

In the Case of Bailey Gilande

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In the Case of Bailey Gilande

by [Croik](#)

Summary

In the end, the Camerata integrated the data of nearly two dozen of Cloudbank's citizens into the transistor. Bailey Gilande was the first.

Notes

I almost included a character death warning, but then again, I don't consider "going to the country" to be literally death, exactly...? At least, I don't mean for it to be, in this fic. Anyway, I hope you like it!

What color would you like the sky to be today?

It wasn't Bailey's favorite vote, though one she participated in almost eighty-seven percent of the time. The terminal stood just outside her place of work, and she always arrived early enough that the sky color had yet to be settled, so there was more reason to vote than otherwise. She rarely chose according to her mood, preferring instead to call upon her knowledge of statistics to pick the option she expected to go through, or converting the letters from each option to numbers and calculating their sums. On rare occasions she would look to the other early morning workers making their way into the administration building and imagine what one of them would have picked.

That morning the options were,

Caribbean Aqua

Cerulean Blue

Baily tipped her head to the side. *The C's cancel each other out*, she thought. *Aqua and blue, alpha and beta. Yesterday was cobalt. Perhaps tomorrow will be cornflower, or cadet. Cecelia must be the one choosing options this week. CAC, CBC. CACB or CBCB... 659CEF...*

But then her eyes skipped lower, and she realized that there was a third option.

Shimmer

Bailey frowned. Her mind raced back like lines of scrolling code as she tried to remember if *Shimmer* had ever been an option before, what color it might have been referring to, who among the OVC would choose such ambiguous wording. She couldn't think of any answers. She would have done a quick search on her assist if not for the man behind her waiting to make his own selection at the terminal. So she reached out, hesitated, and finally pushed option three.

The sky immediately began to change. The hazy glow of early morning in the east rippled outward, darkening from sunrise orange into a deep, prickly gold. It stretched from one horizon to the other in a wave of undulating color, until everything gleamed warm, metallic brilliance.

It took Bailey's breath away.

The man behind her saw her staring and looked up as well. His jaw dropped, and together they marveled at the glittering display. Then he turned to her. "What did you vote for?"

Bailey stepped back so he could see for himself, but the screen only read, *Thank you for voting!* When the terminal registered a new voter in place, it asked of him, *Would you prefer clear or cloudy skies today?* He selected clear, and after sharing with Bailey a baffled look, he continued into the building.

Bailey lingered a moment longer, watching the sky shine, and then went inside.

Twenty minutes later, the OVC released an apology for the anomaly in the vote. The sky then shifted to Caribbean Aqua for the rest of the day, which had been voted on by sixty-five percent of the population by the time the incident occurred. Bailey tried to put it out of her mind and focus on work, but she found her eyes drawn continually to the window. The sky had changed, just for her. She knew it was foolish to think of it that way, but she also knew that what she had witnessed was not an anomaly, or a glitch. It was not a mistake. Her one vote had changed everything, had *mattered*.

She searched the archives. In the city's history there were numerous accounts of various glitches resulting from faulty terminals, but never at such a scale. She calculated the possibility of it being a random mistake to less than eight percent. But there was nothing to suggest what else it might have been, either.

The next morning, Bailey arrived at work twelve minutes earlier than usual. As she had suspected, cornflower and cobalt were up for the morning vote, and below it...

Spiral

Bailey pressed it and then looked expectantly upward. As before the change was immediate: the soft yellow hues of sunrise stretched up from the horizon in tendrils and began to twist, swirling into sleepy blue, blending the early morning colors into dazzling galaxies. Slowly, the spiral patterns took over the entire skyline. Bailey laughed with childish delight. It was beautiful, and it was hers. No one had ever made beauty for her before.

She took her assist out of her jacket and, for the first time, snapped a selfie of herself with her sky as a backdrop. Then she hurried inside, and went about her work with an almost passionate fervor.

The sky only lasted ten minutes. The OVC did not apologize for the anomaly.

When Bailey arrived at work the following morning, there were two people already standing near the terminal, and a third crouched between them, his hands deep in the machine's innards.

Bailey's heart sank. *So, they've figured it out already*, she thought as she drew closer. *If only they'd left it alone for one more day...*

One of the people at the terminal Bailey recognized as Lillian Platt, current head of the OVC. They had met twice before, for a total time of less than thirteen minutes, during the first stages of Bailey's archival upheaval. The other was a tall, angular man with black hair and a cigarette pressed between his lips. Bailey had the feeling she had seen him before, but she couldn't place him, which was in itself unusual. She prided herself on her memory. The third was wearing the uniform of an OVC tech.

"And you're sure it was this terminal?" Lillian asked her companion, crossing her arms. "The surveillance feed didn't pick up anything unusual."

"It was this terminal," said the stranger. "I'm certain of it. In fact..." He glanced over his shoulder and spotted Bailey, as if he had long expected her to be there.

Bailey continued forward without falter. She had done nothing wrong, after all--she had only selected from available options. The pair turned to greet her, and she nodded in acknowledgement. "Good morning, Lillian."

"Bailey. Good morning." Lillian nodded to the man next to her. "This is Royce Bracket, from Building and Planning."

"Bailey Gilande," Bailey introduced herself, offering her hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise." He shook her hand, his grip firm and professional. Bailey was caught a little off guard by his bright, piercing green eyes. "Did you happen to notice anything unusual about this terminal yesterday?"

Bailey had a lot of practice keeping emotion out of her face. "You're talking about the anomaly in the sky-color vote?"

"'Anomaly' may not be the most accurate description," said Royce.

"But that is what we're calling it, until we know for sure," said Lillian before he could elaborate. "Bailey, what did you vote for yesterday?"

Bailey had nothing against the OVC, and nothing for it, either. There was no reason to lie, though she tried to think of one anyway. For once she was not grateful for her city's efficiency. "There were three options to choose from: cornflower, cobalt, and spiral."

"And you picked spiral."

"Yes." She shrugged slightly. "I thought maybe the OVC was simply trying something new."

The corner of Royce's lip twitched with amusement that Lillian obviously did not share. As they considered Bailey's words, the tech closed up the terminal and pushed to his feet.

"There's nothing mechanically or electronically wrong with it," he reported. "Nothing suspicious that I can see. Which means..."

"It was hacked," supplied Royce, despite a silencing look from Lillian. "It would have only taken a few dozen lines of code, uploaded just before the start of the vote. Simple, for a prank."

Lillian sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Then it's time to call in Administration, and hope they're willing to spend the manpower to look into it."

"I have friends in Admin; I'm sure they'll handle it without much fuss."

Bailey knew she should have simply continued on her way to work, but as the three of them prepared to leave, she couldn't help herself. "Excuse me," she said, "but is it really so important as to trouble Admin? It's not like there was any harm."

Lillian frowned and looked to Royce, but he only puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. "Not harm, exactly," Lillian said carefully. "Not yet. But if someone is able to tamper with the

voting process, that has the potential to harm everything we've built here. What if they decide to tamper with more than the color of the sky?" She shook her head. "I can't have anyone taking power like that for themselves, even if it doesn't seem like much of an inconvenience now."

"I understand," said Bailey, though she couldn't help but feel a pang of childish disappointment. "If I see anything else strange, I'll be sure to report it."

"Thank you." Lillian nodded to her employee and then to Bailey. "It was good to see you again, Bailey."

They started to move on, but paused when Royce made no move to follow. "Go on ahead," he said. "Unless you need me back at the OVC for something else."

"No, I think that's it. Thank you again for your help, Mr. Bracket."

They shook hands, and Lillian departed, staff with her. Bailey hesitated. It was time for her to be at her station, but Royce hadn't moved on, and in fact looked as if he expected something from her. She drew herself up. "If you don't mind my asking," she said, "why is someone from building and planning doing errands for the OVC?"

Royce sucked on his cigarette. "I was an architect," he said. "Code is a hobby of mine. When the, ahem, *anomaly* occurred, a friend of mine at OVC staff asked me to help them track the source."

"It sounds as though you have a lot of friends."

"No." Royce gave a tight-lipped smile. "As a matter of fact, I do not."

Bailey smiled in turn. "Me, neither," she said.

It was an unusual way to begin a friendship.

"Do you mind if I follow you in?" said Royce. "I've heard that the archive recently underwent some changes that I'm interested to see for myself."

Bailey straightened and almost didn't know what to say. The archive was more than her responsibility, it was her pride, and she had devoted weeks to its revival and upkeep. She honestly wasn't sure if she ought to be offended to hear him refer to her work so casually, or thrilled he was expressing interest at all. She even considered he might have been mocking her. But Royce only continued to stare back at her patiently, his eyes bright and curious. She'd never seen eyes quite like it, and she found herself cycling through hex codes.

He was still waiting.

"Yes," Bailey said. "That is, I will happily introduce you to the new system, seeing as I am its current overseer." She turned toward the entrance, and the doors opened for them.

Bailey gave her visitor a "tour" of the upgraded archive as promised, and soon realized that not only was Royce's professed interest genuine, he had more than half an idea of what he

was doing after all. He only asked a few questions, but each was precise and pertinent. He could see the simple efficiency of her code work that even some in her own department had failed to grasp, and at one point--to her barely contained glee--offered a suggestion on how to improve it. The entirety of his visit took no more than twenty-seven minutes and some seconds, but it filled Bailey with such sustenance that she barely remembered the morning incident that led to it, until she was walking Royce out once more.

"I'm certain that Admin will want to look into it," he said. "They don't take kindly to authority being, shall we say, *wielded*, so brazenly. But it was a very pleasant diversion, at the time, wouldn't you say?"

"Very pleasant," Bailey agreed. Something about his calm manner made her feel bold. "I might even go so far as to say that I would happily forgo my vote on occasion, if it meant being surprised sometimes with more like it."

Royce paused just before the exit to stamp his cigarette out in the ashtray he should have used going in. "That's easy for you to say, though, isn't it?" he said with a sideways look. "When it was your vote that mattered most the last two days."

Bailey's heart gave a thud. "I didn't hack the terminal," she said.

She realized a moment too late how premature her denial must have sounded, but Royce nodded, unconcerned. "I know," he said. "And I don't think it was anyone you know, either." He shrugged. "We'll just have to wait and see what Administration turns up. In any case, nice meeting you, Ms. Gilande."

"Actually..." Bailey hesitated. She was struck suddenly by the realization that she likely would never meet the man again, and in light of that, an explanation might have been more trouble than it was worth. Then she found herself saying it anyway. "It's just Gilande, if you don't mind."

Royce raised an eyebrow, but a moment later understanding came into his face. "Ah, that's right, you're..." Bailey tensed, her mind quickly spinning with how he might be familiar with her, but he only trailed off with a look of intense thoughtfulness. He offered his hand. "How about just Bailey?" he said.

Bailey relaxed as she shook his hand. "Just Bailey is fine."

"Just Royce," he returned, and with a nod, he left. Bailey returned to her work, and immediately devoted herself to exploring Royce's suggestions for the archive.

The next morning, Bailey arrived at her normal time. She did not expect to find any extra options in the daily vote nor any visitors, and in that regard she was not disappointed. The terminal blinked up at her with all its innocent normalcy as if no deviation in her routine had ever occurred.

What color would you like the sky to be today?

Sea foam green

A larger distinction than usual, but still unremarkable. *Lillian herself must have picked today's options*, Bailey thought. She selected green without really thinking and found herself curiously put out when the vote reported it was behind by seventeen percent. She would have moved on and focused herself on more important matters, but then the screen flickered, and an alert appeared on screen informing her of a newly received message. Mystified, she tapped it.

Bailey-

you're missing the minutes from some public admin defrags, 07.01.43-04.34.44. synched them here for you, ping my assist if I missed any.

@r.bracket.41003

Bailey stared for a long time, and at last she tugged her assist out of her jacket. As soon as it was prepped to receive the files, the terminal transferred them over, and she scrolled quickly through the offered data: a record of several Administration meetings convened to discuss proposed additions to the east bay pier, from before Bailey's time at the archives. The data not only included the finalized plans, but several incomplete incarnations that came before it, with reasons listed as to why each had been rejected. Bailey's eyes grew wider. She hadn't even known the data was missing in the first place, and she itched to add it back into the archive where it belonged.

But how did he know it was missing? Bailey saved Royce's assist locale to her contacts and continued inside. *He couldn't have combed the entire archive looking for my mistakes. Maybe he had an interest in those meetings and just happened to notice. But then how did he get the files?* Bailey's coat swished loudly as she turned the corner, reminding her to calm her pace. *His friend in Administration, I suppose. But why? For the sake of the archive?* Her cheeks felt hot. *For my sake?*

Bailey reached her office and moved swiftly to her station, transferring the new files even before sitting down. Whatever the impetus, the fact remained that Royce had, following their meeting the day before, put himself to some inconvenience for the sake of her archive. She thanked him via assist and almost couldn't stop smiling the rest of the day.

For a while, Bailey gained a new routine.

Every other morning or so, she would receive a message from Royce. Most of the time he pointed out errors in the archive, from missing files, to possibly biased reports, to simple mistakes in syntax and code. Sometimes he offered clerical suggestions, or passed on the assist locales of field experts to help her clarify unclear information. His correspondences were succinct almost to the point of rudeness, but Bailey understood the language of social awkwardness well. In fact, she found his straightforward honesty refreshing; it nothing else, he respected her enough to give her feedback knowing she was mature enough to accept it.

It was almost three weeks later that Royce messaged her with something completely unrelated to the archive, so early in the morning that Bailey had yet to leave her apartment.

Bailey-

I don't suppose you voted for this?

@r.bracket.41003

Frowning, Bailey moved to the window. She had forgotten all about the sky anomaly until seeing it for the third time.

It wasn't just a shine on the normal sky. It wasn't just a pattern drawn across familiar colors. The sky had become the surface of the ocean. Waves roiled from one horizon to the other, violently surging and crashing into each other in dark, blue-gray peaks tipped with frothing spray. The clouds that had been voted in the day before were racing each other across the turbulent seascape, lending to its ragged urgency, and wind hissed and whistled through the gaps in the narrowly placed High Rise towers. With her face turned upward Bailey couldn't see the morning lights of the city, struggling to gleam; there was only the storm churning above every awestruck citizen, powerful and humbling. When she stared long enough, she was convinced she could hear the waves crashing against some distant, invisible shore.

Before Bailey knew it, she was out on the street. Most every apartment had emptied, their owners gawking together like stunned children as they stared up at the impossible sight. It was aweing, and frightening, and beautiful, and Bailey ached, wishing she *had* voted for it. Wishing she could vote for it every day for the rest of her life.

Her assist pinged, and she connected without looking away from the spectacle. "Who did this?" she asked immediately. "Has Admin found them yet?" But the voice that answered wasn't Royce.

"My name is Farrah Yon-Dale," it said, and it took Bailey a moment to realize that the voice was echoing from several other assists: everyone gathered on the street was listening to the same message through their own device. "Sorry, to interrupt your morning with this, but I thought I should explain something, before the Admins try to say it again. No, this isn't a glitch. I made this for you, for everyone. I hope you like it."

The surface of the water overhead broke, and Bailey stared in wide-eyed wonder as a creature appeared among the waves: a great blue whale, its hide glossy and star-like, leaping in inverse toward the gaping cityfolk below it. Its bulk took up almost a quarter of the sky, and when it dove, the smack of its tail kicked up spray that spread for so far in every direction that Bailey was convinced she could feel it against her cheeks. Then the creature was gone, and the waves began to level out. Within minutes the sea had calmed into unbroken sky, and the clouds continued on their path toward fifty-eight percent voter approved showers.

All of Cloudbank was left in uproar.

By the time Bailey arrived at work, the building was bustling with people. Two Administrators were already in the archives, searching through every remotely pertinent record to determine if there was a precedent for such large-scale city vandalism, not to mention digging up everything they could on Farrah Yon-Dale. It hardly seemed worth the

effort; she must have been hauled in by Central Admin already. Still, as soon as the Admins left, Bailey took their place in hunting out Farrah's history.

There wasn't much to find. After making her selections at Traverson Hall, Farrah had stayed on in the school's Chemical Coding lab, and had been contracted by the OVC on two separate occasions to aid their database developments. The second time had been for the meteorological division. Though she had a sizable social media presence, nothing in her personal blog or crossposts indicated an artistic bent to her studies. She did, however, take a *lot* of pictures. There were pictures of a small, colorful apartment; pictures of various, colorful people lounging in said apartment; pictures of different areas of the city, shot from low and tilted angles; pictures of the sky and different stages of the day, sometimes angled to catch people or landmarks blurred in the foreground. Farrah herself was in many of them, among friends and strangers, never too posey or too self-conscious. Every shot looked effortless, snapped in a moment of casual intimacy or else careless impulse. She seemed at ease in everything she did.

Bailey envied her.

For several days, Farrah was all anyone wanted to talk about. Voter turnout dropped as many people abstained, citing a lack of creative choices to pick from. Others struck up fierce debates over her having tampered with the OVC terminals in the first place and decried anyone eager to encourage further infractions. Farrah herself was nowhere to be found. She stopped posting to her blogs and speculation as to her fate at the hands of Administration ran rampant.

"Positive mention is up another thirteen percent," said Tennegan on his show, a week after the ocean-sky incident. "Honestly, folks, I haven't seen a stir like this since Darzi introduced us to reversible sneakers. Even the OVC--arguably the victims of this, yes, this heinous crime, is what we're supposed to be calling it I guess--even the OVC released an editorial today supporting young Ms. Yon-Dale's craft. From the desk of Mr. Kendrell, no less. Might we draw from this that the elder Mr. Kendrell intends to be lenient on Cloudbank's newest muse? Let us all hope so, because God only knows what we're going to do with all these requests people keep sending in if she's gone for good."

Then it happened; Bailey stepped off the train on her way to work in the morning, and when she looked up, the sky was in full bloom. Kaleidoscope flowers of every color blossomed in geometric patterns from one end of the sky to the other. It was lush and dizzying, and Bailey felt as if she were standing up on her toes, ready to be sucked up into soft and fragrant petals. As before, it only lasted for a few minutes, but it was breathtaking. Where Farrah's previous art had been raw, untamed nature, the flowers were structured, symmetrical, and precise. It was nothing anyone had asked for and every eye was on it.

Bailey didn't make it in to work. For the first time she simply didn't go in. She sat on a bench across from her building, listening to Cloudbank go about its morning business abuzz with excitement. Her chest was tight with emotion she couldn't properly identify, as if there were so many things she wished she could do, and say, and accomplish, but her arrows were all pointing in different directions. She couldn't move an inch. So she pinged Royce's assist.

Are you available?

Within only a few seconds his reply came.

JJ sea monster or mystery?

Mystery, Bailey replied, and with a deep breath she got back on the train.

It was too early for Junction Jan's to have filled with its usual lunch crowd, so Bailey had no problem spotting her company; Royce was seated at a table near the back, accompanied by a blonde woman with emerald lipstick. Bailey didn't know what to make of her at first. Her natural instinct was to retreat, as the stranger was obviously deeply embedded in their conversation, her hands excitedly gesturing--and Bailey was not someone prone to interrupting. But then Royce caught her eye, and he motioned toward her with his cigarette. She had no choice but to approach after all.

Fortunately, she stopped speaking once Bailey was beside them, though that then raised its own complications. "Hello, good morning," she said brightly, extending her hand. "You must be Bailey Gilande."

"I...am." Bailey shook her hand. She wasn't used to strangers knowing her name. "I'm sorry to interrupt."

"No, please, by all means." The blonde motioned to the chair next to her. "Mr. Bracket said to expect you. My name is Niola Chein--pleasure to meet you, really."

"Likewise," said Bailey as she sat down.

"You know her from the Goldwalk community outreach program from last summer," said Royce. "Assuming you ever go into Goldwalk, I mean."

Bailey remembered--the program, in any case, more so than the woman behind it. She fit Niola's smiling face into memories of program brochures and voting statistics. "Yes, I do. I remember the campaign; it was very successful, if I'm recalling correctly."

"Yes, very much so; thank you."

Royce puffed on his cigarette. "We were just discussing another possible project for Goldwalk," he said. When Niola looked to him as if asking him not to say too much, he deliberately ignored her. "She'd like me to design a series of gallery spaces for her."

"You're asking the right person, then," said Bailey. "Structures designed by Mr. Bracket have typically lasted sixty-two percent longer in the public favor than those by any other architect in Cloudbank."

Niola looked pointedly at Royce as if to say, *I told you so*. Royce only shrugged. "That's exactly why I sought him out," Niola said. "I was such a fan of his work. The arches in Fairview--the pierwalk in Eastown. Such sophisticated work. A shame to see him retire so young."

"I'm not retired," said Royce, tapping ash from his cigarette. "I'm just focusing on personal projects."

"Goldwalk *is* personal to me. You can make an exception for that, can't you?" Before he could answer, Niola turned to Bailey. "You saw the sky this morning, didn't you?" she carried on excitedly. "And last week? It's been such an inspiration to me, I can't hardly tell you. And the responses it's drawing! I was right: Cloudbank is *hungry* for her, I know it is."

Bailey's heart beat a little faster. "Do you know Farrah Yon-Dale?"

"No, not personally. Not *yet*." Niola smiled wistfully. "But I have a friend who does, and she's promised to introduce us. Such a talented young woman. The spaces I have in mind won't do much for her." She laughed, her voice like silver. "Her canvas is broad enough already! But this catalyst she's provided is going to open the door."

"What door is it going to open?" Royce prodded, almost boredly, as if he already knew everything Niola was about to say.

"The door to a new era of individualized artistry," Niola answered anyway. "A new voice for the people. The OVC has been telling us for years now how important the voting is. And I agree! I've supported them tirelessly, haven't I?"

"You have," said Royce.

"It is a valuable tool in connecting the community. Every man, woman, and other in Cloudbank has a voice, can make a difference. That was the platform Lillian Platt won her election to the board with, no? Celebrating the power and input of every citizen? But." Niola wagged her finger at Bailey, who might have thought it rude if she wasn't already swept up in her infectious excitement. "But it's not quite enough. We vote on *everything* now. The sky, the weather, the seasons. The metro, the sports teams, the entertainment venues. The food and drink, the--well, you know what I mean. So much rests in our hands every single day. And we are taking it for granted. When was the last time you got excited over a vote? When was the last time you really stopped and appreciated the outcome of your choice, and really knew that it mattered?"

"Thirty-one days ago," said Bailey.

Niola frowned, but then Royce explained, "Yon-Dale's first piece was hacked into the terminal just outside Bailey's office."

"Oh? Oh!" Niola's lipstick seemed to glow brighter the more animated she became. "Yes, you see? That's exactly what I'm talking about--Farrah's work. It's showing everyone that in order to be heard, it's not enough to just give everyone the same platform day in and day out. How is that progress? People want to *matter*. By providing them a small, dedicated space, we can give them that. Instead of it being the same already-famous voices all the time, we can have a clean slate for new talents. I mean, honestly, when was the last time you even heard of a designer that wasn't Darzi?"

"Fashion isn't...a priority of mine," Bailey said.

Niola gave her another frown, but then she laughed. "I feel like you're intentionally trying to crash my excitement."

Bailey quickly shook her head. "No, I understand," she said. "By supporting and promoting those of the highest positive mention percentage, the system stagnates. It's almost impossible to introduce alternative viewpoints without finding a way to boost their positive mention from a very early stage."

"Yes--yes, exactly." She looked to Royce expectantly.

"You overestimate the potential visibility of this gallery idea of yours," said Royce. "But...I suppose I could sketch a few things for you. The venue interests me."

"And that friend of yours in Admin?" Niola ventured hopefully.

"...I'll speak to him."

Niola wriggled happily in her chair before she was able to rein herself in. "Thank you, Mr. Bracket. I'm such a fan of your work--I can't wait to see what you come up with."

"At this point, it might as well be 'Royce,'" he said. "I'll ping you when I have something."

"Of course--thank you." Taking that as a gentle cue to leave, Niola stood from the table. "And you, Bailey. Do you mind that? Bailey?" She offered her hand again. "A pleasure meeting you."

"Yes--I mean, I don't mind." Bailey shook her hand. "Good luck with your project."

"Thank you! And you, with yours." Niola kept talking as she moved around the table. "I've followed the archive upgrades. So efficient! I'd like to pick your brain some other time, if you don't mind. I have so many questions about the early development of the district, it's so..." She laughed at herself. "Another time, another time. I'll leave you to your lunch. Good day, both of you!"

Bailey hardly knew how to respond. "Good day..."

Niola showed herself out, and in her wake, Royce and Bailey shared awkward smiles.

"She's really something," said Bailey.

"She is." Royce tapped on the table's menu screen, and within seconds, a waitress headed their way with a Mystery Jan's flatbread. "What do you really think about it, though? Think Cloudbank needs more artists?"

"The question isn't really if Cloudbank needs more artists," said Bailey, helping herself to the flatbread. Her mouth was watering and she suddenly realized she hadn't eaten breakfast that morning. "But whether Cloudbank needs to cultivate those it already has. There may be many more Farrah Yon-Dales out there that could produce amazing new works if only they had the means to relay it to an audience."

"And you like that idea? More Farrah Yon-Dales?"

Bailey frowned, trying to interpret the expression Royce was fixing her with. "I..." Her chest felt tight again with too many arrows. "I do," she said, and she wasn't sure why, but her throat stung. "I really do."

Royce continued to stare at her, eyes half lidded as if trying to disguise how intently he was focused. "It meant a lot to you, didn't it. That you were the first."

Bailey started to protest and then stopped herself so she could compose her thoughts more eloquently. "It wasn't...like that," she said, cutting her flatbread slice into smaller pieces. "Or, maybe it was. I don't..." Already she hated the way she sounded, and she forced herself to raise her eyes to meet Royce's. "Yes. Yes, it meant something to me. Honestly, I'm not even sure why, because I'm not like that."

"You're not like what?" said Royce, sounding very much like he had when prodding Niola.

"I'm not an artist." Bailey continued to cut her flatbread into increasingly smaller bites. "I'm not one of the people Niola was talking about--I have nothing to contribute to a gallery. I'm not one of Cloudbank's voices. I don't need people to hear me; I never have."

"Yes, you do." Royce speared one of the flatbread pieces off Bailey's plate and ate it. "I heard you."

Bailey blinked at him. "You..."

"What do you think that archive of yours is?" he continued. "It's not a celestial whale, but I know the work you've put into it." He raised an eyebrow. "Don't look so shocked; this is very basic psychology, you realize."

Bailey let out a huff and had to shake her head. "I'm not shocked," she said. "I'm a little embarrassed."

"Don't be. Hey." Royce waited until she was looking up. "It's not wrong, Bailey. We all want to matter, and you do. You matter."

Bailey tried to reply, but she couldn't. Her throat closed off and the thought that her voice might crack drove her to silence. But she smiled, and when Royce stole another piece of flatbread off her plate, she let him.

4A904B, she thought. *That's the color of his eyes.*

For the next few weeks, Bailey went back to her routine.

All her arrows pointed forward. She devoted herself to her archive with unrelenting fervor, reaching out to sources she had never considered before in search of rare and forgotten records, filing and compiling and categorizing in the most user-friendly ways possible. Royce continued to send her the occasional update of his own, snuck in among sketches of his work for Niola's proposed gallery. Niola herself even made an appearance to the archive one

morning for "research," and though Bailey was not well equipped to deal with that much lipsticked enthusiasm in her workplace, the intrusion was not unwelcome.

And through it all, the great Farrah debate raged on, spiking every time a new piece of artwork careened across the sky.

Then it came: an invitation signed by Administrator Kendrell, to a banquet honoring the unsung heroes of Cloudbank's infrastructure.

Friends in Admin? she messaged Royce.

You know better, was his reply, and, as usual, he was right.

The banquet posed to Bailey a great challenge--one that, two months earlier, she might not have been eager to face. But she picked her most appropriate attire and set out early in the evening, her head buzzing and steps light. The last time she had attended anything like a banquet was after graduating from Traverson Hall, and she had weathered it well enough. She spent the entire metro ride from her apartment coming up with conversation topics. At least she knew that if nothing else, she could use her tale of voting for Farrah's first demonstration as an open door to pleasant small talk.

Bailey got off at the same metro station she did when going to work; in fact, the venue was located within the Administration complex itself, making for a very familiar path. Along the way she passed the same OVC Terminal she did every morning, and was startled to see a young woman standing before it. Her heart skipped.

It was Farrah Yon-Dale; Bailey felt as if she would have recognized her even without having seen her photos in the archive. She was dressed in a flowing summer dress, her pale, pink hair lightly brushing her bare shoulders. She looked very young from behind, all her weight braced on one foot, kicking and scuffing at the ground with the other. Her assist was out and she was tapping furiously with both thumbs. As Bailey came closer, she could see lines upon lines of code scrolling across the terminal screen.

Bailey took in a deep breath. She didn't know why but her heart was suddenly pounding. "Farrah Yon-Dale?"

Farrah spun, her skirt and hair fanning around her. She fixed Bailey with wide eyes even as her thumbs continued to fly over the assist. "Are you an Admin?" she asked, her voice deeper than Bailey had expected.

"No, I..." Bailey shook her head. "I'm not."

Farrah turned back to the terminal. She didn't seem prepared to pay her intruder any further notice, so Bailey ventured closer. She only understood pieces of the code flowing over the terminal screen. "Are you..." When Farrah glanced to her she flinched and then felt foolish for it. "Excuse me. Are you going to change the sky again?"

"Yeah." Farrah finally stopped her typing and looked Bailey over. She seemed a little skittish, a little awkward, so unlike the thoughtful melancholy displayed in her many pictures.

Somehow it made Bailey feel more at ease. "You, um." Farrah shrugged. "Any requests?"

Bailey blinked. "You're asking me?"

"Didn't I just?"

"Yes, but..." Bailey felt as if her lungs were inflating like balloons, ready to lift her far above. There were so many things she would have liked to say to the mysterious young woman before her--about how inspired she was by her artistry, about the friendship it had drawn her to. She wanted to thank her for picking the terminal she passed by every day to pass on her colors and patterns and beauty, but she didn't know where to start. It all sounded so trite and childish in her head. So she straightened her back and smiled.

"4A904B," she said. "There's someone I want to thank."

Farrah pursed her lips, and after a moment she went back to tapping. She kept at it for some time without speaking or looking up again, until Bailey began to worry that she had asked for too much, or that Farrah wasn't interested in indulging such a plain request. Bailey was about to excuse herself, but was distracted by the hum of an approaching motorcycle engine. She glanced away and spotted the vehicle slowing as it approached the two of them. A woman was atop it, vibrant red hair poking out from beneath her helmet. She waved. "Farrah!"

"Coming!" Farrah called over her shoulder. She made a few final taps to her assist and then to the terminal surface, closing windows and calling up the normal OVC voting screen. "I'll leave it to you," she told Bailey, her lips curling in a fleeting smile before she turned and dashed to the motorcycle. As soon as she had hopped onto the back the woman turned the bike around, and they roared off together, Farrah's dress fluttering behind her.

Bailey watched until they were out of sight, and then turned to the terminal.

What color would you like the sky to be today?

4A904B

Bailey pressed it and then lifted her head. The evening sky above began to shimmer, and then the hue changed, melting into soft green. The clouds dissipated and in their place the sky was scarred with long, thin lines, stretching and crossing each other like scratches of an artist's pencil until shapes began to form. The heavens became a field of swaying, emerald grass. Each shard was lovingly rendered, twisting back and forth as if urged by a gentle wind. Bailey had never been in such a field, but she felt the wind sweep through her, could have sworn than wildflowers were tickling her ankles. It was as natural and freeing as the ocean had been, and when she looked closely, she saw tiny birds swooping over the hills and valleys, their feathers sparkling. She wondered if there were places like it left in the world, and her heart yearned.

As she continued on, she wished she had thought to tell Farrah her name.

The banquet hall was quiet from the outside. Bailey though it was strange and checked the time on the invite against her assist, but she hadn't made a mistake. Distracted with the

thought that she would get to tell Royce about her unexpected encounter, she found the entrance and stepped inside.

The hall was empty. Bailey had endured pranks and disappointments time and again through her youth, and so she did not find it surprising that there were no tables crowned with silver dishware, no printed name cards, not even any guests. Her heart sank slowly into her stomach and her first thought was, *I should have known better after all*. But then she spotted Royce. He was at the center of the hall and he wasn't alone.

"Bailey," he said, gesturing for her to join him and his three guests. "I'm glad you made it."

Bailey came forward despite a sudden, uneasy feeling. "Royce?" She looked to three strangers beside him, her expression carefully neutral. "Friends in Administration after all," she said.

Royce stepped alongside her and touched her back; she tensed beneath the subtle pressure of his hand. It wasn't like him to touch her. "Don't be disappointed," he said. "It may not be the banquet you were promised, but this is still for you. We're here to honor you." He guided her closer. "Let me introduce you to my friends. This is Sybil Reisz, event planner and Administration consultant; Asher Kendrell, editor at the OVC; Grant Kendrell, Administrator." He gestured to Bailey. "My dear Camerata, this is Bailey Gilande."

"A pleasure to meet you," said Sybil, though her face was tight with ill ease.

"Likewise," said Bailey, though the sentiment did not reflect in her manner, either. Grant and Asher, too, seemed to be regarding her with some measure of poorly-concealed distrust. She recognized them all from various Cloudbank functions and archives, but they had no reason to know her, and their steady, almost unblinking stares frayed her nerves. "Royce, what is going on?"

One morning two months previous, Royce had looked at her for the first time, and it had been with calm, curious attention. The unimpassioned practicality in his eyes could not have felt more different on Bailey then. "This is an initiation, of sorts," he said, urging her another step closer to his companions. "You see, Bailey, this whole thing may not have been my idea, but it did start with me. Which makes it, well, my responsibility. And that being the case, I told my friend Grant here that if we were going to go through with it, I should pick first."

"Pick?" Bailey tried to take a step back, but then Royce's other hand was on her elbow, preventing her. Asher and Sybil were stepping to the side, leaving Grant Kendrell before her, his expression hard. "I don't understand. Pick me for what?"

"For integration," Royce said, and though she didn't know what he meant, the sound of it turned her blood cold. "It's simpler than it sounds, much simpler, and you're the perfect candidate. Your wealth of knowledge, your calm and organized mind--such assets, such splendid assets that Cloudbank could use much more of." He sighed and shook his head. "And of course, your lack of substantial familial and social ties makes you ideal. As cruel as it may be to say so, very few people will even notice your absence, except for me."

"My *what?*" Bailey was within Grant's reach, then. He held out his hand, but not toward her-- something flew into his grasp that she barely had time to make out. It was long, and broad, and it hummed with light and energy unlike anything she had ever seen before. It made the small hairs on her forearms stand on end.

"Which is as it should be, I think," said Royce, finally displaying a hint of regret. "Who of us should make the first sacrifice, if not for me?"

Bailey fought back, but it was too little, too late. Royce held tight to her arm and Grant the other, and then the blade was rushing toward her, into her. It wasn't painful. The hall around her scattered into points of flickering light and code. She wondered if it was meant to represent her life flashing before her eyes, but without any noteworthy events of accomplishments worth displaying. But then again, maybe it was just the light.

Everything bled together, growing white and silent, and Bailey's last online thought was regret for the archive she would never finish.

The Camerata stood together, unspeaking, for several minutes. Then Sybil shifted her weight and said, "What do we do with her avatar?"

"We dispose of it," said Grant. "She'll break down and dissipate over time, but obviously, we cannot let her be discovered." He looked to Royce and frowned. "Are you all right?"

Royce crouched down next to Bailey's remains: nothing but a glittering shell of unusable appearance data. "In the Country, there's not much to do but stare at the sky," he murmured. "She may actually be satisfied with that."

He didn't really believe it, but there was still a lot of work for them left to do, and he had no intention of letting sentiment cloud his judgment. He closed Bailey's eyes and then pushed to his feet. "I'm fine," he said. "I'll leave the disposal to you, Grant." His lip twitched in a bitter smile. "This was your idea, after all."

Royce held out his hand, and Grant handed over the Transistor. It hummed in his grip, alive and eager, and as he hefted it to his shoulder any regrets he might have felt faded. "Good evening, all. It'll be up to you to pick the next one."

As Royce left, the sky was still shimmering with sweeping, emerald fields, but he didn't once look up.

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