

Save()

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Save()

by [AveryNeedsBravery](#)

Summary

“Well...” Royce produces a lighter from one of the myriad pockets in his coat and lights the ever-present cigarette hanging from his lips. He takes a deep breath. “Well, *Grant*... it seems that it's gone—”

“*Clearly.*”

“So *I'm* going back to Fairview to figure out exactly what went wrong and to see what I can do to *shut it down* before it... slips the leash... as it were. As it is.”

“Royce, wait, what do you *mean* ‘shut it down’? What do *we* do?”

“Do what you please, Asher, what you please. Because if I can’t shut it down... We’ll *all* be shut down.”

Notes

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

Chapter 1

[*Trace Data detected...*]

execute{command[Integrate(Trace Data)]}

[*ERROR: (Trace Data) Incomplete or Missing*]

execute{command[Integrate(Trace Data)]}

[*ERROR: (Trace Data) Incomplete or Missing*]

execute{command[Collect(Trace Data)]}

[*extrapolating Trace Data from given sample*]

[...]

[*command[Collect(Trace Data)]complete*]

execute{command[Integrate(Trace Data)]}

[*deriving Function from Trace Data...*]

[...]

[*ERROR: (Trace Data) Corrupted*]

[...]

[*command[Integrate(Trace Data)]complete*]

[*Function Derived*]

[*Function designated: Save()*]

[*ERROR: (Function) incomplete*]

execute{Function [Save()]}

[...]

[*Save() successfully executed*]

[*MULTIPLE ERRORS encountered: Initiating Reboot*]

[*User(Grant Kendrell) successfully logged out*]

[Have a Nice Day :D]

<<0>>

The group stares down in silent sullen horror at the suddenly vacant air between them.

“Royce... ” Grant grinds out, tension (*fear*, rather, if he reads it correctly, and he always does) coating every syllable he manages to extract from the name. “I’m going to need you to explain to me exactly *what* the fuck just happened and how we’re going to fix it.” He speaks slowly, carefully, making sure each word washes over the conspirators in stark contradiction with the grave importance of the quickly-mounting disaster developing before them.

“Well...” Royce produces a lighter from one of the myriad pockets in his coat and lights the ever-present cigarette hanging from his lips. He takes a deep breath. “Well, *Grant*... it seems that it's gone—”

“*Clearly*. ”

“So *I*’m going back to Fairview to figure out exactly what went wrong and to see what I can do to *shut it down* before it... slips the leash... as it were. As it is.”

“Royce, wait, what do you *mean* ‘shut it down’? What do *we* do?”

“Do what you please, Asher, what you please. Because if I can’t shut it down... We’ll *all* be shut down.”

“Royce, *please*,” Sybil, this time. She grabs his arm before he can turn to leave, pulling him around to face his colleagues. “Help us understand, let us *help*.”

Royce looks down at Sybil, at where her hand clutches at his sleeve. He snaps his gaze between the other members before returning to her. His expression softens, sighing and shaking off her grasp. “Okay. Okay...” He stops, clearly in thought, trying to frame his thinking for the others. “So... what’s new? What’s changed?”

“Royce,” Asher cuts in, “this is hardly the time for sardonics. We can’t all keep up with you, but you don’t have to be an ass.”

Royce, for his part, tries *very* hard to not condescend him. “ With the *integration*, Asher. *Clearly* this has never happened before, unprecedented in the truest sense, really, so what was different this time around?”

Grant speaks up, “Could it be the location? Interference from the surroundings? There’s high power equipment all over the Set. Maybe some kind of magnetic cross-pollution from the speakers?”

“Maybe at full power it would damage smaller, less secure devices, but not the Transistor. Not the Transistor... The safeguards I put in place wouldn’t... *couldn’t* fail. Couldn’t fail.” Royce blows smoke into the air between them with a huff.

“Humble,” Asher grumbles.

“But true nonetheless. True nonetheless. What else?”

“He fought back. We had the element of surprise when it came to the others, but he had already supposedly suspected us *before* we cornered him after a show. Could he have... resisted it somehow?”

Royce looked at Asher, dumbfounded. “You’re suggesting this man’s *suspicion* and *willpower* were so great that it induced a cascade failure in *the* most powerful computer known to man? I know you’re a journalist, Asher, but this isn’t some human-interest feel-good story. It’s a crisis.”

“Perhaps so, but that doesn’t mean he’s not onto something.” Sybil taps her chin, looking thoughtful. “He was paranoid, we all knew this, nominally, but... when I tried to find him on... well, *any* networks or listings, he wasn’t there. No job history, no bank accounts or activity—”

A gasp. “*Oh my god.*”

“He doesn’t even appear to have any *census* data.”

“*Oh no.*”

Royce’s entire rail of thought came to a crashing halt. He turns, bearing down on Sybil. “He... *what?*”

She does not yield under his livid gaze. “I said he doesn’t appear in census data. Would that have done it?”

“That *did* it. That’s the answer. That’s the answer, alright.”

“Royce, how? Elaborate.”

He turns his gaze to Grant at the intrusion. “The reason we’re in this situation, the reason we’re going through any of this trouble *at all* is to generate Functions for the Transistor. To improve its potential as our tool, our *brush*. The Transistor... Integrates our candidates, and uses their Trace Data to derive a Function. This Data is cross-referenced with things like network presence,” he gestures to Sybil, “account information, Selections, and *census data*.”

“He never made any Selections—”

“Of course he didn’t!” Royce shouts down further discussion, not minding which of the other four offered that final detail, that final nail in the coffin.

He stops, smooths his hair, breathes in the smoke of his cigarette. “Ladies, gentlemen... It seems we have decided upon the perfect candidate, the *only* candidate, with which we could *fuck* ourselves over.”

Another moment of grave silence hangs over the group. Having gathered himself, Royce continues.

“With nothing to match the Trace Data with from which to derive a Function... that it breached the capabilities of the Transistor’s programming is no wonder... No wonder at all.”

Asher steps forward, commanding the group's scattered attentions, “So it seems easy enough to me. We find the Transistor, fix whatever this... mistake broke, and carry on. Simple”

“No. Not simple. Actually, it’s quite severe.” Royce takes another drag of his cigarette, scanning his eyes across the four. “We just *lost* the only thing that holds the Process at bay. The *only* thing that limits its capabilities. I was being quite literal when I said it will slip the leash. Without it? It’s like... a wild dog, if you will. If you must.” He lets out a morbid half-laugh, eyes flicking up towards Sybil.

“Royce, I don’t believe the *gravity* of the situation escapes any of us,” Grant interjected, “but how do we fix this? If this shuts us down, we need to make sure this can’t be traced back to us—”

“I didn’t mean the *Camerata*, Grant... I meant Cloudbank. All of *Cloudbank*.”

A brief silence falls over the group, save Sybil’s small sound of despair. It rattles out through the Empty Set.

“So I’m going to Fairview. You can join me if you want to be in the way. You can go play PR if you think it will help. But without the Transistor—”

“Go. Fix this, then. Asher, keep this off the OVCs until he does. Grant, see what administrative overrides will lock this thing down. Sybil... let’s... stay here a moment. To cut off loose ends.” A sidelong withering glare at Royce, “In case anyone comes to see what the commotion was.” As she says Sybil’s name, she reaches down and gives her hand a white-knuckled squeeze.

“Last time I checked, you were in no place to give ord—”

Royce stomps out his cigarette, cutting off the impending tirade: “Red’s right, Grant. Let’s get it done. Get it over with.”

<<0>>

“There’s a Baudelaire at the private dock.”

“Darling—” she begins, a placation, before, “Wait, *what?*” Sybil stops her pacing in its tracks, the final clack of her pristine heels against the stage reverberating into the concert hall.

Red approaches her slowly, running her hands up Sybil’s arms to hold her by her shoulders. “We take it across the bay and get as far away from here as possible.”

“Red, what are you talking about? I thought you wanted— oh...” A contemplative look casts itself across her face. “But... What about Royce? And Asher? Surely you don’t want to *abandon* Grant, too, do you?”

Red sighs, pain and sympathy clear in her eyes, “This is... this is *bad*, Billie. Really bad. If Royce was right,” she breaks eye contact to quickly roll her eyes.

“Always is,” Sybil supplies, mimicking her friend’s self-assured deliberate cadence. They fall into a small bout of laughter before a terminal update rings out.

The sound sobers Red to the severity of the moment. She squeezes Sybil’s shoulders before she lets go, and takes a heavy breath before continuing. “It means Cloudbank and *everyone* in it is at risk. I love this city and its people. But... I *can’t* risk you. I have to make sure you’re safe, Billie, and I *know* you won’t let me stay behind alone—”

“Hell no.”

“So it has to be both of us... and it has to be now. The longer we wait the more danger we are in, the farther the Process... strays off its leash,” she puts her face in her hands, letting out a frustrated, angry cry. “I just... I just feel so *stupid!*”

“Goldwalk is going O.P.I.”

Red’s head snaps up, her hair falling somewhat out of place at the movement. “*What? Offline?*” She sees Sybil, staring down into her terminal, a look of dawning horror stretching across her face for the second time. “What do you mean *offline*?! Already?! How fast does this thing *move*?!” Panicked, she looks around the Empty Set, searching for red glossy eyes looking back. She seems to Sybil too much like a cornered animal for her to bear.

Red collapses inward. Sybil can see the exact moment she stops taking in the world around her. “This is my fault, this whole catastrophe is my fault. So many are gonna die this city will unravel and it’s all because of me—”

Sybil drops her parasol, reaching up to grasp Red’s face and running her thumbs across her cheeks, trying to ground her. “Darling, darling, what on *earth* are you talking about? How in the world is this on you?”

“This was *my* choice! I was the one who nominated him as a candidate and you *heard* what Royce said. It was because *he* was the problem. He was the problem and now this whole mess is because I wanted to get rid of him! Because his attention— because *he* was *inconvenient!* I should have— I should have *known* his ‘paranoia’ would have caused an issue!” She laughs, an odd stilted sort of noise, broken and wet.

Sybil pulls Red down, cradles her in her arms, putting her head on her shoulder. She runs a hand lightly through her hair, careful not to mess it up any more. “Red, darling, *how* could you have known? How? Royce hoards his knowledge of these things like some kind of dragon, he even breathes smoke,” she adds with a weak laugh, a desperate bid to break Red out of her spiral. “He kept his secrets so close to his chest there was no way you could have known it would cause an error—”

“Goddamn it, Royce I knew— I fucking *knew* it was way too fucking risky to even start screwing around with this stuff, and Royce— goddamn *Royce*— just *had* to insist he knew what he was doing, slicing into the very *fabric* of this city. All he really ever wanted to do was play *god*. I hope he’s fucking happy.” Red chokes off with a frightened furious shriek before letting out a deep sob, heaving her tears and gasping breaths into Sybil’s collar and holding her tight. Her knees give out under the weight of her dread and Sybil catches her, if only for a moment, before lowering her to the ground.

“It’s okay, darling, it’s alright. Just breathe for me, okay? In and out, yeah?” She embraces Red, burying her into her neck, to make sure she can’t see the Set around them as the walls slowly leak their color into the same white as her dress, to make sure she can’t notice the encroaching red eyes peering out of the corners of the stage.

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Grant and Asher Kendrell sit in their Highrise loft, one of the top floors of Bracket Towers. Asher works over his terminal, furiously typing away, his mouth set in a rigid grimace. Grant paces back and forth behind his husband, issuing directives to administrative assistants on calls that seem to never end. The air itself feels cold and heavy, taut between them like a razor wire ready to snap and eviscerate anything nearby for its trouble.

“And make *doubly* sure that relocations have started for the affected areas. Nobody breathing can be left in the offline districts.” Grant hangs up his call, tossing his terminal onto the table next to where Asher is sitting. He himself is not far behind, pulling out a chair and taking a seat, resting his head in his hands and sighing heavily.

“How’s the public?” He asks, dry and self-aware.

“Oh just fine, actually,” Asher replies, matching his husband’s delivery. “They collectively all decided to get up and listen to the news and do what was in their best interests and safety, while also not questioning the nature nor the source of the danger that required it. Lovely little sheep, the lot of them. It’s been incredibly pleasant, all said.” He gives Grant a warm smile and a small laugh, which he returns.

“I’m glad to hear the masses are easier to handle than administrators...”

“Please, Grant, *anything* is easier to handle than administrators. Whoever devised the division of administrative power probably should have picked a different set of Selections.”

“Careful, Ash, those are my colleagues you’re talking about. The only person allowed to disparage them is me.” Asher laughs, full and affectionate. “Besides, you know as well as I do that no *one* decided. It was a vote. All things, a vote...”

Asher finishes the last few lines of the article he’s working on and sends them off to his editor before standing, and walking over to their balcony. He leans against the rail, staring out at what remains of the skyline of Goldwalk. For the past hour, they’ve watched as piece by piece, building by building, the dazzling prismatic picture inevitably turned to a dimensionless void of industrial sanitary white. The Annex Building stands as the latest casualty.

“That’s why we do this, Grant. Why we’ve done what we’ve done. When everything changes—”

“Nothing changes. I know.” Grant, having walked up behind him, snakes his arms around Asher’s waist, holding him gently and resting his head on his shoulder. They watch the decaying skyline for a long while, enjoying, *savoring*, the closeness they had with each other.

“It’s a shame he’s so brilliant...” Asher lets his voice ring out into the cool night air, voted in with 62% majority. “We need him, but... I don’t know.”

“He needs us, too.” Grant squeezes his husband before moving to his side to join him in resting on the balcony’s rail. “You weren’t there in the early days. He was... lost. Exhausted by a city that never seemed to stay the same, every anchor he found, everything he *made*, slipping away in the blink of an eye and a turn of a whim, only to be replaced by the very thing they wanted *gone* however long before. I... I suppose I almost took pity on him, when we first met. So desperate for some modicum of stability, *any* amount of *security* in this city. He... I don’t think he ever felt safe until we began the Camerata. Even just having a *name* for how we felt, how we saw the world, it helped him tremendously. I know— believe me, I *know* he can be difficult and frustrating and—”

“Insensitive? Condescending? Scathingly candid—”

“That *and* more, but... at the end of it all? He just wants what’s best for Cloudbank and her people. He struggles to show it the same way we do, but he is one of the best hearts and minds I know. All four of you are.”

Asher leans into him, craning his neck up to kiss his husband slowly, the joy of it in the simplicity of the moment.

“You’re not exempt from that, Grant. You think a group like us would let just *anyone* lead them? Your soul is beautiful and kind, you make everyone you meet aspire to be better— not even for themselves, but for those around them.”

Grant leans back, apparently trying to pass off his tears as some speck of dust or another caught in his eye, but Asher knows him better—

A broken chattering *roar* splits the serenity of the night, sunders the sanctity of their moment. They both shoot upright, bracing their hands on the railing and scanning the vanishing

horizon for the source. The cold metal bites into their palms as they whip their heads about, frantically searching for whatever horror of the Process they are sure awaits them. They do not find it on the horizon though.

A faint gurgling groan bubbles up from below. It is only then that they turn their eyes to the base of the towers.

A large serpentine creature clings to the exterior shell of the building. Its interminable Process-white body bears streaks of gold and tufts of furs along its spine. Its two arms, each culminating in three razor-like fingers, dig into the intricate windows and spires that Royce designed so meticulously. Its massive crimson head turns to the pinnacle, and Asher and Grant feel as if its solitary golden eye bores right into their very souls.

<<0>>

The sound of the engine drowns out the loudspeaker alerts as Royce speeds his bike down Goldwalk's West 64th Expressway. His coat whips behind him, snapping and twisting in the wind. He sees the chromatic lights of screens and buildings whiz by in a prismatic panorama as he heads off the exit towards the southeast end of the district. He's alone on the road, an impossible sight in a city as dense and vivacious as Cloudbank. The O.P.I. had been executed well before he had even hit the Expressway and the emptiness of such an expansive (*indulgent*) project strikes him with a bolt of revulsion and remorse.

He pulls to a stop on 16th street. Normally it's a thoroughfare for foot traffic: shoppers, families, young couples out for the nightlife and memories. Now though, it's utterly abandoned. Not a soul to be seen, to be heard. The lights still blink as they should, the signs and advertisements garish and blazing in the fallen shroud of night, but the silence laying thick in the air seems to mute all other sensations. He kicks the bike's stand and pulls off his helmet, shaking his hair free of the confinement, before lighting a cigarette and taking a drag.

He lets the smoke curl deep in his lungs as he thinks. He'll have to see if there's any abandoned watercraft still in one of the ports. But failing that, he'd either have to override the results on that petition for the bridge that so publicly fell behind earlier that evening... or have the Transistor with him and hope the area had been Processed enough to give him the right size canvas.

Looking around, that last hope might not be so in vain. The Process, without the guidance of the Transistor, well... had an entire city ripe for the taking. Royce takes a moment to watch as the very substance of things continues to bleach and unravel around him, to appreciate the destruction he helped cause, to feel vindicated in his observation of the fragility of the structures their lives were built on.

But Royce has never been a sentimentalist, so he keeps walking. He works his way past the Channel, headed towards the dock nearest to the proposed site of the footbridge.

As he walks, underfoot, thin stalks of Processed material begin to sprout from the blanching path beneath him. They emerge a handful at a time, growing to knee-height at most before blooming into cattail-like growths right before his eyes. Intrigued, he kicks at a few that rise in his path, shocked to see the growths detach with a hollow *thk* . They float upwards a foot or so before dissolving into the very air around them.

Captivated by the thought of what possible purpose these reeds could serve the Process, and frankly quite amused by the noises they make, he veers from his beeline to the dock, following a patch of the things off into a side alley.

He turns a corner, and abruptly his nose is filled with a thick metallic scent. Royce presses himself against the wall, stubbing out his cigarette on the facade and quickly scanning his surroundings for any hostile Process constructs. He tries to calm his breathing, still his rapidly beating heart, as he keeps his senses sharp to the alley around him. A moment passes... two... three... his hammering heart, his panting breaths the only thing he can hear. No clack of metallic legs against faux-stonework, no stuttered chirping or groaning bellows, no beady red eyes bearing down on him. No Process... so why...?

Royce slowly, cautiously peels away from the alcove he slotted himself into, still keeping an eye out for others. His gaze is drawn to a thicket of the reeds, grown much higher than the others he's seen, crowding around some protrusion or marker. Within, reflecting and refracting through the stems, is a faint pulsating blue-green light.

Rejoicing, Royce rushes to the spot, scattering the blooms with a cacophony of noise. They dissipate to nothing in the air, revealing a gruesome sight.

The Transistor sits buried deep in the stomach of the night's candidate. Blood has spilled forth from the wound, soaked the man's shirt, splashed across his jacket, and pooled on the ground around him. It's long since dried, but Royce remembers the scent now. It had been so long since one of these went awry. Never to this degree before, certainly, but... Royce imagines he is one of very few souls in Cloudbank who knows the smell of blood. His colleagues notwithstanding, of course.

The security guard who asked too many questions, now securely locked away in the Transistor. Unable to ask anything. Unable to speak at all.

Royce tightens his hands around the handle of the Transistor and yanks it out of the cold slumped corpse. He hefts the Transistor over his shoulder. "Time to get you home."

[User(Royce Bracket) *successfully logged in*]

[*Have a Nice Day :D*]

<<0>>

Royce finds it endlessly amusing that Asher's recorded Function turned out to be a baleful curse that inconveniences others and renders them ineffectual. Grant's makes sense, though: a Function to consolidate, to invigorate, just like the man himself. He wonders idly what Sybil or Red's Functions would have been, how useful he'd find them, had he the chance to record a Trace of the two women before all this.

This, of course, is not his primary concern as he makes his way to Fairview. What is, however, is exactly how much more *lethal* the Process has become in the interceding hours since the Transistor rebooted. Outside the carefully monitored and limited conditions of his laboratory, and with an entire city under its thumb, the Process has adapted several times over. There are still the same recurrent forms (Creeps, Weeds, Cluckers, a Fetch or two here and there and so on and so on), but each seems to have iterated on itself in its time away from his watchful study. The Transistor refers to them as 2.0 and 3.0, depending on exactly *how* much more of a problem to deal with, but frankly, Royce doesn't have the time to waste dealing with them.

He spends as much time as he can under the effects of Mask(Ping()), so modified for rapid reuse as he picks his way through the stark-white streets and walks of what once was Fairview. When inevitably caught, he drops a Void(Tap(), Purge()) on those he can and relies on Ping(Switch(), Jaunt()) to keep the Process distracted with itself and off his trail while he slips away.

As he gets closer and closer to his lab, and more importantly the Cradle, Royce begins to have some... unorthodox misunderstandings with reality. Vast expanses seem to stretch out before him, yet are cleared in just a few strides or a Jaunt(). Gravity spontaneously decides to cease its function, or rather doubles, triples down on its duty to compensate for its earlier losses. Sometimes passages let out in strange places, and don't return to where he came from when reentered.

But inexorably he heads onward, partly by his own navigation, piecing together the fractured and deconstructed landmarks around him, partly (and irrationally) trusting the Transistor to guide him to where (hopefully) they both knew where it needed to be.

When he does finally arrive though, it's almost entirely by accident. A Jerk a little too keen to live up to its namesake and a few too many missed shots pair up with a resetting Mask() to get Royce securely knocked off a rooftop. He closes his eyes and braces for the worst when—

He lands in a cacophony of noise, in a patch of reeds, whose blooms shake free and fog the air around him as they dissolve, but he isn't hurt. He should be... should be in quite a bit of pain right now, as it were. He's not, though... Why?

The Transistor pulses with vibrant blue light, and— *wait*. Royce has never seen it do that before. He stands and approaches it where it lies just a few paces away. It emits another wave of light, emanating from the central eye. The pulse washes over him and... he feels safe. Secure. *Restored*. Odd. Why would the Transistor—

Oh.

The Integration must have gone through in some capacity. To some extent. Mysteries upon mysteries, it seems.

He picks up the Transistor, the Function ceasing as he does, and looks around at his new surroundings. He'll have to access the Function file once he makes it— The entrance to the Cradle stands open before him. How serendipitous.

Royce strides through the entrance, inspecting the oh so familiar space for damage or signs of Process activity. He doesn't find any though, and so relaxes as he works his way down the corkscrewing central path, letting the innate glow of the Transistor light his way. Royce had always balked at the impractical length of the journey. He had always dreamed of using the time it took to reach the Cradle as an excuse monologue from on high to any guests he might receive, some lengthy dramatic speech about the monumental importance of his work, something to make them *understand*.

None of the others ever deigned to visit him, though, by necessity so far out of the way, so secluded. But Royce prefers to work alone, without interruption, anyways.

As he approaches the Cradle, Royce feels the Transistor begin to vibrate in his hand. He drops it to the floor, the low buzzing echoing in the cavernous chamber. "You must be eager," he says, "Me too. Welcome home. Welcome home."

Without any more ceremony, he slides the Transistor into its port, and the world erupts in white.

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! This is my first fic like... ever, so let me know what you think!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!