

When the Fire's Burning Blue

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When the Fire's Burning Blue

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Summary

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“They gave you that during my first day on the job.”

“They *gave* me a title. Do you really expect me to believe you go by *The Boxer* and nothing else?”

He peeked at Red. Shafts of neon light washed over her. For all the colors residing in Cloudbank, nothing dulled the clear blue hue of her irises. The very ones that locked onto him.

“Maybe it’s classified,” he teased, albeit anxious.

She blinked, then snorted. And snickered. Absolutely unladylike of her. Even Red’s publicist shot her disapproving looks. And it was as lovely as her singing voice.

Before he met Red, he was nobody. Now? Well, funny what a single person can do to impact another’s life.

Notes

*When the tide pulls us away
Not the one you need to save
All the lies, they’re coming true
With you*

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

It was just another job.

A paycheck. Something under the table, per usual. Not that he ever used it—the credits piled up in an account he somehow had access to—but the acceptance of said paycheck was out of etiquette than necessity. A means to avoid complications, avoid questions. Maybe that kind of life didn't suit the majority in Cloudbank, but he always walked against the current, so to speak. That was why various high-profile figures solicited for his protection; a forgettable face was easier to sweep under the rug if shit went sideways. Plus, he was good at what he did. *Real* good, actually.

Good enough to garner *her* attention.

The tip came from a regular over at Curbside Pint during a game of billiards. A friend of a friend of a friend said word on the street was that a famous—or infamous, depending on who told the story—musician was returning to the limelight. Needed some extra muscle to stave off rabid fans and nosy photographers. Seemed like his kind of gig. Fit the role like a missing puzzle piece and all that. So sure, why not? Wouldn't hurt to scope it out.

Within a week, his contact slid him a folded piece of paper across the sticky countertop—a rarity in the likes of Cloudbank. Black ink scribed a street address, date, and time. Nothing more.

It rained that night: a light drizzle at 2 AM sharp. He waited at that street corner for almost an hour. *Where the hell is this person?* Granted, he *had* arrived early—the clients ate that shit up—but doubt spun the gears in his mind. Maybe he was set up. Maybe it was an elaborate joke.

Or maybe—

“Hey.”

—it was something else.

He turned to the origin of that voice. A figure approached, heels clicking against concrete and hands clutching an umbrella. Sparse lampposts illuminated the rain-slicked streets. She walked into one, like she stepped into a spotlight.

No one informed him *who* his client would be. Just that it was a musician. He hadn't pried for a name—why do that when he preferred to keep a low profile himself?—but one glimpse of her face revealed enough.

Because he was meeting with Red. *The* Red. The most popular singer-songwriter in the past four years, possibly five. Everyone knew her music, her *voice*. Even someone like him.

Now he was tasked with protecting her and he couldn't string a damn sentence in reply.

Eventually, he said, “H-hi.”

Smooth. *Real* smooth.

To his surprise, she grinned. And in hindsight, that was when it all started. The job, the revival of her career.

The skip in his heart, reserved only for her.

A gasp, a shiver, then a fresh bout of panic.

“What... where...? How... no.”

Darkness consumed him. He floated there, suspended and helpless, and disregarded his own fate to locate *her*.

“Hey, Red! Where are you?! Where are you....”

But his stubborn resolve didn’t cancel out what happened. Still, there was a chance—that she survived. Maybe. Hopefully.

“Don’t be gone,” he rattled off. “Please, don’t be gone. I can’t... I’m here. I’m over here, I’m over *here!* I’m—” Dread weighed upon him like a sinking anchor. “—still here.”

Then it yielded to ire.

“Look, if she’s hurt—if she’s *hurt*—I’ll....”

No response. Simply the silence and darkness.

“I’ll what?” He scoffed at himself. “I’ll nothing.”

Because he was stuck. Inside *something* he couldn’t comprehend. And that *thing* held a whole lot of nothing.

How fitting for a guy like him.

But he had one job, *one* simple task. To protect her. He ended up doing far more than that—and for free—but if he *couldn’t* save her, then what the hell was the point?!

Right as he prepared to scream and curse out the Camerata, the rhythmic click of heels approached him. He bit his tongue, waiting. And *waiting*. Then amidst the darkness, Red stepped into view, like the sun cresting the horizon at dawn.

She was okay. She was *alive*. Worry wrinkled her face as she examined him—what was left, anyways—but if she was fine, then so was he.

Except.

“Hey, say something already.”

She wasn’t.

“Oh no....”

Not entirely.

And he watched her in silence as she ripped her designer gown above the knee and wore his favorite jacket and knelt before his corpse with a wistful glow in her eyes and embraced the *thing* that skewered him.

If there was one truth he learned after all the time spent together, it was that when Red put her mind to something? It was as good as done.

So he told her, “Hey, Red. We’re not going to get away with this... are we?”

She never answered—*couldn’t* answer—but her actions spoke plenty.

If anyone in Cloudbank claimed to not recognize one of Red’s songs, they were either lying, deaf, or living under a rock.

When she released a new single, every terminal and bar radio and device that possessed speakers played her music. Within twenty-four hours, that song became a hit. No votes necessary. People just *knew*. He liked that, honestly. One of the few things in Cloudbank he could enjoy that wasn’t locked behind credentials and other administrative bullshit.

He never considered himself a fan, however, until he heard her sing live.

Five days after they finalized his contract—damn, he signed heaps of papers that evening—he escorted her to a prestigious recording studio in Highrise. He never cared for the district. Not his type of haunt. Overpriced and underwhelming. Guy like him stuck out like a flickering letter on a neon sign.

But he came to appreciate it, because Red was there. She lit up the darkest corners of Cloudbank, including his heart. And Red’s brilliance nearly blinded him when she held the microphone stand in a loving embrace, ghosted her lips over it, and *sang*.

From the control room, he watched her. That’s what he was paid to do, technically, but this time? In that precise moment? He did that on the house.

He gazed at her like it was his first time listening to music *at all*. He gazed at her like she returned from the Country, unharmed and sublime. He gazed at her like he was front and

center of her last concert, before the riots broke out—now he couldn't fault anyone for that, because he too would brave wars for her and *that* voice. He gazed at her and wanted nothing more than to be her microphone, to also sweep his arms around her, and feel her breath teasing his lips with each note she struck.

Red was halfway through her song when he noticed her staring back. A shudder tore through him. He turned away, looking at anything but her. That tormented him more than keeping distance between them, keeping things *professional*.

Because he wasn't hired to woo her. Doubtful that she'd humor him, even off the books. Besides, what he harbored was nothing serious. Just a dumb crush, like he was a schoolboy noticing a pretty girl's cleavage. Best to keep it in his pants and focus on the job.

Still.

When he slept, Red lingered there, burned in his retinas. She echoed in his ears and thrummed in every inch of muscle. It never dulled, never rendered him numb.

And each day he greeted her, he swore her blue eyes swept over him. Could've been his imagination, though. He *had* been getting less sleep since she hired him.

"Hey, end of the plaza."

Cloudbank blurred before him in place of the skies. The vivid colors cycled like a kaleidoscope, but in the center was Red. Always Red. Not only her in the flesh, dragging the Transistor, but—

"It's *you*."

The silkscreen poster advertised an upcoming concert, the very one that occurred last night. He recalled her posing for an up-and-coming graphic designer—fresh out of Traverson Hall, her alma mater—and how she grinned at the final product. No changes necessary. She trusted a fellow artist's vision.

She failed to grin while confronting the poster in the promenade.

"I'm so sorry, Red."

Her eyes flicked about the design, gilded in foil. What did she see in it now? Nostalgia? Regret? Something he overlooked?

"They took your voice," he continued, mostly to combat the smothering silence. "I couldn't stop them."

Damn it, he *should* have.

He spun that indignation in his favor. “Well, we took something of theirs.”

She didn’t blink. Didn’t flinch. Simply stared ahead and hugged the Transistor—him—close.

If only he could reciprocate.

“Hey, let’s just go.”

Red stayed motionless, speechless. The glint in her eyes... that was new. Dangerous, even. It managed to spook the likes of him, to be honest.

“Come on, just go.”

A shadow grew along the wall—another bleached enemy to deal with. It was all on her now, much to his dismay. One minute, he chatted with Red, as if to hype her up for combat. The next, it was over. How she accomplished that was beyond him, but... that didn’t mean he *liked* Red putting herself in danger.

“Just... yeah.”

But he knew better than to talk her out of anything. And whatever was running through her head? Between scraps of unused lyrics and showtimes? She’d go down swinging if it meant sticking with her gut.

He loved that about her. So much. Even if it would doom them both.

“You’re quiet this evening.”

He almost missed her comment. Preoccupied with watching the glittering city roll by en route to some gala event. Didn’t realize it was directed at *him* until she leaned in. They weren’t alone in the limousine—her publicist and personal assistant also hitched a ride, glued to their portable terminals—yet Red spoke as if they were.

She sat opposite him, donning an emerald gown that clung to every curve. He dressed the part, but his tuxedo was a last-minute rental—one *she* insisted on. Even foot the bill, too. Fit him like a glove, or so the boutique’s tailor assured him. It was a damn miracle he didn’t claw his way out of it.

“Am I?” he shot back, unable to maintain eye contact.

Red tilted her head. Crimson ringlets bounced around her face. “Yeah.”

“So, no different than most nights?”

She chuckled and he wanted to explode.

“Maybe,” Red continued, “but I hope you’ll open up someday around me.”

Words failed him momentarily. “How so?”

“It would be nice to know more about the gentleman who’s looking out for me.”

A sound shot out, something between a scoff and a laugh. The gentleman, huh? That was a new one. He hung his head while his cheeks burned.

“Not much to know about, to be honest.” *Better that way. For everyone involved.*

Curiosity dazzled in her eyes. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Can’t even tell me your name?”

“They gave you that during my first day on the job.”

“They *gave* me a title. Do you really expect me to believe you go by *The Boxer* and nothing else?”

He peeked at Red. Shafts of neon light washed over her. For all the colors residing in Cloudbank, nothing dulled the clear blue hue of her irises. The very ones that locked onto him.

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She blinked, then snorted. And snickered. Absolutely unladylike of her. Even Red’s publicist shot her disapproving looks. And it was as lovely as her singing voice.

“Anyone ever tell you,” Red said, barely containing her amusement, “that you’re a bad liar?”

His mouth twitched into a crooked smile. “All the more reason to be quiet.”

Red squinted, then scooted to the edge of her seat. Their knees almost touched. Almost.

“How about this?” she purred. “I ask a question and you tell me yes or no. Sound like a plan?”

He inhaled until his chest trembled. “Yes.”

“Have you been doing this bodyguard thing for a while?”

“Yes.”

“Am I your first musician?”

“No.”

She chewed on her lower lip, unconcerned with smudging her lipstick. “Can you *actually* box?”

“Yes.” *Damn good at it, too.*

“Then I take it you’re quick on your feet?”

He hesitated. “I... sure. *Yes.*”

“Can you dance?”

The question struck him like a gut punch. “*What?*”

“Humor me.” When he didn’t, she rolled her eyes and smiled. “Wanted to make sure you didn’t stand in a corner the whole night, watching me. You should have fun, too.”

“Oh. *Oh.* Right. I, uh—” He cleared his throat and adjusted his bow tie. Damn collar was tight. “No.”

Red slumped a bit. Was she disappointed? “Are you a fan of gala events?”

“Don’t know. Never been.”

“Not your scene?”

“No. Er, yes, it’s... not my thing.”

She nodded, gazing out the tinted window. “Have you traveled around Cloudbank, at least? Enough of it, anyways?”

“Yes.” Kind of. Not entirely.

“Have you....”

He furrowed his brow. “Red?”

Outside, a group of motorcyclists wove through traffic. Such negligence to highway laws would earn them strikes on their motor privileges, maybe even ban them from driving. Another precaution set by the administrators. Perhaps there’d be a vote in a month to change that. Not like he ever had a say in any of it.

Red watched each one. Out of admiration? Shock? Hard to tell in the sparse lighting. She didn’t come off as the type to be into that kind of thing. Wasn’t something for a renowned starlet. But for all her glitz and glamor, Red possessed a chip on her shoulder, as if to spite her circumstances. And the more time he spent with her, the more glaring that facet became.

Especially now, looking like she longed to tear off her jewelry, rip every pin out of her hair, and jump out onto the streets.

And then.

“Have you traveled beyond Cloudbank?” she finally asked.

That single question affirmed every gut feeling he had since working for her.

“No,” he told Red.

Her smile vanished. Not a sparkle to be found.

“Have you?” he asked, leaning closer.

She drank in Cloudbank and all its splendor with those gorgeous, listless eyes, then shut them. “No.”

Do you want to? he wanted to ask.

By then, her assistant chimed in. Their destination was two blocks away. Time to touch up hair and makeup, then review their itinerary—who to chat with before the gala concluded. He relaxed into his seat, into the shadows. Not another word left his lips. Even as he opened the door for her and led the way down the red carpet—lined with flash photography and a cacophony of praise and questions—he said nothing. Not then, not the entire night.

But he watched her, because that’s what she paid him to do. And he watched her, because who could possibly ignore Red when she entered any room? Then he watched her, because he hoped to catch her smiling—like when they were in the limousine, candid and genuine.

She did, eventually. Right when they were ready to leave and she scouted the ballroom, then found him.

“Okay. East 64 on-ramp, six blocks down, take the second right.”

Red mounted the motorcycle, like she was born for that over the stage. A part of him wanted to smile. If only he could.

“Do *not*,” he added as she reached for the ignition, “turn left.”

Nothing blipped across her face as the engine rumbled.

“And... thanks for the lift.”

She smiled before speeding off. Even if he was trapped in the Transistor, he followed her. Part of the job, really. But... he would’ve done that regardless. Because why wouldn’t he?

As they sped down the barren highway, he counted the exits, counted the missed ramps, counted how often she surprised him, even now.

“Hi.” A pause, then, “You turned left.”

Wind whipped hair across her face.

What remained of his heart plummeted. “Thought we were going to skip town.”

She simply twisted the accelerator. If Red hadn’t lost her voice, he imagined her response remained the same.

Damn it, he admired that fiery spirit, but it also frightened him. For many reasons. He articulated each one as best he could without spiraling into a rambling mess. And yet Red raced ahead.

No wonder her music ignited something in her fans.

“Look, whatever you’re thinking? Do me a favor.”

She tilted her head. To him. And it pained him to know he could never cup her cheek again, never feel her lean into him, never savor the slow kisses she peppered along his wrist.

“Don’t let me go.”

Red never did the entire ride back to the Empty Set.

Most of Cloudbank’s offerings were available from a swipe of one’s fingertips. Each unique print was linked to credits, passwords, and more. All public terminals recognized the user within one tenth of a second, thanks to a single keystroke. Without that vital technology? It made the simplest tasks impossible: opening doors, ordering food, purchasing literally anything, and so on.

He just learned to get used to it.

That said, there *was* a fifty-fifty shot that things worked in his favor. Usually in a ludicrous way. Like that time he paid a clerk thrice his grand total. Or once when he unlocked not one passenger door, but all of them in the parking lot. He was quick to smile, laugh it off, dismiss it as a coincidence. Few people chuckled. Most didn’t. What he called a coincidence was instead an error. A breach in the system, they loved to say.

Maybe they were right. Cloudbank rarely felt like home, but it was the only one he knew. He also knew that when others voted for the upcoming weather, he avoided the terminals, knowing he’d never get a say in the matter. When acquaintances gathered for lunch during work, he asked one of the more compassionate folks to order on his behalf. When he was alone and forced to access something, only to have another coincidence—an *error*—occur, he made a mental note to skip that section of the city, long enough for folks to forget about him.

At least he was good at that. Being forgettable. Mr. Nobody, as he once quipped a few years back.

And he wondered how long it would take until one of those coincidences reared its ugly head while escorting Red from location to location.

How long *had* it been? A month or two? Longer? Days bled together when she was around. Night and day ceased to exist. He followed her every move, mostly to recording studios, though she wrapped up a little past midnight during autumn. Her team applauded her efforts. Hell, so did he, clapping in the rear of the control room. But shortly after, everyone exchanged goodbyes and went home. Whatever celebratory thing they had in mind could wait.

As for Red, she buzzed with energy. “Hey.”

He stood taller as she rushed to him. “Hi.”

“You doing alright?”

He nodded. “Yourself?”

“Could be better. I’m *starving*.”

Made sense. She *had* been working nonstop for the past six hours, stopping only to chug bottled water or use the restroom.

“Ah, yeah.” He breathed out a chuckle. “You and me both.”

“Want to go grab something?”

Wait, what now? “I... us?”

“Mmhmm.”

“*Together?*”

“I hope so. You *are* supposed to keep an eye on me.”

She certainly wasn’t wrong.

“So,” Red continued, “know of anywhere that’s open at this hour?”

He did, but was it Red’s kind of scene? Why drag her to some hole-in-the-wall joint? Her standing there would spike up the property value by three hundred percent. But he humored her request. Besides, if she was paying, might as well take advantage of the free meal plus leftovers.

Located on Goldwalk Boulevard, Junction Jan’s prided itself on speedy deliveries, but there was adequate seating, so long as it was outside of the dinner rush. The aroma of frying oil and yeast seeped into every surface. A broadcast featuring the Highrise Hammers played in

the far corner while timers went off from the kitchen. One waitress wiped down tables of crumbs and spilled sauce when they arrived. He ordered his usual Sea Monster flatbread. As for Red, she spent ten minutes scrutinizing the menu, then smiled.

“I’ll take a Supremo Deluxe,” she said.

He scoffed. “Suit yourself.”

“Not a fan?”

“Sea Monster’s the best.”

She scanned him. “Then you’ll need to let me try a slice.”

That purr of hers lingered in his bones. It resurfaced when they claimed a booth, received their flatbread, and took those initial bites. Tomato sauce dappled the edges of her lips. He yearned to wipe it off, but she caught it with a swipe of her tongue. Seeing *that* evoked more chills.

“This is *delicious*,” she said, shoving another slice into her mouth.

It certainly was. What he enjoyed more was the sight of her relishing it all, disregarding table manners to satiate her hunger. Despite her designer threads, something about her sitting across from him—casual and clumsy and comfortable—felt nice. Felt *right*. Like she belonged there as much as the spotlight.

“Mind if I try it?”

He glanced at his slice of Sea Monster, inches from his mouth. Chuckling, he extended it to her. To pass it off. “Not at all.”

She didn’t grab it. And somehow, he didn’t drop it when she leaned in to sink her teeth into it. Again she moaned while munching on fried calamari, pillowy scallops, and garlic butter shrimp. And he froze and watched her, wondering if the flatbread tasted better on her lips.

“You’re right.”

That snapped him out of his reverie. “What’s that?”

Red smirked, swiping her tongue over those lips. “Sea Monster *is* the best.”

Her eyes never left his while stealing a second bite.

Junction Jan’s stood unlit amidst Cloudbank. That didn’t stop Red from testing the front doors. Must’ve been locked. Couldn’t blame them for that. Who’d want to run any business

during that mess?

Still, Red was human. Hunger would plague her. So would exhaustion. He doubted the Transistor was light, too, yet she kept him close, kept bringing him along.

“Sea Monster’s the only choice,” he quipped when they reached a terminal.

Because he *always* said that when she contemplated the menu. And she *always* ordered anything but that.

Maybe it was to rile him up. Maybe she preferred stealing his share of flatbread. Or maybe she didn’t enjoy it at all, yet refused to offend him. Then she selected the third option for home delivery—one box of Sea Monster flatbread—and marched on.

It was the first and only time Red ordered it.

“And we have a special guest here for today’s show, one I’m positive is a household name across Cloudbank.”

So was Wave Tennegan, based on recent popularity polls. Even if *he* could vote, he doubted it would’ve made a difference. Guy was too chatty for his tastes. Just filling up the room with hot air. Typical loudmouth behavior.

But Red’s publicist insisted on booking the interview. Nearly everyone on her team gasped with delight at the idea. What a perfect opportunity for Red to announce her upcoming album release! He simply rolled his eyes and followed orders. For now, that meant standing in a corner, keeping a vigil on them in Tennegan’s high-end recording studio.

“I must say,” Tennegan said after introductions, “it’s quite the treat to be speaking with you today!”

Red chuckled and smiled. Not like the usual mask she wore for the cameras. “Oh, thank you. You’re too kind.”

“I am an honest man speaking the truth! Since your last performance, I—along with plenty of fans—feared it marked the demise of your music career.”

Ho boy. Here we go. At least Tennegan skipped beating around the bush.

“Nothing wrong with a little break,” Red replied without hesitation, without her smile faltering. “I believe that’s as necessary as creation itself.”

“Ah, wise words from such a young lady! We could all learn a lesson from you.”

More polite laughter, more goosebumps taunting his skin.

“And how has this *little break* of yours faring?” Tennegan asked.

“Well enough,” Red said. Good answer. A very PR-appropriate answer.

“It’s been quite some time since the tragedy at your last concert, yes?”

Then something shifted. Subtle, but there. He noticed it, though. In her eyes, in her posture, in her timbre as she replied.

“I wouldn’t call it a tragedy,” was what she said.

Tennegan’s eyebrows shot up. The entourage in the control room with him on the other side exchanged whispers. Red’s publicist set her jaw.

As for himself, he listened.

“Is that so?” Tennegan inquired. “Then what *would* you call it? A riot? A premeditated attack?”

“A breath of fresh air.”

Nothing but the ambient hum of electronics filled his ears as Red inhaled.

“I never intended my music to be controversial,” she explained, “just as I never imagined getting wrapped up in music to begin with while studying at Traverson Hall. I created for myself, then shared with anyone who would listen. And when people *did* listen, I wrote more. Sang more. We inspired each other, in a sense. All on our own. It wasn’t decided by a poll or taken away after a week.” She gazed at her lap. “It just *happened*.”

Why was his heart racing? Not out of anxiety, but... eagerness. Anticipation. Understanding.

“That’s not to say I’m pleased with the violence,” Red clarified, “or the fact that quite a few were innocent victims. But something in my music roused that reaction. And I think about who else might feel that way in Cloudbank, though opt for silence.”

“Feel what way?” Tennegan asked, entranced by her voice. Everyone was.

“Trapped.”

There was that skip again.

Then Red coughed up a laugh. “I love this city. I do, truly. Cloudbank is alive as much as we are, thanks to constant creativity, but are we truly embracing our full potential if we keep choosing the same five artists to win the popular vote? Is it fair to dictate one’s opportunities, let alone successes, around the majority’s perception? Tens of thousands of people vote... and I don’t know a single one myself.”

Tennegan propped his intrigued face up with a loose fist. “Do you suggest we abolish the polls, then? The very foundations of our society?”

“I don’t know. I don’t... think there’s an easy answer.”

“Then let me ask you this: what do *you* want, Red?”

He forgot to breathe until she spoke.

“What I want,” she murmured into the microphone, “is for my music to make people feel *something*. Doesn’t matter if it’s joy or sadness or anger. No one can dictate that, except them.”

Tennegan smiled. “Eloquently put, my friend. And speaking of your music—”

The interview ran for ninety-five minutes. It became Wave Tennegan’s most replayed interview by the end of the year. A recent poll claimed thirty-eight percent of listeners strongly disagreed with Red’s opinions. Another eighty-two percent voted *yes* when asked if they’d continue to support her music.

She announced the release date of her upcoming album in the final five minutes of the interview. When Wave Tennegan signed off, preorders hit half a million sales. And his job protecting Red became harder.

But he also fell harder for her. A *lot* harder.

Last night was a full house at the Empty Set. Sold-out performance. The talk of the town, really. Anyone who *was* someone had coveted tickets to Red’s debut concert after her hiatus. Coordinators and stagehands fixed the place up real good, too. Every inch exuded Red’s aesthetics, dripping in gold and triangular patterns. A love letter to Cloudbank. To the citizens who adored her as much as she adored their home.

Now? The Empty Set was, in fact, empty.

And Red took to the stage, as if preparing for another performance.

“When I first saw you,” he said, watching the rafters and spotlights overhead, “up on that stage back there, it was like...”

Red slowed down as she reached the microphone. He closed his eyes and yielded to the darkness. Memories painted a vivid picture: of the house lights dying out, of infinite cameras flashing, of her emerging center stage, of the spotlights striking her as the orchestra struck the opening notes, of her voice flooding the space and his soul.

The Transistor possessed no facial features, but he beamed, nonetheless. “Everyone loved you.”

She held him tight. Something wistful swept over her. He longed to cup her cheek and kiss away the tension between her eyebrows. He couldn't, though. Not anymore.

At least he *had* protected her. That wasn't enough, but... still.

"Everyone except for *them*."

It turned out that they were not alone; a certain member of the Camerata stayed there, waiting for Red. But for now, Red closed her eyes, drew in a breath, and hummed into the microphone.

Hummed for *him*, he liked to believe.

Things took a left turn since the Wave Tennegan interview. Cloudbank thrummed with chatter about Red. That meant more fans and reporters piling outside of buildings—recording studios, boutiques, even Junction Jan's—in hopes of glimpsing their beloved icon.

Also meant he rarely left her side. Tough work, sure, but he appreciated the silver lining.

Lights blinded them whenever they stepped outside. A cacophony of voices—all shouting her name—bombarded them. He marched ahead, wedging through the crowds to escort Red to another limousine, another way out. It didn't make a difference if they changed hours of operation or found an alternative exit; her fans were persistent. Anything to see Red. Maybe garner her attention.

He couldn't blame them; he also yearned for something similar.

But unlike the fans, he was on the clock twenty-four seven. If he wished to stay on Red's payroll, that meant being professional. So when they slipped out a rear entrance and into a rainstorm, he whipped off his jacket for her to use as a makeshift umbrella. And when he cornered her into an alcove, boxing her in with his arms, it was to conceal her from the passing mob down the alley. He refused to succumb to distractions—at how his favorite jacket draped off her shoulders, at how her breaths teased his neck, at how *easy* it would've been to pin her against the building and see what else made her gasp—for if he was to protect her, he needed to maintain that space between them.

"Alright," he uttered after a moment and withdrew. "Should be clear."

They bolted out of the alley. Puddles reflected Cloudbank and its spectrum of lights, plunging the rest into pitch-black. It was in those shadows that they navigated the streets and pedestrians, all the way to her abode in Highrise. Mission accomplished. No one tailed them and Red could sleep soundly. But as he went to say goodnight, she paused in the doorway.

"You coming in?" Red asked.

His jaw dropped. “I... excuse me?”

She pushed a drenched lock out of her eyes. “You think I’m sending you home in *this* weather?”

Well. Um. Sure? Probably?

Except he said none of that. Each word lumped in his throat and he gawked at her as rain cascaded over him. Of course Red chuckled. Of course she curled her manicured fingers, beckoning him inside.

Of course he complied and followed, shutting the door behind them.

His impression of Highrise wasn’t very *high*, truth be told. Just a bunch of pretentious snobs looking down on the rest of the world. At least it wasn’t Fairview, but still. Never sat right with him. But Red? Red was different. So was her apartment, exuding a blend of eclectic aesthetics and cozy functionality. A bit of a mess, but tidy. Hardly the sterile museum-esque quality in most Highrise establishments. This was lived in. Used and loved.

This felt like home.

And he tried not to dwell on the fact she *welcomed* him into said home—let him use her shower, wear her oversized T-shirt and sweatpants from her Traverson Hall days, warm up with a cup of tea, and crash for the night. He fought against the latter. All it took was one of Red’s smiles to disarm him and change his mind. Damn it, no wonder folks rioted at her concert.

But before they retired, he sat on the couch with Red, sipping chamomile and enjoying the fleeting privacy. They talked to pass the time. Less about work and more about... well, everything else. He couldn’t recall what exactly they rambled on about, except that it made her smile. It also distracted him from how she scooted closer, how she trained her eyes on him, how she rested a hand upon his thigh and purred to him.

“Tell me something,” she said.

It was late and he was tired and all alone with her and shivering from a simple touch.

“Anything,” he murmured.

Her fingers curled into him. “Your name. Never got around to telling me.”

He blinked, then scoffed.

“Won’t you humor me with that?” Red asked. “We’ve been working together for quite a while now. You can’t *truly* go by The Boxer or Mr. Nobody, do you?”

No. He didn’t. Just as he didn’t believe that *they* were working together, as she put it. There was no collaboration, no mutual effort. He was a bodyguard and she was his ward, his client, his monthly paycheck for the sake of appearances, the false sense of normalcy.

But also? She was a million other things surpassing that.

“Blue,” he whispered.

She raised an eyebrow. “Blue?”

“Yeah. Just Blue.”

That was a lie. His name wasn’t Blue. He didn’t *have* a name. But if he *was* to call himself something, either by a name or a title or whatever made him unique in an ever-changing city, he imagined he was the opposite of everything Red stood for. She was somebody and he was nobody. She was loved and he was forgettable. She was the loudest and brightest corner of any room and he was the deafening silence within the shadows of Cloudbank.

She was Red, so he was Blue.

But when she looked at him right then? It rivaled the way every adoring fan beheld *her*.

“Goodnight, Blue,” was all she said before heading to bed.

He barely slept. Not out of discomfort—the couch beat his stiff mattress by a long shot—but because he couldn’t stop thinking about her and *that hand* on his leg and how every inch of him screamed for her attention, for her to shift closer and notice the influence she had on her loyal bodyguard. Damn it, Red deserved better than him, than some guy crashing on her couch and fighting back the urge to jerk off to her under her own roof. Before dawn, he planned to rise, swap into his dried clothes, and run out before she woke up. Maybe leave a note on her fridge saying thanks.

But he didn’t. He woke up to the smell of coffee and sizzling bacon. He sat across from her at the table while eating the breakfast—*her* breakfast. He reviewed the day’s itinerary while she scribbled fragments of lyrics that struck her like lightning. He agreed to leave first, then meet with her two blocks down after half an hour. He finally thanked her when she walked him to the door, wishing he could’ve done so with a kiss instead of words.

“I should be thanking *you*,” she giggled out.

Maybe. Hard to wrap his head around why she’d feel that way. But he didn’t argue. Just nodded and ducked outside.

That was his first visit to her apartment. To his surprise, it wasn’t his last.

The Terrace Apartments housed the most illustrious names of Cloudbank. A perfect haven from the city’s hustle and bustle. Quite the view, as well. Or it used to be. Pillars of white pervaded the horizon, speckled in blood red.

Apartment number three hadn't changed. Not yet.

"It's strange coming here," he said as they entered. "Like this."

Because he was used to walking alongside Red, chatting about the day so far. It became his home away from home, but then again, home was with Red—in her smiles and her cups of coffee and idle humming and midnight whispers and jacket-stealing habits.

None of that was present as she stood in the entryway.

"Can't imagine what it's like for you," he added.

That made her frown more, albeit short-lived.

"Well, at least Junction Jan's delivered!"

They did. One order of sea monster. Red brought it to the kitchen table along with the Transistor. She hung his jacket over him and ate in silence. So he spoke—about anything and everything. Flatbread wasn't so bad cold. Not that he knew anymore. Did she like it? Yeah? Probably better fresh out of the oven. Or off his plate. Hey, got some sauce on your chin. Don't forget to wipe it off before the OVC snaps a photo for tomorrow's headline. What? No, he didn't mind if she ate in front of him. It was what he wanted for her. Go on. Don't worry about him. Eat up while you can.

Red devoured half the flatbread. Sucking her fingers clean, she stored the remainder in her fridge, washed her hands, then walked out the door with the Transistor. She forgot her keys, though. That wasn't like her.

"Locked yourself out," he remarked. "How are you—"

She didn't look at him or the closed door or the view from Highrise they gazed at every morning for the past... who knew how long.

"Oh."

She definitely didn't look back while running ahead, determined as ever.

He loved a stiff drink as much as anybody. Best method to unwind after a rough day was with a glass of old fashioned. But a drink like that didn't come cheap and while he preferred shelling out extra credits for a top-shelf experience, he rarely risked it with his whole... problem with that. Might as well have someone else foot the bill, per usual. Drinking in company was superior to drinking solo, sure, but what nonsense would he spew with a loose tongue?

He found out the hard way during a solstice party.

Apparently it was something those Highrise types liked to throw for close friends. Red was invited, which in turn meant *he* was invited. As her bodyguard. Hell, everyone there had their share of hired muscle. Except he doubted his peers were nobodies. Just him. Always him. All the better to steer clear and not mingle and avoid any unwanted—

“You enjoying yourself?”

Red approached him, a martini in one hand and a crystal-encrusted clutch in the other. Her smile lit up the room better than the fairy lights. Warmed him up plenty, too. She always had that effect, but since he crashed at her apartment... yeah, it only doubled. Maybe tripled. Didn't help when he took one step back, Red took two more forward.

“Um.” He resisted the urge to rub his neck or look elsewhere or do anything to convey his anxiety. “Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Feel a bit out of my element, like I'm unwelcome.”

“Oh, nonsense! You're with me, so you belong here, Blue.”

His heart skipped. No, don't be stupid. Of course he was *with her*. Not like *that*, but....

“Have you had a drink yet?” She wiggled her glass at him. “Might help you relax.”

“N-no, I'm good.”

That was his first mistake.

“No?” Something devious sparked in her eyes. “Care to change that?”

Who the hell was he to say no?

Before he could process her request, he knocked back a glass of whiskey. Then another. Why not? The party had an open bar for a reason. And Red was right. He *did* relax with a drink in his system. That burn in his stomach lingered, like when he sprawled out on her couch, struggling to sleep. And that same sentiment haunted him every night since then, albeit alone in his flat, and no matter how often he scratched that particular itch, he couldn't snuff the flames. Maybe he never would.

So he swallowed down a third drink as Red finished her initial one. Just in time for him to sway into her.

“Hey, Red,” he slurred, grinning into her silky curls. “You having fun tonight?”

He swore their noses bumped. “I am.”

“Oh good. That's *real* good.” He steadied himself against... something. Was that her shoulder? “Had me worried for a second.”

“Is that so?”

“Mmmhmm.” He shuffled closer. She didn’t recoil. “I’m supposed to... you know, look out for you. That’s my job.”

She giggled under her breath. “I appreciate it, Blue.”

“But like... if you’re *not*, I should do something to fix that, yeah?”

Red refrained from answering. Perhaps if the room wasn’t spinning, he might have noticed the small audience they garnered or the whispers they shared. Instead, he nuzzled into her ear.

And he groaned, “I can help, you know. Help you have some fun.”

After that, his grip on reality loosened, then faded. He vaguely recalled laughter and Red’s perfume and that *heat* which taunted him in every waking moment. It ebbed and flowed, akin to the air in his lungs. One second, he was attending a party with Red. The next, it was morning.

And he woke up on a couch.

Her couch.

Again.

Fuck.

The hangover pounded in his head like a jackhammer. Somehow, he shuffled out of the living room. The sooner he got out, the sooner he could—

“Hey.”

Never mind.

“H-hi,” he squeezed out. Wow, he sounded like shit. Felt like it, too.

Red sat in her bathrobe at her kitchen table, drinking coffee. A second mug graced the table. For him, most likely.

“Hey, um—” He cleared his throat. “About last—”

“You feeling better?”

He winced. “I’ve felt *worse*.”

Red frowned. “I’ve got some pain meds if you’d—”

“N-no, that’s not—” He slammed both palms into his face, dragging them down his weary features. “I’m sorry for how I acted.”

She paused, waiting for more.

“I was out of line,” he continued. “I was meant to look out for you and... well, you ended up looking out for *me*.”

Red tapped her nails against the mug. “You *were* pretty drunk. Passed out on the couch the second we got here.”

Best case scenario, from the sounds of it. “That won’t happen again. Not while I’m working for you.”

She cocked her head. “What won’t happen?”

“The...” Wait, what *was* she talking about? “Uh, me getting wasted? And sleeping on your couch? And probably making an idiot out of myself and no doubt giving your *friends* some gossip that’ll land in the OVC’s lap and I don’t want to make a habit of... of *this* and—”

Nothing prepared him for the snort she made. That time, he shut up.

That time, Red smiled. Like she did the other night.

“That’s a shame,” she said. “I like it when you talk.”

Did she?

Sipping her coffee, Red gestured across the table. “Now sit down and enjoy yourself before it gets cold.”

He did exactly that—enjoy himself. As best as he could, anyways. That night never came up again—from Red, her Highrise friends, or in the OVC—but he repeated it in his mind like a broken record he refused to replace.

“Can’t even see the canals,” he said. Or was starting to.

Then it hit him.

The darkness he floated within burned *red*. Like fire. Like a split upper lip. Like traffic lights. His liminal world spiraled and toppled and throttled him worse than a hangover.

“Red, uh....”

Where was she? His vision blurred and doubled. It *hurt* to look, but the nausea persisted, despite shutting his eyes.

“What happened...?”

Good question. Excellent, in fact. If Red could speak, he wondered if she'd even *have* an answer.

Something roared outside. A smear of white flashed in the sky. Then it vanished. Kind of like his whole fucking life, to be honest. Reminded him of how dark it was inside, where he resided.

How... *lonely* he was.

"Think anybody else... is in here...?"

If she heard him, she didn't acknowledge it. A bit tricky while she fought off the Process. And he fought off something plaguing his... his everything.

"Besides me?" he clarified.

But she didn't need to answer, either. He just... needed to get that off his chest. Off the Transistor, more like it.

"I've seen... *no one*."

Not entirely true. He spoke with a handful of folks, all victims of the Camerata, but those were their Traces. Mere ghosts to the humans they once were. Then they disappeared once the conversation ended. Where did *they* go, he wondered? Was it like him? Like *this*?

Where would *he* go, if anywhere, once it was all said and done?

"But."

Despite his mental spiraling, he pried his eyes open.

"When I look up."

Did exactly that.

"To where the sky should be."

And tried to remember every instance they shared, before every trace burned up, as well.

"I see *you*."

Before diving into another battle, Red looked at him. She cracked a weary smile, smoothing a hand over the Transistor. So he held on a little longer. He had to. For her.

Always for her.

Not everyone loved Red.

Some were indifferent to her music, preferring gritty vocals and ready-made beats to her siren songs. Some possessed no love for music in general, much like those who never cared for sports or sleek cars or tailored outfits. Some harbored jealousy, because how *dare* she become a sensation within Cloudbank with little to no effort.

And then there were some who hated everything she represented, for one reason or another. He never bothered to stop and ask. Kind of busy making sure those particular assholes stayed clear of Red.

One got too close. A random stranger on the streets while they walked outside after a photoshoot. Wasn't even waiting for them; all a matter of chance and coincidence. Right place, right time, and whatnot. Recognized Red instantly. He dismissed the jerk as some heckler, immediately shielding Red as they walked on.

But the guy followed. Nothing serious, in hindsight. Probably didn't have much of a plan beyond being obnoxious and abrasive. But he was loud enough for everyone in the immediate vicinity to hear what he thought of Red. Her music, her retreat from the stage, her so-called pathetic revival for the sake of attention, her posters needing more sex appeal for anyone to give a shit.

He set his jaw and balled his hands into fists at that last one.

"Ignore him," Red murmured. "He isn't worth the effort."

Maybe. But when that creep mentioned Red was better off posing in those lewd magazines? He wasn't going to stand there idly.

So he pivoted and nailed the jerk square in the jaw with a mean right hook.

Ringling flooded his ears. Shallow breaths rattled every bone in his body. Someone shouted—from behind, up ahead, everywhere. His target staggered and spat out blood. Was in the middle of flinging some mildly original curse when he punched again. A jab. A straight. Repeat. Quick, but lacking precision. Didn't matter. Just needed the guy to stay *down*.

But he didn't. The target hit as hard as he yelled. And he was light on his feet himself, but all his energy poured into offense. He should've known better; the Highrise Hammers lost twenty to four when ignoring defensive tactics. And he received four blows—one in the gut, another in the ribs, and two clean shots to the nose—before authorities swept in to break up the fight.

The ringing didn't stop. It persisted, grew *louder*. Blood poured from his nose and soaked his shirt. Stars crackled in his vision, but he found Red looming over him, fear paling her expression.

Not his finest moment.

He dismissed whatever medical attention was on the way. He didn't need it. Also didn't need to humor any reporters who'd inevitably swoop in like vultures. He... he didn't need to burden Red with his incompetence, his outbursts, his fucking *useless* existence. But it always happened like that, huh? Whether it was an ID scanner or a social gathering, it made no difference; his luck would run out and cause more damage than good.

So he marched off and away from Red. He found himself in the previous building—where the photoshoot occurred—and stormed into the bathroom. He could clean himself up. Hell, he'd been resourceful enough this far. And definitely not the first busted nose he had to realign. Hurt something fierce, but... yeah. He could... he *needed* to....

Another splash of water against his face and he screamed into his palms before collapsing on the tile floor. At least he was alone to wallow in his misery. Temporarily, anyways. Some suits would waltz in and have a shock when seeing that bloody shit stain of a mess sniveling in the corner.

Someone *did* walk in, locking the door behind them. Distinct clicks approached. Those heels peeking into view... he recognized them.

But he recognized Red a mile away.

“What are you doing?” he asked in between sobs.

Red grabbed a handful of towels to run under warm water. “What’s it look like?”

He scoffed. “I’m not worth the effort—”

“Yes, you *are*.”

She joined him on the floor to clean up his injury. And he let her. He'd let her do *anything*, in all fairness.

“I told you to leave him be,” Red said after rinsing the towel.

“It’s part of my job. To protect you.”

“*That* was different.” She knelt again, sopped up dried blood again. “You instigated that.”

Yeah. Yeah, he did, huh?

“Not much different from those who started rioting,” he admitted, out of shame more than anything.

“Maybe. It felt... personal.”

He swallowed. “You’re not going to hide from the public again, are you?”

No response. She continued to dab his wound.

“Should probably give you my resignation,” he muttered.

“You’re *what*?”

“I’m supposed to protect you, Red. Not... cause a fucking *scene* on the streets. You’d be better off without me. One less thing to worry about, yeah? Someone else can do a better job than I have at keeping you out of harm’s—”

The towel fell. Tender hands cupped his face. The words hitched in his throat and died as Red drew closer, tilted her head, and sealed her lips over his own.

She was... soft. Very soft. Impossibly soft and sweet and gentle and then gone as swiftly as she eased in. Right then? A broken nose was the least of his worries; a heart attack would sooner be the death of him.

“You,” she purred, her thumb stroking the edge of his mouth, “have done more for me than any single person has done in my entire life. Not only as a bodyguard or a business partner or a fan.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I accepted a bodyguard on the strong recommendation from my publicist. But I kept *you*—” She rested her forehead against his. “—because you didn’t treat me as Red the Songstress or Red the Celebrity. Just... Red. Me. The person.” She coughed up an airy laugh despite the tears. “And *that* makes me want to sing the most.”

He didn’t resign. He ended up seizing the juncture at her jaw and neck to answer with a suffocating kiss.

She groaned into him and he parted his lips. She straddled his lap and he tangled a hand in her hair. She devoured him like water amidst a desert and he withstood the dull ache in his wounds to kiss her again and again and again and again. She kissed him back and he smiled. She did everything he thought was strictly reserved for his dreams and he hoped he never woke up.

She asked him to stay—as her bodyguard, as a friend, as something *far* more—and he said he’d go anywhere she went.

She lost her voice, but Red remained creative when communicating her thoughts.

[Hey. It’s me. It’s me. Are you still there? Answer me.]

Amidst his stupor, he noticed the text on the OVC terminal. Not a comment directed at the latest news posting, but... to him.

“Red, I... what?”

It hurt to talk, to think, to do much of anything.

[Look we’re going to get ourselves out of this OK?]

“Okay,” he sighed out, lacking conviction. Tough to compete with a drive like Red’s, though.
“Okay, I... yeah.”

Text disappeared. New ones formed.

[Hold on you just try to hold on alright?]

“I’m trying,” he said and meant it. “I’m trying.”

Damn it, he *really* was and it still wasn’t enough.

Before he slipped into nothingness, one last message reached him.

[I’m going to find the thing that’s doing this and I’m going to break its heart.]

Girl after his own heart.

“Go get ‘em,” he slurred. “I believe you.”

Because she always thought ahead, always struck first, always stood her ground. A better fighter than she was—when he *could* fight. So he left his fate in her hands. Whatever happened? Happened.

The specifics eluded him, blurry and distant as he floated within the Transistor, but when the haze lifted, he woke up in her arms.

“Hi.”

She smiled, blowing out a shaky breath. Damn, what a relief it was to see her face.

“Thanks. For whatever you did back there.”

A part of him wanted to stay like that—in her arms while the world went to shit—but he tried talking Red out of pursuing the Camerata once. No luck there. Why try again? If anything, she had more incentive to fight now.

All he could do was cheer her on.

Things returned to normal since that fistfight, that *kiss*. Red continued her work and he secured her safety. Whatever strings she pulled to sweep that mess on the streets out of sight was beyond him. Sometimes it was better not knowing. Same with their newly forged bond. No need to complicate matters.

But he *did* know one thing.

He loved her. So much that it eviscerated him, at times. And she loved him, too. It was evident in her lingering gaze, her fleeting touch as they walked by each other, her insistence on calling him by the name that wasn't his, yet also *was* hers. Nothing provocative. All simple gestures that could be nothing more than friends expressing appreciation. A hand on his shoulder. A smile at his remark. A thank you for his help.

And when they retreated from the public eye and behind closed doors, they ceased to restrain themselves.

He explored, memorized, and worshiped every inch of her body. He admired her many gowns on the floor as they headed to the bedroom—or anywhere with a sturdy surface, depending on their patience. He lost himself in her perfumed scent and her tender embrace and her plush skin dappled in neon lights and freckles and her endless warmth, begging for him to plunge deeper and deeper. He lost track of time while indulging in her and never learned from his mistakes. He found new reasons to love Red, from how she relished riding him to how she *looked* at him before nuzzling between his thighs to how she sounded far more divine bent over the couch than she did on stage.

He wondered how he possibly got as far as he had in life without Red there.

“Hey.”

Sunlight crawled into the bedroom. A mix of sweat and sex stained the air. Pristine bedsheets tangled in their legs as she snuggled against him, tracing his clavicle. The way she was now—messy hair, no makeup, wearing nothing but a smile—sent his heart aflutter. Didn't matter how often he frequented her place and woke up to that sight. Always felt like the first time.

“Hi,” he said, kissing her forehead.

It wasn't very professional of them, but once dressed and out the door, they maintained the illusion that nothing happened the other night. But something *did* happen. Again and again. And he looked forward to more nights with Red. Not just to hear her cry out his name—that *was* a nice perk—but to feel something other than mind-numbing indifference towards the world. They shared dinners and bottles of wine, then late-night chats with heartfelt confessions, and also walks in a park and limousine rides to her place. They shared each other: mind, body, and soul.

He felt *alive* when Red was present. How could he go back to his old ways—without her?

“Go ahead. It's open.”

The break room amidst the archives must've been a welcomed sight for Red; she *had* been pushing nonstop since arriving at the Empty Set, never mind when everything with the

Camerata went down. Not to mention she did all that while lugging him around. She deserved a break.

Deserved some privacy, too.

She shrugged off his jacket and hung it from the Transistor's handle. Backing into the room, she winked and wiggled her fingers at him. Such a taunt was typically used when she had stolen one of his button-down shirts and neglected some appointment they *had* to go to within an hour. He gave in to her—either standing or on his knees—and, somehow, they arrived on schedule. Together. As singer and bodyguard.

It was rare for them to be separated, to be alone.

He didn't *like* being alone. Especially now. Especially after the night they had.

His world dimmed as Red entered the break room. Had he been present—in human form—he might have suggested breaking in said break room. You know, let it live up to its namesake. Have a little fun to spite the Camerata for putting them through hell. But he couldn't. He was... floating inside that blasted thing, unable to do shit, except add his commentary to fend off boredom, to ease his anxiety, to confirm that yes, he was still there. Somehow.

Alone with his thoughts meant stewing in the past and the future. If only he had done something sooner to prevent this. If only he was in his old body, so he could strangle Grant and Asher himself. If only a million other things transpired instead of the million mistakes that already occurred.

If only. What a pleasant lie that was. Passed the time, at least.

And Red came back. Of course she did. That whisper amidst his thoughts was wrong. She *always* came back. Why wouldn't she?

They started this together, so they'd end it together.

"Can't believe a light rainstorm lost to *this*."

Red chuckled as they admired the sunset from her balcony. "What's wrong with clear skies?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. Same with a bit of rain."

"Perhaps the people want to enjoy a dry evening."

That squeezed out a bitter laugh. "Yeah. Figures."

"Do you always vote for rain, then?"

He hesitated. His mouth opened and closed several times, like a gaping fish out of water. Nothing emerged.

Red furrowed her brow. “Blue? What’s wrong?”

Where was he to start?

“I was only teasing—”

“I know,” he said, then winced at how keen his tongue was. “I-I know....”

They stood in silence as the sun descended and skyscrapers flickered to life. Whatever won in the daily polls came into effect then. All the changes everyone voted for, by popular demand.

Everyone but him.

“Hey.” Red held his cheek and turned him to face her. “If something’s troubling you... you can tell me. You know that, right?”

He knew that and more. Tch, and to think he loved her. How dare he bask in her presence while withholding the one bit of information he kept a secret his whole life. But that life—his pitiful existence on the fringes of Cloudbank’s glory—held more meaning since *she* walked into it.

So maybe... just *maybe*... she’d give him a chance.

And he told her. Plain and simple. No sugar-coating or exaggerating. About his lack of Selections, his fears when using terminals, his inability to live like everyone else, all of it. Almost like he was a mistake. The fact the administrators had zero record of him was proof. As far as everyone was concerned, he didn’t exist. He never *would*. No point in fixing something that wasn’t there—and he made the mistake of trying several times *long* ago.

But *why*? Why did some people have green eyes instead of brown? Why did some excel in arts over sciences? Maybe it was predetermined at birth. Or decided in a poll. Damn it, he was so *sick* of polls. If change—true change—mattered to people, then how come no one bothered to vote for anything other than their surroundings? Just a vapid game of dress-up. Empathy towards others outside their bubble was too much effort. Easier to look away. Ignore it. Cover it up with another pretty building than *deal* with it. Slap a bow on top for good measure. Everyone will forget come next week. You’ll see. Happens every time.

He braced for Red’s outrage. Disgust, maybe. Or a glimpse of terror. He deserved that and more for keeping it a secret from her.

He wasn’t prepared, however, for her hug, her compassion, her acceptance.

Quiet tears spilled from his eyes. Slowly, he embraced Red twice as hard. They slipped inside eventually, when the skies no longer glittered gold, but she never pried for more information. Not unless he brought it up—every instance he counted on one hand. But she *did* insist on paying every bill, on reserving dinners in her name, on taking the initiative to include him in ways that were once inaccessible.

And whenever a poll for the weather popped up, she always picked the rain.

After overriding the locks and disposing of a slew of Process jerks, the last stop in their journey was around the corner. Finally, they could tear into those Camerata scumbags. Give them a taste of their own medicine. Maybe wrench information out of them regarding *why* he was the way he was. If anyone knew, an administrator would know. Whatever harsh truths they held, he was ready for them. From how Red clutched the Transistor's handle, he imagined she was, too.

But it didn't matter. Grant and Asher were dead before they arrived.

Red gasped. He viewed the scene through the window of his prison. Just stared for a moment, at a loss for words.

And then.

"Cowards."

That single word clawed up his throat, tasted bitter on his tongue, and inundated him with shivers up on leaving his lips. Like coughing up a hunk of food he choked on. Rage was the catalyst, sure, but something else forged that outburst. A bit of regret, no doubt. Even a dash of amusement, because wow, how much worse could their day get?

But at the core of it? The foundations that built the single *thing* he uttered? Nothing but guilt.

It wasn't long ago that he told Red to skip town and forget about Cloudbank. He spent most of his life evading every problem he faced, simply to stay off the radar and keep a permanent low profile. And he remembered that trance he drowned in when The Spine showed up and the baseless panic that sent him spiraling when Red used the break room and disappeared after the incident at the Empty Set and....

He didn't say it to Asher and Grant; he said it at himself.

"So that's it?"

In a sense, yes. With that chapter, anyways. Still a lot more ground to cover.

Red scoured the vicinity before they left. Swiped their Traces, too. Even learned some details regarding the Process without trying. And he had been *so* thrilled to make them talk, only to have them... give it all up. Like that.

He thought about that as they flew west on a Process nimbus. Asher's final words... he did it for Grant, for his lover. The waver in his voice said enough, let alone the actual meaning in his words. And he said he would sooner take an eternity in the Transistor than be without him. Got his wish, at least. Not exactly a happily ever after, but....

He also said *see you in the Country*. Everyone did, at some point. To a loved one or a rival. During happy hour or a funeral. A promise and a lie.

And Red typed her response, echoing him.

He thought of that. A lot, honestly. And then he thought about Asher and Grant, dead on arrival... and wondered what *he* would've done, had he been in their shoes.

On the eve of her album release, Red announced concert dates at the Empty Set. Tickets sold out in minutes—a new record for Red and any musician. Within a month, she would sing for the masses, both old and new material.

If all went accordingly, there wouldn't be another incident.

But Red was prepared. She doubled her team to work behind the scenes and turn that dream into a reality. They hired stagehands to build set pieces to accompany Red's performance along with innovative designers to create merch and marketing material. And Red had her loyal bodyguard—a long-term investment that paid off in every sense of the word—following her like a shadow.

Out of all the new recruits, however, he wasn't fond of a particular addition.

Sybil Reisz flaunted an impressive resume of successful events she coordinated, but something about her... didn't sit well with him. Like a soda that was sickeningly sweet. Maybe others stomached her aggressive cheer and enthusiasm; he simply hoped she remembered to breathe between sentences.

Also didn't help that Sybil checked in with Red frequently. More so than *he* did, which was already excessive, even for a lady of her status. Whenever he took his eyes off of Red for two seconds, Sybil magically popped in. Always smiling, always purring endless praise. She stood too close for his liking. Sometimes she touched Red's arm. *A lot*. And when Sybil tucked a lock of hair behind Red's ear, he couldn't bite his tongue any longer.

"Why the hell is she here?" he asked before rehearsal one evening.

Red looked at his reflection in the vanity mirror. "Who?"

"That *Sybil*."

"She's helping to coordinate the—"

"Concert. *I know*." He approached from behind, steadying his breaths. "What I *don't* know is if we can trust her."

"We? Did something happen?"

“Aside from showing up and being her oh-so-charming self? Not really.”

Red turned to him, a blend of confusion and disappointment pulling at her features. “Blue, I’ve known her since Traverson Hall.”

“An old friend, then?”

She shrugged. “More than an acquaintance.”

“Sybil certainly acts familiar with you.”

“She’s like that with everyone.”

No, she’s not, he wanted to say, but hesitated.

“Look.” Red stood and wove her hands into his, delicate fingers testing the spaces in between. “Sybil has a superb reputation when it comes to running these events. And she *loves* people. That’s her thing. She’ll do whatever she can to ensure everyone is happy.”

His nostrils flared with an inhale. “You believe that?”

“I *know* that. Her work with the student clubs at Traverson Hall was already impeccable. Knowing she’s improved since then... yeah, she’ll make sure the night is perfect.”

“Right.” He nodded and released a frail, yet coarse laugh. “I... yeah, sorry. Shouldn’t have doubted—”

Red tightened her hold on his hands. “But if something *does* happen? Something that endangers anyone here? You let me know, okay?”

He licked his lips, nodding. “Okay.”

Her smile returned and Red stole a smoldering kiss before stepping out of her dressing room. Of course Sybil was down the hall looking for her. Of course she looped an arm around Red’s and led her to the stage. He tried to ignore the sentiment twisting his stomach as he followed them.

He imagined Sybil tried to ignore him, as well, always looking over her shoulder—at *him*—with deadly disgust for a split second before snapping back to her usual, cheery self.

In all his life, he had never visited Fairview. Neither did the vast majority of Cloudbank. Would’ve been nice to see it before the Process bleached every surface. Also could’ve done without Royce Bracket and his pretentious ramblings.

At least the weather was nice. Light rain, per Red’s decision. No mass voting necessary.

As they wove through the maze-like streets, he pondered on what would happen once they reached Royce. He called for a truce, a solution to their problem. Sounded perfect, but some plans looked ideal on paper. What did he *want*, though? An offer that alluring didn't come without a price.

But he trusted Red. If she intended to hear Royce out, then so be it. If she accepted, that was fine by him.

If she had to relinquish the Transistor and....

And.

Say goodbye.

Well.

It was temporary. Nothing final.

He couldn't protect her anymore—even if he wasn't stuck inside the Transistor—but he could believe in her, trust her, support her. He had for some time. That much hadn't changed.

But still.

“You know what you have to do.”

He told her.

“I love you.”

As a reminder.

“You know that, right?”

As a promise.

“It's time.”

As an undeniable truth.

“Bye for now.”

Because after everything they endured?

“But I will see you again.”

After all the late nights and insecurities and orders from Junction Jan's and cowardice and music recordings and denial and gala appearances and terror and fleeting touches and shock and stolen kisses in between appointments and elation and mornings waking up to each other and absolute comfort?

“I *will* see you again.”

He gladly accepted the recent turn of events if it meant he could be at her side.

“I know you can hear me.”

Somehow.

“I won’t let you go.”

They’d find a way.

“Stay with me.”

And find each other.

“Stay with me....”

No matter what.

A year ago, one of Red’s performances was cut short, due to a violent reaction from the audience. Now, she prepared for her first concert since that incident. And she was prepared. Everyone involved was. Not a damn light was out of place in the Empty Set that night and a full house awaited her seductive voice to serenade them.

He also waited for her backstage, right outside of her dressing room.

The foundations thrummed from the audience’s chatter, matching the beat of his pulse. He palmed a small velvet box like a quarterfielder. Breathe. Any second and she’d walk out. And when she did, he would—

“Hey.”

The door opened. He shoved the box into a pocket and stood tall. And Red? She always looked beautiful, but *damn*. She was something else in that gold number, complete with a feathered collar.

“H-hi,” he said, a hair above a whisper.

Red smirked. “So?” She twirled to show off her layered gown. “How do I look?”

“Like a goddess,” he replied without thinking.

“Oh stop!” She whacked his shoulder with a laugh. Took every ounce of willpower to *not* hug her right then and there. “You spoil me.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “Only telling the truth.”

The stage manager poked out from a corner, beckoning for Red. Showtime. A few more minutes and she'd be in her element. He escorted her backstage, like any proper bodyguard would. Had a few minutes to spare, too. Not much, but....

It was all the time he needed.

“Hey, um....” He slowed to stillness, keeping his voice low. “Do you....”

Red paused alongside him, quiet and curious.

He rubbed his neck and stared at her boots poking past the gown's hem. “You want to grab something to eat after the show?”

“To eat?” she echoed.

“Y-yeah, figured you might... be hungry and want something.” Wow, he sounded pathetic. “Just the... just the two of us.” Like a nervous wreck. “Me and you. Together.” Like someone who didn't deserve her, really.

Red chuckled and bent at the hip to meet his gaze. “What's this all about? You make it sound like we've never swung by Junction Jan's after a twelve-hour rehearsal.”

“No, I know, but—” He sucked on his teeth. “The thing is... that I—” A wince, then, “I love going there with you. Anywhere, honestly, but....”

Someone in the sweep distance called out a countdown. Sixty seconds until the show was live.

“Whatever happens after tonight.”

He plucked out the box. Almost fumbled it.

“Whether you keep singing and I watch from back here.”

He held it up. Cracked it open.

“Or... something else entirely.”

And revealed a gilded triangular ring, containing a single ruby.

“I want to spend every moment of it with *you*, Red.”

The house lights died. The audience roared with cheers and applause. He missed Red's reaction before darkness overwhelmed them. Just his luck, too. Figured that he blew it on scoring that engagement ring—the one time he needed his credits to process, all amassed from every paycheck while under his current contract, and it actually *did*—so why push it further?

But he heard her heels clicking, felt the weight shift in his palms, and saw the faintest glimmer against her hand, despite the shadows, before she stepped into him and *melted*

against his mouth.

And he embraced Red, accepting her answer in the form of a kiss they typically shared in the bedroom.

“Think they’ll have Supremo Deluxe after midnight?” she whispered upon his lips.

He blinked, then snorted. “I hope not. Sea Monster’s the best.”

“Hmm, I don’t know,” she teased in a sing-song manner.

Another countdown warning echoed backstage. Another fierce kiss, just because. They pried apart and she approached the microphone and the audience fell silent and the spotlights fell upon Red and he watched her from backstage, smiling from beginning to end.

And she cradled the microphone with her left hand, showcasing her engagement ring front and center.

Since the Transistor absorbed him, he suspended in an abyss. Nothingness.

Then, it was white. Blindingly so.

Eventually, color percolated his vision.

So did Red.

“We got away.”

How? No clue, but that was water under the bridge.

“Red, we got away!”

She panted while holding him. Nothing humored her lips otherwise.

“Now you’re here. And me.”

Beyond Red, that stark white consumed the city they knew and loved.

“And... that’s it.”

Because it was gone. Claimed by the Process. They survived, but had they really won?

He shrugged off that unease. Besides, a blank canvas meant she could do *anything*. The Transistor was her brush, after all. It belonged to her. *Obeded* her. A simple hum and the white blocks crumbled, revealing the bridge to Fairview.

He fired off suggestions—where to go next. The options paralleled her imagination: infinite and vivid. Whatever she envisioned for Cloudbank? Consider it done. Red was in charge. More powerful than the administrators, than every poll result in the city’s collective history.

And she ignored it to head back to where it started, where his corpse remained.

Red couldn’t restore him. Or any of the lost lives. But he was still *there*, just... yeah.

That was fine, right? They’d figure it out. Make it work. They always did.

Apparently, she didn’t want to settle for that.

“Red...?”

She hugged the Transistor—and let go.

“H-hey, what are you doing?”

From his narrow window, he watched her sit beside his dead body, snuggling in like it was another lazy morning.

“Wait, wait, wait—”

She didn’t, though.

“Don’t do this. *Please*—”

As the Transistor soared above, aiming directly at her, he swore he saw her smiling. Like she always did. For *him*.

One last time.

“If you do this....”

But there was no point in convincing Red otherwise. He knew her better by now. She always had a plan. And when she set her eyes on something?

Well.

For all the time spent protecting her from the world and its perils, he couldn’t save her from destroying herself.

Red received a standing ovation when the curtains fell. The crowd boomed louder when it lifted and she performed an encore. A handful of lucky VIP patrons met her backstage

afterwards for signed posters and photoshoots. Everyone involved—the Empty Set crew and Red’s team—toasted to a successful opening night with champagne flutes raised high.

Once the revelry died down, all that remained was them.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, shuffling closer and smiling. “Hi.”

And Red smiled, too, brighter than the sun. “Hey.”

He welcomed her into his arms, against his lips. “You knocked it out of the park tonight.”

“Think so?”

“Mmhmm.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “If I wasn’t a fan before, I’m definitely one now.”

She laughed. “Is that so?”

“Yeah.” And he proved it with a slow, yet ardent kiss.

As much as he wished to push further—maybe help Red out of her gown and put on their own private show in front of that vanity mirror—a growling stomach interrupted them.

“Hungry?” he teased.

“*Famished*. And *you* promised me flatbread, mister!”

He sure did, huh? “Need to change first?”

“I’ll pass. Don’t want to waste another second. They might close once I swap outfits!”

He chuckled, both at her logic and the mental image of Red strutting into Junction Jan’s in a number like that. “Fair enough.”

They ambled across the stage; the rear exit was located on the other side of the Empty Set. Junction Jan’s wasn’t far, either. Couldn’t wait to loosen his collar, roll up his sleeves, plop down in a booth, and—

“Ah, *shit*.”

Red skidded to a halt. So did he. “Something wrong?”

She wrinkled her nose. “My clutch. I gave it to my assistant. And I don’t know where she—”

“Left it in storage. Saw her tuck it in there for safekeeping.” He jerked his chin in the opposite direction. “Locked it up, but I can fetch it real quick.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.” The door kept unlocking whenever he passed it. Might as well capitalize on that.

Red released his hand and smiled. “Thanks, Blue.”

He didn't realize that would be the last time he heard her voice.

His footsteps echoed into the rafters while jogging back. The lock flashed and chimed upon his arrival, as expected. He hummed a tune—the melody of her song about paper boats, his favorite one—while rummaging through the darkened space. Once he located the elusive clutch, he tossed it in his palms like a ball, then sauntered to the stage.

And froze.

The murmurs there... that wasn't Red. It was Sybil. And someone else.

His heart and stomach traded places.

The ghost lights barely illuminated the figures confronting Red: four of them—cornering her in a semicircle. The older man of the group brandished... something. A sword-like object. Then it floated midair. And aimed at Red.

He dropped the clutch and bolted ahead.

Adrenaline overrode every function in his body. Not even regrets nor fury fueled him. Just panic. Pure *panic*. As a bodyguard, who was tasked with one job and somehow fucked that up. As a fan, who refused to let another violent outburst drive her out of the spotlight. But mostly as her lover, who would do anything to save her.

Even at the expense of his life.

He made it, though. Vaulted in front of her, accepting a strike intended for Red. He expected pain and the astonishment on their faces—especially the rage fracturing Sybil's saccharine guise—but he didn't expect... whatever the hell was happening to him.

His vision didn't blur. It *flickered*. Like one of the monitors at Junction Jan's during another home game. Static. Distorted images. Glitched pixels that bled and broke and rerendered his surroundings. The sounds around him lost audio quality, akin to an old radio. Nothing but white noise—a nightmarish kaleidoscope of shapes and colors, of zeros and ones, of walls of text warning about a breach.

Then nothing.

Absolutely.

Nothing.

Had he died? Finally gone to the Country?

Or was this... something worse?

A gasp, a shiver, then a fresh bout of panic.

“What... where...? How... no.”

Darkness consumed him. He floated there, suspended and helpless, and disregarded his own fate to locate *her*.

The funniest thing happened, in light of Red's actions. Or perhaps it was the catalyst. Because after acclimating to the void that was the Transistor? It changed.

It *brightened*.

He squinted against the noon sun, raising a hand to shield his eyes. From there, he witnessed blue skies, a field of wheat, a rustic cabin along the edge, and—

No. It couldn't be.

He hitched his breath and blinked. Maybe it was a figment of his imagination, tormenting him as he truly died. But it wasn't that. It was real. All of it.

Red was real and alive and standing before him and *smiling*.

His lips curled up—sheepish, yet in awe. “Hi.”

A breeze caught in her hair. She tucked the loose ringlets aside, looking nowhere but at him.

But the best part?

“Hey.”

Was hearing her voice again.

Something burst free. A laugh? A *sob*? Hard to say. Tricky to focus on her when tears blurred his vision. But the distance between them shrank and he spun with her until she lifted off the ground and she laughed alongside him, then wept, and he held on tight, because so did she, and he wasn't certain if he could ever let go again.

“You're here,” he said, a touch shaky. “I... I don't even know where here is, but—” He cupped her cheek and she nuzzled into his palm, kissing his wrist. “You're okay. You're *okay*. You—”

“*We* are okay.”

Yeah. Yeah, they were. No arguing that. And he dipped in to seal his lips over hers to confirm the notion. She didn't fade like a ghost; she *moaned* into him, dangled arms around his neck, and returned the gesture in kind.

“Now what?” he asked when they pried apart, when their lips rubbed raw.

Red reeled back to examine their new home. “Beats me. I’m not in a rush.”

“That makes two of us.”

Her eyes widened. “Is that a farm by the cottage?”

“Maybe. Can’t say I’ve—”

“Oh! Look! I see cows! Oh, how precious! Let’s go say hello!”

Even if he possessed zero desire to see said cows—which was impossible; who didn’t love cows?—Red was already dragging him to their destination. There were, in fact, cows. Plus goats. And sheep! Chickens and ducks, too. Just like in all the bedtime stories depicting the Country.

There was that cottage, as well. Big enough for the two of them and more. Fully furnished and decorated to their tastes, as if to welcome them home. Red beelined for the kitchen, whipping the fridge and cupboards open. He laughed as she tore into a bag of crayfish chips with her teeth to shove into her mouth. He laughed harder when he went to grab a handful for himself, only to have Red recoil and clutch the bag defensively.

She yielded, though, and shared; it was no Sea Monster, but the briny morsels hit the spot. She also yielded to him while washing her hands after, when he slipped in from behind to kiss her neck. Reuniting with her like that—touching her, inhaling her decadent scent, *feeling* her tremble against his featherlight lips—was a reminder that yes, this was real.

They didn’t reach the bedroom. Then again, there wasn’t even an attempt to search for it. Not when Red wrapped her legs around him and *looked* at him like that. And he wasn’t stopping her when she trailed to the waistband of his pants and tugged at his belt.

Instead, he moaned into her hair. “I love you.”

And Red paused to gaze into his eyes, then stole a tender kiss, sharply contrasting her desperate motions. “I love you.”

They reminded each other of that, verbally and physically. It was in how she clung to him while he pinned her against the kitchen counter. It was in how he brewed them coffee while she washed up. It was in how they watched the sunset in silence, then marveled at the infinite stars gracing the skies—familiar, yet wildly different. It was in how they retired to bed, how Red pounced him once more, how he marveled at her looming above and basking in moonlight, how they fell asleep tangled up in bedsheets and each other.

How the first thing he saw when he woke up—because he *did* wake up again—was her. Right beside him. In the flesh and not in a dream.

He smiled and traced the length of her spine. The sun crept across her face and she stirred awake. Eyes fluttered open—to him.

“Hey.”

That sapphire stare entranced him. Memories of Asher's final words struck him, about preferring an eternity in the Transistor, if it meant staying with the one he loved. Back then, he didn't want to dwell on it, to *admit* it, but....

"Hi."

Yeah. Blue understood that now, because he felt the same way.

End Notes

I first played Transistor at PAX East, shortly before it launched. The weekend had been terrible for me, but playing that demo was like finding a light in the darkness. Upon playing the game on its release, that light bloomed into something even brighter.

When I received my Yuletide assignment this year (for Transistor's 10th anniversary too!), I decided to replay the game to refreshen my memory. Revisiting Transistor—something that was immensely formative for a younger me—felt like finding a box of childhood keepsakes in an attic. I know the goal of Yuletide is for me to write you a thing you requested, but honestly? You requesting this game and thus compelling me to replay and re-experience why I fell in love to begin with? That's also a huge gift to me and I cannot thank you enough for that, sweet recipient o' mine.

I hope you enjoyed this love letter to Transistor as much as I have bringing it to life. Happy Yuletide! 💕💕

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