

at first light lay proud foundations

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/31452983) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/31452983>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Transistor (Video Game)
Relationship:	Royce Bracket/Grant Kendrell
Characters:	Grant Kendrell , Royce Bracket
Additional Tags:	Pre-Canon
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-05-22 Words: 2,669 Chapters: 1/1

at first light lay proud foundations

by [narcomanic](#)

Summary

Royce Bracket first met Grant Kendrell half a lifetime ago. It marked the beginning of a very fruitful time of mutual appreciation.

Notes

This is 100% based on a random thought of, "hey wouldn't it be funny if Grant and Royce had a one-night stand way back when they first met", to which my brain went, "hey what *if* they had a one-night stand when they first met", and I went, "oh shit, you're right, what if."

Royce's eyes are an intense ocean green, like a wild animal's. What kind, Grant can't quite put his finger on — a deer? A bird of prey? If he were to lean in for a kiss, would Royce bolt, or dig his fingers into the nape of Grant's neck?

It's an idle thought, but one Grant keeps carefully filed away at the back of his mind. Royce has only just made his Selections among the first of his year class, about to undertake his first assignments in the city itself. They've met briefly, over handshakes and inaugurals at Traverson Hall, and in symposiums to discuss what exactly it is that the admins can facilitate for the city's engineers (everything), and what sorts of data the engineers need to run by their admins before implementation (everything). The impression Royce has made during these fleeting encounters is an interesting contradiction of vastness and precision: a diamond in the rough, sure, but one who could with time and practice be honed sharp enough to make a real mark on the city. He would be good for Cloudbank, Grant can already tell, and he'd hate to spook a talent like that.

There's a poll going for a new waterfront feature at the southern pier: the boardwalk with amusements is going strong, but Grant has spent enough years as an admin to know there's still a good percentage chance the opinion may be swayed for the water organ instead. Royce is among the team of engineers conceptualizing the change, overseen by Central Administration. Grant's contact with the team has mostly been hands-off, directing from a distance, but what he's seen of Royce's work so far is impressive. He has avoided the typical first timer mistakes of overreaching and branching out beyond his scope. If Grant were to find something to nitpick, it may be Royce's habit of using comments to pepper in insights he personally finds interesting rather than keeping the rest of the team on the same page.

The day the poll closes (87% in favor of the boardwalk, perhaps water organs are simply not in season right now) Grant sends final instructions to the team: to finish all changes by the end of the week and drop a copy of their work for review. That very day he's working late in the offices, reviewing a schedule of upcoming polls, when a private message pings on his terminal. He pulls it up to see it's none other than Royce.

we're to bring our copy to the office?

He replies in the affirmative and is about to get back to his work when there's another ping.

the door is locked.

He stares at the message for a short moment, then slowly gets up to check the door. He opens it to find Royce leaning on the wall on the other side, frowning at his phone and glancing up at Grant with a perplexed expression. Grant schools his own into a conciliatory smile.

"Apologies," he says.

"What ever for?" Royce says with a shrug, and before Grant has time to answer, holds out a flash drive labeled with his name.

Grant accepts it with thanks, subtly looking over Royce in concern as he does: hair in perpetual disarray, a look in those wild eyes that suggests it's been a while since he slept, and Grant has half a mind to tell the man to go home and rest. But Royce stands in the hallway with an oddly expectant air, so Grant relents and steps back from the doorway in a silent invitation. An invitation Royce accepts, slinking past Grant into his office.

"Can I get you something while you wait, a coffee or...?" Grant asks, though he feels somewhat dubious about the offer, partially because Royce doesn't look like he needs any more stimulants in his system, and partially because any coffee left in the office at his hour is likely to have reached a new level of unappetizing. Thankfully, Royce shakes his head.

"No, I'm fine, but thank you," he says.

Grant sits back down at his desk and bids Royce to make himself comfortable in the meanwhile. As he boots up the portable drive and sets to reviewing the work, from the corner of his eye, he sees Royce pull out and unfold a small notebook that appears to be covered from margin to margin in tidy, indecipherable shorthand.

They work in near silence, Grant occasionally writing down one remark or other regarding each segment he finishes reviewing, Royce flipping through his notebook, adding or overwriting its rows of cipher. When he is finished, Grant connects his terminal's feed to a projector so that they can both see it, and pulls up a few highlighted segments.

"Right," he says, turning to Royce. "So, in your own words — walk me through this part."

Royce glances from him to the screen, wets his lips and begins to talk. His words wander this way and that, tumbling out of his mouth like pebbles in a stream. He keeps his hands folded in his lap, but the longer he speaks, the more his fingers begin to stray up to a shirt pocket, only to be immediately pulled back to fold over themselves. This repeats a few times until Grant pushes his chair over to crack open a window and places an empty coffee mug before Royce.

"Help yourself."

Royce looks up at him in surprise but nods gratefully, quickly fishing out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. The scent is thick and tarry, but Royce's shoulders relax and his voice continues more steadily after a few drags. For the most part, Grant listens, only interjecting here and there to remind Royce of the allotted space for each feature or to suggest an optimization to better accommodate the traffic that area will likely experience. Royce nods at each comment and jots them down in his notebook.

After what feels like hours of juggling ideas back and forth, Grant leans back in his chair and stretches his arms, barely suppressing a yawn. Royce is staring intently at his notes, chewing on the end of his pencil.

"I think that's all," Grant says, rubbing the back of his neck. Royce glances up at him and nods.

“Yes,” he murmurs. He snaps his notebook shut and stands up in one fluid motion. “Thank you. I’ll get started right away.”

Grant blinks at him, then glances at the clock on his terminal. His remaining plans for the night had been a warm shower followed by a soft bed. But Royce looks newly energized by their conversation, a bit of color on his cheeks and a focused gleam in his eye.

Grant turns back to his terminal. “As you will. But... do take what rest you need,” he feels compelled to add.

Royce glances at him, but only hums in reply. Before he leaves, though, he pauses at the doorway. “Then... the opening next week. Until then, I suppose?” he says over his shoulder.

Grant shoots him a warm, if tired, smile. “Until then, indeed, Mr. Bracket.”

The boardwalk opens for the public the next week: Foot traffic is up by 87%, visitor enjoyment by a remarkable 104%, and Royce Bracket’s file in the storage archives receives a mark of recommendation — the first of many.

Things are pushed into motion after that. It’s more than just Grant who has noticed him now: Bracket is quickly becoming a household name, called upon by those in the know. To the public, the man himself remains relatively unknown until the commissioning of the new offices for Central Administration. After the opening ceremony, however, Bracket Towers joins the ranks of Traverson Hall as a staple of Cloudbank’s skyline, to the point that it quickly becomes hard to remember Highrise without it. The man of the hour is present for the unveiling at the concourse, looking pleased as punch — at least to those who know him well enough. And Grant, after all this time, counts himself among those lucky few.

He asks Royce over for dinner later that evening, with a carefully crafted invitation that is obvious enough to make his intentions clear, but not too obvious to be crass.

Royce arrives punctual to the minute. He’s still wearing the clothes from the opening ceremony — sleeves slightly ruffled, tie crooked — but Grant takes no offense at this. He doesn’t think Royce would bother owning more than one presentable suit, and in any case, he’s planned for the evening to be a more casual affair among friends after the pomp and posturing Royce has no doubt had to endure the entire day. That it gives Grant an excuse to test out the delivery of the new seafood restaurant that opened up in the neighboring block is an added bonus.

Royce nibbles on his calamari while they talk about whatever catches their fancy: The latest additions to Grant’s collection of books (as in physical, paper books, a concept Royce seems to find amusingly antiquated). About Royce’s plans after his upcoming graduation, once the last necessary bits of paperwork have been filled out. His interests range from the practical (increasing the efficiency of traffic flow between Terrace Apartments and Jallafood Square) to the esoteric (he waxes slightly lyrical over... something about solving or verifying a mathematical problem in polynomial time). At that point Grant must admit defeat and settle for watching Royce gesture in excitement while he shuffles the silverware around the table to illustrate one point or another, the remains of his food long forgotten.

Once they've both eaten their fill, Grant ducks into the kitchen to fish out a bottle he received as a gift for his 15th year at Central Administration. There haven't been many occasions in the years since to shave off much of it, so this one feels as good a moment as any. They retreat to the balcony overlooking the city, where Royce is free to light up a smoke and enjoy the view. Much of that view is dominated by the eponymous Towers themselves, soaring into the sky only a handful of blocks away from Grant's apartment. The new offices are a much needed improvement, and not only for the shorter commute he gets to enjoy. Royce grins when Grant mentions this aloud.

"Was told something similar at the function. One of your colleagues — Neuhill? Neumann?" He glances at Grant, who nods. "... said as much, well, in not so many words."

Grant raises an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"His words — exact words — to me were, ah," Royce pauses, clears his throat, "*'it was about damn time'.*"

Grant laughs quietly into his drink. "That may have something to do with Neumann's commute to the old offices having undergone an overwrite, I believe, four times in the past three years. Used to be he'd take the Western circuit, before it was rerouted to make room for the downtown parks, then the DeLaurent overpass, which used to house the retail district, and then before *that* ..."

The words flee from his tongue and he pauses, suddenly discomfited. "I can't... actually recall what that block used to be before that."

Royce observes him in silence, half-slouching over the railing of the balcony. He rotates his glass precariously over the drop, lights of the city below reflecting and refracting in the amber and crystal. He tilts his head from side to side and seems to consider his next words.

"Much of Cloudbank is... defined by what it is not. By what it will be. Not by what it is. Certainly not what it was." He pauses, considers the view below. "But...! Such is the will of the people," he says with a shrug. Though there is, perhaps, a hint of critique in his voice. These days, the southern pier features an array of small artificial isles, joined by elaborate iron-wrought bridges. At least until the next poll.

Grant frowns and shakes his head slightly. "Between you and me, it does sometimes feel more like the *whim* of the people." He sighs. "I simply don't know if this... change for the sake of change is going to continue to be good for Cloudbank."

There is much more he could say on the subject, years of thoughts building up, but — the silhouette of his company cut against the skyline makes him recall the reason for this meeting. Grant averts his gaze and gives a rueful laugh. "Apologies. I didn't mean to be so morose. It wasn't my intention to call you here just to talk more about work."

Royce taps the rim of the glass against his lower lip, a faint smile playing on his face. "Of course," he murmurs, almost too low to hear over the distant buzz of the city below.

He swirls the remainder of his drink around. Then he drowns it in a single gulp, makes a small face at the intensity of the taste, and nods as he sets the glass down with a rattle of ice. “Yes, of course,” he repeats to himself and turns to Grant with an expectant expression.

Grant raises an eyebrow, feeling as if he missed some conversation Royce appears to have conducted without him.

Royce stares at him without blinking. “Yes, you may kiss me now,” he says.

Grant wouldn’t have gotten this good at his job if he were easily surprised. He masters his expression, takes a long sip of his drink, and sets his glass down with barely a sound. Royce does not move an inch during all this. Slowly, Grant reaches over to tilt his chin for a better angle, then — sensing no resistance — gently presses their lips together.

A bittersweet tang of alcohol. Beyond that, the thick, smoky taste of Royce’s cigarettes, which grows even stronger when Royce opens his mouth for a tongue, a hungry hint of teeth, his fingers digging into Grant’s left shoulder.

When they part for air, Grant opens his eyes to find Royce watching him, eyes half-lidded.

Grant licks the aftertaste of the kiss from his lips. “What else may I do to you?” he murmurs.

Royce looks him up and down, a high color to his cheeks, and that familiar focused gleam in his eye as he plucks at his own shirt collar with impatient fingers.

“I will tell you.”

Grant wakes up at some indeterminate hour in the night to find his bed empty. The sight of rumpled sheets, devoid of any lingering body warmth, shouldn’t be a surprise: He wasn’t expecting much in the way of sentiment, but the small pang of disappointment still stings a little. He rolls over to his back, scratching at a few tender spots — kiss-shaped bruises-to-be in the dip of his hip and north of his navel — when the hint of cigarette smoke and a draft of cool air make him realize he’s not alone after all.

He blinks blearily up at Royce, tucked into an armchair in one corner of the room, lit only by the glow of his cigarette and shafts of light from an open window. His pale shoulders are hunched over some book he’s scavenged from Grant’s library, though how he manages to read in the gloom of the room, Grant has no idea. As he watches in silence, Royce turns his head to exhale a stream of smoke out the window, eyes flicking over to Grant as he does so.

Grant lets his body relax and sink into the mattress. He’s somewhere between wondering if he could coax Royce back to bed and falling back asleep, when Royce speaks up.

“Thank you,” he says, voice soft in the dark.

Grant grapples with the words for a while, too tired to make connections. “... For the sex?” he finally mumbles.

Royce's lips quirk up into a brief smile and he takes another drag of his cigarette. "... That too."

"Don't mention it," Grant says. At least, he thinks he does, as beyond that point he remembers nothing more of the night.

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