

Blank Canvas

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/5291813) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/5291813>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Transistor (Video Game)
Relationships:	Red/Subject The Boxer , Red/The Transistor , Royce Bracket/Red
Characters:	Red (Transistor) , The Transistor (Transistor) , Subject The Boxer , Royce Bracket
Additional Tags:	Complete
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2015-07-14 Words: 7,332 Chapters: 11/11

Blank Canvas

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Summary

After Red's defeat of Royce Bracket, Cloudbank is a blank canvas and the Transistor her paintbrush. But she has no desire to paint, not in the lifeless husk that Cloudbank has become. When Red discovers that there is a way to restore those who have been integrated into the Transistor, she embarks on a journey to save the city that she loves. Spoilers here, so beware!

Chapter 1: Eject()

The Transistor is halfway to Red's chest when she hears his soft, lilting, voice.

"What if..." he begins, then falters. "What if I told you there was a way to undo the Process. Remake Cloudbank."

The Transistor comes to a dead stop, inches from her body.

In the background, somewhere, Boxer breathes a sigh of relief. "Don't you ever scare me like that again, Red. For a second I thought you really were going to –" She relegates him to the back of her mind, concentrating instead on the voice of the man that she has just sentenced to an eternity in the Transistor.

"So you're listening." Ever one to state the obvious, Bracket goes on. "I wasn't sure if you would be able to hear me, but as you are my jailor I do suppose that we share a certain bond."

She hates the way he says it - without even a trace of accusation or resentment.

"I see what you're thinking. No, I am not lying. I am an engineer. I think of all the possibilities, and there is always, *always*, a backdoor in my design. I did not create the Transistor, but I did do a certain amount of...tinkering, shall we say."

Her mind races furiously. Perhaps there really is a way to save Cloudbank. To save everyone. But...how?

"So many questions, so little time," Bracket's voice echoes in her ears. "I believe the easiest way for you to ascertain if I am telling you the truth is to go and find the function for yourself. Bracket towers. I believe you've already overridden the firewall, so it should be no problem."

Bracket towers it is, then. She sets off, stopping at the OVC terminals to drop Boxer a line. For some reason, he can't hear anything that Bracket is saying, even though they're both trapped in the same virtual world.

"Hey. Hey. Red, where are we going? Thought we were done with that place. The city's all yours now." He sounds confused. She doesn't blame him.

Spotting a terminal, she types quickly, fingers flicking over the keyboard. "Bracket's in here. Says there's a way to get you out."

"He's lying. You know how the Camerata are. They're liars!" Boxer's mad. She knows how his grudge against the Camerata runs deep.

She deletes the previous sentence, and the next one is typed in a matter of seconds. "But why would he lie?"

“I don’t know, Red. I don’t trust him. Whatever he tells you, be careful, okay?”

She nods twice and turns off the OVC terminal. Up ahead, Bracket towers beckons, lights glowing brightly.

Grant and Asher are still there when Red arrives.

Of course they’re still there, she berates herself. Why would they move? They’re dead. She sets the Transistor down, waiting for further instructions.

“So, we’re here.” Boxer echoes her thoughts. “What now?”

“See that screen on my desk?” Bracket asks. “Just put the Transistor through it. The function I was working on is on there. All you’ve got to do is insert the Transistor it in and it will automatically download. You must first enable it at an access point. I’ve never actually gotten the opportunity to test drive it, so there might be a few...bugs,” he adds.

She scrolls through the function a little bit first, just to make sure it’s not some sort of self-destruct function. All computer jargon. But from what she can make out, it looks like Bracket’s telling the truth.

“There’s an access point right outside of this rooftop,” Bracket remarks, unhelpfully. She just passed by it, of course she remembers that it’s there.

She loads up the control screen on the Transistor, and there it is – Eject(). She switches out Breach() for it, and on second thought, disables most of her functions, keeping Jaunt() and Cull(). It’s not like she’ll be needing them anymore, but she’ll keep them loaded. Just in case of trouble. She takes a deep breath, readying herself. Time to head back to Boxer.

Chapter 2: Eject(Royce Bracket)

"Wait." Bracket's voice echoes in her ears. She ignores it. Boxer first.

"You'll find it out the hard way," he notes, "or you can find it out from me."

She stops for a few seconds, gives him a chance to say whatever he wants to say. Who knows, it might be useful.

"Eject() can only eject the function files in the order that you've integrated them. It works like a stack. Last one in, first one out."

She finds an OVC terminal, fingers moving in a quick staccato. "What if I don't do it in order?"

"What are you talking about?" Boxer's been pretty quiet this entire time, but he pipes up now. There's a brief moment of silence, then, "Oh. You're talking to *him*. Be careful, Red. I still don't trust him."

"It won't work," Royce replies. "You can try it on the Kendrells, but I'll tell you right now – the function will fail. I was the last integrated, so I must be the first to leave."

She decides to try it out on the Kendrells anyway. They're not far, and besides, Bracket might attempt to reclaim the Transistor once he gets out. There's nothing to lose from testing out Eject() on Asher.

True to form, the moment she tries to use it on his lifeless body, the Transistor spits out an error message.

"Most recently integrated function must be ejected first. 'Asher Kendrell, Void()' function file status: 2nd in line. 1st function file in line: 'Royce Bracket, Flood()'."

"Looks like Bracket's telling the truth," Boxer whispers hoarsely. "Guess it's time for us to head back to the Cradle. Retrace our steps."

She nods resolutely, leaves the fallen figures of the Kendrells behind, and heads towards Fairview.

Red does *not* like Fairview.

It's a twisted, confusing, place. Nothing makes sense, and laws of physics are somehow... suspended. She jaunts away, moving quickly towards the Cradle. There, she finds a smoldering body, almost unrecognizable save for his characteristic white lab coat. *Bracket*.

He shakily draws a deep breath.

"Sounds like he can't always be objectively emotionless," she thinks grimly. She inserts the Transistor into Bracket's still body, preparing to use Eject().

"Hold on!" Bracket's voice stops her in her tracks for the second time today. "Like I said, I never had the chance to test out Eject(). Be prepared. We know that the Transistor and the Process are somehow irrevocably linked. Ejecting me may lead to the creation of thousands more Process."

There's an OVC terminal nearby. "Why are you telling me all of this?" she types. "Didn't you try to kill me not ten hours ago?"

"Not kill you, *integrate* you," he replies, stressing the word. "And that was then. This is now. I want to give you a fair warning so that you know what you might be up against."

"Thanks," she types, wishing that there were a way of making her sarcasm more evident through the flashing screen. She returns to his body, puts the Transistor through his chest, and uses Eject().

There is a blinding flash of white light.

Red is in the Transistor once more, facing an irate and wholly processed Royce Bracket. The blade she clutches in her hands is voiceless, no longer giving her advice or the occasional witty remark. She circles him warily, wondering if his attack pattern will be identical to Sybil's.

But Royce doesn't attack her. Instead, he claps his hands, and suddenly there are a dozen Process surrounding him.

Fetch, Jerks, Creeps, Bad Cells, and Youngladies. She curses quietly beneath her breath. At least she still has Cull(). She disposes of them quickly, just about perfectly using up two Turns(). She's had practice.

Process Bracket shudders violently, and five storm spheres materialize at his side. They drift towards her, crackling with malicious intent. She dodges them cleverly with a Jaunt() and culls Bracket twice, sending him flying into the air. Bracket's Process helpers spawn once more, and not for the first time, she wishes that she could have equipped her favorite combo – Mask() and Switch(). Hindsight really is 20/20, she gripes to herself.

After slogging through the waves of opponents, Red manages to defeat Processed Bracket. Lying on the ground, he flickers twice. The world fades away and Red finds herself in Cloudbank once more, the Transistor grasped firmly in her hands. She spins around, readying herself for another surprise.

"Lost you there for a minute," Boxer remarks. "Did it work?"

Red hugs the sword tightly to her chest and carefully walks closer to Bracket. He stirs, and his eyes open. A lopsided grin spreads across his stoic features and he clears his throat – once, twice. "As I told you," he says, spreading his arms out wide with a knowing glance, "I always build a backdoor."

Chapter 3: Eject(Asher Kendrell)

“Red,” Boxer whispers as she sprints across the abandoned city, visiting Bracket Towers once more for the third time that night. The owner of said Towers was by her side, but only she could hear her Boxer’s voice. “Do you remember how we first met?”

She nods, the Transistor clutched tightly within her grasp. *How could I ever forget?*

She had been standing in the empty set, eyes closed, humming to herself. She had always loved how sound echoed through the bare room, cutting through silence. She hummed a final note, a sad, sweet melody that she’d come up with on the spot – and let her voice taper off into nothingness.

Then, suddenly, applause. “You know, you should really consider singing in front of an audience.” The suggestion came from stage left, and her eyelids flew open as she tried to pinpoint its source. She thought that she had been alone, but clearly, she had been wrong. A flutter of black fabric – a flash of a gold triangle – and she glimpsed him. Originally partly obscured by the curtain, he began walking towards her.

She looked for an escape route, eyes darting back and forth as she tried to gauge how much of a threat this man was. He extended a hand wrapped in bandages towards her.

“The name’s Boxer. I was just passing by and couldn’t help but stop to listen. You know, you don’t have to sing to an empty set. Voice like yours, I’m pretty sure you could fill up all these seats.”

Red could only stare at him speechlessly. And just like that, he walked away. Cloudbank was a big city, and she hadn’t been able to find out anything about him or where he’d come from. Some days, when she practiced at the empty set, she hoped that he would come back. See how far she was getting, how well her albums were starting sell.

And a year later, after “We All Become” and Sybil Reisz had skyrocketed her to fame, Red still found herself looking for that jacket of his. And one day, she found it.

“Told you that you’d be able to fill up all the seats,” he had grinned at her when she found him after her set. “Want to go to Junction Jan’s? My treat.”

After that, it was all history. The Process, the Camerata, the Transistor, the Cradle, and Eject().

“Just don’t forget about me,” he asks, simply. They’re outside of Bracket Towers now, next to an OVC Terminal.

“What are you talking about?” she types rapidly, adding a sidenote – “No, not you, Bracket.”

“I don’t know,” Boxer replies. “Sometimes I feel like I’m not real anymore. Like I’m exactly what Grant Kendrell called all of us trapped in the Transistor – traces. We’re just traces of the people we used to be, signals left behind by a source that has been long ago extinguished.”

“Stop thinking like that,” she types fiercely. “Look at Bracket. Look at what the function did him. He’s out now, isn’t he? So I’m going to get you out of there, or I’m going to die trying.”

“Please,” Boxer answers, “Don’t say that. I love you, Red, but there’s something I’ve done that might keep me here forever. So for your sake, and for mine, don’t make that promise because I don’t want to see you keep it.”

Her fingers come to an abrupt stop, bewildered. She collects her thoughts, places a finger on a key, then stops once more. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there,” she reasons. Maybe Boxer is legitimately concerned. But maybe she’ll be able to eject him without a hitch. No sense in worrying about it now.

She turns to Bracket and resumes typing once more, a steely glint in her eye. “And you. We need to talk before anything else gets done. What are you going to do now that I’m restoring Cloudbank?”

He shrugs offhandedly. “I thought I could, well, atone for my sins. For how much I’ve wronged this city and her citizens.”

“Really?” She shoots him a skeptical glance. “Not going to recreate the Camerata, wrest the Transistor from me, get the Process back on your side, and continue with your grand plans?”

“I think,” Bracket vacillates. “I think you need to have a little more faith in us. Perhaps, perhaps we are truly remorseful for our actions. Though I can only speak for myself, I know for a fact that Grant and Asher regretted what they had done.”

“The last time I had faith in one of you,” she retorts, thinking of Sybil, “I lost my voice, my city, and the love of my life in the same night.”

“You flatter me,” Boxer laughs lightly in her ear, “but I’m still here, remember?”

She ignores him. “So pardon me if I would like to have some proof, some unequivocal evidence, that you will not destroy this city the moment I eject all the members of the Camerata.”

“Well,” Bracket shrugs, “I suppose you will have to do without it. It is pointless, I say, pointless, to try to find irrefutable proof. All one can do is find more evidence that either supports or rejects a hypothesis. And either way, you have no other options. If you would like to restore the other citizens of Cloudbank, you have no choice but to eject the remaining past members of the Camerata first.”

She grimaces. It’s true, what Bracket has said. She has no other choices. Unless...unless there was a way that she could incapacitate the Camerata so that they would be able to face

justice once the rest of Cloudbank returned. Quickly, she formulates a plan.

First, since she was here, she would eject Asher and Grant. Even if they tried to overpower her and take the Transistor back, she was a Superuser of level 15. She doubted that they would be able to best her, especially since she had the help of Turn(). Afterwards, she would find a backdoor, lock them inside, and seal off the entrance until she returned Cloudbank to its former glory. Luna would watch them well and keep them from escaping.

Decision made, she plunges the Transistor into Asher's chest without hesitation. The message box appears above his head, and she selects Eject(). She's already augmented her functions list with a few more useful ones – in addition to Cull(), Red has equipped Mask() upgraded with Switch(), swapped out Jaunt() for Breach(), and added Crash().

As the world fades to white, she feels another pair of hands grab the Transistor, covering hers. Before she can react, Cloudbank disappears and the all-too-familiar countryside of the Transistor appears. And Royce Bracket stands next to her, smiling with a self-satisfied curve to his lips.

Chapter 4: Eject(Grant Kendrell)

Not for the first time, Red wishes she could speak. Instead, she glares at him incriminatingly, arms folded, waiting for an explanation.

He shrugs. “I was curious.”

There’s no time for this now, she realizes as she sees a Processed Asher making its way towards them. A darkly pulsing sphere surrounds him, enveloping everything in a four foot-radius with a blood-red color. For some reason, Red gets the idea that entering that sphere would be a bad idea. A very, *very*, bad idea.

She engages Turn(), runs to Asher and Crashes him once. But there’s not enough planning time left in Turn(), and she can’t escape the sphere with her remaining moves. There’s not much she can do – she had started out at the very edge of his Void(), and it looked as though she wouldn’t be able to inflict damage on him without invariably taking some damage from the sphere. She would have to take her chances.

Red takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and executes the Turn().

Her lungs are on fire. Her vision bleeds, a hazy veil of scarlet. Red struggles through the thick, depressive air, trying to move her leaden limbs. Desperately, she tries to begin Turn(), but finds that she cannot. Processed Asher continues walking closer to her, bright red eyes flashing relentlessly. Soon, he is standing face to face with her. His smooth, white, face with its alien features screams at her to get away, to run, but Red is incapable of movement. She can only stand and stare helplessly, feeling her life drain away. She cannot wrench her eyes away from his blank ones, and she recoils with horror from their soulless stare.

And suddenly, the Void() breaks.

Red seizes the opportunity and uses Turn(), running as far away from the creature as she possibly can. On her way, she notices an innocuous storm sphere glittering with malicious sparks by Asher’s side. So that was what had caused the disturbance in the Void(). She hates feeling indebted to Bracket, but there is no doubt about it. The man had just saved her life.

Red feels as though she’s spent her entire life inside the Transistor, firing off Breach() every few seconds, running from the terrifying blood-red orb. But together, with Bracket’s Flood() and Red’s careful aiming of Breach(), they finally manage to bring down Asher Kendrell.

Cloudbank reappears around them, and Boxer growls angrily.

“What did he do to you, Red? What the hell did he do?”

Red shakes her head.

Nothing. He saved my life.

Boxer gets the message, quieting instantly. On the ground, Asher moans in pain, rolling over on his side. His eyes open to see an unresponsive Grant. He quickly shifts his gaze to Red and Royce, communicating an unspoken question.

“Remember the backdoor function?” Bracket prompts. “The backdoor, that I made. Eject(), is what I named it. That’s right. And it works.”

“Well, hurry up and use it on Grant,” Asher replies urgently. “I don’t care *how* it works, just let him out of there. I can hear *his* voice...coming from there.” His eyes flicker towards the Transistor clutched in Red’s hands.

She hesitates, wondering if she would be able to repel the Kendrells and Bracket, should they turn on her after Grant is ejected. At the same time, a translucent figure glitches through the air and kneels by Asher, whispering words that only he can hear.

“I said, do it now!” He elbows Bracket aside and seizes the Transistor, plunging it into Grant’s chest. Red almost lets go of the Transistor – Boxer gasps in pain – but her grip holds, and she finds herself absorbed into the Transistor along with Asher.

It’s the second time that this has happened.

Red glares at a dazed Asher, who in turn stares blankly at Processed Grant.

“Wha-what’s happened to him?” he trails off, question directed towards nobody in particular. “Grant...” He shakily extends an arm towards the figure in the distance that sparkles with malicious intent.

“Don’t go one step further,” Red thinks furiously. But Asher is no Boxer, and he can’t read her mind. Not for the first time, she wishes she could speak. He walks closer towards Grant, and Red engages Turn(), freezing Time – and Asher – in their tracks. Grant’s file function had been Tap(), so she could only assume that whatever attacks he had would confer a life-stealing effect. Red maps a path towards Grant, inputs Cull(), and maps an escape route to a safe distance away. She curses inwardly as she realizes that Asher may still approach Processed Grant after her Turn() is executed. But there’s no helping it. If he wants to court death, she can’t stop him.

She executes the Turn(), and several things happen all at once.

Processed Grant releases an inhuman scream as he is Culled. At the same moment, Asher recoils away from the creature, finally realizing that there is absolutely no remaining essence of Grant Kendrell within the Process that bears his appearance. Red cringes as with every hit to the Processed Grant that she executes, life-stealing Bad Cells fall out from his body. She has to end this, and she has to end it quickly. Luckily, she’s equipped Help() as a passive function.

The next Turn() she engages, Red becomes a SuperUser. Nerves tingling with fiery electrical impulses, she goes to Grant and uses Kill().

In a few short seconds, the battle is over, and the country fades away.

Chapter 5: Backdoor()

Red gasps for breath. The transition between Cloudbank and Transistor is always a little jarring, a little harsh. As much as she loves the twisting alleyways and towering skyscrapers of Cloudbank, the contrast between it and the gentle countryside of the Transistor always throws her off a bit.

Asher's constitution is not as strong as her own, however, and she watches detachedly as he stumbles sideways, crashes into an OVC terminal, and is sick. On the ground beside her, Grant Kendrell stirs, and she realizes that she is now surrounded by three of the individuals who tried to kill her earlier today.

Backing away, Red clutches the Transistor tightly, muscles tense. Bracket, more perceptive than the other two, realizes the source of her discomfort.

"Look, you don't have anything, anything at all, to fear," he says. "We are different, now that we have all spent time within the Transistor. We only wish to help, to redeem ourselves and right the wrongs we have committed against the city that we love."

She glares at him, a challenge in her eyes. *Prove it.*

"Didn't I save your life a few minutes ago? Is that not enough? If not, then what is?" he peppers her with questions, and Red has no voice to answer him with.

"Don't listen to him," Boxer says, ever distrustful. "He's a member of the Camerata. They all are. That's all that you need to know."

But Red hesitates. After all, back in the Country in the faceoff against Asher Kendrell, he *had* saved her life. And, fine though that line may be, there *was* a line between processing and cold-blooded murder.

"*No*, Red, *no*," Boxer says forcefully, and she reconsiders. Keeping the lot of them locked up in the Backdoor wouldn't hurt, and Red is certain that she is prepared to handle anything that Processed Sybil could throw at her. She jerks her head at the exit to the terrace, indicating that they should follow.

Red takes Asher, Grant, and Royce through the next Backdoor she comes across. Luna approaches them, sniffs these new intruders cautiously, and then settles back down, deciding that they are all right.

Because of Boxer's continual warnings, she leaves them in the sunlit beaches of the Backdoor, strangely reminiscent of the simple scenery of the Transistor. Dragging the Transistor behind her once more, she sets off towards the Empty Set, where she knows she will find the Trace of Sybil Reisz waiting for her.

Chapter 6: Eject(Sybil Reisz)

It almost feels routine. Red has seen so many bodies by now that the sight of her lifeless childhood friend barely even evokes the slightest sliver of sympathy. She inserts the Transistor, chooses Eject(), and braces herself for the transition into the Country.

...Red?

Red, it's me, Sybil.

Red, I wish I could have told you...I wish I could have warned you...I wish it hadn't ended this way...I wish...iwishiwishiwishiwishiwish.

Red, we were best friends. Red, I didn't mean to do it, I was only jealous, I was only was only was only –

It's my fault my fault my fault I only wanted things to be the way they were they were they were...

Red, I'm sorry.

It is raining in the Country, and the moment Red feels the first drop of wetness on her face Sybil's mutterings come to an abrupt halt.

Red opens her eyes to see her former friend lying in the mud, her red-and-white parasol elegantly impaled through her Processed body. Electricity sparkles violently across the exposed wires, and Red begins to panic. Already, the Country is starting to fade away into the dark skies of Cloudbank, and she struggles towards Sybil, trying, *trying* –

She is back in the Empty Set once more, and Sybil's human body still lies beside her. Red draws a shaky breath. Perhaps it was only a fluke? Part of her wishes that Bracket were here to explain it, to assuage the creeping suspicion in the back of her head. She can still see the broken body in her mind, and unconsciously, she trembles.

"Red, it's going to be okay."

She clutches the Transistor tightly to her chest, reassuring warmth emanating from the blade. The very sound of his voice puts her at ease, though all she wants to do at the moment is yell at him. What does he know? Cloudbank is still deserted, he is still trapped in the Transistor, and she is still voiceless, *voiceless* –

"It's definitely going to be okay. Because you and I, we're like paper boats floating on a stream. No matter how this ends, we'll be together. Always."

And as cheesy as it is, Red can't help but smile.

She hoists the Transistor up, inserting it into Sybil's inert form once more.

"Here goes try two," Boxer says, and she takes a deep breath, selecting Eject().

This time, all she gets is an error message.

"Most recently integrated function must be ejected first. 'Sybil Reisz, Help()' function file status: ejected. First function file in line: 'Preston Moyle, Jaunt()'"

She stares blankly at the message. Disbelief. Denial. She rushes to the nearest access point to check her function list, hoping, *hoping* that she is mistaken, that her suspicions are wrong.

Help() has disappeared.

She jaunts to the closest Backdoor. This is Bracket's fault, she knows it is, and he can fix it too – of course he can, he's an engineer, isn't he? – and she finds herself locked out of the Backdoor.

Luna – gone.

The Backdoor – gone.

The three remaining members of the Camerata – gone, perhaps unwittingly sentenced by her to waste away in an eternally inaccessible Backdoor.

"Red, try the Cradle," Boxer whispers. "Trust me on this. I've got a feeling."

Red doesn't have any better ideas, so with a heavy heart, she sets course for Fairview.

They're all here.

Bracket. The Kendrells. Even that silly cat that Asher is so fond of. But there's no Luna, and there's no Sybil. And Red has the problem of the Camerata on her hands once more.

"What happened?" Bracket asks her. "The Fetch...it just vanished. And we found ourselves here, with no indication of what happened to the Backdoor."

Red's in no mood to explain anything to him, so she ignores him and continues onward, back to where she first found Preston Moyle.

"You don't want to tell me. Fine." It's eerie, sometimes, how well he can read her. It's not the same as the comforting familiarity she feels when Boxer answers her unspoken questions – it's a piercing uneasiness, and she feels as though her innermost thoughts are being examined and dissected by the most methodological of procedures.

"No matter, I can always hypothesize. The very fact that you are not heading towards the Empty Set implies that you no longer possess the Trace of Sybil Reisz. Or should I say, the *late* Sybil Reisz."

Boxer growls, a deep rumble coming from the Transistor. "Red, you can shut him up, you know. You don't even have to get your hands dirty – just knock him unconscious for a few minutes of peace and quiet."

Red shakes her head. Irritating though he may be, she's still curious as to what had happened back at the Empty Set, and he's her only chance at confirming her morbid suspicions.

"The Fetch disappeared, so Sybil's function file – Help() – must have been properly ejected. But Sybil herself is nowhere to be found. This suggests two possible outcomes."

He extends a slender pointer finger. "One, that Sybil elected not to join you and is currently roaming another district of Cloudbank. This is the less likely of the two hypotheses, as I doubt you would be comfortable with letting a member of the Camerata out of your sights, evidenced by your haste in finding us," he postulates, sweeping his hand to indicate himself and the two Kendrells.

"The second outcome is supported by much stronger data. The Backdoor is gone. Only Sybil could open it, and its disappearance can be explained in the following way – if her Trace has disappeared from this world beyond all doubt, the Backdoor, too must vanish. I can only logically conclude that Sybil's Trace has been completely and utterly destroyed – by either you or herself."

Chapter 7: Eject(Preston Moyle)

Red closes her eyes, takes a deep breath. She doesn't want to believe his cold, aprosodic, words, but she knows that they must be true. Why else would the Backdoor disappear? Her mind wanders back to the events in the Country, and all she sees is the red-and-white colors of the parasol and the mangled, Processed, body of Sybil. She grips the Transistor tightly, wishing that it hadn't had to end this way. Deciding that she can deal with the problem of the Camerata later, Red starts toward the next target.

She arrives at Preston Moyle's body a lot faster than she expected. It's a good thing, she thinks. The more she concentrates on the task at hand, the more she is able to suppress the emotions that are threatening to spill over her calm exterior. Mechanically, she uses Eject() on him and enters the Country once more.

The rain has stopped now, and a thin pale ribbon of hues stretches across a weakly lit sky. In the distance, a Processed Preston Moyle clammers to its feet. Glancing in Red's direction, it catches sight of the Transistor. She blinks once and his rapidly retreating form is already far away in the distance. She curses to herself in her head, wishing she could vocalize her frustration.

She uses a Turn() to catch up to him – but it's not quite close enough. And in the time that it takes for the Turn() to recharge, the Processed Moyle has already reestablished the distance between them. Red tries using Turn() again, this time saving a little extra planning space at the end. Aiming carefully, she plans a Breach() and executes the Turn().

It's a hit.

Moyle falters for a second but quickly regains his original speed. She repeats this maneuver several times, slowly whittling down his health. But while planning the 8th Turn, she hesitates. Each subsequent Turn, the Process was gradually getting farther and farther away from her. If she didn't change something, soon, she would completely lose sight of it. And what would happen then? Would she be doomed to wander the Country for eternity until she managed to find Moyle and destroy him?

No, there had to be some other strategy she could use.

She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, thinks of all the functions she can. The images run through her head, people's souls who have been simplified into no more but a combination of a picture and a utility.

There. Boxer's not speaking, but she can still hear his voice. The picture of the function glows in her head, standing out from all the rest. Get(). She pauses to wonder if she's able to switch out functions in the Country and is pleasantly surprised when it works. Right now, it's her best bet at catching up to Moyle again.

Hoping for the best but expecting the worst, she aims Get() in the general direction of Moyle and fires.

Nothing happens, and Red sighs, disappointed. The range of Get() was probably too small to detect Moyle and force him closer. Then she feels a small tug at the end of the Transistor, and in an instant the Process is less than a foot away from her.

Seizing the opportunity, Red enables Turn(), lines up a Crash() and a Cull(), and executes. Moyle never even stood a chance.

She is back in Cloudbank, and the once-inert body of Preston Moyle has begun to stir. She offers him a hand, and he nods to her in thanks as he grabs it and pulls himself up off the ground. Moyle looks at her, a question in his eyes, but she glances away, looking towards Bracket. He could explain. She had better things to do.

As Bracket begins explaining the Transistor and Eject() to Moyle, Red sets off once more, leaving the racer with the Camerata. She knows it's a bit cruel of her, but she's only got one more Trace to eject before she can see Boxer again, and she's growing impatient.

Chapter 8: Eject(Lillian Platt)

Lillian Platt. Spark(). The last trace that Red has left to eject before she is reunited with Boxer.

She rushes into this one, ill-prepared.

Of course, she's got Cull() equipped, as well as Breach(), and Get(), but there's an empty slot where Jaunt() used to be, and Red doesn't feel the need to take the time to fill it. After all, she's battled several of the Process at this point. And besides, this time, it's only Spark(). How dangerous could it be?

Several explosions, silent curses, and one singed hairdo later, Red pledges to never underestimate an opponent again, particularly one with the single-minded focus that Lillian Platt possessed.

"Jesus, Red," Boxer swears, "I knew you were always brash, but try not to cross the line into carelessness!"

Not that he had any authority to scold her on that, she retorts silently. Whose impulsiveness got him trapped in the Transistor in the first place, anyways? But still, she nods her head obediently. A brush with death has a very humbling effect on one's self esteem, she reflects.

Lillian Platt slowly stirs and rises to her feet, appraising her surroundings. She fixes her eyes on Red. "Maximilias Darzi. Where is he?"

"Her voice sounds like steel," Boxer comments. "Hard and flinty. Nothing like yours."

Red shakes her head, trying to avoid his distracting remarks. If only there were an OVC terminal nearby...

Platt's eyes widen, almost imperceptibly. She tilts her head to one side, as though listening to voices that Red cannot hear. Quickly, Red revises that thought. Considering that Darzi is still imprisoned in the Transistor in Red's grasp, there is no doubt that Platt is listening to the voice of his Trace.

"I see..." Platt says flatly. "Then I will deal with them. Red, I trust you will tend to the rest of the prisoners within the Transistor in a timely manner. In the meantime, I will be having a word with the Camerata. I'll see you in a moment."

Red nods wordlessly, her thoughts a world away. Soon, he would no longer be an empty voice. Soon, they would be reunited. Soon, she would be able to speak once more.

She sprints to the Empty Set, wishing that she had thought to bring along a motorcycle.

Chapter 9: Eject(Subject Not Found)

Red kneels on the cold metal of the ground, sobbing noiselessly into the sky. Tears stream down her face, but not a sound escapes her body.

I'm sorry, Red.

A bright-green display hovers above Boxer's inert figure. "Error: Subject background data corrupted during integration. Trace data is unrecoverable. Eject() will simply delete this function file. Would you like to proceed? Y/N."

Red clenches her fists so tightly that her carefully manicured nails leave bloody, crescent-shaped indents on her palms. She dragged that godforsaken hunk of metal across the entire City and back. She fought wave after wave of Processed creatures. She restored several of the trapped Traces back to their former bodies. She beat down the Camerata, unveiled the ugly truth of their sins against the city. And all this for what? She holds the power to reshape all of Cloudbank in her hands, but still, she is helpless, unable to do the one thing that she wishes to do.

Her thoughts flash back to what she had first thought of doing, back when everything was over and the Camerata had finally been defeated.

Red, I know what you're thinking. Don't do it.

She smiles wanly to herself. He could always tell what she was thinking.

But she refuses to take the coward's way out, not now, not after what she has gone through to make Cloudbank alive once more. And besides, he is still here, she rationalizes to herself. Sure, maybe he doesn't have a material form, and maybe he's eternally imprisoned within the Transistor. Still, things aren't so bad.

That's the spirit. She can hear him smiling.

A few minutes later, Platt shows up with Bracket in tow.

"Red, Royce tells me that a trace cannot be ejected without an appropriate body to receive it. For some *reason*," she says, casting a scathing glance at Bracket, "the body of my dear friend, Maximilias Darzi, was never found."

Bracket speaks softly, contrasting Platt's harsh and thinly veiled accusation with a bit of necessary explanation. "The additional function files that you no doubt have accessed by now were absorbed prior to your acquisition of the Transistor. These files required a higher user level, and as such, were unavailable to you when you first acquired it. However, the bodies for these Traces were deleted from the server by one of my superiors...there's nothing left for their Traces to return to."

She breathes a sigh of understanding. Grant. Of course. A member of the Camerata with administrative access meant that any and all evidence against them could be erased with a few simple commands.

“Of course, you could still check in the archives. Though I know that Asher and Grant tend to be very thorough...”

Lillian Platt’s steely voice cuts straight through Bracket’s explanation, interrupting him. “Then we’ll go to the Archives. I swear that will tear down every block of this city to restore my friend once more.”

“After all the hard work Red spent putting it back together?” Boxer remarks. *“Sheesh, lady. Calm down a bit. You’re not the only one who’s lost a friend.”*

“That won’t be necessary,” Bracket replies. “Either they will be in the archives, or they won’t be. Nothing in your power can change that.”

“For your sake as well as the Kendrell’s,” Lillian retorts, “you had better hope that they’re in there.”

Secretly, guiltily, Red hopes otherwise.

Chapter 10: Archives()

The archives are empty.

Well, not empty, Red reflects, revising her thought. They are completely and perfectly intact. It's just that the archives are missing certain files – specifically, those for Wave Tennegan, Henter Jallaford, Maximilias Darzi, Bailey Gilande, Shomar Shasberg, Farrah Yon-Dale, Olmarq, and Niola Chein. It is almost as though they never existed, she thinks, shuddering involuntarily.

Bracket shrugs. “Ms. Platt, it looks as though the files in question have been regrettably erased not only from the server, but also from the archives.”

“No!”

Red winces at the volume of Platt's objection.

“Denial of the facts will get you nowhere, Ms. Platt,” Bracket replies.

Platt strides forward angrily, eyes blazing. “Well, if Maximilias is to remain in the Transistor forever, then so should you and the rest of the Camerata.”

“Would you really sentence a repentant man to an eternity in the Transistor?” Bracket returns.

She nods quickly, no hesitation. “Yes. Yes, I rather think I would.”

In the midst of their bickering, Boxer speaks to her.

Hey, Red...what's that over there, on the desk?

Her eyes flicker to the table. A small glint of polished metal winks at her, partially obscured by a sheaf of papers. Grasping it within her fingers, she twirls it around, examining it critically while trying to tune out the increasingly irate Ms. Platt.

If that's what I think it is, perhaps the lady won't need to carry through with her threat to Bracket.

Boxer narrates her thoughts so perfectly, except this time he's forgotten one critical point. For a single, fleeting, moment, Red considers destroying the USB beyond repair. But she cannot condemn the others to a lifetime in the Transistor on the basis of her own selfish desires, and so she knows what she must do.

Resignedly, she hands the USB over to Bracket.

He'll know what to do with it.

Bracket raises an eyebrow, intrigued. “Well, well. It appears that Ms. Gilande already suspected something. How clever of them.”

With a dramatic flourish, he inserts the device into one of the archive computers. Fittingly, the USB had been named A://Backup. Red watched mutely as the entire database of Cloudbank citizens appeared on the screen. All save for one.

I'm sorry, Red. I didn't make any selections, and that's probably why my Trace is corrupted.

Platt places a patronizing hand on Red's shoulder. "It's for the best, Red. Now, we must return to the empty set. It's time for you to set Boxer free."

All very well and easy for you to say, she thinks resentfully. Once he's gone, you'll be able to have Darzi back. But she knows the pain of losing a lover, and she can't stay angry at the physicist for long. She clenches her jaw resolutely, and starts off towards the empty set. There's much to be done before the night is over.

The Transistor is in Boxer's body once more, and she leans against his prone form, cherishing the feel of his weight beneath hers for one last time. If only she could also feel the warmth of his body...but that was not to be.

That's not me, Red, not anymore.

Red closes her eyes, takes a deep breath. Within the Transistor, she knows that Boxer's thoughts are echoing hers. Her eyes snap open, and his voice resonates within her head.

So. I guess it's goodbye for real this time.

She hugs the Transistor tightly. Not for real, she whispers in her mind, no, surely they would see each other in the Country once more.

I love you, Red.

For a brief moment, she wishes that she had an OVC terminal nearby to type out a final goodbye to him, but she dismisses the thought. He knows what she's thinking, just how she knows what he's thinking. She deletes his function file along with the fractured pieces of his Trace, and his words float across the edges of her consciousness

Goodbye, Red...I'll see you in the country.

Chapter 11: theCountry.add(Red)

Cloudbank, 6:34 PM.

The sky glows soft pink and purple, a majestic orange streak illuminating the horizon, courtesy of a Mr. Sienna Yon-Dale. An advertisement for the latest fashion show headlined by the most up-and-coming fashion designer of Cloudbank, Ms. Io Platt-Darzi, sits on prominent display, projected onto one of the many skyscrapers of Goldwalk. Rebuilding took time, but now, the Process feels like nothing but a nightmare from a long-ago past.

When everything changes, nothing changes.

Red sits on a bench overlooking Goldwalk Bay. Her brilliantly red hair is now streaked with pure, swan-feather white, and when she smiles, the lines at the edges of her eyes crinkle like candy wrappers.

She closes her eyes, and begins to hum.

*The river always finds the sea
So helplessly like you find me
We are paper boats floating on a stream
And it would seem we'll never be apart*

*I will always find you
Like it's written in the stars
We can run, but we can't hide, try*

*I will always, always find you
I will always...*

...Hi.

...Hey.

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