

river always finds the sea

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by [Rhiannon87](#)

Summary

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*

The first time you meet her, you don't know who she is. Nobody does, back then, back when you're both so much younger. She's clearly out of place down here, her hands planted on her hips as she stares at the new park. There's not much to look at-- some trees, a decorative pond, a woman and her dog playing fetch-- and you can take a guess as to why she's staring.

"Looking for the rail station?" you ask.

She startles, and turns, and wow, she's really pretty. Everything about her is bright-- bright blue eyes, bright red hair, bright yellow shirt. "Yes, I am," she says, sounding a little sheepish.

"The park got voted in a couple months ago," you explain. "Station's over on the east side of the bridge now." She nods, but you can tell from the blank look on her face that she has no idea where that is. And because she's pretty and you've got some time to kill, you smile and shove your hands in your pockets. "Come on. I'll walk you over there."

"Thanks," she says with a relieved smile and falls in step beside you.

You slow your stride a bit so she can keep up-- and maybe so that you can drag out walking with a pretty girl for a little longer. "So what brings you down here?" you ask.

"It was an accident, sort of," she says. "Got stuck writing and went out for a walk. Figured a change of scenery might help." She heaves a fairly dramatic sigh. "I was so lost in thought that I didn't notice where I was until I hit the bay."

"Writing, huh?" Most of the writers you know of are journalists. "Working on a story?"

She shakes her head. "Lyrics," she says. "I'm a singer."

"Oh." She doesn't look like any of the posters you've seen around for Cloudbank's current crop of famous artists, but someone new could've popped up without you noticing. "Sing anything I'd have heard of?"

"Not yet," she says with a small, confident smile.

You smile back. You don't know what the failure rate is for artists in Cloudbank-- those kind of statistics never really stuck in your head-- but it's probably pretty high. Figuring out what the city wants and providing it in the way it wants is always tough. Throw in personal artistic sensibilities and it's a setup for disaster, most of the time. But her kind of confidence has got to count for something.

"Do you live around here?" she asks.

You shake your head. “Nah, I've got a place out closer to the ports,” you say. Still overlooking the bay-- for now, anyway. So long as that skyscraper between your building and the water doesn't get voted in.

You reach the bridge, and she looks out at the heart of the city. The sky's gold today, and it turns the skyline bronze, the neon and spotlights somehow muted. “I'm glad the gold looks good,” she says. “I wasn't sure about it.”

“But you voted for it anyway?”

“Well.” She tugs at the collar of her shirt, which has shaded into a deeper yellow in the golden light. “Kind of a fan.”

You chuckle. “I guess favorite color's a good a reason as any.”

The new station's right at the end of the bridge. You present it to her with a slight bow, and she laughs. “Thank you,” she says.

“Anytime. Good luck with your writing.”

“Thanks.” She waves and heads into the station, and it's only after the doors have shut behind her that you realize you didn't ask her name. Ah, well, not like it really matters. You're probably never gonna see her again.

*

You don't see her again for almost six months. And truth be told, you more or less forget about her in that time. You've got other things to worry about-- following this year's pennant race, moving to a new apartment (they did build the skyscraper, and you like being able to see the water), keeping the boxing circuit off the administrators' feeds. The boxing matches are in a weird, undefined area: not forbidden, but there aren't permissions for them, either. Everyone involved has agreed that it's for the best if the administrators don't find out.

That's part of why you chose to fight in them. No connections to the databanks, so the fact that you opted out of your selections never comes up. Which is good. Avoids an awkward conversation.

You're aware that your aversion to selection is... an anomaly. Nothing compels people to participate, but almost everyone does, because that's how you have a voice. That's how you get anything done in Cloudbank. You select clothes and food and sports teams and bridges, and it all gets logged somewhere. No one else ever questions it, really, but the idea doesn't sit quite right with you. Logged for what? Where? By who?

At first, it's a game. How long can you avoid selection before the administrators catch on, make you vote, make you define your entire self in two words? But as time goes on, it becomes more of a principle. Keeping yourself out of the system is a choice, too, one that won't be recorded by anyone but yourself. That starts to mean something in and of itself. And so you never vote, wake up without knowing what the weather and sky will be, and you only

shop at places where you can talk to someone face to face. It's unusual, but everyone in Cloudbank has their quirks. Insistence on personal interaction can be yours.

So, six months go by, you live your life, and then you see her on a poster outside a club in Goldwalk. You're on your way to the bar that's hosting tonight's match when you spot the small, blurry image that can't do anything to hide how bright she is. She's the last of three opening acts, and you do the math in your head, trying to figure if you'd have enough time to catch her performance without being late for the fight. You're pretty sure you can, and you head inside without letting yourself think about it any more than that.

The club's only half-full, and you're able to get a table to yourself off to the left of the stage. You settle in with your drink and people-watch, guessing what selections everyone else has made, killing time until the lights dim. The first two acts aren't bad, just unmemorable, nothing that anyone will vote for in a few weeks' time. And that's what counts in this town. It's dark when she takes the stage, and you wonder if she'll be as unremarkable as the others were. You're cutting it close on when you have to be in the ring, and so far, you haven't seen anything that'll make it worthwhile if you're late.

The lights come up, the music starts, and she begins to sing. And every doubt you had about her vanishes from your mind.

It's not just that she's got a gorgeous voice, or the kind of presence on stage that holds everyone's attention. No, what's keeping everyone transfixed is the emotion, the heart in every one of her words. They come from some place deep inside her, and they settle in some place deep inside you, like pieces you didn't know you were missing.

The club goes silent for a moment when she finishes, and you hope that it's because they all feel the same way you do. If no one else heard her music the way you did... The moment ends, and the audience bursts into thunderous applause. You clap along with them, and you don't care how late you are for your match, you're not leaving until she's done.

She sings three songs, all of them beautiful, and much as you want to hang around and maybe try to talk to her again, you head back outside. You stop by the poster again before you go too far, reading it more closely this time, looking for a name.

Red. Well, that's easy enough to remember.

*

You see Red on stage another two times before you actually manage to talk to her. Or, more accurately, before she decides to talk to you. You're able to stay through the whole show for once, though the only set you really care about is hers, and after it ends you linger over your drink, idly humming one of her songs to yourself. Which is probably why it catches you off guard when she says, "I thought you looked familiar."

You manage not to choke on your drink, but it's a near thing. You set your glass down and look up at her. She's still dressed for the stage, a yellow and white dress with matching heels, and holding a half-empty drink in one hand. "Hi."

“Hi.” She tilts her head to the side, eying you curiously. “You came pretty far out of your way for the show.”

You shrug. “Worth the trip,” you say. “You were amazing.”

Red smiles and ducks her head a bit, and even in the dim light of the club you can tell she's blushing. “I-- thank you,” she says.

There's an awkward pause, and you're pretty sure the worst thing in the world would be if she walked away right now. “Was one of the songs you did tonight the one you were working on last time we met?” you ask, stumbling over your words a little. Real smooth.

She nods and glances at the empty chair across from you. You nod, wave a hand at the chair in invitation, and can't help a smile when she sits down. “The second one, Old Friends,” she says. “Took me a while to work that one out.”

“Do you compose the music, too?”

“Yeah. I rough everything out on guitar, but the final versions are on synth—I have to tweak the sound whenever I play somewhere new...”

You talk about her music, about the places she's performed, about her upcoming gigs. About Cloudbank, about your new apartment, about the new plaza going in up in Sunset. You find out she's never had the Sea Monster flatbread from Junction Jan's, and your shock and horror is only partly feigned. She seems far more interested in the boxing than you'd have expected, and she promises that if she happens to meet any administrators, she won't mention it.

You'd be happy sitting there and talking to her until the sun comes up, but the bartender politely informs you that the club's closed. You both apologize as you stand up and make your way to the doors. “I didn't realize it had gotten so late,” Red says as you follow her out onto the sidewalk. “It's gonna take ages to get back to Highrise.”

“Shouldn't be too hard to get a lift this time of night,” you say, mentally revising your opinion of Highrise. Never thought much of it before, but if she lives there...

“Yeah. At least it's not crowded.” She shakes her head and smiles at you. “I-- I feel terrible saying this, but I don't think I ever asked your name.”

Not something you usually give out this quickly. Most of the time, you operate under nicknames and aliases, but it doesn't seem right, giving her any of those. “To be fair, I never asked yours.”

“Mine's on all the posters,” she replies with a smirk.

You hesitate for a moment, then throw caution to the wind. “Can you keep a secret?”

She gives you a slightly odd look, then nods. You take a step closer to her and lean down to whisper your name in her ear. Red looks even more confused when you straighten up. “Why is that a secret?”

“Try to look me up and see,” you reply.

“All right.” She shakes her head slightly. “Well. It was nice to meet you, again.”

“Yeah. This was... this was fun,” you say. More than that, really, but you don't know what else to say.

“Yeah.” This time, she's the one who hesitates. “Would you want to get lunch sometime? We could go to Jan's so I can try that Sea Monster you're so crazy about.”

You nod vigorously. “I'll send you a note, we can set something up.”

Red smiles. “Okay. Great.” She takes a step backwards and waves. “I'll see you later.”

“Good night, Red.”

She turns around and walks away down the street, and you watch her until she turns the corner and disappears from view.

*

“You're not in the system,” is the first thing she says when she sits down at the table across from you at Jan's. “At least, none of the public ones.”

And almost every database is public. It's the handful that aren't that bother you. “No, I'm not,” you say and wave a hand at the terminal. “I already ordered our flatbread up front, if you wanted to get a drink.”

Red gives you a look, then pokes at the screen for a moment. “*Why* aren't you in the system?”

“Never made my selections,” you tell her. She blinks at that; you're both well past the age where most people make them. “I'm still figuring things out,” you continue, before she can ask the obvious follow-up question. “Don't know what I'd choose.”

She nods slowly. “So you never had to fill out any of the census data...”

“Yeah. And so, not in the system.”

One of the staff swings by and drops off Red's drink, refills yours, then zips away again. Red takes a sip and gives you a look that's more curious than confused. That's good. Curious you can work with. Curious means she at least wants to understand. “So, can you use OVC, or...?”

You reach out and tap the screen, causing it to unfold from the table and flicker on. The loading icon rotates eight times, as always, before displaying a familiar error screen. *Identity scan failed. Please contact your local OVC support for terminal repair.*

It's kind of funny, really. The whole system is built on the assumption that everyone's logged, and so if a terminal can't find someone's identity, it has to be a hardware malfunction, not

user error. "Most places will do business face to face," you explain as she reads the error message. "It actually doesn't get in the way all that often."

"Huh." Red sends the screen away again. "So you never vote on anything?" You shake your head. "And that doesn't bother you?"

"I've never felt like I'm missing out," you reply. If something really significant ever comes up, something that your one, solitary vote might make a difference on... Then maybe you'll reconsider. So far, it hasn't happened.

She studies you for a moment, then shrugs. "Well, if it works for you," she says amicably. "Then-- oh, hey, I think that's ours."

You sit up as the steaming hot flatbread is delivered to your table. "Sea Monster, Junction Jan's finest," you say, helping yourself to a slice.

Red takes a piece as well, and you wait expectantly as she takes a bite. She blinks, chews, and swallows, blinks again. "Oh wow. That's really good."

You grin. Another convert. "I told you."

*

After that, Red makes sure to reserve tickets for you at all her shows. And they are her shows, now-- she's not opening for anyone anymore, though she's still playing the smaller clubs. Not the kind of places she deserves, but she'll get there. You're sure of it.

You don't make every performance, and the ones that you do make, you're not always able to talk to her. Sometimes you have to leave early to get to a fight; sometimes she has an after-hours party to attend. But you make the time to see each other whenever you can. You get lunch, or dinner, or just spend an hour or two walking around the district. It's easy, talking with her. You want to know everything about her-- her hopes, her fears, her opinions on the Hammers' win last week-- and you get the sense she wants to know just as much about you. You almost never run out of things to talk about, and when you do, the silence is rarely awkward.

It's been a little over a year since your chance meeting by the river when you send her a note asking if she wants to grab lunch. She replies almost instantly: *Sorry, in the middle of something, can't go out right now. Wouldn't say no if you wanted to stop by with noodles, though.*

So you grab lunch for two and head up to Highrise. You've never actually been to her place before; the balcony outside has a great view, though you still can't see the water from up here. The door slides open when you approach, and music pours out. Shouldn't be a surprise, really. You stop in the front hallway and frown. You're not really comfortable just wandering around on your own. Not yet, anyway. "Uh, Red? It's me," you call, loud enough to hopefully be heard over the music.

The volume suddenly drops by half. “Kitchen's to your left,” she calls. “I'll be there in a second!”

Her kitchen is tiny and slightly cluttered, though most of the clutter is those silly little figurines restaurants will give away with takeout meals sometimes. Red appears in the doorway just as you set the bags down on the counter. “Thanks,” she says. “I'm trying to get a new song pieced together before the show tomorrow. Don't really have time to go out.”

“Ah.” You hand over her box of noodles and pull a chair out with your foot. “I'll actually be able to stick around after that one.”

She wrinkles her nose. “I won't,” she says. “I'm going to this party right after. You ever heard of Sybil Reisz?”

“Event planner, right?” She turns up in news stories from time to time, usually the ones about high-society galas or district festivals.

“Yeah. She's throwing some kind of party for 'up-and-coming artists to mingle with Cloudbank's elite.” Her voice goes all high and breathy at the end, and you chuckle at the impression.

“Sounds fun.”

She shrugs. “Hopefully, I'll meet somebody who could actually get me playing concert halls,” she says. “I'd love to hear my music somewhere with proper acoustics.”

“You mean it could sound even better?”

Red pauses with a forkful of noodles halfway to her mouth. “You have *no* idea.”

“Well, in that case, I hope it goes well for you,” you say. You've never made a secret of how much you like her music. She's good. She's *really* good. You'd listen to her music even if she wasn't your friend. The fact that you know the woman and the heart behind the songs just makes them that much better.

She smiles wryly and shrugs. “I'll consider myself lucky if I meet someone halfway interesting to talk to,” she says. “If it weren't invite-only I'd drag you along.”

“I'm... flattered?”

Red laughs and lightly kicks you under the table. “That I think you're more interesting than any of Cloudbank's so-called elite?”

“Oh, well, when you put it like that.”

She shakes her head at you. “Do you have anywhere to be right after this?”

“No.”

“Good. You can stick around and get a preview.”

*

It takes a few months of Ms. Reisz's parties before they pay off and Red has her first show at a real concert hall. Not one of the big theaters like the Empty Set, but still a place with a proper stage. You can't stick around afterward, and Red has to go to some kind of private party with Ms. Reisz and the theater manager and a few other performers anyway. But the day of the show you send her a bouquet of red and yellow roses, and when she comes on stage, she has one of the red ones pinned to her gown.

And she was right. Her music does sound even better in a place that was made for it.

Better stages means bigger crowds, more attention, busier schedules. Red's spending more time at various social events around the city, and she has less time for walks in the park or lengthy dinners before a show. She's always apologetic when she has to turn down your invites or cancel plans, and you can tell she's trying to make it up to you when you are able to meet.

But even so, sometimes weeks go by where the only time you see her is on the stage. You miss her, far more than you expected you would. You've got other friends, of course, but you've never connected with any of them the way you have with Red. You see things that make you think of her, that you want to ask her about, and you try to store them all up for the next time you see her. But there never seems to be enough time.

At one point, nearly a month passes without talking to her, and you've almost gotten used to the way loneliness sits on your chest like a weight. She sends you a note one morning asking if you've got time to grab coffee later that day; you don't have any plans, but you'd have canceled them all for the chance to see her. You get to the cafe a little early, so as not to miss a minute of the time she can spare, and she comes in with a cold breeze and a flurry of snow. The city's been on a winter kick for the last week or so, an excuse for everyone to break out heavier coats and scarves.

Red's scarf is amber colored, bright as always, but it's nothing compared to her smile when she slides into the seat across from you. "Hi," you say, and wow, you've really, really missed her. Just seeing her feels like you can breathe normally again.

"Hey." You two grin at each other for a few moments, at least until Red's coffee is delivered. She takes a large drink and sighs in relief. "Nice to just have a chance to sit," she murmurs.

"Where are you off to after this?" you ask.

She tells you about a new synthesizer she's been invited to test out; she's excited, you can tell, but she also seems tired. When you ask about it, she admits she hasn't been getting much rest - performances and social events at night, composing and rehearsing during the day. "It doesn't leave a lot of time for anything else," she says with an apologetic wince.

Which includes you. It's not on purpose, you know that, she's not trying to cut you out of her life. That only makes it hurt a little less. "I could stop by with lunch sometime," you offer. "So you don't always have to go out." Anything to see her more often than this.

“My place is a mess,” she says, but she looks so relieved by the idea that you know she's only arguing for appearance's sake.

“You've seen *my* place,” you reply. Only a few times, when she's come out to your part of the city, but she knows perfectly well that housekeeping isn't one of your strong suits. “I'm not gonna judge.”

She laughs. “All right,” she says. “Maybe sometime later this week?”

You nod, probably a little over eager. “I'll send you a note.”

Red glances at the clock and winces. “Ugh, I have to go,” she says. “I'm sorry, I feel like we barely got to talk...”

“It's okay,” you say. Lunch later this week. You'll get to see her again soon. Unfortunately, that doesn't keep the heavy weight from settling back onto your chest.

She pauses with her coat half-on and reaches across the table, puts her hand on yours; you can feel how warm she is even through the ever-present wraps on your hand. “I miss you, too,” she says. You huff out a laugh-- you really thought you had a better poker face than that. “Things should slow down, soon. Won't be this busy forever.”

“Yeah,” you say. “I know.”

She squeezes your hand once and stands up to pull on her coat. You get up too and follow her outside. Still snowing, though it only piles up on the rooftops and planters. The sidewalks and roads are heated enough that it melts right away. You're about to say goodbye when Red steps forward and hugs you tight. It takes you a second to get over your surprise, but then you raise your arms and hug her back. “Lunch this week,” she says when she steps away.

“Definitely,” you reply. You're warmer where she'd been. “I'll see you soon.”

“Yeah. See you soon.”

*

You're not sure if her schedule actually slows down any, but if nothing else, Red seems to get better at managing her time, and you're able to see each other more often. Still not as often as you'd like, though if you're being honest with yourself, 'as often as you'd like' would be always.

Those are the kind of thoughts that really should give you some pause. But she's been the most important person in your life for so long now that it just seems normal. It takes you a while to realize that this isn't how most people think about their best friends.

When you do finally realize it, you're at an informal party after one of Red's shows. The theater she performed at tonight has a rooftop garden and bar, and she'd asked you to stick around when the lingering crowd started to move up there. You don't know any of these people, and they're not really your crowd, but you agree. Because she asked you. And it hasn't been quite as bad you'd feared-- there's a few people who recognize you from the

boxing circuit, and you're all able to talk sports without things getting uncomfortable. Red flits around the party, working the crowd like a pro, though she circles back around to you every so often.

You finish your drink and excuse yourself from the couple you'd been chatting with, then head back to the bar. You scan the crowd for Red as the bartender refills your glass, finally spotting her at a table in the corner of the garden. She has her back to you as she chats with a man you sort of recognize, someone you've seen at her shows before. You're about to go over and join them when he leans forward and gives her a charming half-smile, brushes his hand against her arm, and you can hear her laugh over the sound of the crowd.

Red's talented and gorgeous, and it isn't surprising that people would be attracted to her. What is surprising is the surge of jealousy that slams against your ribs, an almost tangible thing that threatens to crush you. It's so sudden that it almost doesn't feel like it belongs to you, and that's what gives you the presence of mind to turn around and walk to the opposite side of the garden, staring out over the city while you try to sort out what just happened.

She's your best friend, you can say that without hesitation, and yes, you've always thought she's beautiful. Beautiful, and talented, and kind, and smart, and funny. And maybe you've had some thoughts about her that strayed outside the bounds of platonic friendship. It's just that... she's incredible, she's amazing, and being around her makes you happier than you've ever been. But none of that is new, none of that explains why you're feeling like this now.

You sigh and take a healthy drink. It's not an issue of other people taking up her time-- if that were the case, you'd have given up on her months ago. Red has plenty of friends, to say nothing of her unending social obligations. There are always other people in her life, and it's never been a problem. Not like this. The only difference is that someone's flirting with her.

Someone else. Someone who isn't you.

Oh. *Oh.*

You frown at your drink and wonder how upset she'd be if you bailed on the party without saying goodbye. You really just need to leave, clear your head, figure out what you're going to *do* about this. And you definitely need to stop drinking before you say something you'll regret.

"Hey."

Red touches your arm, and you jump, spin around to face her. She looks a bit taken aback, and you shake your head. "Sorry. You surprised me."

"Oh. Sorry." She gives you a quick smile, then tilts her head to the side. "Are you okay?"

I think I'm in love with you and I don't know what to do about it. "Yeah, fine," you say. "Just taking in the view."

She brightens at that. "You can see the bay from the other side," she says and takes your arm. "C'mon."

You let her lead you across the garden; she points out the distant glimmer of lights on water, because she knows how much you love it, and you realize you can't tell her. If she doesn't feel the same way, you'll lose her as a friend. And her friendship means too much to you to risk it.

*

Once you've identified it, put a label on how you feel about her, it's impossible to stop thinking about. You almost feel like you have to think about it, like if you don't concentrate you'll blurt out *I love you* over lunch, and that'll be awkward for everyone. So you have to keep the words lodged in your throat, even on the days when it feels like you're choking.

For all that you can't stop thinking about it, Red doesn't seem to notice that anything's wrong. You've got a better poker face than you'd thought. And life goes on as it did before you realized you've fallen hopelessly in love with your best friend. You're able to see each other at least a couple times a week, lunch at her apartment or dinner before a show. There's a flurry of concerts as the year winds down and every artist in the city fights for position on the year-end polls. Red has a show almost every other night for three weeks straight, and while you worry about how exhausted she looks, you still go to every single performance. And no matter how tired she might be, when she's on stage, she shines.

She invites you over on the last night of voting, and when you show up, she's got the live feed of the results projected on her living room wall. "I've been in the top hundred all night," she says, giddy and breathless.

"Which one, singers, or...?"

Red shakes her head. "The arts."

Her name's on half a dozen polls of singers and songwriters and composers, but the big one is the general arts poll. Anyone whose work falls under the heading of 'art' can go on that one, and the people who place high tend to be the ones who hold city-wide fame the next year. So for her to be that high already is amazing. "Too early to open the champagne?" you ask, holding up the bottle.

"No, don't jinx me," she teases.

You laugh and set the bottle down, then drop onto the couch. Red paces around the room; you keep grabbing her wrist when she gets close enough and pulling her down to sit beside you. Despite your best efforts, she'll only stay put for a few minutes at a time before she bounces back up to start pacing again. The steady flow of messages to her terminal doesn't help, notes from her manager, from friends, from Sybil. Red rolls her eyes when she gets the latter. "She's trying to make me feel guilty about not going to her party," she explains.

"Why didn't you go?"

She shakes her head. "Imagine being in a room with thirty or forty other people all acting like this," she says, waving a hand at herself.

You'd probably have climbed out a window by now. "Oh."

“Yeah. That's why I'm here...” She heaves a sigh as the projection goes dark, replaced moments later by a notice saying that the results will be officially announced tomorrow. “I'll get a private message,” she explains. You let out a sigh of relief, and she laughs. “I wouldn't have made you put up with me if I wasn't going to find out until morning.”

You shrug. “I'd have come over anyway.”

She gives you a warm, fond smile, so much like the way you look at her sometimes. She starts to say something, but stops when her terminal chimes. “That was fast,” you say, standing up as she crosses the room.

“Yeah.” She taps at the terminal for a few moments. She'd been hovering around forty when the stream ended, but there's always a rush of votes right at the end, people who like to feel like they've made a difference by jumping in at the last minute. Anything in the top fifty is remarkable, especially for someone so early in her career, but you know Red's got her eyes higher than that.

She goes still and makes a quiet, startled sound, and you can't tell if it's good or bad. “Seventeen,” she says. Your jaw drops. That's-- “I placed seventeen out of almost four hundred, I...” Red turns around and covers her mouth with both hands, speechless with shocked laughter. This is gonna make her career. Make her famous.

“Red, that's amazing,” you say with a stunned smile. She laughs again, then practically launches herself at you, flinging her arms around your neck in a hug. You catch her and spin her around on instinct, laughing along with her, and you're so, so happy for her. She keeps her arms around you even after you set her down, and before you can say anything or step back, she pulls herself up and kisses you.

It's not a very lengthy kiss, and it takes you a shamefully long time to get over your shock and kiss her back, but you manage to respond before she pulls away. She doesn't go far, though, bare inches of space between your lips and hers, and your mind's still reeling with the shock that this is actually happening when she kisses you again. You kiss her back much faster this time, and she leans into you, her head tilted to the side and lips parted.

You're both out of breath when you finally draw back, and you keep your eyes closed, because you have a horrible feeling that if you open them you'll find yourself waking up alone in your bed and this wonderful dream will end. “I've been wanting to do that for ages,” Red says, sinking back to her feet instead of standing on her toes.

That's surprising enough to get you to open your eyes, and it's not a dream, you're standing in her apartment with your arms around her and she just kissed you. Twice. She's giving you this dazed, sort of goofy smile, like she can't quite believe this is real, either. “Really?” you ask.

She nods, idly toying with the collar of your shirt. “Ever since you sent me those flowers.”

“That was months ago.” Before you'd even realized what your feelings really were, although in retrospect, the fact that you picked roses to send her probably should have been a clue.

“Yeah, well...” She trails off and shrugs sheepishly.

Months of pining over each other, all because neither of you wanted to risk saying anything. “At least I wasn’t the only one being an idiot about it,” you say. She laughs and pulls you down for another kiss, and maybe someday the novelty of it will wear off but right now the fact that you can do this is sort of staggering.

You’re well into kiss number four or five when Red’s terminal starts chiming frantically. She pulls away from you with an irritated groan. “Guess the results got leaked,” you say.

“They usually do,” she says and reluctantly steps away from you. You watch as she walks back to her terminal and taps at the screen. She shakes her head and hits a switch on the side, and it abruptly goes silent. “I’ll deal with that in the morning.”

You can only imagine the number of messages she’ll have by then. “You’re gonna regret that tomorrow,” you tell her as she comes back.

She just smiles. “Mm, probably not,” she replies and lightly pushes you down onto the couch.

It’s late enough to be early when you finally leave to start the long trip back to your place. You’re sort of relieved she didn’t ask you to stay the night; you don’t want to rush things and risk ruining this, but if she’d invited you to bed you’re not sure you’d have been able to say no. You do make her promise to keep her schedule clear for dinner tomorrow night. You’re taking her out to celebrate, just the two of you. She deserves it.

*

It’s probably not the best time to start a new relationship, so you’re glad that it isn’t a new one, exactly; it’s just a change in the one you already had. A pretty significant change, of course, and you’re still not quite over the fact that you can kiss her almost whenever you want, but you’ve both had plenty of experience at dealing with her busy schedule. And it’s a good thing, too, because after the vote, everyone wants her time and attention.

The theaters and concert halls are actually the easiest to deal with. They’re coming to Red now, begging her to perform on their stages, and she can pick and choose where she wants to sing. She even gets an offer from the Empty Set, asking to book her for a show in a few months’ time. She plays it cool when her manager calls to schedule the performance, but you’re the one who gets to watch her bounce around the room when she ends the call. It’s the stage she’s had her eyes on since she first started, the one you always knew she’d end up on.

She actually ends up doing fewer shows, though for far larger crowds, and while her days might be filled with composing and recording and mixing her music, she has more nights free to spend with you. For all that you’re afraid of rushing things, you only make it about two weeks after that first kiss before you tell her you love her. And it turns out that the way she smiles at you when she says, “I love you, too,” is everything you want out of life.

She asks you to stay the night not long after that, and while you’ve never really thought much of your name, you decide it sounds best when she breathes it against your skin. And waking up with her is its own reward—Red’s not a morning person *at all*, and watching her sulk

around until the coffee's ready is kind of hilarious. The fact that she usually ends up wearing your shirt and nothing else certainly doesn't hurt.

So if it were just the shows and newfound romance, everything would be pretty much perfect. But it's not, of course. If every theater in Cloudbank wants Red on their stages, then every socialite with any degree of influence wants her at their parties. She's no stranger to the social scene, but before, she was just a guest. Now, it's more like she's a trophy; having her at a party is an accomplishment in and of itself. People treat her differently, and you can tell it grates on her. At least she has enough pull that she can bring you along now, which is a mixed blessing at best. You know it makes them easier on her, but sometimes you find yourself wondering if she's mad at you and the endless parties are your punishment.

"If that were the case, do you really think I'd put myself through them, too?" she says when you bring up the possibility after a particularly awful party that the two of you snuck out of hours early. "Besides, I have far easier ways of punishing you. Like ordering Harvest Garden from Jan's."

You clutch your chest and fall dramatically across her bed. "You wouldn't dare!" She throws a pillow at you and laughs, which was your goal in the first place.

But even the parties are preferable to the press. Before her sudden ascension to fame, she'd done a handful of interviews, usually with smaller radio shows or lesser-known reporters. Now she's Cloudbank's darling, at least for the moment, and every journalist in town wants an hour or three to talk about her music, her process, her relationships, her life. The parties you can at least help her with. The interviews she has to do on her own, and she hates them. Red's a deeply private person; she told you once that she likes the stage because she has total control over what the audience sees, what they get. She gives the same non-answers at the interviews, but they keep asking the same questions, over and over. And she always seems so drained when she comes back from them.

The reporters wait outside the theaters, too, snapping pictures and shouting questions when she's trying to leave. Sometimes the more dedicated (her words) or obsessive (yours) fans are among them. After a trio of those fans try to sneak backstage to catch her alone, you start acting as her unofficial bodyguard. All that time in boxing rings has made you good at stopping people without doing any serious damage, and you're tall enough that she can literally hide behind you if she needs to. Let the press take all the pictures of you that they want—you're still not anywhere in the system for them to find.

"I'm glad it's you doing this," Lorelle, Red's manager, tells you one night as the two of you stand near the exit and eye the crowd of photographers on the other side. You shoot Lorelle an inquisitive look, and she shrugs. "Anyone else, and I'd always be wondering why they were doing it. If I could trust them."

But she trusts *you* with Red's safety. You smile at her and nod. "Thanks."

"Ready to go?" Red asks, shrugging into her coat as she comes down the hall.

You lean over and crack the door open, peering out, and almost get blinded by the flurry of flashes going off. "Ow," you mutter and rub your eyes. "Let's, uh, try going out the front

tonight.”

*

Backstage at the Empty Set is a labyrinth, twisting hallways and rooms of various sizes hiding behind mostly unmarked doors. You make your way through them as confidently as possible, weaving past the theater staff and security guards. Red spent most of the afternoon on stage in the empty theater, practicing and doing sound checks. You spent the time familiarizing yourself with the layout and the quickest routes to all the exits.

Red's dressing room is easy enough to find, at least-- one of the few doors with a sign on it. You rap your knuckles against the door. “It's me.”

“Come on in,” she calls.

She's sitting at the vanity, humming to herself as she applies her lipstick. She has a new gown for the occasion, yellow and black and gold, feathers at the collar and triangle details everywhere. “Hey, beautiful,” you greet her with a grin.

She sets the makeup down and smiles at you in the mirror. “Hey. You clean up pretty nice yourself.”

You scoff. “It's not that different from what I normally wear,” you reply. You do have a new suit, one that looks almost identical to your others, save for the addition of a faintly glowing yellow-gold triangle on the back of the jacket. It matches her dress. You're pretty sure you're never going to stop wearing it.

“You still look very handsome,” she says as she stands up. She smooths out her skirt and sighs.

“Excited?”

“Yeah,” she says with a nod.

“Nervous?” you ask, stepping closer and putting your hands on her shoulders.

She smiles. “That too.”

“You're gonna be great,” you tell her. “You're always great.”

“I think you might be biased.”

“Doesn't mean I'm wrong.” You lean down to kiss her, then stop abruptly when she puts her hand in front of her face.

“I don't have time to redo my makeup,” she explains. You make a face at her, and she laughs. “You can have all the kisses you want after the show.”

She steps past you towards the door, and you let out a sigh as you follow her. “I'm holding you to that.”

“Good.”

You trail after her to the stage, lights dimmed as the last opening act exits. Red takes a deep breath, lets it out slow. The music starts-- her music-- and you squeeze her shoulder. “Knock 'em dead.”

She nods and walks onto the stage. The lights are still down, but the crowd cheers for her anyway, and you can see the change in her immediately. She walks to the mic like she owns the place, like this stage was made for her. The lights come up right on cue, and even from where you're standing in the wings, you can see her smile as she starts to sing.

It's probably the best show she's ever done. She's amazing, as always, and the crowd adores her. She puts her heart and soul into the music, and it doesn't matter that you've heard the songs dozens of times, it still feels like the first time you saw her on stage. Her music touches people, and they love her for it.

You're waiting for her when she comes off stage. Red's practically floating as the crowd roars behind her, and before she can say a word, you sweep her up in your arms and bend down to kiss her. “You were incredible,” you breathe when you finally part. She just smiles, a giddy, breathless laugh escaping her.

“Red!”

You both turn as Lorelle runs over, beaming, and Red steps away to give her a hug. “You were perfect,” Lorelle gushes. “Perfect.”

Out in the theater, the cheering is turning to cries for an encore. Red looks back at the stage, hesitating, and you step out of the way and gesture towards her mic. “Go!” Lorelle says, making a shooing motion with her hands. “Gotta give the people what they want.”

“Yeah.” Red shakes her head to clear it, then heads back for the stage. She squeezes your hand as she passes, and when she steps into the light, the audience goes wild.

Lorelle tugs on your sleeve, and you glance down at her. She's smirking as she waves her hand at her mouth, and after a second, you get what she's saying and drag the back of your hand across your lips. Red's lipstick leaves a crimson streak across your skin, and you chuckle. “Oops.”

She shakes her head at you and opens her mouth to say something, but she stops as the theater manager hurries over. “When can she come back?” he asks. Lorelle's suddenly all business, and she moves off a few steps to discuss Red's next show. You turn away, leaning against the wall as you watch Red smile and sway with the music. *That's my star.*

*

You've been dating for about six months when Red invites you to move in with her. You're more than halfway there already; most of your clothes are at her place, and it's been months since you've slept at your apartment for two nights in a row. So the two of you spend a few days packing up the stuff you actually want to keep, and then another day rearranging clothes

and furniture and an alarming amount of outdated recording equipment to make room for your things. (It takes some arguing, but you manage to convince Red that if she can't remember the last time she used something, it can be thrown out to make room for your exercise equipment.) The only things you really miss are a view of the water and easy access to Goldwalk's bars, but that's what the rail lines are for.

And you do make it back to Goldwalk at least a few times a month, getting a drink with friends or catching a boxing match. Sometimes you let yourself get talked into actually getting back in the ring, but Red always worries over you when you come home with bruises and a bloody nose. So mostly you just have a few drinks with your friends and watch a stream of that night's game. Red comes with you sometimes, when her schedule's clear, but you can tell it's always a little weird for her. She's famous, after all, and while your friends make an effort to treat her normally, she's never entirely comfortable.

It's a little like how you feel at the parties she goes to, but instead of awkward questions or nervous laughter when one of her songs comes on the radio, you usually get ignored. You and Red have kept your relationship fairly quiet-- not a secret, exactly, but you're not really open about it, either. It's for her sake more than anything. There's already enough gossip swirling around her without adding a mystery boyfriend to the mix. Most people think you're just her bodyguard, and neither of you go out of your way to correct the assumption.

You finally meet Sybil Reisz at one of those parties. You're pretty sure that Red has been trying to put that off for as long as possible, and once you've met her, you understand why. From the way Red talks about her, she doesn't really consider Sybil a friend, but it seems the other woman hasn't gotten that message. She greets Red with a lengthy hug, acknowledges you only when Red introduces you, then links her arm through Red's and drags her away to meet some painter. Red shoots you an apologetic look over her shoulder; you give her your best 'it's okay' look and go to find a drink.

Red finally manages to make her way back over to where you've been lurking by the windows for close to half an hour. "Sorry," she says. "I didn't want to abandon you like that, but..."

"She didn't give you much of a choice."

She nods and plucks the glass from your hand, taking a large drink before returning it to you. "She's always been like that."

But only towards Red, based on what you saw. Sybil had eventually detached herself from Red, but she wasn't nearly as hands-on with anyone else. You're not jealous, not much anyway; you know Red loves you, and you could tell how uncomfortable she was with Sybil's attention. That's really what bothers you, more than anything, that she's not happy. "I guess telling her to back off hasn't really worked?"

"I can't really tell her that," Red says with a frown. "She has connections everywhere in the city, and if she decides I've wronged her..."

You make a face and offer her your drink again. "I could always kiss you in the middle of the dance floor," you say. "Then she could just be angry at me."

Red laughs. “Well, that might solve one problem,” she says. “But it'd probably cause a lot more.”

The perils of dating a celebrity. “Yeah, I know.”

She sips your drink again before returning it, then takes you by the elbow. “Come on,” she says. “You've been standing over here looking lonely long enough, and I want to get back to talking to that painter. She's got some really interesting projects planned.”

“Like what?”

“Well, she selected meteorology and chemistry, so try and guess.”

*

Life settles into a sort of routine, performances and parties, nights out with friends and nights spent at home, and before you know it, it's been almost a year since Red kissed you for the first time. You want to do something special for your anniversary, but none of the ideas you come up with seem quite right.

In the end, Red's the one who comes up with a plan. “We should go to the beach,” she says, more or less out of the blue.

You glance down at her where she's leaning against your chest. The two of you are settled in on the couch, reading a book together, and it takes a second for you to figure out what she's talking about. “For our anniversary?”

“Mm-hm.” She nods. “It'll be nice to get out of the city for a day.”

It would. And you've missed the water, which she probably knows. “Yeah,” you say. “That sounds good.”

You take Route 64 out to the far edge of the bay, opposite the city, hopefully secluded enough that you'll have the beach to yourself for a while. It's still within the bounds of Cloudbank's influence, as evidenced by the faintly shimmering blue-green skies overhead, but it's still beyond the edge of the city. Red sings along with the radio while you drive, and you give in to her pleading eyes and sing backing vocals for her on a few tracks.

There's no one else around on your stretch of beach when you get out of the car, and Red immediately sheds her sundress and heads straight for the water. You leave the bag of snacks and your shirt beside an empty hammock and follow suit. The water's almost the same shade as the sky, and it's surprisingly warm, given the mild temperatures everyone's voted for lately. Red decides that it's a fun game to try to dunk you, diving under the surface to take you out at the knees. It doesn't really work, and you retaliate by picking her up and tossing her into the water.

Eventually, you both get tired of chasing each other around the waves, and Red announces she's starving. You settle in on the hammock while she rummages around in the bag you

packed, then hands you a bag of grapes before carefully tucking herself in against your side. "This was a good idea," you say, shifting your weight enough to set the hammock swaying.

"Yeah." Red pops a couple of grapes in her mouth. "Don't get out of the city often enough."

For a second, you consider suggesting that you two hop back in the car and drive away, see where the highway leads. But only for a second. Cloudbank's home, for both of you, and you don't really want to get out of sight of the city. So instead you claim a handful of grapes for yourself and watch deep blue clouds roll across the sky. Probably the work of Red's painter friend. A comfortable silence falls, but it doesn't last long, quickly replaced by Red humming one of her newer songs. You smile and let your eyes drift closed.

You actually doze off for a while, and wake abruptly when Red clambers out of the hammock. "Oh, good, you're awake," she says when you grab the side to keep from falling out. "C'mon. I wanna make a sandcastle."

"Wasn't asleep," you mumble and get to your feet, following her back to the shore.

The sun's setting by the time you head back to the city. This time, Red's the one who falls asleep, her head against the window, and you keep stealing glances at her as you drive. She doesn't stir when you park the car. You reach over, brush her hair behind her ear. "C'mon, gorgeous," you murmur. "Time to wake up."

Red blinks and rubs her eyes. You let your hand fall to her shoulder, rubbing your thumb back and forth while she wakes up. "Oh, we're here," she says, then yawns. You chuckle. "I hope you didn't plan on going out for dinner," she adds.

"I figured we'd just order from Jan's."

"Mm. Good thinking." You nod and reach for the door, but she catches your sleeve and pulls you back, leaning in for a kiss that's no less wonderful than the first one she gave you a year ago. "Love you," she says when you draw back.

You smile at her. "Love you, too." You steal another kiss before climbing out of the car. Red catches up to you and links her arm through yours, leaning her head against your shoulder. It's more publicly affectionate than she usually is, but you're hardly about to push her away. "This was fun," you say as you walk. "We should do it again next year."

Red nods. "Definitely."

*

For all that Red isn't a morning person, one of the few things that can will get her out of bed quickly is her music. You've gotten pretty good at telling when she's starting to compose something, and so it's only a little surprising when you wake up to an empty bed. It's a little after ten-- early, for the two of you-- and Red's already at her desk, murmuring to herself and scribbling something. You do your best not to interrupt as you roll out of bed and pull on your clothes, and she doesn't look up when you shuffle off to the kitchen to make coffee.

You lean against the counter while the coffee's brewing and stare absently out the window. It's actually a pretty nice morning, warm and clear under blue skies. It makes you miss the bay. Red's gonna be busy all day with writing, and you can pick up something to make for dinner if you go out. That decision made, you grab both cups of coffee and head back to the bedroom.

Red's got her chin resting against her hand and her pen held between her lips as she rereads her lyrics. You lean over and set her mug down, well away from her papers, and then press a kiss to her cheek. "Morning."

She takes the pen out of her mouth and smiles. "Hey. Did I wake you up?"

"Nah," you say around a yawn. She laughs, and you take a large drink of coffee. "I'm probably gonna go out for a while. Grab something to make for dinner."

"Hm, let me guess: seafood?" she teases.

Okay, so maybe you're a *little* predictable. "Hey, if you want a say in what gets made for dinner, you can start cooking."

Red levels an incredulous look at you over the rim of her mug. Her inability to cook knows no bounds, as far as you can tell. The only thing she's able to heat up without burning it is coffee, and even that gets scalded if she has to write down lyrics *right now*. You grin and give her another kiss, then head back to the kitchen to find breakfast.

By the time you've eaten, showered, and gotten dressed, she still hasn't moved from her desk. You remind her that pens aren't actually edible and she needs to stop composing for five minutes to eat real food; Red sighs, but leaves her writing and goes to the kitchen. You flop down on the couch and start reading through the day's news. Red did something of questionable permissibility to her personal terminals after you moved in, and now they just default to Red's ID, regardless of who's actually using them. You wonder sometimes what the system makes of her apparent sudden interest in seafood recipes and sports.

You're about halfway done with a downright hilarious gossip column when the sound of guitar chords drifts out from Red's studio. She'll be in there the rest of the day, most likely, and once you finish reading the article, you get up and poke your head in the door. She's got papers spread across the tables, a mix of lyrics and musical notation, and she's bent over her guitar as she sings under her breath. You wait until she leans over to scribble something down before you say anything. "Did you know you have a secret boyfriend who plays for the Clientele?" you ask, leaning against the door frame.

Red frowns and glances up. "I'm kind of offended they think I'd betray the local team like that."

"That's what most of the commenters said. It got pretty heated."

"I can imagine," she says with a smirk.

You chuckle and straighten up. "I'm gonna head out, should be back in a few hours."

“Okay.” Her attention is already drifting back to her notes. “I’ll be here.”

“I figured.”

Probably for the best that you’ll be gone most of the day, you think as you descend to street level. When she’s working on a new song, Red’s focus narrows to the music and very little else, at least for a few days. You’d be lying if you said it didn’t bother you, but you knew what you were getting into when you became her friend, to say nothing of when you moved in. Music’s at the core of who she is; you couldn’t have fallen in love with her if you didn’t love the music, too.

Besides, the extreme focus only lasts a few days. Then she drags you into the whole creative process, pulling you into her studio so you can listen to half-finished lyrics or different mixes. That’s a big reason why, when your friends ask if her fame ever bothers you, you can honestly say it doesn’t. So maybe the whole town knows the words to Vanishing Point. You’re the one who got to dance around the living room with her while she worked out the bass line.

You take the rail lines all the way out down to the bay, well away from most of the mid-day crowds. You don’t really have a particular destination in mind, so you just head across the bridge, hands in your pockets as you idly hum one of Red’s songs to yourself. It’s not until you come across the park on the other side that you realize this is where you first met her. Over three years since that day, and you know you wouldn’t have predicted a minute of it. She changed everything for you, in the best possible way.

It’s funny, you think as you cut across the park. Three years ago, you were pretty sure you’d never get around to making your selections, and you wouldn’t know what to pick if you had to. These days, you’re still perfectly happy to stay out of the system, but you’ve got an idea for what you might select. Not that it makes any difference-- you still couldn’t choose. You know for a fact that ‘love’ isn’t one of the available options.

You pause by the fence and glance around to make sure no one’s looking before you climb over it to the narrow strip of concrete above the bay. There’s enough room for you to sit down, your back to the fence and your legs dangling safely above the waves. The heart of Cloudbank’s stretched out in front of you, and you give the skyline a fond smile. You lean your head against one of the fence posts and sigh. “Hello, world.”

*

Another week, another party. After all this time, you’ve gotten pretty good at navigating them, and most of the people who are at these sort of things have gotten used to the sight of you at Red’s side. You’re pretty sure that it’s something of an open secret among them that Red’s dating her apparent bodyguard. It’s not like they’re wrong. They probably just don’t have the order of events right.

Tonight’s party is another one of Sybil’s productions. The year-end polls wrapped up last week; you and Red almost missed the results, since you were at the beach for your two-year anniversary, but you made it back in time to hear that she’s the ninth most popular artist in the entire city. Sybil’s gala is for the top twenty, their guests, and “other esteemed individuals” from around Cloudbank. You have a feeling that if it were just the first two groups, this party

would actually be pretty nice. Red always seems more relaxed at gatherings of fellow artists, where she can talk about her work without putting on a show.

But the other guests, administrators and architects and politicians, they all want something from Red and the rest. To have their own work memorialized, somehow. You can sort of understand the impulse: things don't last in Cloudbank, but artists tend to leave marks that hang on a bit longer. That doesn't mean you have to like it when Red gets intercepted by a fairly intense-looking woman on her way back to you.

White and red in the corner of your eye catches your attention, and you glance over to see Sybil herself sidling up to you. "How's Red enjoying the party?" she asks.

"I wouldn't know," you reply, trying not to sound too sarcastic. It doesn't work very well. "I haven't talked to her in almost an hour."

Either less sarcasm gets through than you'd thought, or Sybil's just ignoring it. "Well, she is the most popular person here," she says. "Everybody loves her."

Something about her tone and the way she's staring at Red rubs you the wrong way. "She's worked hard for it." It's as neutral an answer as you can come up with on the fly.

"Yes. She really is something special, don't you think?" Sybil's gaze turns appraising as she looks over at you. She's fishing for information, and you don't know why. Maybe she just wants to confirm the rumors about you and Red.

You're not confirming anything, least of all to her. You drain your glass and give Sybil a polite nod. "She is. Nice talking to you, Ms. Reisz," you say. "Excuse me."

You can feel Sybil's glare boring into your back as you walk away, but you ignore it. It's not like she can do anything about it-- if she bans you from her parties, Red won't show up. You make your way through the crowd towards Red, who's busy smiling and nodding at the woman who intercepted her. She catches sight of you, and while her expression of polite interest doesn't change, you can see the relief in her eyes.

"Ah, there you are," you say when you reach her side and put on a hand on Red's shoulder. "Sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Darzi was asking for you."

"Oh, I'm-- I'm so sorry," the woman says. "I've been taking up all of your time. Go, go, we can talk later."

"Of course," Red says. "It was nice to meet you."

She holds in her relieved sigh until you're halfway to the bar. "Thanks," she said. "Is Max actually looking for me, or...?"

"I saw a couple staff pouring him into a cab about half an hour ago," you reply. "But I'm sure that if he was still here, he'd love to talk to you about designing a gown for your next show."

Red laughs and shakes her head. You set your empty glass down on the bar and snag a pair of wine glasses from a passing waiter. "So," you ask as you hand Red her drink, "what was that

about?"

"Hm? Oh, something to do with improving the arts in Goldwalk," she says. "I'll be honest, I zoned out after a while. She was very passionate, but I think she just wanted an audience. Not me specifically."

"Ah." You take a drink of wine and sigh. You've had enough to drink to leave you pleasantly buzzed-- probably why you were willing to blow off Sybil like that-- and part of you thinks that maybe you shouldn't have too much more. The rest of you thinks that if you're gonna be stuck at this party, you may as well take advantage of the quality liquor.

Judging by how fast Red's wine is disappearing, she feels the same way. At least no one's bothering either of you, for the moment. You glance around the room, looking for familiar faces and wondering if anyone besides Darzi has escaped already. Farrah Yon-Dale's holding court in one corner of the room, and if she weren't surrounded by admirers, you'd probably suggest joining her. She and Red get along pretty well whenever they see each other at these parties.

After a few moments, you spot Farrah's partner on the other side of the room, frowning and looking around in confusion. You manage to catch their gaze and nod in Farrah's direction; they look over, spot her, and flash you a grateful smile. "What was that?" Red asks.

"Just helping Raine figure out where Farrah is." You watch as Raine reaches Farrah and leans down to whisper in her ear; Farrah smiles and takes her partner's hand as she stands. The two of them almost make it to the door before they're intercepted by Sybil.

Beside you, Red sighs. "So close."

You chuckle and take a healthy drink of wine. "Guess we're all gonna be here for a while longer."

It's a few more hours and several more drinks before you and Red finally make your escape. You're tipsy and she's drunk, which wouldn't be a problem if she didn't get so damn handsy. You've got enough sense left to get her to leave before she does anything that'll end up at the front of the gossip section tomorrow morning, though not enough to turn her down when she wants to make out in the back of the cab. That's what tinted glass is for, anyway.

Red puts on music when you get home and pulls you over to the empty space behind the couch so you can dance with her. It doesn't work very well; neither one of you is coordinated enough, and you both end up spending more time tripping over your own feet and laughing about it. The laughing quickly turns into kissing, and before long, you've given up on dancing entirely.

You draw back from a lengthy, breathless kiss, your fingers tangled in her hair, and she's so gorgeous, she's amazing, and you don't think you'll ever understand how you got so lucky. "You're my star," you murmur, because if Red's a flirty drunk then you're a poetic one. She giggles, and you shake your head a bit, pull her closer. "Not, not just 'cause of the singing," you explain, because this is important, she needs to know. "You're just... you're so bright.

That's what I remembered about you, after we first met, how bright you were. Everything about you just-- just shines.”

Red gives you a helpless, adoring smile, even as she puts her hands on your shoulders and pulls you down for another kiss. She’s still smiling when she draws back, and she takes your hands in hers and leads you to the bedroom. You meant every word, but that’s not all of it, not really. A star pulls things into its orbit, shares its light and warmth, keeps them close as long as it lives.

Sounds familiar.

*

Cloudbank has moods, sort of. Most people who vote want to be in the majority, so there’ll be trends—warm weather or pine trees or chrome-plated buildings—that turn into feedback loops, netting higher and higher victory margins until they burn themselves out. And as the year goes on, Cloudbank feels... uneasy, you guess, for lack of a better word. The news stories seem a little grim, unsolved thefts and new rumors about secret societies and people leaving for the Country. Farrah’s skies are stunning as ever, but the requests she gets are darker than usual. More grey, less gold.

For a while, you try not to worry about it. Just another feedback loop, it’ll pass, and trends will probably swing in the other direction to compensate. But the city’s mood starts creeping into Red’s music. Her lyrics have never been precisely upbeat, but stuff like *The Spine* and *Dormant* verges on bleak. The music’s still beautiful, still comes from her heart—and honestly, that’s what worries you. “I’m fine,” she says when you ask about it. “Really. Don’t worry so much.”

You do your best.

Unfortunately, Red’s popularity means her music’s everywhere, and it just makes that feedback loop stronger. There’s a different feel to the audiences at her shows as the months go on, that same unease in the rest of the city concentrated in her theaters. They still love her, love her music, but it seems to have gotten twisted, somehow. She’s always had some obsessive fans, but the number of them seems to jump abruptly. You find yourself having to push people away from doors more and more often—and more and more often, they push back. You try to keep Red from seeing it for as long as possible. But eventually someone tries to rush past you to get to her on the way to the car, and you have to take him to the ground before he gives up. Red’s silent on the ride home, and that’s probably the most disturbing part of all.

When everything finally breaks, it’s because of *Signals*, of all songs. It’s one of her darker songs, and definitely one of the more subversive ones—you can’t help but wonder if the part about not being a number in the system refers to you—but it’s fairly calm and simple, as far as the melody goes. The crowd’s been on edge all night, which makes you nervous, keeps you pacing around backstage and triple-checking the exits. You’ve just finished another one of your loops through the back and returned to your normal post in the wings when... when whatever it is starts. There’s shouting out in the audience; it happens sometimes, but this

time, instead of the offender immediately being silenced, it spreads, growing loud enough to compete with Red's singing.

"What's going on out there?" Lorelle asks, coming up beside you.

There's a wordless, furious shout, then a crash, followed by several screams. "Get the car," you snap. Out on stage, Red's pleading for calm, for people to stop.

Lorelle nods, eyes wide, and takes off at a run. You can hear glass shatter as you shove past the curtain, and while the bright lights keep you from seeing much in the audience, you can tell by sound that this has gotten way out of hand. Bar fights were a little more common in your old neighborhoods, and you know this brawl won't stop on its own.

Red's too stunned to resist when you grab her arm and haul her off stage, keeping your body between her and the crowd in case anyone decides to turn on her. "I don't understand," she says as you lead her towards the exit. "What happened?"

"I don't know."

Lorelle had the driver park as close to the door as possible, and because the show's not due to end for another forty minutes, the alley's mercifully clear. "Highrise," Lorelle says as soon as you've climbed in after Red, and you barely get the door shut before the driver accelerates.

You can feel Red trembling beside you, and you wrap your arm around her shoulders, pull her in against your side. "I don't understand," she says again, sounding horribly lost. There's nothing you can do, no answers you can give, so you just rub your hand up and down her arm. Lorelle's already fielding messages and calls, even before the distant sound of sirens and alarms reach you.

Red doesn't say another word on the drive back, though she at least stops shaking by the time you arrive. You keep your arm around her anyway. Lorelle follows you both inside without looking up from her mobile. "The crowd's been dispersed, mostly," she says. "There were some injuries. A few people were arrested."

"Do they know what happened?" you ask. Red steps away from you and sinks down on the couch. "Who started it?"

Lorelle shakes her head. She's in full damage-control mode, while you really aren't sure what to do. You got Red out of the theater safe, but now... She stares blankly at the wall, her hands laced together in her lap, and she still hasn't said a thing. You're about to ask if there's anything you can do when the front door opens. You automatically move to put yourself between the door and Red. No one's ever harassed her at home, but you had a feeling it would only be a matter of time. And tonight certainly seems like the night for everything going wrong.

The pair who walk in aren't obsessive fans, but they don't make you feel any better. You've never actually spoken to any administrators, because somebody like you doesn't *do* that, but you still recognize them. They show up in the news often enough. Nadia Zaman is a newer

admin, you're pretty sure, but Grant Kendrell is about as high up as they go. The fact that he's here is a little frightening, to be honest.

"Red. Miss Chapman." Kendrell glances at you, frowns slightly, and gives you a polite nod in lieu of a name. You're oddly proud of that for a moment, before you go back to being scared. "I'm glad to see you made it back to Highrise safely."

"We left as soon as the trouble started," Lorelle says, apparently the only one of the three of you currently capable of speech. Red's still silently staring, though at least she's adjusted her gaze to the administrators instead of the wall. You move to stand closer to her. Just in case. "Do you have any idea what happened?"

"We arrived on the scene to deal with the instigators," Zaman says smoothly. "Most witnesses identified one individual as the instigator, and he has been banned from the premises. We expect to see him banned from all other performing halls within forty-eight hours."

"He did make certain... accusations, however," Kendrell adds. You frown. What could anyone have accused her of? The only thing you can think of is your own relationship with her, but even that's barely a secret anymore-- "He claimed that Red was an instigator and a provocateur against Cloudbank."

Several long seconds of silence greet that statement. That's *insane*. "What?!" Lorelle finally says.

You glance down at Red. The color's drained from her face, but she's not saying a word. If she won't defend herself, then you will. "She's performed those songs a dozen times at least," you snap. "And nothing like this has ever happened. How can you--"

Zaman holds up her hands in a placating gesture. "We consider the accusations to be essentially baseless," she says. "We merely wanted you to be aware of what has been said."

And that they know what's been said. It's not very reassuring, but at least they're not going to try to arrest her. You've never punched an administrator before, and truth be told, you'd rather keep it that way. "Can you send over this accuser's information?" Lorelle asks. "In case he shows up anywhere else?"

"We'll have the precinct forward his name and photograph," Kendrell says. They've been alternating, tag-teaming this whole conversation, and it's weirdly unsettling. "And if there's anything else--"

"Thank you, Administrators," Red says as she slowly stands. It's the first thing she's said since the car, and while her voice is utterly flat, at least she's talking. "I appreciate you taking the time to see to this personally."

It's a clear dismissal, which borders on appallingly rude, given who she's talking to. Kendrell and Zaman exchange a look, then Zaman nods. "Of course," she says. "We're sorry this happened, and we hope things will go more smoothly in the future."

They head for the door; you follow them, a few steps behind, and punch in the locking code once they're gone. If they want to come back, they will—administrators have override access basically everywhere in the city—but it'll keep out anyone else. You stay there for a second, leaning against the door. What a night.

Lorelle glances at you when you come back, then turns her attention to Red. "I suppose this could have been worse," she says. "You weren't hurt, and the person responsible won't be showing up at your future shows, so--"

"Cancel them."

Red's still standing by the couch, her hands curled into fists at her sides, her head bowed and her gaze fixed on the floor. Lorelle blinks at her. "What?"

"My shows," Red says, her voice still emotionless. "Cancel them all. And don't schedule anything else."

Lorelle shoots you a desperate look; you shrug. This is Red's decision, and while you might not agree with it, the last thing she needs right now is for everyone to gang up on her. "Red, look," Lorelle begins, "I understand this has been upsetting, but that seems like an overreaction."

"I don't care." Red finally raises her head and glares at Lorelle. "I'm not performing. So just—just cancel them. All of them."

She turns on her heel and storms off to the bedroom, and you wince when the door slams. Lorelle sighs. "I'll wait until tomorrow," she says. "Let her calm down. She'll probably change her mind."

You have a horrible suspicion that she won't. "Maybe."

Lorelle frowns, looking you over. "Are you all right?"

You shrug, shake your head. "Ask me after I've had a decent night's sleep."

She lets out a faint laugh. You walk her to the door, tell her to get home safe, and she promises to send you a note once she does. She lives in the neighborhood, and normally neither one of you would think anything of walking home through Highrise at this hour. But tonight's been anything but normal.

You linger by the door for a minute, telling yourself that you're checking security, not stalling. For a moment, as you cross the living room, you consider opening up the news, seeing what the reports look like. Then you shake your head and continue to the bedroom. There'll be time enough for that tomorrow.

Red's gown and shoes are a tangled heap that you have to step over to get into the room. She's curled up under the blankets, her back to the door and her posture all but screaming 'leave me alone.' You want to help, to do something to make this right, but you don't even know where to start. You've just picked up her dress to hang up in the closet when she says

your name, quiet enough that you barely hear. You immediately drop the gown and walk over. “Yeah, Red?” you ask, perching on the edge of the bed.

She sighs and shuts her eyes. “Would you sing for me?”

“Of course,” you reply and reach out to stroke her hair. You’ve got a decent voice—nothing on her level, of course, but not bad. And she likes it when you sing with her. “Any requests?”

“Signals.”

Your hand goes still. “Red...”

“Please.” She opens her eyes and stares up at you, looking like her heart's breaking. “Please, I need to hear it, I need to know why...” She trails off. “Please.”

You’ve never been good at saying no to her, so you nod, start stroking her hair again, and she closes her eyes. You take a deep breath and call to mind lyrics you’ve heard more times than you can count. “Step off the edge, and start the motion... Look out below, I know there’s no decision... just collision... it’s all arranged...”

She keeps her eyes shut, but that doesn’t stop tears from escaping, running down her face and streaking her makeup. You want to pull her into your arms and hold her, somehow find a way to fix this, but she didn’t ask you to. She asked you to sing. So you do, and when you finish Signals, you immediately switch to a different song, one of her older ones. You stay there until she falls asleep, and then a little while after, just to make sure she won’t wake up when you stop.

You’re alone in the bedroom when you get up the next morning. The sky’s a brilliant yellow-orange today, the sun barely visible as a slightly brighter patch, and you wonder if the color is for Red’s sake. It’s almost the same color as her dress from last night, and it seems like the kind of thing Farrah would do. Pretty as it is, you sort of wish it were raining. It’d fit your mood better.

Red’s at the kitchen table, a steaming mug of tea and a few handwritten pages in front of her. She looks up when you come in, and while she looks tired and her eyes are a bit bloodshot, she still gives you a small smile. “I made tea,” she says. “Should still be warm.”

“Thanks.” You make yourself wait until after you’ve gotten your tea and taken a seat to ask, “What’re you working on?”

She shrugs. “A statement for the press,” she says. “Explaining why I’m taking time off.”

You hesitate for a few long moments. “Are you sure about this, Red?”

“Yes.” She sighs and sets down her pen. “I need to understand why this happened. Why my music caused this.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“Nothing like this has happened at anyone else’s shows.”

You shake your head and put your mug down. “Nothing like this happened at any of *your* other shows, either.”

The look she gives you seems almost pitying. “That's not true, and you know it,” she says. “You've seen how the audiences have been lately. This has been brewing for a long time.” She sighs and looks back at her papers. “I need to understand why.”

“Okay.”

Her head immediately snaps up. “Okay?” she repeats, startled. “That's it?”

You nod. “It's your decision,” you say. “And if you decide you want to go back in two weeks, or two months, or never, either way, I'll support you.” It might make things a little strange around here while you both figure out what to do with your time, but you'll manage. You're sure of it.

Red stares at you, then smiles, some of the tension seeming to ease out of her shoulders. “I love you.”

You smile back. “I love you, too.” You pick up your mug again and push your chair back. “Have you eaten yet?”

“I'm not hungry.”

Neither of you have eaten since before the show last night. You're starving, and while she might not have an appetite, she does need to eat. “How about I start making breakfast, and you let me know if you change your mind.”

She huffs out a laugh and nods. “Okay.”

*

Things are hard, for a while. Red's still writing music, but most of it, she doesn't keep. The confidence that struck you about her back when you first met has been shaken, badly. She's always created music with the certainty that she was making something good. Now she's second-guessing herself, picking apart everything she writes, and there doesn't seem to be much you can do to help.

For the first couple weeks, Red doesn't go any farther outside than the front balcony. Her abrupt disappearance puts the city's rumor mill into overdrive; the most commonly repeated one is that she was killed in the altercation at her show, and it's been covered up by the administrators. That one gets enough traction that even you start getting messages from both your friends and hers asking if she's all right. Lorelle begs Red to do at least one interview, just to put an end to the rumors, but to no avail. Red's committed to her self-imposed seclusion, and no one's going to change her mind.

Eventually, though, she starts going out more, walks around Cloudbank or dinner with you at her favorite restaurants. Sometimes, the two of you will meet up with friends, but Red quickly gets tired of fielding questions about her hiatus from performing-- why she's done it,

what she's working on, when she'll be back. If nothing else, the occasional photo of her leaving an apartment in Sunset or a bar in Goldwalk quell the rumors about her being dead.

But as the year winds down, Red seems lost again. This time of year is usually hectic with concerts and parties and interviews, and she doesn't quite seem to know how to fill the hours. She spends a lot of time in bed or picking out minor-key melodies on her guitar. You bring home new books, offer to teach her how to cook, anything to distract her from whatever thoughts are chasing themselves around her head. None of it seems to help much, and your only consolation is that you don't seem to be making things worse.

You're in the kitchen, slicing up tomatoes for dinner, when Red wanders in and slides her arms around your waist. "Hey," she says, voice muffled by your shirt.

"Hi."

You've finished with the tomatoes and moved on to the peppers before she speaks again. "Are we going to the beach next week?" she asks.

"Sure," you say, stepping to the side to dump all the vegetables in the pot. Red steps with you, and you chuckle slightly. "If you want to."

She lets you go so you can turn around to face her. "Yeah," she says. "It's tradition, now. And I wouldn't mind getting out of Cloudbank that day."

Same day as the year-end polls. You're not sure where she's going to fall on them this year, or how she's going to react to her new standing. So a day out of the city will probably be for the best. "Then yeah, of course we'll go," you say.

Red smiles. "Good."

Your three-year anniversary's a good one. Red seems more like her old self, as if being out of the city's taken some kind of pressure off her. When the sun starts to set, she turns on the car radio and leaves the windows open so you can hear the music while she dances with you on the beach. By the time you get back to Cloudbank, it's late and you're both exhausted; all you really want to do is fall face-first into bed and sleep for a day or two. But Red stops by her terminal and hesitates for only a moment before opening up her messages.

"Checking the results now?" you ask.

She nods. "If I don't, I'll be up all night worrying about it."

You peer over her shoulder as she brings up the final ballot. It only takes her a moment to find her name, in sixteenth place. "Oh," she says, surprised. "I... I thought it'd be lower."

So did you, honestly; after a sudden disappearance and months without performing, it was reasonable to assume that she'd have dropped a lot more than seven places. That she's stayed in the top twenty is amazing. You lean down and press a kiss to her hair, still damp and smelling faintly of the ocean. "They still love you," you murmur.

Red sighs and leans against you. "Is that a good thing?"

You wince. “Of course it is,” you say and wrap your arms around her. “Your music means something to people, Red. It always has.” You reach out and tap her name on the screen. “You wouldn’t be here if all it did was cause riots.”

“I think calling it a riot is a bit of an exaggeration,” she says wryly. She skims through the subject lines on the rest of the messages waiting for her, then shakes her head and switches off the screen. “Tomorrow.”

*

You’re not sure if it’s the show of devotion from her fans or just the passage of time, but Red starts composing again as the new year begins. Music that she’s keeping and recording, music that she actually seems proud of. It’s a relief when she hauls you off the couch and into her studio so you can listen to the piano line on her newest piece. We All Become still isn’t exactly upbeat, as far as the lyrics go, but both the song and Red seem to have energy that had been missing for a long time.

It's just around sunset, and the two of you are heading home through Goldwalk. Red doesn't seem to be in much of a hurry, probably because she's not the one carrying the flatbread. Jan's is good cold, but it's better hot, and you'd like to get home sooner rather than later. So when she stops walking completely on one of the bridges over the bay, you can't help but roll your eyes. “Red, c'mon, you can admire the view from the balcony,” you say, shifting the box to one hand and holding your other out to her. It is a nice view, the deep orange of the sunset striking a beautiful contrast to today's purple skies. It'll be even nicer if you can admire it while eating dinner.

Instead of listening to you, she glances around, then walks to the plaza on the far side of the bridge. “C'mon,” she calls and sits down on the edge, just above the bay.

You sigh and follow. “Guess we're eating here?” you ask, setting the box down behind her before taking a seat.

“Mm-hm.” Red folds her legs underneath herself and twists around to open up the box.

She had the right idea, you decide after a few minutes. The evening crowd's just starting to come out, so there's plenty of people-watching to do. Everyone else has somewhere to go, though, so the two of you have the plaza more or less to yourselves while you eat. Red gleefully claims the mushrooms you've picked off, and she laughs when you make faces at her fungus-laden slices.

The flatbread's mostly gone when you hear footsteps approaching from behind. You automatically tense and turn to see who it is, bracing yourself for... well, you're not quite sure what, exactly, but nothing good. The nervous-looking teenager standing behind you and clutching a notebook to her chest isn't quite the threat you were expecting, and you relax a bit. “Um,” she says, glancing from you to Red, “oh, I-I'm sorry to interrupt...”

Red turns as well and gives her a warm smile. “It's all right,” she says.

“Uh-- I'm, I'm a huge fan, and I was just wondering, um, if I could get your autograph...?”

“Sure.” Red takes the notebook and pen when the girl holds them out. “What's your name?” she asks, scrawling her autograph across the page, somehow managing to make three letters huge and flowery.

“Jayda.”

Red adds a heart and the girl's name. She starts to hand the notebook back, then pauses, glancing past her. You follow her gaze to see another teenager hopping excitedly from foot to foot on the other side of the square. “Does your friend want one, too?” she asks.

“Oh! Uh, yeah, sure, if you don't mind...”

“Not at all.”

Red signs another page with the friend's name, then hands the notebook back. “Thank you so much,” Jayda gushes. “Really. Thanks. Have a great night.”

“You, too,” Red replies, grinning, but you're not sure if the girl hears, she runs off so fast. She meets up with her friend, and their excited squealing is audible from all the way across the plaza.

Red chuckles and turns back to the bay, idly picking at a seam on her dress. “Well, I guess this is as good a time as any,” she says. You blink at her; she glances over at you and shrugs. “I-- I think I'm gonna go back. To performing.”

“Yeah?”

“I mean, it's not just because of...” She waves a hand over her shoulder, indicating her young fans. “I've been thinking about it for a while. And I... I think I'm ready. I miss the stage.”

You nod. It's not that much of a surprise, truth be told, with her renewed focus on composing. “Okay,” you say. “Good.”

She smiles and tilts her head to the side. “Not upset about having to share me with the adoring crowds again?”

“Well, I managed before,” you say with an over-dramatic sigh. “I'm sure I'll find some way to endure it again.” She giggles, and you drop the act. “Besides,” you add, “none of them adore you like I do.”

“No, they don't,” she agrees and leans in to kiss you. You can't help but smile against her lips; you're not sure if she's forgotten that you're in public or if she just doesn't care, but it's kind of nice to be able to do this. To not feel like there's something to hide. She shivers a little when she draws back and rubs one hand up and down her arm. It's gotten a bit cooler, now that the sun's gone down, and you start to shrug out of your jacket. “Oh, no, you don't have to,” Red says, “I'm fine--”

“Too late,” you say, draping it over her shoulders.

She chuckles and pulls it a bit more securely around herself. “You sure you're all right with this?” she asks, reaching for your hand.

“Yes. Very sure,” you say firmly. Then you laugh and shake your head. “Not as all right with it as Lorelle will be, though.”

“I'm expecting tears of joy.”

“She's gonna throw a parade.” Red makes a face at that. You grin and give her another quick kiss, then start to get to your feet. “C'mon, we should head home. It's getting cold and I can't feel my legs.”

Red stands and goes to pull off your jacket. “Here, you can have this back.”

You shake your head and straighten it out on her shoulders again. “Nah, you keep it,” you tell her. “It looks good on you.”

*

Red's first return show sells out in under an hour. The Empty Set increases security for her performance, which you're grateful for; you don't want to think about what could happen if something goes wrong with a crowd this size. Nothing happens, though. It's a great show, the crowd calls for two encores, and Red's beaming by the time you catch up with her in her dressing room. “I didn't realize how much I'd missed it,” she says, breathless after the lengthy kiss you greet her with.

“I think they knew exactly how much they missed you,” you reply and kiss her again.

There's the expected explosion of party invitations and requests for interviews, and Red turns down almost all of them. Her fans still flocked to her, even after more than half a year of silence. She—and Lorelle, after some persuading—have realized that she doesn't need to do any of that. All she has to do is share her music, and people love her. You do end up going with her to a few parties and galas, of course, but they're events she wants to be at, rather than obligations. Red's happier because she can actually enjoy herself, and you're happy because she's happy.

Red's return doesn't mean that Cloudbank's problems have disappeared, though recently most of the trouble seems confined to Goldwalk. There was that whole blow up over the Channel, and sections of the district keep being taken offline. Honestly, though, it's hard to worry about it too much. They're bigger issues than you can do anything about. Not even being able to vote on any of it would make much of a difference.

And at home, things are great. Red's got her confidence and her music back, she's performing again, and you feel like a weight's been lifted off you both. The only strange thing is Red's latest song—she's writing something new, but for the first time that you can remember, she won't let you hear it. You catch fragments of it, guitar chords and bass lines greeting you when you get home, but Red always switches everything off right away.

“I’ve got a good reason,” Red says when you ask her about it. “You’ll still get to hear it before anyone else, I just... I want to have it mostly finished this time.”

Further questions don't get you anywhere, and since she's never done this before, you're inclined to trust her when she says she has her reasons. It still stings to have her hiding something from you. So it's a relief when, after weeks of secrecy, she pulls you into her studio and sits you down across from her array of recording equipment and synthesizers. “It's not quite done,” she says, fiddling with various switches and dials. “But it's... where I wanted it to be before I let you hear.”

You nod and lean back in your chair as the music starts. Red takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, fingers tapping out the beat on her leg, then she starts to sing. “Seconds march into the past, the moments pass, and just like that, they're gone...” She opens her eyes and smiles at you on the second stanza. “The river always finds the sea, so helplessly, like you find me...”

You laugh a little and smile back, your arms wrapped around yourself as you focus on the lyrics. Red's songs are rarely this direct; she can usually explain the inspiration for her music, if you ask, but this doesn't need it. You know exactly what it's about, and you're pretty sure the rest of Cloudbank will, too.

The last bars of the song fade out, and Red gives you a faintly nervous smile. “So?”

It takes you a couple seconds to find your voice. “I-I love it,” you say, and she grins. “It's... wow. It's beautiful, Red.”

“I'm glad you like it,” she says, running her finger back and forth on the edge of the chair. She's still nervous about something. “It's not quite done, though. One thing missing.” You give her a puzzled look, and she lets out a heavy breath. “I want you to sing it with me.”

You blink at her. “Really?”

She nods and shrugs a little. “It's about us,” she says. “Doesn't sound right when it's just me.”

There's a pretty big difference between singing with her around the apartment and... well, presumably performing with her at one of her shows. Even so, you can't imagine turning her down. Not on this. “I'd love to,” you tell her. She beams, and you quickly continue, “Were you thinking I'd be on stage, too, or...?”

Red shakes her head. “Not if you don't want to.” You let out a relieved breath, and she laughs, moves from her chair to your lap. “You could do your part from backstage, maybe,” she says. “We can work something out.”

“Okay.” You pause for a moment. “When you said my part...”

“I've gotten it written already,” she says. “I can get my notes--” She starts to stand, and you wrap your arms around her waist, keeping her in place. “Or I could stay here and get them later.”

“I like that idea,” you reply and pull her down for a kiss.

*

You get the ring on a whim, truth be told. You spot it in a jeweler’s window while you’re out, and it’s exactly the kind of thing Red would like, a gold triangle setting around a deep red jewel. The question that goes with it, though, that’s something you’ve been thinking about for a while. The only thing that had been holding you back was the issue of Red’s privacy, but now that she’s writing duets about your relationship, that’s not really a concern anymore.

It’s not exactly the most romantic proposal in Cloudbank’s history—you had vague plans of taking her out to dinner, going to the Floating Gardens, getting down on one knee, being all traditional about it—but by the time you get home, you’re too excited to wait. Red’s in the bedroom when you get home, sighing at her closet while she figures out what gown to wear for her show tonight.

“You should wear the yellow one,” you suggest. Red shoots you a withering look, and you grin, shove your hand in your pocket to close your fingers around the box. “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“I think you just did,” Red says, turning to face you, “but you can ask another one.”

You take a deep breath, but the words get caught in your throat. So instead you just pull the box out of your pocket and hand it to her. She blinks at you, then looks down at the box, a small, stunned smile forming on her face as she opens it. “I... Is this...?” She looks back up at you, eyes wide; you shrug and give her a crooked smile.

“You wanna get married?”

She laughs and nods. “Yes,” she says, beaming. “Yes, of course, yes.”

You were pretty sure that would be her answer, but hearing it is something else entirely. You grin and step forward to sweep her into your arms, then twirl her around. As soon as she’s on the ground, Red slips the ring onto her finger. She holds out her left hand, then laughs again. “It’s perfect,” she says.

“I figured you’d like it.” You tilt your head to the side. “You’re wearing it tonight?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I don’t care about the gossip. We can make an official announcement later.”

“Probably after I’ve put in my census data,” you say. If you want the marriage to be official-- and you really, really do-- you’ll have to be in Cloudbank’s systems.

Red’s smile fades a little. “Is that okay?” she asks.

You nod. “Can’t think of a better reason to.”

She smiles again, then lets out a heavy breath. “Okay. Wow. I-- I still need to get ready.”

You sit down on the edge of the bed and lean back on your hands. “Go ahead,” you say with a grin. She shakes her head at you, but she still gives you a kiss before going back to her closet.

The first person to find out is Lorelle, although you don't exactly tell her the good news. She's walking with the two of you back to Red's dressing room when she abruptly stops and grabs Red's left wrist. Lorelle stares at Red's hand for a second, then shrieks and hugs you both. You let Red explain that yes, this just happened and no, you haven't picked a date. Red asks her to keep it quiet until there's a formal announcement, and while you can tell Lorelle wants to write up a press release right now, she agrees.

Red's show is wonderful, as always, and someone manages to organize an informal gathering at the bar next door when it's over. The two of you are among the last to arrive, and the people near the door applaud when she comes in. Red laughs and waves, shaking her head as she walks over to say hello. You follow in her wake, and you're pretty sure that the smile on your face is nothing short of lovestruck. What can you say, though-- you're proud of her, proud of the name she's made for herself. And, all right, you're a little bit smug, too. She could have anybody she wanted in this city. She chose you.

“It's a shame about Farrah,” Lorelle comments later, while you're both standing by the bar waiting for your drinks. “She'd probably have done something gorgeous for you two.”

You nod. Farrah got into trouble with the administrators not long ago, some kind of issue with where she was permitted to paint her skies, and after being banned from skypainting entirely, she and Raine skipped town. “She might still come back,” you say. “Once the dust has settled some.”

“Hope so.” Lorelle takes her drink from the bartender and frowns. “Seems like a lot of people have been leaving, lately.”

There have been some familiar faces absent from the social scene. “Some people need a break from the city, I guess.”

“I suppose.” Lorelle stirs her drink and laughs a little. “I can't imagine living anywhere but Cloudbank.”

“Yeah.” The bartender slides you a pair of glasses; you take them and turn, scanning the room.

“Ah. There's your girl,” Lorelle says, pointing. “Looks like Sybil finally found her.”

You make a face at that. “Better go stage a daring rescue.”

Lorelle gives you a look that's half understanding, half irritated. “Sybil's not that bad,” she says. “She can come on a little strong sometimes, but she means well.”

“There's coming on strong, and there's not taking no for an answer. For several years.”

She sighs and shrugs a little. “Go save your fiance, then.”

The mere reminder that Red's your fiance, that she agreed to marry you, is enough to make you grin. You set off across the bar, picking your way through the crowd, and you find yourself wondering if the entire audience just moved over here. Sybil and Red are chatting, fairly amicably as far as you can tell, although Sybil's smile looks rather forced.

"Hey, sorry it took me so long," you say as you reach Red's side. "Not nearly enough bartenders for this crowd." Red flashes you a smile as you hand over her drink; you smile back, then nod at Sybil. "Nice to see you again, Sybil."

Sybil's smile goes from forced to pained. "Yes. Nice to see you, too," she says. You're kind of impressed at how sincere she manages to make the lie sound. "I was actually just on my way out. Wanted to congratulate Red on another perfect show before I left."

"Thank you," Red says. "See you around."

"Yes. Yes, I'll see you soon." Sybil nods at her. "Have a good night." With that, she turns on her heel and all but runs for the door.

You take a sip of your drink. "So, I guess we shouldn't send her an invitation," you comment. Red swats your arm and makes a face at you; you just grin and reach for her hand.

*

Much as Lorelle might want to make a formal announcement, Red ends up dragging her feet on it. News of your engagement is slowly spreading via word of mouth, which is good enough for now. There'll be an unavoidable frenzy, once the media gets ahold of it, and she's not really looking forward to that. Neither are you, honestly-- you expect to get almost as much attention as she does, and after staying anonymous for so long, the thought's kind of terrifying. It'll be worth it, though, to be able to call yourself her husband.

Red headlines another show at the Empty Set about a month or so after your engagement. It's a sold-out crowd again, and the theater management begged her to come back in two weeks. She agreed, of course; she can play any hall in the city, but the Set's still her favorite. The audience is long since gone, but the two of you are still here. Red wanted to rehearse some of her newer songs on stage, and the manager was hardly going to tell her no.

You finish your walk through the theater, making sure it really is empty, and follow the sound of Red's voice back to the stage. She smiles when she sees you, but she doesn't stop singing. You drop into one of the seats and sprawl out, one arm hooked over the back of the chair. It's been a long time since you've seen her perform from anywhere but the wings. And while you certainly enjoy your backstage access, there's still something special about seeing her like this.

She wraps up her song and laughs when you applaud. "Hope you're not too comfortable down there," she says. "I wanted us to do Paper Boats, next."

Ah. That's probably why she wanted to rehearse here. You're still a little nervous about the idea of singing for one of her crowds, even if you're probably going to be doing your part

from behind the curtains. Hearing how it sounds on stage probably isn't a bad idea. "All right," you say, standing. "I *was* pretty comfortable, though."

Red laughs again. You make it two steps towards the stage when a small group of people comes into view behind Red. Sybil's the only one you really know, but you recognize two of the others-- Grant Kendrell and his husband, Asher. You don't know who the fourth one is, but you don't really have time to worry about it, because none of them look friendly and Kendrell's carrying what looks like a giant *sword*, of all things.

You break into a run just as Red turns towards them. "What-- what's going on?" she asks, falling back a step, the still-live mic throwing her voice through the theater. "What're you doing here?"

"She's not alone," the unfamiliar man says, watching you with unblinking eyes as you reach the stage, his voice like a warning.

"It doesn't matter, Royce," Sybil snaps. You recognize him, now-- Royce Bracket, used to be a city architect until he retired years ago. "Grant. Just do it."

"Sybil? What's..." Red takes another step back as Grant points the sword at her. "What're you doing?"

You climb onto the stage just behind her, and now that you're closer, you can see that all four of them are wearing the same emblem. You've seen it on Sybil for a while now, didn't think anything of it, but they all have it... "You have something we need," Grant says, taking his hand off the hilt. The sword hovers in the air in front of him. "This is for the good of Cloudbank. The Camerata are going to make this city a better place. And you're going to help us."

The sword begins to glow, bathing the stage in blue light. "What're you talking abo--" Red cuts off mid-word with a horrible, choked gasp. The sword flares brighter, and you start to move a split-second before it does. It flies forward, straight towards Red; you push her aside and throw yourself in front of it. The blade catches you square in the stomach, and for how blunt it looked, it cuts straight through.

The sword goes from blue to sparking red, and you can barely see, can barely think. It feels like you're being drained away, and the only clear thought you can manage is that you have to get Red out of here, get her somewhere safe, get away away away--

There's a flash of white light, and then... Then everything changes.

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