

no use being numb

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by [Croik](#)

In the country, there wasn't much to do but stare at the sky. Just miles of empty field as far as the eye could see, swaying. Always swaying, whether there seemed to be wind or not. Infinite, empty. Pointless.

Or so Royce had thought, when looking from the outside in. The reality was much more crowded than that: he could see farm houses and cabins dotting that endless landscape, databanks thrusting out of the swaying corn, and along the horizon, the towering silhouettes of the transistors. They dominated the western view like looming monuments. He thought he should have found them hopeful, or at least fascinating, but he couldn't muster up that much of an emotional response. They were, as everything was now, pointless.

Royce made a thorough exploration of everyone one of his pockets, but he had smoked his last cigarette down hours ago. "Pointless," he muttered, and he sat down in the grass to wait for some inspiration.

A sound of footsteps alerted him, but he didn't bother turning to look. Whoever it was, he was fully prepared to engage in the equally useless exercise of accepting their accusations and blame. No need to rush. But then the visitor sat down in the grass beside him, and Royce had little choice but to look up. His heart thumped with surprise he hadn't thought himself still capable of. "Grant?"

Grant Kendrell relaxed among the long grass. He was dressed only in his button down and slacks, his broad shoulders sloping in exhaustion. How unlike him to present himself at anything less than his stoutest composure. "Hello, Royce," he said, and his voice was hoarse. "Asher said we should expect to see you here. I didn't believe him."

Royce glanced behind him, and sure enough, he easily spotted Asher and Sybil standing close together several meters away. They seemed to be conversing while shooting searching looks at their peers. Royce turned forward again. "You had faith in me, did you?" he said, though without any gratitude. "Thought that I would find a way to reverse it? Bring you all back?"

"I did," said Grant, with such simple conviction that it was embarrassing. "I've always believed in your skill."

"So you did," said Royce. "You did. Well. A little less faith and we might have avoided all this, hm?"

Grant sighed. It was unlike him, and Royce's skin crawled to see him so reduced. "We all have regret for what's happened," he murmured.

He started to say more, but Royce cut him off, saying, "I don't. I don't know what that word means."

Grant looked to him, startled. How long had they known each other, and Royce couldn't remember having ever seen Administrator Kendrell startled? "You don't? After everything?"

"I don't," Royce said, willing truth into the words. "After everything."

Grant's eyes narrowed slightly with hurt which he then quickly shook aside. He must have been rationalizing. He must have been telling himself that Royce didn't know of the gruesome end he had chosen for himself in the world they had vacated. It was the only way he would be able to preserve his regard for the younger man, and for *that*, Royce felt the tiniest inkling of guilt.

"You mean to say that if you could do it all over again, you wouldn't do things differently?" Grant pressed. "Having seen how it would end?"

"I didn't say that." Royce snapped one of the grass stalks off with his fingers, plucked it clean, and stuck it between his teeth. "Wanting to improve upon a method is not the same as regret for the enterprise."

Grant watched him closely. For a moment his eyes regained their predatory gleam, so much more like the man Royce remembered. But then he glanced behind them, and there was no mistaking the creases deepening along his brow.

"I suppose Asher has convinced you we were wrong to try," said Royce, but even disappointment and irritation were difficult to hold on to with the wind sweeping constantly through him. "He's consumed with remorse and believes we were utterly in the wrong. Well, every last inhabitant of Cloudbank should be here now, somewhere. He can spend the rest of his days apologizing to each of them individually if that will satisfy him."

"I can't tell if you're being honest, or just petulant for the sake of it," retorted Grant, and suddenly Royce wasn't sure he could tell, either. "The city is *gone*, Royce, by our hands. Years of work and progress lost in hours. Do you not feel responsible for that?"

"What do you want from me?" Royce glared at him, a sudden spark of resistance welling in his chest. It was fiery and cold at once, and unlike anything he would normally allow himself to acknowledge. "The city *is* gone, *utterly* gone. And I, for one, am glad for it. Wasn't it you who said the foundations needed a little rattling? The status quo made simple again? Well, we have that now—you ought to be oh so pleased."

"Enough!" Grant clenched his fists against his knees, and Royce thought he could sense Asher stepping closer. But then Grant took a breath, and his temper abated. "Enough," he repeated, with resignation, and he climbed to his feet.

Royce twisted the grass stalk back and forth against his lips. "What do you want from me, Grant?" he asked again, finding himself more eager for the answer than a moment ago. But Grant only shook his head again and strode away from him, deeper into the field.

Asher increased his pace, and as he passed by Royce he shot him a cold look. "Must you always be so difficult?" he said.

"'Difficulty' was one of my selections," Royce retorted dryly, and with a scowl Asher hurried on so he could fall into step alongside his husband. Their fingers intertwined as they continued toward the east.

Royce watched them, oblivious to Sybil's approach until she was in front of him. She offered her hands, and with reluctance, Royce allowed her to help draw him to his feet.

"Royce," she said quietly. "It's going to be very difficult for us now. The four of us have to stick together."

Royce's eyelids drooped as he mulled those words over and over. "Most difficult for you," he said, just as softly, as if now was a time for secrets. "You can tell Red it was *my* idea to choose her for the Transistor, if you like."

Sybil's delicate features tightened in a wince, and her gaze slipped away. She was tempted, and yet.... "No. I'll tell her the truth. She deserves it." She drew her eyes back to his, glossy with emotion and stinging his. "They *all* deserve the truth."

"The truth," Royce echoed. What an insignificant thing that seemed now. There was nothing to be gained from guilt or regret, but then again, there wasn't necessarily anything to lose, either. No forward and no going back. Nothing at all but empty, untamed wilderness, and a thousand fools who were so used to wanting everything that they didn't understand how to *want* at all. It all seemed so utterly without purpose.

But then Sybil tugged his hand, and without reason enough to refuse, Royce followed. She hooked her arm through his elbow and they walked after the Kendrells. "The truth," Sybil said again, "is that I'm more worried about you than them. But we'll all be all right. We just have to stick together, like we always have."

"If you say so," replied Royce, but as they continued, he could see shapes in the distance—the citizens of Cloudbank were beginning to gather by one of the farm houses, and at the head of them Royce spotted a familiar flash of brilliant red hair. Despite all his claims to indifference, the sight of her rekindled in him that hot-cold sensation of dread, and he caught himself holding Sybil's arm tighter. She touched his hand in reassurance.

"All right," Royce said, and he took in a deep breath. "Let's go face the music."

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