

Persist

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/9100573) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/9100573>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Categories:	F/F , Gen
Fandom:	Transistor (Video Game)
Relationship:	Red/Sybil Reisz
Characters:	Red (Transistor) , Sybil Reisz , Royce Bracket , Luna (Transistor)
Additional Tags:	a little bit AU , Angst , possibly happy ending , possibly bittersweet ending , Major Spoilers
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Recursions
Stats:	Published: 2016-12-29 Updated: 2017-02-02 Words: 8,033 Chapters: 3/?

Persist

by [Allaine](#)

Summary

Red walks into the Empty Set, looking for the three people who murdered a man and tried doing the same to her, and finds someone else entirely.

And then it gets worse.

Notes

1. I only discovered the story of Transistor five days ago, and I've been bawling on and off over various parts of the saga ever since. This is intended to be the first part of a series of fanfics, all of which are about me trying to work through the "so many feels" I've had ever since.
2. This fic is mostly canon and follows the same general storyline as the original version, but there are a couple important alterations which will quickly become apparent, and these changes will impact how Red's story unfolds. I've also tweaked the combat system, so that if Red were to lose all of her health, she wouldn't simply lose a Function and keep fighting. She'd just die.
3. If there's one thing I've learned in my research, it's that a lot of Transistor is open to interpretation, and many of the questions posed by the game lack a definitive answer. So if you disagree with any of my own personal interpretations of how the world of Cloudbank works, keep in mind that this is an AU, not a full-blown analysis on the canon storyline.

Chapter 1

Red wouldn't have guessed that she might actually *miss* something about the repeated ambushes by Process units, but as she made her way through the Empty Set hallway, she realized for the first time that there was something she missed after all. At least their battles were noisy.

She hadn't really thought about it before. She'd had a lot on her mind initially, of course. And in her old life, before everything had changed so dramatically, Red had sometimes enjoyed walking the Cloudbank streets late at night, when there wasn't a soul around, and she could compose melodies in her head without it being drowned out by background noise. Tonight the silent, deserted city blocks hadn't been all that different.

But there had *always* been sounds inside the Empty Set. Even in the daylight hours when the theatre was closed, you could always find at least one person rehearsing the latest musical number selected by the public. Even in the hours right before dawn, when the ticketgoers had all gone home and most of the musicians had called it a night or relocated to a nearby bar, there was always someone still on that stage, taking advantage of the Set's excellent acoustics. Several times that one person had been her, although that wasn't counting . . .

Red closed her eyes and sighed mournfully. Best not to think of her savior until this whole bewildering nightmare was settled and she could honor his memory in peace. But it was hard not to, when he *should* have been walking one step behind her and two to the right, keeping up an easygoing monologue about the life he knew in Cloudbank. More – serious topics were saved for behind closed doors.

She had imagined that she might hear his voice coming from the weapon that had killed him. He had been such a big presence in life that he should have filled the device up to overflowing. Instead the murder weapon had mocked her silence with its own. And now Red couldn't help but notice that the Empty Set was deathly quiet as well.

She could really go for a song right about now. But her voice had abandoned her, as if the machine had somehow severed her vocal cords along with his mortal coil. The music was there, but the words defeated her.

Maybe she didn't need words though.

Experimentally Red tried humming the first few bars to one of her older songs, and was pleasantly surprised when they slipped right out through her lips in perfect pitch. So clearly whatever was blocking her from speaking, it wasn't a physical condition. Something mental or psychological, then.

It didn't come as a surprise, after the night she'd had. It wasn't every day that you found yourself attacked in your dressing room by three complete strangers wielding what had looked like a levitating surfboard, only to watch as your trusted friend appeared practically from nowhere and took the killing blow meant for you.

Don't think about it, remember? Save it for later, she thought to herself. *Stick with the humming.*

So Red did. She could only imagine the reasons why her subconscious had first chosen "In Circles", but it didn't matter. It was probably going to be a long night, and she'd probably end up humming her entire catalog by the -

"Red. Red. Red. Red. Red."

Lost in thought, Red froze as she passed through the double doors and found she wasn't alone. There was someone else there, and it wasn't human, even if it almost seemed to be dressed in a bizarre fascimilie of human clothing underneath that large red-and-white . . . striped . . . parasol.

No. Nonono.

"Red. Red. Red. Red. Red."

The humming died in her mouth as Red realized that she wasn't staring at a Process, not exactly. She was staring at a Processed Sybil. She spared a quick glance at her "sword", for

lack of a better word.

S. Reisz, Processed: 98%, Disposition: Meticulous. The words flitted briefly across the surface of the sword in her hand.

As if the wordless melody of “In Circles” had been lulling her to sleep, Sybil looked up. Her young, lovely face was now blank and white, like a theatrical tragedy mask. A large red circle, not unlike the eye-like circle in the center of the “blade” of Red’s sword, stared balefully at her.

“You are here you are here you are here I knew you’d return I knew I knew”

Red hadn’t even given a single thought to Sybil, not since the attack on her life happened. As she stared, horrified, at the thing Sybil Reisz had become, Red fervently wished she could go back to that place of blissful ignorance.

If asked a few minutes ago, Red would have said that Sybil was the only living thing left in Cloudbank who she could call a friend. The socialite event planner was a well-known patron of the arts, and having her in your corner could be marvelous for your career. When Sybil had become as passionate a fan of Red’s music as any teenager hovering outside the Empty Set’s stage door, Red had welcomed the attention.

It had certainly seemed to pay off, judging by her poll numbers, but at some point Red had realized she needed to put some distance between herself and Sybil. It was clear that Sybil was not only passionate about Red’s music, but also had been ensnared by Red’s celebrity. Red had seen that rapturous look in the eyes of many fans of hers, and she had grown worried that Sybil was making ever-increasing demands on her time. Her self-appointed bodyguard had predicted that Sybil would only try to leverage the contributions she’d made to Red’s career into getting even closer to her, but Red had to make the effort anyway.

It wasn’t that Red didn’t *like* Sybil. In fact she felt that they could become great friends, given time. But not with Sybil worshipping the ground Red walked on, it wouldn’t be healthy. By keeping Sybil at arms-length, Red could wait until Sybil’s ardor inevitably cooled, and then let go and see what happened. Maybe she’d just move on to her next

infatuation, or maybe Sybil would become more willing to take it slow, and they'd become friends like *normal* people.

And it had been working, Red thought as she watched the Processed monstrosity rise to its full height. Clearly frustrated by Red's inattention, Sybil had unhappily backed off. Red could see it in her eyes, Sybil had taken Red down from the pedestal she'd put the singer on. And then carefully, before Sybil could pull away completely, and despite the reservations of her "security", Red put a feeler out, suggesting they have coffee sometime. Sybil rewarded her by responding hesitantly, her feelings still bruised, rather than rushing back towards Red at full speed.

Coffee had been nice too. Red grieved that clearly it would never happen again.

"Sybil" closed her parasol with a loud snap. Red couldn't help but notice how it was even longer than her own sword, or how sharp and pointed the end of the umbrella looked. Or how Sybil's death-mask face didn't betray the slightest ounce of infatuation, affection, or even interest.

"Help us help us help us won't you we only wanted your help"

Red stepped backwards, shocked. Sybil's voice was so distorted that it was no longer recognizable, and her face never even twitched, but even that couldn't hide the anguish that colored every word she spoke. Maybe 98% of her had been Processed, but the other 2% was alive, and awake, and sounded just as horrified as Red felt.

Red tightened her grip on the sword and lifted it in the air defensively. The greatest tragedy was that the only way she knew how to "help" Sybil, was to put her out of her misery.

Sybil pointed the brightly colored parasol-turned-spear at the sky.

"The Process cannot be stopped, cannot be stopped, cannot be stopped . . ."

I'm going to try anyway, Sybil.

And then, moving so fast that Red could barely react in time, Sybil aimed the spear at Red's heart and launched herself forward. It was only because of the Jaunt function of her own weapon that Red was able to avoid it.

The next five minutes were an awful blur for Red. The Sybil-thing ("alone alone alone I told them I'd always be alone I told them") hadn't shown her any mercy, and Red could only return the favor. Careful use of the sword's Turn ability had enabled her to deal heavy damage to the beast, no matter how much it pained her to hear the tortured cries ("you knew I would wait I would wait I would wait for you") every attack wrung from the last of Sybil's soul. The monster summoned various nameless but familiar Process units in turn, forcing Red to waste valuable time destroying them while Sybil healed itself.

Still, Red thought as she stealthily slipped behind a row of pillars, she had destroyed them all. Sybil had showed no signs of summoning more, and now it was just a matter of wearing her defenses down, until Red –

She hadn't been as stealthy as she thought.

One moment after Red first lost sight of the Sybil-thing, it came barreling through them at top speed. The parasol lance shattered them all, and because her sword's Turn ability was still recharging, Red could only reflexively stumble backwards to escape being impaled.

Sybil pursued her though, and almost before she knew what had happened, Red found herself cornered. The tip of the Processed spear hovered a mere inch from her neck, so close that Red's chin hid the point from view. She couldn't move left or right, only forward, and even Turn couldn't help her when moving in the only direction left open to her would lead to her trachea being pierced.

Red had failed herself, and the man who saved her, and the friend who seemed to weep with every strike aimed at Red. She'd failed them all.

The parasol didn't move though. What was it waiting for?

A song maybe?

It was true that Sybil had only become aggressive after Red had stopped humming. Maybe a melody would tame the savage beast?

Worth a shot. At the very least she'd die making music.

Very carefully, fearing that even a swallow could get her killed, Red picked up where she had left off earlier, humming more of "In Circles".

There was no sign of a response at first, but then the parasol trembled. It didn't retract at all, so that Red was still effectively pinned to the wall, but something was clearly happening.

"Your voice it is gone it is gone it is gone"

Maybe I'm onto something here, she thought to herself, even as she noticed that the small part of Sybil that was still human sounded even more distressed by this latest discovery, than she had when Red's sword was ripping her body apart with mini-explosions. So she started humming louder.

The parasol's tremors now seemed to run all the way up the monster's arm. From the way it twisted its body, it looked almost as if it was trying with all its might to push the spear through an invisible wall.

Come on, come on, Sybil, she thought. *Just pull it an inch back and I can slide past it and Jaunt away.*

As if Sybil could hear her thoughts, a maddened cry of pure despair rose up from her body.

“I won’t save you I won’t save you I won’t save you”

That doesn’t sound good.

Suddenly the tremors ceased, leaving the deadly umbrella right where it had always been. The creature brought itself to its full height once more, and Red felt like the red orb in its midsection was directing only hatred toward her.

Ironically, that was when Sybil made its mistake. It swiftly brought the arm back, clearly preparing for a brutal strike at full power.

But no matter how swift it was, there was no way it could be swifter than Turn, not when it had just given her a yard, not when all she needed was an inch.

Turn! Jaunt!

In the blink of an eye, Red turned the tables on Sybil, placing herself directly behind it. Then she stacked every Crash and Spark she could, aiming it all directly at its unprotected back, before Jaunting once more and putting some separation between herself and the coming explosion.

Goodbye, Sybil.

The resulting explosion of light was very bright, but not enough to prevent Red from witnessing her attack tear Sybil into shreds. What had once been her skirt fell about the room in pieces. It was over.

Or so Red thought, before she realized something was still moving on the ground. *Are you fucking KIDDING me?!*

Hurrying towards it, Red lifted up her sword so she could Crash whatever it was and destroy it once and for all. Her hand was stayed, though, by the sounds it was making.

Red watched, transfixed, as something that looked slightly more like the Sybil she'd known crawled across the floor. Crawled, because it was missing its legs. Even worse, she was *sobbing*.

"I saved you I saved you I saved you I always I always wanted to"

The sword descended slowly, forgotten, as Red could only watch, almost overcome with sorrow. Through the agony and the madness, the note of pure *relief* in Sybil's "voice" was impossible for Red to miss. *We would have been the best of friends, wouldn't we? If we'd had the time?*

"Finally finally finally we can be"

This is for all the times we would've had, Sybil.

Then she quickly brought the sword back up, hilt in the air, pointed it at poor, broken Sybil, and drove it down with all her might.

The computerized scream was loud but mercifully brief, as the thing that used to be Sybil disappeared. All that was left was a familiar dark blue cube, and that too vanished quickly as it practically pounced on Red's sword and melted away.

Red sagged, suddenly exhausted. But she was satisfied, because the blue cube had been Sybil's Trace. There had been something left of her, and now it would live on, even if that was only another Function in her sword.

She could rest for a minute. She'd earned it, hadn't she?

Staring down at the spot where what was left of Sybil used to be, Red would spend that minute remembering her as she was, by humming “In Circles” in its entirety. She wasn’t exactly sure what Sybil had done when she’d been cornered, but Red felt certain that it really had saved –

“Oh God, I love that song,” Sybil said, her voice coming directly from the sword.

If she could have, Red would have screamed.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Sybil makes the best of a bad situation. For everyone except herself.

Chapter Notes

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

Although Red was unable to scream, she did let the sword fall from her suddenly nerveless fingers. Taking a step back, she kept her eyes trained on her weapon, waiting to see if it would speak once more.

She didn't have to wait long, as Sybil giggled. "Have I been drinking?" she asked. "I seem to have fallen down, and I can't get back . . ." Then there was a gasp of outrage. "Red, your dress! What happened?"

Red looked down. Oh, right, she'd torn the bottom off. Hard to fight killer robots if your dress prevented you from moving at full speed.

"It isn't important," Sybil said. "Granted, Darzi isn't – well, he's not designing right now, wherever he is. But they still sell copies of his designs in stores. Tomorrow you and I will get you a new dress, because that dress was so lovely. It was practically part of your act!"

Sybil sounded so normal, it hurt. Especially since she seemed to have no idea she was speaking from a flat piece of electronics lying on the floor.

"Sorry I missed tonight's show, by the way," Sybil apologized. "You wouldn't believe how busy I was at work this evening. It was crazy, I was getting twenty calls, a little problem here, a minor crisis there. I'd probably still be there if Asher hadn't called and . . ."

Red had a sudden sense of foreboding as Sybil remained silent for several seconds.

“Red,” Sybil finally said. Her voice sounded very small, considering Sybil could normally fill a room with her charm. “I believe I’ve had a very strange dream tonight.” She tried to laugh, but there was no life to it. “I dreamt that you almost died, twice, and that the second time – it sounds quite laughable when I say it out loud, but the second time it was me trying to kill you!”

The singer dropped to her knees and bent over the sword’s surface. She realized that its red center had shimmered slightly, almost like it was an eye that had turned slightly to stare at her.

“Red,” Sybil whispered. “Why can’t I stand up?”

Red looked around helplessly. It was a little hard to explain, considering she couldn’t speak. She opened and closed her mouth several times, then clutched at her throat.

“Did – did something happen to your voice, Red?” Sybil asked.

Red nodded.

She couldn’t see Sybil’s “face”, obviously, but it sounded like she was sniffing. “Right, I remember that from my dream,” she said brokenly. “You couldn’t sing, you could only hum your songs.”

Softly Red started to hum the melody of “We Become One”, another of her favorites. And Sybil started to cry.

“Oh, Red,” she wailed. “I’m so – SORRY!”

Not knowing what else to do, or how to comfort her friend, Red patted the surface of the blade awkwardly. It didn’t feel like nearly enough, so she stumbled to her feet, picked up the

weapon by the handle, and carefully hugged it within her arms.

Sybil's cries eventually dwindled after a minute. "Thank you, Red," she said weepily. "Soooo, I'm dead? Dying? Some kind of mechanized monstrosity? Judging by my dream – sorry, I suppose calling it a 'memory' would be more accurate – any of those could be true."

Red held the weapon away from her and shrugged.

"Could you perhaps find a mirror, Red? A lady likes to know how she looks when she's in public."

That part was easy, at least. The walls of the Empty Set's auditorium had mirrored walls in several places. Red went to the closest one and hoisted the sword up in front of it.

"Dear GOD!" Sybil gasped, shocked. "I'm in the Transistor?!"

Red's eyebrows rose. She knew what the sword was??

"Oh dear, oh dear, this is very bad, this is very bad," Sybil repeated in dismay. "This explains a few things, and they're all VERY BAD."

Red cocked her head, trying to convey to Sybil that *nothing* explained things to her.

"Yes, all right, you couldn't know what's going on," Sybil realized. "You see, ugh, where do I begin? I have this small . . . circle of friends who I haven't introduced to you yet, of course. They include Administrator Grant Kendrell, his husband Asher, and an engineer named Royce Bracket."

It seemed whistling was another one of those things Red could no longer do, like screaming and singing. She didn't recognize two of those names, but Grant Kendrell had been an

administrator for as long as Red could remember. He was the closest thing Cloudbank had to an “elder statesman”.

“I’ve been over at the Kendrells’ apartment several times,” Sybil continued, “and they’ve got blueprints and drawings all over the place of something that looks remarkably like what you’re holding in your hand, something they call the Transistor. They’ve said that it will revolutionize life in Cloudbank, but they . . . they were always short on details.”

Something about the way Sybil said that last part didn’t exactly ring true for Red, but she let it go for now.

“Asher Kendrell is the reason I’m here tonight, actually,” Sybil added.

Red had forgotten. She’d come to the Empty Set looking for any of the three men who had attacked her and murdered her friend. She’d never even imagined Sybil would be there, considering Red hadn’t seen her sitting in the front row of the audience, where she might usually be found.

Sybil sighed. “I mentioned earlier that Asher called me on the telephone? He said he was calling to apologize, that they’d been responsible for all of the work-related flare-ups I had been dealing with all night, because they were trying to keep me away from your concert tonight. Of course, I was very cross with him!” she chuckled unhappily. “And I asked him why. And – and he told me that they were outside your dressing room, that they were going to kill you in just a minute, and that he wanted to apologize for that as well. Can you imagine? He was calling *me*, to say he was sorry for murdering *you*.”

It certainly sounded like an odd form of manners to Red.

“Well, I became extremely upset, as you might imagine. I demanded to know why, and he claimed that I was too ‘wrapped up in that singer’, that ‘I was losing interest in anything that had nothing to do with that singer’, and that ‘they were doing this for my own good, because that singer has been a terrible influence on you’.”

Red snorted. That was just crazy. Except for the part about Sybil becoming too wrapped up in her, she'd had firsthand knowledge of THAT.

"I know, right?" Sybil said. "So, at this point I'd become rather frantic. I'd – look, I totally panicked, and the rest of the night became something of a blur to me. There was no way I could get to the Empty Set in time, and yet I remember racing out of my building and taking the first taxi I could find. I know I tried to call you, but there was no answer. I even tried calling that horrible meathead who's always lurking around you, but he's not even in the phone directory. How can someone live in Cloudbank and not be in the phone directory?!"

Red turned the Transistor around so that Sybil was looking at her, not the mirror, and she glared angrily at her. It. Whatever.

"Oh," Sybil said after a moment. "He saved you, did he?"

Red nodded.

"Is he – all right?"

She drew a finger across her throat.

"I see," Sybil replied. "I – I'm sorry, Red, that was frightfully rude of me. He was your friend long before I was, and I'm glad he made that kind of sacrifice for you. We just, we never really got along, he and I."

That was understating it. He hadn't liked or trusted Sybil from the start. He'd always been a bit of a conspiracy theorist, spinning wild tales about the elitist rich and how they wanted to turn Cloudbank into a corrupt oligarchy. And he'd flat-out accused Sybil of being one of the worst of them, suggesting that she only saw Red as a possession that she wanted to hoard all to herself, like some kind of evil dragon in a cave. Red had always preferred to see the best in people, though, and she'd shrugged off his warnings.

Then again, a wealthy and respected city administrator who moved in the same social circles as Sibyl HAD tried to murder her tonight . . .

“Red? Are you there, Red?”

Red suddenly realized she’d been too lost in thought to pay attention to what Sibyl was saying. She nodded sheepishly.

“I was just wondering – what is going on here? I mean, you’re standing in the middle of the Empty Set, and I haven’t heard any patrons or employees come to check on the young woman in the torn dress carrying a very large sword. Where are all the people?”

She shrugged.

“*Nobody?* When was the last time you saw somebody other than me? Or whatever I was exactly before I was int – inside a giant sword?”

Red shook her head, and drew a finger past her throat once more.

“Your dead friend? You haven’t seen *anybody* since then?”

Actually, now that Red thought about it, that was true. Granted, there seemed to be angry Process robots roaming the streets, so people had probably taken shelter indoors. But that couldn’t be *everywhere*, could it?

But that wasn’t what Red had meant. When she mimed slitting her own throat, she had been referring to the three men who tried to kill her. Because while she didn’t have any answers to Sybil’s questions, she did have a plan. She was going to find Grant Kendrell, and she was going to see how HE liked losing someone he cared about.

Which meant she'd better get moving. They'd already remained there too long. There was no telling how long it would take before Grant or the others realized that the trap they'd left for her, somehow turning Sybil into a Process against her will, had failed. No telling what they'd send after her next.

"Red, where are we going?" Sybil asked as Red turned away from the mirror and began hauling the Transistor towards the Empty Set's private dock. It wouldn't be hard to find the Kendrells. Everyone in Highrise knew where the administrator lived, and Red lived closer to him than most.

"Red? R – oh, right, your voice."

There had to be a boat down by the dock. She'd take it as close to Highrise as she could get, and then she'd just have to hoof it the rest of the way. Sure, there would be more Processes along the way, but she'd defeated the Sybil-thing. How much harder could they be?

"This is very disconcerting, I feel like I'm being dragged by my feet somewhere."

And at least the journey wouldn't feel quite so lonely, now that she had Sybil's Trace along for the ride. She'd probably be a big help. She had already mentioned this Royce person, who was clearly the third man who'd tried to kill her. Sybil must know where he lived.

"Red? Hellooooo, Red?"

But Red would deal with him after she'd dealt with the Kendrells. Let him know that he'd be the only one left.

"Red?! RED!!!"

Red stopped twenty feet away from the dock. There was a nice boat there waiting for her, but Sybil sounded irritated. She hoisted the Transistor up, and looked at it expectantly.

“I said, where are we going?”

She pointed in the direction of Highrise. Some of the tall residential buildings for the city’s wealthier folk could be seen even from the Empty Set.

“Oh dear, you’re going after Grant and Asher, aren’t you?”

Red nodded.

“Probably going to kill them, then Royce?”

Now Red smiled.

“Yes, I see.” Sybil’s voice hesitated. “Before we go, could you please use that access point over there?”

Red looked over and decided she could take a minute. At the very least, she could see what Function Sybil had unlocked in the Transistor for her.

Once she activated the access point, she quickly spotted what was new, a big box labeled “HELP()”. That certainly sounded appropriate.

“I would push the Help button, Red. I want to show you something. Sort of a backdoor into the system.”

Red did as instructed, and was surprised to see that, as a list of options like with the other Traces she’d added, a separate link appeared titled, sure enough, “BACKDOOR”.

“Just select that.”

When she did, Red was startled badly when a glowing green portal seemed to open in the air itself. In fact, it floated a foot away from her, above the water. She looked back at the Transistor.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to frighten you. Let’s go in, may we?”

Red wasn’t sure if that sounded like a good idea, and this must have been obvious to Sibyl, because she added, “Trust me, please? I was hoping I wouldn’t have to tell you this, but I think you need to hear it very much, and we don’t have a lot of time.”

She sounded very urgent about it, so Red picked up the Transistor, and gingerly stepped out into the empty air, half-expecting to touch only water.

But instead, she felt only . . . *sand*???

To be continued . . .

Chapter End Notes

I realize that the first in-game Backdoor doesn't appear until after Red has crossed the river and left the boat, but I figure Sybil can access the Sandbox from anywhere, seeing as how she's much more "in control" here than she was in the game, as long as she has an access point.

Speaking of which, the whereabouts of the Subject/Boxer/Blue will be addressed, don't worry.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Red knows that sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better, but this is getting ridiculous.

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Three

Red could only stare. This was . . . not what she had been expecting. She'd half-expected to end up bobbing in the river.

Instead she was standing on a quiet, sandy shore, with a lone tree towering overhead at the other end. Some kind of inlet lapped along the shoreline peacefully. It was all so bizarrely idyllic that for a moment Red could almost believe there weren't Processes somewhere behind her, waiting to – what was behind her anyway?

She spun around, only to find herself staring at a portal similar to the one she'd seen at the dock. The only difference was this time, the beach beyond it was shrouded in mist. It looked almost like a flat canvas onto which a foggy shore had been painted.

Red experimentally put her hand out to the left of the portal. It didn't go even a half-inch past it. It encountered some kind of solid resistance, and the fog twitched and gleamed briefly.

Okay, so it was like a flat monitor into which a foggy shore had been projected.

Dismissing it, Red turned back to explore the beach some more. Every new detail was so – normal-looking that it felt jarring after the night she'd had. The hammock, the open fire, the

beach ball? She could almost forget the urgent situation that waited for her back where she'd come from.

Maybe that was the idea. Sybil had admitted she had a connection to her would-be killers. Maybe she thought she could coerce Red into spending time here, giving those bastards the delay they needed to escape.

Maybe she was being hugely unfair to Sybil, who'd given no indication of betraying her, and who in fact had been betrayed by the murderers herself.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Sybil said wistfully.

Red nodded, not that it was visible from the Transistor's angle.

"I was certainly never an administrator, but in my position I had certain privileges. This place was one of them," Sybil explained. "I'd come here when I needed a break from my insane workload, eat my lunch, spend a few hours relaxing, and then return to face the afternoon."

Red wasn't sure how to react to that. She was doing the math in her head, and the hands on the clock weren't adding up.

"That's the main reason I asked you to come here," Sybil continued. "Time is a little – funny in here. Not that I'm entirely sure where 'here' is. Royce . . . anyway, his explanation was very long and confusing, something about the Process and pockets and loops. All I really remember was him saying that 'if you think too hard about it, you might begin to question your sanity'. So I don't think about it."

Royce, she'd said. Royce Bracket, the engineer, the killer.

"Look, the important thing is, I've spent hours at a time here, only to return to my office and discover that only five minutes had passed. I can tell you everything you need to know, and

you'll still have plenty of time to be the hero I'm sure you can be," Sybil said. "Why don't you just take a couple minutes to acclimate yourself? I'm still trying to acclimate myself to this world I'VE found myself in. Lie in my hammock, dip your toes in the water, whatever you like. Be right back."

Red sighed silently. Sybil had this big, important thing to tell her, and now she was dragging her feet.

She had a bad feeling she wasn't going to like it, whatever it was.

Still, she did as Sybil asked. Red tested the "ocean" and discovered that it certainly felt real enough, and naturally it was neither too cold nor too hot. The hammock seemed to hold itself perfectly still as you got into it, then lazily rocked back and forth on its own once you were in. The fire felt warm even from a distance, which was probably why the dog was sleeping next –

That wasn't a dog.

Slowly Red slid out of the hammock and, without taking her eyes off the fire, moved towards the Transistor, still resting against the tree. It looked kind of like a dog, but that was unquestionably a Process. It wasn't one she'd fought before, but dogs were supposed to have FUR, not smooth, metallic surfaces.

Red grabbed at the Transistor's hilt with her left hand until she got hold of it, then brought her right around. It was in some kind of "sleep mode", and she didn't feel comfortable just waiting until it woke up.

"Red? Red, what's going on? Where are we going?"

Keeping the Transistor between herself and the Process, Red swiveled it so that the blade was facing forward.

"What, the dog? Red, no, that's just Luna, it's . . . oh, Luna," Sybil said, her voice suddenly turning very sad at the end.

It must have been a real dog before, and the Process got to it, just like it got to Sybil. No wonder she sounded so sad, Sybil must have just figured it out.

And just in the nick of time, because the Process' ears perked up. Its eyes lit up, and it raised its head. Seeing Red, it bounced to its feet.

Shit. Red pulled the Transistor back for a Breach(). If that wasn't enough to kill it, she'd shift into Turn and finish it off.

"Red, no, stop, STOP! That's Luna, she's my dog!"

The Process became twice as excited as it was before, and it ran forward, barking. Even the Processes could talk better than her.

"Luna, oh Luna," Sybil said. "It's been so long, there's my good girl!"

Red lowered the Transistor slightly. Sybil didn't seem at all bothered now by the Process' appearance. In fact, she was acting now like this "Luna" was perfectly all right.

For its part, Luna looked as confused as she felt. It turned its head left and right, probably wondering why it could hear Sybil's voice, but couldn't see or smell her.

"Red, I'm dreadfully sorry, I should have warned you. Yes, Luna is a Process, but she was designed and created long before things started going crazy in Cloudbank. She's a self-contained unit, so whatever is making the Processes violent, it wouldn't have affected her," Sybil said.

Suddenly Luna leapt up onto Red, supported by its hind legs. It ignored her, though, focused entirely on the Transistor.

“I never had a pet as a child,” Sybil explained. “And with my busy schedule, there’s no way I could have one as an adult, I wouldn’t be home enough to take care of it. So I – had one built for me. I keep her here because Process pets are practically unheard of in Cloudbank, so I never have to answer any questions.”

Luna whined, nosing the Transistor.

“But she’s not mine any longer,” Sybil added miserably. “Not without arms to play with her, or legs to run with her, or any kind of body at all. I’ve lost Luna too.”

Red could sympathize with Sybil, even though being this close to a Process, even one that wasn’t trying to kill her, was freaking her out.

For its part, the “dog” clearly had no idea what to make of Sybil and the Transistor. Giving up, it turned its head toward Red and nudged her hand.

“I think she wants you to pet her, Red,” Sybil said. “I’d appreciate it if you could try, although I’m sure being this close to a Process is very alarming for you. But I’m not exactly up to the challenge any longer.”

Red winced. Gingerly reaching up with her free hand, she carefully scratched behind Luna’s ears for a few moments.

This seemed to pacify the dog slightly, and it finally stopped trying to climb on Red, dropping down to all fours and scampering over to the oversized beach ball. It looked back at her expectantly.

“Don’t worry, I won’t ask you to play fetch,” Sybil said. “We don’t have that kind of luxury. Why don’t you just go sit by the fire instead, and we can talk?”

Since Red was itching to go back out into the real world and track down the men who murdered her friend – both her friends, truthfully – she was more than happy to comply. She

plunged the Transistor into the sand, sinking the tip in several inches, so that it remained upright after Red had let go. She sat down near the fire, trying not to jump when Luna suddenly came up next to her and settled down on its haunches.

“Yes, well, good. So . . . where to begin?”

Red waved her hand in the air, as if to say, “Come on, let’s get on with this”.

“Right, of course, sorry. I just – I’m not looking forward to what I have to tell you. I’m only telling you because it’s for your own safety, and for the safety of the people of Cloudbank.”

None of this sounded good to her.

“Perhaps at the beginning would be best. Do you ever think back to your childhood, Red? Do you have any strong memories of when you were a girl?”

Red blinked. That was a really strange way to begin a conversation. Of course she had strong memories of when she was a child. Like the time she first heard . . . or there was that time . . . or in school when she once . . .

Her eyes widened. She looked at the Transistor and shook her head. The more she thought about it, the more she realized how little of her life she could remember before her teen years. It was all just vague impressions to her.

“I thought so. I had the same problem myself. I believe it’s a problem we share with all of Cloudbank, actually. No one knows why for certain, but my – former friends and I believed that it had to do with the city itself, as well as its peculiar form of government. Everything can change on the people’s whim, and everything does. Nothing looks like it does twenty years ago, or five years ago. We believed that there was nothing about Cloudbank to *ground* people’s minds in the past, and so our long-term memories atrophied. What was the point of memories if nothing lasted? Perhaps in fifty more years, we won’t even be able to remember yesterday anymore.”

Red thought this was getting a little too philosophical for her, and more importantly she couldn't see what made all this so urgent for her. Fifty years? For all they knew, Cloudbank wouldn't last another fifty HOURS.

Sybil sighed. "When everything changes, nothing changes. That was the motto of the Camerata."

Red suddenly straightened. *The Camerata*. It was almost as if the Transistor had finally chosen now to begin speaking in her friend's voice. The Camerata had been a favorite subject of his when they were alone. Well, "favorite" in that he talked about them a lot. Not "favorite" because he liked them. He despised them. They were the "corrupt oligarchy" that he'd so often warned her about. He hadn't known who the members of the Camerata were exactly, but he was utterly convinced of their depravity and lust for power.

And Red could suddenly guess who they were. Grant Kendrell, Asher Kendrell, Royce Bracket . . . and Sybil Reisz.

"You've heard of us?" Sybil asked, confirming what Red had thought was a pretty easy guess. "I'm surprised, even few of the administrators have. The Camerata ran the city behind the scenes. Every time the people of Cloudbank voted for change? It was the Camerata who made it happen, and the Process was how we did it. I never truly understood how it worked. Royce professed to, although I'm not convinced. The Process is some kind of nanotechnological artificial intelligence with the power to control the most fundamental building blocks that everything is made of.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you, Red? The Process can manipulate matter at its subatomic level. It can change everything about anything. The Process can turn a working motorcycle into a perfectly edible orange. A lit stick of dynamite into an ordinary park bench. A balloon into a two-ton bronze sculpture. Everything can be made to change . . . and as it happens, 'everything' includes 'everyone'."

Everyone? Did she mean . . . people?

Red stared at the Transistor, transfixed, as Sybil revealed all. "The plan was relatively simple," she said, "if twofold. The short-term objective was meeting the public demand for anything new and exciting. Thanks to our democratic system, the people's tastes could turn

on the drop of a hat – or on the drop in the polls of yesterday’s hot young artist today. As you may have been somewhat aware, Cloudbank’s artistic community simply couldn’t keep pace with the city population’s rather rapacious hunger for the next big thing, not on its own.”

If that was an attempt at distraction, it wasn’t working.

“But the Process had the technological capacity to supplement the limits of human creativity by manufacturing dazzling delights out of thin air. All it needed was a little artistic knowledge and ability of its own, something computers are woefully short on. Royce . . . he suggested that the best way to teach the Process these things, was to go directly to the source. And that,” Sybil said heavily, “was how we first integrated someone.”

Integrated?

“Integrated sounds wonderfully euphemistic, doesn’t it, Red? It made rationalizing our actions even easier if we didn’t call it ‘murder’.”

Red’s mouth fell open in what felt like a perfect circle.

The red circle in the center of the Transistor appeared to be fixed on a spot on the ground somewhere in front of Red’s feet. “Do you remember a comedian by the name of Shomer Shasberg? I wouldn’t blame you if you don’t, that’s a common failing for most of Cloudbank’s residents.”

But Red did. He had been a tremendous talent, before he seemingly vanished off the face of the earth. “Nervous breakdown,” they’d said. “Gone to the Country”, they’d said. More euphemisms, when you thought about it.

“We arranged to have a private showing of Shomer’s,” Sybil continued. “Just the five of us. And after he was finished, Grant took the Transistor and plunged it into his chest. Five minutes later, his body had been reduced to its most basic building blocks, while his Trace forcibly became one with the Transistor, and by extension the Process. All so bloodless and . . . Red?”

Red had stopped hearing Sybil's words. She'd risen to her feet slowly, and then stumbled backwards.

Grant took the Transistor and plunged it into his chest.

Her friend had died the exact same way, at the exact same man's hand. She could see it all in her mind, so crystal clear. How he'd emerged breathlessly from the shadows, looking and sounding like he'd run a marathon, and leapt in front of her. How moist and thick the sound had been as the Transistor buried itself in his chest, instead of hers.

How had it never truly hit her until this very moment? She was protecting herself with the very machine that had taken her friend's life, and she felt like a little of the blood on his killers' hands had been passed along to her.

The machine facing across from her was the engine of her life's ruin, and Shasberg's, and who knew how many others? Oh, right, Sybil knew. Because she'd been there for all of them. She was one in a quartet of serial killers, and it seemed somehow apropos, in a horribly macabre way, that the murder weapon spoke with the voice of a murderess.

And Red had thought Sybil was her *friend*?

She couldn't take it all in. She couldn't "process" it, no pun intended. Two hours ago she'd been a singer, nothing more. A perfectly ordinary woman with a pretty face and a prettier voice. How the *fuck* was Red supposed to come to grips with everything that had happened to her since then? Her best friend dead. Her next-closest friend exposed as a killer and betrayer. Her voice inexplicably gone. Killer robots trying to make her one of them. And possibly the fate of an entire city on her shoulders.

Red was done. She was finished. Her rational mind had shut down, and all she could think of was getting as far as she could from the homicidal Transistor and its sweet, untrustworthy voice. All she had to do was escape from this awful Sandbox, this spider's web, and she'd be free from it all.

“Red? Red? Where are you going? Red?! RED!!!”

She wouldn't listen. That way would only lead to her death. The exit was twenty yards away.

She began to run.

“RED, NO!!! IT'S TOO DANGEROUS, YOU'LL BE KILLED!!! GET BACK HERE RIGHT THIS INSTANT, RIGHT NOW!!!”

It was too dangerous out THERE? What a laugh coming from her!

Ten yards away . . .

And that was when a four-legged Process bolted past her and interposed itself between her and her escape. It barked at her, suddenly less friendly than it had been earlier.

Of course. Another of Sybil's creations unsheathing its hidden claws. Luna and the Sandbow weren't a strange pet and a private getaway, they were traps for the unwary.

Red tried to slip past it, then juke'd the other way, but Luna continued to block her way, barking over and over again.

She could have burst into tears at that moment. She wanted nothing more than to get away from here, and this stupid robot was stopping her. If only she had . . .

She turned her head. The Transistor. Right. The only weapon that could destroy a Process like Luna. Or - like the hundreds of Processes currently prowling Cloudbank on the other side of that portal. Processes she'd be completely defenseless against if she went out there without the Transistor. She'd probably end up like the Sybil-beast inside the Empty Set.

The Transistor had always been heavy, but knowing that her survival depended on it, made the very thought of it feel like a ball and chain around her ankle. Dully Red turned away from the exit. She could escape the Sandbox, but she couldn't escape the Transistor. Or the dead. Or Sybil.

"I'm exceedingly sorry, Red," Sybil now said, her voice trembling. "But I threw away my life's work, my mission, my career and my body, for the sole purpose of keeping you alive, and I can't bear to let it all go to waste. Luna?"

Red glanced at Luna and saw it had returned to a much less aggressive posture, although it maintained its position between her and the exit.

"You couldn't know this yet, Red, but that's what HELP() does. It summons a copy of Luna to assist you in battle against its fellow Processes. I can't summon one myself, only you can, but once it's appeared, I do have some control over its actions. Luna was the only way I could protect you from . . . from the fact that you now despise me so much, that being killed by a Process was almost preferable to being near me," Sybil explained, sounding as if the mere words caused her physical pain.

Red didn't care. She didn't care if Sybil was sad. Red was grieving for her friend who was dead, and for her other friend who never really existed, and for the life she no longer had.

Without even thinking about it, she screamed. She screamed and screamed until her voice felt hoarse.

It was only when she'd finally stopped to breathe that she realized what she'd just done.

She'd screamed. Out loud. With her voice.

Red clutched at her throat with one hand and stared at the Transistor. "Could – could you hear that too?"

“Ah,” Sybil said with grim satisfaction. “I hoped that would work.”

She finally had her voice back, and Red had absolutely no idea what to say.

To be continued . . .

Chapter End Notes

I didn't really have an ending to this story planned. I think I finally came up with one last night.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!