

Read/Write/Sing

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/38079616) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/38079616>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/M , M/M
Fandom:	Transistor (Video Game)
Relationships:	Red/Subject The Boxer , Farrah Yon-Dale/Henter Jallaford
Characters:	Red (Transistor) , Subject The Boxer , Henter Jallaford , Niola Chein , Maximilias Darzi , Lillian Platt , Olmarq (Transistor) , Farrah Yon-Dale , Royce Bracket , Asher Kendrell , Grant Kendrell , Sybil Reisz , Shomar Shasberg , Preston Moyle , Bailey Gilande , Wave Tennegan , Luna (Transistor)
Additional Tags:	Canon Compliant , Post-Canon , Canon-Typical Violence , Established Relationship , Extremely Established Relationship , they're so freaking in love , Whump , mild whump honestly , the unnamed narrator is sometimes extremely upset , he's also sometimes very happy , Game Spoilers , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , the country , finished work , Suicide That's Not Really Suicide , But That Has The Trappings Of Suicide , we start with what's happening at the end of game , Fluff , Angst , Fluff and Angst , Hurt/Comfort , weirdly enough the emphasis is on comfort , i didn't mean for Yon-Dale and Jallaford to get together , they just decided on that themselves
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-03-31 Completed: 2022-06-09 Words: 27,955 Chapters: 10/10

Read/Write/Sing

by [AbigailMoment](#)

Summary

She walks down the bridge she made out of her longing for him. She's humming a particular song. He hasn't recognized it. Doesn't register the significance. He's talking about rebuilding the city. He has no idea what she's about to do.

Is there a way to make this easier for him? Could she type it into a terminal? Could she paint a mural that would let him understand?

She's not a writer or a painter.

She keeps humming. She walks back towards where she lost him.

--

A story about what happens next, in the world inside of the Transistor.

Notes

I am almost a decade late to this fandom, but playing Transistor inspired me in a way that I've never experienced before.

I HAD to know what came next for them, and the only way I saw to do that was to write it.

I've finished most of this work. There are some plot points I need to work out, but the spine is there. Nine chapters and an epilogue. I'm going to post a chapter every Thursday.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Chapter 1: The Transition

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Red always has a plan.

He said that at the beginning--back when the world had only just started crumbling. It's still true.

He's not going to like this plan.

Red hums pieces of the city back into existence to figure out where she is. He's talking about rebuilding the city. She understands why. There's something good about peeling the white back and finding gold underneath. Healing. Running through the blank white space spread over what used to be their home would have been devastating if she let herself stop and think about it. In the few moments she permitted herself to pause and look at the sky it was all she could do not to crack open with tears. And she's not ready for tears. Not even now. She needs to keep going.

The fact that she can undo the white and bring back the gold, well, that's something. But it's an empty something. An empty city without people. A meaningless space. A bad joke. What's the point of singing if no one can hear you? She can't even sing. Her voice is trapped in there with him.

He's really not going to like her plan.

She walks down the bridge she made out of her longing for him. She's humming a particular song. He hasn't recognized it. Doesn't register the significance. He has no idea what she's about to do.

Is there a way to make this easier for him? Could she type it into a terminal? Could she paint a mural that would let him understand?

She's not a writer or a painter.

She keeps humming. She walks back to where she lost him.

It takes her a moment to sort out the significant white pillars from the meaningless white pillars. Divide the body from the wall it's slumped against.

He tells her that's not him. She knows. She knows.

She hugs the blade, holding him as tight as she can. Willing comfort into him. His voice becomes nervous. She plants the Transistor in the ground. It slots in like it does everywhere. Universal compatibility. He doesn't like it when she puts him down. It makes him more nervous. This is going to be so hard for him.

She lies down next to the thing that used to be him. She leans against it for comfort. This isn't exactly going to be easy for her either.

She looks back at him and he realizes what she's doing.

Red. Don't you do it. Don't you dare.

She doesn't think of it as suicide. She knows where she's going. She knows there's something inside there, people inside there. He's inside there. And there's nothing out here. Not anymore.

Don't do this. Please.

But death is the only thing he can see it as. Trying to explain will just draw out his panic. And she wants to make the worst moments of his life as brief as possible.

If you do this...

The threat trails off as he floats helplessly into the air. He knows there's nothing he can do.

Red. Please don't.

She needs to do this. Quickly. But it's hard. Harder than she realized it would be. She's always loved being what she is. And how this looks, how it feels...it's all discordant notes and sharp angles. But it's also the only way forward. The only plan she has. She clenches her hand into a fist.

Wait!

The sword hurtles towards her and her shoulders relax because that was the hardest part, but then...

RED!

It hurts. But only for a moment.

Everything breaks.

He looks up and all he can see is her and it's not her anymore.

He's alone. He can't move. He can only speak and he can't speak to her.

He can still see her and she's slumped against the thing that isn't him and he can count her lashes and it isn't her anymore.

He can't bear to see it and he can't look away and he can't do anything and he can't and he can't and he can't...

INTEGRATION UNPAUSED

TARGET: Crash()

PROGRESS 15%

trace [o] vocal [o] physical [x] social [x] mental [x] spiritual [x]

PROGRESS 36%

trace [o] vocal [o] physical [o] social [x] mental [x] spiritual [x]

PROGRESS 59%

trace [o] vocal [o] physical [o] social [o] mental [x] spiritual [x]

PROGRESS 78%

trace [o] vocal [o] physical [o] social [o] mental [o] spiritual [x]

PROGRESS 100%

trace [o] vocal [o] physical [o] social [o] mental [o] spiritual [o]

INTEGRATION COMPLETE

SUPERUSER ACCESS: Read/Write/Execute

She's falling.

She hits a latticework of filigree code and it shatters around her. Or she shatters around it. One of those two.

She Bounce()s off something. She doesn't know what it is. Or what she is.

She reaches out for Help() and it's a mistake because what she reaches for stings her and draws the attention of something else.

There's a Flood() of sensation. And then she's drowning. The water is angry at her? Water can be angry? Can she drown?

Then everything Switch()es. The sphere of water (it has to be water, she was drowning in it) glows peach and she can breathe again. It can't hurt her.

She thinks someone just helped her? She has a moment to orient herself. She doesn't have a body anymore. She expected that, but that doesn't mean she understands it. Her existence is unfamiliar and that makes it hard to do anything.

She tries to move again and that doesn't work because she's thinking about it in terms of arms and legs. She doesn't have those. She tries to just think of pure movement, and that works

better. She tumbles forward.

No. She Crash()es forward.

OH. She knows how that works!

As the Flood() of anger flickers back to its normal color she Crash()es into it, tossing it into so many harmless eddies.

It's not important, anyway. It's not what she's looking for. It's not who she's looking for. She needs to find him. He thinks she's dead.

She's surrounded by square rooms. They're filled with familiar shapes and colors. She searches through them and finds Traces of people. Functions she's used. She doesn't find him.

She climbs a ladder of memories down into more square rooms. The Traces here are more passive. She Crash()es through them, tossing them aside. Nothing can resist her. She's still logged in as the Transistor's user. She searches among Get()s and Jaunt()s for the telltale flicker of piercing blue.

He's not here. Did she leave him loaded into an upgrade slot? She climbs back up the memory ladder. She searches wildly, interrupting processes, canceling subroutines, tearing through everything she can get her hands on in a frenzied, increasingly desperate search.

He shouldn't be alone. Not after what he watched her do. He doesn't know she's here. Why isn't he here? She found the other Traces. Blew past them in her search for him. They didn't talk, but they've never talked to her. Only he talked. They're here, why not him? He has to be here. She's *used* him. Where is he?

She finally finds Breach(), mostly hidden behind a font of brilliant Spark()s. She seizes it, but it's just an index and text. It's not him. It's not even an active presence, like the other Traces seem to be, which is why it was so difficult to find.

[SUBJECT NOT FOUND]

No selections on record.

Cannot be matched with census data.

Subject's trace data remains disjointed and cannot be recoverable.

Right. He's different from everyone else, because he's never been part of the system. The Transistor must have stored him somewhere else. Maybe she can use this to find where he is? But she doesn't immediately see how. She only half understands how she's doing what she's doing. She's not a programmer. She's a...

Hmm.

She reaches out again. Instead of Crash()ing around in a wild search, she listens. She still seems to be able to do that. She hears sharp, inquisitive Ping()s. She hears soft muttering--she

thinks it's coming from the Help() function. Barely audible. She's not dealing with that now. Possibly, she's not dealing with that ever.

She hears a steady Tap()ping noise. The acoustics are strange. The Tap()ping resonates with an alto trill that doesn't suit it. She reaches to see what it's Tap()ping against.

Yes. There it is. Under that function.

Her voice.

Ruby and vibrating. Full of potential and feeling. It's strange that it's outside of her, so she fixes that. She Crash()es into it, disrupting the Tap()ping, and reintegrating herself.

She takes a breath. She doesn't need to, but it's reflex.

She starts to sing.

He's finally managed to look away.

There's nothing else to look at so he just stares at the darkness.

He doesn't talk. There's no one to talk to.

There are shapes in the darkness. He hadn't noticed them before--he'd been looking up at her. There are distant yellow patterns on the...walls?

It doesn't matter. He can't get there.

Not a lot matters anymore.

He tries not to look up. He knows it will hurt.

He looks up.

Yep. He was right.

He feels like he should be cold. He feels like he should be trembling. But he doesn't get to do things like feel or collapse. Those are things only people with bodies get to do.

He does sob. Occasionally. Wrenchingly. No tears, just the noise. He can't seem to stop and at least it's something. At least he's doing something. Someone should do something because she's...

He can remember. He can remember how things were.

It's all distant and tinted gold. He remembers standing between her and a crowd of blurred faces and flickering cameras. He remembers feeling her pressed against his back. Grinning, because she could hide entirely behind him and that delighted her. He remembers how she

looked in the dressing room before a set. Not nervous. Not even tense. Poised like the sun about to rise.

He remembers the first time they kissed. She was just off stage, the crowd roaring behind her, but she was looking at him and her eyes were dancing and she grabbed his lapels. He had never let himself hope. Never let himself dream that she would...and then she did. And it was like dawn breaking over his entire life and he did everything he could do just to be worthy of it. Any small thing he could think of. Getting her tea. Jumping in front of a sword.

Don't think about that. Don't think about that. Just remember. It's all he can do now. Just remember. The song. The song she wrote for them. Paper Boats. He almost died the first time he heard it (ha) because it was so good. She sounded so happy. Her music was amazing but rarely happy and he was almost breaking open (ha) with how glad he was that he could do that. That he could make her happy. That's all he wanted. For her to be happy and...

...safe.

He really, really wishes he could cry, which is not a typical wish for him. Or scream. He could scream. Maybe he did just scream. He's not sure. He's starting to think he's losing it because he can almost hear the song. The song about love and paper boats. About seconds marching into the past. Moments passing. Like those gilded memories receding. Vanishing. Lost. Though, the song isn't fading like the other memories.

Honestly, it might be getting louder.

The song about love and paper boats and *finding each other*.

The song which she was humming right before...

Oh. Oh, he really hopes he's a complete idiot. He clings suddenly to the faint, glimmering, life-raft of a possibility that he's utterly misunderstood the situation.

He's not sure what to do for a moment, but he quickly realizes there's only one thing he can do. All he has is his voice.

He sings back.

She rises to a space that's metaphorically higher. Above the active functions. Near the yellow traces of code.

The river always finds the sea

So helplessly

Like you find me

She starts soft, then scales louder. She knows how to project. She broadcasts her voice to every corner of this small, mechanical world.

We are paper boats floating on a stream

And it would seem

We'll never be apart

The other Traces fall silent. No more pings or sparks. Listening. Understanding? But this is not for them. She sings.

I will always find you

Like it's written in the stars

You can run but you can't hide

And there. A baritone intermingling with her mellow alto.

We are magnets pulling from different poles

With no control

We'll never be apart

Relief washes through her. He's there. Now all she has to do is get to him. She launches herself towards the voice. She's a sparkling streak of force.

I will always find you.

She rushes away from the User Interface and the crowd of Traces clustered around it. She hurls herself into darkness, following his voice.

Like it's written in the stars.

She finds a hidden folder. Not indexed. The Transistor didn't know what to do with him, so it logged him somewhere obscure and forgot him.

You can run but you can't hide.

She dives inside and there he is. A blue spark, like a star. Floating still.

I will always, always find you.

It's him. It's him. But they don't have faces so they can't be face to face and the world around them is dark, metaphorical nothingness, and that is suddenly unacceptable.

Fortunately, she has read/write access to everything. So she changes all of that. Starting with him.

She remembers his shape, the strong solidness of him. Broad chest. Broad shoulders. His favorite jacket. His wry, crook of a smile. His kind eyes.

There. There he is. Looking a little startled, but that's all right. But he's alone in the dark, and that's not all right.

She thinks about where they should be. Her first thought is Cloudbank, but that's too sad. Cloudbank isn't the city. It's the people. The cloud painters and the flatbread makers. Even in its original, golden form, an empty city is just a dreary, haunted place. She knows this from personal experience. A city is also, honestly, a little complex for her to recreate from memory. She's still relatively new to this crafting-worlds thing.

She thinks she can manage something simple. A field. A golden field. What grows golden? Wheat. A golden field of rolling wheat. And a blue sky. Because she chooses that. And a house in the distance. Something to retreat to. Yes. She manages all of that quite neatly. The bridge was good practice.

And then she gives herself a face. She doesn't spend much time on the details, eager to be present. The wheat was the last thing on her mind so she ends up wearing something vague and golden.

He's staring at her and there was so much to say, to explain, to reassure, just a moment ago. But now it all melts away into the moment. She laughs because he's here and he's solid and she can touch him. She can touch him so she reaches out and takes his hand, because he asked her to do that, such a long time ago.

She takes his hand and he's warm and solid and it's the best thing she can do to reassure him that she's here. She's here.

Something changes in his face. A shred of disbelief melts away. He still holds himself close and tense, but he's no longer looking at her as if she's impossible. He's always taken careful, small steps into feelings, particularly good ones. It took him so long to believe that she loved him. After so long in the dark, it's going to take him a while to have faith in the sun and the open field and the reality of her.

That's okay. They have time.

He smiles at her. His small, wry, cautious crook of a smile.

"Hi," he says.

As if they were meeting casually. As if they just randomly ran into each other in this golden field of wheat. As if to say: "What are the chances that you happen to be trapped inside of the same reality molding prison-sword that I'm trapped inside?"

He's ridiculous. He's afraid. She understands. Her smile gentles. She squeezes his hand.

"Hey."

If you like this, you can find more of my writing at [my website.](#)

Chapter 2: Nightmares

Chapter Summary

They grow accustomed to their new world.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was inspired by [The Storm](#) by [toushindai \(WallofIllusion\)](#).

Nightmares feel like an inevitable result of the events of Transistor. But in my version, no one talks about it! Very healthy.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

They spend most of the first day touching each other.

He moves from holding her hand to tracing the edge of her face to running his fingers through her hair to kissing her like she's air and he hasn't been able to breathe deeply in months.

Eventually they part. Their lips are chapped and she takes his hand again and leads him towards the house in the distance. He stumbles on the first step, like he's not used to walking. He hasn't been able to in a while. She leans against him and they make their way through the field of wheat towards the house.

They open the door and discover the house is completely hollow. Just four walls and empty, triangular eaves.

"Huh," he says.

"I think I can fix this," she says.

She hums. Obviously she doesn't need to anymore, but this is actually easier to do with humming because she needs to concentrate and lyrics are distracting. A room spreads out from the door. It's cozy and rustic, bright with light pouring through windows. It's sparsely furnished because details are difficult, but there's a couch, which was the main thing she wanted and she pulls him towards it as he stares around.

"Wow," he says. "So you can still do this?"

"I guess so," she says.

Then they don't talk for a while.

Eventually they get hungry. Or they think they should be hungry, so they are. She hums a kitchen into existence and they explore it.

"There are a lot of eggs," he reports from the refrigerator.

"This feels like a place that should have eggs," she says.

"I guess we're having breakfast."

He does the cooking. He says that she's building the house, the least he can do is cook. He searches for pans and spices. They're missing black pepper. She tries to create black pepper. It looks right but tastes like paprika. It turns out small details are tricky. He can make do without.

She sits at the table and watches him. Every minute or so he steps away from the pan to kiss her hair or touch her shoulder. Reassuring himself that she's still there. He cooks the eggs sunny-side up, to match the sky. They're very good.

They linger over the dishes, touching each other. They wander back to the couch, talking about small things and touching each other. Time passes in a warm blur and they touch each other.

Eventually it feels like it should be evening, so the sun begins to set. They walk out onto the porch to watch it. She makes a hammock and they swing together as the sky grows dark orange-red and then navy blue.

"Nice sunset," he says, as if she's to credit. Maybe she is.

"It was pretty simple," she says. They're both used to the prismatic productions of people trying to imitate Farrah Yon-Dale.

"I like simple," he says.

"Do you want to go upstairs?" she asks.

"We have an upstairs?"

"We do now. There's a bed."

He smiles. "Everything you want out of an upstairs."

They make love and it's more frantic than the day was. Holding each other close. Whispering names. Almost acknowledging the ordeal that brought them here, but not quite. She doesn't want to bring that pain into this space. Not yet. She wants to wallow in the joy of touching him just a while longer. He follows her lead.

He's more careful with her than he needs to be. As if she were fragile. She feels like the last few days have proven that she's anything but, and in the past this kind of caution has irritated her. But she doesn't mind now. He's going to think of her as fragile for a little while. A price to pay. Cheap at the cost.

While waiting through a refractory period he traces her body with his fingertips. Up her arm, cradling her head, back of her neck, down her back, pausing under one of her shoulder blades.

"You missed a spot," he says.

"Mmm?" Her response is bleary. He's diligently insistent about a three to one ratio for their orgasms and she's still a bit dizzy from that.

"You should have a mole, right here." He touches the place on her back.

She arches and twists to look at herself. As she focuses the black spot appears where, now that she does think of it, she remembers it should be.

"There is it," he says, sounding satisfied.

"Great," she says dryly. "Were there any gray hairs you were missing? Want me to add some cellulite?"

"Whatever you want," he says, wrapping his arms around her. "You'd make anything look hot."

She makes an indistinct sound and smiles. Then she grinds against him and his breath catches and she thinks he's ready for round three.

They fall asleep intertwined.

They both have nightmares. This is his.

He's sitting in an office across from an administrator. He's trying to explain himself. This is actually a somewhat typical stress dream for him. Instead of a face, the administrator has an OVC terminal. That's also not unusual. That's happened before, in dreams.

What's new is that the administrator has Red's voice on their desk. It's in a glass green jar labeled "CONTRABAND". The glass vibrates as her voice tries to sing. When it can't be heard it crashes against the sides of a jar in mute frustration.

He's trying to get the administrator to give her voice back, but the administrator keeps saying that they can't talk to him because he doesn't exist. He needs to make a Selection so that he can exist. That it should be easy, that it will be safe, everyone else does it. Why does he need to be special and stubborn and foolish and inconvenient?

He can't explain himself, he never can in these dreams. He focuses on trying to get Red's voice back. Eventually, the administrator gestures to his hands. They say that he can have her voice in exchange for those. So he unscrews his left hand and puts it on the desk.

He's struggling to remove his right hand when he hears the administrator say--

Here. This will be faster.

--and he looks up and the black screen of the administrator's face has darkened to pitch nothingness. It expands and keeps expanding until it covers the entire world and swallows him.

And then he's in the dark and he can't move. But he can look up and he sees her. Then the dream is less a dream and more a memory, vivid and real, replaying the last moments in perfect clarity.

If you do this...

Red. Please don't.

Wait!

RED!

He wakes up and it takes him a moment to realize that he's awake because his surroundings are very surreal.

The bed has buckled into a curve. The walls of the bedroom have curled down to cup the bed in a protective cocoon of white plaster, paintings, and some of the closet door. He's entirely inside of the impromptu shelter. Red is slightly above him, in a gap between the edge of the bed and the ceiling. She's somehow still asleep. She's a very deep sleeper.

Her hands are wrapped around his hilt--his *arm*. Her hands are wrapped around his arm so tight he's lost feeling in his left hand. She's breathing in rapid gasps. Making faint noises like she did when she first tried to talk and found she couldn't.

"Red," he says and reaches up to shake her. "Red. Wake up."

She comes to groggily, and as she does the room relaxes, unwinding from around the bed, but still distorted. White walls curled out into awning-like protrusions. The closet door looms over them.

"Hey," he says. "It's okay. We're okay. I'm here. We're here."

He pulls her to him. He whispers a constant flow of repetitive assurances. She slowly relaxes and wakes up completely.

"Bad dream?" he asks.

She responds by burrowing her face into his chest.

"Yeah," he says. "Me too."

He strokes her head. Running his fingers through her hair and gently teasing out nighttime tangles.

"Maybe no more sleep," he suggests. "I think there's tea in the kitchen."

She nods again. He can feel it against his chest more than see it.

"You can talk," he reminds her.

There's a long pause.

"Right," she says. "Tea would be great."

The sky is dark with the pale hint of early morning. He makes coffee for himself and tea for her. All of the supplies for coffee and tea are present and in order. She had her priorities when making the kitchen.

They sit on the couch together and sip their drinks.

"What was *your* nightmare about?" she asks. He did mention he had one too.

He shrugs. "Take your pick of bad stuff. We've had a couple of days."

"It's felt like weeks," she says, and curls her legs around his.

They spend the morning on the couch. Not doing much. Recovering.

By the afternoon they're both restless, so they explore. They walk out as far as they can go, until the wheat dissolves from fields into patchy islands, and then into the gold curlycue traces of code that decorate the darkness around them. Ones and zeros flicker in the distance.

He picks up stones and throws them, seeing if he can get them through the zeros. She laughs and joins him. They make a game of it. Every time they hit the code it flickers red and flares with error messages too far away for them to read.

He's still restless when they get back, so he goes out for a jog. As a surprise, she tries to recreate his training room. She focuses this time, trying to get all the bits and pieces in the right places. Remember how the machines work and how many weights there should be.

He's delighted by it, in his quiet, understated way. He's even more delighted when he discovers all of the tiny errors. How the weights all weigh exactly the same, regardless of size. How the rowing machine actually moves you across the room. How the punching bag makes clanking, buzzing sound effects when he hits it.

"I'm a trained musician," she tells him, hand over her face. "I'm very good at Music."

"Best punching bag I've ever had," he assures her, hooking an arm around her to give her a quick kiss before he goes back to seeing how he can vary the sound effects by punching in different places or with different amounts of force.

These experiments are followed by a pressing need for a shower, which she creates and they share. They realize that the rooms she's made, almost all on the first floor, shouldn't technically fit inside the house. They compare how long it takes to walk through the house as opposed to around the house. They identify the ways it shouldn't work, physics-wise, and speculate on whether or not it's going to be a problem. He doesn't think so. She figures if it is, she'll fix it.

They fall asleep intertwined.

They both have nightmares. This is hers.

She's running through a forest. The ground is thick with snow. The trees are frosted white.

She's bleeding and where her blood speckles the ground the red blotches open into eyes. Where the snow has eyes, it rises into shapes and the shapes begin to chase her.

She turns and she cuts through a lunging arc of frost. It has teeth like icicles and eyes like angry rose petals. She turns and she cuts through a snowman with manicured scarlet claws.

As she cuts them down, the monsters bleed and speckle the snow. And their blood becomes eyes, and the eyes rise into new monsters.

She's running through a forest and the snow rises up around her with white teeth and red tongues.

"Red. RED. Wake up."

She does, by degrees. He holds her shoulder to keep her from sitting up. She would have knocked her head on the ceiling.

The bed has grown upward--seven feet off the ground. The floorboards below have bubbled into spikes and blades and strange indents that look, from the right angle, like open mouths with fangs.

"Bad dream?" he asks, and she's afraid this is going to become their version of 'Good morning'.

She wonders if they could get away with not sleeping.

I want to express particular appreciation to the works [river always finds the sea](#) and [start\(\)](#).

Reading those helped me envision a dynamic between these two characters where they both can talk.

And I came up with the idea for the punching bag while reading [Rhythm](#).

Chapter 3: The Detective

Chapter Summary

ACAB. Though this is a post-scarcity Democratic Utopia and Jallafood was literally murdered by the corrupt aspects of the system he's a part of, so we will cut him a little slack.

A couple of days pass. She's standing on the porch enjoying some morning tea. She likes white tea to start the day. He's inside doing dishes. She examines the sky and wonders if she should do something different with it today when she sees what looks like a shooting star.

It's almost certainly not a shooting star. Because this is daytime and there are no stars even at night. And also it's bright orange. But apart from the color and context, it looks like a shooting star.

She walks out into the field to get a better view. Another point against the shooting star theory--instead of falling straight down it's bouncing around like the ball in a pinball machine. Tracing a zigzag pattern through the sky.

She watches with her hands in her dress-pockets as the thing zips a jagged but thorough search pattern gradually down towards the ground.

When it hits the wheat it recoils--lancing back upwards, a startled lightning bolt. But it returns quickly and the sheaves of wheat rustle and glow orange as the thing buzzes through them.

"What's going on?" he asks, walking out onto the porch. He's drying his hands with a dishtowel.

"We've been found," she tells him, pointing to the glowing orange buzz making its way towards her.

He jumps the railing and jogs to her, arriving as the glow emerges from the grass. It stops, hovering. A bright line in the air. Its tip twitches back and forth between them as he positions himself between her and it.

"It's one of the functions," she says, head tilted to the side. "The fast one. Ping."

"Yeah," he says, relaxing slightly now that the thing isn't barreling towards her anymore. "It's the one based on Henter Jallafood."

"He was a detective," she asserts, though there's a hesitation in her voice that asks for confirmation. She didn't pay as much attention as she could have to Cloudbank culture

outside of the arts. She was distracted by her music. She also didn't pay as much attention as she could have to the files they uncovered inside of the Transistor. She was distracted by fighting for her life.

But she paid enough attention to be right about this. He nods and adds: "He was one of the best detectives in the city."

"I see." She rubs her face and examines the orange line of light, floating in the air.

"Is that him?" she asks.

As if in response--actually, almost certainly in response--the line of light glows incandescent neon.

"I'm guessing that means yes," he says.

She nods. Her head tilts down and her eyes shift from speculative to certain. A decision has been made and a plan is forming in her mind.

She moves past him, towards the line of light, and she starts to hum.

Having a body after so long without is a very strange experience. Acquiring it is like the sensation of feeling returning to a numb limb, but instead of pins and needles in his leg it is pins and needles over his entire body. Sensation like a static fuzz as newborn nerves calibrate themselves.

Jallaforf flexes his hand. His fingers twitch, motions sharp and staccato. He adjusts his sleeves. He pulls too hard and fast and almost tears the cloth. He's used to starting and stopping, quick and intermittent. That's how he had to move when he didn't have a body. That method is fine when one is made of light and thought. But when made of bruising flesh a gentler pace is called for.

He adjusts his sleeves again. And a third time. Trying to execute the motions that were once familiar. He will drill this until he has mastered it, and that will be a metric by which to determine whether he can walk safely.

He is being watched. He does not turn to look because he is concerned about wrenching his neck, but he can see them through his peripheral vision. Red, the subject of his current investigation, is standing in front of him, and beside her is the unidentified man.

The man watches Jallaforf with caution. Jallaforf attributes this attitude mostly to protectiveness, given the man's body language towards Red and tendency to position himself between her and any perceived threat. However there is a measure of latent hostility to the man's expression that implies a more personal animosity. As Jallaforf can't recall having

personally wronged him, or ever even met him before, he concludes that this may be a hostile attitude towards his profession, or authority in general.

Red herself is watching Jallaford with an expression of patient expectation. She is waiting for him to speak. He clears his throat and sees if he can.

"Thank you," he says, successfully.

"You're welcome," she says. "Would you like to come inside? We have tea and coffee."

Liquids. Drinking. Yes. That's something he used to do. He adjusts his sleeves six more times, and shifts his weight from his right foot to his left. He suspects that he can manage walking.

"Yes," he says. Audibly.

They all go inside and Jallaford finds that it is difficult to move with two legs. There's so much shifting and tangential weight distribution. It was much simpler just to go from point to point. He does not exactly stumble, but keeps moving one part or another too fast and having to slow down for the other parts to catch up.

Red and the unidentified man considerably handle the doors. Jallaford arrives at a chair and, with some effort and concentration, successfully uses it.

He is given tea. He regards the cup and decides that he will put off crossing that rubicon until a time when he is not observed. He bridges his fingers, another familiar motion that he manages on the first try, and regards Red, who has sat down in the chair across from him.

"I presume you have questions," he says.

She raises an eyebrow. "I could say the same to you."

"I have deduced a considerable amount about this situation," he says. "The details of which I remain ignorant are not urgent. Also: I am in your debt."

He adjusts his sleeves, displaying his hands as evidence of that fact. Red shakes her head.

"That's not how I see things. But there are some things I am curious about."

A natural condition, and one with which he is familiar. He gestures for her to go on.

"How do you find us?" she asks.

"Based on your actions while possessing the Transistor and behavior on arrival inside, it was apparent you were looking for someone." Jalliford nods to the unknown man, who has moved to stand behind Red. "Process of elimination would have revealed who--there is only one Trace not present in the main interface--even if you have not left the relevant file open. The main difficulty was identifying where the Transistor stored non-recoverable Traces. I reviewed the file system, which is read accessible from the main interface, noted all of the locations that were not indexed and searched them."

"Huh," says the man.

Red nods slowly. "That's really clever."

Jalliford smiles. Praise is not unfamiliar, but it has been a while. "Thank you."

"So probably the other Traces aren't going to find us like you did?" Red asks.

"It is unlikely." Jalliford folds his hands together. "Those who are still active or not as inquisitive as I am."

"How long have you been in here?" she asks.

He hesitates. "What is the current date?"

She tells him.

"Six months and thirteen days," he calculates.

The man whistles.

Red hesitates, then asks: "How are you doing?"

Jalliford shrugs. "I am functional." Hm. That was sort of a joke. He had not intended it that way. "That is more than some can say."

"What do you mean by that?" The man asks, his first contribution to the conversation.

Jalliford sighs, adjusts his cuffs, and launches into his findings with a mixture of pleasure at being able to share them and reluctance because they are grim:

"I cannot communicate with any of the others, but I have been observing them. When not actively being used it is possible to engage with this world to a limited extent, at least when one is not isolated." He nods to the man again, in deference to his unfortunate situation.

"However, it seems that the longer a Trace exists the less they are inclined to be active in this way. Miss Platt and Mr. Darzi arrived recently, and are still very active. They often gravitate towards each other and I believe they have some method of communication."

"Miss Yon-Dale arrived recently after me. While she still moves occasionally, she is otherwise passive. Mr. Moyle, whose disappearance was part of my investigation, is incessantly moving, though recently his movements seemed less about engaging with the outside world and more about simply moving. Gilande, Chein, Tennegan, and Olmarq are almost entirely sedentary, never moving under their own volition and not responding to any stimulus, with the exception of Olmarq who will occasionally attack objects near to him. I have not engaged extensively with this tendency of his for obvious reasons."

The unidentified man seems to be counting off people on his fingers.

"What about Shomar Shasberg?" he asks. "He should be in here."

Jallaford smiles, a genuine expression. "I have yet to be able to locate him when he is not loaded into active use. It is a challenge I am grateful for."

It's good to have something to think about. Important. He coughs.

"And then of course there are the four most recent arrivals," he says. "Who I have not had much time to observe."

"Right," the man says, voice low enough to be almost a growl. "The Camarata's in here too."

Jallaford nods sharply. He shares the sentiment implied in the man's forbidding tone of voice. He wonders if the unidentified man remembers the experience of being murdered as distinctly as he does. An interesting thing to bond over.

"We'll deal with that when we need to," says Red, and she folds her fingers together, looking squarely across the table at Jallaford in a way that makes him feel suddenly and somewhat startlingly seen.

"What do you want to do now?" she asks him.

He blinks at her. The intensity of new possibilities and unknown variables rise in his mind, unweighted and unanalyzed.

"I'm not sure," he admits.

"Think about it," she says, and then she stands. "We'll be back in a minute."

Red leaves Jallaford with his tea and his thoughts. As she retreats to the living room, she pulls him along with her. Not Jallaford. *Her* him.

"Wow," he says softly. "If that's what six months does...some people have been in here for more than a year. What are we going to do?"

"We'll figure it out," Red says. "But first there's something we need to decide."

"Yeah?"

"There's going to be more people here," she says. That's not in question for her. They're going to find everyone and help them.

"Yeah," he agrees immediately. It's not a question for him either, and she loves him for that.

She puts her hand on his chest and looks up at him gravely. "Babe. You're going to need a proper noun."

He laughs, and then sighs in mostly-mock exasperation. She can tell there's a little real reluctance there. She used to think she was a private person, but then she met *him*.

He gazes across the room, out the window and at the sunlit field outside. She watches him run through nicknames and aliases, searching for one he'll be mostly comfortable with.

"Let's go with what the Transistor thinks," he decides. "Breach."

"Nice." She stands up on her tiptoes and kisses him. "I love you, Breach."

He laughs and kisses her back. "I love you, Red."

There's a clatter of ceramic from the kitchen. The sound of someone hesitantly figuring out how drinking works after only recently reacquiring hands.

"Let's give him a few minutes," Red suggests.

"Yeah."

When Red and Breach return to the kitchen, Jallaford has a request.

"I would appreciate a place in which to record my findings," he says. "And a place to stay."

Manifesting a journal is the work of a moment and a house isn't much harder. She and Jallaford head outside--he's already getting better at walking, Red consults her memory of Bracket Towers. That's near where the 18th Precinct was. She used to go there all the time. It was close to home, and there was a theater called The Pedestal that booked her regularly before she became popular.

She hums and envisions a townhouse with tall sea green windows and copper walls. It looks like a piece of Cloudbank, plunked down in the middle of the field.

Jallaford thanks her and quickly retreats inside. Red can tell he's eager to be alone. She doesn't take it personally because she can also tell how much it hurts him to have people watching him while he stumbles and stutters and gets used to having a body again. She hopes he recovers quickly, both for his sake and for the sake of everyone who's going to have to go through this.

She wanders back to her own house, taking a meandering route through the wheat to give herself time to think. Breach is waiting for her on the porch. She's going to have to get used to thinking about him with that name. He wears names like bulky winter clothes--uncomfortable and awkward. He doesn't like to be summarized into just one thing and that's what a name does. Even his given name, which he whispered to her like a secret a long time ago, sits on him only lightly.

"How's our cop?" he asks.

"I think he'll be okay," she says optimistically. "I think I did pretty well on the house. Does it look good?"

He accommodately examines the distant townhouse.

"I'm worried it'll raise property values," he says.

She smiles. "We'll manage. "

She glances out at the horizon, still thinking. She's stirred back to awareness of the present moment as he comes up beside her and kisses her shoulder. She didn't hear him approach. He moves very quietly for such a big man.

"You're doing the 'planning something' expression," he tells her.

"I have an idea for how to tell the other Traces where we are," she says. "And that they can come here. If they want help."

"Great," he says. "Can I help with it?"

"You could be my audience."

"Always."

He follows her to the edge of the field--the one closest to their house. He settles down to sit in some low grass as she turns to face the darkness beyond their little slice of reality.

She closes her eyes. Takes a moment to compose herself. Remember the words. Summons the emotion she needs them to have. Then she sings:

"Step out beyond the edge and start the motion."

The lyrics infuse the air with a palpable charge.

"Look out below, I know there's no decision. Just collision. It's all arranged"

She skips a verse, editing on the fly because she's not just expressing herself right now. She's sending a message.

"And we all are sending smoke signals. Keep pretending we are one."

There is something taking form in the space in front of her. It gleams and pulses in time to the rise and fall of her voice.

"Take up the call and follow everybody. We won't become a number in the system. Zeroes and ones. Not us. Not us."

The thing in front of her is a scarlet tendril. A thin flag winding up into the air. But more than that.

"And we all are sending smoke signals. Keep pretending we are one."

It radiates feeling. Pain. Grief. But also faint, faint hope, lying in wait at the base. A blessing at the bottom of Pandora's box.

"We're all descending, no strings. We keep pretending we are one."

Her voice finally descends into silence. She's shivering with the emotion she pushed into the words. That happens sometimes. She takes a few deep breaths to steady herself and looks out to examine what she's wrought.

It's a scarlet banner, brilliant glowing crimson. It curls into the air, higher than the house, far higher, almost brushing the clouds. It hums with echoes her song. It thrums with the message she intends: *I understand. We're together in this. Come. We can help.*

It looks good. She thinks it will work.

Behind her, Breach applauded.

Chapter 4: Traces

Chapter Summary

I was on vacation last week. But I'm back now so new chapter!

The traces float in like the walking wounded.

Lillian, the scientist, and Maximilian, the designer, are the first to arrive. Lillian lands in a shower of Sparks() with Maximilian trailing slightly behind her. Breach knows from reading their files that they are both older than him. But the way they look around, wide-eyed and uncertain, and the way they never let go of each other's hands makes them seem like children. Red seems to feel this too, because she talks to them very gently.

Niola Chein arrives next, but the activist doesn't settle down to get a body until she finishes herding Wave Tennegan and Bailey Gilande into the field. When Chien does stay still long enough for Red to manifest her, she says that she would have brought Olmarq, but he still attacks anyone who gets close to him. They earmark that as a later problem, because Tennegan can barely speak, and Gilande doesn't respond to anything at all.

At Chein's coaxing, Tennegan eventually takes water and starts talking quietly about having a dream that he was murdered. Bailey Gilande, who always had a reputation for being reserved, will not speak, walk, eat, drink, or even look around.

Chein and Red have a long discussion about what to do, and Breach is grateful he's not the one in charge of eventually making the decision to turn Gilande back into a function. He understands why they do it--he doesn't want to see if people here can die of dehydration. But watching Gilande dissolve into a series of concentric hexagons is still disturbing.

It's just as disturbing when it happens to Preston Moyle. The racecar driver arrives under his own power, but as soon as he has a body he has a sort of mental break. They have to chase him to keep him from diving off the edge of the world.

He mutters compulsively: "I can't...I can't...too slow...too slow...I can't move...please..."

When Red changes him back into a blue blur he leaps into the air and vanishes with speed that looks like joy.

"I guess this works for some people," Breach says as they watch him go.

"Well..." Niola Chein, who has insisted they call her Niola, is wringing her hands. "He knows where we are if he ever wants to come back."

"He does," Red agrees soothingly.

In contrast, Farrah Yon-Dale is extremely composed from the moment she appears. The first thing she says to Red is:

"I want write access to the sky."

"Oh." Breach can tell that Red had been bracing for something manic or disjointed. It takes her a moment to readjust her expectations to this immediate clarity. "I don't know how to do that. Do you?"

"No," Yon-Dale admits, frowning. "But I will figure it out."

She then asks where Jallaford is, and goes to see him without even waiting to get a house.

They have no idea where Shomar Shasberg is. Red vetoes Niola's proposal to search for him.

"His entire thing is being elusive," she explains. "And he's entirely elusive right now. You saw what Moyle did when we took his speed? I don't want to pressure him."

"You might be right," Niola acknowledges reluctantly. Red feels strongly that she is, but she also has sympathy for Niola's endearing desire to save everyone.

Niola sips her hot chocolate. She, Red, and Breach are sitting around the front porch of the farmhouse. Red made swinging benches for company and hung them alongside the hammock. Breach made warm beverages for everyone.

Red drinks her tea and looks out over their eclectic neighborhood. About two blocks away from the farmstead is Maximilias' apartment, which is mostly window and looks a little odd. Like it was plucked from the inside of a skyscraper and dropped on the ground. He and Lillian live there.

In the middle distance is Jallaford's copper townhouse. Presumably Farrah Yon-Dale is staying with him until he figures out how to give her access to the sky.

If Red cranes her head to the side to peer around the edge of the porch she can see the adorable white walled cottage that Niola asked for. Tennagan is also staying there, until he can manage on his own.

"He's doing much better," Niola reports. "He's talking more. He tells me what he thinks about things. Small things. I don't think he quite understands what's happened."

"I feel for him," says Breach. "Sometimes I feel like I don't understand what's happened."

Niola nods. "It's been bewildering. I'm glad we're not alone for it. I mean, anymore."

She glances at Red, who looks away. It feels weird to be a savior. She's never sure what to do with it. Niola, at least, is sensitive to that, and quickly moves on.

"It's also nice that no one's alone from day-to-day," she says. "Everyone has a roommate."

"I'm a little curious about what the Jallaford and Yon-Dale house is like," says Breach.

"Practical," Red guesses.

"I know Maximilias and Lillian are doing all right," Niola says. "They come by almost every day to borrow sugar or bread." She laughs. "Max generally ordered out so his apartment doesn't have much."

"They don't have food?" Red asks. "Why haven't they talked to me? I could make them a box that makes flatbread or something."

"Oh." Niola hesitates before explaining: "I think they're a little intimidated by you."

"I'm not intimidating!" Red says, then looks uncertainly at Breach. "Am I intimidating?"

"Babe," he breaks it to her gently "You were intimidating even before you could control reality."

Red frowns and sinks down into her bench, making it sway slightly. "I don't mean to be intimidating."

"Maybe you could invite them over and do something together," Niola suggests. "Like charades."

Red makes a face. She's not keen on games where she can't talk. She changes the subject.

"Niola, did you have any more ideas about how we could communicate with Olmarq?"

"Yes!" Niola leaps on the subject. "I talked to Lillian about it, and she had a thought. We couldn't move around when we were loaded into the little boxes. Function slots? I think that's what they're called? We could load him into a function slot and then talk to him safely."

"That's clever," says Breach.

Red leans forward. "I've only ever loaded functions from the outside, using the interface. I'm not sure how to do it from in here."

"You could practice on me," Niola suggests, and then hastily adds, because Red and Breach are staring at her: "Well, it doesn't hurt to be a function, does it? And I don't think I'd mind if I knew I could turn back."

Red looks at Breach, who is holding his coffee mug very tightly. But that tension doesn't appear in his voice when he says: "When you put it that way, I guess it's not such a big deal."

"Exactly!" Niola says, a little too intensely. "And it's for a good cause. And while we're out there maybe we'll find...hmm."

She trails off. The silence stretches, but Niola looks intent enough that Red doesn't want to interrupt whatever she's thinking about. For almost a minute the only sound is her leg

bouncing against the edge of her chair.

"Do we...want to save the Camerata?" Niola asks, finally.

"Uff," Breach leans back "That's a question."

It is. Red takes a long drink of tea to avoid answering it. Niola reflexively fills the silence.

"I mean, part of me, most of me, thinks I don't want to leave any person in that place. Alone. It would be right, wouldn't it? To forgive? But..."

Her fingers are tapping so hard against the chair arm it sounds like a woodpecker.

"Before they...before I came here, I was working with a group of artists. Young artists. They all had such interesting Selections. Art and Mathematics. Music and Aeronautics--she made songs out of the flights of birds. We were going to open a studio for them on the Goldwalk. That didn't work out, but they were still passionate and hopeful and had plans. So many plans for the future. And now they're all..."

Her hand flutters. She's starting to cry.

"And I know that the right thing to do is forgive, that it's good to forgive, but I'm just so...angry..."

Red slides out of her chair to sit down on the bench beside Niola. She wraps an arm around the other woman, who is trembling with grief or rage or both.

"I understand," Red tells her.

Niola nods and hiccups and tries to compose herself, but ends up just leaning against Red and tapping the chair arm so hard it sounds like she's going to put a dent in it with just her fingernail.

"I feel exactly the same," Red says, holding her tight.

It's evening, according to the sky. Niola has gone home. Red made tacos for dinner--just manifested them because she didn't feel like cooking. Now they're cleaning the dishes. Breach washes and Red dries.

"So," Breach says, breaking the silence that's been hanging over them for a while. "I don't think Niola's as okay with this becoming-a-function-again plan as she says she is."

Red nods, accepting a plate from him and listening as he voices thoughts that have been needling them both.

"She's been here for, what, eight months?" He scrubs some stubborn bits of food off a plate. "She was one of the first. And everyone that's been here for a while...well, you know they've been affected by it."

Red dries a cup with a little more force than it needs.

"Niola hides it better," Breach continues. "I think she feels like she needs to? To take care of everyone else?"

"I see it too," Red says, pausing over a mug to examine the chip in its side. "But what can we do? It's her choice."

"I was thinking I could do it instead," says Breach.

Red puts down the mug with a clatter. "What? No. How is that better?"

"Niola was a function for months," Breach says, putting down his own dish. "I was a function for a day. Maybe two."

"Two of the worst days of your life," Red throws back.

"It wasn't peaches and daisies in here for anyone," he points out. This is becoming a fight. Red can tell. This is how they fight. She gets angry and he gets logical and brittle. Hot and cold, they go.

"I'm just saying," he says, picking through his words tensely. "Everyone here is shell shocked. I figure the person who got hurt the least should take on the most."

"In what universe were you hurt the least?" She's not yelling. Yet. "You were murdered!"

"Everyone was murdered. Everyone was trapped. And I..."

And then his voice softens.

"At least I wasn't alone."

The sudden warmth in his voice derails her anger. It wasn't really for him in the first place, and now his softness makes him an impossible target. Which is good. She shouldn't be angry at him. But it also means she has a bunch of rage ready to turn inward when she confronts the memories he's bringing up.

"You were practically alone," she says venomously, running her hands through her hair. "I couldn't even talk to you."

"Hey." He abandons all pretense of doing dishes and steps into her space. "You were there. I could see you."

He's trying to comfort her. Of course he is. She's upset and for him soothing her is as natural as breathing. She appreciates it and also kind of hates it because it's just another way he puts other people before himself. He's still talking.

"Do you know how relieved I was? When I saw you?"

"I do. I remember." She rubs her face. "You were shouting. From the sword. It took me too long to figure out where you were."

"But then you did and everything was better." He leans against her, forehead brushing her hair. "Not...good. But better."

They stand there. Just being together like this is a novel joy that still hasn't lost its sheen. Probably never will.

"I think I'd be just fine," he says. "As long as you're there."

Damn it all. Fine. She looks up. She reaches up and tilts his head down so that he's looking straight into her eyes.

"Are you sure?" she asks. "How sure are you that you'll be fine?"

He pauses, and she's glad he does because that means he's really thinking about it.

"I'm pretty sure," he decides.

"I don't want you throwing yourself in front of any more swords," she says.

"That's not what this is," he says, though she's pretty sure that his habit of breaking off pieces of himself for the sake of others is very much at the core of what this is. But she's not going to tell him he can't do something. She's not going to try and control him like that.

"I just don't want you to be hurt." She doesn't want to hurt him. "Just promise you'll let me know if it's hurting you."

"I promise," he says.

She kisses his cheek. "Okay."

Breach catches Niola the next morning. The speed with which she agrees to let him do the saving-Olmarq experiment makes him sure that he was right on the money with his theory about how little she wants to be a function again.

He and Red get ready to make the trip up to the user interface. Niola decides to stay behind to watch Tennagan, but they have an unexpected addition to their group.

"It was my idea," says Lillian Platt, one of the preeminent scientific minds in Cloudbank. "I want to see if it works."

"The more the merrier," Red says smiling. She's being particularly friendly in a way that reminds Breach of how she used to act at fancy parties. He can tell that she really doesn't like the idea that Lillian and Max find her intimidating.

The three of them set off from the edge of the field. Red hums as they walk and a pathway of bridges unspools before them. The bridges are a longer recreation of the very first bridge she

made back in Cloudbank. Breach is relieved to see that this time she leaves out the statues of him and her reaching for each other. They were beautiful and touching in a bittersweet way when she made them in Cloudbank. But now he feels like seeing a giant statue of himself would make him very self-conscious.

They wind their way through the darkness, which they discover is filled with things. They see a scrolling list of districts, decorated with incomprehensible numbers. They see tiny white robotic cells gyrating in a helix. They see the Process, a group of creeps, assembling a fountain and then destroying it and then assembling it again.

"It's strange to see them and not need to smash them," Red says.

"I bet," says Breach. "It's strange seeing them not being smashed."

"I think this is a schematic," Lillian says, crouching on the edge of the bridge to peer down at the working Process. "A plan for how they construct fountains. A visualization of how the data is stored."

Red walks to stand beside her. "Visualizations of Cloudbank?"

"Parts of it at least. Instructions for how to build it," Lillian says, looking up at her. "You're probably accessing these schematics when you build things. That's how you can make such complicated objects without knowing exactly how they work."

They move on, wandering past more strange sights, more instances of the Process either passive or working in loops. The bridges slope upwards, and they see the user interface in the distance. A series of squares hanging in the sky.

Red makes some stairs. Breach groans.

Red pushes him playfully. "You jog every day. Why don't you like stairs? It's like jogging up."

"Jogging is fun," he tells her. "Stairs are drudgery."

"Here." Red crouches by the stairs and hums a few bars. With a creak they begin to move, steps rotating upwards. Then they all have to hustle on to the impromptu escalator before it elevates away.

"It seems that when you alter the base schematic of an object, sometimes it starts acting in unexpected ways," Lillian says, tapping the bottom steps with her foot and then stepping back quickly as they come loose and fall into the darkness.

"That's probably why our house is such a mess," Red observes wryly.

"I like it," says Breach. "It's like living in an Escher painting."

Being on the moving stairs is like riding a diagonal flying carpet up to the user interface. Red figures out how to direct the stairs and stops them just under one of the active function slots.

She turns to Breach. "Ready?"

"Sure," he makes sure he sounds calm and casual. He doesn't want her worrying about him.

She touches his shoulder. She gets that little crease between her eyebrows that means she's thinking hard. She doesn't hum. Humming is for creation, he supposes. This is different.

Very suddenly his perspective shifts. All the tiny details of smell and taste and fingers and legs fall away into one pure point of awareness.

He bobs up, surprised. He's weightless. This isn't like it was before. He can move just by thinking about it. And he can still see everything around him. See and hear and everything else, but it's like all of his senses are coming from a point in his center.

"Are you okay?" Red asks.

Yeah. He's almost surprised that it's quite true. **Yeah I'm fine.**

Lillian is standing just behind Red, watching them intently.

"Did he answer you?" she asks Red.

"He says he's fine," Red tells her. "You can't hear him?"

Lillian shakes her head. "We aren't connected enough."

I can still hear her, says Breach.

"I'm actually making sounds," Lillian says after Red relays this fact. "Vibrations with my voicebox that are generally perceptible. When functions speak I don't think they're audible in the same way. It's more like sending a message."

"It does feel different when you say something," Red says.

Breach nods, or tries to, and ends up dipping dramatically up and down. It's amazing how fast he can move. Like being a bird. Or a very controlled firework.

He bounces back and forth, just to see how far he can jump. Pretty far. Very fast. He's starting to see why Moyle didn't want to give this up. He darts to hover under the empty square function slot above them.

Let's do this, he sends to Red.

Red adjusts the stairs so that she is directly below him. She looks up and gets that cute little thinking crinkle in her forehead again. He loves watching her think. It used to be mulling over lyrics. Now it's trying to shape the nature of the world around them.

He feels himself beginning to drift up. He's not doing it himself. It's actually a very different sort of a motion than when he moves. He moves in fast leaps. This is a kind of gentle hovering. It drags him up to the square, pauses for a moment, and then drops him in.

Being in the function slot is a little like being in a room, in the sense that he can tell that there are walls around him. But it's less that he can see the walls, and more that he knows that they are there because he can't move past them.

Actually he can't move at all. Which makes the situation that, moments ago, was pretty okay, suddenly much less okay.

But he was expecting that. That's why they thought this was an idea worth testing. Functions in slots can't move, so Olmarq loaded into a slot won't be able to move or attack anyone. This is actually a good thing. It is a good thing that he can't move.

"Are you okay?" Red asks from far below him.

Yeah, he says, and it's not a lie. He's fine. **I think this is going to work.**

He tries to see if he can move around at all, and finds that he can rotate. He shifts and he can look down at Red and Lillian. He shifts and he can look up.

Red is above him too. But it's not Red anymore.

She's slumped against white blocks and the body beside her and it's not her and he can count her lashes and he can count the feathers on the collar of her dress and it's not her and how does she still look so perfect hasn't it been days shouldn't something have changed and it's not her she's here it's not her and he can't move and he can't look away and he can't do anything...

Red I need to get out of here right now, he tells her, because he promised, and because he does.

The response is instantaneous. He is launched upward, orientation tumbling, flying free through space. He can move again, which is great. He's not looking up and he doesn't think he's ever going to look up again. He tumbles to a stop and hovers. Just existing. Recovering.

He hears Red. Maybe hear is the wrong word. He knows that she is speaking to him. At this distance he can't hear the audible details, but the message vibrates inside of him.

She calls him by his name, and then asks: **What happened? Are you all right?**

I'm okay now, he tells her in the same way. Hearing her helps so much. **I was just...I couldn't move.**

Right, she says, and she sounds like she's kicking herself. He wants to tell her no, it's okay, she couldn't have known, he didn't even know, but he's still pulling himself back together.

Do you want us to come up to you? she asks

No. Just give me a minute. He shifts around to make sure he can still move, which is why he isn't obliterated when Olmarq attacks him.

Chapter 5: Olmarq

Breach moves around a bit to reassure himself that he still can. This is why he's at the edge of the attack's impact zone, instead of the center.

The edge still hurts. He flickers, feeling his entire self jitter, and the pain is weird. Less like taking a punch and more like dental work. He spins through the air, which is a good thing because it gives him distance and a moment to recover as Olmarq turns towards him.

Olmarq is a pulsing yellow circle. He's hard to track as he moves because while the apex of the pulse is violently bright, the rest of the time he's almost invisible.

He charges Breach, trying to catch him in the bright part of the pulse. Breach dodges away, and then dodges again. He's good at dodging and quick. He can't do much else though, in the face of this relentless assault. Can't see an opening to get out of range. He does carve out a moment to send a message to Red.

I found Olmarq, he tells her. Tries to keep his tone casual. Not worry her. Hard to tell if it works over telepathic messaging.

She responds, but he doesn't have the attention to understand it. Olmarq is varying his pulse speed, and Breach has to dance back. He realizes just in time that he's being crowded towards the active function slots. He darts right instead of back and avoids being trapped inside one of them.

That puts him near one of the utility function slots. He jumps behind it and it breaks the force of Olmarq's next pulse. Instead of backing up again, Breach darts through the space where he knows Olmarq is recovering. His entire being tingles with building power, but he's in and out before the next strike.

And then it's a chase. Breach dodging ahead, and Olmarq following doggedly. Breach could probably outpace him in a straight line, but doesn't want to get lost in the darkness and Olmarq gains slightly whenever Breach has to turn back towards the landmark of the user interface. Closing the distance between them.

Olmarq is about to get in another glancing blow, but then there's a shower of sparks. It bursts between them, startling them both and interrupting the chase.

Olmarq is only distracted for a moment. He tries to smash the sparks. But they're tiny and scattered, and hard for him to catch in his focused pulses of destructive energy.

Red calls Breach by his real name and it catches his attention.

Lure him down here, she tells him. *I'm ready*.

Got it, he messages back.

Breach jumps towards the confusing melee of blue sparks and yellow pulses. He hovers still, a tantalizingly simple target that Olmarq does turn towards. Then he darts away, trailing Olmarq as he sprints down towards the active function slots.

He arcs under them, staying as high as he can so that Red on the stairs isn't in range of Olmarq's pulses. Breach pauses under the third slot, turning as if to confront Olmarq. He's planning to dart up through the function slot to get away. He's really hoping he doesn't accidentally load himself into it.

But he doesn't need to dodge. Olmarq isn't chasing him anymore. He's being gently pulled upwards, pulsing erratically, confused, and then still as he's loaded as an active function.

Red breathes a sigh of relief. And then she starts humming to give Olmarq a body.

Breach hopes they can talk some sense into him, and that he doesn't just start tackling people.

Red is a little worried that after she gives him a body, Olmarq will still be violent. He isn't. He's a shivering, disjointed, relieved mess.

It turns out he hadn't meant to hurt anyone. He just couldn't see anything clearly unless he was actively pulsing into it. The world outside his radius was a hazy, dark vagueness. He was desperately reaching out to find something, anything, real. Any time he sensed something moving, he rushed towards it, trying to understand.

He doesn't say that, exactly, but it's the story she pieces together from his stumbling explanations and the way he keeps reaching out to people and stopping himself. He's horrified to learn that he'd been hurting people, but it's a resigned, unsurprised horror.

"That's just what I do," he says. "What I always seem to do."

Breach immediately forgives him, obviously, and talks to Olmarq as if they just finished a sparring match, complementing his technique and revisiting the highlights. Casually reframing the situation from struggle to sport. Red loves him so much as she watches him. The banter draws Olmarq into its comforting patter, and he gratefully listens to Breach for the entire walk home, hanging on his words and, very occasionally, contributing hesitantly.

Red leaves them to it and checks in with Lillian to make sure she's okay after spending some time in her function form.

"It was fine. Fine. Interesting even," Lillian tells her. "I've never used myself offensively, and my awareness of the mechanics of the Transistor, when other people were using me, has always been very distant."

"It may sound a bit morbid," she continues. "But I'm actually a little curious about the concept of pain and damage. What does it mean when we're hurt as functions? Can we die? Why should that be possible, if we're data? Or at least, why should we have pain signals as warning for it? Files didn't evolve to survive."

"But I think we're more than files," Red says. At least she hopes they are.

"That's true." Lillian nods. "We all have a lot of baggage from perceiving ourselves as human. Ah, I can see from your expression that that sounded bad. We are still human, in all the essential ways, I think."

"That's reassuring," Red says, bemused. She feels like she's only just keeping up with Lillian's train of thought.

"Still human, yes," Lillian continues. "But we are also data. And while I think it's very important that we retain the things that will make our human minds healthy, such as having physical bodies and maintaining them, from a technical standpoint what we are is very different. And I suspect a lot of what we think we need is just habit."

"Like: It's a habit that we need to eat and drink?" Red asks. That's something she and Niola talked about a lot when deciding what to do with the unresponsive Gilande.

"Precisely," Lillian says. "And I think it's habit that we perceive offensive interactions between functions as pain. As data, the only threat to us is deletion, or corruption. And I think it's unlikely that functions engaging with each other would cause deletion, unless the function's purpose was specifically to delete data."

"I don't think we should do any experiments about that," Red says, heading off her immediate concern about Lillian's speculative enthusiasm.

"No. No that wouldn't be safe," Lillian says, and she doesn't sound disappointed. "I do want to explore the truth behind the nature of this new world, but there's no reason to start with the dangerous things. I wish..." She sighs. "I wish any of us had technical Selections. Software or engineering. But I think the only one here with that would be Royce."

"Right," says Red, and she tries to keep the venom out of her voice. "But I don't think I'd trust anything he says."

"No. No, I don't imagine anyone would," Lillian says.

They lapse into silence as they follow the winding trail of bridges home.

Breach hadn't realized how much he missed talking shop with someone. Football isn't exactly like boxing, but there's tactics and physicality to them both. Olmarq has trouble keeping up his side of the conversation, but Breach has had a lot of practice filling silences.

When they get back to the field, Breach takes Olmarq right to the farmhouse to show him the training room Red set up there.

"This is the best punching bag you will ever use," he assures Olmarq. He gives the bag a slap, and it makes a chipper blinging noise like he just collected a coin or something.

"Cool," says Olmarq, grinning. "This is...a great set up."

"You can come over and use it whenever," Breach tells him. "Or Red can set you up with your own wherever you decide to live."

"Thanks. You're...and she's...you're very kind."

"Sure thing. You in the mood to work out? Anything you missed?"

Olmarq looks around the room. "Do you have a...rowing machine?"

"You know we used to," Breach says, walking over to the corner where it's usually stored. "But it's kind of mobile. Not sure where it's gotten off to."

They have a great, exhausting training session. Olmarq gets less hesitant the more tired he gets, which was part of Breach's grand plot to get the other man to relax. When they finish, Breach grabs them ice lemonade from the kitchen and they move to the porch.

"She just made all these houses?" Olmarq asks.

"Yep," Breach says, proud on his girlfriend's behalf. "Hums them up."

"Wow," says Olmarq, enough admiration in his voice to satisfy even Breach's high opinion of Red.

Speaking of the singer, she's standing out in the field. She does that sometimes, to make herself accessible to people who need things. She's talking to Niola, probably giving her an update on how the rescue mission went. It's pretty obviously a success since Olmarq is standing next to him drinking lemonade. Niola looks delighted and waves at them.

"Is that Farrah Yon-Dale?" Olmarq asks.

Breach looks where Olmarq is looking, and yeah, Yon-Dale is striding purposefully across the field towards Red.

"You a fan?" Breach asks.

"Isn't everyone?" Olmarq says.

"Point," says Breach, and he starts walking towards the group in the field. Yon-Dale hasn't asked for anything since arriving, except for access to the sky, and he's curious what she wants. Olmarq follows him.

"So I just have to read this out loud?" Red is asking as they arrive. She's holding a piece of paper.

Yon-Dale nods. "That will give me access to the sky."

"Trust Jallaford to figure out something that's not even his Selection!" Niola exclaims.

"A very clever man," Yon-Dale agrees.

"I'm not sure how to pronounce this?" Red says, indicating the paper.

"Just try," Yon-Dale says, not impatient exactly but approaching that. "I will see if it works."

Red nods and reads aloud: "Chmod dash r oh plus r w x sky."

The sky above them shimmers, like it's a lake and someone just dropped pebbles into it.

"Well, that did something," Niola says.

Yon-Dale raises her hands, points to the sky, and sketches a zigzag with her fingers. Far above them, streaks of cirrus clouds appear.

"Oh," says Olmarq, impressed.

"Yes. Yes!" says Yon-Dale, beyond excited. "Thank you! Let me..."

The pale blue sky grows a shade darker, and Yon-Dale starts to draw a faint backdrop of cirrostratus.

As everyone watches the sky, Red walks over to lean against Breach. He wraps his arms around her automatically.

"It's nice to hand it off to a professional," she says.

"I liked your skies just fine," he tells her.

She smiles up at him. "You like my everything."

"True."

He kisses her as art happens above them.

Sunsets become an event. Everyone walks out in front of their houses and watches the spectacular colors melt into darkness. It's a nostalgic, faintly homesick tradition. This is what they used to do in Cloudbank. It's more fun than sad, though. It's hard to be sad under so much beauty.

Red is watching from the edge of the field—the best place to get a view of the entire sunset. Breach just went back inside to get her a coat, because controlling the sky also means controlling the temperature to a certain extent, and sometimes the weather phenomenon Yon-Dale needs are cooler than usual. Red said she was fine, but Breach insisted. He always does.

Tonight's sunset is a roiling feast of orange tinged with violet. A lot of it is reflected off the bottoms of clouds, whose bright bases peter off into dark purple tops. Red is admiring one of the clouds when she notices something strange.

Some of the orange is more reddish, but only in one place. A circle. Red has seen enough sunsets to know that's not how meteorology usually works. She peers up at it.

It moves slightly.

She breaks into a run without even thinking, sprinting across the field towards that aberrant cloud patch. As she runs she sings under her breath, tossing up stairs slant up into the sky.

The wrong patch of clouds notices her coming, but too late. She catches it with her attention. Dragging it away from the cloud, out into the clear sky.

It's stark against the darkening sky. A circle of red lumps, gyrating around and drawn towards a glowing point in the center. She recognizes it immediately. She's used it often enough to soften up tough enemies. Void. The function based on Asher Kendrell.

She considers throwing it like a frisbee into the darkness, but resists that violent impulse. For now.

It rotates helplessly in the air. It's shaped like Olmarq was, a pulsing circle, but unlike Olmarq it's harmless by itself. Just weakens things. Doesn't actually hurt them. Even more harmless right now, as Red holds it still.

She probably shouldn't think of it as it. There's a him inside of there. And he's here for a reason, presumably. And he can't tell her like this.

"I'm going to give you a voice," she tells him. And then she does.

As soon as Asher Kendrell appears in front of her, Red realizes she might've just made a mistake. It was very easy to consider hurling the function Void back into the darkness. But now there's a haunted looking man staring at her like she's the source of all hope and fear intermingled. It's harder to deal violently with something when it has a face. She's only had to do that once.

She reminds herself what Asher was a part of, and decides she'll probably be able to manage some violence, if she has to.

"Why are you here?" she asks him.

"I wanted to watch the sunset," he says, words immediate and sounding like reflexive truth. But then he continues because that's not the whole truth: "And. I wanted to talk to you."

If he wants to talk to her, there's something he should start with: "You should apologize."

No one ever actually did.

"Would that mean anything?" he asks.

As much as a cup of water on a bonfire. But still. Words are important. Lyrics are important.

"It would mean something," she says.

"I'm sorry," his voice breaks at the end with the weight of all he's sorry for.

It does mean something. He was, back in Cloudbank, the only one who ever came close to apologizing. Printed and published an article admitting responsibility as the world ended. That also means something. She thinks she hates him the least.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" she asks.

"Grant." The name jumps from his throat, loaded with concern. "He's not doing well. I can talk to him. I'm trying to help, but I can only talk to him."

He looks away. He knows she knows what that's like, at least from one side. He drags his eyes back to her.

"Will you help him? Like you've helped everyone else?"

She snarls. It's instinctive, and just as instinctively Asher takes a step back. Which is wise. Her anger does things, in this place. One of the stairs in front of her is curling up into a blade, point towards his chest. She turns away from him to stare out at the sky, now night. Spikes start growing beside her. Pointed harmlessly away because she doesn't want her temper to make any decisions for her.

She doesn't want to make this decision at all. She shouldn't. This isn't her decision. At least, not hers alone. Once she's calmed down a notch she turns back towards Asher and tells him:

"I'm going to tell everyone what you're asking for. And then we're going to talk about it. And then we're going to vote."

Chapter 6: The Trial of Asher Kendrell

Chapter Summary

I don't have a voice for Wave Tennegan, so he doesn't talk much. Sorry, Tennegan. You would have been served better by a different author. Religious radio personalities aren't my thing.

Everyone meets in the farmhouse living room. It's the largest inside space they have. Red makes a few more chairs and couches to seat everyone.

Asher waits outside. Jallafor had a thought that they should confine him somehow. Lillian pointed out that he had nowhere to go.

As everyone settles, Breach has this weird impulse that he should be getting people drinks or something. But this isn't really a drinks and snacks sort of a meeting. Looking around the room, the tone feels more like a funeral.

Max and Lillian sit on a couch together, holding hands. Lillian looks grim and Max looks faintly ill. Niola has taken a seat by the coffee table, and she fiddles with one of the coasters. She just got back from taking Tennegan back to their cottage. Tennegan didn't understand what was going on and wouldn't stop talking about the sunsets, so they all decided he probably shouldn't vote on something like this.

Yon-Dale is sitting by a window, staring fixedly out. Jallafor is pacing. Breach is confident that that's going to get on his nerves real fast.

Olmarq has a chair next to Breach. He's staring down at his hands. Red is on Breach's other side. She's poised, one leg crossed over the other, hands folded. She hasn't spoken since telling them all what happened.

"I suppose we should begin," says Jallafor, coming to a stop.

"I don't want to see them," Yon-Dale says, still staring out the window. "I don't want to see any of them. That's all."

"That seems quite reasonable," Jallafor murmurs.

"Yes," says Niola. "If we give them what they want, they shouldn't live here. They shouldn't be allowed to come here."

"I think that's the true question, though." Lillian leans forward. "Should we give them what they want?"

"There is an argument to be made that this is a humanitarian issue," Niola says, and it sounds like she's speaking by reluctant rote. "There are basic human rights. Food. Shelter. Self-expression. Having a body is probably one of those rights."

"I...think that's true," says Olmarq.

"But it...it feels wrong," Niola says, seeming almost angry to be agreed with. "After what they did, doing anything for them. I don't...something should happen. Some consequence. Justice."

She looks at Jallafor, who seems uncomfortable.

"I'm not a judge," he says.

"You do have the most experience with litigious proceedings," points out Lillian. "Even if it's not your Selection."

"Eleven murders in the first degree, and ninety thousand counts of manslaughter," Jallafor recites. "We have no precedent for that. I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"We could kill them," says Max.

And now everyone is looking at him. He squirms.

"They killed us," he says. "All of us."

"Can we do that?" Lillian asks, looking at Red.

Red nods, once, sharply.

"Is that the sort of justice you're looking for?" Lillian asks Niola, voice carefully neutral.

Niola takes a while to respond, then says: "I don't know."

"It is a reasonable addition to the voting options," says Jallafor. "Given the circumstances."

Breach looks over at Red. She hasn't said anything. She's barely moved. He knows he's not the only one watching her. A lot of them instinctively look to her for guidance. That's probably why she's being so quiet, he guesses.

He wonders if he has anything he should say. If his voice would be useful here. He doesn't have much experience with Cloudbank's version of aggressive democracy. But this is different from the meaningless debates he spent his life avoiding. The topic is actually important, and so very few people are left that he would actually be heard.

Does he have anything that needs to be said? What does he think? Just one thing, he decides.

"Whatever we do, we shouldn't leave them as functions," he says. "Asher and Grant. Did you all hear Asher's messages to Red? While we were in Bracket Towers?"

"I did," says Jallaford. So did Lillian. Niola and Max weren't watching. And of course Olmarq saw nothing.

"He's in love." Breach remembers clearly the agony when Asher talked about Grant leaving him behind. His devotion was plain to see, at least for Breach. Like recognizes like. "And if they're alive, people in love should be together."

The sentence comes out utterly bitter. He's not sure something that sappy has ever been said so bitterly.

Breach almost jumps when someone puts a hand on his shoulder. Olmarq pats his shoulder once, and then retreats.

Red still hasn't moved. She might be a statute, for all that she's done.

"Do we all feel that our voices have been heard?" Jallaford asks.

No one says no.

"I believe the options that we have settled on are: one, give them bodies but require that they be away from us. Or, two, kill them."

He waits, but no one corrects him. Breach hadn't realized that his comment would make things that...extreme. But it's not wrong.

"I will make ballots," Jallaford says, taking out his journal.

He tears paper into precisely square pieces. He hands them out to everyone. Red moves for the first time to make sure everyone has pens. People write down their votes. One for life, two for death.

Breach writes a one on his tiny piece of paper. It's the most bitter vote for life that anyone has ever made. And his first formal vote in anything ever. Yay.

He folds up the paper like the others do, and gives it back to Jallaford who collects them all in his hat. After Jallaford collects the last vote from Yon-Dale he shakes his hat to mix them all together and murmurs over it: "So we all become one."

Lillian and Niola volunteer to tabulate the votes, and they retreat briefly to the kitchen. Only briefly though. It doesn't take long to count eight votes.

If there is a tie, Breach thinks he might scream.

But no, they come back and Lillian says: "We give them bodies, but far away from us."

"Thank God," Breach hears Olmarq murmur behind him.

"All right," Red says. She gets up and walks across the room towards the door.

Breach gets up and walks after her. So does Niola.

"Now?" Niola asks. "Do you need help?"

"No," Red says, sharp as a guillotine. And then more gently: "You've done what you need to do. Stay here. I can handle this."

Niola nods and sits back down. Red heads out the door. Breach follows her, because the 'stay here' wasn't addressed directly to him and he doesn't think she should have to handle this. At least not alone.

Asher is sitting on porch steps and gets up hastily when he hears the front door open.

"We're giving you what you want," Red tells him. "Go get Grant."

She puts her hand on his chest and gives him a little push. His surprised expression dissolves as he dissolves into a gyrating red circle. He spins for a moment, and then rotates into the air and off into the darkness.

Red stalks towards the pathway of bridges she made to the user interface. Breach follows her.

"How far away is far enough?" she wonders out loud. "I want to be able to keep an eye on them."

"Are you okay?" Breach asks.

She shrugs. Breach catches up to her – she's moving fast but he has longer legs. He reaches out and takes her hand. She slows from stalking purposefully to just walking. He traces little circles on the back of her hand with his thumb. She sighs.

"I'm just getting through this, you know?" she says.

"I know," he says. He squeezes her hand. "I just want you to know I'm here. And that isn't like it was before, you know? We're all safe."

Red sighs again, and it's like she's exhaling all of the responsibilities in the world.

"Right," she says.

They walk together down the bridge. Red stops occasionally to look back, judging if they're far away enough from the field. She stops at the first turn the bridge makes, at the helix of cells. A five minute walk away, but still with a clear view of the farmhouse.

Red drops a house on the turn in the road. It's the least effort Breach has ever seen her put into building something. She doesn't even hum. Just copy pastes a random house from Fairview.

She leans against him and smiles slightly, like something just occurred to her.

"Congratulations on your first vote," she tells him.

"Yeah. Hooray," he says. "I kinda got thrown in at the deep end. I didn't mean to take out the only moderate option."

I mean, he had meant to take out that option. He can't bear the idea of Asher floating out here trapped and unable to do anything but talk while someone he cared about broke down. Any other extremity seemed preferable to that.

"I'm glad we chose...this," he says. Instead of the alternative, he means.

Red rubs his arm and looks at him. "Babe, don't worry about that. There is no universe in which that group of people votes to kill someone."

"You seem pretty sure about that," Breach says, thinking about the tension in the room. "Max suggested it. Jallafood agreed."

"They needed to talk about it," Red says. "It was important to talk about. To take this seriously. To honor the consequences of what they did. But we were never going to kill them."

"Okay," he says. "Yeah."

They stare out into the darkness of the Transistor, hand-in-hand.

"You voted for this, right?" he asks. "You voted one?"

"Babe, you're not supposed to ask that," she tells him.

"I voted for one," he tells her.

"You're so bad at democracy."

"Yeah," he says, kind of proud.

They see movement in the distance and stop talking.

A red circle leads a teal circle down towards them, landing together, concentric.

Red wastes no time. She reaches out and Asher appears again, ashen and haunted. She reaches out and there's Grant.

If Asher is haunted, Grant is the hollow eyed ghost haunting him. The man is tall, taller than Breach, but hunched. His gaze is vacant until it falls on Red, and then the faint impression of fear creeps in.

"You're not allowed in the field," Red tells Asher. "Don't talk to anyone else. I'm going to visit you once a week to see if you need anything. I'm going to be watching you. If there is an emergency, you can come to the back door of the farmhouse and knock. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Asher says hastily. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me," she snaps, quick and sharp like a whip. "I didn't decide this. The people you murdered are better than you."

She turns on her heels and stalks away. Breach hurries after her. He doesn't want to say anything to blunt the force of her parting words. He does glance back at them. Asher looks stricken. Grant looks like he's dying.

Good. Breach catches up with Red.

"You've got a way with words," he tells her.

"Well, you know," she shrugs. "The lyrics always come first."

Chapter 7: Sybil

Chapter Summary

I do not like Sybil. People never owe you love. It does make me sad that all gay people in this story are bad guys. I'm glad Supergiant Games did better in Hades.

They fall asleep intertwined.

They both have nightmares. This is hers.

She is performing in the Empty Set. It's a full house, but the people don't have faces and their hair moves like it's alive.

She's singing an encore. As long as she keeps singing, she's safe.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees red and white. The Camerata standing backstage. Or the Process. It's hard to tell out of the corner of her eye.

But for now they're backstage. As long as she keeps singing, she's safe.

And as long as she's safe, he's safe.

She finishes her song. The crowd applauds. Their hair writhing. She hears a call for an encore. She tries to sing again.

Her voice stutters. She chokes out a strange sound that's not a word. Certainly not a song.

She grabs the microphone. Takes a moment to adjust it. This isn't how it happened, she tells herself. This isn't the order. She can still sing.

She opens her mouth and music comes out. The crowd buzzes appreciatively. It is now rows and rows of the Process, red white and smooth, sitting patiently. Waiting.

But as long as she keeps singing, she's safe. And while she's safe, he's safe.

She finishes another song. There's applause.

The applause sounds like barking.

That's weird.

Red wakes up. The room is less distorted than it often is when she first wakes up. A microphone is growing out of the footboard and there's a spotlight pointed at the bed, but that's it.

Something is still barking. She can hear it, coming from outside the window.

Breach is awake. He usually wakes up before her. He gets out of bed, walks to the window and looks out while she rubs sleep from her eyes.

He looks out the window and his entire face lights up.

"Luna!" he yells.

They throw on clothing and go downstairs, Breach leading the way, barely containing a run while Red toddles after him. She's really not a morning person.

Outside they find a dog. Sort of a dog. The friendly almost-dog thing that Red remembers from the sandbox. She glows a friendly orange. She wags her disjointed tail. She barks again, noise doglike, but with an edge of static.

Breach kneels down, and she runs right up to him, tail wagging so hard that the disconnected segments distend out of alignment before whipping back into tail-formation.

"It is you! It's Luna!" Breach exclaims. "Who's a good girl?"

Luna jumps up and plants her paws on his chest. She rubs her strange, V-shaped head against his face.

"I missed you too, girl!" Breach says, rubbing her pointy black ears. "Red! It's Luna!"

"It is," Red says. She's scanning the horizon.

She finds what she's looking for very quickly. It stands out. A white figure, hovering above the wheat. Taller than a human, holding a red and white umbrella in its four arms. Breach follows her gaze. He sees the figure too.

"Oh," he says, hand stilling on Luna's head.

"You should stay here," Red suggests.

"Yeah, good call," he says, sitting down on the porch steps. Luna crawls into his lap with happy obliviousness.

The figure doesn't move as Red walks towards it, but Red feels like its blank white face is watching her approach.

She stops with a few yards of distance still between them. Enough space to respond if there's some sort of attack. She waits a minute to see if the figure is going to do anything to set the tone.

When it doesn't, Red starts with:

"Hello Sybil."

"reD. rEd. RED. Red." The voice doesn't seem to come from the figure, but echoes back and forth through the air around them. The words are garbled by reverb, but still understandable.

"you'rE heRe. YOu'RE heRE. you're Safe. YOU'Re heRE. I sAVED yOu."

Well that's a delusional can of worms that Red doesn't feel qualified to unpack. And arguing with Sybil never goes well. Even back when she was human.

"Do you want a body?" Red asks. It might make her easier to deal with.

"I aM. i aM a body. i am SOmEbOdY. A BodY. i am."

"Okay," Red says slowly. She supposes that's just as well. She's never tried to change the Process directly. Apart from when she disassembled it violently with a sword.

"What do you want?" Red asks.

Sybil floats closer, her flowerlike skirt twirling.

"REd. ReD. RED. i SaveD yoU. i lIeD. TO sAvE YoU."

Red takes a few steps back to keep the distance. "That's not..."

Sybil keeps coming. "I wAiteD. tO SEe yoU. You CaMe. YoU're here! Red. rEd. REd!"

"STOP," Red shouts.

Sybil stops short, dress pausing mid-twirl, body language startled. It occurs to Red: this is the first time she's ever raised her voice to Sybil.

In their old life together it was never really possible to give Sybil a hard no. Sybil never asked for things. She assumed. She gave. She organized. And while Red told her to back off in as many ways as she could, there was always the hanging threat. The fact that being outside of Sybil Reisz's good graces destroyed people's careers.

Red regrets letting that hold her back. That she let things get this far. That she let herself be so trapped in this relationship. That she let Sybil fall so far into this delusion.

"Sybil, you have to stop," she says.

Sybil does not stop. She advances. "i SAvEd yOU. i sAVED yOU! For yOu. Red. red. i LIED fOr yOU. FOR rEd. For uS. FoR Us."

"There is no us," Red tells her, still backpedaling, starting to circle to keep Sybil away from the farmhouse.

"I sAVEd YoU." Sybil is spinning her parasol. "I lieD fOR yOu. I waItED For You..."

"Sybil," Red has to jog backwards to keep distance. "Stop. I don't want you that close."

"Red. ReD. RED."

Sybil darts forward in a billow of skirts. Red doesn't think, just responds reflexively. She slashes forward, moving her empty hands as if she had a weapon.

And then she does have a weapon. Pale green and gleaming and Crash()ing violent power forwards.

Sybil dances back, surprised. Red adjusts her grip on the hilt, not questioning the blessing. She glares at Sybil.

"I don't love you," she says. "I don't want you near me. I want you to go away."

She makes the words simple. She infuses them with as much force as she can.

Sybil hovers in mid air, clutching her parasol with all four hands. Her skirt twirls madly, and then billows.

"RED!"

She charges again, but this time Red is ready. She slams the Transistor down, sending out a pale yellow pulse, catching Sybil in the edge and throwing her back.

"Leave me alone!" Red yells at her.

It takes a few more times being thrown back by Cull() for Sybil to get the message. Finally she screams and takes off, spiraling into the sky. The echoing reverb of her words stays long after she departs.

"i saVeD yOu. I saVed YOU. i sAVed yoU..."

"Fucking gaslighty bullshit," Breach says, coming up beside Red.

Red laughs breathlessly, an exhausted mirthless sound. Breach puts his arm around her and holds her tight. She leans into him, letting the tip of the sword drop to the ground.

"I wish it didn't take this for her to listen to me," Red says, looking down at it.

"That's on her," Breach says.

Luna barks in agreement. Breach reaches out with his other hand to rub her smooth head. He glances down at Red.

"We're keeping the dog, right?"

"Absolutely," Red says.

"Good," Breach says.

"Hello?" says someone from behind them.

They turn around together. Red surreptitiously grips the hilt of the Transistor, but then relaxes when she sees it's Olmarq. He's walking towards them, wearing loose clothes and looking around blearily.

"Hey man," says Breach. "You're up early."

"Yeah. I woke up," he says, uncertainly. He glances down at the Transistor. "I was...did...it felt like someone...used me?"

"Oh," says Red. And then she drops the sword as her hands fly to her mouth. "Oh NO. Olmarq. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"No! No, it's fine." Olmarq puts his hands up to stop her apology. "I just wanted to know! Why someone...would need..."

He casts around for a way to express: 'to obliterate something and also possibly hurl it through the air.'

"...me." Is what he settles on.

"Uh. Sybil came around," Breach explains.

"Oh!" An alarmed recognition lights Olmarq's face. "She's uh...she's intense."

Red laughs. It's a little more like a normal laugh, this time.

"Yes. She is."

Red is out, going door-to-door telling everyone about Sybil and asking permission to use their functions if the mostly-Processed woman ever comes back.

Breach is on the front porch, playing fetch with Luna.

Luna is very good at chasing and finding the ball. The fetch part of the equation is a little harder for her. She likes running around with the ball, and then looking expectantly at Breach as if she expects him to throw it again while she is currently holding it in her mouth. Mouth-area. He's not sure Luna has a mouth, but she can carry things like a normal dog. They sort of hover in front of her nose.

Eventually, Breach walks over to her, convinces her to give him the ball, and throws it again. Luna gets very excited and continues not to understand how fetch actually works.

In the distance, Breach sees Red and Lillian doing something with the Transistor. Probably science. Lillian likes science and Red is always happy to cooperate. Breach plays fetch with Luna for a little longer, resigned to the fact that he is the one doing the fetching. When he gets tired and sits down on the porch Luna curls up beside him with her head in his lap.

"Good girl," he tells her.

She barks her electrostatic bark, though softly this time. There's a little force behind the noise. He can feel it when she's this close. An echo of the attack she used when she was summoned to help Red. But Luna seems to know how to ratchet it down so that it doesn't hurt people.

Red's walking back towards them, done with whatever was going on with Lillian. She drags the Transistor behind her, cutting a glimmering line through the wheat that doesn't leave any permanent mark. Breach waves to her. Luna barks cheerfully.

"What's the verdict?" Breach asks as Red draws close enough.

"Everyone's fine with me using their functions," Red tells him. "Apparently, it doesn't really do anything to them. They're just aware it's happening."

"That's a relief," Breach says. "What were you doing with Lillian?"

"Experiments. She wanted to figure out what this is exactly." Red holds out the thing that looks, to Breach, very like the Transistor.

"I have a guess," he says sardonically.

Red sticks her tongue out, and kicks him, very gently, in the shin. "Yes, that's what it looks like. But we're inside the real Transistor. This is just some little metaphor for it. And it turns out there are differences."

"Yeah?" Breach leans forward. He supposes a big difference is that he's not trapped inside of this Transistor. Very important difference there.

"The main one we found is that this one can't access all the functions." Red shakes the hilt. "It can only do the functions of Traces that are nearby. So anyone in our neighborhood. But it can't use Get or Jaunt."

"Because Bailey and Moyle aren't here." Breach nods, scratching Luna behind her ears. "I guess it can't do Mask either." Which is a pity. Turning invisible is a cool power.

"Actually," Red says, shifting the Transistor from hand to hand. "The first time I tried to use Mask, it worked. But the second time, it didn't."

"Huh," said Breach.

"That's what made Lillian realize it has a range. Shasberg must have been near us, but then moved away when he realized we had a way of noticing him. And I can use Spark when Lillian is next to me, but not when she's standing out on the bridge path."

"Interesting," says Breach. "Any other differences?"

Red pauses for a moment. Then she pulls the Transistor out of the ground.

"There's this," she says, and she offers it to him, hilt first.

Breach leans back, surprised. He leans back further when an actual pop-up appears in the air in front of him. A little box with options that looks like it belongs in an OVC terminal.

It reads: **Red is relinquishing SuperUser Privileges. Do you accept SuperUser Privileges?**

Yes/No

"Uh." He glances from the message to the hilt to Red. She's looking down at him with quiet affection and mild curiosity.

He feels suddenly very close to her. Very trusted.

He reaches out and presses the **No** button. Red nods and drops the Transistor back down to the ground.

"I like you as our..." Breach starts to explain, but isn't sure what the right word is. Administrator? Benevolent dictator? Goddess?

"You know." Is what he settles on. "You do way better than I would."

"Thanks." Red smiles faintly. "That's what Lillian said too."

"Unless you're tired of it," Breach says, suddenly concerned. It is a lot of pressure, he realizes, being responsible for making the world.

"No it's fine," Red says. "I just wish I could share it? You know, so that other people could make what they need. But the Transistor doesn't seem to have a share option."

"Big oversight," Breach says. "We should complain."

He turns to the dog at his side. "Luna. The Process and the Transistor need to get better at sharing. Can you get on that?"

Luna barks. Red laughs.

"Lillian is working on it too," she says.

"Lillian and Luna." Breach nods approvingly. "Dream team."

"And Lillian is planning to consult Jallaford, since he figured out how to give Farrah access to the sky."

"Yeah sure he can come too," Breach says, less enthusiastically.

Red laughs again. She drops the Transistor and it vanishes. Off to wherever it came from, until she needs it again. Another convenient difference between it and the original. She sits down next to Breach.

"Did you try my function?" Breach asks.

"I didn't," Red says, leaning against him. "I figured I should ask permission, whenever I can."

Breach kisses her hair. "You can use me whenever you want."

"Oh." Red looks up at him through her lashes. "Can I use you however I want?"

Breach inhales sharply. Then he nods multiple times.

"Yes," he tells her. "Definitely."

"That's very good to know," she says, pressing a hand to his chest and trailing her fingers down.

Her hand encounters Luna, who interprets this as a pet, and barks appreciatively. Red draws her hand back and they both look down at the dog, who wags her tail, happy at the attention.

Red reaches over and pats Luna's head, intentionally this time. Then suggests to Breach:
"Let's go upstairs."

"Yeah. Luna. Stay here, girl."

Chapter 8: The Trap

Chapter Notes

"What we were doing was wrong...in the traditional sense. In the contemporary sense."
- Royce Bracket

Breach likes to get up early in the morning and jog. He never goes out before Red wakes up. He wants to make sure he's there when she opens her eyes so she knows he's all right. Just in case her dreams told her he wasn't.

After she's awake they'll put the room back how it's supposed to be, if she's changed things while she slept. Then he'll throw on a faded T-shirt, which she created faded, and shorts. He'll kiss her as she lounges in bed and go out to run.

Luna likes to come with him. She trots beside him. Or she goes off to chase things in the tall grass, and circles back later. Sometimes she barks encouragingly when he starts to get tired. She never gets tired.

Breach has a route he likes to follow for his run. He starts from the back of the farmhouse. He makes a tour of the landmarks. First he runs out to the bridge that leads to the Kendrell's house. He never gets on the bridge, he doesn't want to visit them, but taps it with his foot and glances down its length to make sure all is quiet.

Sometimes he sees Asher in the distance. He never sees Grant. Very occasionally he sees Sybil floating above the bridge. She's always facing him—facing towards the farmhouse. Towards Red, probably. She doesn't move. Just floats there, twirling her parasol and watching.

She never comes closer. Not since that first confrontation with Red. That's just fine with him. Peachy keen. He turns and gets on with his run. He circles back to loop around the neighborhood. He passes Jallafor's townhouse. He passes Maximilias' apartment and heads towards Niola's cottage, now larger with the new wing for Olmarq.

He skirts the edge of the field here. At this point in the run he always encounters a blue blur that comes up alongside him.

"Hi Moyle," Breach says, and he breaks into a sprint to race the blur to Niola's cottage.

The blur always wins. It's as fast as light, or thought. Breach wishes that he could offer Preston Moyle more of a challenge, but the racer seems to enjoy the experience of the race even though there is no real competition. After all, he comes back every day.

Sometimes Breach thinks he sees a purple curl of smoke. He's never sure. It's always very faint, and out of the corner of his eye.

But just in case, when it happens he says: "Hi Shasberg."

Then he sets off through the wheat for the distant trail of stairs leading up into the sky. Red built it when she needed to run up and catch Asher, who was pretending to be a cloud. What wacky stories they have in this strange place. Living inside a sword. It's weird sometimes. Anyway, the staircase to nowhere is a nice, tall target to run towards. Day after day, Breach has worn a path through the wheat with constant treading.

Luna runs ahead of him, and then stops and barks at something. He catches up, pauses to kneel and pet her and then looks to see what she's barking at.

Red is standing on the staircase, smiling down at him. When she sees he's noticed her, she waves.

"Hey!" he yells. "You're up early."

She nods. Then she makes a beckoning motion and starts walking up the staircase.

"Are you making something?" he asks, following. He's at the base of the stairs, and about to start the climb when something makes him pause.

She's wearing the dress. The yellow and black dress with the feather collar. He hasn't seen her in that dress in ages. Not since...you know.

"You're all dressed up," he says. "What's the occasion?"

She stops climbing, turns around, smiles, and crooks her finger at him. As if to say: 'Come and see!'

He continues to pause at the base of the stairs. Luna barks curiously at him.

"Red," he says, serious now. "Say something."

She turns to face him entirely. She pauses for a moment, as if considering. Then she speaks.

"I am making something. Follow me. I want to show you," she says. And it's wrong.

The words are wrong. Too formal. The tone is wrong. Too soft. The inflection is wrong. Her smile is wrong. That dress is wrong. Why the fuck would she ever wear that dress again.

"Who are you?" he asks, and Luna beside him growls, echoing his tone voice.

The person who is not Red sighs. Then they say:

"Run script paparazzi ambush, target breach dot exe."

The air above Breach flickers, and then seven white devices fade into view. The camera things. Snapshots. They descend to surround him.

He doesn't give them time. He dashes for the edge of the ambush circle. He grabs the edge of a Snapshot—the gyrating white ring that surrounds the camera. He spins it, sending the Snapshot twirling through the air.

The next nearest Snapshot takes a pot shot at him. It only gets off one round – Luna barks a cone of force that smashes it back.

One of the yellow spheres of static still hits Breach in the shoulder. It's like being punched by a static shock. He'd like for that not to happen again. He takes off running. He has to get back to the farmhouse. Back to Red.

There is a flash of light. He stumbles, and then he sees a snapshot of himself stumbling. More static shocks smash into his back. He drops blindly to the ground and hears shots of static buzz over his head.

He pulls himself back to his feet, starts to run again and then changes his direction sharply. He remembers that the Snapshots aim ahead, where they think you're going. So if he weaves and turns they should have trouble hitting him. Sure enough, the next round of shots sail by him, missing by yards.

He hears the person who is not Red say something behind him:

"Snapshot one five six ampersand snapshot three six nine, target fetch process."

Then Breach pulls up short, because he hears Luna whimper in pain.

He whirls around. The person who is not Red is down from the stairs and walking towards him. Most of the Snapshots are still hovering after Breach, but two of them have flanked Luna.

He sprints back towards his dog, dodging another line of fire. He catches one of the Snapshots menacing Luna from behind and, lacking any sort of weapon, punches it in the blue glowing space that's supposed to be its weak spot. It's like punching plastic, but it seems to work. The floating monster camera sputters and dips.

"Luna!" Breach yells. "Go home!"

Luna barks and takes off. He turns to follow her, and finds himself face-to-face with the person who is not Red.

His boxing instincts kick in. He falls into a guard, pivots on his back foot, and starts to throw a right cross.

But it's Red. He knows they're not Red, but they look just like her. He has to look into their face to aim the punch, and when he looks he sees her and he stops.

The person who is not Red says: "Activate personal permission: revert, target flood dot exe."

And then they change. They melt into a sphere made of some strange, viscous, blue liquid. Breach is so close to them that he's inside of the sphere as it manifests. It's like being dunked underwater, but the water burns.

Breach staggers back and the sphere follows. It doesn't move very fast, but neither does he. It burns and stings and he can't breathe. It's like drowning but worse because the water hates him.

He tries to lunge out of its radius. He gets clear and gasps for breath, and sees that the Snapshots have circled around him. As soon as he's out of the orb of hate-water they open fire.

It's like being pummeled and electrocuted at the same time. He crumples to the ground and the sphere follows him down. It burns and he breathes burning water and chokes.

The world's starting to go black when the water vanishes. Breach coughs as a figure reforms above him. Not Red, not even pretending now. He tries to get up, but that's not happening. Just before he passes out he hears them talking:

"This didn't need to be such a confrontation. Such a conflict. You always seem to make things more complicated than they need to be."

Red has been trying to wake up earlier. She knows Breach won't go out to jog until she's awake. It's very sweet and it is a comfort to see him in the morning, but if she wakes up too late then sometimes he decides to skip his run. And when he skips his run he's restless and punchy for the rest of the day.

She set up her side of the bed so that it shakes a little after sunrise, which is usually enough to rouse her. Then she accepts some morning affection and they fix the room if it needs it. Breach goes out to run, and she settles back into bed to doze.

She has a small nightmare while she rests. It's vague and not as terrible as the ones she gets during proper sleep. She dreams that he's calling out for her, urgently, desperately. Then he's cut off by something.

When she wakes up, for real this time, the dream nestles into a vague sense of disquiet that colors the morning. At least it hasn't ruined the room. She sighs and puts on a robe and goes downstairs.

The house is quiet with only her inside. There's a peace to that. It would be more peaceful if she hadn't had that dream. She goes to the kitchen to manifest some bagels for breakfast. She puts the kettle on. Tea tastes weird when she makes it out of nothing, so she always brews it the traditional way.

She looks out at the waving grain as she eats and the quiet morning settles into pleasant rather than ominous.

She drops her dishes in the sink and goes into her music room. It's a small room just off the kitchen. It has a desk, littered with notes and music paper. It has a piano, old and wooden like the ones Red used to admire in museums. It has large sunny windows that overlook the front of the house.

This is a little strange, since it should overlook the back of the house. But Red likes to be able to see the neighborhood and know if anyone is coming over to ask for something. And it amuses Breach when she blatantly violates physics. She likes seeing him laugh.

Red sits down at the desk and jots down some ideas.

Reaching out

over any distance

It's easy to find you

– too much like paper boats?

Stay close. We'll ??? together.

– needs verb

– live, dance, fly, sing, read, walk

She turns to the piano and plays a few chords, looking for the right key to start in. But before she gets into the groove of composing she's interrupted by barking.

She can see Luna through the front-of-house windows. The dog is hurtling towards the house and barking up a storm. She doesn't see Breach. The ominous feeling Red woke up with returns with a vengeance and she hurries outside.

She meets Luna on the porch. Luna is barking louder and faster than she ever has before. She jumps up and plants her paws on Red's chest. Echoes of force from her barks make Red's robe flutter.

"What's wrong?" Red asks. "Where's Breach?"

Luna jumps away and runs out towards the field. Then she stops. She turns back to Red and barks.

"Okay. I'm coming." Red hums to change her clothing into something more practical for running and then she's off after Luna.

Luna leads her past Niola's cottage, down a trail through the wheat. Red sees the staircase she made into the sky. She should probably take that down. Later. For now, Luna leads her

towards it.

Luna stops when they reach the odd, out of place staircase. Her head swivels from side to side, like she's looking for something. She sniffs the ground, and trots around to a space where the wheat has been crushed down a bit. She starts barking again.

Red walks over. She examines the crushed wheat. It looks like someone was maybe lying down? Or fell down? Luna is watching her expectantly.

"I really wish you could talk," Red says.

She's not sure what to make of all this. Did something happen here? To Breach? Was he hurt? Why isn't he here?

She stands up straight and closes her eyes. She's not sure what's going on, what to do next, and worry is needling at her mind, making decisions harder. If he were here, he'd say something thoughtful and steadying. He'd have a useful idea, or at least an encouraging word. It would paradoxically be a lot easier to figure out where he is if he were here.

It occurs to her that, even if she can't have help from him, she doesn't have to do this alone. Niola's cottage is right there. She can get help, and they might have seen something.

"Luna. Follow me," she calls, and jogs back to the cottage.

Niola opens the door seconds after Red knocks.

"Red! You're up early. Would you like to come in? We're having breakfast. I made muffins!"

Niola sounds enormously proud of this, and Red feels a twinge of sadness at interrupting muffin breakfast. But that mild regret is nothing compared to the overwhelming ocean of concern stewing inside of her.

"Maybe later," she says. "Have you seen Breach?"

"Not since yesterday." Niola frowns, finally registering the tension in Red's voice and posture. "Is something wrong?"

"He didn't come back from his jog and now I can't find him."

"Come inside," Niola suggests. "We can ask everyone."

Everyone turns out to be quite a few people. Olmarq and Tennegan are at the table, after all they live here, but also Maximilias and Lillian. From the relaxed feel of the room Red gets the sense that this is a regular occurrence.

"Star of song and stage, the songstress known only as Red joins us this morning," narrates Wave Tennegan.

"Would you like a muffin?" asks Olmarq.

"Is something wrong?" asks Lillian, and Red wonders if she looks like something's wrong or if Lillian just associates her appearance with problems.

"Have any of you seen Breach this morning?" she asks again.

"Yes." Lillian nods. "Max and I saw him while we were walking over."

Red walks over to the table. "Where?"

Max and Lillian glance at each other—a silent consultation.

"Heading onto the field I think," says Max. "Running? But not like, away from something. Jogging. He does that a lot, right?"

"He never came back," Red explains. "And Luna came back without him. And I had a... dream. That he was in trouble."

She's a little embarrassed to submit this last detail as evidence for her concern, but the room seems to take it seriously.

"I can help you look," Olmarq offers.

"We can all come," Niola decides. "I'll wrap up the muffins."

"We should consult Jallafood," Lillian suggests.

"The Eighteenth Precinct's finest Forcaster begins another case," Tennegan reports.

They quickly sort out jobs for everyone. Max and Olmarq will start searching the field. Niola will go down the bridge to ask the Kendrells if they've seen anything. Lillian and Red will head over to Jallafood's townhouse to get his help. Tennegan promises to announce the search to his listeners and ask them to call in if they have information. Red thanks him, grateful for the sincerity of the impulse.

Having everyone around and helping is extremely comforting. Red even tries a blueberry muffin as she and Lillian make the short trek over to Jallafood's townhouse. They're pretty good. Very sugary. Niola's getting better at baking, but wow, she likes things sweet.

Jallafood answers the door in a smoking jacket. His eyes light up when he hears there's a mystery. He ushers them inside with enthusiasm restrained slightly by formality.

He leads them to a small dining room. Farrah Yon-Dale is sitting in a window seat, looking out at the sky. She's also wearing a smoking jacket. Red briefly wonders again about the nature of their relationship.

But only briefly. She quickly moves to focus on explaining the situation to Jallafood. He asks her to go over the entire sequence of the morning and stops her occasionally with questions when he needs more detail.

When he has all the information Red can give him, he leans back in his chair and stares fixedly at nothing. His fingers twitch as if he's typing on an invisible keyboard. Red and Lillian watch him, Lillian curious, Red hopeful. Even Yon-Dale glances over.

Finally Jallaford shakes his head. He actually hisses in frustration.

"Something is missing," he says. "Some detail."

"It's all right if we can't get a perfect forecasted solution," says Lillian. "We just need to know where he is."

"You've taken the most important steps," Jallaford tells them. "Consulting everyone. Searching the field. There may be an innocent explanation. A twisted ankle. A fall."

That would be great, thinks Red. She would love to be worrying for nothing.

"Is there a way we can take advantage of the technology of the Transistor?" Lillian muses. "Some way of searching for functions?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that," says Jallaford. "That sort of technical knowledge is beyond my Selection."

"I thought you might have a guess," Lillian presses. "After all, you figured out how to let Farrah edit the sky."

"I did?" Jallaford asks.

Behind him, Red can see Yon-Dale at the window suddenly tense and turn her attention entirely from the sky to their conversation.

"That's what she told us," Lillian says uncertainly.

"I was actually under the impression that *you* were the one to discern the command necessary to give her access to the sky," Jallaford tells Lillian.

Lillian shakes her head. Red is already looking at Yon-Dale. Now Lillian and Jallaford turn to regard her as well. She squirms uncomfortably.

"Dear," Jallaford says to Yon-Dale, and oh gosh, Breach would be delighted at that revelation if only he were here. "Could you resolve this inconsistency for us?"

Yon-Dale shifts uncomfortably on the window seat. She glances back at the window like she'd really rather be watching the clouds than having this conversation. She makes a reluctant noise, but then says:

"I asked Royce."

"You what?" Red is suddenly on her feet.

"How?" Lillian asks. "He's not here. He's a function."

"I followed the long bridge to the place with the squares," Yon-Dale explains. "Where we all used to spend time. I took that machine that rows and lets you fly. The one from Breach's exercise room. I rowed around until I found him and I asked him."

Red's fingers flex and suddenly the Transistor is in her hands.

"But he can't talk to you," Jallaford is asking. "How did he..."

"He spelled out the command with his little things." Yon-Dale flicks the air with her fingertips. "Droplets."

"That's fascinating." Lillian says, hand going to her mouth. "Using aspects of our function forms to communicate. I could probably do similar things with my sparks if I..."

"Can we please focus?" Red asks. Her voice is quiet, but her tone makes everyone else in the room twitch their attention back to her. Lillian actually jumps.

"Yes!" Lillian exclaims. "Sorry."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Red asks Yon-Dale.

"You might've stopped me," Yon-Dale says simply.

Red thinks a number of curse words that she learned from Breach. She covers her face and considers the fact that, back in Cloudbank, Farrah Yon-Dale was suspended from sky drawing and also murdered both because she recklessly pursued her artistic passions.

Red tries to put that aside. She resolves to focus on practical things.

"Is this a detail you needed?" she asks Jallaford. "Is this related?"

"It complicates things," Jallaford says. "Adds a new suspect. I will need more time to reflect."

Red thinks back to that day that Yon-Dale came to her with the words to unlock the sky. She tries to remember the words. It was all dashes and letters.

"I want to know what I said," she tells everyone. "I want to know what it did."

"Do you have the paper with the command on it?" Lillian asks Yon-Dale.

Yon-Dale twists the hem of her smoking jacket. "Ah..."

"I will find it," Jallaford assures them. Red mostly. "We will discern its meaning. You have my word."

"Okay," says Red. "I'm going to go out and help search the field."

She heads outside. Partially because she wants to, partially because she doesn't like the feeling that Jallaford is protecting Yon-Dale from her wrath.

The Transistor bounces off the townhouse's front steps, throwing sparks. She considers dismissing it, but decides not to. She feels better with the hilt in her hands. She walks out until she's in the sort of town square made by the circle of houses that make up the neighborhood. She plants the transistor in the ground and leans on it.

She closes her eyes and tries to send him a message. Like he used to do for her.

Are you there? Are you safe?

She can't tell if it does anything. It just feels like thinking.

"Miss Red?"

She opens her eyes and sees Olmarq, standing a few yards away, watching her with concern.

"Hey," she says. She doesn't bother correcting his formality. It doesn't stick. "Any luck?"

"No. I'm sorry. But I was just...going to meet up with Max. Do you want to come?"

"Yeah." She pulls the Transistor out of the ground. "Let's see if he's found anything."

They head off side-by-side to the portion of the field that Maximilias is searching. They walk silently. Olmarq isn't talkative by nature, and Red doesn't fill silences when she's nervous. She has someone else for that. Usually.

"If something...happened," Olmarq says, hesitantly but also somehow with resolution. "I'm going to do everything I can. To help."

The simple genuine feel of his words makes Red want to write a song around them.

"Thank you," Red tells him. "Me too."

They only walk for a little longer before pulling up short, because they see Maximilias in the distance and someone's with him.

"I found him!" Max shouts, jogging a bit ahead.

"Oh." Olmarq lets out a huge breath of tension.

Red is already running. He's here, and he's safe and he doesn't even look hurt. He looks a little sheepish as she hurtles towards him. He's probably embarrassed he caused a fuss. He hates to cause a fuss.

"I apologize," he's saying. "I didn't mean to worry you."

Red stops in her tracks. She's within arms reach of Maximilias, so she grabs him by the wrist and pulls him behind her. He yelps in surprise as she levels the Transistor to point at the person who is definitely not Breach.

"That's not Breach," she says, for Maximilias's and Olmarq's benefit, because they're both looking at her, alarmed and confused.

The person who is not Breach has taken a startled step back. He puts up his hands up in a peacemaking motion. Then he chuckles.

"You are both, just, startlingly perceptive," he says. "Well. I guess the, ah, ruse is up. Run script platform, target flood.exe."

Something in the air above him sparkles. Then a large white box appears. Red tenses. She recognizes this as a Process loading mechanism and therefore a prelude to violence. A huge tank-like bulk emerges from it. A one eyed enemy she remembers that used to follow her tirelessly and smash everything in its way.

She levels the Transistor at it, but it doesn't move towards her and Max. It floats down to the person who isn't Breach. It tilts sideways, creating a sort of platform out of its body. He hops onto it, and it floats back up.

The sensation of having a smug, strange man looking down on her while manipulating the Process is far too familiar for Red to have any doubt about who this is.

"Royce," she says. "Stop looking like him."

"Of course. Of course. Run script default underscore face, target flood dot exe."

Something in the air, right next to him now, shimmers again. Then he shimmers, and he looks like he's supposed to. Right down to the cigarette.

"What have you done with him?" Red asks, her anger boiling under the words.

"Right to the point," says Royce "I respect that. I respect that. I have put him somewhere that I will not disclose, but I will return him to you. Intact. Unharmd. Once you give me that."

He points with his cigarette at the sword in Red's hands.

"Obviously that's just a metaphor," he adds. "For SuperUser privileges. But it should..."

"No," Red cuts him off with a growl.

"Don't be so hasty," he cautions her. "I think I can convince you. Persuade you. Run script display underscore countdown."

Another sparkle in the air. Then the clouds above them warp, becoming angry red and twisting into numbers. A countdown timer. Minutes ticking in seconds rushing downward. Currently at 17 minutes.

"Farrah won't like that," Max whispers. He's still standing right behind Red. It sounds like he's in shock.

"I feel fairly strongly about this, you see," Royce is saying. "And I'm willing to do some things that others might see as extreme."

"Fuck," Olmarq mutters. Red doesn't turn away from Royce, but she hears the football player come up behind her.

Royce is still talking. He likes to do that.

"I've created a situation that can only be undone by someone with SuperUser privileges. It's a bit of a complex situation, and I don't mean to sound full of myself, but I think I'm the only one here who could safely undo it. Disarm it. The timer is a bit dramatic, I know, but I find a time limit encourages quick decisions. That's what we want here."

He extends a hand down towards Red and the Transistor. "A quick decision."

Red makes a quick decision. She swings the Transistor. A starburst of blue force leaps from the end and hurtles towards Royce. He's too high up for the bolt to reach him, but he starts back, which is what Red was going for. But he catches himself before he falls, dammit.

Royce hastily mutters something, and the impromptu Process platform he's standing on swoops higher.

"I don't think that was necessary," he says, resentful and breathless.

Red twirls the transistor back down. She can use the Breach function. That means he's still close. But where?

"Royce?" Someone calls out. It's a heavy, powerful voice that carries through the air. Unfamiliar. Red didn't think there were voices here that weren't familiar to her.

She looks over and sees Niola standing with the Kendrells. In the distance behind them she sees the bridge to their house, not too far away. Grant is talking. She's never heard him speak before.

"Royce, what are you doing?" His tone is tired but has a force and gravity that makes you want to listen. Royce turns towards him.

"Grant." Royce sounds mildly but pleasantly surprised, as if they just met by the water cooler at work. "What am I doing? What we've always done. Finishing the work."

Grant shakes his head, still striding forward, Asher and Niola following. "The work is over, Royce. It's all over."

"It's not!" Royce insists. "It's not over. Do you know what she did?" He points down at Red. "She entered the Transistor while she was its User! She STILL has SuperUser access, and the Transistor is independently mobile! We can finish the plan! Reshape Cloudbank as it should be!"

Grant comes to a stop below Royce, neck craning up to look at him. He looks ill as he says: "But there's no one out there."

"The CITY is out there," says Royce.

"With no people."

"I don't give a fuck about..."

Royce cuts himself off. He shoots a glare at Grant as if the man has disappointed him, then turns back to Red.

"This is pointless. I'm not here to talk to him. I'm here to talk to you. You have what I want. I have what you want. Thirteen minutes to deletion."

Red's blood freezes in her veins. It was implied, heavily implied, that Royce was threatening Breach's life. His roundabout talk of extreme measures. The ominous, crimson countdown timer. But there had still been a little, in denial part of her that hadn't fully engaged with the fact that she might...that there is a very real possibility that she is about to...lose him.

Her first impulse is to climb up there and beat the everloving shit out of Royce, but that's exactly what she can't do. He's set it up so that she can't do that. He's the only one who knows how to stop...whatever fucking deathtrap he's set up. She has power, but she only barely understands how to use it and she had twelve minutes and there's no time.

"Miss Red?" she hears someone say. That has to be Olmarq. His voice is filled with concern

Every time she tries to think about what to do all she can think about is a world without Breach. Without him in the morning to pull her out of nightmares. Without him making sunny side up eggs to match the sky. Without his wry, crook of a smile.

"The transfer process is simple," Royce is saying. "Just offer it. Just offer it. I can handle the rest. I can handle everything."

She feels her hands loosen around the hilt of the Transistor.

That's when Sybil interrupts everything.

Chapter 9: The Rescue

Chapter Summary

It's hard to express how difficult it is for me to write SuperUser when I want to write Administrator. But I soldier on.

There is a blur of red white and parasol, lancing through the sky. It hits Royce's platform, which dips and spins. Royce has to crouch down and grab onto a joint to avoid falling off.

"What the...what are you doing?" he stutters out.

Sybil looms up in front of him.

"yoU upSET Her. She's upSeT. yOu shOuldN'T upSeT Her. I'll stOp yoU. i'll stoP YOU. I'm STOPping YoU."

Royce laughs, thin and disbelieving. "You're not thinking straight, Sybil. You need help."

"I Am AskiNG POLiteLy FOR yoU to StOp."

Sybil follows up on this request by lashing out with her umbrella in a lance-like thrust.

Royce ducks flat and mutters something urgent. The Jerk he's using as a platform suddenly activates. Its blasts of concussive force shoot out sideways, catching Sybil and throwing her away.

Red watches as Royce takes evasive maneuvers and Sybil gives chase. She's torn between relief and terror. Relief that she's no longer about to hand over ultimate power to a soft-spoken dictator. Terror that she just lost her best chance to save Breach.

Niola and the Kendrells arrive as the dogfight continues above them.

"They were willing to help," Niola explains. "And it's an emergency."

"We need to get Royce down here," says Grant. He's still haggard, but purpose has returned to some of the power to his voice. "When he's face-to-face with you, he'll tell you what you need to know."

He sounds like a man who understands how people work.

"But he said he's the only one who knows how to...stop it," Max says, gesturing at the scarlet countdown.

"He says a lot of things," says Asher. "He even believes most of them. But he underestimates other people constantly." He glances at Red. "A chronic flaw."

Red nods, resolve steady. Hearing this frank analysis from her former enemies is surprisingly heartening. Above them, Royce has summoned a small fleet of Young Ladies, which circle Sybil, harrying her and blocking her access to Royce.

Sybil is outmatched. Also she's attacking to kill, not to subdue. Red needs to get up and into that fight. She hums and starts building another stair, curling up towards the aerial conflict. She jumps up a few steps.

"Stop!" someone yells. "Don't follow him!"

Every muscle in Red's body screams against stopping, because she can see the red countdown in her peripheral vision. But she pauses on her staircase, because that voice was Lillian, and Lillian is worth listening to.

Lillian is running towards them, trailed by Jallafor, who's yards behind her, and Yon-Dale, who's helping him along. Pretty much everyone's here now. It's a party in the wheatfields.

"Why?" Red yells.

"The command," Jallafor yells back, sentences short as he gasps for breath. "Unlocked the sky. Can do anything. In the sky. Control the process. Change the world."

"Technically anyone can do anything in the sky," Lillian shouts an important clarification. "But Royce is the only one who knows how."

"That is not the case," says Yon-Dale.

She raises her hands. The distant white cirrostratus billows into black storm clouds. She drops a fist. A fork of lightning splits the dogfight, taking out a Young Lady and making Sybil leap back. Above them, Royce curses.

"Young lady 456 through 786, target switch dot exe," he yells.

A fleet of floating feminine silhouettes swoops down towards Yon-Dale. She blasts a couple more of them with lightning. A pelting rain starts to fall.

Red dashes to intercept the Young Ladies as they reach the ground. She catches most of them in a circle of Void() as they touch down. They turn to Yon-Dale, ignoring the threat Red represents. This makes it easy to catch each of them from behind, sending a blue Breach() of light through them. They dissolve.

All except one. Red missed one with the Void(), and it's not quite down. Fortunately, Olmarq started running at the same time Red did. As the wounded Process is taking aim at Yon-Dale it's interrupted by a flying tackle.

Yon-Dale returns her attention completely to the sky. She sweeps the air with her hand and a gale force wind picks up. Above her, Royce is standing on a completely smooth, rain slick

platform. The wind hits him and he slips. He falls.

Red runs towards the falling figure. He won't be able to answer her questions if he breaks his neck. Many people in the field seem to have that same impulse, possibly with more charitable motives. Grant is the one who reaches him in time to catch him. Tall man. Long legs.

Grant is setting Royce down as Red arrives. The engineer is soaking wet and rattled, glancing around wildly. He quickly focuses on Red as she crouches over him. She stabs the Transistor into the ground beside him, and hisses:

"Tell me where he is."

Royce glances up. That's enough. It's the only answer that makes sense, given what she's learned. Red straightens.

"Farrah!" Red yells and points to the patch Royce was looking at. "Clear the sky!"

Yon-Dale makes a claw with her hand and rakes it through the air. She peels away the wind, then the clouds, then scratches a hole in the sky. The air above them is the black void of the Transistor, glinting with distant golden filigree code.

And in that space that used to be hidden, there is a cloud of the Process. Young Ladies and Snapshots. A few Jerks. All processes that can fly. They're concentrated in one spot. Milling around a perfectly square space. A function slot hidden behind the sky.

Red leaps up. She starts building stairs upwards, but that's too slow. She stops on a step and wills it to fly. She swoops up and up and she's flying fast but it feels like she's only creeping up. The sky is so high and she's flying past a timer that reads four minutes, fifteen seconds.

She sees a blue blur out of the corner of her eye, keeping pace with her effortlessly. She turns towards it, and it turns towards her. It catches her and suddenly the world is a blur around her. The ground below her vanishes into the distance. She races up towards the function slot, blinding fast.

Preston Moyle stops the fastest Jaunt() that Red has ever experienced only a couple of yards before they hit the crowd of the Process. He probably means to give her a moment to prepare. Red starts to fall and hastily makes a bridge. Then she levels the Transistor.

Moyle peels off, dancing back and forth to attract attention. He pulls away a crowd of Young Ladies, thinning the crowd and giving Red more room to maneuver.

Red slams down a Cull() to clear an initial group of Snapshots. Then she shoots every Jerk she sees with a Switch(). She uses their large square frames as cover to weave her way through the mass of Process.

She uses Crash() and Breach() like a dagger and sword. She hopes that every time she uses his namesake he knows, and knows she's coming for him.

She takes hits as she goes, so she starts using Tap() to restore herself. She's not sure how she feels about Grant right now. Less utterly hateful. That's probably healthy. They're going to

have to live in the same neighborhood, possibly forever.

But that doesn't occupy her mind for more than a passing reflection as she obliterates a group of Snapshots. Her focus is overwhelmed by her goal.

She finds it suddenly. She comes up to the edge of her bridge. Before she makes more bridge she looks for her target and sees it immediately below her. Moyle took her up so fast they overshot slightly.

The function slot is a perfect square, just like the ones in the user interface. In the center there's a blue star.

And on the side there's a timer. Less garishly threatening than the one in the sky, but just as terrifyingly ominous. Because it reads 20 seconds.

That's not enough time. She needs more time.

So she does what she always does when she needs time to think.

She takes her Turn.

The world goes dark and quiet. The Process freezes in place. She sees in her mind the blue line of her Turn that can be filled with actions and functions.

The Transistor's ability to do this has always left her in awe. It goes beyond creation and destruction. Bending time. Holding a moment frozen in space. This was a huge part of how she managed so well in those terrifying violent days. Because whenever she felt overwhelmed, she could stop everything and take time to plan.

A helpful grid of circles stretches around her. It seems to sense that she's planning to jump off the side of the bridge, because the circles become spheres and extend into the air, stretching into three dimensions.

The function slot is even easier to see now. A glowing beacon in a dark world.

Red jumps off the edge of the bridge and falls down towards it. But that won't work at all. She only gets halfway there before the Turn runs out.

A different approach. After all, she knows that Moyle is nearby. She jumps off the edge and Jaunt()s straight down. That gets her to the function slot with a small sliver of turn to spare.

Her first instinct is to call to knock Breach out of there with the edge of a Cull(). But she doesn't have quite enough Turn left to do that. Damn.

She tries Crash()ing the timer on the side of the function slot. She can destroy it easily, even one hit is overkill, but she can't tell what will happen next. If she's actually disabled it, or just destroyed the visual.

She shoots Breach with Switch(), thinking maybe that will make him safe. He glows a cheerful pink, but again, she can't be sure that will work.

She needs to get him out of the slot. That's the only way to be sure. She tries to use Get(), to pull him towards her, but she can't use that function. Bailey must be out of range.

She hesitates, then she Jaunt()s one more time. She lands directly in the function slot.

As she enters she sees Breach leave, pushed out by her presence. She looks around at the four walls and the timer. She seriously considers this.

But no. They have to stop this. This cycle of self-sacrifice. She'll find a better solution. She has time.

She reviews her functions. She realizes there's one she hasn't considered. It's not exactly a reliable one, but one she hasn't tried yet.

And wouldn't it be funny if it decided to start working just now. Wouldn't that be so appropriate.

She tries the function. It works.

She smirks and executes her Turn.

Breach is not having a good day.

He's no longer super beat up, which is nice, but it's because he doesn't have a body anymore, which is not nice.

He's trapped in a small box and he can't move and he can't see anything and that is just...not the best.

He tried to talk to Red. Send a message. It felt like it was working, but then something changed and it didn't feel like it was working anymore. Probably Royce did something. Fucking Royce.

What a complete asshole. It's not enough to destroy an entire city, that's not enough for this guy. He has to come and make trouble in paradise. He probably wants something from Red.

God, he misses Red. He hopes she's okay. He hopes she's not worried about him. It would actually probably be good if she is a little worried about him. He kind of needs a rescue. He wishes he could talk to her. Being stuck in a box was way better last time. At least he could talk to her.

He wishes he could talk to anyone. He was talking to Niola the other day. She was excited about baking. It was really sweet.

That was the other day, right? How long has he been here? It's hard to tell. He misses Red.

He should marry her. He should ask her to marry him. She'd get a kick out of that. They can ask Niola to officiate.

They should invite Moyle. He feels like he's spent enough time with the racer to be on first name basis. They're pretty much exercise buddies. He wonders if Moyle saw what happened. He wonders if Luna is okay.

He's really kind of not okay. At all. But he can't do anything about that. All he can do is sit here and...

She just used him. He can still tell. He can't talk to her, but he can tell she just used his function.

Is she in danger? He's not the sort of function you use for happy tea parties. He's no Olmarq, but still, he's not good for much except attacking.

She uses him again. And again. She's definitely fighting. It's agony not to be able to see her. He hopes she's okay. Please be okay.

He tries to count the time between attacks and guess at how well she's doing. It's impossible to tell, but it's something to do. Please be okay.

She stops fighting. Or at least she stops using him. What's going on now? Where is she? He can tell literally nothing except for whether or not she's using Breach.

Red? he tries. *What are you...*

She slams into the function slot, throwing him out.

He's free. The world is back. He can move. He can see. He looks up.

MOVING CRASH.EXE from /Etc/Unindexed/Sky to
/Etc/Unindexed/Sky/Temp_Function_Slot

INVALID MOVE: Only one function allowed in function slot.

JAUNT OVERRIDE

MOVING BREACH.EXE from /Etc/Unindexed/Sky/Temp_Function_Slot to
/Etc/Unindexed/Sky

Timed Script Activating

DELETING Contents of /Etc/Unindexed/Sky/Temp_Function_Slot

DELETING CRASH.EXE

> Run MASK.EXE

ERROR: Cannot Find CRASH.EXE

Timed Script Complete

Red is surrounded by purple smoke and soft giggling.

"Shasberg?" she tries to say, but she can't speak. At least not out loud. Apparently jumping into a function slot has reverted her into a function. The soft shimmer of force that she is doesn't have a mouth.

The giggling purple cloud is less constrained. Trails of smoke twist into words:

Happy to help!

The smoke scatters and reforms.

Your boy is making a fuss.

There's a little down pointing arrow at the end of the sentence. Red looks down. Below them, a blue star is leaping back and forth, right under the function slot, movements frantic and confused.

Red Crash()es down towards him. There's a brief resistance, some sort of lock trying to prevent her from leaving the slot, but she's the Transistor's user so she blows past it.

The purple smoke fades as she leaves, a final coil waving back and forth as if saying goodbye.

The blue star rushes towards her as soon she's visible: fast and inevitable as a magnet moving to its complementary pole. They collide. They embrace? They overlap.

They send messages to each other and when they are this close it's as easy as thinking. Thoughts spill from one person to the other and it's sometimes hard to distinguish the source.

I'm here. I'm here. You're safe. I'm safe. We're both safe. We're together.

They overlap and move together. Shimmering force and shining precision. Listing thoughtlessly as they focus on communication.

I was worried. I was afraid. I was so afraid I'd lose you. It's okay. It's okay. I'm okay. We're okay. What happened?

Red pours her memories of the morning into him. Hearing him in a dream. Luna's arrival. The subsequent chaos.

He's self-consciously happy everyone wanted to help find him. He's exasperatedly aghast at what Royce was planning to do. The psychopath. He's proud and a little awed by her dash to save him. He can't quite believe he was in danger. He had no idea. He was just sitting in the dark.

There's a tremor in that thought that she notices. He tries to downplay it, but she reaches out and holds the pain that it's impossible to deny when they're like this.

And that pain leads to another, leads to memories. Sitting in the dark, unable to do anything, just watching. Night after night. Words repeating: "Red. Don't you do it. Don't you dare."

You've been having nightmares, she realizes.

They're not that bad, he tries to tell her. But that's not true. They just leave no trace in the room and he wakes up before she does.

Another line from a memory: "Don't do this. Please. If you do this..."

She says his name in his mind. Then they both start thinking at once and again, it's hard to distinguish who's saying what.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You had to. I understand. It wasn't dying. Not really. But it hurt you. I'm sorry. It's okay. I'm sorry. We're here. You had to do it, to be here.

There isn't a word for: I don't regret it but I'm sorry.

There isn't a word for: I don't regret it but I'm hurt.

So they descend from words into impulses that express those sentiments, winding around each other in a slow descent down from the hole in the sky.

Eventually the feelings are felt enough, at least for now, and they just wind together. Being together.

Eventually, they're close enough to the ground to see what's going on down there. It's a lot of people looking up at them. A lot of people they know, relieved and happy. Luna is barking. Niola is actually jumping up and down.

There is an unfamiliar person in the crowd. Hunched and smiling and dressed in purple. As they spiral down, he yells up at them: "Get a room!" and then cackles.

The Kendrells are standing off to the side. Royce is between them, still sitting on the ground, looking down, expression hidden.

The Kendrells are looking up at them. Asher is smiling nostalgically, as if he recognizes something familiar as he looks up at them. Grant is back to being haunted by fresh regret. But there's something new in his face. Like he, for the first time, believes he can do something about the regrets haunting him.

I think I'm going to be able to forgive him, Red thinks at Breach.

I guess maybe, Breach thinks back, reluctantly. *But not Royce.*

No, not Royce, Red thinks. Though she's feeling magnanimous in victory. She supposes it depends on how long they're going to live here together.

Eventually, they land.

And life continues.

Chapter 10: The Epilogue

Life continues, in their small digital world.

They end up deciding to keep that command that Royce tricked Red into executing. The one that lets anyone do anything in the sky. It means that everyone in the community can have Red's editing powers, as long as they are changing something a couple feet off of the ground.

Maximilias makes the most immediate and extensive use of this new power. He starts designing clothes again.

Everyone is happy to supply him with requests. Jallafood wants suits. Olmarq appreciates a uniform for exercising. Red enjoys a few new dresses. Lillian is Max's most indulgent model, and wears something dramatically new every day.

When their small community runs out of cloth-based desires, Max starts making things for the Process. It becomes commonplace to see Young Ladies in ballgowns and the Processes' strange approximation of Men wearing well-cut blazers.

Tennegan recovers more and more. There is a turning point when he tentatively asks Niola if he's dead and this is the Country. She tries to explain, pulling in Red to help her with the details, and to her delight Tennegan finally seems to understand. He becomes less detached and more aware of what's going on around him.

Niola sometimes goes out as a function to try and find Bailey Gilande, but the Administrator never changes. She never responds as a function. Never speaks or moves when she's made human. They bring Grant to try to talk to her, he knows her from before, but his words might as well be silence for all the effect they have.

It's hard to tell if Shasberg is suffering from having been a function for so long, or is just very strange. Breach suspects the latter. Shasberg makes his own house. It's a door that floats two feet off the ground. Sometimes it leads to his house, and sometimes it leads to nowhere, and the schedule of that is a puzzle.

Shasberg loves making strange, impossible things and hanging them above the town square-- a paved area Red recently made between all of the houses. Breach's favorite so far of these interpretive art pieces is a Mobius strip you can walk along. Red likes the statues that somehow make you hear things when you look at them.

Shasberg also turns out to have a working knowledge of software engineering. Apparently hacking was a big part of a lot of his projects. This makes him a valuable consultant when people need to change things in complex ways. He is always delighted to help after some riddles are answered.

Preston Moyle remains a function. He doesn't want to be human. He doesn't want to talk. He just wants to move with beautiful swiftness. He does like being around people, and he appreciates attempts to challenge him with races.

Breach and Olmarq like coming up with new contests for him. They go out to the edge of the field where Moyle likes to sprint and announce that racers should go to their starting points. So far, Moyle has beaten: Olmarq, Breach, a football (thrown by Olmarq), a javelin, a slingshot pellet, and an arrow. He was outpaced by a bullet, but he's working on his time and Breach thinks he'll come out ahead soon.

The sky being editable frees Red from needing to be constantly on hand, in case someone needs something created. But she still leaves herself open for larger, more complex requests. Anything that can't be made in the sky and transported elsewhere.

Like new landmarks. Breach is the first to suggest one. He'd like a hill that he can run up and down. So Red makes a hill. Then she makes a whole hilly area. Then she makes a mountain range.

Niola suggests that a forest might be nice. Now green trees stretch out to the east of their town, between them and the user interface, under the Kendrell's manor. The west side of the field becomes a beach. A sliver of ocean floats alongside it to complete the beach experience. It looks very strange from below.

Red leaves the staircase to nowhere because it's a useful place for people to go when they need to edit themselves. Being on the staircase counts as being in the sky.

Red continues to occupy a nebulous position of authority. People look to her when decisions need to be made. Which is ironic, because she usually takes care to have anything important be decided by vote.

This regard has a little to do with her power, but Breach thinks that's only a small part. It has more to do with the fact she saved them all. It has the most to do with who she is. Who she's always been. The person you notice when she walks into a room. Even in a small farmhouse in the country, she's his star.

Breach can tell that this responsibility weighs on Red. She cares deeply. She doesn't want to make a mistake. Use her influence poorly. She finds a strange source of advice for this problem. She starts visiting Grant Kendrell regularly. They meet on the bridge and talk quietly for hours.

The Kendrells still aren't allowed in the field most of the time. But time softens grudges. At least when the subjects of those grudges are so painfully penitent. Niola goes to visit them regularly because Niola is a fucking saint who forgave them completely when they came to help with the Royce emergency.

Speaking of Royce: another point in the Kendrell's favor is they take responsibility for managing that menace of a technological genius.

He has his trial: same as Asher and Grant. There is talk of punishment, but it fades away into mercy and confinement. Breach ended that stressful day very proud of his little community. It's weird being a part of something—he never felt this way about Cloudbank. It's also weird voting so often, but it's different when he actually thinks it matters.

Royce is confined to the Kendrell's house, both by rules and by a command that Shalsberg came up with. Breach has no idea how he's doing, and honestly doesn't care as long as the man doesn't kidnap him again.

Breach does get occasional news about Sybil. Grant is trying to reach out to her, and reports his progress to Red, who sometimes frets about it to Breach. Red is firm that she doesn't want anything personally to do with Sybil. But she still cares. She never stops caring about people. Breach loves that about her, though he understands that it's sometimes painful.

Sybil has trouble getting out of the loops of thinking that she's caught in. A combination of the relentless focus of the Process and her own obsession. Royce is apparently working to see if her integration with the Process can be reversed. Grant visits her and tries to talk her into different subjects. He thinks it's helping. But healing takes time.

Healing takes a lot of time.

Red has started asking, every morning, how Breach slept. He tells her. He tries to be honest. He hates how she looks when she's blaming herself for his pain. He explains that. She says she'll work on not blaming herself, as long as he works on being okay with the fact that his sadness makes her sad. All hard assignments.

But the work bears good fruit. He has fewer nightmares, and sometimes they're the old anxiety stuff about Administrators and Selections. And Red, well, sometimes they wake up and the room is intact.

Just like Maximilias and Shasberg, Red returns to her Selection. She is secretive about her composition. This is normal. She doesn't want to show anyone until it's ready to be understood. Breach is excited when she invites him to hear a song.

He sits in the kitchen. She's in her music room with the door open. She plays the melody on the piano and sings.

Moments fall like sand

And when we land

We're still falling

It was golden there

It's golden here

Meet me in our Country

It's easy to find you

It's easy to lose you

Stay close. We'll fall together

Walk that shattered, bramble path

Until the past is just the past

I cut my hand on a broken promise

But it heals

Paint morning on the sky

Fall far enough to fly

Meet me in our Country

They fall asleep intertwined.

For the first time, neither of them have nightmares.

End Notes

If you like this, read more of my writing at [my website](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!