the first time I've left the apartment in weeks – stopping at a warehouse with "Keep Running" written across it.

My bag of paint cans hits the ground with a *rattle-clank*. Pulling up my mask, I grab one at random. In low gravity, I push myself off the ground and...

Arm still raised, I stare at the wall, head as empty of ideas as the apartment's felt since Blue left. Almost as quiet, too. I stopped playing the broadcasts. And Blue's not there to make me laugh. Or look at my sketches and tell me which ones she likes—

“Are you gonna use the wall?”

I jolt, sending myself spinning.

Someone else, two paint cans stuffed in their pockets, looks up at me.

I kick off the wall, hanging limply.

“Thanks.” The chemical paint smell starts floating in the air like electricity.

*I know I've said before there's no one keeping you here, but I've
decided to amend that sentiment.*

I groan. “Can you turn that off?”

“Leave if you don't wanna hear it.”

I don't leave. The other artist hops into my gravity field, painting a giant tag.

Half-heartedly, I watch things fly through a tangled web of delivery pipes between buildings. The web stretches higher and higher, from the squat factories to the towering, shimmering skyscrapers.

There's no one physically keeping you here.

And above them, the usual clouds—smooth, dull, unmoving; the city's lights illuminating them like rainbow lightning.

Is Blue looking at the same clouds?

She's not, that's the whole point and She's not, and not with you hit me like colliding hovercars. I nearly start crying all over again.

We're told over and over "there's nothing out there."

But how do we know? We don't know because no one leaves, and no one leaves because we don't know.

The finished tag reads "Follie." Follie stands back, observing their work. They nod, then glance at me. "Wish me luck, I guess."

"For what?"

"I'm heading out."

"Out?"

"Y'know." They nod towards the edge of the city, pulling hair back to reveal a bandage where their link should be. "Out."

A city-wide mind game.

“There’s nothing out there.”

“You been?”

“No...”

“Then—”

“There isn’t!” I throw my paint to the ground. It breaks, sending out a pigmented explosion. “And you’re just going to hurt people by taking off.”

Follie kicks the broken can, adding to the discarded things littering the ground. “I’m gonna take a stab in the dark you’re speaking from experience?” When I just keep glaring at nothing, they ask, “Why’re you so mad? Didn’t you choose to stay?”

“Yeah, and she didn’t!” I wrap my arms around myself. “She’d rather chase after a myth than stay with me.”

It’s effective, isn’t it? Trapping us all in our own minds, with our own minds. No need for walls or border patrols.

“Well, it goes both ways, doesn’t it? I mean,” they look up, face bathed in neon lights, “you’re in here moping because she chose a ‘myth’ over you, but she’s probably out there moping because you chose ‘reality’ over her.”

So if you want to get out, you have to escape yourself first.

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I open my mouth. Nothing comes out. Just because I

didn't go anywhere, doesn't mean I didn't leave Blue, too.

But it doesn't matter now. She's gone.

In mid-air, I curl into a ball. "At least I'm safe here."

"Is being safe worth it if you're alone?"

"I..."

Follie looks to the "Keep Running." "You could go find them."

As they leave, I call out, "What if there's nothing out there?"

They shrug, eyes bright. "Only one way to find out."

I left the black lights on. The stars are on display when I get home. My hand finds its way to my pocket, to Blue's plans. To those words.

Lying down, I stare up at the painted stars, replaying our fight on loop. Blue left, but... how much did I hurt her by staying?

The apartment is so quiet my ears ring.

Pressing my hands to my eyes, a cracked laugh spills out of my throat. "It's not worth it."

I take out the datachip – the "Keep Running" almost invisible in the black light – and clutch it to my chest. *I want to see the stars with you.*

Grabbing a kitchen knife, I wedge the tip under my link, take a deep breath, and twist.

[panting, running footsteps, breathy laughter]

The sun's so bright without the clouds it stings.

*The sky... The colours as the sun sets are more neon than any
lights.*

*The city's vanished beyond the horizon except for the tallest
towers, sticking up like scorched fingers pulling the sun down.*

*If I stare at the dark sea above me, it feels like I could fall off into
it. There are so many more stars than you could ever draw.*

If you get this, I hope you come find us.

Nothing we can make could be as magnificent as this.

ERROR BROADCAST 99 NOT SENT



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