

networking

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networking

by [hostsushi](#)

Summary

it's the events. These crowded places with fluorescent lighting and linoleum flooring, where bodies are packed too tight together and Asher can't make out one coherent conversation but imagines he can make out every individual footstep on the fucking tiles.

Chapter 1

He *hates* networking.

It's not so much the idea of it--he understands its necessity and, actually, he's a perfectly capable conversationalist. It's what he does, it's what he's good at-- finding a topic of interest and digging, picking away at it with the meticulous dedication of an artist, though his personal interest in the conversation can be(*usually is*) feigned.

Which is fine, he thinks. Fine if he had no prior interest at all in something until he finds a person absolutely enraptured by it. Things like stamp collections and action movies and the team that won that Monday's game. Emotions are infectious, he finds, and excitement especially so.

So it's not making connections that he finds tiresome, superficial as those connections may be--it's the events. These crowded places with fluorescent lighting and linoleum flooring, where bodies are packed too tight together and Asher can't make out one coherent conversation but imagines he can hear every individual footstep on the fucking tiles.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he hears, before an administrator slides onto the stool beside his.

Grant, he realizes. And then, *thank god*.

"I find this party to be so boring as to be offensive, if you must know." He takes another puff of his cigarette, squinting when the smoke hits the back of his throat.

"I believe you'd find it a great deal more entertaining if you'd care to join the rest of the assembled personage," Grant muses, amusement tinging his tone. "And when did you take up smoking?"

"Half an hour ago," he says, not bothering to dignify that first statement with a response. "Asher."

"Asher?"

He waves his hand dismissively. "Ash tray. Pass it. This stuff is foul."

Grant pushes one of the ash trays on the bar towards him. "I do believe you've made the right choice."

"Yes, well," he replies, punctuating the sentence by pressing the burnt tip of the cigarette into the ashes. "*To be truly human is to be constantly exploring*. This particular exploration was a resounding failure."

He downs the rest of his whisky as Grant chuckles. His laugh is so deep Asher can imagine he feels it more than he actually hears it, and the intrusive thought that follows is *touch his chest, right here, right now, diaphragm under your--*

Well, he thinks. That was bizarre.

“If I am not being too forward--excuse me if I am--you may feel free to accompany me back into fold.” He leans a little closer, a corner of his thin lips tugging upwards, almost conspiratorial. “Bracket’s with me. I daresay he’s almost as excited to be here as you are.”

“Bracket?” he repeats, slowly rounding in on Grant. “Royce Bracket? Bracket Towers Bracket?”

“The one and only.” He leans away again, and Asher finds himself wanting to lean towards him in turn. He doesn’t.

“I’m sure two intelligent young men can find some common ground. You can start with your shared distaste for public functions.”

Asher hurriedly shoves his hands in his pockets, looking for the small notebook he carries around with him. Not finding it he settles on a stack of napkins he grabs from across the counter. “Have a pen?”

“I’m afraid whatever information you’re going to try to weasel out of him will be much more easily procured if you approach him under the pretense of casual conversation,” Grant says, easily prying the napkins from his hand, placing them back over the bar. Journalistic integrity. Right.

“Duly noted,” he says, hopping off the bar stool. Or he thinks he does--his blood-alcohol level at this point ensures that it is a less-than-graceful slide down while he feels out for the floor with the tips of his feet.

Maybe it’s the alcohol that makes him lay a steadying hand on Grant’s bicep, too. “Lead the way, then.”

Chapter 2: composition

Chapter Summary

life goes on

“It’s too sterile.”

He looks up at that, the comment having been the only sound in the grandiose office space for the past fifteen minutes. Grant’s dark eyebrows are furrowed, stark against his skin. His silvery hair, always pulled back into a sharp ponytail, sees errant strands poking this way and that, illuminated by the bay window behind him--by the late afternoon sunlight pouring undeterred into the room.

He looks up, and Asher realizes that he has been staring.

So he scoffs, turning back to Grant’s impressive collection of knickknacks. “‘Sterile’? It’s the news, not a thinkpiece.” He picks a small carriage off the shelf, turning it over in his hands to inspect the quality of the woodwork. It’s been immaculately kept, he notes, in spite of its age. *Maybe they’ll come back in style, he thinks, and I can ride in one myself. I can bring Sybil along--no, she wouldn’t enjoy that sort of thing. Too quiet. Maybe I can ask Grant,*

“Regardless,” Grant answers. Thankfully. “Your publications of a similar variety have managed to capture my interest much more than this particular piece. It feels as though someone else altogether wrote it. Oh, don’t pull that face.”

“I don’t even know why I’m asking your opinion.”

“Very rude, Asher,” he says, organizing the papers, tapping them against his desk to put them in order. “I am nothing if not a dedicated fan of your writing and an advocate of your future career in the industry. Why would you ask my opinion besides?”

Asher snorts, pulling up a holographic folio with a flick of his wrist. “To entertain you while I borrow the relative peace of the central administration building. I need to gather my thoughts.”

Traverson Hall is a mess this time of year. Under- and upperclassmen alike invade the libraries and cafeterias, sprawled on every surface in a mockery of Cloudbank’s largest sleepover. People have even rearranged the couches in the corridor for ease of conversation, for group studies; his own favorite couch, a hard-backed loveseat facing a huge painting of a field of sunflowers, has been commandeered for the past three days by man carrying enough hardware to murder a man with blunt-force trauma and wild black hair.

“It’s a warzone back on campus, and there are no libraries in the city. Why *aren’t* there libraries in the city?”

“I suppose no one has petitioned for one in quite a while.”

“Wouldn’t you like something like that? A library?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Grant muses. “I do have one at home. Small, but serviceable. And I don’t often have much free time to spare to books, anyway.”

“And here I am, sapping you of what precious little of it remains.”

Grant does laugh at that, albeit uncomfortably.

Sensing his faux pas too late, Asher scrambles for another topic. “Perhaps journalism will fall out of favor,” he says lightly. His hand trembles minutely as he swipes it across the surface of his folio, scanning for a response from his composition professor. “I’ll have to retire by the time I’m thirty. Pack up and head off to the country, the whole lot of us.”

This joke falls flat too, apparently, for when he looks up to gauge Grant’s expression he is less Grant, more Administrator-Grant, his eyes gone cold, his face a chiseled mask in the heat of a debate. Cold, silent power, hands resting over the mahogany of his desk.

“Don’t joke about that.”

Asher clears his throat. “Sorry,” he says. His face feels hot, his vision hazy. *Terrible*, he thinks. Thinks of his father carving away at small blocks of wood to create things so similar to these exquisite miniatures. Small horses, small buildings, small people which Asher would play with after supper, imagining and reimagining their little roles, their little lives. Restructuring their small city over and over again.

Things can’t get worse, really, so he says:

“Did you lose someone close to you, too?”

Grant takes one look at him, at eyes that are red and glistening now, and looks away.

“New, ah, friend?” Royce asks that night. They’re leaning their elbows on his balcony, both holding glasses of scotch.

“Pardon?” he says. Royce takes another puff of his cigarette in response, breathing in sharply through his teeth. He turns his gaze back to the horizon--Cloudbank’s sky is a beautiful dark teal this evening, wispy orange clouds placed just so. Sometimes it takes Royce a while to respond to questions, takes a while to parse a reply, so he appreciates the skyline while Royce finds the words.

“Theeeee, young man, at the event. Leaning off your arm.”

“Oh, that’s--I’m sorry, doing what?”

“Leaning, off your arm.”

“Oh,” Grant says. He goes back to his drink. “I believe he was quite inebriated at the time. Quite excited for the opportunity to speak to you, though.”

“Quite,” Royce says, matching his tone. He flicks his cigarette, now mostly filter, to city below.

Grant frowns at him. “Please don’t do that.”

“Oh,” Royce says, “it’s quite--quite alright, I believe. The chances of that starting a fire--the probability, probability of something happening is never zero per-cent, but it can come quite close. Quite close. Such as in this, case.”

Grant gives him a once-over, disapproving, before continuing. “He’s a Traverson man, graduating this year. Only child of the late Andrew Kendrell.” When Royce fails to react, he sighs. “One of your coworkers, Royce, for God’s sake. Kendrell. He’s collaborated with you on,” he waves his hand, “half the city. He left us some years ago.”

“Oh,” Royce says, recognition suddenly sparking in his eyes. “Oh. Ooooh. That’s interesting. Yes. Interesting. Quite. A, ah, chip off the old block, then?”

“No,” he says, finishing off his glass. “A writer.”

“Ah.” Royce finds another cigarette, lights it. “They’re retiring younger and younger these days, aren’t they.”

“Mmm.”

“You are, hmm. Pointedly, morose.”

Grant looks back at him for a moment, at a face that has changed only minutely since he has known it.

When will Royce grow tired of this life, he wonders, and leave the city behind?

He laughs. “Not morose. Tired, maybe, of seeing talent go to waste.”

Chapter 3: intermission

Chapter Summary

college baseball fans

WARNING: CONTAINS DUBCON

Asher Kendrell, at the age of twenty-two, has learned to accept that regret is simply an unavoidable background facet in the wake of most of his social interactions. To point:

The rambling excuse he gave his professor for missing class three days in a row. Agreeing to let a complete stranger inject a syringe of methamphetamine between his toes last week. Apparently flirting with Grant, Administrator Grant, whom socialites are now reporting was proudly escorting him at an event in which he'd supposedly hung off his arm like a lover.

More presently, sucking Olmarq's dick under the bleachers while the idiot pulls on his hair hard enough to uproot a few strands.

“cuse you,” he says, or tries to.

“Hey,” says Olmarq, breathless. “Wanna come up to my room?”

Asher looks up at him. He has a dick lodged firmly against the back of his throat.

“Wanna pay you back.” When Asher doesn't respond either way, he continues. “That's the proper thing to do. Right?”

Well. A gentleman. Asher pulls away from him and Olmarq rights himself, his erection not wholly obvious through the padding of the uniform on his thighs. Excellent. “Lead the way.”

He drags Asher through groups of people celebrating the winning team. They're stopped more than a few times by frat boys clapping Olmarq's shoulders, drunk and blazed right out of their minds. Asher's own diminutive height means he gets elbowed and shoved around more than once in mayhem of the crowd, but Olmarq keeps a strong grip on his wrist. Everyone is yelling, cheering, and Asher's eardrums are blown. He wishes, not for the first time, that he were elsewhere. He wishes Grant would perhaps invite him to see his personal library.

“Here we are!” announces Olmarq, cheerfully unlocking the door to his room.

“Yes,” he agrees, rubbing one side of his head. Unfortunately.

Olmarq leads him inside, where the sound of the party outside is reduced to a more bearable muted bass, and wrinkles his nose in disgust when he sees Olmarq put a sock on the door handle.

He turns around to give the room a once over; there's a twin bed pushed to one corner, covers undone. A pair of dumbbells lay discarded beside it, and he briefly imagines the large oaf behind him tripping over them in the relative darkness of dawn. He fights a grin, wonders if that might have anything to do with the stranger bend in the athlete's nose.

"Oh, um." The shuffling of feet.

"What?"

"I thought I could, um. Fuck you."

Asher stares at him, eyes wide over his shoulder at the audacity of this imbecile. "Absolutely *not*. Is that what you thought we'd do when you brought me here?"

Olmarq—oh god, he's looking at him with doe eyes. "You don't have to get mad! Besides," he says hurriedly, "I've got stuff for it. It wouldn't hurt. You're just real pretty, is all."

Asher pinches the bridge of his nose. He can't believe he's considering this. "What do you have."

"Um, weed. Beer."

"No, you idiot. Have you ever done this before? I mean lubricant." He hops on the bed, starts taking off his shoes. "Hand me a beer."

Olmarq hurries to the minifridge. He opens one can and tosses the other to him.

"Good start," he says, popping it open. He watches with some interest as Olmarq pulls open drawers, scans the tops of a messy dresser for something useful. Some moments later, *aha* from the other side of the room, and Olmarq procures a tin of hair grease.

"Seriously?" Asher scrunches up his nose for the second time that night. He crushes the empty beer can in his hand and drops it on the floor, adding to the mess.

Olmarq doesn't even seem too notice, proud as he is with his find. "It'll do the job, right?"

"Well, yes. I suppose."

"Alrighty then," and Olmarq is grinning ear to ear, making his way to the bed. He gets down on all fours, crawling up to Asher to grab one of his legs and pull, swinging him all the way onto the bed. He shoves one knee between Asher's spread legs and crawls over him, making quick work of Asher's button down shirt amidst appalled squacking.

"*Gently*," Asher hisses, when his shoulders are pushed down so he's laying flat but the back of his head hits the headboard on the way down. "God."

“Sorry 'bout that,” Olmarq says, sheepish. Asher sighs and lays a forearm over his eyes. *Stupid, he thinks, stupid. Dozen things I could be doing right now. Have to draft a message to Grant, need to apologize for looking like an absolute fucking floozy last week. Should stop drinking. Yeah, I'll do that,* he affirms, riding the slight buzz the beer gave him. His pants are pulled down and he hisses at the kneejerk embarrassment of being exposed.

“Dude, you wear these things?” he feels Olmarq push a finger under the band of one of his sock garters, yelping when he lets go and it snaps back into place. “That's kinda hot.”

Definitely not drunk enough for this, he thinks. Utterly embarrassing. He hears Olmarq fighting with the lid of the tin, swallowing when he has to listen to the obscene sound of the man slicking himself up.

“You doing okay?”

“Yes,” he lies, eyes still scrunched shut.

Apparently it's what passes for warning in Olmarq's mind, because the very next thing he does is shove the head of his dick into Asher and he, entirely unprepared, screeches through grit teeth.

“Oh my God,” he says, throwing his arm to his side and opening his eyes against the pain enough to glare. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“Oh, God, sorry,” Olmarq stammers. “I thought you were ready, I--”

“Whatever,” he hisses, cutting Olmarq off. “Give me a minute.”

Thankfully, Olmarq is quiet while he adjusts to the sensation. He's never been a fan of this particular sexual act, doesn't find pleasure in feeling too-full and pinned. He closes his eyes again, presses his arm back over his eyes. Fisting his hand in the sheets, he settles on thinking of someone, something else to get through this awful mistake.

He doesn't know many people of Olmarq's stature, tending to gravitate towards people he doesn't have to crane his neck up to look in the face. Olmarq, he doesn't even know him, had just taken a passing liking in him when he'd grinned up at him from the stands. And besides that, when he'd approached him in the mostly-deserted stands after the game, all broad shoulders and glinting dark eyes--

He hooks his knees behind Olmarq's legs, spurring him on. Almost immediately he's down on Asher, pressing bruising kisses against his throat. Asher exhales slowly through grit teeth when he starts to move, thrusts shallow. Keeping his eyes shut he reaches up to wrap his arms around Olmarq's neck, digs his blunt nails into his back.

If his imagination serves him well enough, if he disassociates from the here and now and thinks on warmer memories, he can almost smell the old study in central administration. The warmth of the afternoon sun spilling in through the windows almost warms his perpetually cold, clammy hands. Thin lips press against his forehead, his cheek, his chin, his leg held in

the air by the back of his knee by a firm hand. Stray silver hairs tickle his nose as the man kisses his collarbone, and he--

“Fuck,” breathes Olmarq, right into his ear. Asher hisses in frustration, but it might be mistaken as a sound of pleasure because Olmarq shoves himself in hilt-deep, orgasms inside him with a snap of his hips.

Asher rakes his nails across his back. A punishment.

Chapter 4: communicating

Chapter Summary

He lays his phone down next to his plate, unsure. Unsure about a number of things, but also unsure about the particular emotion he is feeling. Part annoyance that he spent the better part of the morning drafting an apology that is being handwaved away, *no big deal*—part embarrassment that he snuck a letter under Grant's door like he was starring in a low budget spy flick, part mortification that he had spent a considerable amount of time mulling over how to go about apologizing—not in person, they'd be seen, not electronically, it could be tracked—paper, because it was easily disposed of. This is the sort of thing, he knows, he will relive over and over years later in the quiet hours of the evening, staring at his ceiling with shame gnawing at him in the way these small awkward memories are wont to do.

In the eye of the storm, the relative quiet space between the end of finals and his graduation, Asher sits down to write his apology.

Rather, he sat down over an hour ago to write it, and is growing exponentially more frustrated as the minutes pass and he can't parse a suitable introduction. He finds himself flip-flopping uselessly through ways to address him, titles-names-name and title-title and name-noun, lather, rinse, repeat, and the pile of crumbled paper beside him grows ever taller.

Dear Grant,

He stares, scribbles furiously at the line, and rips out the sheet from his quickly-diminishing notebook.

Administrator,

Too stiff, he thinks, and does his best to turn the comma into a 'G'.

Administrator Grant,

I sincerely apologize for any undue trouble my actions may have caused you in the wake of our prior

Another sheet, another sharp exhale,

in the wake of the last event you attended. I was not in my--

A fresh sheet,

If possible, I will do anything I can to dispel any falsehoods or rumors you might have had to endure.

Love,

He tears this page out more quickly than the others, rewrites this highly-condensed final draft of his previous long-winded attempts, signs *Love*, again, on autopilot, and this time he has to throw his notebook aside for a moment to stem the infuriated scream that bubbles in his diaphragm.

Moments later, he picks the notebook back up, scribbles out the *love*, forces himself out of the habit and consciously signs *sincerely, Asher Kendrell*. Good enough, then, and he folds the paper in half, folds it again, again, again, until it is a small square fitting in the palm of his hand. He slides it into his pocket and heads out for the day.

He's slid the paper under the great oak door of the administrator's office, careful to attract as little attention as possible in the constantly shifting crowd of city officials and staffers in central administration, and is enjoying a quiet lunch at a cafe on Goldwalk when he hears the telltale beeping of a text notification from his pants pocket.

I appreciate your concern, but I fear you may be attributing more importance to that particular rumor than it is worth. -G

He stares blankly at his screen before tapping out a response.

I was really, really drunk

He lays his phone down next to his plate, unsure. Unsure about a number of things, but also unsure about the particular emotion he is feeling. Part annoyance that he spent the better part of the morning drafting an apology that is being handwaved away, *no big deal*—part embarrassment that he snuck a letter under Grant's door like he was starring in a low budget spy flick, part mortification that he had spent a considerable amount of time mulling over how to go about apologizing—not in person, they'd be seen, not electronically, it could be tracked—paper, because it was easily disposed of. This is the sort of thing, he knows, he will relive over and over years later in the quiet hours of the evening, staring at his ceiling with shame gnawing at him in the way these small awkward memories are wont to do.

Another message, this time: *I believe most of the attendees were.* And a second message: *I can't believe you wrote me a note. Made me feel as though I was in primary again. :-)* -G

This time he has to restrain himself from slamming the phone onto the table. Instead, he counts backwards from ten, exhales through his nose, takes another sip of coffee.

The next message takes a little longer to arrive, but when it does, it is—mercifully--less taunting.

If I had a nickle for every time a tabloid gossiped one of my interactions at a gathering I would probably be the richest man in Cloudbank. Perhaps give Maximilas Darzi a run for his money? Years ago a writer theorized I was dating my mother because she kissed me at an event, didn't know she was my mother of course. Perils of being a bachelor. -G

He feels the corner of his lips threatening to quirk upwards into a smile.

Gross

Very. -G

He recalls burying his head so deep into research material for the past month as a method of distraction, recalls too much drinking and bad decisions and that godawful tryst with the athlete that had left him curled up on the floor of his bathroom with a burning in his gut, recalls sleeping too little and reading too much, thinking too much, considering turning his sudden bout of insomnia into a personal experiment—*How long can I go without sleep before I start to hallucinate*—four days, apparently, and realizes that he is probably, perhaps, wound a bit too tight.

He'd talked to the spectre of his father for hours, trying to get his attention while he worked ceaselessly at Asher's small end table, drawing and re-drawing blueprints, schematics for a building that would be torn down in a month or two when the next polls swung around anyway.

“It's not worth it,” he'd said.

No reply.

“Why do you work so hard?” he said, trying again. “It's not worth it.”

True to life, consumed by the drawings in front of him, his father did not reply.

“Nothing is worth it.”

And so, he picks up his phone, taps out *If it's not weird to say I missed talking to you. I graduate soon we should do lunch, I want to interview you and I can*

He pauses here. A joke would be good, yes.

Introduce you to some ladies? ;) That aren't related to you?

His response comes a few minutes later, and this time Asher checks immediately.

Haha alright -G

The knot in his chest finally loosened, he places his phone back into his pocket.

He's halfway through his sandwich when he realizes he doesn't know any middle aged women.

Chapter 5: holes

Chapter Summary

“I talk to you because you're nice. You don't expect anything out of me. You don't want anything. We can just talk, and it doesn't have to be—it doesn't--”

“Not like the other men in your life?” Grant finishes. This time, Asher does look at him, and regrets it immediately. He looks like he thinks Asher is pitiful. How much does he know? He thinks about Sybil, earlier, and wants to reel over and retch. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Stupid orphan boy ruining his life with vices, and the caring gentleman with a guiding hand on his shoulder who pulls him from the depths of his own misery. *What hole can I dig you out of now?* He doesn't need it now, not when he sees he's been a mole all along, perfectly at home underground.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter--mentions of paternal neglect, substance abuse, dubcon. It gets worse before it gets better

“Well, well, well,” and Asher can hear the click-click-click of nails on the other end of the line. “Look who the cat dragged in.”

“I believe the turn of phrase is 'what', actually.”

“Reworded for the occasion.”

“Currently, I feel more 'what' than 'who,’” he says, and then pauses. He's speaking on autopilot, and the sentence doesn't sound right. He doesn't bother correcting himself.

“Tragic. What's up, kitty cat?”

He can practically hear Sybil's nonchalance—she'll be sitting in her bed, probably, drying out her freshly-painted nails(bright red, she's infatuated, currently). He knows this song and dance; Sybil playing at annoyance when she's used to his long absences, his weeks of silence before calling her up out of the blue for lunch or coffee. He'll apologize, she'll wave it off; it's a comfortable routine.

“Existing, currently.”

“But not enough to clap when I got my diploma. For shame, Asher.”

“Everyone else clapped. What difference can one person make?”

“The world. But you didn't call to philosophize.” He hears Sybil blow on her nails on the other end of the line—he was right. “Down to brass tacks—what hole can I dig you out of now?”

“There is no hole, thank you.”

Currently. That hole was filled and buried some time ago. No more benders, no more one night stands that left his innards roiling and his face buried in a toilet, no more all-nighters wringing water out of a rock bullshitting his senior thesis.

And there were friendly messages from the administrator. He looked forward to those.

'*Good morning*'s, once in a while, unprompted. '*Are you doing alright?*', seemingly always when he actually wasn't doing alright—those were welcomed. Asher would respond to these messages by bombarding Grant's comm with photos of his cat.

It was comfortable. Easy. Asher didn't expect anything from him aside from his graciousness, his kindness, which he seemed to extend to everyone around him like warm sunlight—and Grant expected nothing from him. Only assurances that he was alive, once in a while.

Speaking of.

“I was wondering if you'd meet up with a friend of mine. Do lunch or something.”

“Friend'? I'm not your wing man, pal.”

“I'm not your pal, buddy.” He taps a corner of his desk. “I've been talking to one of my dad's colleagues. He's nice. I interviewed him for my papers a few times. I thought you'd like to meet him.”

Silence, then, on the line. “Your *dad's* friends?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Well, *Sybil*, since you've asked so kindly,” he leaves out the expletive they both know is there, “he's an admin. He worked with my dad on a few projects in person—with Bracket-Bracket-Towers-Bracket. I like hearing his stories. I write them down whenever we talk.” *He keeps me out of trouble*, he doesn't say. *I think about him when I fuck*, another thing he doesn't say.

“I can't believe you're trying to screw one of your dad's friends.”

“Wow. I literally said none of that.” A pause. “Wait. Are you? Either way, you're wrong, in which case I've shattered whatever hidden hopes you might have had for being the next forecaster down at the precinct.”

“Whatever. I am not going with you.”

“Incredible. And here I thought I was offering you a grand opportunity to rub shoulders with the highest echelons of society.”

“And this is me turning you down. I'd be going with you if I thought I had to keep you out of trouble, but I'm pretty sure an administrator can keep you on the straight and narrow for a few hours.”

Asher laughs, and the sound is foreign to his own ears. “Keeping me out of trouble? When have you, Sybil, kept me, out of trouble?”

“I heard about Olmarq, Asher.”

He doesn't respond. He doesn't respond for a while, and when Sybil knows he won't, she continues.

“Everyone has. Some people *saw* you. You were getting dragged all over campus; you probably didn't notice because you were zoned out on whatever the hell you were taking. You still there?”

The answer comes slowly--terse. “Yes.”

“We've graduated. And you can't keep doing this to yourself.” A pause, here, like searching a vault for a suitable phrase. “I care about you,” she says, finally.

“Yeah.”

“Stop burning the candle at both ends.” The call drops. Just as well—neither at them are good at this. This raw sentimentality. Touch and go. You lay your hand on the stovetop long enough and the first degree burn is a third degree burn.

He texts Grant instead. *'Late lunch tomorrow?'*

They're on the bridge in Goldwalk, and it's like everyone in Cloudbank is outside. He's holding an ice cream cone he can barely taste, so he holds it to his shoulder—let his cat have it, then.

The sky is purple, and orange, and blue—it's too much. Farrah's hit or miss with him—she's new at this, he knows, still being mentored, but this is an absolute mess. Oversaturated,

gaudy, loud--

"I think it's quite nice," Grant says.

"I didn't even say anything."

"You were looking into the horizon with a thousand yard stare and glaring," he says, laughing but not—Grant does that, he laughs with his eyes, his smile, crows feet becoming prominent.

He frowns, because he doesn't like to be read but it seems like something Grant just *does*, like breathing or walking, so he lets it slide. "If it's so nice, look at the sunset and not at me."

"I was watching your cat, actually—she's a funny little thing, isn't she?--but I watch the sunset every day, and I only get to experience such exaggerated shows of annoyance once in a blue moon."

He elbows Grant—who feels like young man when he's around him, not Grant-Administrator-At-Central-Grant—and feels the niggling warmth under his sternum he gets when they're like this. Not the ice cream, he thinks, sadly. No antacid for this saccharine bullshit.

So he puts his feet up on the bottoms of the railing, leans over the top with his arms holding him over the top. The wind blows east, and his hair's a mess. He drops the cone into the ocean as his cat yowls sadly, and, rocking on his heels, he says--"I like looking at you too."

He doesn't bother looking to his side; just listens as Grant clears his throat. "Asher," he starts.

"I know that you must miss your father terribly."

His ears blow out, like his blood pressure is skyrocketing. He grips the railing tight, and then he grips it harder, because no. No. That wasn't what he meant at all, and how could he be so *patronized*, how could he be so *patronizing*, after all of this—and what did he expect—and the administrator is talking, but he can only catch bits and pieces.

Confused, he hears, through the haze in his head. Rumors, poor parenting, poor relationship, found family. Asher wants to scratch his eyes out. Asher wants to tear his skin open. He can't believe he didn't account for this. He can't believe he didn't see it happening.

When he opens his mouth to talk, he finds he's hiccuping. "You don't know *shit*," he says. He's crying, because things couldn't possibly get worse for him, more embarrassing. The sky is, mercifully, hazy, and the colors blend together in a more aesthetically-pleasing way. It should have been like this first, he thinks—blaming the sunset is easier than blaming himself.

"Please don't cry," Grant says, his voice barely above a whisper. It's not embarrassment, it's—it's pity, which is so much worse.

"*Fuck*," he says. "Fuck. I don't care about him."

There's silence beside him. Grant thinks he'll explode, probably—maybe that's why they're out in Goldwalk in the late afternoon, so he can't cause a scene. A child. Grant thinks he's a

child.

“I talk to you because you're nice. You don't expect anything out of me. You don't want anything. We can just talk, and it doesn't have to be—it doesn't--”

“Not like the other men in your life?” Grant finishes. This time, Asher does look at him, and regrets it immediately. He looks like he thinks Asher is pitiful. How much does he know? He thinks about Sybil, earlier, and wants to reel over and retch. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Stupid orphan boy ruining his life with vices, and the caring gentleman with a guiding hand on his shoulder who pulls him from the depths of his own misery. *What hole can I dig you out of now?* He doesn't need it now, not when he sees he's been a mole all along, perfectly at home underground.

“No,” he says, maybe to humor Grant, maybe because he's spiteful. “Not like the other men in my life. I truck through it, though—I think about you.”

He feels something cold. He doesn't know what to say, but he's angry, so he keeps talking.

“When I'm getting fucked in my shitty apartment, I think about you. I don't even want them, all it does is make me feel sick and waste half a day puking, but it's almost worth it. *No*, don't touch me, I'm not done—if it's a bigger guy, I'll usually let him, because it's easier to pretend. I hope you hate this. I hope you're disgusted, don't talk down to me like I'm a fucking *project-*”

And then Grant is behind him, closer than he's ever been, and gripping his arms.

He hisses “*Be quiet.*”

His cat's off his shoulders. He doesn't remember when she left.

Grant is still gripping him—maybe not kindly—but through his blown ears he can hear him calling for a car on a remote comm.

He slides his hands off the rails, finds the cold thing was cooling blood on his palms.

Chapter 6: holy fuck

Chapter Summary

“Open for me.”

Asher does, and Grant presses his thin lips to his. It is chaste, at first—a teenagers first kiss, all lips, no teeth, no tongue—but Asher swipes the tip of his tongue across the bottom on Grant's teeth, notes the sharpness of his canines. He feels Grant grip his thigh, press the hand on the back of his neck closer—their teeth clash, their tongues press together. Grant tastes like mint.

Suddenly, Grant pulls away too fast. Out of the corner of his eye, Asher can see the bulge in his pants. He, himself, shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

“Enough,” Grant says, breathing a little too hard, brushing strands of hair out of his eyes. “Enough.”

Chapter Notes

uh, partial nsfw

It must be a personal chauffeur.

Grant greets the driver, taking one hand off Asher's arm to open the car door. He is too busy flexing his fingers, feeling the circulation come back to his extremities, to pay much attention to the rest of the conversation. Directions, most likely.

He's sat firmly in the seat. Grant enters through the side door quickly, the door lock sounds, and when the divider between passenger and driver is rolled up, Grant rounds in on him.

“If you want to be treated like an adult,” he hisses, “act like one.”

It's the last thing he says for the entirety of the trip. He vaguely feels Grant take one of his hands and press a kerchief to them, but the sensation is blunted, as though he is out of his own body. A week ago he might have felt his face and ears grow hot with giddiness, but now he feels numb with a vague aftertaste of embarrassment. Outbursts are common. Public outbursts are less-so.

Grant presses a thumb to the deepest part of the wound, other hand on his wrist, and all Asher can do is literally navel-gaze.

When the car stops, they're in Highrise. Grant leads him up the steps to the building by his shoulders ('*Up, up, now,*' when the tip of Asher's shoe hits a stair and he would have fallen), and opens the door for him.

The interior is lavish.

"This isn't my home," he says.

"Currently, I do not trust you in your own home." *Another jab.*

He doesn't respond, and entertains himself otherwise; the people coming and going—tenants—are dressed to the nines. The outfits are impractical—he spies one woman's gown dragging a good three inches behind her, and wonders how. Gentlemen throwing their coats over puddles. Will the gown be used after this venture, or merely hung in a closet for the rest of its owner's life? He hopes it won't be lonely. He hopes there will be other gowns to accompany it. Maybe they have a club, he thinks, and they hang in their closets venting to one another. If they could, they would write a memoir; *The Price of Decadence*, subtitle *One Gown's Rise and Subsequent Fall*.

"Your cat left," Grant says, and he realizes they're in an elevator. He supposes he must have gotten here while he was busy anthropomorphizing clothing.

"She knows her way back home."

Grant still has a hand on his arm. It doesn't hurt—but his hand is large enough to wrap around the whole of Asher's upper arm.

"You don't have to keep holding onto me, you know." He watches the elevator buttons—how high does Grant live? Does it bother him, the urge to step over the balcony and drop?

Do other people even have those urges?

"I know."

His tone is even. They arrive at the twentieth floor, and walk down a hall, to the left, another hall, another left. He fishes for his keys in his pocket.

The inside of Grant's apartment is small, but not for lack of floor space; it merely looks lived-in, unlike his own studio. Photos line one wall, paintings, another—a piano, an ancient thing, sits against a bay windows. Seats are positioned around an unlit fireplace, the smell of sandalwood is faint in the air, the fluorescent light of a kitchen nearby edges at the leather of his shoes.

"Are you calm?" *Yes*, he wants to say, but also *no*. He doesn't want to scream, but irritation coils in his belly, a viper's nest. In the end, he doesn't reply, and merely leans against Grant's

side.

He stiffens.

“If you insist on keeping hold of me, I insist on leaning on you.”

“Asher.”

He doesn't sound angry now, either. Maybe resigned. That won't do at all.

He doesn't scold him, though. Merely takes his hand off Asher's arm—what he now realizes was a welcome heat—and heads into the kitchen. “I'm making you something to eat. Please, make yourself at home.”

He does so, toeing off his shoes and making his way to the largest couch. Standing over the arm of the grandiose beast—soft leather—he hits his knees across the hard edge of the chair and goes careening downwards, falling flat on his face; his preferred way of taking a seat, when not on assignment.

Grant, no doubt drawn by the thud in his living room, rushes out to see Asher face-down on a couch that could buy Asher's entire life. “For God's sake.”

“This smells new.”

“Asher, get up. Sit properly.”

“This is how I 'make myself at home',” he says. This prolonged conversation is making him drool onto the leather. He swallows audibly before he is—surprisingly, unceremoniously, lifted by the waist. A trail of spit dangle from his mouth, and Grant whispers, “God. Asher. God.”

He sits him beside the armrest—how strong is he, Asher wonders?—and sits beside him. He doesn't bother wiping the drool on the other end of the couch.

“No food. Talk to me.”

He grounds his heels into the floor—plush carpet. The decadence is nauseating, harlequin. This is where a man takes his mistress to wine and dine, to fuck. The penthouse at the center of the city. Does Grant have someone like that, he wonders? Bracket, who the administrator had introduced him to.

Not a pleasant man. “I was your age,” he had said, voice low, eyes wide and sightless but not blind. “I was your age when we fucked.” He'd dropped his cigarette to the floor, crushed it underfoot.

“I don't know what to say,”--*that isn't incendiary*, his mind helpful provides.

“Fine. I'll start. Your neck's all marked up. Do you remember what you've done in the last week?”

“Eat. Sleep. Write. What do you want me to say? That I don't remember anything, that I was on a bender for the past week? That I don't remember who I've fucked? Don't--”

“Asher—” A warning.

“--play daddy for me. I don't need it. If my former conduct is surprising to you, I urge you to speak to other Traverson graduates about their days in school.” Regardless, he presses a hand against his neck. He'd thought the shirt looked nice on him, and his cat always laid across his shoulders, anyway.

Grant wrenches that hand away from his neck, and in a moment his face is centimeters close.

“You,” he bites out, “are wrecking yourself, far before your time, as your father did before you. Do you want me to talk to you like a man? I will do so, gladly.”

Asher's gut clenches. Whatever frustration he was feeling is gone now. He isn't afraid, but he begs to God—any god—to strike him deaf.

“Your father had a child at home—an infant, you—and he spent days at the Towers. I begged him to go home, to see his family, but he wouldn't have it. He'd rebuild and rebuild and tweak the blueprints of a building, just one building, for hours before he was done. Half the city. Meelo's was more important than you were. Did you know that?”

Asher says nothing. He feels his face move.

“Do you think that's funny? Maybe you do, because you know the next part. Maybe you know he kept himself awake with a cocktail of drugs worthy of any dealer in the city. I think if someone had tried to poison him he wouldn't have died.”

Asher moves quickly, hand grasping the collar of Grant's shirt. “God. Fuck. Fuck. You fucked my dad, didn't you?”

Grant stares at him, wide-eyed and silent.

Asher laughs. He laughs for a long time, even when Grant holds his elbows, pleading for something Asher can't hear.

“That's why. That's why you think I'm—that's what you see me as. You—sick—twisted--*fuck.*”

In the middle of this, Grant slams him sideways into the head of the sofa, lands a punch to his gut. The move sends Asher reeling forward, gasping, forehead on Grant's leg. It hurts so badly he thinks he might puke, and he clenches and unclenches his teeth, simultaneously trying to get his breath back and not lose his lunch.

And, in the midst of this, “Asher—I can't give you what you want because you're destroying yourself.”

A warm hand on the back of his neck. Whispered apologies. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You were raving. I didn't know what to do. I'm sorry. Does it hurt too badly? Should I bring you an ice*

pack? You were manic. I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

“Please,” he says, and he's crying now. “Please, just one kiss. I don't care what you think about me. You don't have to worry. It's not your place. Please, kiss me once and I won't pursue it.”

The hand on his neck moves slowly—a thumb plays with the short hairs at the nape of his neck, an index finger trails softly across the side of his throat. Asher breathes into Grant's pant leg, and wishes he wouldn't ruin everything good life had handed to him. Wishes he hadn't ruined this too.

“Alright.”

Grant pulls him up gently, wipes his tears. He presses his face—his lips, to the side of his neck, and Asher gasps, moving to grasp Grants elbows. He feels a kiss, the graze of teeth, and he moves up—kisses his jaw, licks his earlobe. His beard tickles his throat.

“Open for me.”

Asher does, and Grant presses his thin lips to his. It is chaste, at first—a teenagers first kiss, all lips, no teeth, no tongue—but Asher swipes the tip of his tongue across the bottom on Grant's teeth, notes the sharpness of his canines. He feels Grant grip his thigh, press the hand on the back of his neck closer—their teeth clash, their tongues press together. Grant tastes like mint.

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