

And I Will Follow You into the Dark

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And I Will Follow You into the Dark

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Summary

The thought of never hearing Red sing again pains Sybil, only because she doesn't know what to do to help.

Sybil nearly choked on her tea when Red suggested it. At least Red caught her off guard when she had been seated. How was Sybil to respond after *that*? Perhaps it was a joke. An off-colored one, but a joke nonetheless. She stared in utter disbelief and waited for Red to crack a smile. Despite Sybil's hopes, the reality of the matter was that Red hadn't been smiling for some time.

"You're kidding me!" Sybil blurted out. Red didn't respond in an instant, thus provoking Sybil to prattle on. "You can't do that!"

Red fidgeted. "Why?"

Where was she to start? How was she to organize the chaos exploding in her head after the thought Red dropped into her lap? How did Red say the words without a hitch in her breath?

"This is your *passion*, Red!" Sybil placed her tea down, fearing it would shatter in the vice grip hold her hands insisted upon. "It's in your very selections. People don't just... *give up*. Cloudbank needs someone like you-

"They'd be better off without me," Red said, her eyes on the window in her flat. The night sparkled on without a care for what transpired within.

Cloudbank's favorite musician - the renowned Red - wanted to stop creating music.

Had it been left to the votes of a poll, the vast majority of Cloudbank would have gone against Red's decision. *Everyone* loved her. Sybil knew that better than anyone. Red's shows sold out in minutes. While the masses exited the performances in an exhilarating tizzy, Red still left them insatiable. She wove elusive tales within her melodies and stood before crowded audiences with divine grace. Sybil didn't blame the people for loving her; it was one of the many reasons why Sybil came to fall for the woman herself.

Yet there she was, wanting to throw away everything. And for what? Mere weeks ago, Red had been smiling and planning on a new album. She stuck to her usual regimen of staying up late, restless as ever and beaming with ideas. As much as Sybil preferred it when the woman fell asleep by her side, Sybil imagined Red in another room, humming with a phantom tune in her head and pursuing the right words to divulge the tale her soul desired to release.

But that creative spark flickered out. Red had been cooped up in her flat for almost a week. Had Sybil not known the whereabouts of the spare key, she wouldn't have been inside to check up on her love.

Why couldn't you tell me what was going on? Sybil thought while pouting. *You could have reached out to me and I could have helped before you came up with silly ideas like this.*

The thought of never hearing Red sing again brought an onslaught of panic Sybil was never prepared to confront.

"You can't do this!" Sybil snapped while shooting up to standing.

This time, Red peeked over her shoulder, huddled over on her couch.

“Think of everything you’ve accomplished!” Sybil went on, marching towards Red to loom over her. “Think of the accolades and praise and following you’ve acquired.”

“Sybil, it doesn’t *mean* anything.”

“It means everything! Red, this is your *life*! If you give up on music, you’d be giving up on yourself!” She paused and bit her lip. “Did... something happen?”

Red blinked her blue eyes. Even they didn’t shine as bright as they had in the past. “What?”

“Did you receive a nasty letter from a stalker?”

“No.”

“Did... an event coordinator say no to a request of yours? You know you can just let me know and-”

“No.”

Sybil inhaled and held the breath, fearing if she let it go, than the room would collapse onto her. “Did *I* do something wrong?”

There was a pause. Far too long for Sybil’s liking. Each second stretched out for days. Maybe Red would never answer.

When she did, it was more heartbreaking than the silence. “Sybil, I just want to be left alone right now.”

Her lower lip trembled. “I *did* do something-”

“The only thing you did wrong was barge in without letting me know-”

“I was worried-”

“And all I want is to be alone, so please, Sybil.” Red pulled her knees into her chest and buried her face into them. “Can you leave?”

But she didn’t want to. She wanted - no, *needed* - to convince Red that she had to *stop* thinking the way she was and realize she was far more distinguished and influential than she believed herself to be. Why was such a concept so troublesome? Why couldn’t Red look in the mirror and see what everyone else saw? It was evident in the sales numbers, the sold out performances, the adoring fan letters, the critics’ reviews, and above all, the poll results. Cloudbank *loved* Red.

If only Red could love herself, too.

Not wanting to add more damage to the scenario, Sybil exhaled and gathered her belongings before leaving. She traveled across the flat like crossing a lake frosted over in thin ice. By the

door, Sybil looked back to Red. Not once had she moved.

“Um....” Sybil sniffled and blinked back the tears. “If you need anything, Red... and I mean *anything*... you let me know, okay?”

Silence. Absolute silence.

By the time Sybil reached the streets, she couldn’t stop the tears from rolling down her face.

“What’s wrong?”

Sybil glared at Royce. “Excuse me?”

He stood in the living room of his studio with a raised eyebrow. As always, his attire was part impeccable and part disaster. The hair didn’t help, but Sybil tried not to stare at the unkempt, black strands. For now, he returned the look with his eyebrows knitting together.

She scoffed. “Royce, don’t give me that look. Just spit it out!”

A single, knobby finger pointed at her. “You’ve been looking out the window like you’re about to kill someone.”

“I *don’t* want to kill anyone.”

“Strangle, maybe?”

A groan escaped her. “Why would you even care?”

Royce cocked his head. “Why would I....” His eyes wandered past her. “Well, that’s rather silly, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“You come here upon your own whim to... check up on me? Make sure I haven’t wandered off? All because *you* care. Always.” He hummed quietly while pausing. “Yes, always. Would be odd if you didn’t. Wouldn’t make much sense-”

“And this has to do with *you* caring *how*?”

“Because I *don’t* care, Sybil.”

Her entire body shrunk by a few inches. “Wow, could you be a little blunter?”

But Royce only shrugged while setting his green eyes back upon her. “If I *did* care, I’d be locking you out. Change the locks, upgrade the security cameras. Simple. Logical, no doubt.

Back to the point, however, is that you show up... distracted. Maybe annoyed. Mixture of the both, sure. You didn't come up here for *me*; you came up here for *you*. You're... not good at hiding your emotions. This is different. This is... *quite* different."

Sybil blinked, then squinted. "So you still don't care?"

"Yes, but only because those aren't... the right *words*."

"I'm *pretty* sure what you're describing is that you *do* care."

"To you, maybe." Royce pursed his lips and drew in a deep breath. All the while, his eyes twitched about the landscape, looking for succinct words to free him from whatever disarray lived in his mind. "You could say I'm... oh, I don't know, curious?"

Why am I not surprised? Sybil opted to keep to herself.

Royce approached Sybil by her vantage point along the vast window comprising of one wall. It provided one of the best views in Fairview and served as one of the few reasons why Sybil continued to visit. Aside from the fact that yes, she *did* worry about Royce and his voluntary seclusion, it was a nice break from the rest of Cloudbank. The only better vacation she could think of was a visit to the Country, but everyone with half a brain knew better than to grow comfortable with that particular fantasy.

"You've been grinding your teeth," Royce said, breaking the brief silence. His eyes fixated on something past the window, drifting on and off when it no longer held his interest. "Your shoulders are tense. Your forehead is wrinkled."

Sybil furrowed her brow deeply. "It is *not* wrinkled!"

"Choose whatever you believe to be true. I'm merely... observing. Like always. Nothing new." With a momentary flick of his eyes, he looked at Sybil. "You should know that by now."

"And why are you telling me this?"

"To inform you of the signs which indicate that yes, you are worked up over *something*. If there are tense, strained muscles, then a subject is in a state of stress." He waved a hand about while explaining. "If x, then y. Simple math. Elementary level of learning. It's not hard, Sybil. Even *you* were taught basic-"

"You could have just asked me if I was doing okay like a *normal* person."

To that, Royce brought his full attention upon her. Through lengthening his spine, he gained several inches on Sybil. "I *did* and *you* snapped, so I fell back on what I *usually* do."

Rewinding her memory, Sybil couldn't help but sigh upon realizing the truth in Royce's words. She *hated* it when he was right.

"So?"

Sybil tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. “So what?”

“This... is the part where you, uh....” He motioned his hand between them. “*Tell* me what’s... on your mind.”

“Is that another one of your formulas for people?”

“Along those lines, yes.”

“A hundred percent success rate?”

“Ninety-eight percent, actually.”

Why do I ask? “But even you said it - you don’t care. So why listen to whatever it is I have to say?”

Royce didn’t flinch. “Wouldn’t that be... better? To have someone detached and unbiased to the situation? Why, everything else could... get in the way, muddy the path, and bog us down. We wouldn’t want *that*.”

Again he was right. Again Sybil just wanted to scream and shake him. Maybe *that* would be therapeutic. Maybe talking to a wall would have been better than traveling to Fairview. But Sybil had submerged herself and Royce offered a hand to prevent herself from drowning.

He left her with no other choice.

With a deep breath, she began. “There’s... uh, someone I know who isn’t doing well.”

“Sick?”

“No, she’s not... well, I don’t know. She’s just been acting weird lately. Like she was talking about wanting to give up her selection.” Her eyes pleaded to Royce to spare a sliver of empathy. She doubted his aloof eyes could muster such a thing. “Her *selection*, Royce! People don’t just *do* that! She said there was no point in sticking with it, that everything she’s amounted to means nothing. I’ve... never seen her like this before.”

“What are her selections?”

“Why does that matter?! Whatever it is, she doesn’t want to do it anymore!” With a pause, she noticed his blank stare overpowered hers. “They’re... music and linguistics.”

He offered a subtle nod. “A rather lucrative path. Not many flourish in the arts, but those who do reap the rewards.”

“Except she doesn’t see it that way. Well... not now, anyways. Before all of this happened, she was aware of the influence she had on Cloudbank. Now? It’s like it never happened. She told me nothing went wrong to bring this on, but I can’t picture her suddenly *not* being motivated.”

She was always motivated. Geez, I 'd have to drag her sexy butt back to bed. We'd laugh about it.

Sybil sighed and stared out the window, remembering the late nights spent in Red's flat. The woman's voice echoed in the space while she figured out her next, biggest hit. Or so Sybil claimed the tunes to be.

You always say that about every song I write! Red had said with a giggle upon her lush lips.

And Sybil scooped her up into her arms and bumped noses with Red. *It's because it's true, silly!*

The memory brought a frown to her face. "I tried to tell her that she was still loved. She has her fans and admirers. If we were to run a popularity poll on her, Cloudbank would rush in to sing her praises." She shook her head. "But it doesn't matter to her now. She just... doesn't care. I tried to help, but she told me to leave her alone."

"And when was this?"

Sybil recounted the time which passed. "About two weeks or so? I've lost count."

"Maybe she just needs to be left alone."

"But why?!" Sybil spun her head back to eye Royce. "She *loves* going out and socializing! It's one of her favorite things to do. Interacting with her fans gives her life!"

What she didn't expect to happen was for his eyes to widen with an intensity she had only witnessed in him while he slaved over a pet project.

"Have you ever considered that perhaps she *doesn't* need a reason behind her actions? That maybe this - whatever this is - happens to be normal for her?"

"But I've seen her so often and never seen her like-"

"And maybe she's aware, more so when more than your eyes are upon her, and thus has taken it upon herself to hide away. Wouldn't want the happy facade Cloudbank is used to seeing to shatter before the masses. To shatter before *you*, of all people."

"But...." Sybil lowered her head, unable to process any of it. "But she could have told me before it came to this."

"Except she *did*."

Peering up to Royce, Sybil swore his eyes softened despite the cold air continuing to circulate around him.

"Had she not cared, she wouldn't have told you that she wanted to quit."

Confusion contorted Sybil's face. "How would you know? How-"

“Because the brightest and most brilliant of flames cast the darkest and deepest of shadows.”

Royce crossed his arms, diverting his attention back out to the sights of Fairview. Fingers twitched along his elbow - a sign he craved a cigarette. Sybil dared to part her lips again, only to catch herself from breathing life to her thoughts. She rolled Royce’s comment over and over in her head.

Then she recalled the days when she stumbled into Royce’s studio when he hadn’t left for a week straight. Empty cups stained with coffee littered counter tops and every ashtray overflowed with smothered cigarettes. She went out of her way to cook him up a decent meal he insisted on depriving himself of, all while he curled up into himself on the couch with a blanket covering him. A far greater mess than he usually was. Sybil scolded him for not taking care of himself, of course.

How can you forget to eat?! she had barked at him at some point. Bleh, never mind that. How can you live in this dump?! You should be grateful Asher doesn’t visit you as much as I do. He’d be writing articles about you. ‘The Great Royce Bracket: Where is He Now?!’ Is that how you want people to remember you?

Royce never talked much then, but he also never kicked her out.

But Sybil had been too focused on Red to dwell on the empty boxes of flat bread scattered about the room. She didn’t comment on the dust and crumb-covered floor or the pile of dirty laundry creeping out of the bedroom. Sybil opted to ignore all the elements out of place, for Red had always been infamous for maintaining order within chaos. There was, however, a difference between that and living in ruin.

And when it clicked in Sybil’s head, she stepped towards Royce and took a breath. “What do you think I should do?”

She waited a few days before shooting Red a quick message: *Hey, do you mind if I come over? I promise I’ll leave the moment you tell me to.*

Several hours later, her terminal chimed with a response: *Sure.*

Sybil canceled all other plans she had for the night and headed over to the lovely redhead’s apartment complex. The spare key was right where Sybil last left it. She knocked first, then slowly unlocked the door to slip inside.

The interior wasn’t better; a hurricane must have roared through the rooms. Sybil frowned as she closed the door behind her, though did her best to not fret over the growing stacks of flat bread boxes and bottles of unfinished soda everywhere.

“Red? You there?”

There was no vocal answer, though Sybil spotted the woman poking her head up from the couch. Sybil perked up and headed on over with a massive tote bag in hand.

“Hey,” Sybil spoke softly, sweetly. “How are you doing?”

With her eyes fixated on the floor, Red just shrugged. A part of Sybil broke inside, but she swallowed hard and repeated mentally to herself not to worry. All the while, Royce’s voice echoed in her head.

Sometimes, he had told her back in his studio over fresh cups of iced coffee and tea, people don't need to be reminded of their success. It's... well, when one falls deep enough into nothingness... why, they can't see the light shining down onto them. It's a speck. Nothing but a smudge. A dot. Nothing. And yet when you say this dot is millions of times bigger, they can't grasp the notion. No, praise won't work. It never does, actually. All that can comfort them is someone willing to fall with them in that abyss.

And be miserable with her? Sybil raised the question.

A rare, slight smile quirked to life briefly upon Royce's lips. No, not shared misery. Simply share an umbrella while life rains down upon them.

When will I know it 's over?

When the sun comes out again.

But... will it?

The breathe on his lips was close enough to pass as a chuckle, albeit a sad one. *Funny enough, it always does.*

Sybil settled the bag down onto the floor to rummage through it. From within, she plucked out a massive blanket, a box of chocolates, and a set of disks containing beloved animated features.

“I got these for you,” Sybil gestured to the gifts. “I thought you’d like them.”

Except Red stared at them and spoke of no gratitude towards them.

Sybil wanted to scream and kick everything over. Maybe flip the coffee table over for good measure. Instead, she unraveled the blanket and wrapped it around Red. She placed the chocolates on the coffee table before fussing with Red’s terminal to play one of the movies. Once the animation was in play, she took a seat beside Red.

They watched the entirety of the movie in silence. Same with the second one. Intermittently, she checked on Red, who kept her eyes cast to the floor the whole length of the movie. Sybil rose from her seat to switch each movie and to prepare tea for them. Red only stirred once to find the bathroom.

Before starting the third movie, Red licked her lips and cracked her voice to life. “Why are you doing this?”

Sybil stared at the unopened box of chocolates, the pile of unwatched movies, and the lifeless veil that served as a blanket around Red. She ignored the prickles behind her vast eyes while gazing upon the one she loved.

Instead, she took a deep breath.

“You know... back when I was first starting off with event coordinating, I worked as an assistant for a full year. I messed up so many times that I started to wonder if what I was doing was even right for me. I second guessed every decision I made to the point of making myself sick. I thought I’d never be better than an assistant.” She chuckled at herself while cradling her tea mug. “And now I have people working as *my* assistants, but back then, I couldn’t imagine that kind of possibility.” But her lips faltered as she eyed Red. “But... even multiplying that sense of dread... I can’t even comprehend what it is that you’re feeling. Oh, I wish I could, but the truth of the matter is that I’m clueless. Perhaps a touch useless, at that.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “I wish I could say yes, I know exactly how you feel. But I don’t and I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry all I have to offer is compassion. I wish I could do so much more. I know *things* like chocolates and movies won’t change how you feel, but... I didn’t know how else to let you know that I’m here for you.”

More silence. More unwanted tension. Sybil wanted to scream over the overwhelming nothingness daring to choke her.

“It’s hard.”

Sybil tried not to flail over the sound of Red’s voice. Her eyes snapped open and she fixed them upon the woman before her. At first, Sybil parted her lips, only to close them shut. It wasn’t about what Sybil thought in this scenarios; it belonged entirely to Red.

Once more, Royce’s words of wisdom - oh, she never thought the day would come where she’d credit him with *that* - rang in her ears. Sybil allowed the silence to wash over her. She hoped she had enough patience in all of Cloudbank to weather the storm with Red.

“Sometimes,” Red continued, “I wonder if it’ll ever get better. I didn’t want this to happen. It just *did*.”

Sybil placed her tea down and settled a hand upon Red’s shoulder. “It’s not your fault, Red.”

“I feel like it is.”

“Some days are harder than others. You’re allowed a chance to be human.”

When the silence lingered, Red shattered it with a series of sniffles.

“I feel like such a failure.” The words bubbled onto Red’s lips, laced with sobs she had been hiding back for far too long.

As much as Sybil yearned to scream about how Cloudbank was in love with her - with Red, the most praised singer of the generation - and her creations, she held her tongue. In turn, Red unraveled more of what dwelled in her head.

“I want to create music. I want to so bad, but it doesn’t come to me right now. All I can think about is how every day passes by and how I’ve done nothing. But I can’t bring myself to do anything. It only gets worse. And I feel like if anyone saw me like this, they’d just laugh. I’m not supposed to be like this. I should just get over myself, but I can’t. I don’t know how. I can’t find a reason when all I can focus on is how pathetic I am as a musician. I’ve already missed three shows. People are disappointed in the cancellations. They’re upset I didn’t make an appearance. They’d be better off with someone who didn’t cry backstage over the idea that maybe all of this was a mistake.”

Sybil cupped Red’s cheek and brought her face to her own. She swiped away a tear with a thumb. The whole while, she smiled softly to Red.

“The only mistake you’ve made,” Sybil whispered to her, “was letting yourself suffer alone.”

Red choked on a sob. “I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

Sybil leaned in and kissed away a tear. “Red, I love you. You’re so dear to me. I’m *here* for you. You’re *not* alone in this. And when this is all over? Whenever that is? I’ll still be here, just as you will be, too. I’d rather see you like this than never again.”

After a beat, Red snaked her arms around Sybil’s form and clung onto her. Sybil reciprocated the sentiment and allowed Red to bury her face into her shoulder to release the tears she had been afraid to show to anyone. Neither of them said another word; they simply held onto one another and existed in the moment.

In time, the hysterical sobs faded away and Red’s tight grip loosened. They only parted from one another when Sybil went to make more tea or change up the movie disks. Together they curled up within the massive blanket. Sybil sipped on tea and Red devoured all of the chocolates. Halfway through the last movie, Red slumped into Sybil and surrendered to a deep sleep. All the while, Sybil stroked over her matted hair.

She couldn’t help but smile.

Sybil swore she imagined *that* particular voice shouting out her name on the streets with utter glee. Upon turning to inspect the origin, she gasped as Red rushed over to her.

It had been a week since they shared a blanket on Red’s couch. No longer living in her pajamas, Red donned a classic look: an oversized sweater, leggings, and knee-high boots. Her hair was tousled, but passed for the unkempt look which was gaining popularity with the younger generation. Above all, she smiled. Maybe not as massive as her usual ones were, but a smile nonetheless.

They interlocked hands. They stared into each other’s eyes. They giggled.

And then the most decadent words left Red's lips. "I'm working on a new song."

Sybil's eyes glistened. "Are you?!"

Red nodded and bumped noses with Sybil. "Yeah."

"I can't wait to hear it!"

And with a deep breath, Red gently sang the first few lines.

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