

Re:Bank

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/31415720) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/31415720>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Transistor (Video Game)
Relationship:	Other Relationship Tags to Be Added
Characters:	Red (Transistor) , Royce Bracket , Sybil Reisz , Grant Kendrell , Asher Kendrell , Asher Kendrell's Cat , Other Character Tags to Be Added , Facsimile (Transistor) , Amelia Garbur
Additional Tags:	Fix-It of Sorts , Post-Canon Fix-It , Post-Canon , Angst , Grief/Mourning , Reconciliation , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Work In Progress , expect delays , Other Additional Tags to Be Added
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-05-20 Updated: 2021-06-21 Words: 22,717 Chapters: 7/?

Re:Bank

by [SableGear0](#)

Summary

Post-Canon fix-it/AU, of sorts.

The Camerata's plan, and their precious city, fall into ruin. All of their work, undone, and the Process out of control. It falls to the last two people in Cloudbank - the last remaining member of the Camerata, and their last target - to mend things.

Yet even after the city is repaired, and its citizens restored, there is still more mending to do.

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Happy Transistor Day!

Notes

Happy Transistor Day! I hope this offering of a few chapters will suffice. Again, as with a lot of my pieces, this is a WIP and will probably stall out/see long hiatuses throughout its release. For what it's worth, here's the first chunk of Re:Bank. Enjoy!

Chapter 1: Night Out / Prologue

Sybil didn't join them when they found their seats. Asher let Glitch down off his shoulders and into his lap when he got settled. Grant tucked the case he was carrying under their seats, out just enough to rest a heel on it, to know it was still there. Royce made himself as comfortable as he could, legs jammed in the meagre space between his seat and the row in front of them.

"This is weird..." Asher murmured to himself.

"Actually coming to the show?" Royce asked him, talking across Grant.

"Yeah."

"Think of it like a gesture of respect," Grant looked at neither of them when he spoke, "And try not to dwell on it."

"I suppose this isn't our first." Asher's hands traced over Glitch's back as the cat stood up in his lap to look at the row of seats behind them.

Royce fidgeted in his seat, "How long to curtain?"

"About twenty minutes," Grant answered without checking his watch.

"I'm going for a smoke, then," Royce unfolded himself and stood, straightening his coat, "I'm not staying crammed in here if I'm just waiting."

"Can you check on Sybil while you're up?" Asher called after him as he left. Royce waved in place of an answer.

Outside in the open-air atrium, he picked a spot away from the shifting crowd, nearer the water, and leaned against the wall to light his cigarette. The crowds were bad enough but there was never adequate legroom in these big venues. Everything was meant to cram more people in. Was there another show tonight, or were all these people really here to see Red?

Sybil slouched over to him after a few minutes. Arms crossed, hugging herself, head down to hide behind her hat. She bumped her back against the wall with a huff to lean beside him.

"How are you feeling?"

"Bad. I feel bad. Something's wrong. Something's..." she grimaced, trying to bite back the repetition but it came anyway, "Wrong." She shook her head, "Everything's loud. My thoughts keep racing, they keep racing, and they won't shut up."

"Sounds like a panic attack."

“That’s why I’m out here. I wanted to get some air.” Royce dug into a pocket and offered his cigarette case. Sybil pushed his hand away, “I said *air*, Royce.”

“It helps, doesn’t it?”

She sighed, and after a pause took his offer, holding a cigarette between her lips and pushing the case back into his hand again. Before he could reach for his lighter, she trapped his other arm and leaned in, kissing the tip of her cigarette to his to share the spark. A flash of red in her eyes. It lingered like she did. Pressed close for several breaths, until she had caught enough heat to burn on her own. She stepped back, looked down and away to exhale, fixed her hat to keep the brim out of his face. “You’re a bad influence.”

“But it does help?”

“It does. It does and I don’t get why,” she moved to his side to lean on the wall again, “You know I’ve been trying to quit, you jerk.”

“Because it’s illogical,” Royce flicked away some ash, “Completely illogical. Humans ingest all sorts of things that impair our function or damage our bodies. We poison ourselves for fun. On purpose. The Process doesn’t get that. Doesn’t understand a lick of it.”

“Keeps me feeling human...” Sybil looked down at the cigarette in her hand with disdain, “Gross. Why’d it have to be this?”

“I’m sorry,” Royce took a long drag and sighed, “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more to help.” He didn’t have to look her way to know the red in her eyes wasn’t a mere reflection. Or see how pale she’d become over the past few weeks. Or touch her hand to know how stiff that pale skin was becoming. She was changing. And though he’d tried, he couldn’t stop it.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I feel like it is... I feel like it might be.”

“Well, I don’t blame you.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Don’t be like that,” a small laugh, a practiced smile that struggled not to waver, “You did what you could.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. What if I haven’t? What if it’s more a matter of,” he made a circling gesture, trying to find the word, “reach? It—” the Transistor, they tried not to name it in public, not that anyone else would know what they were referring to, “—gets more ‘reach’ when it gains more functions. What if...”

“Royce, stop. Stop.” Sybil took a nervous drag on her cigarette, “Don’t keep this up just for me.”

“I suspect we’re going to keep this up regardless. It might be worth a shot.”

“And for how long?” Red-shot eyes pierced his own, “How long?”

“I... don’t know how to answer that.”

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you started this,” Sybil growled, retreating into the shadow of her hat to finish her cigarette.

“It’s not solely my decision.” He hoped that would be enough, but Sybil still hid and sulked. “And you know how Grant gets.”

“I just don’t want... I don’t want you dragging this out just for me.”

Royce took a long breath, “If... If you want to, we can try again later. We can try to fix this again.” He took a few steps away and crushed out his cigarette against the inside of a nearby garbage can. Sybil took one last drag and followed suit. “Only if you want. We can try again.”

“You’d be up for it?”

“It wasn’t *that* painful. For me at least. I’m no stranger to a bad headache.”

Sybil hugged her arms again, turning away to face the entrance to the concert hall. People were filing in. “What if we can’t fix it...? Can’t fix me...?”

Royce rolled his eyes, making a show of thinking, “Hmm. Maybe I go with you, then.”

A small gasp escaped her, one hand rose to her chest when she looked over, “You mean...” Her expression of shock twisted into a bitter smile. “It wouldn’t let you. It likes you too much.”

“I very much doubt the Process has any conception of loyalty. I very much doubt it. It does what it’s told.”

Sybil shook her head, “Still, I don’t think it would let you. I don’t think it would listen. And don’t do it for me, please, not just for me.”

“It’s not *just* for you, it’d be an important step in my research—”

“Royce, I mean it. Don’t. Just don’t. I mean it.” She hesitated then took a slow, stiff step forward, as if unsticking herself from the ground, “Let’s go, I don’t want to be late.”

Royce offered her an arm and they proceeded together. She kept a nervous grip on him as they walked to the auditorium. A solid, mechanical grip. Despite her trembling. All this already. And their night was just getting started.

Chapter 2: Test

The pull was all too familiar. Welcome back, you're here again. Royce picked himself up off the not-quite ground; yes, exactly what he expected to see. Not-quite-dirt under his feet, not-quite-grass swaying around him, not-quite-a-landscape around the collection of trace banks he'd come to know best. An impression created by something that had only ever glanced at an open field. And a look back confirmed Red was here too, kneeling over the Transistor – her Transistor, his was stuck in the ground before him. He tapped the handle and it rose into his hand.

“Let's see,” he tested the not-quite-weight of the device in his hand, swung it up to his shoulder, “The good news – well, the Process... I think we got it. Contained it. So, the town is going to be alright. It's just, well...” Another look back, Red was still kneeling, the ghost of an interface in front of her. She'd clued in. “Someone's going to have to rebuild. But we flew a little close to the flame there, so, now we're *here*.” He called up his own interface, began assigning functions, “Not *there*. We're stuck. And unfortunately, the only way back that I'm *aware* of is, well, unpleasant.”

“So...”

Red was still down. He'd at least give her the courtesy of an even start.

“Let's get this... over with.”

A breath and the sound of her rising. “Who gets to go first...?” Finally, finally someone who knew what they were doing. This would be good. “How about...” This would be good.

“Me?”

His first mistake was underestimating her. And he knew it would be, he knew. He'd even told himself not to get overconfident. She came this far, ran across town and back with the Process at her heels, there was no way she had anything less than a moderate grasp on how the Transistor worked. But the neat little bubble that intercepted his first Flood(), and the way she dragged herself out of the path of the second, even as his Turn was still resolving, spoke to a more comprehensive understanding than he had anticipated.

And then she was gone. A whisper and a blur among the trace banks. Shasberg's function. He backed up, watching for any signs of her moving through the unreal terrain. Keep yourself covered, limit the angles. She'll probably try to hit you–

A pulse of vertigo cut short by the heavy blow over his shoulder.

–from the back!

It was a Crash(), which was new. It was *hers*, and a handy thing that apparently worked well on an organic target too. The impact left him stunned for an instant. A Breach(),

also new, struck him square between the shoulders. He coughed at the searing heat of it. No, there was more. A burning ache, like a full-body static shock. He did his best to move away from her, the shocks seizing his limbs, slowing him down. She was already backing off anyway. Purge(). Poor Darzi's function.

"Stop." And everything did. His Turn. Play it safe. Hit her hard or gain some distance? No, definitely attack. Before she hides again. "And, *go*."

And so it went. The second time she lined up a good Turn on him he realized it. He'd been aiming for her Transistor. It was just prudent, to him. That's what was keeping them here, target that.

But not her. No.

She was aiming for *him*.

Maybe it was something her bodyguard had taught her, or maybe she was just that angry. Maybe she wanted to see what her overclocked function assignments did to a softer target. Or maybe she was frustrated that the fights here were so bloodless. They always were, startlingly so. The hits he knew should be cuts, the burn of a Breach(Purge()) something in the back of his head told him should make him taste copper. Nothing. Too clean, too perfect.

Not that he'd pegged her as the bloodthirsty type. But grief was always a wildcard. And she was playing that hand aggressively. Even after losing her ranged function – and he was down by *two*, damn – she was a wily little assassin with Mask() and –

"Where are you–?"

The hit caught him across the chest, into one arm, into the device; a vicious uppercut that sent him reeling, sent his shattering weapon spinning from his hand. A limb he knew should be broken at best.

His Transistor was solid again by the time it hit the ground somewhere behind him. He heard its blade sink into the not-quite-dirt as he lost his footing and fell.

Who was that? A hit like that, it had to be Olmarq. Cull()? That was an intensive function, and during a recharge too. No amateur move.

No. Red stood over him, holding her Transistor with an arm snaked around its handle to balance its perceived weight. Contacts not quite touching him. She was no amateur, not by a long shot. But it was good. A genuine challenge, a real challenge after all these clashes. Every previous trace was just a scared animal playing with fire, not a person equipped with a well-tuned weapon.

He glanced past the Transistor to her feet. He *could* try to kick out her legs, she was close enough. But if her fall put her weight into the Transistor, he was dead anyway.

"Didn't much care for that," he propped himself up on his left arm, his right entirely numb from the strike. Red's weapon warned him to stay low.

“Well, go on.” She narrowed her eyes at him. He tipped his head towards his damaged weapon, “Go on! Break it. Take your ticket out of here.” Despite himself, Royce knew he was smiling, “I’d say you’ve earned it. Don’t you think? You’re in a good spot here, Red, a good spot. The town’s yours if you want it. Make it whatever you want it to be, in any shape or form. I know you’ve had a rough night. But I’m impressed, genuinely impressed. I’d say you’ve earned it.”

She took a step back, flicked the tip of her weapon at him. Mouthed words that took him a moment to parse.

‘*Get up.*’

“There’s no point in trying to make this fair, you know. I never did,” Royce pushed himself into a sitting position, rubbed at his right arm to try and coax the feeling back into it, “Certainly never did. This isn’t my first of these little matches, you know.” He met her eyes, tense electric blue. “You know that. The only one who ever came close was Olmarq. Fitting really,” he shook his head, “Brute strength, nothing but brute strength. But he managed to shave a function off me before I put him down.”

Red gestured again, urging him to his feet, pacing around him to put herself between him and his weapon. Royce struggled up, still holding his arm. “Look, I get it. I get that it seems unfair. Dishonourable maybe. You didn’t have a problem with that earlier, when you hit me in the back—” a short *tch* from Red but she let him continue, “but that’s not the point, here. Red. When you have an animal in a trap, you shoot it. That’s what it’s for. It can’t fight back. Can’t fight back but you don’t *let it go*,” he shook his head again, “You *know* I’m a danger to you. So why are you waiting?”

Red took a stiff step backwards, weapon lowering a few degrees.

“I’ve already conceded the win. You don’t have to feel bad. I’ll happily go away. Quite content, to, really.” The pins-and-needles feeling had faded away, down to his fingertips. Lingering there. A memory of a different sharp object in his grasp. “You know, I’ve often wondered what it’s like in there. Had a little look around but... well, never *been* there. You don’t have to feel bad, Red. Just another part of the research...”

Maybe it was time. Finally. Time to go, for real. No mistakes, no hesitation. It was out of his hands. Quite literally.

“An important part of the research.”

Or was she going to make him wait. *Keep* making him wait. Maybe it wasn’t time? After all that? He felt his fingers twitch, and an old, buried part of him start to ache. For the quiet he knew he’d find there. Wasn’t that what he’d wanted all along? More than a little bit. Somewhere *quiet* where no one would trouble him. Somewhere all the thoughts that yearned for quiet wouldn’t be so loud.

Wouldn’t it be peaceful?

Red shook her head slowly, eyes shifting down to the Transistor as she set it on end, then back up to him. Electric blue, both of them. ‘*I don’t want this,*’ the shape but not the sound of the words.

Royce took a deep breath. The adrenaline of the fight was fading away, leaving him shaky. Tired. He didn’t bother trying to hide it in his voice, “And you think I *do*? This is my *job*, Red. This is what I do for the Camerata. You think Grant, or Asher, or Sybil –god forbid *Sybil*– ever had to come in here and put a trace down? Kill that person a second time? I don’t *want* to be here. But it’s not about *want*. There are *rules* here, Red. It’s a system with rules.”

“So, you have two options,” he pointed to his Transistor, stuck at an awkward angle in the not-quite-ground behind Red, “You break that thing, trap me, and go home. Or,” he shifted to take a step towards her and Red stepped back, raising her weapon to stall his advance. He showed his teeth, not quite a smile, and stepped back again, “You stand aside and let me do the same to you.”

Red gave him an uncertain, appraising look, grip wandering on her weapon. The mouthed words were harder to make out this time. ‘*There’s no other way?*’

“‘Other way’? Other way *out*, I assume?”

Red nodded.

Royce hummed, took a few steps back to lean against a trace bank, folded his arms. It was fine, their fight was over, and Red had already demonstrated an unwillingness to attack an unprepared opponent. “Not that I know of, but...” One hand lifted to his face, muffling his voice, “Not that I *know* of. And I’ve seen some new phenomena just tonight. Seen some new things tonight, that I hadn’t before. Nothing I *know* of, *but*... That doesn’t mean there *isn’t* one...”

Red took a few tentative steps closer, dragging her Transistor. She flinched back when Royce dug into his pockets – nothing, of course – and let out a rough sigh of frustration. “I’d offer you a pen and paper but,” he shook his coat to show the lightness of his empty pockets.

Red shrugged. It made him smile, the open frankness of it.

“Alright, let’s – I need to sit down for this.” Sitting on the ground felt rude somehow, considering the state of Red’s dress. He turned and scaled the trace bank instead to sit on the edge, legs hanging down. Red backed up to lean against another nearby bank. “Oh,” Who was this? He patted the top of the bank, “Pardon me, Miss Platt. Now then,” he sat forward, elbows on his knees, fingertips together, “Let’s sort this out.”

“Our known elements are these: Upon interface with the cradle, each user is assigned a Transistor copy. Breaking one such copy traps that user and lets the other go free. This is confirmed, observable, and repeatable.”

Red nodded, a cue to continue.

“Our unknown elements are: What happens to the physical user if the integrated trace wins. How a Transistor copy behaves in the hands of the other user. And...” *There*, could that be...? “What happens if both copies are destroyed simultaneously.”

Red perked up, leaning forward. Royce nodded slowly.

“What *does* happen? That might be it. Red, that might be it.”

Red held out a hand, another gesture to continue.

“So, then – agh, wish I had *paper* – Let us... Let’s... Let’s see. It *seems* obvious but we’re also working around the established rules and knowns. What *could* happen...” Too many possibilities; they hit him all at once. Royce took a deep breath and passed his hands over his face, carded them through his hair. *Focus*. “Alright. Hypotheses. We need hypotheses. I have controls, I’ve already done those. And we only get one test, but we need hypotheses.”

Red cocked her head. She was starting to look concerned. But he was already listing, counting his best guesses on scarred fingertips.

“We need a null, that’s easy. Null hypothesis, nothing changes. H_0 : A simultaneous break proves impossible; the clash naturally favours one copy over another, and things proceed as normal.”

A breath. What next? One level of abstraction away.

“ H_1 : A simultaneous break proves impossible; the clash leaves both copies damaged normally...” He tapped his engaged fingers together, “I suppose there’s also an H_{1a} : the clash leaves both copies undamaged somehow, but that seems unlikely.”

Red rolled her eyes. Royce continued.

“ H_2 : A simultaneous break is possible; destroying both copies frees both users.”

“Then, H_3 : A simultaneous break is possible; destroying both copies traps both users in the Transistor. That’s our worst-case scenario I suppose. Unless...”

Red looked worried, mouthed a tense ‘*Unless?*’

“Unless there’s an H_4 : A simultaneous break is possible; destroying both copies traps both users in the...” he pressed his hands to the top of the trace bank, “current state. Which, *that*, I suppose is our actual worst-case. No offense meant but I’d really rather not be trapped here with you. The Transistor is preferable, at least then I’d be alone.”

Red balked, glaring up at him.

“I’m just saying. Considering we were actively trying to kill one another just moments ago. I’m not really emotionally equipped to deal with that sort of tension for the rest of eternity. Really not equipped for that.”

Red made a show of rolling her eyes, but conceded with a shrug and a nod. At least the feeling was mutual.

“Well then... I suppose those are our likeliest possibilities.” Not the *only* possibilities. Those were too numerous to count. They could erase one another’s traces, destroy the very fabric of reality, release *everyone* – there was no telling what this event would trigger. But Red... He looked down at her, watching him expectantly. She was eager to try. And all he had to lose, *most likely* to lose, wasn’t anything he hadn’t been ready to give up moments ago. Damn that old, buried, *tired* part of him. It was important, yes. But sometimes he wished he didn’t have to listen to himself so much.

“You’re still set on doing this? You realize you have a guaranteed out; you could just—”

Red cut him off, holding up a hand and shaking her head. She pointed to the twin devices, then beckoned him down from his perch.

“If you insist.” Royce slid down to the ground with a grunt. “You’ll have to pull two functions off of yours to do this right. They won’t overload simultaneously otherwise.”

There was a sigh, and she seemed to struggle with it for a moment, before muddling her way into the interface, projected from the Transistor’s eye, and discarding a pair of functions. She kept Cull(), notably. Understandably. That had been the one to stop him in his tracks and tear a whole function away from him.

He moved past her to retrieve his own device. Sad and unstable, Flood() his last function. Alone with himself. “At least if this doesn’t work, we likely won’t have to hear from each other again.”

Another breathy sound of frustration from Red.

“What? I genuinely *don’t* understand. Don’t understand why you’re so invested in this.”

Red shook her head and gave a vague can-we-get-on-with-it gesture.

“Hold on... give me your copy.” At his proffered hand, she stepped back and lifted her Transistor copy up to her chest, hugging it protectively. “Not – I meant we should *swap*. It might help. Just a hunch, but it might help. Here,” he stuck his weapon into the ground again, motioning for Red to do the same, “No funny business. I already told you. I have no reason to try to sabotage this. Now or at any point. Alright?”

Red considered him a moment. She took a short breath, gave her Transistor copy a squeeze as if it were a person, then stuck it point-down next to his. On a shared cue, they drew the other’s weapon.

Or, tried to. Royce wheezed in shock when her copy refused to leave the ground. He needed both hands to heft the damn thing, despite it being smaller than his. “Why’s yours so *heavy*?”

Red, conversely, was trying to wrangle his weapon with a scrunched, startled expression. Larger than the one she had relinquished, its relative weightlessness left her fighting to keep a grip on it as it tried to rise out of her hands.

“You good?”

Red fumbled a firmer grip on the handle and held it out. Ready.

“Alright. On ‘three.’”

Red side-eyed him.

“Okay on ‘go,’ *after* three.”

A nod. Figures she of all people would be picky about the timing. It *was* important, he couldn’t deny that. Probably the most important part. Striking simultaneously.

“One...”

It was a worthy test, really.

“Two...”

Finding out if it was at all possible. But why bring him with her?

“Three...”

They raised their weapons, angling for contact.

“*G —!*”

Chapter 3: H2

Cold concrete and *breathing* came as a shock. Royce scrambled into a sitting position from his sprawl on the floor. Lights off. But, *but!* The hum, and the glow of the cradle. And Red! She was lying on her side a few meters away.

“H₂...” he breathed. “We did it... We’re out... Red!” His balance hadn’t returned yet, but it was only a short stumble to Red’s side to touch her shoulder, “You were right! You madwoman, you were absolutely r–” The word died in a wheeze – Red seized his lapel with one hand and the other did its best to connect with his spine via the space just beneath his ribs – An admirably fluid motion. In retrospect.

Already kneeling, Royce doubled over and retched, gasped for air. He heard Red rush to her feet. Clever. If unsporting. A good thing he hadn’t eaten in hours.

“That was...” he coughed, gasped again, spoke between breaths, “I deserved that... But... *really?*” He wiped spit and – oh, blood. Another nosebleed. Brilliant. – from his face with his sleeve and sat back on his feet. Red was fussing with the Transistor, freeing it from the confines of the cradle once more.

He watched her lift the device to her chest again, duck her head down. He dug into his pockets, now with their full complement of *things* as they were back in reality, and found some tissue to clean his face with. “Where was that devious fire a few minutes ago?” An idle question. She ignored him.

And why did she keep on...?

Her jacket. *His* jacket.

“Your friend...”

Red turned to him. Electric blue eyes. The Transistor dim in the half-light.

“It just occurred to me that jacket... isn’t yours. You did all this,” He stood, blew his nose, “You did all this for *him*. Didn’t you. The man from the Empty Set. He wasn’t just your bodyguard. Was he?”

She shook her head slowly. Held the Transistor closer against herself.

Royce took a deep, if painful, breath and sighed. Was it that simple? Had it *really* been that simple this whole time? He closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, “This whole time... You didn’t – well, you *wanted* me dead, I’m sure. But you couldn’t *use* me, dead. You wanted my *help*... You cooperated and found that loophole because you wanted my help. Is that it?”

A single, resolute nod.

“You know you might have led with that. Would have made this whole...” Red advanced on him with an accusatory point and an angry hiss through her teeth, “Okay, alright!” Royce backed up, one hand guarding his stomach, “That’s my fault! I’ll admit that’s my fault. Didn’t exactly give you an opportunity.”

“If we’re going to...” Talk about this? “Work this out. Can we at least go upstairs? Or outside? I think it might be better, outside?”

Red nodded and let him lead. Prudent, she was the only one armed. Royce coughed to clear his throat, midsection complaining at the pressure, “Take this however you like, but; you hit awfully hard for someone your size. You know that?” He heard her huff in response.

Outside... There wasn’t much left of outside. Fairview was a landscape of white and red. The Process had even begun to chew the corners of his building before they had called it off. The only sign of nature was the faint breeze. Inescapable thanks to the sea. Everything else was white. Blocky. Sterile. Perfect, in a sickening way.

Red’s disappointment was clear on her face. She stepped gingerly on the flat, white plane beneath her feet. Checking on the device in her arms. Listening for something.

“You know we can fix this. Right? That was the plan, anyway. Remake the city however we like. Put everything back, or don’t. Or change it. Or not. All sounds nice; to me at least. I...” She was trying to reign in her incredulity. Trying. “don’t know about you...?”

Red was mulling. Or calculating. She looked down at the device again, then back to him. And what about my friend? She seemed to ask.

“See that’s the thing... That’s the thing I wasn’t. Looking forward to *impressing* upon you. See... The people inside the Transistor they’re... Trapped.” A blank look. “They’re trapped.” Grant, Asher, Sybil. “I don’t... I really don’t think there’s any way to get them out. At all. So...” He gestured loosely, hating the stillness, even with the breeze. “We’ll do what we can. For the city I mean, we’ll do what we can there. But...”

Red set the device on end, letting it lean against her. She patted the hilt and touched her ear, shaking her head.

“You don’t... hear him?” A head shake. “That’s normal, actually. That’s pretty normal. Traces tend to go quiet after an interface with the cradle. If you waited around long enough, you’d more than likely hear his voice again. Though...” Did they have time?

The mainland city was completely consumed, from the water line right up into the sky. Colourless but for the glaring, 255-red that flecked the buildings. Mock-ups of windows, eyes. Staring back. Inherently empty.

“I don’t know if waiting around is all that... possible. That and, well. Fixing all this we may—” It was more than may. It was a very real risk, “We *may*, very likely, end up losing the Transistor.”

Red made a sound. An inarticulate, but actual vocalized sound. That incredulous look, now turning desperate.

“I know, I know it’s less than ideal but it’s a risk we take. We sent the Process away, yes, to keep it from going any further than...” He waved at the geometric canvas of the city across the strait, “*That*. But to *fix* all that we’ll have to drag it back. And then,” he glanced to Red, who was nodding, wide-eyed, “We’ll have to send it away again. And the Process, it’s not a fickle thing.”

“Nobody... *owns* the Transistor. I know I talk about it that way, but that’s just for ease of thought. Nobody could ever *own* something like that. I just have it on loan. From the Process. And if they don’t like how we’re using it. Being... fickle... They might just take it back. Back to wherever they came from, when they leave.”

That look. Sybil had given him a look like that not too long ago. Two weeks or more before tonight, when he’d tried to use the Transistor to undo her Process infection, and only earned a migraine and a nosebleed for his effort. *I’m sorry but I don’t think there’s anything I can do. Nothing... I can really do.* And she’d given him that look; scared and heartbroken, welling with tears that she fought down with a grim focus. Red too. She looked like she wanted to run, but knew it wouldn’t help.

“It seems clear to me, at least. And I understand why you’d hesitate. I want to remind you...” Not another drink with Grant; or long talk with Asher; or night out with Sybil. “You’re not the only one with a stake in this. But this is bigger than us, Red, so much bigger than both of us.”

He searched his pockets. A notebook, a pen. And looked to Red, “I want to rebuild Cloudbank, salvage as much of it as I can, so as not to let my work go to waste. To not let this be... pointless.” He offered her the book and the pen. “What do you want?”

She took the book, uncapped the pen and flipped to an empty page. And... Nothing. For a minute or two she stood, stalled out at the empty page. Just as he was about to prompt her, she scribbled something out and held it up for him.

‘What about the people? Can we save them?’

“Theoretically, yes. I believe so, yes. Since they weren’t integrated, they should be able to be rewritten. But we’d need to act on the sooner side. Not to rush you, but...”

Red brought the book back close to her chest. Looked down at the device. Still no flickers, no signs of life. Was her friend listening? Was he even still there? That trace data had been incomplete, had they accidentally wiped him by synching with the cradle? Would she really... try to trade all of Cloudbank for one person? Granted if none of its citizens could be restored then it was just an oversized art project. But... One person?

She wrote something, capped the pen and left it between the pages, handing him the notebook and turning away. In the pause he took to read it he heard the Transistor crunch into the ground, and Red’s footsteps begin to recede.

'Fix your city.'

"Red, wait." She stopped but didn't turn. "I know it's... Maybe cruel of me to say this, but. I'd like your help." No reply. He tried to lighten his tone, "After all, we— You were dragged into this because we valued your insight. No one looks at the city the way you do, thinks or talks about it like you do. If anyone... If there's anyone who knows Cloudbank, it's you and I." One eye, electric blue, looked back at him.

"Please."

She took a long breath, tense and wheezing, before turning entirely. Coming back to join him as he tucked away his notebook and moved to stand by the Transistor.

"Just this. I know it's a lot to ask."

Red laid her hands on the Transistor's handle, Royce found space between her grasp to hold on as well, trying to avoid touching her hands. Her skin was cold, her eyes wet. She wouldn't meet his gaze. He tried his best to speak gently. So *tired*. He couldn't keep it out of his voice.

"Now, you haven't done this without a terminal, right?" A head shake. "I'll walk you through it, then. First, close your eyes. Then clear your mind... Clear the mind. And focus. Now, any memory you have, anything at all, any sense, that's useful. Not just how things looked but sounds, smells, feeling... Anything at all about Cloudbank, that's useful information."

Red began to hum. Softly and to herself. Not a tune he recognized but it could only have been her work. Royce let himself ramble, whispering over her melody, working it into his focus.

"Any favourite spots...? Write those in. Shops or parks or... whatever. Put them in. I had a spot. Right where the South district met Goldwalk, along the water. There was this tiny little park; one bench, one tree, and a fountain. Completely forgotten, so small and tucked away it never changed. Sometimes I'd walk all the way up from my place in South just to sit there. In the middle of the night, sometimes. Listen to the ocean, forget the world. Get a little work done, maybe."

"Anywhere in Goldwalk? The shops and cafes, that noodle place with the cat on the sign. Any favourite haunts, just like you remember them. Or different, if you want them to be. And the thoroughfare. Running *all* the way east to Highrise, where it splits around the Canals. Except... The Empty Set." Even without looking he could feel Red tense next to him, her tune faltering, "I think, maybe, we leave that one out. Leave that blank, maybe. There's... too much to that place now. It was due for a facelift anyway. Let someone else fix it up, I think."

"Traverson, should probably put that back. And the North district, that was mostly offices, wasn't it? And some commercial. Highrise... I always liked Highrise. Marvel of engineering, like a jungle, almost. Couldn't get used to living so far off the ground though. Wasn't for me. Beautiful, though."

“The Admin core... Bracket Towers. You know, I never liked that they put my name on that complex. Didn’t want that, but they wouldn’t listen. As much as I want to change it, should probably put that back the way it was, too. Don’t need people panicking that the Admin buildings have vanished.”

“Never spent much time in Sunrise. Or Sunset. Residential, mostly. Not my talent. Don’t like surveys like that, but they can go back to how they were, I think. No problems there. Anything... anything else you want to change, Red? We’re close, I think. We’re close to done if you want to be.”

Her humming died in a shuddering breath, but nothing else. “I think... It’s just the people, then. Just the people. The crowds... I don’t really know how this works, though. Should be enough to just tell the Process to put them back. I’d think? Put them back how they were. Then... go away again.”

He opened his eyes. Across the strait the city was writing itself back into being. Colour and detail painting and sculpting themselves back onto the blank canvas of white and red. And the lights. Lights were flicking on in places. And there was movement. A distant, oh-so-faint drone of things coming back to life. *People*. Coming back to life in Cloudbank.

“I think... That does it.” Something shifted. In his body and in his mind, something shifted, left him breathless and drained. Full stop. “That does it.”

The Transistor shook them off, somehow. No movement, but he had to let go of it, they *had* to. The Process had come to claim it. One of the barriers, the white walls, golden-ratio rectangular solids, formed around it. Red recoiled with a gasp, but Royce reached out –

And flinched back as if he’d been bitten. It *felt* like a bite. The white shape obscured and swallowed the Transistor, retreated into the flat-white ground. Gone. Simply gone.

Along with part of his finger. Cut clean off where the pad of his right middle finger had touched the barrier. He hissed in pain and fought the instinct to put the injured digit in his mouth. That would just hurt more. He fumbled to undo his tie and staunch the bleeding.

Red watched with a detached sort of fascination. Eyes dark and makeup smudged. She lingered until he stopped panicking, then turned and walked away. Even when he called after her, this time she didn’t stop or turn.

“Red—! Thank you. Thank you for... not letting it all go to waste.”

She had a long walk back to... wherever she was going. But she still had the bridge, at least. She wouldn’t be trapped on Fairview. The island was still patchy and Processed in places, but it was fine. He didn’t intend to stay here much longer.

Chapter 4: Glitch

Grant... Grant had been a good friend. His only friend, for a time. He'd learned a lot from Grant. Things you'd expect to learn from a more worldly friend; more discerning taste in food and drink, fields of interest he never much cared for like sports and politics, how to approach a contract, how to seal a deal, dress for an event, light a cigar. Things that only came with the territory of a decades-long friendship; how to ask for and accept help, how to offer help, how to have a conversation of volumes with only a few words, how to trust and be trusted, be vulnerable.

And the unique intersection of all these things with Grant's choice of profession, as it was Grant's position as an Administrator that Royce felt had served him best recently. And was still serving him. Even predating the Camerata there had been a certain amount of subterfuge to the Administration's function. And among all the practical things Grant had taught him, chief among those things now was the ability to get into places most people were not allowed.

Sometimes it was a bit of clever hacking. Some stolen passwords, a spoofed Admin ID, an exploit in an old keypad. And sometimes, it was simply knowing how to bluff, and walking in like it was your job.

Repairs began almost immediately around the city following the... rewrite. The city's infrastructure and some buildings hadn't been entirely repaired – as far as Royce was concerned, they had done an admirable job with their best guesses, but still. Maintenance crews were busy all around the city mending what had been left blank. Emergency services were swamped with reports of missing people and cases of Process illness. And law enforcement was out in force trying to maintain order.

And sweep the city for any remaining members of the Camerata.

After all, nobody had been formally reported *dead*. The only information the public had on their whereabouts was Sybil's last known location, and the record of Grant being removed from duty as an Administrator. Neither of those things *necessarily* meant they had died, as far as the public were concerned. And if the Process had followed his instructions, there would be no bodies to find if these locations were searched. Well, excluding the Empty Set. If the Process had followed his instructions, there would be nothing there at all.

So Royce's plan, such as it was, was to get somewhere the public was usually not allowed, and clean up the last remaining bits of incriminating evidence concerning the Camerata, before anyone else could recover them. To go across town, from Fairview all the way to Bracket Towers, get in, get to the very top floor, get out, and come back. Without being detected or stopped.

Not simple, certainly, not a simple task. But with the right bluff, the right approach, it *should* be totally safe. The relative chaos of the repairs was his main advantage. As Grant had mentioned to him, almost offhand and early in his career: Nobody thinks to stop someone in

high-visibility gear. He'd kept the neon yellow jacket and hardhat for semi-practical reasons. He was not a sentimental man; more that they were interesting artifacts from a time when Cloudbank was still perfecting its automated construction. When people were still needed on-site to labor and supervise.

Navigating the usually-crowded-and-now-much-fractured transit system hadn't been the hassle he expected. People were nervous, destination-focussed, kept their heads down. He could hide behind the high collar of his jacket and under that ridiculous hardhat, tend the innocuous contents of his duffel bag to avert his face whenever police were present. The second-greatest advantage of being a recluse, after the peace and quiet, was the slim chance you'd ever be recognized in person.

The first person who stopped him was at Bracket Towers. A haggard-looking woman in a pantsuit was pacing back and forth near the maintenance lift. He sifted through his bag before approaching her; rearranging his headgear to include a dust respirator to cover the rest of his face.

"Hey!" She threw up her hands when he neared her, "Where's the rest of your crew!?"

Royce shrugged, "I'm all they sent."

"Well, your buddies went up to check on the Archives like half an hour ago. Said there were more guys coming to do something about the servers. You a sys-eng?"

Royce shook his head.

The woman groaned and rubbed her hands over her face. "And you're really all they sent?"

"Just me. Maintenance is spread pretty thin."

"I guess they must be. Sorry, I didn't mean to yell at you."

"I get it. I'll let the guys in the Archives know you're still waiting on an engineer if I see them."

"Wait, you're not here to work on the Archives?"

"My dispatch said they found a spot up there still full of that Process stuff. I'm here to check that out, see if it's safe."

"Oh, crap. Well, be careful. Here, I'll let you up."

Royce nodded his thanks, mumbled to himself once the lift was a fair distance away, "Still can't believe that just *works*. Should be careful of the other team, though." They'd know he wasn't here with them.

Up on the concourse he was apparently alone, though the signs of the other maintenance team – orange cones, an unattended toolbox – were there. No matter, he wasn't headed to the Archives.

Before the Camerata, there had been nothing up here except entrances to the Maintenance and Archives towers, just an empty concourse with minimal adornment, unusual for Cloudbank. After the establishment of the Camerata, Grant had proposed they needed somewhere more central to meet. Another location just as secure, but not as far afield, as Fairview. While their Sandbox space served that purpose some days, it wasn't always convenient to slip into a Backdoor, especially in a public place. So began the Camerata's modus operandi of working essentially in plain sight: Royce had written in a space here for them at the top of Bracket Towers. Right on top of the seat of the Administration. Visible, though not accessible, to any member of the public willing to travel up this high. Hidden behind sealed double-doors requiring their unique access codes.

But the maintenance crews would undoubtedly breach it soon, and that was a problem. Because he'd instructed the room to be rewritten the way it was before the Towers were completely consumed. Whatever had been in there, any work, any documents, should be exactly where they had been left. Valuable information he wanted to recover, to keep out of the hands of the Administration and the law.

Unless Red had trashed the place, which was a distinct possibility. But this couldn't be left to chance or bad faith. He had to get in and clean it out before anyone else did.

The other maintenance workers were still nowhere to be seen by the time he got the access panel to accept his code – forgetting for at least the second time that day he couldn't type with his injured finger. The doors and their mechanism were damaged, it seemed, but one side grated open slowly. Royce stepped inside.

He was going to miss this space. Part safehouse, part lab. Where he'd been able to capture and directly study some Process forms, rather than stalk them in the wild through the city and hope sketches and scribbled notes would suffice. Handwritten materials were safer, true, but they were never *enough*.

All the containment tubes were shattered, with no sign of what they had once held. There was a scattering of paper notes across the main desk and along the floor nearby. All the displays were dark. Their oversized chalkboard – a nostalgic favourite of both his and Asher's – still bore a breakdown diagram of the Transistor. All as it should have been, with two important exceptions. Grant and Asher, wherever they had been in their final moments, were gone.

Royce pulled down his mask and took a deep breath. The air up here was dry, cold. Even at the end of June. No distinct smell to this place. Nothing to commit to memory. Time to clean up. First things first, no fingerprints. He pulled a pair of work gloves from his bag and fumbled into them, struggling a bit with his bandaged finger.

He started at the desk, gathering papers into a stack, checking the drawers. Hell, even taking the pens left behind. No point in leaving anything the least bit useful. He crouched to sweep up the papers from the floor and jolted back – movement. Something else was in the room with him. A small, black shape. Two reflective red eyes – that shouldn't be – and a pink nose?

“Glitch...?” Royce lowered himself back to the ground for a better look. The black cat took a few tentative steps forward from its hiding place under the desk. “Hey, Glitch!” he murmured, removing a glove and extending a hand. The cat ran to him with a trill, nudging its head under his hand, rubbing along his arm, climbing into his lap. “Hey, kitty. Hey... Have you been here all alone?”

Glitch stood up on his leg, stretching to sniff at his face. “Did they leave you behind too? That doesn’t...” he ran his hand down the cat’s back, “That doesn’t seem like something Asher would do. Then again, they never... he never told me how...”

“*Mrrp?*”

“Okay, it’s okay. We need to stay focussed,” he looked down at – *her*, Asher always referred to Glitch as ‘*her*’ – “You can come with me, but you need to behave, okay? You need to stay quiet,” he scratched behind one of her ears, “And stay in the bag until we’re in the clear. Got it?”

“*Mrrm.*”

“Good.” He let Glitch back down to the ground and collected the papers again, tucking them into his duffel. “Let’s clean up the rest of this, then.”

Glitch followed him around the lab as he scoured away any traces of himself and his co-conspirators. Cleaning up the papers, pulling the hard-drives out of the computers, erasing the diagrams. Everything went into the duffel, including the cat. Which he knew was accustomed to being ferried around in a messenger bag or on Asher’s shoulders, so fortunately she was amenable to hiding for now. He donned his mask again and left the lab behind for the last time.

“Hey!” One of the maintenance workers waved to him as he emerged. “We were told that area was Processed. Does it look okay?”

Stay calm. “All clear. It’s just an office, but it looks like someone came through and broke everything. Could have been during the—” he made a vague gesture, “—you know. Hard to tell.”

“We didn’t even know there was something like that up here. Figured *that*,” they pointed to the solid double doors, “was just storage or more machinery. Should we... do something about it?”

Royce shrugged, “Leave it for the cops, I guess? Not my problem now that we know it’s safe. I’ve got to run to another site.”

“Guess you’re not our systems engineer then, huh?”

He shook his head, “The woman below the concourse wanted you to know she hasn’t heard anything and is still waiting on the sys-eng. I guess she’s an archivist?”

“Oh, here,” the worker pulled a handheld radio off their belt and offered it to him, “Can you give this to her? Meant to leave it with her on the way up but we got wrapped up in work, y’know?”

“Sure I’ll take it to her.”

He waved on his way to the lift. On the way down, Glitch began fidgeting in the bag, squeezing her head out to take a look around. Royce shook his head when she looked up at him, “Just... can’t believe that *keeps working*.” Glitch meowed at him and he patted her head gently, “I have been nothing but lucky today, you better not turn that around on me. Guess I’ll have to do some shopping for you on the way back too, won’t I? You’ve been alone up there for almost two days now. You must be starving.”

Glitch purred, scratching her cheeks against the rough leather of his glove. “Me? I’m thinking flatbread. Could stop at a Jan’s on the way back. Would have to carry it, though. Not ideal. Maybe I’ll settle for a calzone. More portable. Oh—” A flash of yellow in his peripheral, “—back in the bag!” he pressed the cat down carefully.

Another maintenance team heading up in the opposite lift. Good timing, for both of them. He waved at the other crew as they passed. He handed off the radio to the now rather puzzled woman watching the lifts. And disappeared back into the city.

There was *one more thing* he needed to do, to cover his tracks. He had to be sure that *all* of the Camerata had thoroughly disappeared. Including himself.

The thought had struck him to leave town. Just... pack up and leave. Go to the Country, maybe. Or some other city, assuming there was anything appreciable outside of Cloudbank. That had always been part of the mystery. Logically there had to be, right? Raw materials had to come from somewhere. Even though there were industrial buildings in the South district, they had to be supplied somehow, didn’t they? Food had to be grown somewhere, didn’t it? Cloudbank didn’t just exist in a bubble, right?

Right?

But then why had he never met anyone from outside? Never seen past the skylines? If Cloudbank wasn’t just some insular construct... where did the Process’s influence end? At the survey borders? Somewhere past that, encapsulating the farms and quarries that *must exist* to feed the city’s needs? Did the Process – as it existed with respect to Cloudbank, as a kind of extradimensional underpinning to the entire city – run beneath the perceptible surface of the *whole world*?

Well, these were questions he would have loved to find answers to, if he were able anymore. But with the Transistor gone back to where it belonged, that was quite impossible. And so, the option remained: leave town, or stay?

Leaving... well, leaving felt like giving up, somehow. After all, he'd had the chance to rebuild the city. Done exactly what the Camerata had aimed to do. Put it all back the way he had wanted it. Mostly. With Red's help of course.

And where had Red gone to? Had *she* left town? Stayed? Gone to the Country in a... less literal sense? Did he care? Maybe a little bit. She was the only other person who'd seen the true extent of, well, everything. Seen the breadth of the Camerata's plans, seen the full force of the Process, seen the out-of-range nullspace between reality and the inside of the Transistor. Besides, knowing as much as he did about her – thanks, Sybil – it was hard not to be just a *little* bit invested. She'd pulled him out, after all. Freed them both. Some kind of cosmic compromise.

But – *focus* – it was his own safety he had to worry about right now. Whether or not Red had a hand in it, the authorities would be searching for him. If they dared to search Fairview, patchy and undefined as he'd intentionally left it, they were sure to find him, given that his studio was one of the few buildings with recognizable features anymore.

So he had to disappear, and if he wasn't going to *leave*, he had to disappear within the confines and rules of Cloudbank. Easy.

"You know, in retrospect I could have tried this while I was at the Towers." Royce looked over to Glitch. The cat was crouched over a dish of soft food by the foot of his desk, quite content to ignore him and eat her fill. "Then again, I wasn't exactly equipped, and there were people in the Archives. Would have been tricky, too tricky, and too risky. But from here," he turned back to his console, "I still have deep network access. Grant's credentials are no good anymore but that's fine. The network is so full of holes after the rewrite, spoofing an ID into the city's records shouldn't be too hard."

"So... what do I need? New D.O.B., easy. Randomize a new S.I.D.N. within last known... parameters... Let that run for a minute." He sat back and stretched while his program found an unregistered ID number and attached it to the profile he was building. It probably belonged to someone who hadn't made it back through the rewrite. Oh well, no time to feel guilty.

"What else? Oh, I wonder... If I can scrub my *old* profile while I'm at it. Clear out my old – *ow*, finger – my old file photos, at least." He was working through Admin override, not registrar credentials, so the cleanup would be a bit messy, digitally speaking. If anyone so chose, they probably could restore any of the information he was clearing away. Like running a pencil over a pad of paper to see a shadow of the writing from the previous page.

"*Does* look like it's working, though." He looked down at Glitch again, "All this time I spent agonizing over wanting to be remembered. And here I am trying to delete Royce Bracket from the city's records." Glitch licked her snout clean and responded with a needle-lined yawn. Royce looked back to his screen, "We learn to adapt, I suppose."

Glitch leapt up onto his desk. It made him flinch. He still wasn't used to her presence. Even as much as he'd visited Grant and Asher, her stalking silhouette in his peripheral put something primal in him on high alert. She wasn't even that big as far as cats went. It was

more something about the way she moved, how silent she was. Still, she was friendly. And she was Asher's. He reached out to pet her absently, mulling the incomplete profile.

"Replacement-me needs a name. And Selections. You are..." he took a long pause and sighed. "I have no idea. Let's start with Selections instead. Untitled-Royce-Bracket-replacement has selected for... Hm." Glitch nudged her way along his arm to bunt her forehead against his shoulder. He hugged her loosely with that arm, trying not to drum his fingers on her as he thought.

"I want an excuse to keep an eye on the network, to do that freely and frequently. I could try to get in with the Administration, but that runs the risk of being recognized. Or..." *You a sys-eng?* "I could work for *Maintenance*. I've dabbled enough to be able to do this for a job." He pressed the side of his bandaged finger to his lips. "Let's do it. Alright, whoever-you-are, you're *extra* employable now."

Selections: Infosec, Civics.

Reasons cited:

Oh, that had always been a tough one. He'd declined previously. There was no adequate, single-sentence summary for his selections before. They had been a lot of things at a lot of different points; passion, spite, ambition, obligation. He should probably put something down this time to distance the look of it from his old profile. Untitled-Royce-Bracket-replacement would undoubtedly have some of the same notions about his job as original-Royce-Bracket, but he should at least try to hide them better.

"Infosec to keep me in the loop, Civics to have an excuse to..." Glitch pawed at him, tiny white claws catching in the fabric of his sleeve. "Process-proof the network. That's it. I don't need competition, and I don't need them becoming the peoples' tool again. That's how we got into this mess to begin with."

Selections: Infosec, Civics.

Reasons cited: 'To build a better mousetrap.'

"Much better." He took a moment to unstick Glitch's paw from his sleeve, "You still need a name, though. How about..."

...

No, no way. He hated it but it was near-perfect. Wouldn't take much relearning to get used to and anyone looking for him, well, they'd only be confused by it. He wasn't *stupid*, right? There was no way he'd pick something so close to his old name. Something so obvious. There was no way. Royce Bracket was a member of the Camerata, to the public he was a criminal mastermind. There's no way he'd go incognito as...

Name: Roy Banner.

He drew a breath in through his teeth. “Oh, it’s awful. *God* it’s so awful. I hate it,” he leaned his head in his hands, elbows on his desk with Glitch stuck between them, “*I hate it*. Am I really risking my safety on a double-bluff? Am I really doing this?” He lifted his head enough to look at Glitch. She stretched her head up between his hands to bump her forehead against his, purring.

“Okay. Alright. You’re right,” he stroked his hands down her back, “I’m overthinking this. Just go for it. It’s stupid enough to work. And I can always change it. Or leave. I can always skip town if things get *really* bad.” Glitch rubbed her cheek against his, stepping up onto his hunched shoulders from the desk. “You know, you’re lucky I can’t blame you if any of this goes wrong. Well then. Well. Then. Let’s finalize this and wipe everything from here, too. We’ll duck out when things start to get dark and find a place to stay. Guess I should get packing.”

Chapter 5: White Elephant

Three months had passed since the night Red tried her best to think of as ‘the Rewrite.’ Not the night Cloudbank had nearly been erased, not the evening she’d lost her partner in an ill-fated attempt on her own life. She had been doing her best to regain some semblance of normalcy in the weeks since; trying to return to work, to create, and to reconcile her losses. She wanted to let people know she was still around, despite the digital vigil that had been held for her and others who had disappeared. She wanted to convince *herself* she was still around, too. After all, it was only a semblance of normalcy.

For the first time in a long time, she was alone. Some unconscious part of her kept expecting him to be there, to hear his voice or catch him moving in the corner of her vision while she worked. Even now, months later. That was proving to be the more difficult adjustment, truthfully.

Her voice... She could work without it, at the very least survive without it. She had never been that talkative anyway. He used to joke that she saved her voice for the stage, and in a way it was true. Some days it felt as if she only ever spoke to him, and *he* had spoken to everyone else. Except when she sang, then she could speak to everybody, even if the words were only for herself. Or for him.

But now she was alone. Her voice, and her second voice – sometimes he really had felt like her other half – were gone. So, in the weeks that had passed, she had been working on her semblance, trying to reintroduce some normalcy. There were tracks she had intended to release throughout her concert tour; those were going out as planned, even though she wasn’t able to do shows anymore. There were a handful of interviews, no longer in person, and now a little less focussed on her career. And her new private project of re-teaching herself Sign Language, so she wasn’t so reliant on typed or written messages.

There had been a lot of questions about the incident at the Empty Set, from both media interviewers and the police. Talking about it... certain subjects had been easier than others. For her part, Red endeavoured to remain professionally vague.

Yes, she and another individual had been attacked by the Camerata.

No, she was not at liberty to identify the other individual as they wished to remain anonymous.

Yes, her current silence was due to an injury sustained in the attack.

No, she did not anticipate a return to the stage.

But yes, she was going to do her best to continue her music career.

The police had pressed further, wanting more details about the Camerata themselves.

Yes, as far as she knew the individuals identified in Asher Kendrell's confession had been the ones to attack her.

No, she did not believe there were any other people involved.

No, she did not know their motive for attacking her.

And no, she did not know the current location of any remaining members of the Camerata.

Not all of it was one hundred percent true, but there was no explaining the Camerata's *actual* plan to the authorities. It was simply too far-fetched. As far as the police knew, it was a far-reaching network sabotage plot meant as some kind of political power-grab, which wasn't too far off from the truth. As to the location of any remaining members, well... the less said or thought, the better. If Royce Bracket didn't want to be found, she doubted the police would ever locate him.

That night... That *day*... By the time she had finally gotten home it was late in the afternoon. She'd walked back to the mainland, across the bridge she'd written, and past the abstract monument she'd left in place of... what was left of him. Search teams were already sweeping the city outskirts, and she'd waited by the highway access until someone came by. She'd asked for a ride as best she could and found herself brought all the way to the north end of Highrise. To Mercy Hospital, one of the city's big clinics where possible Process infection cases were being collected. Red knew she wasn't sick; the lineups were massive, and she knew there were people in worse shape than she was, so she walked home. It was another almost hour-long hike back to her apartment in the heart of Highrise.

The first time she left, she'd locked herself out. She'd wished she could put it clearly why. It's not that it was unintentional, it was just... A way to convince herself that maybe she didn't *need* to come back, whatever happened. She hadn't wanted to. She had no plan, but... Leaving town, or doing *anything* else, felt more attainable with the simple action of locking herself out of her home. During the Rewrite, well, she'd written herself a key, hidden in one of the planters outside. Just in case.

When she'd finally stumbled home, she dug the key out of the planter, unlocked her door and staggered inside to collapse into bed fully dressed. She slept through the rest of the day and late into the following morning. When she finally managed to haul herself out of bed, everything hurt. Her legs were sore, and she could barely keep her feet. It was a chore to wrestle off her boots and peel herself out of the remains of her gown. The bottom hem was trailing torn threads and half the feathers on the collar were crushed from sleeping in it. It was a Darzi original she'd commissioned some time ago, intending to save it for her return to the stage, now reduced to not much more than crumpled scraps.

Doing anything else that first day had been a chore as well; convincing herself she needed to shower, to eat, to drink, trying to keep herself moving around to work out the aches and soreness in her body. She'd fallen back into bed that evening and curled up with his jacket. With all the time she'd spent wearing it around while travelling, it had started to smell like outside, like the sea air and the city. Not like him. It seemed like a strange thing to mourn, on reflection, but she was losing another part of him.

She spent about a week living in a kind of haze, going through the motions of normal life while everyone else did the same. The whole city trying to collectively pick up its pieces and start over. The weight of it truly hit her when she went back to her work, intending to check over her unreleased tracks before making them public.

‘We All Become’ was a poor choice to start with.

It was the last song she’d practiced, staying late at the Empty Set to see if the mastering held up live, before the Camerata had stormed the stage and attacked her. It was the song he had tried to sing by mistake when they were being stalked through Highrise by the Spine. She had tried to hum something for him, to let him know she was close, despite everything seeming so far away for him. His lyrics hadn’t matched her melody, but...

When you speak, I hear silence,

Every word a defiance.

She’d done her best to carry a tune for him, mismatched as it was.

I can hear,

Oh, I can hear...

It was the last song she had ever sung. The last time she had used her voice to form real words, not just hums and simple noises.

Think I’ll go where it suits me,

Moving out to The Country,

With everyone-

Oh, everyone...

It was eerily prescient, to look back on it. At the time she had only the most basic knowledge of the Camerata, and none of the Transistor. Even the Process was a kind of vague force of nature with no real face. She hadn’t known about any of it, but...

Before we all become one.

She nearly had. *They* nearly had. Everyone. All of it.

Red barely made it past the first verse before she broke down and wept.

She had cried until she felt empty. No longer numb with shock, it all felt more like the ache of a wound once the adrenaline wore off. Like a bruise on her whole being.

He had been a fighter before she knew him. Even early on he had still been in the ring before she’d officially hired him. He used to come back to her apartment banged up, sometimes bloody or bruised. They’d sit in her kitchen together and she’d help him clean up,

fix the hasty patch-up jobs whatever ringside medic would do on him with proper bandages and disinfectants and ice. He would always wave off her fretting, as if he didn't understand why she would ever worry about someone like *him*.

She had never known how to explain just how special he was to her.

But every time she'd frown at a bruise or a cut, he'd just smile and say, '*Don't worry. That just means I'm still working. If it doesn't bleed at least a little, it won't heal.*'

The whole city was piecing itself back together, grieving its losses and mending, and she took some solace in that. Her apartment may be quiet, but on a grander scale she knew she wasn't alone. She would bruise, she would heal, and she would keep going. They were survivors, both of them, and she would do him proud by carrying on. Even if it was so, so hard without him.

Things were still difficult day-to-day, she knew they would be for a while to come, but she managed as time went on. She'd hung up the remains of her gown from that night in her closet. It felt wrong to discard or even try to repair it. In a way it was like an artifact now, but in another way, it was just another old dress for the collection. A costume she'd never wear again. She still struggled with what to do with his jacket. It ended up making the rounds of her apartment, sometimes she would wear it around, sometimes it was a small throw-banket, sometimes it just stayed on the bed. As a bitter reminder of his absence, it was difficult to justify incorporating into her daily wear, but as a memento, it was difficult to commit to hanging it up and putting away alongside her ruined dress.

It was September now. The evenings were getting colder, especially in Highrise where the climate varied with one's altitude. The climate had never much bothered her, though, and the view as Cloudbank began to take on the first tinges of autumn was as spectacular as always.

Red had been spending her days in lately, trying to finish up what remained of her as-yet-unreleased works, keeping up with the news, trying to refresh her grasp on Signing. Today she'd actually taken the step to record a little bit of new material. Nothing groundbreaking, but in trying to get used to hearing her own work again, she'd gotten into the habit of humming along, decided she liked how it sounded, and had recorded a few takes of 'voice over,' humming to her instrumental tracks.

She let down the drapes on the west-facing windows by her door as the sun started to set. Spending the evenings alone was something she was still getting used to. She had always been a bit introverted, and *that night* had made her a bit more circumspect about her neighbours – *Sybil*, she had *trusted* Sybil – so there wasn't much other than the news cycle to keep her company.

The sudden, frantic rapping at her door made her jump. The faint silhouette of someone paced back and forth behind her drapes. They were carrying something. A neighbour with a package, maybe? The brief glance she took around the edge of the curtains only caught their back and the bag over their shoulder. Someone tall dressed in a hooded sweater and denim. But when she opened her door and the stranger turned to face her, she just about slammed it shut again.

“Wait! Wait wait wait—” Royce jammed a foot between the door and the frame, wedging it open with a grimace as she tried to close it on him. “Red, *wait*. Please.”

‘*What do you want?*’ she mouthed and signed at him, too angry to panic.

“I – look, this isn’t...” he fidgeted with the things he was carrying, the bag over his shoulder and something else under his arm, behind the door where she couldn’t see. He shook his head, resetting, “This isn’t about you. Or me. It’s...” He looked to the thing under his arm, his manner settling and softening just a shade, “I’d *like* to call it an olive branch, but...”

Royce leaned away from the door to change his grip on the object under his arm and hold it in front of himself with both hands. A pet carrier. Through the grate of the front, she could see a dark shape inside and two reflective red eyes.

“It’s more of a white elephant. Even though it’s a black cat.”

Red tilted her head, easing off the pressure she held on the door.

“She’s Asher’s. I – I found her at Bracket Towers, but I can’t... I can’t keep her.” He looked away, “The shelter in my area was full, but I didn’t just want to leave her with some stranger. You were the only one who— You know what *happened*, so I thought... You don’t have to keep her, you can take her to a shelter or give her away to someone, I just— I can’t look after her. I can’t. We’re driving each other crazy.”

She gave Royce a quick once-over. Maybe it was because he was dressed down, but he looked terrible. She would have believed him if the next words out of his mouth were that he hadn’t slept in days. There was obviously more to this than just the cat, but she knew he wouldn’t say more. He kept his gaze averted, waiting on her response.

Red took a deep breath and tried not to vocalize her sigh. She did remember a cat in Asher’s file photos, so that part at least checked out. As much as she wanted no part of this, she knew she couldn’t blame the cat. And it was the quickest way to get Royce to leave her alone, so...

She took the pet carrier from his hands and stepped back to place it down inside. She crouched next to it, the cat still cowering against the back wall, a small black ball with wide red eyes. She opened the grate and stepped away to her coffee table. The cat dashed out of the carrier to hide under her couch, and from the door she heard Royce mumble a complaint about how it “took forever to get her in there.” She bent and scribbled down a message on a pad of paper on the table, then brought it with her back to the door.

Red gestured for the bag over Royce’s shoulder. He handed it off to her with only a look of slight confusion. She set that down inside too, then held up her written message.

‘*I don’t know how you found me here, and I don’t care. I never want to see you around again.*’

Royce gave half a nod, and Red closed the door on him before he could open his mouth to reply. He lingered for a moment, then she saw his shadow cross past her door and

head away, towards the stairs to the terrace plaza. She waited by the door, peering out past the edge of her drapes to be sure he was gone, before tossing her notepad aside and investigating the bag Royce had brought along with the cat.

It had been heavy, and her guess was confirmed when she discovered it contained canned cat food and half a bag of litter, along with a few toys. She shook her head. She couldn't hold a grudge against the *cat*, she knew. It wasn't the cat's fault its – 'her', he'd said? – previous owners had been a covert cabal of serial killers and political saboteurs. Or that her previous owners had panicked and taken their own lives, apparently leaving her stranded alone in Bracket Towers. It struck her as a rare gesture of compassion on Royce's part to take her in, leaving aside whatever he had been doing at the Towers presumably so soon after the Rewrite.

Then again, he had been some version of reasonable by the end of it all. After she'd proved herself a credible threat to his safety, that is. But he had been willing to concede the loss, to compromise and cooperate with her, to try to help her even if what she asked was impossible.

Red shook her head to clear it. It didn't matter. Whatever Royce's intentions, in this particular case, he seemed genuine. He couldn't look after the cat, and to his own slanted logic she was the next best person to take her in. Red lowered herself to the floor to take look under her couch. The cat was once again balled up in a defensive posture, watching her from the shadow of the furniture. It would probably take some time to coax her out.

She fished the handful of cat toys out of the bag and scattered them loosely around her living room, cracked one of the cans of food and set it out with some water, and searched around for something to work as a makeshift litter box until she went out to get a proper one.

Although it was far from ideal – since she now had confirmation Royce was both still around *and* knew her address – there was a kind of serendipity to this. It wasn't exactly what she would have asked for, but she had to admit, she would be glad for the company of having another living thing in the apartment with her.

Chapter 6: Peace of Mind

For as long as Red could remember, the day-to-day weather in Cloudbank had been directed by the whims of the public. So specific was the control the city had over its own weather, one could stand at the border of two districts and watch it pour rain mere steps away from dry pavement. Granted, Cloudbank's meteorologists tended to err on the side of realism; precipitation would cycle or sweep through the city a district at a time, as if a natural weather system were moving through, and daily temperatures tended to align with the natural seasonal climate. Special occasions notwithstanding, of course. Then, all limits were cast aside for effect and aesthetic.

Since the Rewrite, however, the weather control seemed to be a thing of the past. For the first few months, polls would go out as normal, but the following weather did not always align with the results. It soon became apparent that the populace could no longer directly influence the weather via OVC votes. Other things, too, fell out of the hands of the OVC; event billings, construction, the colour of the sky. Things were... *normal*. Random, even, to some. While the Administration claimed it was due to damage caused by the Process Outbreak in June, and that they would have full control of Cloudbank's network by the new year at the latest, Red knew the truth.

In a way, the Camerata had won. Without the Process trained to every whim OVC collected, Cloudbank was out of the hands of voters. No more fickle, instant change. No more impulsive development. No more pointless reskinning of buildings and districts. They had gotten what they wanted: slow, meaningful, *normal* change. The kind that humans were meant to enact and live by – not the maddening, face-paced flux that Cloudbank had been accelerating towards.

The winter following the Rewrite was, as a result, a difficult one for many. Though the city's seaside location meant the climate itself was mild, the sheer volume of snow that apparently occurred *naturally* in Cloudbank came as a shock to the city's maintenance crews. Dense-built areas like Highrise and Midtown especially had to get creative with clearing snow, as shovelling it off one level often meant dumping it onto someone else's roof or walkway below.

Spring was much easier, even with the natural weather. There were some concerns that above-average amounts of meltwater might flood the maintenance tunnels below the city's main streets, but these worries proved unfounded. If there was one sort of weather Cloudbank was well-prepared for, it was rain. Something about rain, perhaps how it blurred and reflected the city's myriad lights in such a pleasing way, made it a popular weather option for polls in the past. And it had indeed been a rainy spring this year.

By late April things started drying up. The rain was lighter and less frequent, today in particular it had merely been occasional misting cloudbursts. Fair enough weather for a walk.

It was different now, being out and about in Cloudbank. Previously she – *they* – would go out and explore the districts, take in the forever-renewing sights and streets, go out

and see what had changed. But now, Red found she was taking walks to cement the familiar, to find the small and subtle changes in the places she knew, rather than take in something entirely novel every time.

Glitch, the cat, had adjusted well to living with her by now. Red had spent the autumn and into the winter getting Glitch used to her presence and apartment. The sudden change to a strange person in a strange setting made her skittish, and it took weeks before the cat warmed up to her enough to let herself be handled. Red hadn't actually known the cat's name until she was comfortable enough to sit in her lap and let her new owner read the tag on her collar.

However, late in the winter it became apparent that Glitch was suffering from some sort of cabin fever. She had more energy than she seemed to know what to do with and had made several attempts on the lives of Red's houseplants before she put it together that Glitch was *Asher Kendrell's* cat. The same cat that, for reasons she hadn't thought to delve into, featured in more than one of Asher's file portraits. If she were just a housecat, she likely would have *stayed* there, and not been photographed at all. But there she was, on file and in a handful of candid photos Red managed to dig up from when the Camerata had been a subject of interest for the tabloids. Perched on his shoulders, sometimes peeking out of a messenger bag.

Glitch had been his companion animal of sorts, used to being outside and around town with her owner. And so, spring had been a welcome relief to them both, as Red was finally able to take Glitch out and about with her and let the cat get the stimulation she so sorely needed.

She had approached the prospect with some trepidation – in Red's experience cats weren't really the sort of animal that took well to 'walks' – but Glitch was well-trained for them. She seemed to favour riding on Red's shoulders for the most part. A smallish backpack Red had brought as a precautionary measure on their first few walks seemed to be an acceptable spot as well. There was the odd time she would hop down to the ground, if the streets were clear or if they were passing through a park, but for the most part Glitch preferred a high perch for travel.

Late April now and late afternoon. Red had eaten lunch at home and taken transit to the far end of Goldwalk, near to the water. As a matter of course, she tended to avoid the northwest corner of the district, the once-offline sector the Camerata had used as a staging area, and the place she'd left the remains of her partner behind. There were plenty of other spots to explore in the district, however. Today she had chosen the south-most edge of Goldwalk and picked a route that led from the piers inland, along the border of the industrial South district.

Glitch kept close for most of the walk. In part because of the brief, misting rain – the cat had tried to jam herself into the hood of Red's jacket to escape the cloudburst before Red managed to get her umbrella open – and in part because the pavement was damp afterwards. She stayed up on her perch, curled around Red's neck like a scarf, tiny brown paws braced against any shifts in weight or movement.

Red had never spent much time in the South district. Not many people did, save for those who worked or lived there. There was a kind of Brutalist bleakness to it; even the

residential buildings were harsh, plain, and geometric. Even though it was *normal* and unchanging now, like the rest of the city, it wasn't much of a comfort, and the border with Goldwalk here felt like a kind of no-man's-land between Cloudbank proper and another environment entirely.

She strayed a few blocks into the South district out of morbid curiosity. There were *cars* here, which was unusual. Most of the city ran on public transit, with private vehicles relegated to bridges or transport tunnels beneath the surface and away from pedestrians. But here, close to the water, and along the canals as well, there were open roads. Glitch tensed at the rush of a passing truck, and Red reached back over her shoulder to pet the cat, doing her best impression of a purring trill to calm her down.

Red crossed a street, moving parallel to the line of Goldwalk. She felt the sudden prick of claws through her jacket, then the kick of Glitch leaping from her shoulder to the ground. Before Red could bend to scoop the cat up, Glitch was sprinting away down the block. Red made a choked sound, unable to call out for the animal, and gave chase, jogging after the black cat.

Glitch paused once or twice to get her bearings, but Red never managed to gain enough ground to catch her. The cat darted sharply to one side, into the courtyard of an apartment complex, and Red stumbled to follow. She watched Glitch bound up a set of exterior stairs and sniff along the terrace before stopping at a door. The cat reared up on her hind legs, claws splayed, to start scratching and pawing at the door, meowing louder than Red had ever heard her before. Even when she caught up and scooped Glitch into her arms, the cat kept crying and yowling. She tried to shush the cat and stifle her noise gently with a hand over her snout but received a quick nip on her finger and more noise in response. Struggling to contain the squirming animal, Red turned to leave.

And stalled when she heard the click of the door opening. It only opened a fraction, secured by a chain, but she only needed the sliver of face, the one tired green eye, and rasping voice to realize why Glitch had been so intent on getting inside.

“What— Oh, you *have* to be kidding me. You can't *be* here.”

‘*Royce?*’ Glitch was wriggling in her arms again, trying to stretch out her neck and greet her previous owner, her sounds changing from yowls to happy trills.

“What do you want, Red? Are you with the police? Are you? Wearing a wire or a tracker? What are you doing here?”

Red hissed through her teeth at him and shook her head, shoving Glitch up onto her shoulders so she could sign at him, ‘*The cat ran off. I was trying to catch her.*’

He blinked at her, pausing for a breath before asking, “I *meant* what are you doing in the *district?*”

She scowled at him, ‘*Out for a walk.*’

“Seriously.”

Red rolled her eyes, *'I'm not with the police.'*

A dry sigh from behind the door, "That's... *some* relief, I guess. I know you said you didn't want to see me around, but you understand you can't just come to my end of town and tell me to go away, right?"

'I didn't know you were here.' She took a breath to compose herself more, then, *'I'm sorry for bothering you.'*

Glitch was stretching to sniff at Royce from her shoulder. Red let the cat down from her perch and into her arms, stepping closer to the door. Royce snaked a hand through the door to greet her, letting her sniff him and scratching her cheek.

'I think she missed you,' she mouthed to him.

Royce's expression shifted through a few shades of discomfort before he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead on the doorframe. "You're not with the cops."

Red hummed a no.

Royce took a long breath. When he spoke, his voice relaxed back into its usual indifferent lilt, "For the sake of formality, I would invite you in. Ordinarily. Knowing you're not here to sell me out." He straightened, eyes on her, "But in the interest of, ah," a quick glance away, "transparency; things are a mess, and really not in a state to be entertaining guests."

Red gathered Glitch back onto her shoulders, feeling the cat purr against her neck and back. She hadn't expected to come all this way for a visit, especially not with him.

"I would... Like to talk, though." He was looking away again. "If you're able... And... willing. That is." He stifled a small cough, "If not, I understand. Completely understand. If you'd rather not."

Red took a step back to lean on the terrace railing, weighing the offer. He was, again, being some version of reasonable, letting her freely disengage if she wanted. After all, this was an accident. The offer *felt* safe enough, given that she was the greater threat to him than the other way around. Along with the implication they wouldn't be talking inside his apartment...

She lifted her hands and opened her mouth but paused for a moment, reconsidering. No, this was fine. *'I'm not doing anything right now,'* she flipped her hands in a shrug, *'I guess?'*

Royce nodded, "Alright. Then, ah, give me a minute." He retreated inside, shutting the door. It put Glitch on edge for a bit until he came back out. He was overdressed for the weather, but it was obvious the hat and scarf were meant as some measure of disguise. "I assume outside is preferable. Did you have somewhere in mind?"

She shook her head.

“Well, I have a place, but...” He considered Glitch for a moment, “If I may?”

Red took a half-step closer, expecting him to take the cat from her. Instead, he cupped Glitch’s head with both hands, giving her face a thorough petting to distract her while he ran his fingers under her collar, checking the tag as he let go.

Red raised an eyebrow at him.

“Can’t be too careful,” Royce stepped back, hiding his hands in his pockets. “You said *you* weren’t with the police. Technically that’s true if the *cat* is the one that’s bugged.”

Red tilted her head, ‘*You think I wouldn’t lie to you?*’

“I think you wouldn’t tell me the whole truth.”

Red shrugged her free shoulder. That was a fair assumption. She gestured for him to lead.

Royce brought them back in the direction Red had come. He stopped frequently to check their surroundings, zigzagging blocks to loosely follow the South-Goldwalk border towards the piers. Red found herself hustling to keep up with him; he moved with a long, quick stride.

He brought them to a tiny park right on the water. A patch of grass the size of a small room with one bench, a single tree, and a modest fountain not yet active due to the season. Royce took another lingering look around before sitting at one end of the bench. Red sat at the other end. Glitch stepped down off her shoulders to trot along the back of the bench to Royce, who picked her up and set her down in his lap.

“I’m... honestly a bit surprised. That you still have her. And that she was able to find me here.” Glitch stood up in his lap, paws braced on his chest, trying to rub her face against his. “She hasn’t been giving you trouble, has she?”

‘*Not after I realized she likes to be outside.*’ A pause, then, ‘*It’s been nice having her around.*’

“I’m glad...” he ran a slow hand down the cat’s back, “Glad you could use the company. I would have liked to keep her but I just... Couldn’t. So. Thank-you... Thank-you for taking her.”

Red made a show of rolling her eyes, hoping to convey sarcasm, ‘*Some warning would have been nice.*’ It would *not* have been, but she couldn’t resist needling him.

Royce caught her jab with a short breath and a flash of a strained smile. “So... ah...” He showed his teeth for an instant, a grimace of uncertainty that turned into a flat, pressed line. He dug into his pockets, pulling out a cigarette case, “Do you mind?”

Red shook her head, then held up a hand and shook her head again when he gestured to offer her a smoke. He lit with his hands close to his face, fighting the breeze, then took a long drag and bent forward as he exhaled, elbows coming to rest on his knees. Glitch ducked

out of his lap and into Red's when he moved. The cat laid her ears back at the smell of smoke. After a moment she dropped to the ground to roam over the grass while the two sat in silence until Royce mustered up some words.

"So... How was..." he cleared his throat, audibly uncertain, "How was your... holiday?"

She gave him a narrowed look. So that's how he was starting this, with the worst possible direction for small talk? It wasn't a dishonest question, just a tactless one. Still...

'Quiet... and difficult.'

Royce nodded slowly, "That makes sense. That... was how mine went, too." He seemed about to say more but put his cigarette in his mouth instead. A deliberate reminder for silence.

Red wondered for a moment what a normal Winter Solstice or New Year's looked like for Royce. By his own admission he'd been close with Grant Kendrell. Would they have spent the holidays together? That seemed the most likely implication. She let him smoke uninterrupted for another minute or two before he found his words again. He spoke to the space in front of him.

"Red. I owe you... an apology. More than an apology, but this is a start. I... Things..." His free hand turned, grasping at nothing, "didn't work out. The way they should have. That night shouldn't have turned out that way. And..." He sat up and looked her way, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry it did."

Red made no movement, waiting for him to continue.

Royce shook his head, but kept his attention on her, "It was never our intention to hurt you. I know that doesn't seem right but – it wasn't our intention to *hurt* you, do you understand? It wasn't our goal to upset or provoke you—" here he glanced away again, "and I've been told Integration is quite painless but—" and back to her "What I *mean* is it wasn't *personal* like that. Not... Not for most of us, at least. Sybil..."

His expression turned distant and he shifted to face forward, voice dropping to a rasp, "Sybil had other ideas. But it wasn't... it wasn't meant to go that way."

Red shrugged out of her backpack and hugged it to her chest, slouching back on the bench to reflect. She knew about Sybil's betrayal and the accidental nature of the whole encounter. That was old news. To hear they hadn't meant to *hurt* her – to plan violence and claim to mean no harm – felt patently wrong. Just because she could *see* Royce's line of logic, that it was intended to be impersonal and professional, didn't mean she had to accept it.

It took some focus to keep her hands from shaking when she had his attention again. Nerves or anger, it could have been a bit of both. '*You tried to kill me,*' she signed slowly, enunciating her silent words. This was a prompt, a gauge.

Royce took a breath. There was something in his look; disappointed, or just curious? “Twice, in fact. I’m aware,” he said flatly. He lifted his free hand in a small shrug, “I’m not sure what you expect me to do about that *now*. That’s where we’re stuck, you see?”

Red found herself glaring and was about to sign to him when he started speaking again.

“Red, I’m...” he pressed his fingertips together, still holding his cigarette, looking down for the moment, “trying *very* hard not to begrudge you for retaliating the way you did. You were justified... I’ll admit. If I were in your place, I would have done the same. Would have certainly... certainly done the same thing.”

He looked back up at her with an expression she had never seen on a person before. Both hurt and appraising. It was a strange glimpse of something genuine and open, “We’re past the point of regretting things, I think...”

And then it was gone. Closed off and practical again, “I’ll be blunt: I don’t want to hold a grudge. I have enough on my mind as it is. We’ve...” a waver, but his composure held, “hurt one another enough, I’d hope, to call things even. In a sense. And I understand if you’d rather not. I don’t expect forgiveness. I just don’t want to spend any more effort being mad at you. Frankly. Do as you please, of course, but I have no interest in...” another waver, and a tired settling, “dragging this out.”

Red narrowed her eyes at him; her hands came up and flicked back down in an angry shrug. ‘*That’s it?*’ she mouthed. Royce blinked and tipped his head, missing the message. She ran her hands over her face, forcing calm, and signed to him deliberately, ‘*That’s. it?*’

“Again,” Royce gave a small hand-shrug in return, “Not sure what you expect me to do.”

‘*Turn yourself in!*’

“Now you know I can’t do that.”

‘*Then what do you want from me?*’

“Nothing.”

Red blinked at him.

“I told you, I’m not asking you to forgive me. I want to make my intent clear, that I no longer want to consider you an enemy, despite—” he stalled and took a breath, slowing his pace, “Despite what we’ve taken from one another.” He took a long drag on his cigarette to settle himself, “Do with that what you will. I’m not trying to be your friend or asking that we keep in touch. I just... want you to know that. I... I want to be heard. That’s what I want.”

Red sat back, leaning away from him. Glitch came back to them, perhaps reading their shared body language as distressed and in need of help. She hopped up onto the bench and bumped her head against Red’s side. She let her pet her for a moment before moving over to

Royce. Glitch bumped his arm the same way and he let the cat into his lap, where he held her close with one arm.

His voice was a strained rasp when he spoke again, “We... killed your partner. You killed a woman whom I cared about a great deal. My... Two of my closest friends took their own lives for fear of what you would do when you found them. But you, you respected my call for a truce long enough for us to... mend things. To a point. And—” his voice broke, and he took a deep breath to reset. Glitch tried to nuzzle into his chest, and he slid an arm between them to push her away towards Red, “I’m sorry... I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.”

Glitch grumbled and tried to climb back into his lap. Red shifted closer and picked her up, setting the cat down in her own lap. She held her close, gently restricting her attempts to climb back to Royce until she settled and stopped resisting.

“Because I know you.” He crushed his cigarette in half with a shaky hand, “I know a lot about you. An unfair amount. Sybil talked a lot about you. We spent a lot of time together and she told me a lot about you and now it’s... uneven.” He fiddled with the broken, still-smouldering cigarette, “Generally I make a point of *not* learning much about people I don’t associate with. Because I have a bad habit of overthinking. About everything I know about. About the *people* I know about, especially. And lately a lot of it has been... you. These past eight months I’ve been trying not to, but I couldn’t help overthinking. About what to say to you if we ever ran into one another again. About how you’d react. About how to avoid you, maybe, if I had to. About how you might be treating Glitch...

“It’s always been easier to think about strangers like discrete entities, not other, full lives that are interconnected. Or that I’m connected to. But I feel... connected to you. Because I know too much. I know that’s not something you want to hear, from me especially. I—” he shrugged, “I don’t know. I thought I’d like to make things *even*, somehow. But, I don’t know. You don’t want anything to do with me and all I could think to do was volunteer information. Not that I expect that would interest you. This is all just...”

‘For your own peace of mind?’

“I suppose so, yes.”

‘That’s very selfish.’

His attention drifted down to his hands, where his right thumb scratched over the pads of his fingers. “So it is.” He leaned back, thumbnail lingering on the pad of his middle finger, “Thank-you. I... apparently had a lot more to get off my chest than I thought I did. So. Thank-you. For listening. I’m sorry it was all such a mess.”

Red considered if she had anything to add but couldn’t find anything that didn’t just feel petty. *‘I think I’m going to go,’* she gestured to the entrance of the park.

Royce nodded.

Glitch chirped and grumbled when Red scooped her up and lowered her into the backpack. She stood and swung the bag up onto her shoulders. Glitch poked her head and

forepaws out, but otherwise made no move to escape. She lingered on her feet for a moment, running the conversation over quickly in her head. For an inconvenient chance meeting, they'd covered a lot of ground. Or, he had, at least. Though she'd had little she actually wanted to say to him to begin with. He was well aware of what he'd done, and aware now, it seemed, that his version of reasonable was still a version of selfish. She could at least afford him some closure. Red turned back to Royce and cleared her throat for his attention.

'I accept your apology.'

Royce nodded again, then looked away, "If I could ask a favour... Please don't tell the authorities where I am." He glanced her way to check if she was replying.

Red signed to him with a roll of her eyes, *'I won't.'*

"Thank-you. And... No, never mind."

She cleared her throat, louder this time, to prompt him.

"It's just... I think Sybil's authenticator is still paired to your ID." Red tipped her head. "The old Camerata private channel, I think you can still access it. If you wanted to. I've left it up since no one else can get into it. So..." He looked down at the ground, "If you need to reach me. For some reason. You know how."

Red gave a single nod and waved as she left, though Royce wasn't looking her way.

Chapter 7: Winter Solstice

“Red? Oh my gosh, Red! I wasn’t sure if you were coming or not, I’m glad you could make it. Come on in!” Amelia Garbur was a woman of similarly petite stature to Red, though her build was difficult to discern, habitually obscured by layered or geometric outfits. Even in the summer, when they’d seen each other last, she’d been hidden under a starched, angular sort of wrap. Her casual wear in the winter season was no exception, an oversized sweater with an ornate knitted pattern.

She beckoned Red inside with a hand totally covered by her sleeve, “I’ve got a big pot of curry going, I hope that’s okay for dinner. The twins are already here, they’re hanging out in the conservatory. Can I get you anything to drink?”

Red passed her a large container and shrugged out of her coat, hanging it up. ‘*Water?*’ she signed.

“Sure thing!” Amelia drummed her fingers on the plastic container, testing its fullness by the sound. “What do we have here?” Red followed her into the kitchen, gesturing for her to open it. Amelia lifted the corner for a peek, “Brownies?”

‘*Vegan,*’ she signed, spelling the word.

“*You* are the best,” Amelia busied herself pouring her guest a glass of water and herself a mug of something hot, “I told the others I wasn’t drinking, and you know what they brought? Two bottles of wine. *Each!* I can only hope at least half of that is for you, I wouldn’t know what to do with it. Here.”

‘*Thank-you.*’

“It’s just us and the twins tonight. Maybe they figured I was inviting more people, but I don’t know,” Amelia hugged herself and sighed, “I just didn’t want to do a whole big thing.”

Red nodded in understanding. If the invite had been more than a handful of people, she probably would have turned it down herself.

“I am glad you came, though. I realize we’re not, you know, super close? So, I’m happy you decided to come.”

Red shrugged, smiling as she signed one-handed, ‘*That can change.*’

Amelia’s nervous expression lit into a smile, “I guess you’re right.”

‘*I like your haircut.*’

“Oh! Um, thanks,” a small hand wandered up out of Amelia’s sleeve to brush at the short undercut, “I was thinking it was maybe *too* much? I haven’t had it anywhere near this

short since... before? So, I was kind of worried.”

‘It looks good. I think it’s cute.’

“Thanks, Red. Oh, so,” Amelia gestured vaguely in the direction she was leading, “Hina and Haru might have some trouble with Sign Language. To their credit, they’ve been *trying*, I know they have. But I don’t think it’s sticking. Are you okay writing stuff out for them?”

Red patted the purse at her hip and pulled a coil notepad out partway, *‘Came prepared.’*

“You’re the best.”

Amelia’s conservatory was in fact the balcony of her condo; enclosed, insulated and modified with extra lighting and climate control, she had constructed a miniature greenhouse that looked south towards where Goldwalk became the Highrise canals. Red had seen a handful of pictures from ‘meet the staff’ articles released by OVC but had never seen Amelia’s collection in person. There was an impressive array of plants despite the modest floorplan, many hanging in planters from rails – and even a small tree – to make efficient use of the vertical space. It was humid compared to the inside of Amelia’s apartment. A pleasant change from the damp, raw cold of the outdoors.

Amelia’s other two guests, ‘the twins’ Haru and Hina, were seated in folding chairs, leaning shoulder-to-shoulder over a book of botanical illustrations. They looked up in unison and Hina waved as Amelia led Red in.

“You’ve all met before, right?” Amelia asked, “I just want to be sure.”

“Of course we’ve met Red!” Haru stood and set the book down on his chair, spreading his arms for a hug, “Bring it in, come on! It’s been ages.”

Red hummed and shook her head with a rueful grin, holding up a hand as if to push him back down. Hina poked him in the ribs and rescued the book from being sat on as Haru took his seat again, “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Red knew them, of course, as the musical duo Facsimile. Whether or not they were genuine twins was difficult to say, they tailored their appearances fastidiously for the stage to create the impression of a pair of clones. Even now, lacking makeup and identical costumes they still bore a close resemblance; elegantly angled features and pale-dyed hair pulled back into loose matching buns. But their dynamic certainly suggested they were at the very least siblings. Red had met them before at several events.

Amelia sighed, sliding a folding chair to Red so she could take a seat, then finding a spot for herself on a low bench by the windows, “Okay, good. I was honestly a little worried. I know OVC kept trying to stir things up between you two, so I wasn’t sure if this was the *best* idea. I had a feeling it was okay. I mean we all talked over the summer, but still.”

Hina shook her head, “It’s all good. Sometimes you just have to play along for the press, right, Red?”

Red quirked her mouth to one side, resisting the urge to sign a flat ‘no.’ Instead she took out her notepad and a marker – easier to read at a polite distance – wrote her response and held it up for the others to see. *‘It’s nice to see you both again. But I disagree.’*

Hina blinked. Haru smiled, catching on. Amelia hid a small smirk behind her mug.

“What’s your take on this, Red?” Haru asked.

She took a moment to word her response, *‘It’s not our job to go along with whatever rumours the press wants to stir up. I know not all reporting is purely objective, but artists already present a curated face to the public. Adding another layer of acting doesn’t serve any purpose.’*

Haru nodded, reading. Hina tipped her head, politely challenging the assertion, “Do you think everyone should just take an artist’s presentation at face value, then?”

Red wrote without hesitation, *‘I think we should trust an audience to look for deeper meaning if they want to. Whether it’s in the art or the artist themselves.’*

Hina hummed in thought.

Amelia took a sip before speaking up, “So, like a ‘death of the author’ kind of thing?”

Red made a vague flipping gesture. She took a drink before starting to write, crossing things out and starting over on a fresh page before she formed a reply she was satisfied with,

‘Not entirely. I prefer to think of art as an exchange instead of a product. The creator can tell the audience their intent or guide how they want their creation to be interpreted and appreciated. But I feel it shouldn’t fall wholly to either party to form those conclusions. Obviously, it’s not always possible to engage with a whole audience, or to break through preconceived notions, or engage with an artist if they’re not around anymore. To me, art doesn’t belong completely to the creator or the audience, it’s shared, like a conversation. You can choose to ignore the other person in the conversation, but you probably won’t get as much out of it.’

“I didn’t think about it like that,” Hina sat back in her chair, pulling her knees up to her chest, “I like that take.”

“It’s so easy to get caught up in ‘producing,’ though,” Haru added.

‘I know what you mean. Sometimes it’s hard not to think of work like a “product.”’

Amelia’s eyes roamed over her plants, “How do you get around that?”

‘Does it bother you too?’

Amelia shook her head, “I think it’s a little different for me. It’s not like I’m putting my heart and soul into writing the news. It’s more knowing how to be efficient. I was just curious.”

Red tapped the back end of her marker to her lips, then gestured to the twins. She needed a moment to think. Hina rocked side-to-side a bit and drummed her fingers on her shins, “Well, when we get stuck, we usually challenge ourselves to do something weird and arbitrary.”

“It doesn’t always have to be *good*, right?” Haru shrugged, “Sometimes you just have to *make something*, even if nobody sees it. So, we’ll do something like... well, what we did with ‘Pink.’”

“We literally went out and bought as many pink things as we could find, piled them up in the studio, and wrote a song about them.” Red chuckled when Hina sighed and shrugged, “It was... *so bad*. We debated for a long time about even including it in our B-sides. But it was a good reminder that creating should be fun.”

Red nodded, writing, *‘I think that’s a good example. I do something similar, just make something that’s messy to get it out of my system.’*

“It’s like writing a draft, then,” Amelia drummed her fingers on her mug, “The first try doesn’t have to be *good*; it just has to get *done*.”

“Exactly, you get it.” Haru shot a glance towards the door of the conservatory, then back to Amelia, “Hey, Amelia. You’re sure you don’t want anything harder to drink?”

“I’m *fine*, thanks. I told you. Though,” she swirled her mug, “I’m probably going to grab a refill. Red? Cider?”

Red hummed and nodded, signed a *‘thank-you.’* Amelia left them for a moment. Haru shifted and Hina punched him lightly in the shoulder, “I *told* you we shouldn’t have brought those.”

“Okay, you were right, geez. Hey, Red, you drink wine?”

She rolled her eyes with a smile and wrote back, *‘Yes. I can take a couple off your hands.’*

“You’re a life-saver.”

“Dignity-saver.”

“Same thing.”

Red took the pause to write a message that she held up for Amelia when she returned, *‘I heard you were promoted to Senior Editor. Congrats!’*

Amelia let out an awkward laugh, almost fumbling the mugs she was carrying. She passed one to Red, then set hers down on the bench next to her when she sat. “Thanks. I...

thanks. People keep saying I've got a shot at Editor-in-Chief in the next year or two if things go well, but I don't want the responsibility. OVC's been going nuts with hiring, so basically everyone's moving a step up the ladder. I just hope all the new contributors to get sorted out before I move up any higher. I don't want to get stuck doing it. Though, if we're going around congratulating people," she nodded to the twins, "Top spot on the charts for six months straight deserves some congratulations."

Red clapped softly and Amelia chuckled as Haru and Hina mock-bowed from their seats.

'I'm proud of you two.'

"Thanks, but..." Hina looked down and away, "It's... sort of a hollow victory though. Considering what happened."

Red had to tap her notebook for Hina's attention when she held it up, *'It can't be helped. It's not your fault, and you two do great work. You're allowed to celebrate that.'*

"Thanks, Red..."

"If it's any consolation, the critics have been all over us for it. And not in a good way."

Red huffed a small laugh through her teeth and shook her head, *'What is it now?'*

Haru gave an exaggerated shrug, arms spread, "Apparently writing upbeat songs in the wake of a citywide tragedy is some kind of *grievous* faux pas."

"Completely ignoring all the benefit work, which was literally the point of that album," Hina cut in.

Red shook her head again with a wry smile, *'It's always something with them. It's your spotlight now, so you'll have to learn to deal with it, or ignore them. You'll get used to it.'*

"Great," Haru grumbled, "Wouldn't be inclined to lend us a hand with that, would you?"

Red tilted her head. Hina took up the pitch.

"We'd been thinking about asking you to collab with us. We... kind of had to put it off for a while because of *Scramble*, but now that it's out... What do you think? Would you be interested?"

Red hummed, *'What did you have in mind?'*

The twins looked at one another and shared a pause, then a shrug. Haru spoke, "We weren't really sure? We didn't want to be too pushy since, y'know..." He gestured vaguely to Red.

She nodded, *'My options for performing are more limited. It's okay, you can say it.'*

"Yeah, so... Hina and I figured we'd let you take the lead."

Red hummed again, tapping her marker to her lips, *'No immediate ideas but maybe we could do something acoustic? I know it's not your style, but it could be interesting.'*

Hina's face lit up, "Hey, yeah! That could be cool – get an actual piano up on stage, Red can do strings for us, and we can borrow Arsénio's... ah..." Hina snapped her fingers, "What is it called, the box drum that you sit on?"

'Cajón?'

"Yeah! Oh, I like this!" Hina kept snapping her fingers, but in excitement rather than frustration, "I like this a lot, we need to workshop this!"

Red chuckled, *'Can it wait? Maybe until after the new year?'*

"Oh! Sure, of course. Sorry." It was Haru's turn to mime a punch to her shoulder. "Got carried away. But that's a good start. We can do something with this."

"Say, Red," Haru stroked his chin, "Your mystery-man – I know he's shy about onstage stuff, but does he sing? Think we could talk him into joining us?"

Red felt herself freeze for an instant. She took a slow sip of her mug of cider to warm the chill rising through her chest. She glanced to Amelia, wondering for a moment if she could sign instead and ask her to translate. She didn't want to write it, putting it down on paper made it feel so permanent. But still, it had been a year and a half, and she had shared her loss with nobody but the man responsible.

She took another long sip, then set her mug aside and wrote. It took effort to act natural, not to write too fast or too slow, not to form the letters too loosely or too precisely. So much effort just to make it seem casual.

'I lost him during the Process outbreak.' She paused a beat, trying to think of any qualifier she could add to soften the blow to herself and her friends. But there was nothing. She held up the notebook.

The twins blinked in unison and Amelia's face fell. Their hostess was the first to speak after a nervous cough.

"I– I'm so sorry, Red. We didn't realize..."

She breathed a tight sigh and shook her head. She signed to Amelia so as not to pressure the twins to respond, *'You're the first people I've told.'*

"Well... Thank-you for being honest with us. That must have been so hard to hold on to all this time. I'm so sorry."

Red set aside her notebook and marker and took up her mug to focus on her drink. The twins traded a guilty look at the edge of her vision. Amelia took charge, nodding to her guests, “Hey, Haru? Red brought some brownies, did you want to grab them from the kitchen for us?”

“Uh, sure, yeah,” he tried to bite back his uncomfortable expression with a smile. Hina, too, gave a strained grin before following him out of the conservatory and sliding the door shut behind them.

Amelia moved to kneel next to Red, offering a hand, “Hey, are you okay? Did you need a minute?”

She shook her head again, ‘*I’m fine.*’

“You’re sure?”

She nodded.

Amelia glanced up to check on the twins through the glass door; they were distracted going through her cabinets trying to find plates. She looked back to Red, speaking almost at a whisper, “Why didn’t you say anything over the summer?”

Why hadn’t she? Red flexed her hands before signing back, ‘*I wasn’t ready.*’

Amelia folded her hands in her lap, “You know we’re here for you, Red. Even if you don’t want to talk and just need company. You’re not alone... Okay?”

Red reached out to her and Amelia took her hand. She gave it a gentle squeeze and signed a ‘*Thank-you*’ with her free hand.

“You’re going to be okay?”

A nod.

“You know, I can get you a drink if you want. Just because I’m not—”

Red chuckled and shook her head, waving off the offer. She wasn’t in the mood for a hard drink, she’d be fine.

“Alright. Well– hey!” Amelia’s attention flicked to the glass door, “Those are for sharing! Get in here,” she stood to open the door and let the twins back in. Hina was carrying a plate of brownies very deliberately out of her brother’s reach. Haru kept a hand over his mouth to hide that he was chewing, the other tucked close against his body, holding his drink.

Red raised an eyebrow at them, tilting her head.

“Thur rilly goob,” Haru mumbled through a mouthful.

Hina rolled her eyes, “Glad you think so because that’s all you’re getting!”

“‘Ey, c’mom!”

“Red brought these for Amelia, you greedy jerk.”

Red took up her notepad and wrote as quickly as she could to stave off further argument, *‘I brought them to share!’*

“Yeah, so *share!*”

Haru shrugged with the arm holding his drink, still covering his mouth, “I juff took two!”

“And you jammed them right in your mouth.”

“My—” a forceful swallow, a sip, and a short cough, “My hands were full with this,” he gestured with his drink, “and the plate!”

“You couldn’t have waited?”

“But they looked so good!”

“Amelia—” Hina turned to the other woman for her input, expecting her to take her side. Amelia was preoccupied sputtering into her mug trying not to choke. “Never mind.”

Red wrote with a smirk, holding up her jab, *‘Glad you like them, but you’re going to ruin your appetite.’*

Haru’s eyes went wide, “Oh, crap, there’s curry too! Amelia, I’m so sorry!”

His outburst made Amelia spit into her mug and burst out cackling. She doubled over gasping, helpless with laughter. Red tried to keep up a stern, admonishing look at Haru, but Amelia’s mirth was infectious, and she ended up smothering her own laughter with a scrunched smile and some rather undignified snorting.

Haru gave her a pleading look, dark eyes wide, “C’mon, Red, you too?”

Red let out a wheezing chuckle through a grin, making a heart shape with her fingers in place of a reply.

Haru sat and puffed out his cheeks in a mock pout. He stayed that way until Red and Amelia managed to calm themselves down and actually sample the brownies. They snacked over cider refills and loose conversation. Hina spitballed ideas for their collaboration, which only seemed to grow in its potential scope and complexity, much to the horror of her brother and Red. Amelia did her best not to talk business, but eventually things drifted that way. She did unearth an interesting tidbit, confirming Red’s suspicion that Facsimile would be playing Cloudbank’s New Year’s Eve celebration in Goldwalk. Haru lamented that trying to design costumes they wouldn’t freeze in was proving a challenge, and Red congratulated them on the gig.

It was, as Hina had said before, a touch bittersweet. Had her tour over the summer gone well, Red knew OVC might have approached her for the event last year. In retrospect, she probably would have refused and recommended Facsimile anyway. But still, it did sting to be overlooked a second time. When asked if she'd be attending, Red deflected. Despite her choice of career, she wasn't one for crowds without the barrier of the stage – and she had to insist against any offers of special treatment when Haru suggested she could hang out backstage instead. Even if she didn't attend in person, she promised she'd be watching.

They talked into the night, late enough that all four of them forgot about dinner, preferring to snack instead. When the twins had to take their leave, Amelia sent them off with a care package of curry and rice, and two of the bottles they'd brought unprompted. Red requested a serving or two to-go as well but lingered for a while after the others had left. Amelia made them both tea and they sat in the conservatory, watching snow fall from their tiny sub-tropical haven.

“Thanks again for coming.”

Red hummed and nodded, switching to signing now that they were alone, *‘Thank-you for inviting me. Would have been too quiet otherwise.’*

“Did you have plans for New Year's yet?”

‘Not yet. I'll have to see how I feel.’

Red watched her hostess glance around the space, spotting a flash of a frown and a furrowed brow before Amelia remembered she wasn't alone. She tilted her head, unsure of how to word a question to her.

“Oh, it's... Maybe not the most festive topic. I feel like I'm still trying to put the Outbreak behind me, but it's hard when – here, I'll show you,” she set aside her mug and stood, moving to one of her hanging plants suspended from the tree, waving for Red to follow, “Some of my plants started growing all weird right after. This one, here, you can see it best.”

The plant was a collection of thin vines with heart-shaped leaves, spilling over the rim of their pot and dangling down over a foot in length. Amelia lifted a section of the vines from below with the back of her hand, pointing to a uniform kink in their length about a third of the way down. Without the slight weight of their length, the shape of the distortion was easier to see; two sharp right-angles that formed a partial square, before the plant had resumed its normal growth pattern. The leaves near the square kink were pale and ovate, not matching their dark-green, heart-shaped fellows.

Red recognized it immediately, mouthing the word *‘Processed’* before she could stop herself. Amelia didn't catch it.

“This one is the most extreme, but there are a few others that have weird angles or pale spots. I got worried at first, but they started growing normally again, so, I figured everything is fine. They don't seem to be hurt or sick at all. It... reminds me of that night. But I don't want to go around clipping them all down, so, I think I just have to leave it.”

Amelia stayed focussed on the plant, gently untangling spots where vines and leaves had become intertwined. She spoke without looking, eyes dark and distant.

“Hey, Red... I don’t know if I should drop this on you but, I’ve been hanging onto it and I just feel like I need to tell someone...”

Red nodded, prompting.

“I think...” Amelia’s hands grew still, “I think I died. During the Process Outbreak. I think I actually died. And I don’t know how I came back. One minute I was standing there, watching the whole city turn white, seeing that tide move towards me, then the next minute I was gone. Then...”

She curled her hands into her sleeves, back against her chest, “After that, I don’t know *when* but... I woke up. It was like coming out of a really bad nap; waking up all stressed out and groggy and sore. But I was back. I was here again,” she lifted her head, looking out the windows, “and Cloudbank was coming back together right in front of me. It was scary. And for a long time, I was too scared to be happy.”

Amelia lowered her head, looking down at nothing, “I was scared I was just imagining it, or that I really was dead, and things were just the same on the other side, or... I don’t know. It felt like it wasn’t real, somehow. Those first couple months... were almost scarier than that night.

Red reached out a hand, pausing for permission before resting it gently over where Amelia’s were clenched against her chest. The other woman forced a brief smile.

“I’m doing better *now* but... It’s still weird... I was worried about you, too. Can I ask? Did– did something similar happen to you?”

Red’s gaze wandered away as she thought. *Yes and no*, she was tempted to sign. It was similar, but different. She hadn’t *died*, hadn’t been erased as she knew Amelia had, but she had been *away* from Cloudbank. Taken somewhere else, bent into a space beyond reality by the Transistor, been shunted back and woken up dizzy on cold concrete next to the cradle... She let go of Amelia’s hand to sign, a slow, pensive ‘*Sort of.*’

Amelia did take some solace in it, however, and brightened to a more genuine smile. “You’ve probably heard by now, but there was a rumour going around for a while that *you* were the one who stopped the Process. I don’t know who started it. Maybe they thought because you were one the Camerata were after, you knew something about how to shut it down.” She chuckled at Red’s blink of surprise, “Silly, right?”

But her smile faded again, and she lowered her hands to fold them in front of herself, fidgeting with her sleeves, “I know you’ve been quiet about it but, seriously, off the record? What happened? What was that about?”

Red opened her mouth, then pressed it shut, unsure of how to respond. She didn’t like the idea of lying to Amelia, but there was only so much she could tell without spending the whole night explaining. There was only so much she herself knew, anyway. She nodded back

to where they had been sitting and returned to her spot to take up her notepad, tapping her marker on it while she thought. Amelia sat across from her and nursed her tea while Red formed a reply.

‘Your rumour wasn’t far off. The Camerata might have thought I knew things I shouldn’t. Maybe I did know more than I realized. Either way, they saw me as an obstacle, and wanted me out of the way.’

Amelia scowled, “Who would *do* that, though? I mean, what did they actually want to accomplish by erasing the city?”

Red shook her head, writing quickly, *‘Amelia, they weren’t trying to erase Cloudbank. That I know for sure.’*

Amelia looked... hurt? There was a teary glint to her eyes. That anyone could think to do something so heinous to the city its people loved so deeply, even by accident, must have been beyond thought for her. Her voice was small and shaky when she finally found it, “*What then...?*”

Red looked down at her notepad, then set it aside. She signed, but didn’t mouth the words as usual, *‘I can’t say.’*

Amelia took a long breath, calming herself with a few sips of tea. Red signed an apology and Amelia shook her head, “It’s okay. I just... It’s over now. It’s... in the past.”

‘I didn’t mean to upset you. But you’re still allowed to be angry about it. What they did was...’ she hesitated, hands lowering. It was a lot of things. Amelia finished the sentence for her.

“Unforgivable.”

‘I’m sorry I upset you.’

“It’s okay. It’s getting late,” Amelia quirked her mouth to one side, “I’m just trying to settle down because I don’t want to go to bed angry.”

‘Should I go?’

“Oh, I don’t want to kick you out or anything. But if you want to get home at a good time, you might want to head out soon. I think the snow is supposed to pick up later, too.”

Red nodded and smiled, *‘Thank-you again for having me.’*

“Here, I’ll help you pack up, and get you some curry for the road.”

Red took transit home. The metro ride from Midtown to central Highrise was short, chilly, and quiet. Out of habit she stopped at the OVC terminal on the main terrace near her apartment. There were no pending notifications for her, but the impulse to check tomorrow’s weather and skim the crawlers and headlines was automatic. More snow, a roster of holiday events, a Solstice greeting from OVC staff in the crawler.

Her hand stalled over the button to sign off. Instead of tapping, she long-pressed to pull up her sign-in options. By default, it was proximity-activated for most citizens, automatically switching to a password prompt if multiple potential users were present. She changed hers to a password prompt temporarily, signing out.

Then signing in again, and long-pressing to check if it would auto-fill due to solo proximity. Two possible auto-fill options came up. One the length of her usual password, and another, much *much* longer string of obscured characters. She selected this second string.

The sign-in jingle of the terminal played; distorted and dying with an off-key whine. The UI displayed in a red-orange instead of the default teal. And, as expected, the Camerata emblem – a vivid parody of Cloudbank’s crest – replaced the usual OVC icon.

‘*I’m in,*’ Red mouthed to herself. So Royce had been telling the truth.

She blinked at the *User Authenticated. Welcome, ßyêdl R---ž* in the header. That didn’t look right. A gross, glitched fusion of her name and Sybil’s, perhaps? She edited the name under the sign-in options, so it displayed properly: **Red**. Not that it mattered much, she knew there was only one other user who could potentially see this channel.

He’d left his mark some time last November, it seemed. A simple ‘**testing**’ had been posted under Royce’s name in the general feed. Nothing before that she cared to read – it looked like a text exchange between Royce and Asher she wasn’t in the mood to tackle – and nothing after.

Amelia’s vehement statement was lodged at the forefront of her mind. ‘Unforgivable.’ That, she had to agree with. Their actions had been unforgivable. But the people... were they, too?

Red posted her message, ‘**Happy Winter Solstice.**’ Then signed out, flipping back to the legitimate OVC feed to take a second look at the event roster and see if there was anything she could plan her next few days around.

A system message blinked into being after a moment, clipping through the default OVC UI, flickering at its edges, limned in orange: *You have -Ĕ - new message(şç).* She swiped it away for the time being, pulling out her notepad to take down the addresses of a few outdoor events. Since last winter she had found herself developing a taste for the cold, so long as the sun was out.

After a few more minutes of browsing, reading the OVC staff’s official Solstice greeting and an article containing a recipe she wanted to try, she flipped back to the Camerata channel.

‘**thanks**’ was all the new message said, attributed to Royce and dated a few minutes previous. Though as she reached for the sign-off button, another message blinked into the feed, ‘**you too**’. She waited another minute or two to see if he would post anything further. Met with digital silence, Red signed off, and made her way home through the snow.

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