

Sybil Reisz Is Infatuated With Red

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Sybil Reisz Is Infatuated With Red

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Summary

The lesbians don't die.

Chapter 1: Crush()

Art deco sank past, outside the glass wall of the elevator. Intern #1 watched idly, clutching their file folder.

The lift seamlessly stopped and admitted Intern #2, with a stack of CDs. Intern #1 noticed their covers.

"She has you researching Red as well?"

(The elevator rose.)

"Yep. This is all her music," said Intern #2.

"Is it good?" asked #1.

"I like it," said #2. "That's my personal judgment."

"I've got a printout of Red's Wikipedia page and all the sources it links to," said #1, holding up the folder.

"Nice, nice."

The elevator paused again and admitted Intern #3.

#3, too, noticed the CD covers. "She has you researching Red too?"

"Yes."

(The elevator rose.)

"She told me to go and find Red's reviews from blogs and newspapers," said #3, indicating a thick binder.

"Huh," said #2. "You suppose it's weird how invested she is?"

"Oh, you know her. She investigates people sometimes."

"Mm, I suppose."

The elevator slowed to a stop again. The doors opened. Intern #4 walked in, holding a poster of Red's face -

By the time the elevator reached Reisz' office, it contained seven interns, all shooting each other bemused looks.

"Great," said Reisz brightly, emerging to receive the documents. "Thank you... Thanks... Thank you," she said, seven times.

"Ma'am," ventured Intern #1, "If I may be so bold - that is, I'm only wondering -"

"I'm investigating," said Reisz, blushing furiously. She swept back into her office and closed the door.

Sybil Reisz generally had a lot going on. She coordinated events on two different phones at the same time.

"That's why people have two hands," she would justify, if an acquaintance asked her about it.

"But we don't have two brains," the acquaintance would say.

"Hm. Well, maybe *I* do," Sybil joked charmingly.

Sybil wasn't on her phones during public events - that would be rude. But she was usually on her phones during Camerata meetings.

"That's why people have two hands," she would say, if a fellow member of the Camerata bugged her about it.

"But we don't have two brains," they would say.

"That's a real clever observation, smartass," Sybil would respond.

She was a bit different with the Camerata than with the public.

Right now, Sybil Reisz still had a lot going on, but you wouldn't know it to look at her. You might think she had only one thing going on. Because suddenly her phones were in her pockets, and her notebooks were on the shelves, and her attention was on only one screen, just as if something, somehow, for once in her life, had captured the whole of her attention.

Reisz felt...

TRUE.

If you wanted to go with programming metaphors - and many people did these days - Reisz spent most of her time trying not to feel FALSE. When she put together an event, she would feel TRUE for the first couple hours, then flip back to FALSE and get bored again. From 1 back to 0. Chasing a moving target of fulfillment - she wanted to be something, not nothing!

The songstress, Red, made her feel...

really, really...

GOOD.

...

I mean,

TRUE.

It was less scary if you cached it in metaphors. If you pretended this was programming, and not human feelings.

If you pretended this was programming...

Actually, it *was* programming, right now. Reisz was programming. She'd never much tried it before (don't judge; you walk past buildings without knowing architecture, don't you?) but suddenly it seemed very important. See, she figured that if Red happened to look at the OVC page for Reisz' next event - the second 'reception for up-and-coming artists', to which Red herself was invited - she would get the basic information, but her eyes might gloss over the details, because the font size was too small and the text color was too much like the background color. The details weren't *hidden*, but they were de-emphasized.

Anyway, if Red didn't read the details, she might not realize that the artists were invited to stay past the event's official closing time for a less formal hangout with (each other and) Ms. Reisz. And if she didn't see that, then even if she *had* felt the warm and strange spark of connection that Reisz had felt when they met the previous evening, she might not even *know* about this soon and imminent opportunity to further their relationship, and the crucial and exciting opportunity could pass and be lost to the heartless sands of time.

And that would be terrible.

Reisz had made her website using templates, but she still had access to all the code. All the tangled, messy, inscrutable code. As soon as she saw the daunting wall of strange letters, she felt a strong urge to avert her eyes, check her phones, and become distracted by about ten other things that needed doing. Then she thought of seeing Red, and refocused.

...what? That wasn't weird at all. There were a hundred reasons a woman could be excited about seeing another woman, and lots of those reasons could seem like a crush, to the untrained eye, but obviously girls couldn't love girls, so they weren't. As a member of the Camerata and the leader of a double life, Reisz was an expert at suppressing her emotions. Or, "managing" her emotions. Or something.

Anyway she thought Red was amazing and beautiful and it wasn't weird at all, okay!

Reisz googled a tutorial on HTML, opened the first good result, and immediately bailed. *That* wall of text really *was* too much. But no matter. As a chronic multitasker, she had a gift for shortcuts. She figured, just like in a text editor, font size was determined by a simple number somewhere. She did Ctrl-F for a search within the code. She searched for "font size" and got nothing. She searched for "size" and got lots of things.

That was actually pretty cool. It felt like calling a certain name into the depths of the program, and receiving a response.

Okay, it turned out the thing that she wanted was written "font-size", with a dash, not "font size". Good to know.

It also turned out that "font-size" was defined in many different places, for many different kinds of text on the page. So... which did she need to change?

Could she just... do a search for the specific words that she was trying to change? *"invited to stay past the..."*

Didn't work, as she had suspected. Because normally she wrote each event separately and then uploaded them to the site, so they weren't written in the code itself.

There were a whole *lot* of different "font-size"s, so she couldn't just go through and change *each one* and then check if that one was right. At least, not until she was a little more desperate.

How could she know...

...what to call into the program, to get the response she needed?

Then she got it.

She was also going to change the *color*, and colors have names. The text she wanted to change was currently a dark blue.

"Blue", she searched.

Nope.

"Dark blue"

"Dark-blue"

"Indigo"

???

None of those got her anywhere. Um...

She could search "font-color", then tab through each instance until she found whatever *their* word for "blue" was. She tried that...

But "font-color" was not found anywhere in the code.

Oh, *come on!*

Again, Reisz' hands itched for her phones. She wasn't used to concentrating this long.

And then her phone was, indeed, in her hand, and she had half-unlocked it, but then she was sweating and hesitant, because she felt the feeling of giving up. She didn't want to give up on Red.

Sure, this probably didn't matter, but... what if it *did*, and then what if they missed the opportunity that she was trying to set up, that opportunity which somehow shone brighter in

her mind than every other iron she had in the fire, than every email stacking into her inbox, than every impatient text from the rest of the Camerata?

How could she know...

...what to call into the program, to get to Red?

How could you ever know?

Somehow, she was so very invested in this platonic, normal, and socially-acceptable friendship.

Okay. She could do this. The distractions that were buzzing in her ears and in her pockets (phones on vibrate) could wait.

She deleted "font-color" from the search box...

And she suddenly got it.

As soon as the R was gone, the search tool found what she needed.

It was spelled "font-*colour*". British-style.

Oh, *honestly*.

Great. Wonderful! She went through each instance of "font-*colour*" in the code, and finally found one that was set to "cobalt".

Its font-size was set to "8".

She changed them to "white" and "12" and saved it, and reloaded the page.

The white stood out wonderfully against the light blue background. She just hoped Red hadn't already looked and missed these excellent changes.

Her phones were still buzzing. And at least some of those texts would be from the Camerata, and the Camerata would ask her why she didn't pick up, what she'd been doing, and she would say...

Reisz looked at what she'd been doing, and blushed. Blushed in a bad way and also in a good way. This was all very silly, wasn't it? In a bad way and also in a good way.

The Camerata could handle a few lies, she supposed.

After all, they were in the business.

Chapter 2: Two Important Girls

People would say that Reisz was at peak performance that night.

The programs that swam within the stuff of the world were obsessed with categorizing everything, they did their best to, they always improved their categorizing algorithms; so maybe tonight they were good enough to tell you *exactly* how good Reisz was at *exactly* what mattered most to her. Maybe, if someone asked, they could have played a music-style waveform along the oceany bluegreen walls and it could have bounced in tune with the very syllables she spoke - no - in tune with the very connections she was making, in tune with relationships. And the programs would conclude, tonight she was on fire.

The programs would tell you - please, check her trace and see for yourself - that Reisz was intent on meeting and entertaining everyone, she did her best to; after all, her craft was to pull on the strands of reality that became malleable at special events, so she filled the world with special events; so maybe tonight she was good enough to pull together exactly what mattered most to her.

Because Red was here. And on the outside, Sybil was trying hard to act normal, overcompensating, socializing harder than ever, because *why* on Earth would she *not* act normal?

And on the inside, Reisz was on fire.

But at 10:00 the fire inverted, like pouring juice and turning a cup from EMPTY to FULL; the fire splashed out in favor of a waterfall cold. It happened quicker than she could follow; suddenly at 10:00 the regular guests had left, although maybe some of them had chosen to stay for the less formal afterward part - scratch that, none of them had stayed - scratch that, *one* of them had stayed, and Reisz, standing in the balcony doorway, could see the silhouette of that one guest on the balcony. And at that moment Reisz knew that this was not real life; she knew she had slipped through the malleable strands of reality into a world half-imaginary, because...

...well...

...*this* was a fantasy.

Being alone after dark with Red, amid the cooling embers of a social event?

I mean, yeah, Reisz had this *thing* about Red, she had to admit that much by now - and in theory, that thing was that she wanted to talk and get to know her. But that was the *imaginary* part, and the *real* part was the part where she felt tense and nervous all day and harbored a dry fire inside just *thinking* about that relationship with Red that lived permanently in Schroedinger's box. Only now those distinctions were all mixed up and, standing there in the doorway, she felt like she was under a waterfall: not hot but cold, and shocking and disorienting, and in theory good for cooling off and maybe having a shower, but she wasn't

quite ready for that, was she? You aren't ready to make good use of a waterfall when someone springs one on you all at once.

"Good evening, Ms. Reisz," came a voice that *sounded* like it could sing, even when it was only speaking.

"To you as well, Red," came a voice that was, um, her own voice - right, she just said that.

Red was waiting at the balcony, the only other one here, and one part of Reisz noted to the rest of herself that if this were the real world, the real social world, rather than a strange dream world, the clear next move would be to go and join her.

She went and joined her.

Red said, "Very nice event you put together."

"Very nice of you to say so."

Reisz' smile came naturally, as did the tiny little wordplay - really, she couldn't take credit for that. It was perfectly set up for her.

Oh, and the cold wasn't all metaphorical. It was cold out on the balcony, and the part of Reisz that was good at her job recognized this category of interaction. The lines of knowledge etched through her brain slowly lit back up and recalled that the cold, private balcony was a place where emotions and secrets were aired. Um, she herself had... she had set up friends in *relationships* using this situation. You know, between men and women.

Then something happened, and Reisz was all of a sudden convinced that this *was* real, it was all real, life was real. That 'something' was an awkward pause, and her instincts caught it immediately, caught the balloon before it touched the ground, and a conversational query (about the other musicians Red may have met with tonight) rolled off Reisz' tongue. And suddenly *all* the lines of knowledge lit up, and Reisz finally internally laughed at herself. Because the world was real and Red was real and her feelings for Red were real, and that meant things could be awkward, but that also meant things could actually *happen*, talking on a balcony could happen, and above all, it meant that this wasn't *hard*. She had been so frightened, because she cared so much, but when you got right down to it -

- Reisz was *good* at talking to people. Good at forming relationships. If she smiled, if she blushed, if she had more and more to say, couldn't it be true that all those actions could be fitted, slotted like puzzle pieces, into the tools for socializing that Reisz knew so well?

Of course it could. And if you asked the programs that swam within the stuff of the world, they would agree, 'of course it could,' and - what's more - they could show you on the side of the building; they could paint a great projection on the warm pinkred building that was like a music-style waveform, and beneath the two shadows which the women cast on the wall, the waveform would dance and dance higher.

And could it possibly be true that Red, too, was smiling, and blushing, and having more and more to say?

...and different public functions, and different conversations...

...so Red liked Pop and Techno (naturally), which were kinda the same thing these days, she was getting into Neoclassic Rock, she wanted to try rapping someday but was terribly embarrassed; Reisz didn't know so much about music, she could use recommendations, her big secret was that she always asked certain guests for ideas for background ambiance, oh well it wasn't a problem, it helped build relationships, it was like sharing a secret; Red thought being a great host was terribly impressive but Reisz thought it couldn't be so different from working a crowd, surely it's harder to be the center of attention, but they were just complimenting each other now; Red's favorite flower was a lily, Reisz' favorite flower was a lily, Red's favorite color was [she just kinda smirked sardonically], Reisz didn't have one, Red liked tea, Reisz liked coffee, but really Red would say hot cocoa if that was an option, she hadn't always liked tea, she used to rather avoid it, but it helped her take care of her voice now; Red didn't used to think her voice was anything much, but she always sang in the shower and just thought of it as something she did, and just recently it kind of turned into something big, well *sorta* recently, the time flew. Reisz, *a diferencia*, felt like she had kinda been working her way into being herself her whole life, consciously. Not that Red hadn't had to work, obviously; oh, but Red actually felt like she'd framed it wrong, now, because now she could remember being a bit of an ass to one of her friends as a kid, telling her nobody wanted to hear her, the friend, sing; and so maybe she had kinda taken down her own self esteem in penance for that. Reisz, actually, thought she herself could maybe do with a self esteem check these days, she had some friends who had a certain contagious attitude... although she couldn't say much about that. Oh, Red understood about secret friends, lol. Which was a mysterious thing to say, but they didn't press each other. Because oh, the lyrics of "*The Spine*" by Red was a fascinating subject, and people had so many interpretations, and it was rather shocking to hear that Red didn't mean anything particularly scandalous by them. She didn't actually use her songs for social commentary.

Oh.

Why?

"Because, I suppose, I don't think people ever really communicate."

On the sky above the roof where they spoke, stars flipped back and forth between their silver and gold sides, in and out of patterns, tricking their minds into seeing moving images.

"I mean that we never manage to get across anything *deep* or *important*..." Red's voice dipped into uncertainty, which was good, because Reisz didn't like where she was going.

"Oh, I don't agree with that at all," Reisz tried to say gently. "I don't think human connection is something to give up on."

Red's eyes flicked up to and back down from the constellations, which were now pretending to be a troop of monkeys swinging through a jungle.

"Haven't the two of us..." Reisz ventured, "said even one important thing to one another so far?" *Too far*, she regretted instantly. *That was too familiar!*

Red looked at her and smiled with narrow eyes.

"If I have with *anyone*... it was probably you," Red admitted.

Too far!

That was simply too much, too sweet and sincere! *Error!*

Error message for Reisz! My dear, you're blushing! Clear your cookies! Toss your cache! Oh dear, oh dear!

"I think..." said Reisz on a different date, "I think how it works is..."

Well.

For a time, when Reisz was a kid, she had followed her older cousin around. And copied everything she did. And liked everything she liked. And everyone thought it was cute until they thought it was weird. And someone made a joke. And then everyone made the same joke because they thought it was funny or at least less uncomfortable.

And Reisz' cousin went along with the joke and laughed and took possession of it, because 'laughed with' *has* to be better than 'laughed at'. And Reisz did the same thing, but much *more* so.

And that's why Reisz, as a kid, for a time, went around pretending to be a dog.

There was a very specific rotten-meat feeling that came with pretending you liked being mocked. Pretending the long joke was a show you were putting on, even though it was never your choice to start it.

And the resolution was horribly messy and awkward and was probably the worst part of it all except in that it was the end. And tiny Reisz learned a valuable lesson: If people think you are fundamentally weird and awkward and uncomfortable, trying to become your older cousin is not the solution.

Well.

"I think how it works," Reisz said, "is that sometimes, a problem on the inside is left to grow until it becomes... well, very literal. Immediate and life-interrupting. And that moment of crisis is the very moment you're able to change yourself."

See, before, Red had said, *maybe it's not that no one communicates. Maybe it's me. Maybe I just don't feel like anyone is listening.* All this had been drawn out over multiple rendezvous. Reisz had gone home and thought about it. And then proposed a concept.

"So what does that mean for me?" Red now said softly. With a bit of a playful smirk:
"Someday... people start literally ignoring me?"

Right, Reisz thought, those were the kind of jokes you can make when you're a star performer... sitting straight across the bench from your *haha not girlfriend but kinda???*

I *mean*, there had been - a moment. Back when Red had said *It was probably you* and Reisz had blushed and then somewhere within a string of moments that were now sloshed together in her memory, they had gotten close to each other, close enough for warmth and details in eyes, and been about to kiss, and then gotten too self-conscious. Reisz had gone home and thought about that, and the more sure she was that it had really happened, the more she felt like she was losing her goddamn mind. Especially because Red seemed *more* reserved since then.

I scared her off. No, no, no, no, no, why am I like this?

Right now, she could have sworn they were truly communicating. And Reisz was trying to be sincere, whatever that meant. And she also a little bit wanted to cry. She was just trying to *deal* at this point, with things being extremely good and bad.

"It's something to think about," said Red.

"It's a thought," agreed Reisz.

"I'll keep this stuff in mind," said Red. "My other friend, you know, has been advising me not to take things at face value."

Chapter 3: Men

"We are *not* murdering Red," said Sybil to her friends.

...to her colleagues.

"Why?" asked Royce, before Grant could object with "We do not murder, we divide."

"If I were a good deal less mature, I would accuse her of being your girlfriend," said Asher flippantly.

"It could be argued," Royce mused to Asher, "that your stating of such, is really an excuse to *make* that very accusation without *sounding* quite so immature." Asher glared. Royce continued. "...a trick which ends up failing in intelligent company, it seems."

Sybil's unimpressed expression felt particularly appropriate just now.

Have we always been like this?

"What exactly is your objection?" Grant asked her with little interest. "I'm sure you know that if your complaint is based on a functional flaw in our plan, then you are telling us useful information; but if your complaint is based on personal feelings, then you are telling us that you are untrustworthy."

Reisz wanted to get mad. With the Camerata, that meant getting extra condescending and disdainful.

"*That* is obviously a needlessly simplistic view," she countered. "We are not bits. We can imagine more than two different possibilities. Perhaps you've become overly enamored with your methods of spiriting public figures away, such that you forget it does have an impact on public opinions - those opinions regarding the issues that will be at hand when we, as it were, go public."

"Public opinions, so what?" said Grant, the politician. "We are not running for office."

"Public opinions are the stuff of the world," Reisz snapped. She lifted a handful of microbeads from the lab table. "Public opinions run through my fingers. Public opinions inflate your lungs. This plant drinks public opinions." She snapped a leaf off the office plant, just to be aggressive. "I can think of nothing more naive than believing the Process will supersede them completely. Sure, perhaps it can beat them down; perhaps there will be a war, the skeleton of the world versus the blood of the world; but if you've already given up on people *actually agreeing with us*, then how can you say we're doing all this for Cloudbank?"

Grant let that sink in and seemed to find it reasonable.

Asher raised an eyebrow. "And that's why you don't think Red is suitable to be divided."

Sybil did not disagree.

"Perhaps, because of your close personal connection with her, she can actually sway the public to our view, hm?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, you'll have trouble with that. It seems that someone else is swaying her view *against* us."

Reisz' eyes went wide. "Who?"

"I have no idea," admitted the reporter without shame. "But it's possible *she* may soon, in turn, sway public opinion against us. In which case, by your very own reasoning, she will be worth more dead than alive."

Sybil reset her expression to neutral. "I'm going to follow up on this." Then she amended, with particular acid: "I'm going to *deal* with this. Do not target her before then."

"In the interest of transparency," Grant stated, his voice like concrete, "I have no real doubt at this time that your true motivations are due to personal feelings. In other words, the ice is thin beneath you."

Sybil Reisz and Grant Kendall parted shortly, and each thought they had come to a temporary agreement. They were both wrong.

She stood alone in the elevator with a dawning sense of horror.

What just happened?

Nothing out of the ordinary, for her. She was in a gang with a drastic far-reaching plan for the greater good, in other words, a group who thought they had good reasons to kill people.

That had been *her* for years and years. And then her crush on Red had pulled out a lost, forgotten, innocent other self who still had the capacity to be horrified. Outside that cold, cold laboratory, the feeling was thawing back into her fingers, feelings of warm pink life which were the only things that mattered now. But inside that room, four pretentious fools could talk about slicing traces from bodies, opening wounds in the world, all in order to surgically operate on the world itself, and she was one of those four.

What was she going to do?

Well, the big plan didn't matter anymore. That was easy to let go of. She just had to save Red's life. Save her from the same fate she'd chosen to subject others to - but she couldn't think about that now. No, she couldn't *feel* about that now. She had to *only* think. If she wanted to live as the new, caring, alive Reisz, she would have to invoke the ruthless mask one last time, and pull the strands of reality until things were okay and they were both safe.

Okay.

...

...

...

Things were a lot easier once she cleared her mind of caring. Her warm-self nagged at her, but she knew she had a job to do first.

So she needed to *influence* someone, in order to make things okay?

Fine. She had ways.

There was a man you didn't know about.

That's 'you' in the general sense. There was a man *nobody* knew about.

There was a man who had the *personal trait* of not-being-known-about.

There was a man you just *didn't know about*.

But now Sybil knew.

Someone said once that auties notice absences. She didn't know about that, but now that she was looking, it was pretty obvious to her when, in records of Red's activities, stat counters sometimes "glitched" by showing evidence of one-more-person than other stats accounted for. She could follow the chains of inconsistencies, away from and back to Red, like a sort of abstract treasure hunt, and physically map the Mystery Man's life just like you could map anyone's. But a life involved a whole lot more than the physical, and that side she couldn't access.

You see, he seemed not to have a trace.

Which was sort of horrifying. She supposed it would make him some sort of modern-day zombie or vampire... although she had an impression that some vampires were considered very attractive and were known for competing for one's girlfriend... okay that was not an idea to follow any further.

Really, it must be that his trace was incompatible with the world in some way. Still rather scary. Whatever the reason, he couldn't use the OVC. Of all the opinions that swam through the shiny tiles under Reisz' shoes, none would ever be his.

Call her selfish, but sympathy wasn't the peak of Reisz' feelings pyramid right now.

She'd managed a meeting with him, inviting him using a little treasure hunt of her own. She didn't usually plan events for only two - well, she went places with Red, but she didn't take the same responsibility for planning them - but the principles were similar. There was an atmosphere to create. She found a room that was claustrophobic, but awkwardly cheery and

pink. Lighting that was too bright. Reisz sat behind what was technically a coffee table but gave the impression of an interviewer's desk. With a lacy tablecloth.

"Hi," said Mystery Man. Reisz jumped.

She suddenly remembered the door opening and him coming in a moment ago. It had slipped out of her head. But now she focused on him.

She almost laughed. He was, well, exactly what you might expect of an ambiguous man. He was like an early step in the process of 3D-rendering a man: a clearly human but totally featureless blue figure. He was almost transparent, or maybe it was just that Reisz' eyes were trying hard to focus on the wall behind him, and even filling the wall in from memory the same way you compensate for your blind spot.

"Hello, Missy," Sybil smiled, her manner more 'host' than 'erudite gangster' right now, but not exactly warm. "That's what I decided to call you - for 'Mystery Man'."

"Good as anything," said Missy good-naturedly. At ease, he found himself a spot on a couch. Reisz' eyes hurt as they followed his movement.

"Great. You may be aware - I'm Ms. Sybil Reisz, selections Supervision and Organization, and I wanted to talk to you about some *concerns*."

"Concerns with my existence?" said Missy.

"Oh, my, no," laughed Sybil, secretly a bit alarmed, "only your actions. Only a certain relationship. It's just the concern that some of your views have had a less than positive effect on your associate Ms. Red."

Missy was silent for a moment, and then barked a laugh. He had no mouth to open wide; the sound just came out.

"I love how you people talk," said Missy, seeming to veer away from the point. " '[L]ess than positive'. '[C]oncern'. Is a concern a threat?"

"Certainly *not*," Sybil said, meaning yes. "It's only some friendly advice. I have reason to believe you have some degree of awareness with regards to an organization I have ties to; I'm expressing a certain... *worry*, a certain *disinclination* toward, well, any unfair slander toward them. That is all."

"Then don't worry, Sibby," he seemed to grin. "I've never slandered the Camerata unfairly. I don't think I'll ever need to."

"I was remiss using such words," Sybil said evenly. "Judgments of *accuracy* are a tangential issue here; the relevant realities concern the *preferences* various parties may have in regards to the language used in connection with them. Such preferences can have significant effects on the situations and even personal wellbeing of those who express their own views, I'm sure you understand."

"Your gang is threatening me if I don't stop talking about them."

A lick of anger surged in Reisz, but in that moment something else clicked and she realized that she and he were not really enemies. She didn't need to threaten him herself. All she was really trying to do was save Red's life. He'd agree with that goal.

Her manner changed subtly. She tried to convey a sense of significance with her eyes. She tried to show she was truly trying to communicate.

"I think it would be accurate to state," Sybil amended, "that the intentions of my associates have very little relation to *yourself*. The party in question, as I've attempted to convey, is much more accurately *Red*."

She imagined she was meeting his lack-of-eyes.

"...You're not saying 'me' or 'us'," Missy noted. "You're saying 'my associates'."

"I think a message could be sent to them," Reisz improvised desperately. "In a manner more concrete and trustworthy than mere text. It seems that if you didn't show up to Red's concert at The Empty Set, it might begin to pave the way for more amiable relations between themselves, and yourself, and herself."

"Gosh," said Missy sardonically. "Now it sounds like you're actually trying to give me helpful advice."

"I'm glad," said Sybil with relief.

There was fragile little pause where things actually seemed balanced and safe.

Then Missy stood up and walked toward her desk languidly, maybe aware of the disconcerting effect his motion had. He rested his knuckles on the table, terribly casual yet looming.

"But here's what I think is going on," he said to her. "You got some kinda *thing* going with Red. It's nice for you both, I'm sure. But then someone (me) decides she should know just what business her special friend is involved with. All of a sudden, she starts to pull away from you. And the reason is that you're evil. But you've never gone a full day before without getting what you want, so you get jealous. You think, oh, the problem must be that she has other friends besides me! So why don't I just threaten them away with my gang. Because, sure, *that's a good way to make someone like you.*"

Reisz' emotions started to mash and turn to jelly. But her frontal facade stayed firm. And then she realized it shouldn't.

Reisz steeled herself and broke through herself. "I'm not innocent," she said plainly, "but I don't want Red to die."

Missy took a step back. "So, what? There's danger to her that's not under your control? Are they not *your* gang anymore?"

"I'm... having a change of heart, yes," she admitted painfully. "And the reason they're going after her, the reason you need to stay away, is not about *my* issues. So I need you to... well,

you know, trust me."

The face-he-had-not-got was clearly glaring. The glare was clearer than the head itself.

Sybil Reisz and the man without a trace parted shortly, and each thought they had come to a temporary agreement. They were horribly right.

And things happened behind the scenes...

Reisz had no idea how much she had scared the Camerata.

As much as they tried to sound dispassionate, they were a highly insular group executing a highly ambitious plot, and it was no small thing for 25% of them to start going rogue.

So Grant declared that it was go-time, Right Now, before things got worse.

He readied a long, flat tool, whose one eye did not yet see, and which needed to consume just one more packet of data.

And Asher gave that tool to a drone.

The drone was complex and clever, built for only one action in its life, but with a breadth of skills to account for any obstacles to that action.

And Royce raised his conductor's baton.

The Process was waiting - much, much further behind the scenes.

Chapter 4: Resurrect Your Gays

When Reisz realized how badly she had messed up, it was the end of the world.

Everything felt strangely muted as she threw on her coat and dashed out onto the street. It was raining. Straight down, because there was no wind. The air felt more humid than ever before. She caught one of the few cabs willing to go *toward* the white place.

The whiteness was spreading much faster over the sky than over the land. She watched it creep across the sky out the window - she couldn't tell exactly when she was under it, except that the raindrops around the car were now white and, bizarrely, descending much more slowly. And... they were cubic.

The sign on the front of the white place was slowly losing its meaning - it was settling into a featureless rectangle with no protruding letters. But it was supposed to say The Empty Set.

(In fairness to Missy, she hadn't gone to the show either .)

The glass double doors were still recognizable, but when Reisz pushed through them they didn't swing open, they just let her *through* like a cloud made of pudding.

There were no people in the whitening seats.

Well, the show *had* been over... but...

Backstage, to the dressing rooms. The one with Red's namecard in the holder on the door. The door, she silently opened...

There was a long, flat tool stuck in the back wall. On the floor was a shuddering pile of white feathers.

No. No. No. No. No.

They were the feathers of Red's jacket. It hid what was underneath.

But she couldn't check yet because, chances were, she already *knew* -

Reisz crept forward silently.

She reached out both arms.

And gripped the Transistor by the handle.

She tugged at it.

It shifted out of the wall too loudly.

When she had to - if she had to - she was ready to use Turn(). She had it primed in her mind.

As she touched the Transistor, light flashed along its length and its eye looked about. Reisz stumbled back under its weight. She stepped back into the doorway. And then, spilling out a rainbow of guilt, she called softly, "Red?"

By the time Reisz had activated Turn(), the creature had already looked up, made an aggressive autotuned noise at her, and pounced. From Reisz' perspective, it was now frozen in the air.

There were five gold-disc eyes crowded on Red's face. There was a jaw that was stretched and drooping wide, with a mix of normal and sharp teeth. There was a huge mass of spindly black limbs popping out of Red sides and torso, whose fingers blended into sharp black claws. The coat with the white feathers was now attached to her, flapping out behind her like wings. Her gold dress seemed to be melting into her skin, like the Process was bored of the distinction between body and clothing.

And her red hair was white. Of course.

Besides all that, it was awful how normal she looked.

Auto-OVC said she was 66% Processed.

And Reisz knew she was 0% Red.

Reisz hadn't wanted this, and neither had the Camerata. They had meant to put Red in the Transistor. The weapon was incomplete.

Was that the reason the whole plan went wrong?

But it wasn't hard for Reisz to believe that the whole plan was wrong from the start.

She was starting to cry, and wondered how long she had in the Turn() timestop to just break down. But as she lowered herself to the floor, time continued along with her movement - the Redbeast shifted closer - and Reisz stopped, heart beating fast.

What was she going to do?

She could increase the time-slowness effect somewhat, and then she could walk around behind the Redbeast before it landed, getting out of the way, and then... she could fight it.

No. No. No. No. No.

Yes.

(The honeysweet nights talking with Red didn't feel *gone*. Her insides didn't *get it* yet. But she would, one of these moments. It would all suddenly catch up. Her chest was constricting, slowly, slowly, waiting its chance to choke her to death.)

She would walk around behind. Then she would use Spark() as many times as possible, until her Turn() was complete.

Okay.

She executed. She felt fast like lightning, moving in a flash round behind, and then the sprays of flashing bombs tumbled out of her sword onto the Redbeast, exploding around her. Again, exploding around her. Again, exploding around her. Animalistic pain in slow motion; the humanoid creature landed badly on the dressing room floor and slid out into the hall. Its wounds looked like burns in plastic, exposing blank white mass inside. The Turn() function needed to recharge, which Reisz realized only just in time. She ran past the creature and down the hall, trying to get out of distance during the period where it had the advantage. She heard it scrambling to its feet, then running along, it ran on two legs wearing Red's boots, oh god. It was gaining, then the bootsounds *ceased* as it pounced again -

Turn() was ready, Reisz froze time once more.

She almost tripped on the stairs up to the stage. The Redbeast was suspended in the air behind her, terrifyingly close.

Reisz searched for any other useful functions. She could lay two Load()s, which would use up most of her Turn() time, then hurry up to the stage and stuff in a Ping() to detonate them.

Time to blow up Red.

She executed. The power of the charges seethed through her weapon and blopped out, one and two, then she zoomed up the stairs and downstage, turned around, and fired her one quick shot back. Turn() ended immediately and time was normal by the time the two Load()s sizzled and exploded, slamming the Redbeast against the ceiling and knocking junks out of the white Processed walls on either side. Panting, Reisz took off running again.

And here is where she messed up once more.

The thing that happened was that she jumped down off the stage awkwardly, and hurt her ankle - oh *crap* she hurt her ankle and it hurt and she was falling forward, she tumbled onto the flat white no-longer-carpet. She smacked her face on the hard surface, it brought more tears to her eyes. In this split second, no time to get up. It was simply time for the Redbeast to kill her. The Process was waiting to use her RAM. It pounced once more. So this was the moment, wasn't it? The moment to face her true feelings?

No, that was scary, so Reisz disassociated even further, instead.

And why had she, they, ever thought this was a good idea? (she had turned over and was grappling the thousand thin hands, she was pushing at the face and chest to keep the hands away) Not that it was *ever* supposed to go like *this*, said her inner Royce morosely. (the autotuned voice was blaring at her, almost singing, an electronic song of either pain or hunger) And why had she thought it was okay to do this to *anyone*, this thing they had ended up doing to Red? (and Red was covered in wounds now from the bombs, gorey holes dripping white, the structure of her body seemed to break down and melt around them) Could it be that in some strange world a thousand years ago, Sybil Reisz had been so without ____(), so without ____(), that she had thought what had to be drastically changed was *everything*? (then suddenly the washed-out strands of Red's hair hung forward in front of her

face exactly the way they *used* to, and -) Crying bubbled and burst out of Reisz' face, and her hands squished through the dissolving material of Red's white skin, and Red leaned closer and her grabbing hands crawled all over Reisz and the Process began to *infect*, and in the same moment Reisz closed her eyes tight and tugged desperately at the iron cables of Time in order to winch it back and undo *everything* and heal Red back to being a *person* and, lying nearby, the Transistor flared, and Something Happened.

Reisz was sorry for everything she had ever done and everything she had ever been, Reisz was sorry for being evil and joining evil and for killing 10 different people and never rebelling until it was *her* person, Reisz was sorry for killing the world and killing everyone, Reisz was sorry for being powerful enough to make big mistakes, Reisz was sorry for being weird and awkward and uncomfortable and for being a lesbian, the Process was sorry for nothing. The Process was simply following badly phrased orders, like a genie; the plan had been inches away from a less apocalyptic result; maybe they shouldn't have rushed it. But look, Reisz wanted to know about Red, she wanted to talk to Red, if the Process swept over things like a wave, didn't it incorporate and remember everything it ate? The Process was a maelstrom of information, so very much of it, and none of it was made for humans to read, it was all right *there* but just too opaque, that was why they presented themselves as white, they were all the different wavelengths mashed *together* into blandness; but Reisz wanted, wanted, she still wanted, she Want()ed, wanting was the blood of the world so somewhere inside, some organ *had* to absorb and listen to what the blood contained, surely; but it was not receptive, not receptive, the bones were blank white and the bits were packed dense and she didn't know how to speak. The Process' favorite flower was nothing, the Process' favorite color was nothing, the Process' favorite beverage was nothing, Reisz' favorite person was Red because she hadn't loved any person at all for a long, long time and now she did, she did, and she wanted to talk to her one last time, she Call()ed into the machine, and how... how...

How could she know...

...what to call into the program, to get to Red?

How could you ever know?

And then a terribly clever and stupid idea brought tears to her eyes. Because there were always shortcuts and cheats, you know, and if she was trying to Search() for something that identified Red within that huge mass of information... she could always try just...

...searching for how she herself felt about Red.

If Red happened to contain those *same* feelings for Reisz, she should turn up in the search.

Expressing it wasn't as hard as describing it out loud would have been, because she was in a more direct uplink now. Reisz simply called out,

~a spark that blossomed outward lighting things and unfolding flower petals in warm colors that were soft like satin and peaches and skin~a veneer of frost that was chased back by a fast-moving dawn, a sun racing around you, identical brutal spikes of ice tugged out and evaporated into mist and a sweet fog of magic that gently accompanied the wounds'

recovery~melancholy that dripped and gushed behind you filling up a sideways-gravity pool until you gurgled in tears until you reached out to the opposite planet and touched fingers to fingers until perception reversed cold to hot and the unhurting magma swirled and supercharged your body until you cried the magma from your eyes until perception reversed again~the simple, absurd, hilarious desire that has no meaning until the other feelings string onto it with their spiderweb strands so it means everything; the inelegantly specific desire that is older than the world, that was born before life even switched to digital; to kiss; to kiss; to kiss~

and the message flowed through the veins of the world and she felt that they were glowing gold instead of merely flowing red, and then it split and split and split many ways, soon it seemed to reach every extremity of the body, and she realized Red was not stored centrally, there was a far more clever and efficient algorithm, it was like a thousand pieces of paper hanging at different distances from the ceiling so that only when you looked at it just right they came together in an image, and that image was of a sleepy, smiling, intelligent face, and that smile widened to see you.

And then Red said, or sang, her own ~____()~

And the message that joined Reisz's in the blood was a warm, metallic pink, and it was like a remix, different and the same.

And the tears that covered Reisz' face, whether in the real world or in metaphor, suddenly felt like magma, and she couldn't breathe but in a good way, and then she *could* breathe, and then she was glowing pink and gold.

And then, audaciously, surely asking for more than she deserved, she Want()ed Red to come back.

The gold and pink desire, seeming like a magical space whale compared to all the small, pale OVC votes that it passed by, flew to every extremity of the body of the world and filled it up with the shining message.

Oh, okay, said the Process. No problem. We'll get on that, then.

And back in the physical world, such as it was:

Red became unwhite. And the arms and extra eyes disappeared and her mouth fixed up and everything was better and, and, and...

She saw Reisz; and the Process, presumably acting on someone or other's command, healed up all Reisz' little injuries. They both picked themselves halfway up, sitting on the ground beside the stage, and then they pulled each other into a tight, tight hug, one that had joy and laughing in it and heavy breaths and crying and maybe a little kissing, as well as so much -

so much -

Then they noticed the still-whitening Empty Set around them, and they looked at each other and said, *Do you suppose? Is it too audacious? Is it more than we deserve?*

But the two women had to try, so they closed their eyes, and they sent their full ~___()~ to reform the gold and pink bonds. And then they told the Process to completely stop Processing and to undo all of this crap.

And back in the physical world, such as it was, The Empty Set came back, and it even stopped being empty, because there were people in the seats being un-consumed.

And then Reisz and Red got to thinking, and one or the other suggested that if they were going to be doing this many more times, it would be useful to have a shortcut. To *mean* all that without *saying* it every time - to not re-describe it except on special occasions.

Yes, that seemed like a good idea. Taking just a moment as the color and shape returned to the meat of the world, they discussed names together.

They decided to call it Love().

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