

Camerata

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Camerata

by [SableGear0](#)

Summary

A year and a half before the events of "Transistor," Royce Bracket has a revelation about the true nature of Cloudbank and the forces that shape it. He shares his findings with Grant Kendrell, a city Administrator and his closest friend. From there, a plan begins. They can fix Cloudbank, all they need are a few clever people. What follows are months of plots, schemes, tenuous allegiances, personal struggles, and eventually... lethal betrayals. A year and a half journey from the inception of an idea to the fall of a city.

! Unfinished work: Originally started in 2016. Currently on hiatus/not being worked on. !

Notes

Another reminder/warning that this work is Unfinished! At time of posting I am not actively working on this fic, but wanted to share the parts that were relatively presentable. (Hopefully this will impel me to finish the dang thing one day, but we'll see.) As an old and unfinished work, readers may note that the style differs from some of my other more recent works.

Please enjoy, and moreso than ever, please leave a comment if you did!

Chapter 1: Part 1: January

Chapter Summary

January()

Royce Bracket loses his position as the Administration's favourite civil engineer and opts to work on personal projects instead.

NB: Warning for suicidal ideation/discussion of suicidal tendencies. (Don't worry, he isn't always like this and Grant is a responsible friend.)

“We’re sorry, Mr. Bracket,” the female administrator spread her hands over the tabletop, a gesture of appeal, “but we just don’t feel that Cloudbank is ready for–”

A leather-bound folder closed with a definite snap, cutting her off. Royce Bracket stood up from the conference table. He donned his jacket, took up his portfolio, and left– all in livid silence.

“Uh–?”

Another administrator held up a hand, “Let him go.”

After the faint sounds of the engineer’s retreat faded down the hall, the other administrator spoke again. Grant Kendrell, the most senior member of the Administrative Council, had a peerless poker face; not even a hint of the bitter smugness he felt came through in his voice or expression, all masked by a tone of concern.

“Well, I hope you’re all happy. You’ve just lost the services of the most brilliant civil engineer Cloudbank has ever seen.”

“We–”

“I know it was only the democratic conclusion, but you could have approached the issue a bit more delicately.”

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Down the hall, Royce pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. Some city official’s aide rounded the corner just ahead of him, seeming panicked when they crossed paths.

“Uh, sir? You can’t be smoking in here–!”

Royce hissed smoke through his teeth at the aide and shouldered past him, rushing to the end of the hall to punch the button for the lift. It was empty when it reached him. Inside, he hit the button for the ground floor with one hand, taking the cigarette from his mouth with the other. He tried to take a deep breath to calm himself but only managed an angry sigh.

Two floors down, five people crowded onto the lift. Royce snuffed his cigarette against one of the buttons on his sleeve. One complaint was enough. He still chewed the end of it while he watched the doors, ignoring the wordless attention he was getting from the others. Stuck in a tiny metal box with five strangers— not ideal even in the best of moods.

He was first out of the lift when it reached ground level, sidling out rather than waiting for the doors to open completely. Through the nearly empty lobby, out through the double glass doors, into the snow.

By popular demand it had been a mild and picturesque January. Temperatures not far below freezing with lots of light snow; it simply made banks on the sidewalk and lined windowsills in an appealing way without being a driving hazard, always starting in the afternoon and trailing off in the middle of the night.

Royce fluffed up his scarf and buttoned his jacket. He knew the weather algorithms. The snow would start falling —he looked for a clock, 3:07 pm— in three minutes. Another four-minute increment earlier than yesterday. At the end of the week the math would change with the new set of votes.

Habit already had him reaching for his flip-lighter, but it denied him the sense to shield the flame at first. He had to turn his back to the wind and cup a hand around the flame to get it to take. Not his usual custom, he wasn't typically an outdoor smoker.

The cold air did help settle him somewhat. His day —likely his entire week, even more likely a much longer span— was still completely ruined. He caught sight of his reflection in the windows of a passing bus: white jacket, black scarf, sour expression under wavy black hair already mussed by the wind. He blew smoke at the fleeting image. If he was going to spend the day out being miserable, he'd at least have to find somewhere quiet.

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Grant stomped snow from his boots and shook off his coat. The snowfall had increased dramatically after dark, with the temperature dropping much lower than it should have. Some glitch in the weather system was turning the night into a proper blizzard.

The inside of the pub was dim and quiet, the low hum of a handful of patrons and the varying drone of a sports broadcast were the loudest sounds to be heard. Grant spotted Royce in the very back corner. He was slouched over the edge of his table, head resting on crossed arms, facing the window. As the Administrator approached he saw more evidence of Royce's extended stay here: scattered papers, an empty coffee mug, a full ashtray.

"I figured I'd find you here."

“And yet I stayed...” Royce mumbled into his arm.

“May I join you?”

Royce sat up and cleared the table of papers, “Of course. Your company is always welcome, Grant. Always welcome.”

Grant shrugged off his coat and hung it on the back of his chair before taking a seat. “Still coming back here after all these years?”

“It’s the only pub that won’t kick you out to the patio for a smoke.” He looked at the dense snowfall through the window, “Even when the sky isn’t falling.”

“It’s called ‘snow,’ Royce.”

Grant immediately regretted the quip when Royce glared at him. “You’re not funny, Grant.” He looked outside again, lapsing into sullen silence.

Grant let a moment go by before trying once more. “You’re still upset.” It wasn’t a question.

“No, I’m fine. Just fine.”

“I’m sorry about what happened, Royce. I really thought the council would approve your designs, but there was nothing I could do. I was outvoted.”

“Ah, compromise; the flipside of democracy.”

“I’m really very sorry.”

“It’s not your fault...” Royce closed his dark green eyes, one hand straying to his lips as if reaching for a nonexistent cigarette. “I’m not upset... I’m not.”

Grant tried to take a lighter tone, “I think it’s pretty clear that you are. Especially when you start doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Never mind,” Grant nodded to a waitress clearing a table nearby, “Buy you a drink?” He watched Royce ponder the offer, tapping a finger to his lips. “It’s the very least I can do after what happened earlier.”

Royce took a long breath and sighed, “...Irish coffee.” After Grant had relayed their order, Royce took up his portfolio and opened it, flipping through a mix of rough and finalized sketches. He leaned his head in one hand, “I just don’t get it, Grant. I thought these would go over so much better...”

“So did I. Everyone loved the Spine—”

“Of course they loved the Spine of the World, it’s brilliant! Someone even wrote a song about it! But all this...?” He gestured to the portfolio, “Why not any of this? It’s all in the same vein, the same concept.”

“If I may ask... Why all the multipurpose buildings?”

“Well, they were supposed to be the solution to people treating my craft, my livelihood, like it’s disposable. I’m not some column writer, Grant, it takes more than a few hours to design an entire building. There’s so much more to consider; materials, zoning, utilities, the actual aesthetics of the thing— light and acoustics! And by the time it’s done and people are finally getting used to it, your council wants to tear it down and asks me to design another one!”

Royce stalled his rant to let the waitress set down their drinks. He took up his coffee in both hands to enjoy the warmth of it for a minute before taking a long sip. Only the barest degree of his manic frustration had faded when he continued.

“Nobody does that to any other kind of artist. ‘Hey that 20-foot oil painting looks great! We’ll put it up for a month then throw a layer of gesso over it so you can make us another one!’” He took another sip of his drink, “It’s ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous what they want from me.”

Grant hummed into his drink, “You still didn’t need to leave like that...”

Royce spoke softly, “I’m not upset, Grant. This city is upset. With the way it’s being managed. It’s going to collapse on itself if we’re not careful. There’s no permanence. Everything keeps... changing.” He picked up his glass and tilted it back and forth, failing to disturb the head of cream on the dark coffee. “Everything’s changing, but nothing *changes*. No one notices. It doesn’t matter what any engineer or any artist does, at the whim of the public it’s gone.” Royce stopped toying with his drink and looked directly at the other man. “Tell me, Grant. Was it always like this? This state of weird... stagnant flux?”

Grant looked down at the table, “No...” he sounded almost ashamed, “No it wasn’t.”

“You noticed it before, didn’t you? Before me, probably.”

“It’s been a slow decline. But you’re right. Cloudbank...” the Administrator’s expression became pained, “Cloudbank is falling apart.” A strained pause; Grant drained his glass, the last of his drink vanishing with uncomfortable swiftness.

“You know, Grant,” Royce’s tone brightened as he went back to tipping his glass, “I like to think every artist aspires to be outlived by their work.” He stopped playing with the foam-topped coffee abruptly, “Which may explain why so many of them die young... Lately my work doesn’t even seem to outlive the stuff in my fridge.” He looked into his drink with a rueful smile, “But maybe I’m just being selfish,” he murmured, and took a long sip.

“What are you thinking?”

“Mm... I’m thinking the cheap light fixture in my studio probably wouldn’t hold my weight. I’ll have to pop open the ceiling tiles to find a pipe or something—”

“Royce. You’re not going to kill yourself.”

“Not like *that* I’m not. No one would ever find me.”

“So it has to be a statement, does it?”

“Well as my last act on this earth I’d like it to be something interesting—”

“Royce!” The unrestrained outburst silenced the rest of the pub. Grant slouched in his chair, waiting for other conversations to resume. He shot an intense glare at the engineer, “You are *not*—”

“Grant, *relax*. I have much better things to be doing with my time. Considering the Admins probably won’t ever want to see me again after today, I can start work on a few personal projects I’ve had in the back of my mind. Namely, looking for a way to solve this weird ‘flux’ problem we’re having.”

Grant was still glaring at him. Royce made an effort to be casual. “I’ve tried to do the math on it. People are beyond me but numbers I understand. I’m close to something, that’s what all this is about,” he tapped the open portfolio before him, “I’ve seen the cycles of development and I’ve tried to accommodate them, but there’s something else at work here,” he glanced over the sketches, “Something... I’m not sure what.”

Royce finished his drink at a leisurely pace, finally looking content. Grant went from furious to impassive in the time it took, paying their bill without comment while he waited.

The engineer looked out the window; snow had piled in a drift up to the sill outside and still blew in thick flurries past the street lights. “Did you drive? Because I might have to ask you for a lift.”

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“Ooh, classy,” Royce ducked into the front passenger seat of the black sedan, “Very official-looking.”

“I wanted something more modest but this was all I could find.” Grant buckled up and started the car, “Where are you living now?”

“South end, by the water.”

“You moved again?”

Royce buckled his seatbelt, “More room for less money. Neighbourhood isn’t the friendliest but I hardly go out anyway.”

Grant eased out into the road, taking his time in the heavy snow, “You still don’t drive?”

“Can’t handle it. Too many opportunities for anonymous confrontation.” When Grant glanced over, Royce looked back; a wide-eyed, earnest expression, “People are jerks, Grant. On foot they’re bad enough, give them control of a few tonnes of metal and it’s even worse.”

“‘People are jerks’ sounds a little ironic coming from you.”

“I know I don’t like people. Anyone who knows me knows it too, shouldn’t come as a surprise. What *is* surprising—”

“Is how little people care for other people.”

“Exactly... So we *have* been over this before.”

Turning onto a main street, Royce leaned against the window, looking up and out at the veiled skyline. A cold smile touched his face, “Now *that* would be ironic.”

“Hm?”

“A jump from the roof of Bracket Towers— the seat of the Admin Council, and the only building in this city I *didn’t* want my name on... Hideous edifice.”

Grant’s concern was stifled by his confusion, “Hideous?”

“I hate it. That’s not even what it’s supposed to look like. The Council liked my draft sketches better so they used those for the design instead. And then they named it after me, even when I asked them not to.”

“It doesn’t look that bad, Royce.”

“Not bad...” the engineer’s voice became hushed, almost wistful, “It could have been *beautiful*, Grant...”

The two spoke little for the rest of the ride, only requesting and giving brief directions. Royce, unsurprisingly, made an excellent navigator. He knew the layout of Cloudbank better than anyone, having drawn much of it himself.

“Just up here, on the left... Here.” Royce unbuckled his seatbelt, “Thanks for the ride, Grant, I really—” Grant reached across with one arm to push him back against the seat. Royce blinked at him. “—beg your pardon.”

Grant eyed him sternly, “Earlier, when you said—”

“Look, Grant, I was being facetious.”

“You mentioned it *twice*, Royce.”

“I wasn’t serious.”

“Well I am! Royce...” Grant eased his restraint on his friend, dark eyes softening to genuine worry, “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine, Grant. Look,” he clasped a hand over his friend’s against his chest, an unusually gentle smile crossing his sharp features, “I didn’t mean to upset you, I forgot that’s a sensitive issue for you. I spend so much time on my own, I tend to forget how nihilistic I can get until I’m around someone with a functional moral compass. I’ll be just fine,” he let go of his friend’s hand, “I’ve got way too much to do to even think of stopping now.”

Grant moved his arm, “Alright... If you ever feel something’s wrong—”

“You’ll be the first to know.” Royce opened the door but pulled it closed against the wind, “Thanks again for the ride, I really appreciate it. Goodnight, Grant.”

“Goodnight.”

Chapter 2: Part 2: February

Chapter Summary

February()

Asher Smith has a routine meeting with Grant Kendrell, and manages to score a bonus interview with one reclusive engineer. Royce hits on a revelation while hard at work on his "personal project."

Chapter Notes

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"What was the name again?"

Asher did his best not to roll his eyes, "Smith. Asher Smith."

The receptionist peered at her screen closer than she needed to, "Hmm... I'm not seeing you on here. Mr. Kendrell will be in a meeting shortly, I'm afraid you'll have to try back later."

"Look," the editor did his best to be polite, "I've had a standing appointment with Administrator Kendrell on Tuesdays at four since November. You're sure he can't spend just a few minutes to talk to me?"

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Kendrell has been very busy and I don't think—"

"*Diane?*" The intercom speaker on the reception desk made Grant's baritone voice sound tinny.

"Uh, yes, Mr. Kendrell?"

"You've been leaning on the 'talk' button again. Send Asher up, I should have some time for him before the meeting."

The receptionist's venomous glare clashed with her sweet reply, "Right away, Mr. Kendrell." Asher was gone before she could come up with anything further to say.

The editor had made his way to the Administrator's office so many times recently he felt he could probably navigate Bracket Towers with his eyes closed, however the constant traffic of people made it a challenge he was unwilling to accept. Bumping into someone and having to explain why he had been wandering the halls blind just wasn't worth it. Still, as often as he visited it was always a treat to spend time with Grant. He was a much saner man than any of Asher's co-workers; the frantic columnists and their choleric slave-driver of a chief editor.

Grant was waiting in the door of his office, he waved Asher in with something approaching a sigh, "Please excuse Diane, she's new."

Asher took only an instant to appreciate the interior of the office he knew so well by now. Grant had an old-fashioned sensibility when it came to decor; heavy wood furniture, a gorgeous leather-topped desk, an actual bookcase— "I'm sorry, sir, I hope I'm not interrupting anything," the editor apologized out of habit.

The formal address brought out a half-chuckle from the Administrator. "Not yet. It's good to see you again, Asher. I'm sorry I don't have as much time for you today as I usually do. It's not exactly an emergency but the other Administrators have called an urgent meeting. I didn't know until a few minutes ago; I wasn't sure of the best way to contact you."

"Should I come back next week, then?"

Another clipped half-laugh, this time with a brief smile, "I never said I didn't have *any* time. I can join you after the meeting, it shouldn't take very long; an hour, hour and a half at most. Same place as usual?"

"In the Archives? Of course. It'll take me a while to get things set up anyway. Should I go now and get started?"

"Have a seat for a bit, you look like you've been on the go all day." Grant gestured to one of the slightly oversized chairs and the two sat. "I haven't been outside since this morning, is it still miserable out there?"

"It's very cold and very wet. Your average February, I guess."

"And how have things been with you?"

"Also pretty average; work is chaos, as usual. Sometimes I regret taking a job with OVC. Things are never finished, you just start over again on tomorrow's stories. What about you?"

"Same old. Everything's..." Grant's manner became distant, "always changing..."

In the pause that followed, Asher took a moment to examine him. To Asher, Grant Kendrell was a man of almost kingly deportment; sharp-minded and level-headed,

diplomatic, a master of the judicious decision. To the editor there was also something regal about his appearance, beyond his formal attire. His sheer size made him an imposing figure even at a glance, but up close his stern, solemn expression, strong features and intense dark eyes often proved intimidating. Many OVC interviewers –even other Administrators– found him a difficult man to approach, let alone talk to one-on-one.

But Asher had been brave one day when tasked with interviewing the Administrator, and he had found his bravery duly rewarded, seeing another side of Grant that rarely appeared in the public eye. Behind the neutral mask of duty there was a gentle smile, under the commanding voice a hearty laugh, and after the obligations of his authority could be set aside, there was a passion for knowledge and the pursuit of truth. This was perhaps the thing Asher admired most.

Grant snapped out of his sudden daze, seeming to remember something, “If it’s alright with you, I think our little study session may have to be shortened on both ends.”

“Plans for tonight?”

“I was thinking of taking an old friend out to dinner, it’s been a while since we’ve spoken. It’s not uncommon for us to go a few weeks without talking but last time things got a bit... grim... and I wanted to check up on him. You’re welcome to come along if you’d like.”

“Well I wouldn’t want to impose...”

Grant smiled, there was a hint of something devious behind it, “Asher, you remember last month when you asked me about Royce Bracket?”

“My chief editor just had me out chasing rumours, and you said you weren’t at liberty to discuss what had happened.”

“You can ask him yourself if you join us for dinner.”

“Oh! I didn’t realize– wouldn’t it be better to set up a formal interview?”

“He’d never agree to it. If I’m there I can at least guilt him into being civil with you. He doesn’t exactly... He’s not very good with people.”

“I’ll certainly come along, then. Thank-you, Grant.”

The Administrator checked the time, pulling a pocket watch from his waistcoat in a way that made Asher smile. So old-fashioned. “Well, I should go before I’m late to my own meeting. See you in the Archives later?”

Asher nodded, “Of course.”

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Cloudbank’s Archives resembled a huge vertical warehouse more than a library. All the city’s records were stored on massive server banks in the multi-storey building adjoining the

administrative tower, forming the eastern wing of the complex known simply as Bracket Towers. It was another place few people bothered to go which Asher was becoming increasingly familiar with.

His own hunger for knowledge had drawn him here one day, looking for anything he could find that he didn't already know, much of it concerning the history of Cloudbank. However he found more and more the glaring inconsistencies in the records. Names, dates, even locations were often different between accounts of the same events. There were gaps in the records that spanned years. He took to interviewing senior members of the community, but even then he recovered only fragments of the information he felt he was missing. He turned to his co-workers, who directed him to the Administrative Council. Many of the Administrators, forced to admit they were too young to remember such events, reluctantly referred him to Grant.

In his own way, Asher had been able to intuit Grant's temperament before even speaking to him; sensing –or perhaps more accurately, hoping– that the Administrator's imposing stature and demeanour belied a gentle nature. Fortunately, he had been correct. In fact, Grant had spoken volumes over their many visits together, never hesitating and hardly needing to be prompted. He had been more than willing to share and the two of them quickly bonded, so it seemed to Asher, over their mutual love of Cloudbank and the challenge its history presented them.

On the level just above the main entry, Asher encountered the newly-appointed archivist, Bailey Gilande. Though the archivist presented an androgynous figure, Bailey never objected to being addressed as 'Miss Gilande.' She stood at a console sorting documents with practiced flicks on the touch-screen interface, much the same way one might toss papers into piles.

Asher knew Bailey was shy by nature and easily startled, even when secure in her own element. He made an effort to step with a bit more force on the catwalk as he approached before calling out to her, "Afternoon, Ms. Gilande."

Even Bailey's voice was agreeably androgynous, "Hm? Oh, good afternoon Mr. Smith." She sorted a few more documents before looking over her shoulder at him, "No Administrator Kendrell today?"

"Last-minute meeting, he said he'd be along in an hour or so."

"I see. It must have been very last-minute, no one said anything to me," a few more documents flicked into digital piles, "Though if they don't need me it's just as well, it's been a busy day."

"I apologize if it had anything to do with me."

Bailey turned to him with an airy smile, "Oh don't apologize, Mr. Smith, it's a labour of love. Finding things is what I do. Now, you requested information on the Fairview district, correct?"

"Yes, have you found anything?"

She turned back to the console, swiping across the whole screen to clear it, then bringing up a map of the Archives tower. “I have, unfortunately it’s not a set I’ve been able to sort out very thoroughly.” She tapped the map, typed a query and then stepped aside to show Asher the screen, explaining the location it displayed, “Eighth floor, northeast server bank. You have your tablet with you?” Asher patted the messenger bag at his hip for an answer. Bailey nodded, “Sometimes I feel like you and Administrator Kendrell do a lot of my job for me.”

Asher affected more embarrassment than he felt, “Oh, well as long as we’re not getting in your way...”

“Not at all. We’re filling the many gaps in Cloudbank’s history. The more hands and minds, the better.”

“I’m going to head upstairs, then. If you see Grant before your shift ends, can you let him know where I am?”

“I’ll tell him. And, Mr. Smith? You probably won’t need your coat on the upper levels but...” Bailey winked at him, “Do try not to fall asleep up there. The heat and the drone of the servers can be rather soothing.” She looked away, “I may or may not have taken an unwarranted nap myself this morning. Just be aware.”

“I will, thank-you.”

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“Asher?”

“Nnh... huh? Grant?” Asher sat up straight from his slouch against the side of a server bank, “Oh! Grant I’m sorry, I—” he blinked in realization, “I’ll be damned. I fell asleep.”

“Did Ms. Gilande not warn you?”

“She did but I—” He began packing up his tablet hastily, “I’m so sorry, I didn’t—”

“I’m the one who should be apologizing. I had no idea the meeting would run this late. I was worried you might have left earlier, thinking I stood you up.” Grant extended a hand and pulled Asher to his feet.

“Well I wouldn’t...” Asher fussed with his coat and bag, trying to get everything in order, avoiding Grant’s gaze, “I wouldn’t put it that way. But I wouldn’t have left without you.” He calmed himself, “Besides, there was some mention of dinner?”

Floors below, in the parking garage beneath Bracket Towers, Asher pulled out his tablet as soon as he was settled in the passenger seat of Grant’s car.

The older man glanced over, “Find anything?”

“Before I dozed off? Not really,” he scrolled through the few files he had picked up, “Nobody seems to agree on what Fairview’s original purpose was before it was defaulted to residential development, or whether the island is natural versus man-made. I guess that’s a mystery for another night, I’m done for now.”

“Not done entirely, I hope,” Grant steered out of the parking garage and onto the street, “There’s still an interview to be had.”

“*Possible* interview. I don’t want to be too obnoxious the first time I meet him...” Asher watched the passing buildings and the people bundled up against the raw cold. “Where were you thinking for dinner?”

Grant shrugged, “Nothing fancy. Honestly, I’ve been craving flatbread.”

“Junction Jan’s?”

“Sounds good. Royce’s studio is in the south end, it’s not too far from there.”

Asher fiddled with his tablet, casually hiding the screen from his driver, “So... what can you tell me about Royce Bracket? Anything I should know before I meet him?”

Grant took a moment to consider the question, “Royce is a... tangled up sort of individual.”

“‘Tangled?’ Do you mean ‘complicated’?”

“No, ‘tangled’ is a much better word, I can’t quite explain why. You’ll understand when you start talking to him.”

“You mentioned he’s not very good with people?”

Grant half-laughed with a wry smile, “Let’s put it this way: calling him ‘reclusive’ is being polite about it. I’m sure if he had the choice he’d never leave his studio.”

“Except to go home, I take it?”

“No, he lives where he works. As long as I’ve known him he’s refused to actually use the word ‘home’.”

“Interesting...”

“Something facet of his past he’s never discussed with me, I’m sure...” Grant glanced at his passenger again, “Are you writing this down?”

“I’m recording it, if that’s alright?”

“Just call me an anonymous source if you use any direct quotes. For everyone’s sake.”

“Of course. So what—” Asher found himself interrupted by the sound of a ringing phone, “Oh?”

“My mobile, pardon me,” Grant tapped the dashboard to answer the call, “Kendrell speaking.”

“*Grant—*”

“Royce?”

“*Get over here. I’ve had a breakthrough, I want you to see it. Unit 104.*”

“Royce, I—” The audio cut out. The message ‘*Call ended*’ scrolled across the screen of the dash. Grant glared at the text and continued talking as if he had not been interrupted, “I have someone with me, I hope you don’t mind if I bring them along...”

Asher laughed, an honest but uncertain sound. “So we’ve started as we mean to go on?”

“Seems that way.”

The building in the south end that housed Royce’s studio space appeared to be a warehouse from the outside. Once Asher and Grant were inside it was clear the building had been repurposed. Asher held the front door for a young man wrestling with a long roll of canvas, who briefly explained that a number of other artists were renting the subdivided space as personal studios. “But the guy in 104,” the painter raised an eyebrow, “I think he’s actually living here. I hardly ever see him leave.”

The pair issued a curt thanks and Grant took the lead. Asher paid particular attention to how the building had been subdivided. The outside walls of unit 104 were a bit different from the others, built from cinderblock rather than drywall. It may have been an office or a separate storage space during the building’s first life as a warehouse. Whatever the case it appeared to be smaller than the other units, with a much sturdier door. Grant’s loud knock was greeted with a call from inside.

“It’s open.”

Asher was grateful in a way that he had no expectations for the appearance of the engineer’s workspace, for he certainly could not have predicted this. All of the furniture in the space had been pushed away from the walls into a jumble in the centre of the main room. The whole space reeked of paint. The walls had been done over in a hasty coat of white, the base colour—a neutral green or perhaps a faint blue—showed through in timid streaks. Rollers and paint cans had been left forgotten in one corner.

However the walls were hardly white anymore. They were covered, almost floor to ceiling, in writing. Mathematical expressions, geometric diagrams, even loose computer code; all done in what must have been black marker. Any less organized and they might have passed for the scribbles of a madman.

At the centre of it all sat the engineer himself; a lean dragon on his modest hoard of material things. He perched on the arm of a sofa, its seat covered in boxes, his feet up on a

side table hosting a coffee-maker and a stack of ashtrays. In his left hand a cigarette, in his right a black permanent marker.

Royce faced away from the door, looking at the walls. When he spoke he sounded breathless. “I’ve done it, Grant. I’ve found it.” He lifted his arms to indicate the veritable manuscript that covered his walls, “That thing, that element I was missing before, I found it. It’s... *beautiful*, Grant. So elegant... All that’s left is to put it into practice! All I have to do is...”

Royce trailed off when he finally turned to face the door, ecstatic smile fading. There was an instant of a wide-eyed, almost fearful expression before it turned into a furious glare. “Who is *that*?” he hissed. He was on his feet before either of his guests could answer, striding towards the door, pointing at Asher with the end of his cigarette, “Get him out of here! You never told me you were bringing anyone!”

Grant stepped between them, catching Royce by his shoulders, “Royce, settle down.”

“You never said—!”

“How could I say anything? You hung up on me!”

The logic halted his rant. Royce glared at Grant, then at Asher. He clipped the marker on the collar of his paint-stained shirt and forced a calmer expression with a deep breath. He spoke softly when Grant released him.

“Who is that?”

“This is Asher, he’s an editor for OVC.”

Asher offered a hand and a winning smile, “Asher Smith, it’s a pleasure to—”

“Smith?” Royce narrowed his eyes at the newcomer, “You’re that current events columnist, aren’t you? I know your work. Clean, concise, not completely inaccurate...” The engineer took a long drag on his cigarette, watching Asher’s expression go from pleased to confused. He sighed smoke, “Alright, come on in.”

Royce turned around again, gesturing to the walls with much less enthusiasm, “As I was saying, all I have to do now is build it. That’s going to take some work, though. Going to take some doing. But not just yet. I want to do a little more research first, I want to understand it before I just go ahead and...” he glanced back over his shoulder, addressing Grant, “Why did you bring him, anyway?”

The Administrator replied with a smile and a tiny shrug, “I was going to take you out to dinner if you weren’t too busy. I told Asher he should come along. He’s been wanting to talk to you since January.”

Asher tried the diplomatic route, “I was told a formal interview wouldn’t be to your taste. I don’t have very many questions; really I just wanted to talk with you about your work.”

Royce folded his arms, looking between his two guests, “What was the plan for dinner?”

Grant made a noncommittal gesture, “Junction Jan’s?”

A pause, Royce nodded. “Sounds good, let me just...” he looked down at the paint on his clothes, “get changed. Give me a minute.” He snuffed his cigarette in the topmost ashtray on the stack and retreated into a side room.

Grant looked to Asher and nodded in approval, keeping his voice low, “Good on you for standing your ground.”

“I’ve dealt with worse.”

Grant nodded again and drifted away to examine the walls. Asher busied himself by visually dissecting the pile of furniture in the middle of the room. The bulk of it was a smallish and well-worn sofa, its seats occupied by a pair of large cardboard boxes and a plastic milk-crate full of file folders. The top of a standing lamp emerged from somewhere in the middle of the collection. The side-table had seen a few too many years, it seemed to teeter under the weight of the coffee-maker. Asher couldn’t help but wonder why the engineer needed so many ashtrays. One end of a larger table was visible from the back side of the pile, stacked with books from what could be seen. At one side of the collection was a drafting table; although a part of the condensed chaos by proximity, it was clear of any extraneous objects, the few pencils and tools on it were arranged with immaculate precision.

Asher approached Grant, who was examining one of the diagrams on the far wall. It bore an eerie resemblance to an eye. “Grant?” he ventured quietly.

“Hm?”

“Is this,” he took another look around, “normal for him?”

“No, this is... definitely exceptional.”

Asher took a step back, trying to decipher the engineer’s hieroglyphs. Royce emerged from his room and approached silently, startling the younger man when he spoke.

“You won’t find any typos here.” Asher spun to face him. Royce didn’t react, “And I doubt you’d see the errors in the math. If there were any.”

This close, Asher had a chance to get a good look at the solitary artist. Just above average size, Royce had a few inches on Asher in height, but his lanky build made him appear to be taller than he truly was. Not just lean, the artist was genuinely thin. The way his shirt and jacket fit, it looked as though he had lost weight recently. Even his face seemed to be going gaunt; sharp cheekbones and narrow features, wide green eyes with a permanent watchful expression, half hidden under ink-black hair that was somewhere between unkempt and naturally curly.

Fortunately for the editor, Royce's attention was fixed on Grant, who was still looking over the walls of text. "Make sense to you?" he asked the Administrator.

"Not a lick." Grant turned to face him, indicating the mass of furniture by tilting his head, "You did all this by yourself? I could have helped if you wanted."

"I realize I'm not in the best shape, Grant, but I'm not an invalid. I can shove around furniture and carry a few cans of paint on my own."

Grant held up his hands, "Just an offer." His placating gesture turned into a motion to the door, "Shall we?"

"After you two." Royce seemed to restrain himself from ushering them out, waiting for them to pass before taking one last glance at his handiwork, turning out the lights and locking up his studio.

Out of habit, Asher headed to the front passenger seat of Grant's car. Before he could amend his decision and offer it to Royce, the engineer had already made his way around the back of the vehicle, taking the rear seat on the driver's side. It wasn't until they were on the road that he realized why Royce had not objected. The way he sat, Asher could not see the other passenger in either the side or rear-view mirrors; to look at Royce he would have to turn around. Inwardly he credited the engineer's cleverness, choosing a spot where he could observe without being observed.

The ride to the spot colloquially known as the 'Junction,' where a number of transit lines as well as the South, Midtown and Goldwalk districts converged, was spent in silence. To Asher it felt tense, but he realized he was the odd man out, having nothing but his thoughts to occupy himself. Grant was focussed on navigating the slow-moving traffic. Royce was probably exhausted, though Asher was too timid to turn to look at him, dreading the keen attention of those vivid green eyes.

A chill mix of snow and rain began to fall just as they ducked inside Junction Jan's. Normally busy, the small restaurant was quiet given the inclement weather and late hour.

Asher nearly missed the look that passed between his two older companions. Royce went straight to the counter and placed an order –which Asher overheard, "Extra-large Sea Monster"– then went to go claim a table.

Asher moved to follow him to the seats but was nudged towards the counter by Grant. "Don't expect him to share," the Administrator warned in a whisper, "get something for yourself."

"Alright, umm..." Asher drummed his fingers on the counter, "Two-slice combo with a Harvest and Deluxe. Grant?"

"Panzerotti." When Asher began to open his bag, Grant touched his arm to stop him, "My treat."

"Even though...? Well, thank-you."

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Royce had downed half of his extra-large flatbread before he finally agreed to talk to Asher. The other half he left in the box, which he closed and folded his arms over, enjoying the heat still radiating through the cardboard.

Grant hadn't bothered to hide his amusement over the course of their meal, as Asher had tried and failed more than once to engage the engineer in conversation. Royce had been too busy with his food to even express irritation or disapproval. Asher was forced to resign himself to picking at his meal between tapping down quick notes on his tablet.

Although not a novelist, Asher often liked to think in character sketches, especially for his interviewees. He had found in the past that it made conveying context to his readers much easier, giving them a well-rounded understanding of his subject without having to spend word-count and space on details.

Royce was a fascinating subject, the brief glimpse at his studio gave plenty of clues to his personality and private life. The compacted clutter of the studio had stood in sharp contrast to the orderly drafting table beside it. The sheer scale of the work put into his latest 'breakthrough' had turned his living space into one giant whiteboard. Even the engineer's own shape betrayed his work ethic; his thin build and hollowing features versus his ridiculous appetite. Royce Bracket was a man who would put his work –precise and ordered– before his own comfort and life without fail, even to the point of near starvation. Asher had seen it with other artists. To some, the body was expendable; it was the mind that truly mattered.

The engineer's mannerisms and interactions offered some information as well. With Grant, a man he had known presumably for years, he was still edgy and brusque. Slow to trust or defensive by nature? Probably the latter. He wasn't so much skittish as he was moody, and Grant had said 'reclusive' was being polite. But 'tangled'...where did that come in?

"Alright, Smith," Royce was leaning over his flatbread box, almost resting his chin on his arms, "I see you've been taking notes. How about some questions?"

Asher hadn't prepared a list, and he missed the opportunity to pretend that he had, merely asking the first thing that came to mind. "When was the last time you ate?"

Royce hummed, leaning his cheek in the bend of his elbow, "Probably around the last time I slept, so... three-ish days ago?"

Grant was not impressed, "Seriously?"

"What?" Royce turned his hands palms-up, "I was busy."

"Busy with what, exactly?" Asher cut in as politely as he could, forestalling what he felt might turn into an argument, "I mean, I saw the writing, but what were you working on?"

Royce sat up a bit and considered his answer, "...Not yet. It's not done yet. But, when it is..." a shadow of worry crossed his face, quickly replaced by a tight, wily smile, "When it is, you'll know. You'll have your story."

Asher nodded slowly, committing the answer to memory rather than writing it down. He wasn't sure if he wanted to print it. "I don't usually like to chase rumours but given the topic of my column it's sometimes a bit unavoidable. Last month I heard you walked out of a meeting with the Administrative Council. Just... stood up and walked out. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Royce blinked, "*Why?* What do you mean 'why'? Didn't Grant tell you?"

"He said he wasn't at liberty to discuss it. I assume he didn't want to do you the disservice of paraphrasing your opinions?" He looked to Grant, who nodded solemnly.

Royce seemed satisfied with that answer. "Well, thank-you for having the courtesy not to speak for me." He sat up fully, taking time to collect his thoughts, fingertips of both hands pressed together. "Mr. Smith..."

"Please, just call me—"

"Your work is fleeting." Asher balked, Royce ignored it and kept talking, "You know that, right? You're a columnist, it's the nature of what you do. It's done well, but done fast and put out. And the next day you do it again. You're used to it, right?"

"Y-Yes..."

Royce pressed his palms down on the tabletop, leaning forward, voice flat but forceful. "Well *I'm not*." He sat back, "When I design something, I expect it to *last*. The people of Cloudbank seem to think that it is appropriate for *buildings* to be as temporary as any one of their *other* silly little whims." He took a breath, tone turning lighter but feeling strained, "I enjoyed the challenge for a while, truly I did enjoy it. It kept me busy, kept me on my toes so to speak. It was good mental exercise, it kept my designs innovative, fresh. But I don't care who you are... *no one* exercises for months on end. It would be beyond exhausting. Never taking a break? Never having time to recover? For something physical that's just plain dangerous. For something mental...?"

"So you were exhausted."

"*No*. I was insulted. I tried to find a remedy for this flux that dominates Cloudbank. I tried. I thought I had it. It started with the Spine of the World, the moveable bridge. It was brilliant— and it seemed so easy! It was different, so people liked it, but it was practical, so I loved it. I got to thinking, what if I could design more buildings like the Spine? What if I could integrate multiple functions into a building so it wouldn't have to be replaced, just adjusted and repurposed? The same amount of work for a much greater payoff, a more lasting structure..."

Royce stalled, his shoulders sagged and he looked down at the table as if he had dropped something. The energy went out of his voice, now soft and uncertain. “The Council turned them down. Every design, *every single one...*” He shrugged, “So I left. I walked out. They said Cloudbank wasn’t ready— wasn’t ready for the only thing that could keep it stable? If they wanted to keep things going the way they were, I wasn’t going to be a part of it. I have better things to do with my time. If I’m going to be deprived of food and sleep it’s going to be for something *I* want.”

Asher had typed in a blur as Royce spoke. He took a few seconds to look over his notes before writing down and asking another question, “Would you consider yourself retired, then?”

“Unofficially retired. I’m still hard at work, as you’ve seen. Very hard at work. But my focus is on private projects. I still intend to make a difference in Cloudbank, don’t get me wrong. But it’s going to be... different... Different from my usual work.” Royce pondered his last statement before nodding to himself, “Is that enough for you?”

“Yes, thank-you, Mr. Bracket.”

“Good. If you’ll excuse me.” Royce stood and buttoned his jacket, then swept outside.

Asher watched him through the window, catching the fluid two-handed motion the engineer used to retrieve and light a cigarette; left hand bringing it to his lips, right hand quickly sparking and stowing his lighter. He stood outside, leaning back against the corner of the building, just under the eave to stay out of the sleet.

The editor scrolled through his shorthand notes. Bringing across the injured passion with which Royce spoke was going to be difficult. Direct quotations were probably not a good idea. A well-described paraphrasing would do it justice, though.

Grant settled back in his chair, looking relieved. “Well, that went better than I had expected. He’s still upset, but much better than I expected.”

“He seemed pretty controlled to me.”

“Only because he doesn’t get actively angry. You can tell he’s worked up by how he speaks, he repeats himself.” Grant looked to Asher and lowered his voice, “Don’t tell him I told you that. He’s not aware when he does it, sometimes it’s the only clue I have when he gets like this.”

“Grant, thank-you so much for this.”

“Thank Royce.”

“I don’t think he’d accept it right now. I’ll let him know when I go, but do you think you could tell him as well? I’m very grateful to both of you for this.” Asher looked outside again, spotting Royce’s shoulder around the corner of the building. “I think... he just wants to be heard. To be the one to do that for him, it means a lot.”

“To both of you, I’m sure.”

The two of them lapsed into silence. Grant seemed content just to sit and observe, watching the pedestrian traffic outside, listening to the faint sounds of the kitchen, of the rain. Asher nibbled on the partial crust he had left behind, stealing the occasional glance outside over Grant’s shoulder. Royce had shifted and was more easily visible through the window; he stood with his head back and eyes closed, breathing deeply.

“Poor guy...” Asher didn’t realize he had spoken aloud until Grant responded.

“Don’t let him catch you doing *that*.”

“Huh? Doing what?”

“Feeling sorry for him. He’d never forgive you.”

“Oh... I can see what you meant by ‘tangled.’ He’s not exactly complicated, it’s a simple desire that he has, he’s just all...” Asher sought out a good synonym, watching Royce lean out of cover to wet his face in the rain, then rub it dry on his sleeve, “mixed up by the world around him. He just wants to be left alone to do his job, doesn’t he?”

Grant nodded.

“How long have you known him?”

A pause as Grant did the math, “About sixteen years. We met at a science and engineering expo. It feels like ages ago now. Everyone else was presenting some flashy technology; prototype terminals and weather controllers. Royce had building designs. When I told him he was in the wrong place, I meant it as a joke, but he took one look at my Admin ID badge and said ‘so are you.’”

Asher raised an eyebrow, “And... *that* was the start of your friendship?”

“I admired his candour, there was something endearing about it to me. He said he liked how ‘level’ I was. We kept in contact and, well...” he gestured loosely to the setting around them, “here we are. He’s pretty much always been like this, so don’t feel too bad for him.”

Grant looked to the door. Royce held it open for a couple who dashed in out of the freezing rain; a woman with scarlet red hair holding the collar of her jacket up to keep warm, and a man whose face was mostly covered by his scarf. The engineer let the door fall partway shut, snuffing his cigarette inside a nearby garbage can, then caught the door and slipped inside.

Asher watched the couple cross the floor to the counter. The man pulled down his scarf to say something into his partner’s ear; she shoved him away playfully. He heard her place their order— perplexed at the apparent popularity of the seafood flatbread. Despite himself, he felt a small but sudden pang of envy.

Royce returned to the table, picked up his box and propped it on his hip. Though he kept his expression neutral, it was clear he had settled. “We ready to go?”

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Asher had been reluctant to reveal his address, trying to casually deflect any offers to be dropped off at home. However between gentle coaxing from Grant and the weather that refused to improve, he was forced to acquiesce. Grant pulled up outside one of the smaller towers on the west end of the Highrise district. Only a few minutes from the Junction by car, but a long walk on a cold night.

The editor gathered his bag and zipped up his coat, “Thanks for dinner, Grant.” He turned to look at the back driver’s-side seat; Royce was lounging against the window with his eyes closed. “And, Mr. Bracket?” Green eyes opened to acknowledge him. “Thank-you very much for your time, I’m sorry if I’ve disturbed your work. I can send you an advance draft of the article if you’d like.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Alright... Goodnight, and thank-you both.” He ducked out of the car and ran to the front stoop.

Grant waited for him to close the apartment door before pulling away from the curb and looking for a route back to the South district. “So, are you feeling any better?”

Royce looked out the window, “I am, actually. I wasn’t really that upset, I just got agitated having to explain myself to some stranger. How long has this Smith character been hanging around with you?”

“Since November. He came to me about some research he had been doing on Cloudbank’s history and I’ve been working with him pretty regularly since. Asher’s a good man. Clever, very diligent.”

“Very brave, too.”

“You’re not terribly intimidating, Royce.”

“I was referring to you.”

“Hah...” Grant glanced behind himself at his passenger, “So what do you think?”

“Of Asher?” Royce tapped his lips with one finger, “I think I like him... But don’t tell him I said that.”

“He was really very grateful for the chance to talk to you. He wanted me to thank you for him.” Royce just grunted. “I suppose I shouldn’t make a habit of bringing him along?”

“Let’s...” Royce tapped his cheek, deep in thought, “Let’s not rule anything out just yet...”

“What’s on your mind?”

“A lot, Grant. Quite a lot.”

Chapter 3: Part 3.1: March

Chapter Summary

March()

Grant overnights at Asher's apartment for the first time and meets Asher's cat. Asher accidentally spends the day out with Royce on an urban safari.

Asher looked up from his pile of papers at Grant. Despite his best efforts not to do so, the older man was falling asleep. Nearly eight straight hours of work in the Archives had worn them both down. Coffee had failed them, and food had long since ceased to help. Asher was only still awake by sheer force of stubborn will.

Grant was slouched forward against the table, head leaning in one hand. Wisps of silver hair had fallen out of his samurai top-knot. His small round reading glasses had slipped down his nose. Asher lifted a hand but stalled. An excuse to make contact. He laid a hand on his arm.

“Grant?” The older man made an indistinct sound, Asher squeezed his arm, “*Grant.*”

“What?” Grant jerked awake, sitting up abruptly, “What? I’m up. I’m...” he looked at Asher and his soft expression of disbelief, “I’m not going to lie to you.” Grant took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, “I fell asleep again. I think I’m done for tonight.”

“That’s fine by me,” Asher gathered up his scattered documents, doing his best to keep them organized but not really caring, “We covered a lot of ground. I think it’s a good time to stop.”

“What time *is* it?” Grant fumbled for his watch, squinting at it, “Two in the morning,” he pocketed it, rubbing his eyes again, “...and I am in no shape to drive back to Midtown.”

“You could stay at my place,” Asher offered, sounding a bit too eager to his own ears. Perhaps Grant would miss that? “I mean, I don’t have much to offer, but if you don’t mind sleeping on a sofa it’ll save you the cab fare. It’s like five minutes from here to Highrise by metro.”

Grant moved slowly, stowing his glasses and taking up his coat from the back of his chair, “You don’t mind?”

“I don’t mind at all. You’ve been so good to me these past few months– it’s not much, but it’s the least I could do.”

“Thank-you, Asher. Truly.”

“Don’t thank me yet, we still need to get there.”

It was a dry cold, but the brisk March night did little to keep them up. Asher had to lean his cheek on the window of the metro car to stay awake, nudging Grant on occasion to be sure he too was still conscious. Asher only lived on the second floor of his building, around an awkward corner in the narrow hallway.

“Oh, I hope you’re not allergic to cats,” he mumbled, fishing his keys out of his messenger bag.

“I’m fine with cats.”

“Okay good...” Asher stumbled inside, almost tripping over the cat in question. He dropped his bag and hung up his coat in automatic motions, kicking off his shoes.

Grant was more careful in following his host’s lead. He knelt down and offered a hand to the small black cat that had come to greet them. “Who’s this?”

“This is Mimi.” Asher crouched down as well, addressing his pet as he scratched her head, “Hey you, sorry I was out so late.” Mimi reared up on her hind legs to bump foreheads with him, then dropped back down and trotted away.

Asher stood up, “She’s really friendly, she’s just been stir-crazy because of the weather. So...” he gestured to the small flat; the main room consisting entirely of a sofa, coffee table, TV, and kitchenette. “Welcome to my... whatever. Tiny apartment.” He scratched at the back of his neck, both tired and nervous, “Bedroom’s over there, you can take it if you want and I can sleep on the sofa...”

“I’ll be fine,” Grant sat heavily on the sofa, sinking into it.

“You’re sure? Let me just—”

“Asher, get some rest.”

“Okay... Oh, Mimi’s not a face-sleeper but she may try to curl up with you, just so you know.”

“Thank-you. Goodnight, Asher.”

“G’night...” Asher retreated into his room. He managed to pull off his belt before falling face-first and fully-clothed onto his bed, unconscious the moment he hit the mattress.

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The morning passed by mostly ignored. It was only a few hours until noon by the time Asher managed to drag himself out of bed. He had nearly forgotten about his guest until he was heading back from the washroom to get changed.

Grant was stretched out on the sofa, still asleep, his head propped up on one armrest. His shirt, tie and waistcoat were slung over the back of the sofa, leaving him in a sleeveless undershirt that exposed his arms up to the shoulders. As predicted, Mimi had settled onto his chest. Asher nearly tapped the cat to wake her and shoo her away. Why this small stab of jealousy?

Cooking helped him stifle his rising flustered mood, and Mimi came to join him in the kitchenette the instant she heard things moving. The cat's leap from her perch must have woken Grant, he sat up and called out to his host from the sofa.

"Good morning, Asher."

Between the eggs he was tending and the cat at his ankles, Asher could only spare a glance back at his guest, "Morning, Grant. How do you take your eggs?"

"However."

"Toast?"

"Sure."

Asher huffed at his pet rubbing against his legs and pawing at the hem of his pants, "Mimi, cut it out! I'll get your breakfast in a second." He took the pan off the burner and loaded his toaster before tending to his feline friend, pulling a bag of dry food out of a cupboard and filling her dish, "The way you carry on you'd think I never feed you." He stroked Mimi's back while she ate, addressing Grant, "She didn't bother you at all, did she?"

"Hardly noticed her, I slept like a rock."

"That's good. Breakfast is almost ready, just waiting on the toast and the kettle. I don't have any coffee, would you like tea instead?"

"Tea would be lovely, thank you."

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Mimi was up on Grant's lap the instant he sat down on the sofa after breakfast. He finally had a chance to get a good look at her while he played with her. Though he had first assumed she was completely black, her paws and tail-tip were a contrasting caramel-brown. He spent a few minutes petting her sides and scratching her head and back absently while his host dealt with the dishes. Asher glanced over with a smile that might have been worried, speaking from across the room.

"She really likes you."

"You did say she was friendly."

“Yeah but she doesn’t usually go looking for attention like that. I think she really likes you.”

Mimi flopped sideways against Grant’s leg, letting him rub her belly, “She’s with you in a couple of your file portraits, isn’t she? I was wondering for a while if she was just an interesting prop or if you actually owned a cat.”

“I’ve had her for a few years now. I usually carry her around with me, I’ve just been leaving her at home because of the weather. She gets cold easily but she doesn’t like being squished up inside my coat when I’m out and about, so I leave her at home over the winter.”

Grant left off rubbing Mimi’s chest to feel her purr under his hand, “How did you get in the habit of bringing her with you? Weren’t you worried she’d run off?”

“No, she’s really good about staying with me. I’ve been doing it for so long I don’t think it’s ever crossed her mind.”

Asher joined him on the sofa, sitting down at a polite distance at the far end. Mimi got up to bound over to him. He leaned over so they could bump foreheads—a typical greeting, it seemed—and Mimi leapt up onto his bowed shoulders, settling across them like a scarf as he sat up. He scratched her head, “Mimi’s sort of like a therapy animal for me. I used to get really bad panic attacks through college; it was suggested I try keeping an animal with me. As you can imagine, it was a bit more difficult when she was a kitten, but she got used to being out in public as she grew up.” He brushed a finger over her little brown paws, Mimi kneaded his shoulder in response, “Sometimes I feel like she’s better with people than I am...”

Asher had sounded almost rueful. Grant tried some gentle encouragement. “I think you’re quite good with people.”

“For my job, sure, not so much on my own.”

Grant leaned back, folding his hands across his stomach. He tried a different approach to cheering his friend, “Must be nice to have the constant companionship, though. Unconditionally.”

“Yeah...” Asher smiled and tickled the tip of Mimi’s tail, clearly proud of his pet.

The cat stood up on some whim, hopping from her perch onto the back of the sofa and trotting over to Grant. When he sat up to look at her, she stretched out her neck and touched the tip of his nose with hers. Grant stroked her back and she rubbed her cheek along his jaw, scratching herself on his beard. He chuckled quietly, “You’re sure she’s not like this with everyone?”

“No, she really likes you.” Asher looked away, a bit wistful, “She has good taste.”

Grant let the statement hang for a moment, unsure of how to respond. It had been spoken innocently enough—then again, Asher had turned away to say it. It wasn’t the first

time something like this had come up, but in the past Grant had attributed it to the shyness that came with unfamiliarity. Now, though?

He picked Mimi up from the back of the sofa and set her down in his lap again. The black cat looked up at him with ruby-coloured eyes. "Thank-you for letting me stay," he said lightly, more to the cat than to his host, "I really appreciate it."

Asher looked over, a genuine smile on his dark features, "You're always welcome, Grant. Like I said, you've been really good to me lately, helping with my research and everything..." One hand reached up to play with his straw-blond hair, an odd contrast with his brown skin, "I just wanted to pay you back somehow."

"It was very thoughtful of you."

"I couldn't just let you drive home like that... Oh—! I'm not keeping you from work, am I?"

"No one's expecting me in today. I will have to go back to the Towers to get my car but that's about it. I'll probably go straight home from there." Mimi curled into a ball against his leg, he stroked her back, "What about you? I'm not keeping you from anything, am I?"

"No, I was just going to run a few errands today; hit the bank, see if I can find anything at the library. Mostly an excuse to get outside on my day off. Might as well while the weather's not bad." A pause for consideration, then, "Want to come with?"

Grant was tempted, but, "No, I have a few things to take care of at home. Thank-you, though."

"I suppose I should let you go, then?"

"I'm not in any rush."

"Uh, heh," Asher affected an awkward laugh, mirroring the tone of his last question with a hint of sarcasm, "I suppose I should kick you out, then?" he went back to his earnest tone, "Not to be rude, but I wanted to get going on the sooner side, since we both slept in so late. You don't mind, do you?"

"I don't mind..." Grant looked down at Mimi, who didn't seem intent on moving, "But she might."

"Well I guess I'll just have to have you over again, if only for her sake," Asher restrained a laugh, scratching behind one of Mimi's ears. The cat flicked her ear and opened her eyes. "What do you think, Mimi?" The cat stood up, yawned, stretched, shook herself and hopped off the sofa, wandering away. Asher blinked, "Oh... I guess she'll get back to you."

"I should be on my way, then." Grant stood and retrieved his shirt, shaking it out and donning it. Next his waistcoat, which he left unbuttoned; and his tie, which he simply hung around his neck. "Which stop was it on the metro to get to Bracket Towers?"

“Fourth stop, get out on the east platform if you can, it’ll save you having to cross the street.”

Grant pulled on his shoes, taking up his coat. One hand on the door, he turned back to his host with a gentle smile. “Thank-you again, Asher.”

“See you later, Grant.”

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The day was sunny and clear, crisp and cold, but not unpleasant. The warm sunlight made the chilly breeze bearable. Asher had opted to take the scenic route and walk, rather than take transit, to the west end of the Goldwalk district.

On his way from the bank to the library, Asher caught sight of something he wouldn’t have guessed he’d ever see out in Goldwalk: Royce Bracket. The engineer was stopped in a small pedestrian crowd on the corner diagonal from Asher, laden with a large backpack, a camera slung around his neck. Crowned with an oversized pair of headphones, it was obvious he was well into whatever he was listening to; shifting his weight from foot to foot with more rhythm than someone who just wanted to keep warm.

Asher had every intention of letting Royce go on his way, assuming he had not been spotted. However he looked over again when a sharp whistle sounded from across the street. Royce appeared to be waving at him. Asher looked around, then pointed to himself, at a loss. Royce pointed intently at him, then to the next sidewalk corner that he was crossing to. Asher waited for the light, then crossed to meet with Royce.

“Smith!” Royce paused his music and pulled off his headphones, arranging them in the folds of his scarf as he hung them around his neck.

“Mr. Bracket?”

The engineer spoke quickly, “Are you busy?”

“Not really—”

“Better question; can you work a camera?”

“I— yeah, well enough—”

“Here, take this,” Royce pulled the camera off and handed it to Asher, “Mind the lens, it’s a loaner.”

“Wait, what—”

“Come on, I need your help with something.” Forgoing further explanation, Royce headed off down the block. When he noticed Asher had stalled he turned back and called out to him, “Come on, Smith, keep up!”

Asher huffed and jogged after him. He didn't like being addressed by his last name. "Please just call me Asher," he blurted when he caught up.

Royce stopped in his tracks and turned around, one brow raised for a moment before they both lowered, unsatisfied about something. "Alright," he turned again and resumed his quick pace, "Since you asked politely."

"Where are we going?"

"Just keep that camera ready." Royce swung the backpack off one shoulder to zip it open, digging around with one hand. He pulled a can of spray-paint out, tucked it into his jacket pocket, then zipped up the bag and slung it on both shoulders again. He uncapped the can and began shaking, "You'll need it in a minute."

Asher's mind made a few leaps— he picked up his pace to cut in front of Royce, turning around to jog backwards ahead of him. "Whoa, hold on a second!"

"What?"

The editor did his best to sound diplomatic, "Look, Mr. Bracket, I realize the Admins upset you, but—"

"But *what*?" Royce stopped again and looked at the can in his hand, then at Asher. "Really, Sm— *Asher*: You *really* think I'm going to vandalize a couple blocks of Goldwalk because I lost my job? If I was going to be petty I'd find a more creative way to do it. This is just to keep track of them."

"Keep track of what?"

The reply was nothing short of condescending, "Keep that camera ready and I'll show you. Now come on," Royce set off again, "We've probably lost the one I saw earlier."

Asher rolled his eyes and followed, already frustrated with Royce's manner. But a small part of him dreaded what might happen if he chose to simply walk away with the engineer's camera. Still, it was an opportunity to observe the elusive man outside his natural habitat.

He had expected Royce to show a bit more discomfort navigating the pedestrian mass that flowed through Goldwalk, but Asher found himself following close in the engineer's wake as he wove a path through the crowd in a way that —he was both surprised and impressed to admit— could only be described as graceful. Even sporting an overstuffed backpack, Royce moved in such a way that prevented people from so much as brushing against him as they passed. The engineer kept his gaze up over the crowd, and although he himself could not see it, Asher was certain he was following something.

It was a couple blocks before Royce slowed down and veered from the main street, "Here, this way." Down a quieter avenue, he slowed almost to a stop; a hunter stalking his prey. "There it is, get the camera ready."

“Wait, I don’t...” Asher squinted ahead of himself, seeing only the handful of distant pedestrians and a few parked cars on the empty street. He lifted the camera and checked the viewfinder: the scene remained the same, with Royce approaching a spot just in front of the nearest parked car. Asher lowered the camera, “Mr. Bracket, what am I...?”

Royce reached out with the paint can, spraying something in a quick circle— to Asher it appeared only to hit empty air. Whatever Royce had tagged with paint emitted a blinding flash, stunning the pair of them; Asher heard Royce cry out and felt something whirr by him at high speed.

When Asher recovered his sight, he found Royce bent over, one arm covering his eyes. He straightened up, squinting and blinking cautiously, looking over to Asher.

“Ah... Did you get it?”

“Get what?” Asher rubbed his eyes, “What was that flash?”

“Oh for...” Royce shut his eyes and passed a hand over his face, “Give me the camera, you take the bag.”

They made the switch— Asher staggered under the weight of the backpack. “What’s *in* here?”

“A lot of stuff. I’m still not entirely sure what I’m dealing with so I came prepared.”

“Prepared for *what*?” Asher tried and failed to sound interested, heavy concern straining his voice. To him it was perfectly justified; at first the idea had crossed his mind that Royce might be hallucinating, regardless of how lucid he seemed. The camera-like flash may have proved that theory wrong, but still.

Royce fiddled with the camera, ignoring the younger man’s tone, “Should have figured you can’t see them, no one else can either. Here,” he walked over, looking at the review screen on the camera’s back, “Take a look at this.” He showed Asher the screen: an image of part of a building in the early evening light.

“What am I supposed to be seeing? Is this outside your studio?”

“It is. But here, *this*,” he pulled a pen from his pocket and pointed to a section of the screen, tracing a circle with the tip, “please tell me you see that.”

“It’s...” Asher focused on the image; at first glance it was just a lens flare, but a closer look revealed the streetlight nearest the anomaly was out. There was nothing to create that sort of pattern. A white ring. “Wait... it looks... like a camera lens, or the front of an old webcam?”

Royce sighed, the sound of genuine vindication, “Yes. That’s what we’re after. They’re about...” he stepped back and spread his hands in a rough measure, about two and a half feet in between, “That big across, lots of little lenses in a ring of white metal, big red cell

on the back. The one I just sprayed will have some fluorescent orange on it. If we're quick, we can probably catch it on the next street over."

Asher stood and stared for a moment, helpless in his mix of confusion and disbelief. Royce lowered his arms and stared back for a few seconds.

"Alright, you can stop looking at me like I'm crazy now."

"But... what *is* it?"

"I don't *know*, Asher. Why do you think I'm out here taking pictures of *it* taking pictures of other stuff? One flew into my building the other day, I think it came in through the window or something— it wasn't too cold out during the day so they were open. I found it taking pictures of my work and chased it outside, trying to get a shot of it before it flew away." He looked down at the image displayed on the camera, "I've been seeing them everywhere since. Everywhere. They're all over the city, just watching us."

"Everywhere...?" Asher felt a wave of cold pass through him, horrified at the thought of being constantly monitored. A thought occurred to him, a hybrid of a fear and a hope, "Wait, do you think Grant would—?"

"Grant wouldn't know anything about them. They're not Admin surveillance drones, they're something else entirely, that's what makes this so exciting!"

"I wouldn't say 'exciting'..."

Royce smirked at him, "But look, you're so excited you're shaking. Come on, let's use that adrenaline to run to the next street over and see if it came back down."

"Why would..." Asher looked down, breathing a hopeless sigh. He realized what was coming even before Royce said it.

"You're not getting out of this now. I can't move quick enough with the backpack *and* the camera to get any good pictures. I *need* your help, Asher."

Asher hitched up the backpack and tightened the straps. "Lead on."

It wasn't the sprint Asher had been expecting; they headed back to the main street and continued their search at a swift jog, talking along the way.

"They're not terribly bright, more like pigeons. They'll come back down to the ground once they think they're safe."

"What on earth is in this bag?"

"Everything I thought I'd need and a few extra things just in case. There!"

They slowed to a halt on the corner. Their quarry had come back down a little further in to the side street than last time. It hovered around the wrought-iron railing of a building's front stairs, then over to a parked car, up to a street lamp, then to another car. Royce passed

the can of spray-paint to Asher and approached slowly, camera held low at his chest. The strange machine didn't notice him at first, he managed to get quite close before it swivelled around to face him. Asher found himself in awe once again, witnessing a greater display of civility than Royce had offered even to Grant.

"Hey there, bright eyes," the engineer greeted the camera-thing softly. It rose up in alarm but he held up one hand to show he only carried his own camera, "Don't worry, I won't hurt you. Just out taking pictures." When it lowered again he smiled at it with complete confidence. Asher saw it flash a few times and heard the click of shutters as it took a few snaps of Royce.

"Alright, that's- hey!" Royce held up a hand to its lens, as if deflecting a curious paparazzo, "That's enough. It's my turn." He raised his camera but the machine shied away. "Ah, right. Sorry about the unwarranted paint-job, I can't imagine you're too happy about that. Hey, if I clean you up, will you let me take a few pictures of you?" There was a pause, then a shutter-click. Royce looked back to his companion, "Asher, there should be a few cloths and a can of paint-thinner in the bag, can you bring them to me? Slowly?"

Asher took off the backpack and dug through it, glancing up on occasion to keep an eye on the situation. He found what he was looking for and approached at a measured pace, being sure to hold things in such a way that the machine would see them. Royce took the camera off his neck and traded for the cloths and the paint-thinner.

"Thanks." The engineer turned to the strange machine, dampening a cloth in its view. "Turn around for me? This should just take a second." Royce worked with the gentle attention of an artist, scrubbing the obnoxious orange paint from the machine's outer ring. "There we go. I know you and your little friends are all about the uniform, I'd hate for you to get into trouble on my account... And... Done."

The machine turned again to face him, clicking a few times. Royce dropped the cloths and motioned for his camera. "Now, would you mind? Just hold still..." The engineer took a couple quick pictures of his own. He made a circling gesture with one hand, "Turn a little for me?" Oddly enough, the camera-thing obliged, letting him take pictures of its sides and back. The machine turned back- the pair caught full-face pictures of one another's lenses before it took off, darting up over the buildings and retreating from sight.

Royce reviewed the images, casually ignoring Asher's continued gape of amazement. "Not bad, a little too close for the lens I'm using but they're still clear..."

"Droid-whisperer," was all Asher managed to say.

"Oh, well thank-you, but that wasn't really my intention."

"But you... Why weren't you that nice to *me* when we first met?"

Royce looked up at him, nonplussed, "Because you were an uninvited guest in my workspace?"

Asher opened his mouth to object, but shut it again. It was true, he had no right to argue there.

Royce gathered up the cloths and can of paint-thinner, returning them to the backpack wrapped in a smaller plastic bag, stowed the can of spray-paint, and sat down by his supplies on the curb. Asher sat next to him and leaned over to take a look at the images he had captured: impressive close-up stills of the bizarre machine, all immaculate white metal and unsettling ruby lenses.

“Snapshot,” Royce muttered.

“Hm?”

“I think that’s what I’ll call them for now, seems to be their thing.”

Asher felt he had finally settled, he took a deep breath. “So, what now?”

Royce looked at him with an expression of well-meaning mischief, “Still not busy?”

Chapter 4: Part 3.2: March

Chapter Summary

Continue(March())

Asher and Royce continue their urban safari. Later on, Royce has an unexpected encounter with the Process.

Touring Goldwalk with Royce, Asher saw an entirely new dimension of the city, one he had not even been aware existed. Although ‘seeing them everywhere’ had been exaggeration on Royce’s part, the strange machine-beings he had discovered were indeed much more common than Asher would have guessed.

That afternoon the pair of them discovered and named a form Royce had been unfamiliar with. Asher spotted it hop-skipping through a tangle of discarded furniture as they detoured through a back-alley to avoid the crowds. An egg-shaped body on top of skinny black bird legs, one red eye set in its front face. The editor accidentally startled it by knocking over a garbage can, and so Royce let him name it for the bizarre chicken-like noise it had made when it ran away.

“Clucker.”

Royce made a sound that might have been a laugh, “As good a name as any.”

“Really?”

“Sure, why not? There’s no real rhyme or reason to how I’ve named them so far.”

Asher looked down the alleyway again, empty but for the obstacle course of junk. “Did you want to follow it?”

Royce adjusted the backpack— they had switched back and forth several times over the past two hours, “Let’s go around, I’m not wading through that.”

Asher reviewed the photos they had taken as Royce led the way through the back street around the building. Previously they had encountered and photographed another form Royce had already named; a tripod-like thing with one huge central eye he called a ‘Creep.’ Royce had neglected to explain precisely why he had given them that designation. They had also spotted a pair of Snapshots taking pictures of billboards along the main drag of Goldwalk.

“So, Royce?”

“Watch your step.”

“Thanks... What did you say you called these things again? As a whole?”

“I had actually given them a name before I saw any physical instances of them. I did some serious interpolation on the data I had about how buildings are put up and taken down in Cloudbank; at first something didn’t add up, but last month I found what was missing.”

“Was that the nebulous ‘breakthrough’ you wanted to show Grant the night we met?”

“The very same. There was another force acting in Cloudbank beyond what its human population did. For lack of a better name I called it ‘The Process.’ I— Hold on a second.” He stopped and turned to Asher, eyeing him critically, “You called me ‘Royce.’ What happened to the formal address?”

“I...” honestly it had been a slip, “figured since I asked you just to call me ‘Asher’...” Royce raised an eyebrow, but Asher stayed collected, “I didn’t think you’d mind. It’s a lot quicker. If you feel it’s too familiar, I can go back to calling you ‘Mr. Bracket.’ Seems a bit much, to me.”

The engineer blinked, “Fair. It is quicker.” He kept walking, “Anyway, I think the name fits considering what they seem to do around here. I’m willing to bet the Snapshots are some kind of recording or surveillance form, since they don’t seem to have a preference for subject matter. I’m a little less sure about Creeps. They just sort of...”

Royce stalled again and glanced back over his shoulder, Asher followed his gaze. A Creep had snuck into the alley behind them, some meters away. It tapped a pointed foot on the pavement and rolled its crimson eye as if trying to look innocent. Royce glared at it, “Sort of lurk around. Can’t say I care for it.” He turned forward again and continued on, taking the first left they reached. “Cluckers are something new, though. I’d like to see what this one gets up to once it calms down.”

Royce managed to track the Clucker through the increasingly maze-like warren of blind alleys and backstreets that formed the residential fringes of Goldwalk. Asher had to admire his keen sense of direction. He himself had gotten lost some time ago, and he was starting to feel like they were going in circles.

“Royce?”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Sorry... It’s just, I think we’re lost.”

“Asher, if it wasn’t a gross exaggeration of how my subconscious works, I would flippantly tell you that I *dream* in grids. I know exactly where I am. I drew these streets myself.”

“Okay but where—”

“There!” Royce pointed ahead; further down an alley even narrower than the one they were following was the Clucker. It pawed at the pavement and looked around as if it too was

uncertain of its location. He led Asher a bit closer, then gestured for him to stop at the intersection of another alleyway. “If you’re worried about getting lost, trade me for the camera and stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“You’re sure?”

They traded equipment, Royce keeping an eye on their quarry. “I’m not just going to leave you here, Asher, you’ve got all my stuff. I’ll be *right back*. Don’t worry, just stay put.”

Royce readied the camera and approached the Clucker. It stood up straight when it saw him and bolted when he tried to crouch down close to it. Asher took a few steps into the alley, but Royce noticed when he looked back and pointed for him to stay put. The engineer took a turn and disappeared into another alley. Asher hesitated for a few seconds, then jogged after him. He refused to be left behind. As long as he kept up and kept Royce in view, he knew he wouldn’t get lost.

Asher had to run to keep pace with Royce. But when the engineer stopped dead the editor, unprepared, ran headlong into his back. The pair staggered into something. Something big and white. Royce huffed and shoved Asher back, more mad at him than concerned with the thing in front of them.

It turned to face them. Balanced on a single point, its core was a red eye the size of a beach ball, its upper body a huge mantle of white metal, sporting a vertical slit-eye of yet more baleful red. Arms like segmented pistons hung from either shoulder, tipped with long blunt claws. It glared down on them, unmoving.

Royce rubbed his forehead where he had collided with the massive machine. “*Jerk*,” he spat, addressing no one in particular, but the machine seemed to take offense. It let out a growling sound somewhere between the grating of metal and the grinding of teeth, so deep both men felt it in their chests.

They stared up at the hulking machine. Royce kept his voice to a strangled whisper. “Asher? Remember how I told you to stay put?”

“Yeah?” the reply was more breath than word.

The machine scraped its claws along the pavement, pounding the ground with metal fists and letting loose another grating bellow. Royce began backing up, pushing Asher with him “Now I think I’d like you to run!”

Asher found himself seized by the arm and dragged into a sprint back the way they had come. The alley wasn’t quite wide enough for them to run side-by-side; Royce took the lead, still pulling Asher by the arm. Behind them the sound of metal grating and clashing on concrete refused to fade. Asher recognized they were coming up on the intersection where he had been told to stay. Royce shouted directions at him: “Left-left-right-left and straight on to the park!” then pushed him down the left route as he ran to the right.

Surprising himself, Asher managed to remember the combination of directions he had been given. The cacophony of metal on concrete fell silent behind him. Hopefully –he

checked himself, ‘hopefully?’ – whatever that thing was had decided to chase Royce instead. Still, splitting up was ideal, it couldn’t follow both of them at once. Hopefully –genuinely– Royce wasn’t unduly confident in his ability to escape it.

The first left had been given to him, another left, then right, then left, and straight; true to his word, the engineer’s directions led down a side-street to a wide open park just across the main road. Despite the cool weather, the warm sunlight and clear sky meant that the space was very much in use; children in coats, joggers, people with dogs, couples just strolling along. Asher slowed to a jog, then to a walk, then slumped down on a bench facing back the way he had come.

Panting, he shrugged off the heavy backpack. Where was Royce? Asher knew he had the heavier load, shouldn’t Royce have made it to safety before him? But that was assuming he had taken a similar route. Perhaps he had gone a more round-about way, knowing the machine would opt to chase him rather than Asher.

He struggled out of his coat, hoping to cool off faster. The Snapshot and the Creeps, the Clucker, they had seemed fairly innocuous. But that thing? Definitely dangerous. Asher sat back, still trying to settle his breathing. Maybe it wasn’t really aggressive. Maybe they – maybe *he*– had just made it mad by running into it. Or maybe Royce had made it mad by accidentally insulting it.

Where *was* Royce? A few minutes more and still nothing. Asher pulled his coat back on, getting cold again. He scanned the far sidewalk, hoping to catch sight of

Royce’s bright white jacket. He shook his head, dispelling a brief but awful mental image of that red-and-white machine making the engineer into a red-and-white paste in some back alley.

Asher jumped when someone sat down next to him. Royce! Though the engineer had calmed his own breathing, there was still a faint wheeze in each exhalation. He took the camera off his neck and set it down between them, then dug through the pockets of his jacket. Asher watched him toy with his lighter before sparking it, trying to keep his hands from shaking.

Royce took the cigarette from his mouth, still stuck in a panic-grin, “Bet you any money that was *way* more exciting that whatever *you* were planning to do today.”

“*Yeah* it was. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Royce almost laughed, jittery, “Just fine.”

“What took you so long?” For an answer, Royce passed his cigarette to his right hand, patting the camera with his left. Asher shook his head in disbelief, “You didn’t...”

The engineer blew smoke and nodded, “All for science, Asher. It’s all in the name of science.”

“You could have gotten yourself killed,” though spoken calmly with genuine concern, Asher received a glare when he said it.

“Yes, Asher, I am *very* aware of that.” Royce sat forward, leaning his elbows on his knees. He passed his cigarette back to his left hand, but Asher watched his right. It strayed up to his neck, near his jaw. Was he checking his pulse? “*Very* aware,” he repeated.

Asher tried to brighten his tone, “Did you get any good pictures?”

“See for yourself.”

Asher took up the camera and went through the images. The most recent ones were first; he went all the way back to the last image he remembered taking: two Snapshots eyeing a poster for a band called Facsimile. He clicked through the following photos in order, getting a chronological view of Royce’s ill-fated pursuit of the Clucker: the Clucker stalled at an intersection, the Clucker running away down an alley, then one of it ducking behind the huge white machine they had run right into.

This is where the chase had begun: a few blurry and only partial images probably taken over Royce’s shoulder without looking, one of the large machine at a distance partially obscured by the corner of a wall in the foreground, and one excellent head-on shot of the machine framed by a narrow alley. Asher hoped the closeness and amount of detail were due to the camera’s zoom lens, not Royce’s own recklessness. The next three images seemed to be taken from above, with the machine leering up from street level. It took Asher a moment to realize what exactly had happened, there was no way he would have—

“Did you take these from someone’s fire-escape?”

“Indeed I did.”

“But what if it—?”

“Climbed after me? Tore down the ladder?” Royce leaned one arm on the backrest of the bench, a sly smile beginning to form on his face, “Asher, I might be out of shape but I’m far more clever than your average...” he looked over at the image, lip curling in disdain, “Jerk.” He took a drag on his cigarette, exhaling away from Asher, “I climbed across to someone’s balcony out of its view and took another ladder down.” He pointed to the camera, “It stood there waiting for me to come back before it gave up and left. Take a look.”

Sure enough, the next few images were side views of the machine looking up at the side of a building. The last image was of its back.

“They’re really not very bright,” the engineer assured him.

Asher couldn’t resist, he made sure to keep the jest in his voice, “And what does that say about you?”

To the editor’s surprise, Royce played along, affecting injured pride, “Fine, then. Maybe I won’t ask for your help next time.”

“I think I’d actually be okay with that.”

“Suit yourself,” Royce plucked the camera from his hands. “I think I’m probably done for now. One near-death experience is more than enough for today.” He took another look at the photos, tired but satisfied.

“Did you decide on what to call them?”

“Designation: Jerk.”

Asher laughed. Royce looked over, expression and voice flat, “This is very serious research, Asher.” His severity made the editor laugh again. Royce made an effort to resist but quickly broke; he grinned and snorted instead of outright laughing. “Really though, thanks for your help. We got a lot done today.”

Asher smiled, genuinely flattered, “Oh, thank-you. But... maybe don’t ask me to come along on something like this again.”

“No promises.” Royce turned the camera off and hung it around his neck. He hefted the backpack, slinging it over his shoulders one at a time. He turned as if to leave. “This stays between us, understand? No writing about it, no talking about it. Not even with Grant, not until I tell him first.”

“Alright.”

“And, Asher...” Royce took a pensive drag on his cigarette, considering his next words, almost sighing when he exhaled, “Thanks again.”

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Royce slept for nearly six hours after returning from his expedition. It was well after nightfall when he struggled out of bed. Something had woken him. A sound, but not his neighbours. It was an electronic sound, a hum? No, a pulse... another one. Clicking, buzzing like the sound a Creep made, but higher. The Process had invaded his studio.

He pushed the door of his room open partway, peering through the crack into the dark of his studio. Four red lights gleamed in the darkness, hovering a rough foot-and-a-half above the floor. One flared in conjunction with the pulsing sound, he saw the shot travel in a blink; a tiny muzzle flash for a tiny projectile. Another one fired. What were they aiming at? Another shot, he saw the target in the red-orange flash. His camera! Up on the table, just barely within their reach.

Royce slipped out through the door, moving along the wall as silently as he could manage. The little Process forms were focussed on the camera, they either didn’t see him or didn’t care. He skirted around them, approaching the jumble of furniture in the middle of his main room. Gradually he had loosened up the pile, moving things almost back to where they belonged, but the sofa, lamp and table still remained clumped together.

Another shot hit the camera, pushing it off the table onto the floor. Royce lunged for the lamp, clicking it on and picking it up to wield it like a staff. The Process scattered. Cells, the most basic form the Process could take, but they were different. Black instead of white, single red eyes hooded by a point in a permanent angry glare, gentle curves turned to sharp angles. Something was wrong with them.

The black Cells shrank from the light, darting away into the shadows when he turned the lamp to them. What were they doing here? How did they get in? One shot at his feet— he stepped away. Another one shot at the camera— he turned the lamp on it, scaring it away, glancing at the camera. The outer case was dented and... bleached? Flat and white, featureless. How?

The Cells opened fire. Royce vaulted over his sofa, ducking behind it for cover. His camera was not so lucky; each hit caused the weird white transformation to spread over the dented case. A Cell twitched closer to the camera, within his view. He jabbed the base of the lamp at it, catching its red lens-eye and cracking it. It went berserk, darting around at random until he managed to hit it again, crushing it under the lamp base.

The pulsing sounded again, the other Cells firing desperately but failing to realize their target was hidden. At a lull in the sound, Royce hopped back over the sofa, catching another Cell and crushing it under the lamp. He turned the light on the remaining two; they retreated into the dark, buzzing with rage, red eyes glaring back at him.

Standoff. Royce wanted to chase them, but he knew he was limited by the length of the lamp cord. He would have to stand his ground and defend. The two remaining Cells twitched around in the dim corners, trying to find an angle of approach. One shot him in the leg —he bit back a cry of pain— the other focussed fire on the camera.

He kicked the near one, the one that had shot him. It rebounded off the wall and he swung the lamp diagonally, knocking off its rounded head, making it fall to pieces. The other Cell stopped shooting the camera; it managed to get another shot on Royce, catching him on the forearm, before he struck it with the bulb-end of the lamp. The lightbulb shattered and the Cell exploded, leaving him blinded by sparks in the dark.

Royce slumped down on the sofa to catch his breath. What had just happened? Cells were supposed to be docile, mindless. Why had these ones attacked him? Why were they different? It was like they had gone bad...

He set the lamp upright, turned it off just to be safe, and stood slowly. There was a fierce ache in his leg where he had been hit, but it didn't feel as if it were bleeding. He limped to his front door in the dark and felt for the main light switch. Closing his eyes, he flicked it on, taking a moment to get adjusted before surveying his studio.

The Cells —the Badcells— seemed to have left no other trace of themselves beyond the damage they had done. No black shrapnel or broken red glass, just scorch marks on the floor where he had dispatched them. Where had their materials gone? They were still made of *stuff*, why was there none of it left?

A few of their pellet shots had went wide, leaving pockmarks in his walls, the sofa had been punctured in places but not severely damaged. His camera, however, was hardly its old self. A perfect geometric block of featureless white lay on the floor where his camera had been, the only hint of its old shape were the smaller cuboids adjoined where the lens and viewfinder should have been. The floor beneath it had been affected too. In fact, the two were fused; the ex-camera stuck to a patch of pixelated whiteness on the wood floor.

Royce sat down on the ground and stared at it. The whole day's work, and every expedition before that, gone. All photo records he had of the Process, simply obliterated. The camera lens he had borrowed would have to be replaced as well.

But how had they gotten in? He had made sure all of the windows at his end of the hall were closed. His door was always locked. How had they...?

He looked up. The vents! The ductwork so tastelessly hidden by stucco ceiling tiles was large enough for them to squeeze through. The vent grate in the ceiling near his kitchenette door had been broken open. Of course. But why? Did the Process not appreciate his attention? Or were those spoiled cells just random vandals?

Royce stood and dug through the pile of books on his table, freeing up a small notebook and plucking a pencil from his drafting desk. He roughed out a sketch of the Badcells, noting their aggression and aversion to light. Back to basics, it seemed. He would have to do this for every form he had identified so far. Hopefully the Process was less likely to destroy paper records than digital ones.

Chapter 5: Part 4: April

Chapter Summary

April()

Royce sets his plan in motion and makes some considerable strides, much to Grant's concern. The two finally get their hands on the ultimate tool of influence over Cloudbank; Royce names it the Transistor.

NB: The following chapter has not been rewritten since its original draft. Further plays of the game have made me realize the following events cannot be considered canon-compliant. The chapter has been left as-is.

It was a cold night, the last night of March. Stray flecks of rain drifted in the wind; the sky coated by dark grey clouds, lit pale green from below by light pollution. It was only a few minutes until midnight, and Royce was just waking up.

He ducked out the back door of his building, bundled up in his jacket and scarf, a small bag over his shoulder. He scaled the fire-escape up to the gravel roof. A mostly nocturnal life had its trade-offs, to be certain, but it hardly troubled him. The first thing he wanted to do today was wait for tomorrow. The first few minutes of April would be a show he didn't want to miss.

Situated near the northern edge of the roof, he unpacked his small bag: a travel mug of black coffee, a pair of binoculars, his netbook computer attached to a bizarre antenna-like peripheral of his own design. Royce got himself settled, leaning back against a fan unit; computer on his lap, binoculars at one hand, coffee at the other. He booted up a custom program and watched the clock of his computer. All systems green, 11:56. Almost there.

A few sips of coffee to warm himself up. He regretted not bringing a hat– or headphones, music might make this a bit better. 11:57, he still had time. Music would only improve the spectacle, it wasn't like he would hear anything from this far away. Royce set down his computer and dashed for the fire-escape, climbing back down as fast as he could manage in the cold. He fumbled his keys at the back door, hissing through his teeth, trying to stay calm. He had time, he wouldn't miss a thing.

Headphones found, retrieved. Studio locked, back outside, up the ladders, onto the roof. He checked the time, 11:59. Perfect. He synched his headphones to his computer and searched through his music. There was only one song for this. Only one, and it would be perfect.

12:00. Royce sparked his lighter and lit a cigarette to the slinky guitar intro. A voice like crimson silk sang to him. A contented, smoky sigh to the first verse. On the northern

horizon he saw movement, and heard the chorus.

I see the Spine of the World,

Sparkle and shine, light the inside...

I see the Spine of the World,

I know its line, twisted and tied...

A bone-white shape was shifting, rising over the buildings around it. A pale segmented snake reared up over the skyline, oh-so-slowly to the second verse, the chorus. Its base rested somewhere in Midtown. Its head, once settled near Bracket Towers, now perched atop its graceful s-curved length, looking down on the district below it.

I see the Spine, so come with me,

We'll fly right over, right over...

Watch it break if we get closer,

Much closer...

Royce raised a toast to his creation, fluid and flawless as the song in its honour.

I see the Spine of the World,

Sparkle and shine, light the inside...

I see the Spine of the World,

You know it's mine, twisted and tied...

Royce took a long draught of coffee, an even longer pull on his cigarette. Perfect. Just perfect. He hadn't even needed the binoculars. For tonight, it could only get better from here.

His computer chirped at him, making him jump. An incoming call. Already? OVC certainly worked fast. He answered the call; a stern baritone spoke into his ears. Grant was making an effort to restrain himself.

"Royce."

"Morning, Grant."

“Why am I getting calls at midnight that something is happening with the Spine?”

“Happy April Fools’ Day, Grant.” Silence. Royce took a sip of coffee, “That clown Shasberg is going to have to work pretty hard to top *that*.”

More silence, Grant must have been struggling for words. There were a few uncertain, frustrated noises before he spoke again.

“Sixteen years. Sixteen years I’ve known you and not once have you even mentioned April Fool’s Day except to condemn it as idiotic.”

“That is correct.”

“...And now you do this?”

“Well to be perfectly honest I had forgotten we were coming up on April first. I just wanted to do a little experiment with the Spine without having to contend with pedestrians. When I realized the date, I couldn’t resist turning it into –let’s face it, Grant– one hell of an awesome prank.”

“Someone could have been hurt!”

“You don’t think I considered that? What do you take me for, Grant? Honestly. The Spine’s internal surveillance systems prevent it from moving while there’s anyone inside. It shuts off the thoroughfare one end at a time to keep people from wandering in and waits until it’s empty with adequate ground clearance before it mobilizes. Simple, elegant, and for the rest of the month, hilarious.”

“The rest of the month?”

“It’s important, Grant. People can manage without it for a while. If anyone starts to complain later on, just tell them it’s down for maintenance.”

A heavy breath, *“I’m trusting you on this, Royce.”*

“Don’t worry yourself, Grant. I have everything under control. Completely under control.”

“Alright...”

“Though before you go back to bed, you may want to be sure none of the other Admins do anything rash like declare a state of emergency or call the 18th on me. I’d greatly appreciate that. Somehow I’ve managed to keep a clean record this long, I’d like it to stay that way. Besides, what I’ve done isn’t illegal, just inconvenient.”

“Goodnight, Royce.”

“Night, Grant.”

The call ended. Royce took a drag on his cigarette and laughed. It was an unusual, quiet sound that seemed to stick in his throat, rough-edged from years of smoking.

It had been too long, far too long since he had enacted a prank of any magnitude. Such devious creations had been a staple of his childhood; a tangible but mostly harmless expression of mental superiority over his peers. Something that had gone forgotten until now. But tonight— that self-proclaimed ‘Magician’ Shomar Shasberg would have to do something pretty damn creative to overshadow the Spine. And the people? They could take the long way to Bracket Towers and back. He needed the Spine empty for the next step: narrowing down his theories until only the truth remained.

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Grant was beginning to suspect there was something genuinely wrong with Royce. After April first, he hadn’t heard anything from him for almost two weeks. That wasn’t unusual. But the first message he received from Royce was not a direct call, as they often were. He was pinged by an OVC terminal out on the street; the screen displaying his personal icon, indicating there was a message for him.

On trying to retrieve it, the log-in sound for the terminal seemed distorted, and it displayed a screen he had never seen before. Orange instead of the typical blue, it showed a single question: *how did we meet? --royce*

He had paused to think. A riddle? Naming the expo would have been too easy, too obvious. What would Royce want to hear? He had typed out his answer uncertainly: *You were in the wrong place.*

A short message had rewarded his correct answer, flashing onscreen for a moment: *welcome to the private channel, i’ll get you a proper log-in later.*

Then the actual message was displayed. The text was indirect at best, and concerning: *grant--*

the spine was the key, i knew it.

i knew they’d be drawn to it. they’re so easy to study now, so calm.

i can’t wait to show you, but things aren’t ready yet, not yet.

but soon, very soon. i’m on to something. --royce

Similar messages followed throughout the month. One of the earlier ones detailed a list of renovations to be made to the Spine of the World, along with an admission that Royce was loath to alter his work but it had to be done. The list was prefaced with a request that Grant submit it to the council as his own suggestions. It also included an explanation that any alterations made to the Spine were, legally, Royce’s responsibility, but had to be approved by the Administration first. It didn’t seem too far-fetched to the other Admins, whom Grant had

previously needed to persuade that the Spine was indeed just out of commission for maintenance.

When the barriers went up for construction, Asher had asked him what was happening. He knew as well as Grant did that the Spine was Royce's dearest creation, he wouldn't have allowed any renovations to be done unless they were absolutely necessary. Though it had felt like a severe breach of their trust, Grant had given the same explanation to Asher as he had to the council. His obligation to Royce came first. He could owe Asher a proper explanation later.

Finally, at the end of the month, the last message in the strange and cryptic string arrived. The header was titled *[No_more_theories]*. The message was still burned into his mind:

tonight i will be going in again.

this time i'm 100% positively certain.

i've figured it out!

tomorrow you will see it too.

exciting times! exciting times.

soon we will celebrate. --royce

The following afternoon, Grant had received a quick call from Royce, requesting to meet 'at the usual place', referring to the pub. No further explanation had been given. He was unsure whether to be concerned or relieved. Perhaps it was better to be neither, and simply wait for whatever news Royce had to share. Wait and see whether his friend was still sane.

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May first, a lazy showering rain had been falling throughout the day bringing a chill to the late spring evening. Grant ducked into the pub and shook out his umbrella. The place was quiet, as usual. Royce was seated at the single table near the back. He seemed preoccupied with something. When Grant approached it looked as if the engineer was playing with something on the tabletop, like a cat batting a toy between its forepaws. He couldn't see clearly what it was, but Royce caught it and held it down with one hand when he noticed his friend.

"Grant!" The engineer's excited grin only made him more concerned. "I was worried you wouldn't meet me here. Sit down, please!"

Grant remained standing, "Why would you think I wouldn't meet you?"

"You stopped responding to my messages," Royce drummed the tabletop with the fingers of his free hand, "I got worried you'd given up."

Grant sat, eyeing him cautiously, “Given up on what?”

“On the *cause*, Grant. I’ve *found* it, for real this time! I know how to save Cloudbank!”

“Royce, stop,” Grant kept his voice as calm and level as he could, “Look, I know you get into your work, and I know how excited you get, but you have to stop. The past month you’ve been sending me messages about something— I don’t even know what, you never told me. You’ve just been typing at me like a madman. I’m getting worried that whatever you’re working on is...affecting you.”

Royce blinked, looking more sad than offended, “You don’t believe me.”

“No, I *do* believe you. That’s the part that scares me. Royce...just tell me what’s going on.”

Royce drummed the tabletop again, “You might need a drink, this could get a bit...heavy.” He glanced around for a server, “Have you eaten yet?”

Grant just shook his head.

“Then dinner’s on me.”

Royce ordered drinks, Grant ordered food. While they waited, Royce fiddled with whatever he had been playing with before, then stowed it in his jacket pocket. He kept drumming on the tabletop while he examined his friend.

“How have you been, Grant?” The older man blinked; was he serious? “It’s been a while since we’ve had a good talk.” Before he could reply, Royce held up a hand, “I know you’re concerned about me, you’ve made that very clear, but I want to hear about you.”

Their order came. Grant considered his meal for a moment before starting. Royce, as he usually did, toyed with his drink while he worked on it. Grant spent a few minutes eating in quiet contemplation. He didn’t like Royce’s manner or the sudden change of subject, but the question was honest, and it was important. As antisocial as he could be, he knew he could confide in his friend.

“I’m having a bit of a personal crisis, Royce...”

“Not of the mid-life variety, I hope?”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s just a bit ambitious at fifty-something. Sorry, go on.”

Grant shook his head, recollecting his thoughts, “Well my age is part of it. I’ve been dwelling on it lately. Over thirty years in service to the city, what do I have to show for it? Some loyal voters, a lower crime rate, a charity portfolio befitting a philanthropist, a condo in Midtown and a nice car...” He took a pull from his drink. Bitter. “An empty home and a hollow heart. I haven’t done a single thing for myself in all those years. Not a damn thing.”

Royce was watching him, emotionless but attentive. He nodded slowly. Grant took another drink, “You know what it’s like. If you’re working to please the majority you’re not allowed to have an opinion. If you do, you keep it to yourself. Over thirty years I’ve never had a voice of my own. I’m tired, Royce. I’m tired of playing the part. Wearing the mask...Cloudbank is falling apart, it’s unstable. Dying from the inside out. And there’s nothing I can do...”

“Maybe not you alone,” Royce cupped his drink with both hands, “But I’m willing to help.”

“And what can you do? What can either of us do? We’re just two people.”

Royce took a sip of his drink. Irish coffee again. He licked the cream off his top lip, “What would you be willing to do?” Grant had almost taken a drink, he set his glass down. Royce’s tone stayed eerily level, “Really. What would you be willing to do, Grant, to save Cloudbank from itself...? Be honest.”

Grant looked out the window by their table. Neon lights coloured the rain. The city was beautiful at night. It was always beautiful, and he wanted it to stay that way. “I love this city, Royce. I hate what it’s doing to me, yet I can’t help but love it. I’ve already done everything I can do...I’m willing to try anything else.” He took a long sip of his drink. There, he had said it. “Anything...anything is better for Cloudbank than this.”

Royce nodded, “And you would know,” he said softly, taking another drink, “I think you’re ready. Finish up, Grant, there’s something I want to show you. Take your time, though. We’ve got all night.”

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Royce brought them to the Spine of the World. Despite the rash of complaints in the previous month, Grant had forgotten the colossal construction was not performing its intended duty. It was reared up over the city like a striking snake, looking out across the skyline. The pointed base of its tail rested in the central square of the Midtown district, blocked off from public access by construction barriers. Grant parked his car at home and the two of them walked in the rain to the Spine. Royce avoided the cover of Grant’s umbrella, enjoying the light shower.

Royce temporarily disabled one of the holographic barriers, allowing them access to the moveable bridge. A chink in the bone-coloured plates of its tail was labelled as a maintenance hatch. Grant took a moment to examine the Spine.

“There’s something different about it.”

“Well I did suggest you instate some changes. Here, Grant, take a look at this.” Royce ducked under the umbrella and dug into his pocket, pulling out whatever it was he had been playing with in the pub. “If I asked you about the Process, would you know what I was referring to?”

“Probably not.”

“Alright, if I showed you *this*,” he held out his hand, “would you recognize it?” Settled in the engineer’s palm was a white sphere of metal a little larger than an apple; a huge red lens set flush with its surface reacted like an eye, the aperture behind it contracting abruptly in the orange glare of the streetlights. Two rhomboid wings of flat black were associated with but not attached to it, they fluttered like those of a small insect.

Grant watched the tiny machine watch him back. “I’ve seen these around...” he reached out to touch it but the machine let out a high-pitched buzz, vibrating its wings. “There are larger ones, too. I see them every so often around the city. They take care of the place, I think. Don’t they?”

“Indeed they do.”

“And what did you call them?”

“The Process. You know, it’s kind of funny, not many people even see them until they’re pointed out directly. I think people in Cloudbank are so used to them they just fade into the background, become part of the scenery. The past few months I’ve been studying them extensively—”

“You knew they’d be drawn to it...” Grant murmured, looking up at the Spine again.

“Exactly. Now I want to show you what I’ve been working on, or rather, what I’ve finally finished. I think you’re ready.” He looked down at the tiny machine in his hand, speaking gently to it, “I need you to go find your friends. Let them know I’m here, alright?” The sphere buzzed and fluttered away, up along the length of the Spine to disappear into one of the gaps in its plating. “Now then,” Royce opened the maintenance hatch, gesturing inside, “Come take a look at my latest work.”

The inside of the Spine was supposed to be a covered pedestrian thoroughfare; stained glass windows of abstract art revealing the world outside, while a simple geometric pattern decorated the concourse underfoot. However, whatever alterations had been made to the Spine, aside from its orientation, had changed it entirely.

The inside of the Spine was alive; a mass of white, flecked with red and black, teeming with movement like an insect hive. All through the curving vertical shaft, myriad forms of the Process flew, crawled, and milled about like a crowd of people, producing a dull roar of synthetic clicks, buzzes and hums. Grant stood in silent awe. He had caught glimpses of the Process on occasion in the past, here and there around the city. He had never paid them any mind. They weren’t dangerous, they weren’t a hindrance; they could be left alone.

“Royce...”

“Like I said, Grant. I knew they’d be drawn to it.”

“...What have you done...?”

“What does it look like?” Royce wandered into the centre of the crowd, lifted his arms and turned back to Grant, “I made some friends!”

Grant picked his way through the mass of machines. Most of them seemed to ignore him. One of them, an airborne ring with a camera lens at its centre, hovered by to examine him. He shielded his face from its sudden camera-flash.

“Hey!”

“Relax, Grant, they just want to get a good look at you.”

Grant held a stony glare for a few pictures before the machine flew off, “Is this what you wanted to show me?”

“Part of it, but not the best part. We have to go up.”

“I’m not climbing.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it covered.” Royce reached up; the small spherical thing he had released to be his herald had returned to him. Following in its wake, filtering down from the top of the Spine, was a huge swarm of similar forms. They made no more noise than a whispering crowd as they flocked around the two men. “We need to get up to the top,” the engineer told them, “Can you take us?”

At his request, the swarm clustered together, hovering just above the floor in a bobbing carpet of metal. Royce clambered awkwardly onto it, not quite able to stand. He beckoned Grant to kneel down next to him.

The older man shook his head, “*No* thank-you. Now I think I’d rather climb.”

“It’d be a long way up on foot, all around the edges. They don’t like stairs.”

“I don’t trust it.”

“Oh come on, Grant,” Royce flopped backwards onto the swarm, limbs outstretched. A faint chuckle rang in his voice, “It’s kind of like a water-bed.”

“Made of metal?”

Royce sat up, “I worked really hard on this. Are you coming or not?”

There would be no reasoning with him. Grant stepped up onto the swarm and knelt next to his friend. Strangely it wasn’t entirely uncomfortable, the Process buoyed them up with some degree of gentleness. On some unseen cue, the swarm lifted off.

The Process had rimmed the Spine with sloping ramps and ledges. At every level there were clusters of the strange machines, some watching their ascent, others tending some ubiquitous work. The inside surface of the Spine was no longer the concrete and glass it had been, but a smooth and constant sheet of white. The same white as the Process itself.

“They changed it...” Grant looked over to Royce. He was lying on his back again, teasing the winged sphere with the tips of his fingers.

“They’re just making themselves at home. I can change it back.”

“How?”

Royce pointed to the platform as they drew level with it, “Let me show you.”

The spiralling ramps that lined the Spine all converged on this central point, up near the head of the massive construction. The pair dismounted from the swarm, which dispersed behind them. Royce indicated the object of his intent.

Sunk into a plain cubic pedestal of white was an object the like of which Grant had never seen. A triangular hilt and gold handle topped a sword-like blade of translucent blue-green, set with a huge red lens like an eye. Its surface was traced with pale blue circuits, sharp gold contacts flared from the lower end of the blade. The whole thing was more than five feet in length from pommel to tip, the blade almost a foot wide and the hilt even wider.

One word entered his mind and passed his lips with a reverent fear, “*Excalibur...*”

“Beg pardon?” Royce looked between Grant and the strange object, “Oh. I suppose it does look rather like a sword, doesn’t it?”

Grant took a few steps closer, “If it’s not a sword then what is it?”

“I call it the ‘Transistor.’”

“Did you build it?”

“Not exactly, I had a lot of help...acquiring it, though.” Royce gestured loosely to the Process all around them.

“So...What does this thing do? Will it let you control the Process?”

“In theory, yes. That’s what I aim to find out tonight.”

“You haven’t tested it?”

“Nope.” Royce held out a hand, directing Grant to the Transistor. “Care to do the honours?”

Grant held up his hands and backed away, “Your destiny, Arthur.”

“Excuse me...? Oh, right. Sword in the stone,” Royce paced over to the Transistor, taking the handle in both hands, “You’ve gone a bit medieval on me, Grant. I know you’re old-fashioned but that’s a little much.”

Royce tightened his grip on the hilt of the Transistor and, with a grunt, pulled it free of its pedestal. He staggered under the weight of it for a moment, then held it aloft. A pause:

nothing.

Royce flipped the Transistor point-down again and let it rest on the floor. “Heavy piece of work,” he huffed.

Grant looked around, “Did anything happen?”

“Wait for it...” Royce held up a hand, then slowly brought it to his ear. All around them the constant noise of the Process was dying away. Grant felt a million red eyes turn their attention on the two men.

Royce looked around with a critical squint. He lifted the Transistor enough to walk with it, “Take us back down,” he said, as if to nothing in particular. But as he stepped off the edge of the platform –Grant lunging to catch him– the flying swarm reassembled under his feet. “Don’t worry, Grant,” he said in a mellow, almost patronizing tone, “They wouldn’t let me fall...Coming?”

The swarm ferried them back down to ground level; all around them the Process stood in haunting stillness. Waiting? Royce took his place at the centre of the Spine, both hands on the red glass pommel of the Transistor, looking uncharacteristically regal.

The eye-lens on the blade of the device alit with a harsh red glow. The engineer’s voice echoed in the still, vaulted space. “I know you can all hear me. I know you like the changes you’ve made to the Spine of the World. You’ve done a fine job of making yourselves at home in my work, but I want to see it changed back. I have a new design I want to try, and I think you’ll all agree it’s much better than the last one.” There was a faint stirring in the multitude. Royce continued, “For the windows, I want a palette of gold and white. Warm oranges and browns, black and red for accents. I invite you each to leave your mark, you know what I want to see.”

The glow left the eye-lens, and the Process took action. A few smaller forms, shaped like satellite dishes, took aim at the inner walls of the Spine. A shifting force-field crept up the height of the Spine but stopped partway, then vanished. The dishes redirected their aim to the two men at ground level; both Grant and Royce found themselves encapsulated in refractive domes of energy as other forms of the Process set to work on the Spine itself.

Grant pushed on the dome around him. “What is this? It’s like glass.”

“And yet completely permeable to air,” at Grant’s curious look, Royce shrugged, “I did the math on how long it should have taken me to suffocate assuming the barriers were impermeable.”

“And then you just waited around to see if it happened?”

“*Obviously* I would have noticed something was wrong and stopped before I passed out.” Royce tapped the barrier, “Usually they set these up around whatever they’re working on to keep the area secure. There was too much surface area on the inside of the Spine so they opted to shield us instead. Considerate, don’t you think?”

Grant watched the Process at work, rewriting blank walls into colour and detail. Had they done the same in reverse when they had claimed the Spine as their own? “So this is supposed to save Cloudbank? I thought you said you wanted to avoid change.”

“The first thing we do is *ease* change. By using the Process we take the strain off civic resources that can be better spent elsewhere. The next step is slowing change, showing people the value of permanence. The last step...” Royce looked down at the Transistor, “If this thing is capable of what I think it is...is taking direct control of Cloudbank. What do you think?”

Grant knew he should have been shocked, even appalled at the idea of taking Cloudbank for his own. But somehow, he wasn't. It was for the best. In truth, he was already starting to like the idea. “I think you'll need my help running the place.”

“Sounds good to me. I think our new friends are nearly done their work.” Royce pointed up along the length of the Spine. The previous mosaic, once rendered in greens and blues, had been replaced with a warm palette and abstract representations of the Process. Red eyes, pale scales, and metallic circuit-like symbols now decorated the Spine of the World. Royce offered the Transistor handle-first to Grant when the fields around them were taken down. “Care to make any changes of your own?”

Grant took the strange weapon, marvelling at the deceptive weight of the thing in his hands. “How do I do what you just did?”

“Just focus on it. Try to imagine seeing through the Transistor's eye, and envision the change you want.”

Grant did as bidden, trying to imagine what it would be like to see through that lidless red lens. It was far brighter than his own eyes; saturated, high-definition, extra-dimensional. The eye alit and he felt as if a part of himself was being drawn into the device, but with near-imperceptible slowness. He fought the pull to craft his own vision for the Spine. Grant spoke aloud to the Process, “I want the concourse changed. Update the geometric pattern to a circuit motif. Right in the centre of the Spine, I want to see the Cloudbank emblem in silver and gold. It should span the whole width of the walkway, oriented to face the tail.” He shivered when he released control, passing the Transistor back to Royce before they were shielded again. “That's...very strange...I like it.”

“Good. But we have to be careful with this thing, I suspect it's much more powerful than it lets on.” They watched the Process at work, sharing a breath of satisfaction. “So what do you think, Grant? Was it worth the worry and the wait?”

“I hate to admit it, Royce, but it always is with you.” He nodded firmly when Royce met his gaze, “Let's save our city.”

Chapter 6: Part 5: May

Chapter Summary

May()

Asher and Grant share dinner and drinks, and perhaps mutually say a bit more than they mean to.

Asher had invited him over after another evening in the Archives. Grant, needing a place to just sit and clear his head of the past few weeks of work, gladly accepted. He shed his jacket and waistcoat and stretched out on Asher's sofa to lay down, his head on the armrest. Immediately Mimi was up on the sofa with him, purring and probing his face with her little pink nose. He let her perch on his chest, scratching the cat behind her ears. "Hello, Mimi. It's good to see you too."

Asher sat down on the floor, leaning his back on the sofa where Grant was. "I think she really missed you, Grant."

"Did you want me to move so you can have some space?" Grant could see the screen of Asher's tablet the way it was propped on his lap.

"No, I'm alright."

"You're sure?"

"Yep."

He squinted, trying to read the small text, "What are you working on?"

"I'm covering some of the development debates. The Fairview bridge project is a pretty heated topic. I'm surprised how many people are dead set on just leaving it be. It's not like it's a new issue, either. The debates have been the same every time the bridge poll comes up." Asher looked back at him, "What do *you* think?"

Grant half-laughed. Royce had taken a sudden interest in Fairview and a few other derelict or undeveloped spots around the city. He hadn't explicitly said why, but he knew it had something to do with the Transistor; now that he had it, he was eager to use it. Grant had been doing some research on his behalf, but he knew he couldn't take sides. He kept his reply casual, almost flippant, "I'm not exactly at liberty to have an opinion on this."

"What do you mean? Of course you are."

He almost laughed again, "I'm really not. It's not just a matter of avoiding bias." Now came the part where he had to lie to Asher again, "There are a few private groups looking to

purchase property for development in Fairview. Whether or not they do hinges on the bridge poll. Some of them have contacted me directly about it.”

“And?”

“There’s nothing I can do. My hands are tied until the poll is resolved.” He watched Asher turn back to his tablet to start typing again and almost panicked, “Don’t include that,” he blurted.

“Huh? Oh, right. I guess that’s sort of confidential.”

“I’m sorry, Asher. I really don’t like keeping things from you.”

“It’s alright, I understand,” Asher smirked at him, “Top-secret Admin stuff?”

If only it were that simple. “Basically.” It was an effort to temper the regret in his voice, “I’m very sorry.”

“It’s okay, Grant, really,” he went back to writing, “I have enough to work with anyway. Though, I might have to ask you to talk to a few people for me, see if I can get some interviews set up.”

Grant stroked Mimi’s back to calm himself, keeping his voice even, “Who would you need to speak to?”

“Um,” Asher swiped at his screen and brought up a short list, “There are a few... Niola Chein, the Goldwalk advocate. She’s probably the most interesting.”

“I really respect Chein. She’s a good politician, very active.”

“Very vocal, too. She’s got her heart set on putting some outdoor gallery space in Goldwalk. Can I ask what you think about *that*?”

“You certainly can—”

“Can I quote you?” Asher tipped his head back to look at him, big blue eyes wide and eager.

Mimi hopped off Grant’s chest as he propped himself up on one elbow to look down at Asher. He had such a sweet smile, hopeful but timid. The younger man had a careful kind of shyness when they were around each other. It felt calculated, but he couldn’t tell what end it served. It made him want to wait and find out. It was going to be hard to refuse.

Still, Grant breathed a heavy sigh, “No, I’m sorry but you can’t.”

Asher was gracious in his disappointment, Mimi was at his side nudging him to cheer him up, “Well... can you tell me anyway?”

Grant settled back on the sofa again, “Personally I think it’s a good idea, even if it does edge out that metro station people have been trying to put there. The transit service from

Highrise to Goldwalk really isn't that bad, and I feel like Cloudbank could use more public art space, especially in such a high-traffic area."

Asher went back to work, nodding, "Don't worry, I won't include that."

"Thank-you."

Quiet followed and Grant closed his eyes, grateful for a chance to rest. It wasn't complete silence; there was still the drone of traffic outside, let in by a half-open window also admitting the mild breeze of a May evening. There was Asher's occasional hum, a contemplative thinking-sound, and whatever tiny noises Mimi made wandering about or searching for attention. It was a welcome quiet, though, pleasant and serene.

Grant reflected on everything he had told Asher. Too many lies to be comfortable. Outright lies, not the diplomatic half-truths he was used to dealing in. Lies, plain and simple, and not even about his work. None of it was a cover for his Administrative duties, it was all for this private project with Royce. It was certainly worth protecting; they would fix Cloudbank, they would make history, change so much for the better. *Real* change. Permanent change. For Cloudbank, of course.

But it had always been for Cloudbank. Everything, always for the good of the city. He had said to Royce not even a week ago, thirty years of service and his only personal indulgences came with the salary. Obligatory status symbols that meant nothing to him. There was no one to impress, no one to share them with. No family, no partner.

Royce knew better than to tease him about it. Then again, the engineer could wake up the last man on the planet and live the rest of his days completely content. Grant needed people, he wanted company. He'd had enough of facing the world alone. Royce was a good friend but their bond was platonic, professional. It was a comfort, but it wasn't what he wanted.

What did he want? Musing devolved into nonsense as Grant felt himself beginning to doze off. Asher's voice, though soft and thoughtful, still shocked him awake.

"You really keep a neutral face to the public, don't you?"

He'd heard this before, the reply was automatic, "You don't win elections by making enemies."

There was something akin to cynicism in the younger man's voice, "You don't bring change without making friends, either..." When Grant sat up his tone quickly shifted, contrite, "I'm sorry, that didn't— I didn't mean—"

"No, you're right," Grant's voice was light, frank. "You're absolutely right." He looked down at Asher, who still wore his apologetic expression, "Don't feel bad, Asher, I know what you meant. It's just, with the current climate and my own... personal circumstances, I have to play things close to the vest for now." Royce would not thank him for taking any risks, "But you're right. I suppose I should be branching out a bit, making some allies." When he leaned back to lay down, Mimi leapt up onto the sofa again, pouncing

onto his chest. Grant chuckled, lifting his head to touch noses with the cat, “Making some friends, too.”

“She missed you,” Asher kept his head down, still at work.

Grant scratched Mimi’s cheek, feeling her begin to purr already, “I suppose I missed her too.”

There was an abrupt pause in Asher’s typing, “She really likes you,” then he was back to work, but slowly, carefully.

There it was again. What did he mean with that tone? That timid, wistful tone. It felt like Asher was keeping something from him. It seemed fair. He was keeping Asher in the dark as well. He didn’t want to be, but it couldn’t be helped for now.

Grant looked at Mimi, who had bellied down on his chest, purring and staring at him with her big ruby eyes. The brown tip of her tail flicked back and forth. Then he looked to Asher, who had stopped typing and appeared to be reading over what he had written. Grant stroked Mimi’s back and replied in a loose, casual-sounding way, a carefully affected test of Asher’s mood, “She’s not the only one, is she?”

“What do you mean?” An even, almost concerned response and no physical tell. Either a miss, or Asher was working to stay composed.

Grant kept his voice light, “I was just thinking out loud. We’ve spent a lot of time together since you first interviewed me back in November.” He looked sidelong at Asher, “Not all of it strictly professional, either.”

“Most of it was,” blank, maybe a little bit defensive. Asher tipped his head back to look at Grant again, blue eyes mild and earnest, “But I really do like having you around, Grant. I don’t have many friends outside of work. I just... like spending time with you. You’re so different from everyone else I know.”

“Oh,” was that it? “Well, I’m flattered. Thank-you.” That didn’t seem to be what was bothering him, then. Unless he was taking the wrong approach, or Asher was just a good actor. Mimi twitched her ears and looked at Asher, she had picked up on it too. Grant tried again, “What’s so special about me?”

Asher made a noise Grant had never heard before; it sounded like it was meant to be a thoughtful hum, but it was high-pitched and nervous, he seemed to choke at the end. He coughed to clear his throat. When Mimi tried to sit up to go to her owner, Grant held her down with a gentle press. Not that he wanted to make Asher uncomfortable, but contact with the cat would settle him immediately, and Grant wanted to see what would happen if he put Asher on edge just for a little bit.

Asher cleared his throat again and took a breath, “Sorry, I...” he was stalling, picking his words, trying to brighten his tone, “I can’t really say it’s just one thing. You’ve just got this great depth of experience, I feel like I learn something new every time I talk to you. And, I don’t know, I feel... calmer... when I’m around you. Does that make sense?”

It did make sense: it was an outright lie. If this was Asher calmer than usual, Grant didn't want to see what happened when he was actually stressed. He let go of Mimi, who leapt onto Asher's shoulders and settled onto him like a living scarf. It wouldn't be fair to push him any further tonight; Asher had work to finish, after all.

Grant watched the younger man spend a minute petting the cat. No, it wasn't fair to do that to him. Especially given all that he was keeping from him. He would allow Asher his secrets from now on.

"Grant?" Asher was playing with Mimi's tail, his voice was level now, "I know you're busy tomorrow, but did you at least want to stay for dinner?"

That was an odd thing to ask, "Well I wouldn't want to impose."

"It won't be anything fancy. I was going to cook up a big batch of fried rice anyway, so you're welcome to have some if you'd like."

If Asher had been upset, he wasn't anymore, and he was trying to show it. It would be rude to refuse that kind of gesture. "Alright. Anything I can do to help?"

"Um, there's not a whole lot of room to work, so no, it's okay."

"You're sure?"

Mimi leapt from her perch back onto the sofa as Asher gathered his tablet and stood up, "You can keep Mimi distracted while I'm prepping, I guess. I won't take too long."

When Grant sat up, Mimi wandered away from him, annoyed that he had held her back from going to Asher. "Hmm... I have an idea. What do you drink?"

"Huh?"

"There's a liquor store in the Canals district about ten minutes away. What do you drink?"

"Oh, um..." Asher wandered over to take a look inside his fridge and shrugged, "Surprise me."

"Alright," Grant donned his jacket and shoes, "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Hey, Grant?"

"Hm?"

"Thanks."

"Least I could do for putting you on the spot back there," Asher blinked at him, Grant just smiled, "I'll be back in a few minutes."

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Grant came back to the smell of fried food. He set the six-pack of bottles he had bought down on the kitchen counter. "Asher, do you have any ice?"

The younger man was still tending the fried rice, "Just throw them in the freezer, I'll just be a minute."

"It's not for the beer..." Grant massaged his left hand gingerly.

"Oh... my goodness, what happened?" Asher left the rice and tried to take his hand, Grant avoided gesture by picking up the six-pack again and stowing it in the freezer.

"I forgot what a Friday night in the Canals district is like," Grant dug around and found an icepack, "It's been a long time since I've had any reason to go down there."

Asher handed him a towel to cover the pack, "Here," the editor forced a small laugh, "You get into a fight or something?"

"Almost. Thanks," Grant held the frozen bundle to his knuckles, trying to cool the spot before it began to bruise, "Had to teach some poor fool a lesson, I guess I hit him harder than I thought."

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine..." Grant allowed himself a wry smile, only partially at Asher's look of relief, "Damn kids these days need to learn to mind their manners."

Asher laughed again, genuinely this time, "I'm sorry. If I had known I was sending you out into a warzone I wouldn't have let you go alone."

"It's no big deal. I'm just glad the beer made it back safe."

Asher went back to watching his food, "Someone try to take it from you?"

"Young guy thought he could score some free drinks from me. I made sure he paid for them." Grant rubbed his hand again, looking sidelong at Asher's back, "You know, I'm surprised you like having me around. I'm a magnet for this sort of trouble."

He heard more than saw Asher smiling, "Keeps life interesting, I guess..."

Grant was smiling too, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh I was just... thinking out loud..." Asher borrowed the older man's turn of phrase from earlier with a playful lilt. "Food's done if you're hungry."

"Can you crack open a beer for me?"

"Sure."

The rice had a little bit of everything in it; simple but good. Grant wasn't sure why it surprised him. Asher had been pleased with his choice of beer; an acidic, hoppy maibock, enough to cut the grease from the fried rice without overpowering it. When praised, the younger man deflected any compliments about his cooking, claiming it was just something he'd had to teach himself to survive college. Mimi came to join them while they ate on the sofa, expressing her forgiveness by curling up in Grant's lap.

A few more bowls of rice and drinks into the evening, Grant was halfway through his second bottle, while Asher was at the bottom of his third. Grant sat slouched against the sofa on the floor with Mimi sprawled out by his leg. Asher was upside-down on the sofa, his legs hooked over the backrest and his head hanging down off the edge of the seat cushion.

Grant looked over at his host. Asher had rushed his first two drinks, in addition to having been upside-down for the past twenty minutes or so, and he was beginning to look a bit unsteady. There was something fascinating about watching him drink while inverted. "How are you managing that?"

"This?" Asher took a sip of his drink, "Something else I picked up in college."

"Sounds like a quality education."

"Hey, it got me a job at OVC, didn't it?"

"That's something I don't understand about you, Asher," Grant sat up straight and propped his elbows on the cushion behind him, "You're a grown man and a successful professional writer. Why on earth are you still living like a student?"

"Because I'm cheap." Asher took a look at his bottle, downed the last of it and set it on the floor by his head. "Actually it's... kind of embarrassing. I took on a lot of debt putting myself through school. I'm trying to get it paid off as fast as possible, so anything that doesn't go to rent or keeping me and Mimi alive goes towards that."

"I see."

"Not that I'm asking for help or anything," a hasty outburst, "I'm not trying to make you feel sorry for me, I'm doing fine. I'm just, you know... working my way through," he reached out an arm to his cat, "Isn't that right, Mimi?"

The black cat perked up, looking over her shoulder to her owner. She rolled onto her other side and stood up, stretching out her neck to touch her nose to Asher's fingertips. She spent a moment sniffing him before beginning to lick the oil from the rice off his fingers. Grant smiled when Asher laughed softly. The graceful lines of Mimi's neck and back extended to meet Asher's slim fingers made an appealing image.

Grant looked down at his own hands, significantly less delicate. His left was a bit red, but the ice pack and his cold drink had kept it from swelling and bruising. He had definitely hit that kid too hard.

Grant reached out and scratched Mimi's back with a chuckle, "You two are cute."

“Thanks... Wait,” Asher tried to lift his head and sit up, “You think I’m cute?”

Grant just shrugged. Asher could take it however he wanted.

“Huh...” Asher let himself hang upside-down again, hands folded on his chest, “I know I sort of asked before, but did you want to stay the night?”

“I thought I told you I’m busy tomorrow.”

Asher was halfway sarcastic, “Yeah, but you’ve been drinking.”

Grant mirrored his inflection, “Yeah, but unlike you I’ve been pacing myself,” Asher’s half-sarcasm turned into a half-pout, Grant faced him with a calm and level smile, “I’ll be fine to drive, don’t worry.”

Asher held up his hands –knocking over the bottle near his head and spooking Mimi– and shrugged, “I’m just trying to be a responsible host, Grant. Though, you’re right,” he picked up the bottle and set it upright a little further away from himself, “I should have taken those a bit slower. And maybe not been upside-down.”

“Will *you* be okay?”

“Ah, I’ll be fine,” he let his arms hang, hands touching the floor, his voice turned wistful, “...but I *was* kind of hoping you’d decide to stay...”

“Maybe next time.”

Asher brightened, “Yeah... Sounds good.” He watched Grant when he stood up, eyes bright, smiling, “I’d really like that.”

Grant looked down at his drink, he probably shouldn’t finish it before he got on the road. He gestured to Asher with the bottle, “Mind if I leave this here? I think I’ll get going, so I don’t want to finish it all at once.”

Asher waved lazily, “Just leave it on the counter, I’m sure I’ll find something to do with it.”

He had to try not to laugh, “You sure you’ll be okay?”

“Another half a bottle won’t kill me. Think I’m going to wait a bit, though.”

“Good idea,” Grant left his drink in the kitchenette and gathered his jacket and waistcoat from the back of the sofa, “Want some help sitting up before I go?”

“Hm...” Asher tucked one arm under his head, “Nah, I’ll be alright.”

Grant made for the door, slipping on his waistcoat, jacket and shoes, “Thank-you for dinner, Asher. It was really quite good.”

“Thanks. You know you’re always welcome,” he waved from the sofa; still upside-down, still smiling, still just a little drunk, “Drive safe, Grant.”

“Good night, Asher.”

“G’night.”

Chapter 7: Part 6.1: June

Chapter Summary

June()

Grant helps Royce move house, and things get strained.

Royce sat on the front stoop of his building, finishing off his first cigarette of the day in the dark of the early June night. Once again the majority of his meagre possessions had been collected in a pile, stacked neatly on the sidewalk by the stairs: nine cardboard banker's boxes worth of clothes, linens, and other house-wares; two other boxes and a milk-crate full of old files and books; both coffee makers and his toaster. The rest was still inside.

He got up and crushed his cigarette out inside a nearby garbage can as a cube van, painted with the logo of a rental company, pulled up in front of the building. Grant staggered out of the cab wearing that stony, almost-neutral expression he reserved for the people who frustrated him most.

"Evening, Grant."

"Good *morning*, Royce."

"Already?"

"Why..." Grant circled around to the back of the van and leaned on the door, "Just *why*, did you call me to help you with this at two in the morning?"

"It's about subtlety, Grant," he tried, but he knew Grant wouldn't understand.

The other man waved off the explanation, "Let's just get this done so I can go home and sleep."

Royce watched him throw open the back of the van and pull down the ramp, "You probably didn't have to get something so big."

"I didn't know how much stuff we were moving."

Really? Grant had helped him move before; nothing had changed. "I only have what I need." Grant gestured to the door; a stiff, grudging movement. Royce nodded. Getting this done was all that mattered, "Right. Let's start with the furniture," he jogged up the front stairs and held the door open, "Everything's been taken apart already, but I'll need your help with the sofa."

Grant followed him inside and down the hall, walking slouched. "What?"

“The sofa. I’ll need your help to move it.”

“You’re kidding me.”

Royce unlocked his studio door, trying not to glance back into Grant’s glare, “I don’t understand what you think I’d be kidding about.”

“You’re keeping that sofa?”

Royce tilted his head. Sure it wasn’t the prettiest piece of furniture but it wasn’t in terrible shape. “It’s not that old.”

“It *looks* that old...” Grant walked around the sofa and stopped by one arm, “Are those bullet holes?”

“Hey, that sofa saved my life!” When Grant turned on him, Royce backed away, “Okay so I didn’t know I wasn’t in *actual* mortal danger at the time, but still. It’s comfortable, structurally sound...” More glaring, Royce shrugged, looking up at the ceiling, “And it’s not like I ever have guests, Grant.”

“Are you helping or not?”

“Oh, right. On three?”

Between the two of them, moving the small sofa wasn’t an issue. Royce walked backwards through the hall and down the stairs. He had to make an effort to control his own expression, not to pick up that surly glower himself. He didn’t like it when Grant got like this. Then again, he really should have known better than to call him this late, even if he didn’t want to be seen moving to his new studio.

He backed up the ramp and they set the sofa down inside the van. Grant straightened up and cracked his back, then headed to the building again, “I guess I’ll have to help you with your mattress, too?”

“No, ordered a new one,” a custom he himself couldn’t quite explain, a new mattress just felt right in a new living space, “Should be delivered soon.”

Grant stopped, blocking the front door by holding both sides of the frame, “*Seriously?*”

“What?”

“You’ll shell out for a new mattress but you’re keeping that damn sofa?”

“It was on sale, it was cheaper this way!” Royce pushed his friend’s back, guiding him inside, “Besides, I didn’t tell *you* what to keep when I helped you move to that ridiculous condo in Midtown.”

“It’s not ridiculous.”

“It’s huge. You live alone, Grant.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“*Alright*, sorry. Here, I’ve taken both desks apart, they should be easy to carry out.” Royce picked up his standing lamp, stalling when he felt Grant’s attention on him again. “You can’t seriously object to me keeping the lamp.”

“Did it save your life too?” Sarcasm, from Grant it was needling to the point of painful.

Royce hugged the pole of the lamp to his chest, “Actually it did, same night as the sofa.”

Grant headed out, shaking his head, a bundle of hardware from the drafting table under one arm, the work surfaces under the other. “Never knew you to get attached to furniture.”

Royce followed, “I’m not attached, I literally cannot afford much else beyond the mattress and bed frame. I spent a fortune on the new place.” The pause dragged on until they had both loaded their items into the van. “Thanks, by the way. For all the help getting the new place. I’ve never bought that much property before.”

“A lot of people are going to be disappointed about the bridge.”

They headed back inside, “But nobody’s going to check the actual numbers, so we’re in the clear. Right?”

“Royce,” Grant stopped abruptly in the middle of the studio, empty but for the disassembled table on the floor, “Where is it?”

“Where’s what?”

“The Transistor. Where is it?”

“Last thing I wanted to get.” Royce ducked into his former bedroom and retrieved the device in its makeshift carrier; his old backpack, the bottom slit to accommodate the length of the blade and stuffed with a pillow to keep it in place, the Transistor’s end wrapped with a blanket to cover the sharp gold contacts. He slung it over one shoulder with some effort, “You really think I’d forget it?”

“It did cross my mind.” It wasn’t sarcastic but Royce felt it still hit him too hard. “Is that everything?”

“That’s it. Just the boxes outside.” Royce took a moment to look over the empty space. He had been forced to paint over the labyrinthine formula he’d inscribed on his walls before showing the studio to any potential buyers. It hadn’t been an easy thing for him to erase his greatest work yet. Putting it on paper just didn’t seem to do it justice, but he had to write it down. Only his handwritten materials had proved to be safe from sabotage by the Process. The walls were a boring slate blue once more. The floor, rough polished wood, still

had the peculiar Processed patch attached to it. Even with a metal chisel he hadn't been able to chip the perfect rectangle from the white stain on which it was fixed. Thankfully Grant hadn't noticed.

Royce led the way outside, switching off the lights and locking up. He had already sold his other appliances to the new tenant. He wanted to get established at his new location before replacing them. It wouldn't take long at all.

The last table and the stack of boxes packed away, Grant closed up the van. Royce slid the passenger seat back and sat in the cab with the backpack propped between his knees, the Transistor leaning back against him, its end braced under the dashboard. He had to open the window to allow the door to close without jamming the device's handle.

Grant eyed it warily, "You couldn't have put that in the back?"

"I'll need it when we get there."

"Get *where*? You killed the bridge, remember?"

"*We* killed the bridge. Just head to the waterfront down Fourth, I'll direct you when we get closer."

Grant drove in still, moody silence. The air felt thick with the quiet, even with the window letting sound and fresh air in. Royce hung an arm outside; the night air was warm, the South district smelled like industry. The weak breeze was only cool from the movement.

"Grant?" No reply. "Thank-you so much for this. I know you're upset that I got you up so late and I'm kind of snippy because I just woke up, but I really do appreciate this. It's not just that you're helping me move, we're—"

"Royce, save the speech."

"Right... Still, thanks."

"I could have sworn you said the new place was completely derelict."

"It *was*. I've been working on refurbishing it since you allowed me private access to it." 'Refurbishing' may have been putting it lightly, the building had been little more than a shell when he got to it.

"How?"

He must have been tired, did he even need to ask? Royce patted the hilt of the Transistor, "The Process, Grant. How else?"

The older man let out a hollow sigh, "How could I forget?"

"You'll want to take a right here."

"...I can't believe you're keeping that sofa."

“Grant—”

“I could have bought you a new one, for pity’s sake. What on earth did it even save you from?”

“Well, the Process, but—” Grant jammed on the brakes. The mass of the van screamed to a lurching halt. Royce had to brace a foot against the dashboard to avoid hitting his face on the Transistor’s hilt. “*Careful*, Grant!”

The Administrator rounded on him, “You seriously think it’s safe to be working with these things after they *attacked* you!?”

He’d had enough— the engineer barked back, practically snarling, “I know what I’m doing!” He gestured to the Transistor, “If you don’t trust me, you’re welcome to try dealing with them yourself!”

“I trust *you*, I don’t trust *them*.”

“Well there’s no other way we’re going to be able to do this. I thought you were on board, Grant. I really thought you were on board with this. But if you’re not, I’ll just do it on my own.” He sat up, pushing the Transistor up to give himself more space. He pressed one hand flat on its exposed eye, the other over his shoulder gripping the handle, “You know that would put us at odds with one another. Quite directly at odds. What I have in mind isn’t entirely legal, you know.” Royce tried to stare his friend down but couldn’t manage it, instead he looked away, looked forward to the empty road ahead. “Do you want to protect Cloudbank or not?”

Royce gasped in genuine fear when Grant grabbed him by the collar. He strained to recoil and braced for a hit that never came. Grant held eye contact, his expression was no less stern but his voice softened considerably. “I want to protect *you*, Royce. *You* are what I’m worried about most of all right now.” It must have been his look —Royce could feel it on his own face, abject terror— that made Grant release him at length with a faltering “Sorry.”

They sat in pained silence, the van stopped in the middle of the empty road. Royce fixed his shirt, hiding shaking hands. “Um,” he cleared his throat, trying find his voice, “You’ll want to take the next left.”

Grant eased the van back into motion, letting a moment pass before recovering his own voice. “I’ve been thinking a lot about this project of ours.” Royce nodded, satisfied at the claim of joint responsibility. “If we’re going to do this right, we’re going to need more people. You and I can only do so much.”

“Who do you think we’ll need?”

“We’ll need someone who can talk to the people of Cloudbank more subtly than I can. When things start changing, people will want answers. If they come from me, people will get suspicious.”

“That’s one.”

“And I don’t know how public you want to be with this thing when it gets going, but we might need someone to act as our face. I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to do it, and I know you wouldn’t want to.”

“Or be able to. Okay, so that’s two...”

“No more than that. Two at the very most, and I think we’ll be set.”

“Did you have anyone in mind?” Royce looked over, Grant shook his head. “Anyone at all?”

“They would have to be people we know we can *both* trust.”

“Think on it.” Royce wrapped his arms loosely around the Transistor, “I still have work to do getting set up and getting the Process well under control. We have all the time we could ask for to plan this out.”

“Be careful, Royce. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Trust me, Grant. All I ask is that you trust me.” He pointed ahead, “Here, this is the place.”

“You’re sure?”

“Let me show you. If you’re willing to stay up, that is.”

Chapter 8: Part 6.2: June

Chapter Summary

Continue(June())

Royce and Grant formally induct Asher into their plans, and name him a member of the Camerata. Asher and Grant finally acknowledge their mutual attraction.

Asher jumped at the sound of the intercom buzzer, taking a moment to realize what it was. No one ever called him, he wasn't used to hearing it. The cheap intercom made the voice rough with static, but it was still recognizable: Grant.

Asher hit the key to unlock the building's interior door, within seconds there was a knock at his apartment. Mimi leapt from her perch on top of the sofa to greet the newcomer. She knew there was only one person who ever came to visit.

"Asher," Grant smiled and nodded his greeting, then stooped to pet Mimi, who was already demanding his attention by rubbing against his leg. "Hey, Mimi."

"Evening, Grant. Is something going on? You've never stopped by uninvited before."

Grant picked up the cat, cradling her against his chest as he straightened up, "I'm sorry, were you busy?"

"No, I'm not busy, it's just that," Asher moved closer to pet Mimi, already purring up a storm, "you've never just... stopped by before."

"I was hoping you were free this evening. I suppose I should have called. There was somewhere I wanted to take you," Asher looked up, Grant was looking through him, "Something I wanted to show you."

The younger man suppressed a shiver, unsure of whether or not he liked the way Grant was talking. Low and soft, and serious. But what on earth was he talking *about*? Asher knew he couldn't refuse. He tried to relax, act casual, "Sure, what should I bring?"

"Just you, maybe a jacket. We'll be by the water." Grant passed Mimi back to Asher, she sat on his arms and rubbed her face against his chest.

"What about Mimi?"

"I think it's best if you leave her here."

"Alright." Asher set the cat down on the sofa with a cursory pet, retrieved his jacket and keys and nodded to Grant. "Let's go."

Asher took his usual place in the front passenger seat, watching the scenery go by in the last of the orange evening light. They were heading south and west through the city. For the first little while he was content with the silence, having assumed by their direction they were headed to the South district to meet up with Royce. However they went too far west, to the very edge of Goldwalk. Asher looked over to his driver, “Hey, Grant, where are we going?”

“Fairview.”

“Fairview? But I thought that district was closed off. There’s no way to get there by car, the poll for the bridge tanked.”

“The poll for the bridge was rigged,” Grant said simply, ignoring Asher’s expression of surprise, “A good portion of the district was reassigned for private use. Having a large public thoroughfare connecting it to the rest of Cloudbank would have made things difficult.”

“...Are we renting a boat, then...?”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

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Along the water’s edge, the harbour could be seen just to the north. Grant had parked a short distance away in the last fringe of residential development before the empty waterside. Across the water, the indistinct silhouette of Fairview blocked the last glimmer of sunset.

Grant led Asher to what looked to be a metro access. The sign had been taken down but the steps remained. Just below ground level the tunnel was blocked. Asher balked at the sight of the bizarre barrier; a projection of a white stylized hand with a red eye on the palm. He reached out to touch it. A hard hologram, kept up by a panel set into the concrete floor. The image looked like something the Process might have created, but the projector panel did not.

“What is this?” In the dark, underground, Asher felt compelled to whisper.

“A break point. Just something to keep people from wandering in.”

Grant pulled something out of the pocket of his overcoat; a disc, five or six inches across. Asher didn’t see the front of it. He presented it to the holographic barrier– the panel beneath it brightened, and the hand faded away. Grant stowed the item, pulling out his mobile phone and clicking on its flashlight. He gestured to the passage before them.

“So Fairview *isn’t* completely cut off from the rest of Cloudbank...” Asher mused aloud as they navigated by the pale light of Grant’s phone. The empty shell of a train station spread around them in the monochrome gloom. “I had no idea this was down here.”

“It wasn’t very well recorded in the Archives. Royce tells me this branch of the metro was scrapped right after the tunnel was dug. The project bankrupted itself by digging under

the water instead of building over it. The tracks were abandoned and the station was left derelict.” From a deserted platform, he gestured down onto the tracks with his light, pointing down the tunnel. “This way.”

“Is it safe?”

“The rails have no power, we’ll be fine.”

Asher did his best to move silently, but the gravel beneath the rails wouldn’t let him. Each footfall crunched and echoed in the heavy blackness. Grant’s light was only enough to illuminate the walls and ground directly in front of them.

Asher spoke quietly, trying to keep his voice from echoing, “Grant... what was it you wanted to show me all the way out here in Fairview?”

The older man responded in kind, “I can’t explain it, you’ll just have to see for yourself.”

“Royce has something to do with this, doesn’t he?”

“Indeed he does, he’s the reason the bridge project was cancelled. We tweaked the numbers so it looked like a failed poll.”

Asher tried not to scowl, mulling over such a serious compromise of the Administrator’s integrity. How could he let Royce talk him into something like that? He knew the engineer could be selfish but this was all wrong. Something else was going on here, but he felt it prudent not to press the issue. He thought back to the break point.

“Grant? You know about his work with— with the Process... right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” That was a weight off his mind. “I ended up helping him with a bit of research a few months back. He asked me not to tell you. I wasn’t sure how much he had told you himself, if anything.”

“I’m sure he had his reasons.”

The tunnel reached an end. The pair climbed up onto another metro platform, winding their way up through a less-developed shell of a station, emerging at ground level. Behind them, across the water, Cloudbank was lit up beneath the early night sky. Myriad windows and neon icons decorated its towering outline, outshining the slender crescent moon above.

Asher couldn’t help but stare. The sea breeze chilled him, but he ignored it. “I’ve never seen the city from afar like this... it’s beautiful... I wish I’d brought a camera.”

“This won’t be the last time you’ll come out here. You should have plenty of opportunities to get a good shot of Cloudbank.” Asher lingered, still looking out across the channel. Grant laid a hand on his shoulder, “This wasn’t it, by the way. We’re only halfway

there.” He steered him inland, picking out the path along the waterside into a rare patch of woodland, guiding him towards a dark building at the heart of the small island.

Fairview was mostly suburban, interspersed with moon-silvered parkland; all that wasn’t identical faux-manor houses was open rolling hills dotted with scrub and trees. Simple paths wound through these open areas, punctuated by elegant lamps that threw off a warm orange light. In the feeble moonlight, Asher caught sight of fleeting ghostly forms –the Process– tracking their progress through the trees towards the building in the middle of the island.

The indistinct shape of Fairview’s skyline was thanks in part to this construction; a multi-level industrial complex, meant to be concealed from suburbia’s sight by the pristine parkland around it. Any observer looking across the channel from Cloudbank would only see its shadow beyond the picturesque greenery.

Grant led him to the only visible feature on the near side of the building, a pair of metal doors with an intercom installed next to them. Asher jumped when Grant pressed the page button; the buzzer sounded just like the one in his building.

Silence. Grant paged again and a muffled voice came from inside, followed by a heavy metallic clunk. One of the doors swung outward, pushed by Royce, who huffed with displeasure.

“Sorry,” he muttered, “Still working out some kinks with the electrical.” He took a pause to look the pair over. Asher saw not a smile but a sort of grim satisfaction. Royce nodded, “Come on in.”

Asher blinked when he stepped inside. Darkness. It was an even denser black than the night outside, broken only by trails of red-orange lights that seemed to run along the base of every wall, denoting a hallway, broken by gaps for doors. “Why is it so dark in here?”

Royce walked backwards as he talked, “Like I said, kinks in the electrical. Literal kinks, I’ve had to rewire a lot of this building. I have the emergency lights working, though,” he gestured to the faint orange illumination, “and honestly I think that’s enough for me, I sort of prefer it like this.” Royce turned his back and led them on with an airy wave, “So, Grant, did you tell him?”

“No. I wanted to show him first.”

“Admirable. Rather admirable. And so exciting! Asher, you won’t regret this–”

“Royce,” Grant cut in, “Could you not?”

“Sorry, I’m just,” Asher could see his wild gestures in the dark, “so excited!”

The engineer led them down a series of ramps, spiralling into stark blackness. It sounded like a metal catwalk underfoot, but there was no way to tell without proper light. Then there was the hum. Asher felt it first through his feet, then in his chest as they reached the basement level. And the light, a pale blue like the reflection from a pool of water that

played over the blank concrete walls and floor. Royce stepped forward, silhouetted in blue, spreading his arms to present the construction before them. Whether it was built into the wall or part of the floor it was impossible to tell; grooves of dark orange ran vertically, then in a circle, framing a shape like an eye. Fitted into the top of the eye was the object throwing off the shifting blue light. Asher traced its shape with his mind's eye. It looked like a sword.

"This," Royce began, then amended, "or rather, the lovely apparatus at the top, not the big thing. *This* is what Grant –what we– wanted to show you, Asher." He looked back, genuine smile tainted by another expression, indecipherable in the half-light, "I call it the 'Transistor.'"

Asher responded with a slow nod, expecting him to go on. Royce looked to Grant, "Would you like to explain, or shall I?"

"I can explain it to him."

"Very well. I left in the middle of a few things upstairs, I should see to them. I'll be back down shortly if you're not up before I'm done." Royce swept past them, back to the catwalk, all but disappearing into the dark.

Asher took a few timid steps forward. Part of the Transistor, a red lens like an eye in a ring of metal, seemed to watch him. "Transistor..." he whispered, barely above the hum of the big machine, "What's it for?"

Grant stepped up behind him; Asher could feel him close, and took comfort in the sound of his voice. "The Transistor is the ultimate tool of control over Cloudbank. Royce has found a way to use it to reign in the Process. With it, we can instruct them, set them to any task we please. He's already used it to rebuild this place. His analogy is if you think of the city as a canvas, the Transistor is a brush; we can use it to paint Cloudbank however we want... But that's not how I see it..."

Asher looked back. Grant was looking past him, distant but focussed. "With this thing, Asher, we can tease apart all the errors, all the lies in Cloudbank's history. Get the raw data, get the real truth... We can learn so much about the past, and we can shape the future however we want." Grant looked down at him. There was something in his eyes Asher couldn't place, he had never seen it before. "You've truly inspired me, Asher, with your research. You've already done so much, I want you to be a part of this. Together, with me..."

Asher found himself entrapped, but not frightened. Every timid instinct in him told him to turn away, and he ignored them. There was no need for it, not anymore. He had Grant's trust, it was absolute. That was the unfamiliar expression in his eyes.

Grant's eyes... Every time he had met them, shyness compelled him to look away. They had always looked dark, but he had never allowed himself more than a glance. Now, in the ethereal glow cast by the Transistor, Asher saw them for what they were. Not brown, as he had assumed, but a strange burgundy colour. The rich hue of red wine he could practically taste.

Asher touched the lapels of Grant's overcoat, pulling down. Grant stooped with the pull and Asher stood up taller so their mouths met. Asher held close, hearing a tiny, sharp intake of breath from Grant. Whatever came of it, the younger man didn't care. All he wanted was to make himself known. Asher broke off the kiss, but waited a few seconds to open his eyes. Whatever came of it, it was a risk worth taking.

Grant's expression was one of genuine, but only mild surprise. A silent moment passed as they watched each other. Asher was the first to speak. Plain, almost humorous, his hands still resting on Grant's chest.

"I'm sorry, was that not where we were going with this?"

Asher let out a squeak of shock— Grant clasped both sides of his face, suddenly but gently, and pressed a tender kiss on his forehead. "You're a silly little thing," the older man purred.

"Oh..." Asher felt his cheeks go hot under Grant's touch, both embarrassed and relieved, "So... You— you're okay with this?"

"For the longest time I couldn't fathom what was troubling you, why you seemed so confident and yet so nervous around me. If this was it..." Grant leaned his forehead against Asher's, smiling, "You could have just said something."

Asher touched the hands holding his face, "I didn't want to assume..."

"Asher..." Grant's tone turned grave, his hands dropped to rest on the younger man's shoulders. "I need you to promise me something."

"Anything," he sighed.

"No, this is serious. *This*," he turned Asher to face the Transistor, "You can't breathe a word of this to anyone. Not a word, spoken or written. Not a soul. Understand? This stays between us, and only us."

Asher turned back to him, "Grant—"

"I know you pride yourself on your integrity as a journalist but it's *imperative* that no one knows about this beyond—"

"*I promise*," Asher spoke with such force that Grant fell silent. "Grant, I *swear* to you. *No one* will know about this. I know you're going to warn me again, you're going to tell me I shouldn't make promises solely because of what just happened, but I *mean* it. Grant..." he took the other man's hands, "Wherever you're going, whatever happens, I want to be right there with you. Right beside you..." He squeezed Grant's hands, "Together. Like you said."

Grant pulled him close by the shoulders, looking down on him with affectionate scrutiny. Asher matched his even gaze. One hand left Asher's shoulder to touch his cheek, Grant smiled with a hint of mischief. "I like the sound of that."

Asher leaned into him, "Together?"

Grant hummed his affirmative, slipping his hand from Asher's cheek to lift his chin into another kiss.

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Up at ground level, Asher and Grant found Royce by the light emanating from the room he was seated in. One doorway off the main hall had been left open and a warm, normal light spilled out into the dark. The room was set up much as Royce's old studio had been: sofa, lamp and side table in the middle, long work table against the wall behind them, drafting desk in the corner. Royce was slouched on his beat-up sofa; cigarette in his left hand, pen in his right, notebook on his lap.

Royce waved with his left hand, his right busy jotting down notes. "Took you two long enough."

Asher raised an eyebrow "I thought you said you'd come get us when you were done."

"I did. Or rather, I tried. Then it occurred to me that it might be better to give you two some time alone."

"Oh..."

Grant set a hand on Asher's shoulder, "Thank-you."

"Well then," Royce sat forward, putting his notebook aside and nodding to Asher, "Given that you're still here, I take it you're willing to join our little revolution?"

Grant eyed him sternly, "I wish you wouldn't call it that."

"I'll call it whatever I want, since *you* got to pick the name for our little cabal."

"Could you not call it *that*, either?"

"You're just lucky you came up with something I liked." Royce stood up and went to his work table, laden with boxes and books. From one box he took a small case, like a CD case but thicker. He came back around the sofa and held it up to Asher. "These are... Grant!" He tilted his head, looking disappointed, "You're not wearing yours!"

"I'm not sure I want to."

"Oh come on, they don't mean anything to anyone but us! Besides, it's not like anyone but Asher will be getting close enough to you to see that the emblem is different. Be proud, Grant, declare your allegiance!"

Despite Royce's teasing intonation, Grant seemed to be getting upset. "My 'allegiance' is to Cloudbank."

“And that’s why we’re doing this, right?” A sullen glare, Royce backed off, “Alright, take it easy. You know I need all the help I can get. Both of you.” He turned back to Asher, “Anyway, these are for you,” he handed the younger man the case, “Pin them or clip them on whatever. I’d much prefer if Grant wore his openly, maybe you can persuade him.”

Asher opened the case. Settled inside it face-to-face were two identical medallions, the same size as whatever Grant had used to bypass the break point. At first glance they appeared just to be emblazoned with the Cloudbank emblem, but a closer look proved that they weren’t. Red, white and black rather than Cloudbank’s silver and gold. Instead of the stylized skyline of the city, there was the hilt of the Transistor on the cloud background. In place of the inverted triangle, the distinctive motif of Cloudbank, there was a red eye, rimmed in white.

Asher touched the glossy surface of one medallion, “What are they?”

“These will get you past any break points you might find around the city. Eventually they’ll also give you access to something else I’ve been working on, when it goes online. For now they’ll let you access the private channel Grant and I have been using to communicate via OVC terminals.” At Asher’s look of puzzlement, Royce half-shrugged, “Some things are better encrypted than overheard.”

Asher picked one up and turned it over, admiring the seamless casing that must have concealed some complex circuitry. “You made these yourself?”

“That I did, design and construction. Everything but the name. Stick one on, I want to see how it looks on you.”

Asher pocketed the case and fiddled with the medallion, unsure of what to do with it. It was a bit big to pin to his jacket. First at a loss, then realizing it was often where he wore his OVC ID card, he clipped it to one of his belt loops.

Royce nodded in satisfaction, then nodded again at Grant, who had pinned his own copy to the lapel of his overcoat. The engineer tapped his left shoulder to show where he had attached his to the upper arm of his jacket. “Looking good, gentlemen.” He snuffed his cigarette in the ashtray on the side table. “Looking good. Let’s make it official then, shall we? Asher,” he held out a hand, Asher clasped it and they shook, “Welcome to the Camerata.”

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Asher spent the ride back in quiet contemplation. The bridge and the rigged poll... Royce had been right to use the word ‘cabal.’ Between the two of them, he and Grant had already begun some kind of conspiracy, and now *he* was a part of it as well. Maybe not a ‘conspiracy,’ ‘revolution’ did seem more appropriate. Even without being directly told, Asher could anticipate what Royce intended to use the Transistor for; easing, eventually slowing the rapid and careless change that dominated Cloudbank. He would do it by taking control of the Process, which must be the force that made it all possible on such a large scale.

However, Royce couldn't do it alone. He needed Grant for legal protection; the Administrator could authorize whatever the engineer asked for, be it space, resources or other development. He could take the requests right to the Council, masked as his own ideas, and have them approved without question.

But if that was the case, what did they need *him* for? Grant had never really said. If it was just the research, why involve him officially? He felt like Royce had only included him at Grant's behest. Then again, the engineer had brought him along on his little expedition to study the Process and sworn him to secrecy afterward. What did they need from him...?

He thought back over the past few months. What stood out to him? His day out with Royce, of course. But Royce could have brought anyone he knew who could work a camera. The fact it was *him* seemed more a matter of convenience and coincidence. What else?

The Spine. Of course... Grant had given him information about what was happening with the Spine of the World back in April, requesting he do a write-up on the refurbishing project. That was what they needed him for. If Grant was legal protection, Asher would be their media protection. He could speak directly to the people through his writing for OVC, deflect attention and conceal activity. As Grant had said, it would be trying for his integrity, but he would be devoted to the cause.

Asher opened the case and looked at the other medallion. *Camerata*. Grant had picked the word. It felt vigilant, but secretive. *Camera obscura*, a dark room. The emblem itself bespoke the goal; the shape of the Transistor replaced the skyline of Cloudbank, the watchful eye took the place of the city's primary icon, the inverted triangle. The three founding principles of the city: Arts and Technology, balanced precariously on the bottom point of Industry. The whole thing was top-heavy, unstable by design. Thinking about it was starting to make him upset.

To settle himself he looked to Grant. The older man ignored him, focussed on driving. The streets were busy tonight. Still, it was nice to be able to watch him for a while without feeling rude for staring. It was nice to know where they both stood.

"Grant?"

"Hm?"

"I really wish I had a word for how happy I am that you feel the same... I was so worried, I had no idea what— I mean, nobody I talked to really knew much about you. A few people around the office said you might be a widower but they'd never seen you with anyone previously and I didn't..." Grant looked over at him, a hint of amusement in his calm expression. "I didn't know what to think. I didn't want to assume anything in case I offended you."

"You know you could have just asked."

Asher failed to temper the bitterness in his tone, "In my experience that's not something you just *ask* someone."

“Fair enough... But honestly, Asher, even if the feeling wasn’t mutual I think I’d be more flattered than offended. You taking an interest in someone like me.”

“What do you mean ‘someone like you’?”

Grant glanced over, one brow raised, “Seriously?”

“What? You mean about your work?”

Grant shook his head with a smile, “Asher, how old are you?”

“Oh,” he had actually forgotten about that, “That doesn’t bother me, Grant, I think... you’re...” Asher found himself tongue-tied. Why had this gotten so difficult suddenly?

“What? Go on, you may as well say it.”

“I think you’re lovely, Grant. I don’t care about the age difference...”

Grant left a pause for Asher to calm down. They were nearing his apartment in Highrise. “Thank-you, Asher.”

The younger man spoke up in a small voice, “Please don’t drop me home yet...”

“Sorry. I have to be in early tomorrow. I can stay and talk for a bit if you want.”

“No, I should let you go.”

The car pulled up outside the apartment but Asher stayed in his seat, contemplating the medallion in its case. Grant watched him for a moment. “I’m sorry to pull you into this so suddenly. I wish there was a more gradual way I could have brought it up, but there really wasn’t. And I’m afraid you have no out now. You’re stuck with us.”

Asher brushed his thumb over the polished surface, “That’s fine. It was my choice; if I didn’t want to help, I wouldn’t have accepted.” He closed the case and tucked it into the pocket of his jacket, then looked over at Grant and touched his shoulder, “Getting you in the deal was certainly a bonus.”

The older man smiled and cupped Asher’s cheek with one hand to pull him closer, kissing his forehead, “Goodnight, Asher.”

“Goodnight, Grant. And thank-you.”

Chapter 9: Part 7.1: July

Chapter Summary

July()

Asher, Grant, and Royce discuss recruiting a new member to the Camerata. Grant and Royce head off to reach out to their new recruit.

NB: This chapter contains a description of a panic attack.

Asher double-checked the address of the pub before heading inside. Grant had given him a time, place and simple instructions, ‘sit near the back by the window, we’ll find you.’ The ‘we’ meant it wouldn’t be dinner alone this time, he was probably bringing Royce.

Of course even if it was just the two of them it couldn’t be a proper date, both of them were busy now that Fashion Week had finally started. Asher was writing about it and Grant was keeping it all in order. It was an annual tradition in Cloudbank: an entire week devoted to showcasing the city’s own designers alongside imported brands from around the world, and an open invitation for all the city’s people to wear their best, most unique or most unusual outfits. Typically it spanned a week in mid June but ‘unforeseen complications,’ as the organizers called them, had delayed the events by a whole month.

Asher found a likely table and sat down, tucking his messenger bag under his seat. Mimi hopped off his shoulder onto the chair next to him, then up onto the windowsill to look outside. He took Mimi with him as often as he could when the weather was warm, and with the amount of work he had just been laden with –interviews and event coverage– he was taking her out with him almost every day for the calming presence she afforded him.

Still, he was grateful that he was facing this amount of work now instead of last month. Enough had happened to keep his mind occupied without being forced to generate a mountain of content for work. Not that the lull had given him any more time with Grant, but the time they did spend together was a bit different now. Their trips to the Archives often turned into lazy late nights at Asher’s apartment, or were cut short in favour of dinner dates in the Canals district. It was nice just to be close with him, even if Asher still felt a lingering uncertainty between them. As calm and confident as he seemed, Grant was an unpredictable creature, his moods both difficult to read and prone to sudden change.

But didn’t he look marvellous! Asher saw him holding the door for another couple before stepping past them into the pub proper. Dressed in a stunning carmine-red suit, he wore the blazer like a cape, pinned by both lapels to his white waistcoat with the pair of Camerata medallions Royce had given him. Under it all was a plain white shirt and black tie, secured with a large gold-and-garnet pin in the very centre of his chest.

Grant carried something black draped over one arm. When Asher stood to greet him the younger man found himself hooked around his waist with Grant's free arm and pulled in for a quick hug.

"Hey, you," Grant bumped his forehead against Asher's, "glad you could meet us."

"Any excuse for a break today."

Grant looked him up and down, "You seem a little underdressed."

Asher looked down at himself; white shirt and black hooded vest, dark jeans, "Underdressed on purpose," he gestured to his pet perched by the window, "I'm not alone, I wouldn't want to get cat fur on something nice."

"Fair enough," Grant slung the black object he had been carrying, some kind of garment, over the back of a chair. "Royce is just outside, he'll be with us in a minute."

Asher sat by the window, Grant next to him. Mimi left the windowsill and padded across Asher's lap to nudge Grant for attention. He scratched behind her ears absently, "OVC's been working you hard the past few days, haven't they?"

"I basically have to write or edit two columns per event, one before and one after, most of them I don't even have time to go to myself. And don't even get me started on the interviews."

Grant's expression was sympathetic, but his words were all business, "That woman I asked you about, she said she'd be at tonight's event in the Canals district, right?"

It took Asher a moment to realize who he was referring to, "Reisz? She said she would, and she doesn't strike me as the type not to keep appointments."

"Do you know much about her?"

Asher shrugged, "You'd know more than I would, you're the one who's been talking to her. All I know is what I've heard around the office; she's a force to be reckoned with when she wants something done."

Grant hummed in thought, forgetting about Mimi. She tried to get his attention by nudging him again but gave up and went back to sit on the windowsill, twitching her tail. She was annoyed, Asher could sympathize. Grant had been like this a lot lately, strange and distant. He was working on something with Royce again, he had to be. No doubt looking to add another member to their tiny cabal of revolutionaries. Asher wouldn't try to stop him. For the good of the project they needed all the help they could get. Or rather, they needed small numbers of the best help they could get.

Royce entered and found his way to their table, seeming customarily tired and agitated, though overall better than Asher had seen him in the past. He didn't have the drawn, exhausted look that bespoke a heavy workload, but a stiff, nervous manner. His hair looked to have recently been disturbed from some semblance of neatness. He smelled of smoke.

Royce nodded to the editor, giving a curt “Asher.”

“Hey, Royce.”

The engineer picked the garment off the back of the chair opposite Grant, revealing it to be a sort of light motorcycle jacket; black denim with deep green accents. He transferred a few things from his own pockets to the coat and hung it on the chair again. If Asher was underdressed, Royce looked to have gone full casual, however it was certainly a distinct look for him. Everything was dark and close-fit, turning the already skinny engineer into a collection of straight lines and angles: ankle boots, slim dark jeans, a grey t-shirt with an unusual print in silver ink –a human heart made of clockwork and riveted plates– and of course the jacket he had left on the back of his chair.

Royce slumped into the chair and folded his arms on the tabletop, head down. “Why are you dragging me out to this?” He was addressing Grant.

“Because I need your help.”

“No you don’t, you’re just bringing me along to...” Royce looked up, trailing off when he came face-to-face with Mimi, who had wandered up onto the tabletop to investigate the newcomer. The two stared one another down in perfect stillness, green and red eyes locked, unblinking. Asher watched Royce’s eyes go from the cat to him, then to the cat, then back to him.

“Her name is Mimi,” Asher offered.

Royce blinked and looked at the cat, she was stretching out her neck, trying to sniff him, “Hello.” The cat sneezed, backed off and returned to the windowsill. “Oh, well,” Royce sat back, looking to Grant again, “anyway. You don’t need me to come with you. You’re just bringing me along because you know I don’t want to go just as much as I want to get things going with–” he stopped himself, considering his choice of words, “our project.”

“I’m bringing you along because I want you to meet this woman for yourself. You said the best people to work with are ones that we trust. I want to see what you think of her.”

Royce made an unhappy sound in lieu of a reply. Grant made no effort to hide a smirk. He hailed a waiter with a wave, “Dinner’s on me, you two.”

Royce rubbed his face, “And drinks, I hope.”

“No drinks.” Grant’s flat statement made Royce look up, ignoring the menus deposited on their table.

“What?”

“I need you sober for this meeting.”

“Just *one* drink, Grant. I won’t–”

“You’re a lightweight, Royce. Not even one. I need you on your best behaviour. No sarcasm, no nihilism. Therefore, no drinks. Not until the night’s over.”

Royce propped his head in one hand, eyeing Grant. Something approaching a smile crossed his face. “You’re a good friend, Grant.” He didn’t need the lilt of sarcasm to make his point. He busied himself with his menu, intending to ignore whatever Grant would have replied with, had the older man bothered at all.

Asher leaned back in his chair, covering a long yawn with both hands. It had been a hell of a day, the worst part was that it wasn’t over yet. Grant squeezed him around the shoulders, Asher leaned into him with a small sigh.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m tired,” Asher nudged his face into Grant’s shoulder, “I just want to go home at this point—”

“Join the club,” Royce grumbled.

“—but I still have work to do tonight.”

Grant rubbed his back, “Well, eat something and take it easy. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Royce folded his menu and drummed his fingers on the tabletop, “Sure you don’t want to switch, Asher?”

“The event I’m covering is even bigger than the one you’ll be going to.”

The engineer looked ill for a moment, “Never mind, then.”

The waiter returned and they placed their orders. Royce opted to forgo food entirely, earning a raised eyebrow but no comment from Grant. Asher had to restrain Mimi from distracting the waiter. The cat seemed disappointed when he left and wandered over to Royce again for attention.

This time he obliged the cat’s curiosity, rubbing her cheeks and scratching under her chin with one careful hand. “You know, Grant, I’d been wondering why you were covered in cat hair the last few times we met up.”

“Covered?”

“Well maybe not covered, but it’s pretty obvious on a white shirt.” Mimi leaned into his hand when he scratched behind her ears, “Never took you for a cat person.”

Asher watched the pedestrian traffic outside the window, feeling the tiny pause in Grant’s speech when he considered his answer. Ever the politician.

“I’m not, really, but apparently she likes me.”

Royce hummed, rubbing the spot between Mimi's eyes with a fingertip, "There's some joke about how you deal with women in there, I know there is."

"Nobody likes a wise guy, Royce."

"Just saying."

Asher turned his attention outside again. He felt a sudden unease growing in him; he didn't want to be here, he didn't want any part in this conversation, he didn't want to cover the event in Goldwalk he'd been assigned. He just wanted to go home. Mimi crossed the table and bumped him with her forehead. When he drew her close he noticed a faint whiff of smoke about her, like Royce's own discomfort clinging to her. He leaned his cheek on the cat's head and stroked her back, trying to find a way to express his sympathy without jumbling his words. He didn't feel right.

He found the words when their food came, "Maybe you should just let him have a drink, Grant, if he's going to be like that..."

Over the pause, however, Royce had reconciled the idea, "No, he's right. I accept the necessity of it; I'll only get worse."

Asher picked Mimi up and set her on the windowsill beside him so she wasn't on the table with the food. He shouldn't have ordered anything in the first place. It was only a small soup but he just wasn't hungry. He knew he should still eat though, it was getting late and he'd hardly had anything for lunch. Asher stirred his soup, very not-hungry. He didn't like the idea of eating any more than he did braving the crowds in Goldwalk. He wasn't up to it. He didn't feel right.

He looked outside; the streetlights left streaks of glare on the glass. It felt warm to the touch. The whole summer night was trying to push its way in. It felt wrong. He felt wrong.

"Excuse me." He was on his feet fleeing at a walk to the washroom before either of the others could speak.

Mimi followed him in. She hopped up onto the sink counter while he ran the water as cold as he could get it and washed his face. He wasn't okay—he kept repeating to himself in his mind as he dried off—he wasn't okay. He wasn't in any shape to be out in Goldwalk. Not in this state. He wasn't okay. But he'd be fine, he just needed some time.

Mimi was pawing at him, wanting to do her job. He picked her up and moved away from the sink and the door, finding an alcove to lean in. He closed his eyes and held the cat to his chest, focussing on her, controlling his breathing to match the rev of her purring. Cats purred on both the inhale and exhale. He matched each breath she took. Then every two of her breaths became one of his, then every four, then eight, gradually over the minutes until he had calmed himself enough that he could no longer feel his heartbeat sticking in his throat.

He was always grateful Mimi didn't mind being held so tight. She had grown up with his panic attacks, she was used to being squeezed when he needed her help. He scratched the

back of her neck with one hand, leaning his cheek on her head, “Thank-you, sweetheart... Thank-you...”

“Asher?”

He opened his eyes. Grant had followed him at last. He approached with slow, wary steps. “Are you alright?”

“I’m... no...”

Grant came close enough to get Mimi’s attention, she stretched out her neck to sniff him. “You panicked.”

“Yeah...”

“It was just us, nothing was happening.”

Asher felt his throat tightening again, his eyes getting hot, “Well they wouldn’t be a problem if they *made sense*, Grant.”

“Hey...” Grant reached out to him but he shrank back into the corner, “Asher...”

He hid his face against Mimi’s head again, “I’ll be fine, I just need some time. There will be other OVC reporters there, I can get help from them. I’ll be fine, Grant. I just need some space.”

“Alright. Did you want us to wait for you and drop you off in Goldwalk?”

“No, it’s okay. Go without me.”

“You’re sure?”

“Someone at work got me that woman’s card, it’s in my bag. Maybe take it with you when you go.”

Grant looked to the door but didn’t turn to leave, “Did you want me to come by tomorrow evening?”

“Yeah...and, hey,” he looked up at Grant when he glanced back, “I’ll cook. If you don’t mind picking up a few things on the way, I’ll cook for you.”

“What should I get?”

Mimi nudged her head up under his chin. Asher found himself trying to smile, starting to feel better, if a still shaken, “Surprise me, I’ll make it work.”

Grant nodded, “I’ll see you later, then. Good luck.”

“You too.”

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“‘Sybil’... how do you say that?” Royce toyed with the business card, slouched in the passenger seat of Grant’s car.

“Asher pronounced it ‘rize.’”

“Could be ‘reez.’”

“I have no idea. I haven’t even spoken to her yet.”

“I thought you said you’d been talking to her.”

“Via text.”

“Ah.” The engineer flicked the corner of the stiff ivory card with this thumb, “‘Event Planner & Organizer.’ Why do we need someone like this?”

“She’s a professional socialite. She knows everyone.”

“I repeat my question: *Why* do we need someone like this?”

Grant parked the car and took a pause to think. He looked over to Royce, expressionless, “Because I believe the Transistor has much more potential than what we’ve already seen. But it needs more—”

“More ‘reach,’ you said.”

“More people. Beyond the two of us.”

“Right...” Royce couldn’t put any sound behind the word, or the ones that followed, “We’ll have our detractors too. Obstacles.”

“We’ll need someone who can be out there and identify those people for us before they become a problem.”

“And find people who could be of help.”

“Precisely.”

He looked back down at the card, flicking the corner restlessly, not reading the text. It was true, the Transistor had gained some influence, another facet, since Grant had held it. His few experiments with the Process had yielded new results, new inspirations. It was clear the device could be used as so much more than just a tool. And it terrified him. Bringing in more people would have its advantages, certainly, but it was all so new. And sudden. He felt Grant was pushing their agenda faster than it needed to go.

Still, acting was better than biding their time when they didn’t need to. Besides, tonight was a test. Recruiting this woman wasn’t a sure thing. He bowed the card by

squeezing its corners with delicate pressure, careful not to fold it. Sybil... something. However one pronounced that.

Grant had been watching him while he thought. “Are you ready?”

“I suppose so,” he handed the card back, “What does she look like?”

“From the photos I’ve seen she’s on the tall side, long curly hair, very pale blonde, dark eyes. She’s pretty distinctive, I think you’ll know her when you see her.”

“I’m trusting you on this.”

Grant got out of the car, with Royce following, “You’ll be fine.” At Royce’s unhappy look he tried a coaxing tone, “I’ll buy you a drink when we’re done here.”

“Fine.”

The venue was in the heart of the Canals district. Royce immediately recognized the building as one of his own; a community centre meant to double as a conference hall or other gathering space. The walk connecting the building to the street was fenced off as an extensive patio, he knew the back was a balcony that overlooked the canal behind it. At least he would be in somewhat familiar territory.

Until there were other people, and there were already too many people. Even the patio felt crowded as Grant guided him inside. The Administrator turned heads when they made their entrance. Royce felt like a living shadow, trying his best to disappear behind his friend. This sort of crowd might at least be forgiving, it was unlikely he’d be recognized. A rare perk of being a camera-shy recluse.

Then Grant turned back to him, low voice running under the ambient people-sound, “We should split up. Cover more ground.”

“You’re kidding, right? We just got here!” But Grant hadn’t heard him, he was already moving away, addressing some stranger in an obnoxiously bright suit. Royce huffed, “Some friend,” and felt his own voice dissolve into the noise of the crowd.

He moved out of the middle of things over to a wall, trying to formulate a plan, struggling to hear his own thoughts above the voices around him and the rising white noise of his own nerves. He would keep to the edges and watch the crowd, focussing on the description Grant had given him— a poor description but that couldn’t really be helped, even though Grant knew he was a visual person. Why hadn’t he just brought a photo? Was he—? Damn him. He was doing this on purpose.

At least the food wasn’t terrible. A few minutes of fruitlessly scanning the crowd from the fringes led him around the outside of the room to a series of buffet tables. He picked at what was available —what was it about socialites that seemed to spontaneously generate mini-quiches?— while still watching the milling crowd. He thought he spotted Grant once or twice, but the Administrator’s height didn’t make him as noticeable as it usually would with this crowd, between the extravagant hairstyles and lofty high-heels.

The coffee was awful, though. He only drank enough to wash down his snack and it still left him craving something to get the taste out of his mouth. And settle his nerves. A group of people were drifting his way; one of them looked directly at him with that expression that could only mean he was about to ask a question. That was enough. Royce slipped away along the wall to the back doors of the hall, outside onto the balcony.

Why had Grant been so keen to ruin an otherwise lovely night? Nothing compared to a summer evening in Cloudbank, especially on the Canals, as busy as they were. He could have been out here just on his own, taking in the sights without having to be dragged to some party to look for some woman he'd never met and at this rate never would. Grant would get away with it, too. He always did. He knew that he could.

Royce never got to light his cigarette. He was testing the end of it with his teeth, fishing around in the unfamiliar pockets of his new jacket when a voice distracted him. A laugh from a little too close behind him. A woman's laugh. She backed off a half-step when he looked over his shoulder to her.

He spoke around his cigarette, "Can I..." was that her? "...help you?"

She smothered another fluttery laugh with one hand, "I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at *you*. I mean I *am*, just not *at* you."

Royce took the cigarette from his mouth, returning it to his pocket slowly, "I don't follow."

Was this her? The woman they were here to meet? Everything fit. 'On the tall side' was an understatement, she was taller than he was with those heels on. She also had a hot-pink streak dyed into the front of her hair, which was otherwise the right colour and length. Grant had neglected to mention *that*. Though it was so blindingly bright it could only be a few days old, perhaps Grant hadn't seen an updated photo yet. Everything fit, though. Tall, long curly hair, platinum blonde, dark eyes too.

She considered a reply, and he'd hoped she would explain herself, but instead she grasped his hand for an introduction, "Sy—" —a raucous guffaw from someone inside made Royce flinch—"Reese."

He tried to extricate his hand from her iron grip, "Pardon?"

"Reese," she repeated, letting go to brush the pink streak out of her eyes.

So *that* was how you said it. "Royce Bracket," he replied, trying not to make a show of massaging his hand.

"I *thought* so!" She stepped in again, leaning on the railing with one hand. Just a little too close. She was a lot of woman contained in a very little little-black-dress, but it was hard to be polite and keep eye-contact past that neon streak framing her face.

He opted to face the railing, looking down at the canal below. "What was so funny a minute ago?"

More fluttery laughter, at least she was trying to restrain it this time. “*You* of course. You’re the *last* person I’d expect to see at something like *this*.” She looked away across the city, gesturing with her free hand, “And even if you *did*, I mean you wouldn’t be *here* in the *Canals*, you’d be out *there*, off in Goldwalk somewhere.”

“Feeling out of place on some other balcony,” he muttered, keeping his gaze on the light playing along the water. The woman laughed again.

“Well aren’t *you* the witty one?” She inched in a little more, free hand on her hip, her other hand tapped on the railing with painted nails. “And such a *charmer*, too—”

“Um—”

“—Your file portrait *really* doesn’t do you justice.” Closer still, her hand drifting off her hip, trying to reach the railing on his other side.

He turned his back to her, desperate to look casual. Maybe not the wisest choice, but hopefully she’d be less inclined to try and trap him if they wouldn’t be face-to-face. She took the hint, but stayed far too close beside him, leaning back on the railing. He straightened up a bit, but meeting her gaze was a mistake. He was eye-to-eye with the social equivalent of an apex predator; a chatty leopardess perched on the railing, waiting to spring.

She gave him a silent catty smile. Royce found himself quickly calculating how much effort he’d have to put into a jump to clear the railing and hit the water below. Grant could deal with this on his own. He’d swim back to Fairview if he had to.

“So what brings you to the Canals tonight, *Royce Bracket*?”

“I was... looking to meet someone here.” Wrong answer. She seized on the ambiguity faster than he could react, hooking her arm around his and pulling him off balance, back inside.

“Oh, *wonderful*! I’ve got a few people who’d *love* to meet *you*!”

Chapter 10: Part 7.2: July

Chapter Summary

Continue(July())

Grant and Sybil save Royce from an apparent fan. Royce and Grant pitch a rough version of their project to Sybil, their potential new recruit.

Chapter Notes

This chapter marks the last of the chronologically-linked parts I have finished. As always, if you've enjoyed what I have so far, please leave a comment!

I'll be trying to clean up the disjointed parts and hopefully will be able to link them together some time in the future. For now, I'm afraid the story ends here. At least temporarily.

Grant had found Sybil among the crowd with ease. Ironically enough she was easy to miss. Modestly dressed in a high-waisted pencil skirt, a blue-and-gold geometric blouse, with a chunky glass necklace and her hair up in elaborate braids, she didn't look a thing like the photos he'd seen of her. He caught her flowing from one group of people to the next, juggling the small-talk and pleasantries of a dozen different conversations at once. She was cordial when he caught up with her and joined her on a walking tour of Fashion Week's socialites.

She spoke to photographers, designers both professional and amateur, models, agents, reporters, and people just coming to see the sights, all with the combined ease of practice and talent. Complete strangers became acquaintances by the first 'hello' and felt like close friends by the time she drifted away to speak to someone else. Grant had always considered himself a sociable man but he knew his bearing often made him unapproachable. Sybil was just the opposite. Pretty and personable, she could talk with just about anyone as if they had known each other their entire lives.

Grant watched her closely; her gentle attentive smile, her open body language. He had to admit to himself he was a bit jealous of her poise. Sybil was a professional, after all. This was her job, and from what he had heard and what he was seeing now, he knew there was nobody better in Cloudbank. If anyone knew everyone, it was Sybil Reisz. She was perfect for what he had in mind.

After a quick photo-op –she had been very pleased that he agreed to pose with her– she chatted with the photographer for a few minutes while Grant scanned the crowd. He

hadn't seen Royce yet, which wasn't exactly cause for alarm but he was starting to get concerned. Sybil had led him through the room in a gradual circuit and not once had he caught sight of the engineer. He was confident Royce knew enough not to bail out and leave without telling him; this meeting was important to him as well. Still, where had he gotten to?

Sybil asked him something offhand, trying to draw him into her conversation with the photographer, but he wasn't quite listening. He had spotted Royce a short distance away, and the engineer had seen him as well. He was being led rather forcefully by the arm by a woman who Grant realized bore an unfortunate resemblance to Sybil, or at least to the general description he had given his friend.

Royce indicated the woman to him by pointing while she had her back turned. Grant shook his head and gestured to Sybil as subtly as he could manage. Even at a distance Grant saw the colour drain from Royce's face. When the woman pulled at his arm again to lead him away he reached out to Grant, mouthing the words '*help me*' with an expression of pure dread.

Grant coughed, trying to stifle a laugh. Sybil was at his side in a blink, cheeky but by no means rude, "Hm? Something I missed?"

He cleared his throat, "I'm sorry, Miss Reisz, but I think I need to go... retrieve my associate."

Sybil stood on tip-toe and followed his gaze, "Oh no, I'd better come with you, it looks serious."

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It wasn't that serious, but Sybil knew right away she was needed. That woman was not the type to give up easily, she would have to be pulled away and distracted if her prisoner was to make his escape.

Sybil jogged through the crowd to catch up with her target, reaching out a hand to touch her shoulder, "Is that...?" The other woman turned at the touch and Sybil spread her arms for a hug, "Sylvia! It's so good to see you!"

The other woman released her captive. Sybil caught a glance from him darting away to hide behind Grant, meeting his gaze for an instant with a smile. The woman opened her arms to return the hug, "Sybil!" Sylvia held her at arm's length, "What on *earth* are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in Goldwalk?"

Sybil brushed off her friend's grasp with a casual wave, "The Goldwalk event can run itself, it's not like anyone's rioting to see Darzi's work anymore."

"The poor thing ought to *retire* if you ask me. *Oh*, have *you* met," Sylvia reached out to recapture the man she had been leading, but found him too far away; she retracted her claws, gesturing instead, "Mister *Royce Bracket*?"

“I have not,” Sybil turned to him properly now. Royce Bracket, a familiar name. He still made an attempt to be polite, nodding and offering a strangled “Evening,” even though he looked like he was about to keel over. Grant had shifted and wasn’t letting him hide.

Sylvia was leaning just a little, meaning to move past her to Royce, “Isn’t he simply *darling*?”

“Hmm...” Not really. Sybil played with her necklace while she regarded him. He was tall and lanky and nervous. She wouldn’t exactly call him ‘darling.’ He’d probably have an awkward charm to him once he calmed down. She glanced to Grant, standing by and restraining laughter in polite silence. She took him by the sleeve playfully, pulling him closer to Sylvia, “I think I like mine a little better.”

Sylvia covered a giggle with one hand, then gasped when she realized who she was giggling at, “*Sybil*, he’s an *Administrator*!”

“I know.”

Grant took over, offering a hand and an introduction, “Grant Kendrell. A pleasure to meet you miss...?”

“Reese. Sylvia Reese,” she shook his hand with both of hers. Sybil frowned at the obnoxious pink of her manicure. It matched the streak in her hair. “OVC Contributor. *Absolute* pleasure to meet you, sir. Are you enjoying the event?”

Sybil caught Grant’s look of ‘go on without me’ before he led Sylvia away on a string of small-talk. She turned her full attention to Royce, who kept a wary eye on the other woman until she was a safe distance away. “Good evening, Mister Bracket,” she was able to say at last, trying not to sound quite as smug as she felt.

“Thank-you, miss...”

“Reisz.”

“Reisz,” he nodded and took a quick glance around at the crowd, “Thank-you.”

Man of few words, this one. How to get him talking? She looked him over again, he was very dressed-down compared to most of the other people here. Wearing jeans, even. And what was with that shirt? Well put-together but still so casual. It was worth a shot. “I suppose I’m obligated to ask; who exactly are you wearing this evening, Mister Bracket?”

The look he gave her said ‘no formalities;’ heavy brows lowered just a bit, lips pressed tight. “Darzi, as a matter of fact. Although you and your friend don’t seem to think very highly of him.”

Sybil peeked back over her shoulder, Grant was in the process of passing Sylvia off to someone else, “She’s not my friend.” Royce said nothing. Disappointing. “I wasn’t aware Darzi did print work.”

“He doesn’t. This is custom.” Spoken flat, he didn’t even seem pleased.

“Really? Do you know him?”

“Not personally.”

A deflection, perhaps a lie or half-truth. In over his head most likely, taking into consideration his attire. Not his scene or even his district. Tall, dark, and guarded, hm? Well, time to do something about that.

The Darzi thread seemed easiest to follow. She stepped closer, intending to get a better look at his outfit. “You’re a fan of his, I take it?”

Either he misinterpreted her movement as a cue to start walking or he was very protective of his personal space. He moved with her, taking a step back and starting to turn. “More of a supporter. I can sympathize with the pressure he’s under. Surviving in this town becomes difficult when people start accusing you of being a ‘has-been.’”

Sybil blinked. A has-been? *Him?* He’d left himself open; she opted to be gentle. “Have people said that to you?”

“Not to my face. But you can imagine after my retirement I’ve rather...fallen off the map.” The last few words came out with an unusual lilt. Some private joke, perhaps? There was just a hint of a smile.

“What would you consider yourself then?”

“A revolutionary.” Royce nodded over her shoulder and she followed his look. Grant was on his way back, “Which is why we’ve contacted you, Miss Reisz.”

Sybil welcomed Grant back with a smile, “Everything alright?”

“That friend of yours is really something.” Grant showed only the slightest hesitation in describing her. He was being diplomatic. “Very energetic woman.”

Sybil’s smile grew into a grin. Not just diplomatic, that was an exceedingly polite way of putting it. “She can be.” Here she looked to Royce, whose only reaction to the inconsistency was a bit of a raised eyebrow. “Now, I take it there was something you gentlemen wanted to discuss with me?”

“Mind if we talk outside?” Royce spoke even as she imagined him saying those same words. The man did not like crowds. Still smiling, she gestured for them to lead.

Outside on the venue patio, Royce underwent a sudden and conspicuous transformation. He breathed deep and stretched his shoulders back, standing taller, moving smoother, his manner loosening up in the open space. Grant on the other hand became a bit more guarded, paying closer attention to the people around them than he had been inside.

Sybil crossed the patio to a quieter corner, turning around to perch on the polished brass railing. Royce and Grant had the courtesy not to trap her there, each standing slightly aside giving her a clear path if she chose to leave. It must have been something serious if they

were giving her such a clear avenue on purpose. What reason would she have to run from a conversation?

Grant started, “Thank-you for meeting with us, Miss Reisz. I realize you keep a busy schedule.”

She waved her hand in a circling motion. Pleasantries weren’t necessary, she wanted to know what he had to say. He didn’t seem pleased. A ghost of a grimace crossed his face before he changed gears.

“Royce and I have been—” a tiny hesitation.

“Talent scouting,” Royce cut in.

“—For a personal project of ours. I believe you may be just what we’re looking for.”

“What kind of project? Something...” she looked to Royce leaning on the railing near her, “Revolutionary?”

“I’d like to think so.” She leaned in when Royce spoke, even in the relative quiet outside it was difficult to hear him. He spoke so softly. “You have your finger on the pulse, so to speak, of this city, Miss Reisz. You’re well versed in its ebb and flow of trends and attitudes. You understand its people and what they want. For what we have planned we need someone of your particular skill-set, and Grant assures me you’re the best at what you do.”

That was the most he had said to her at once so far. Now that she could hear him clearly without the sound of the crowd she was struck by his voice. He had a dry, tired voice, a smoker’s voice. Lazy intonation and breathless delivery.

Sybil leaned back, propping her hands on the rail, “That’s all very flattering, gentlemen, but what *is* this project of yours?”

A look passed between the two men, Royce nodded to Grant in deference and the older man picked up the pitch. “If you know Cloudbank as well as I do, you’ll no doubt have noticed how rapid its cycles of development and cultural trends have become in the last few years. While I’m sure it presents interesting business opportunities for someone like you, Miss Reisz, it presents a serious problem,” he tilted his head, indicating Royce, “for people like us. This sort of rapid change has made Cloudbank unstable, and we’re looking to remedy that.”

Now things were getting interesting. She decided to play the sceptic, coax more information out of them if she could, “Unstable *how*, exactly?”

She expected them to switch off again, but Grant continued, “Everything from its infrastructure to its economy to its arts culture. Rapid and careless change is killing this city.”

Sybil couldn’t help but cut in, “And what do you expect *me* to do?” While this was interesting, it was a bit much. What grandiose plan did these two have in mind?

Grant took a pause to settle his tone from its previous rising intensity, “Help us change the opinions of the public and show the people of Cloudbank the value of permanence. Help us find other people, like-minded or otherwise, who can contribute to our cause. What we need is someone who knows Cloudbank’s elite, its culture icons; someone who can help us steer people and their ideas in the right direction.”

She sat up straighter, folding her arms and remaining silent. She took a moment to gauge their reactions. Grant held an impressive poker-face. Royce glanced between her and some spot to the side, trying not to seem like he was watching her too closely. So what did they want? What did they *really* want from her? It sounded like a selfish project under the mask of some grand philanthropy. But... all cynicism aside, it sounded like something she wanted to be a part of. An Administrator and the engineering mastermind behind much of Cloudbank itself? It almost didn’t matter what they were up to.

“What would this partnership entail?” She kept her voice flat, disinterested.

Grant mirrored her perfectly, “I’m not able to discuss that here.”

“Is there a better time or place to go over the details?”

The Administrator looked to Royce, who nodded to Sybil, “We’ll need a few days to ensure everything is organized. Once we’re ready, I believe Grant has your contact, we’ll get a hold of you.”

Sybil tilted her head, “You do realize I keep a very full schedule. The sooner I hear from you, the sooner I can plan around a meeting,” she dropped her stern act in favour of a subtle smile, “I’d hate to miss out on an opportunity because of a scheduling conflict.”

“We’re quite flexible, I’m sure we’ll be able to find a time that works.”

“Well alright then, I think that settles it,” she pushed herself to her feet off the railing. Maybe she was getting ahead of herself but she had her own plans to take care of. “Now, Mister Kendrell, I hate to impose but there was some mention earlier of giving me a ride home? I’d like to take you up on that offer as soon as possible. As much as I’d like to stay, I have a full day tomorrow and I can’t afford to be up too late.”

Grant gestured to the street, “We can leave now if you’d like.”

“Oh,” certainly agreeable, “Just let me go say a round of goodbyes. I’ll meet you out front?”

Grant looked to his associate, “Coming for the ride, Royce?”

The other man’s voice was hardly audible, “Where are you headed?”

“Sunset district,” she told them, “If that’s not too far out of the way?”

Royce cringed. He actually visibly cringed and she had to try not laugh at his expression. She knew there was a rumour the architect despised the coastal district for its boring residential development, but she hadn’t thought it was *that* bad. There must be

something else about the location that bothered him. Maybe she could coax it out of him later.

After a moment's consideration, though, Royce relented. "Sure," he rasped, "I'll come along. Drop me off near the harbour." Or she could try to get her answer on the way there.

She flashed them her most charming smile, "Be right out, gentlemen!"

Goodbyes were always hard, especially when she was in a rush to leave. People wanted to drag her back into unfinished exchanges. 'Oh, but one more thing—' She didn't have the time. So many of them wanted to chat more later. "Call or send me a message," she'd tell them, "I'm busy but I'll see what I can do."

A few minutes of handshakes and waves later, Sybil made it out to the sidewalk. Royce was waiting across the street by a black sedan with his hands in the pockets of his jacket. The streetlight caught the metallic ink of the print on his shirt, that clockwork heart. What did that say about him? A Darzi custom piece far outside the designer's usual style. At the very least it said he had the funds to commission it.

Royce opened the passenger door of the car for her when she approached, saying nothing. He took his seat behind Grant and they were underway.

Sybil leaned back in her seat, admiring the car's interior. A little plainer than she would have predicted. Wasn't Grant a senior Administrator? Why not go for something a little fancier? "Thank-you so much, Mister Kendrell, I really appreciate the ride," she looked sideways at him, "I'm sure not many people can say they've been driven home by an Administrator. I suppose I owe you a favour in return."

"That remains to be seen," casual, almost humorous.

"Oh?"

"We still need to go over the details of our project with you. I'd hate for you to feel obligated to return a favour to someone you might not see again." Grant was smiling but she didn't like it. There was something wrong with his tone. Not quite insincere. She couldn't place it.

She made a note of the change but carried on as if she had not, "Well, I'm sure things will work out just fine." She turned to look at Royce; he was sitting forward, elbow on his knee, chin on his knuckles, watching her with wide eyes. "I'd very much like to work with the two of you, after all. It would be a shame if I never saw you again."

Royce scowled and sat back, directing his attention out the window instead. Was he flustered? Or just grumpy from being waylaid by Sylvia? She couldn't let him forget she was the one who saved him; if anyone was owing it was *him*. Not tonight, though. She knew she'd be seeing them again, she could wait until then to collect.

There *was* that rumour she wanted to chase, however. It was a trivial thing of curiosity, so asking now would be fine. "Mister Bracket, if it's not prying too much, I'm

given to understand you have a certain dislike for the Sunset district.” Too formal? Too late now.

“I do.” Why wouldn’t he say more? She liked his tired, raspy voice.

“Why, exactly?”

“That’s prying too much.” Too bad. It was worth a try.

Sybil stayed quiet for the rest of the ride, mulling over the information she had so far and listening to Royce direct Grant across the city. He knew exactly which roads would be closed, which quarters to avoid, which left would let them jog around a busy plaza, which of the intra-city highways would be jammed and which service roads to take to avoid them. Grant only had to turn his head, not quite glancing back, to prompt him.

Out of curiosity she turned around again to watch the engineer. Half the time he wasn’t even paying attention to their surroundings. He was leaning against the window with his eyes shut, relying on the feeling of turns and acceleration to gauge where they were. Master of his craft, literally navigating Cloudbank with his eyes closed.

When they neared the waterfront he perked up, showing no reaction when he noticed she’d been watching him. They were in a quiet spot along the water, just outside a residential quarter, when he spoke, “Just drop me off anywhere along here. It’s a nice night for a walk.” The car slowed to a stop and he stepped out, giving her one last nod and a clipped “Good evening, Miss Reisz,” before turning to Grant. “You owe me a drink” were the words he parted with, closing the car door and striding off down the waterside.

Grant huffed a short half-laugh and eased back up to speed. Sybil looked over at him smiling. “He’s quite the character,” she had to try not to laugh at her own understatement.

“His company is sort of an acquired taste.” More understatement. Did Grant always speak like a politician?

“Wonder what he’d say about mine.”

“I think he likes you.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell.” Of course he did. The new ones always did.

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