

You Have My Word

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You Have My Word

by [runicmagitek](#)

Summary

At one point, Grant had a vision for Cloudbank. Not once did he believe this would be the outcome.

Every entrance and exit was blocked off, but it would make no difference. They would find them, pin them against their own will, and rip away their humanity. Just as they had with Sybil. Talking went nowhere with the Process. Diplomacy didn't humor mindless *things*. All they longed for was the one object taken away from them.

The object Grant had been foolish enough to ask for.

A few evenings ago, Grant tracked down the reclusive man he called his friend. Only the glow of Royce's monitor and a lit cigarette illuminated the vast room. Royce stared at the OVC while taking long drags to fill his lungs with smoke.

"Just one night," he had told Royce. "Everything will fall into place. You know that. This is what we've been working towards. Isn't this what you want? What you worked so hard for?"

After a pause, Royce swiveled in his seat and peered up to Grant. Sleep hadn't been kind to Royce - or perhaps he refused to submit to it in the first place - but past the exhausted gaze, Grant swore he found a flicker of annoyance.

"Is it?" Royce croaked out. His bright eyes drifted past Grant. "Rather peculiar, this... plan of ours. Yours, maybe."

"Royce, what are you-"

"You put blind trust in one who has only her words to stand by." His lips twitched, the closest semblance to a laugh Royce ever mustered. "Words.... What can we trust in words? We can... manipulate them, yes. Happens all the time. People trust others on a good word. The fact of the matter is that there are no good words... or bad ones. People fashion them all the time to benefit themselves." He inhaled smoke. "All the time."

"It's absurd to be doubting Sybil now. She's been nothing but a boon for us and you know it. To doubt her now is to doubt the intents of the Camerata."

Royce returned his gaze to Grant, reclining in his chair. "You believe that?"

"We *all* should believe that."

Without another word exchanged, Royce eventually rose from his seat, finished off his cigarette, and retrieved the Transistor from the cradle.

Grant had no one to blame but himself. It was gone.

The memory rippled as Grant stood in the private room he confined himself in, yet his mind lingered in Royce's abode. Over time, Royce augmented himself and swelled into an enigma. Grant did well to ignore half of Royce's apathetic ramblings, but now the voice haunted him.

Grant barely caught the glint in Royce's eyes as they screamed their own unspoken words and etched them forever into his memory: *Don't fuck up.*

Maybe he should have listened to his old friend. Royce had been the one who approached him with excitement in place of his usual passive stare and spoke of a plan which would revolutionize the world they lived in. Grant listened. His heart skipped beats. He was almost unable to keep up with the complexities gushing out of Royce's mouth.

"You piece of shit!"

Blinking, Grant pushed the memory away and turned to inspect the commotion. A piece of electronic equipment flew across the room and smashed into the wall. It shattered into dozens of pieces, but the outburst paled in comparison to the light hum in the distance: the sound of their imminent fate. Standing not far away from the mess was Asher. He combed a tight hand through his blonde hair and sucked in shallow breaths.

"Fucking Bracket," he spat out. "He won't answer a damn message." Asher kicked at a chunk of the debris. "He just left us. Fled like the coward he is." Furious eyes darted up to seek out Grant. "After all this time. After all we've worked for. He just leaves us!"

Grant offered no comfort to Asher. What could he possibly say to ease the situation? It pained him to see Asher distressed. The young man had always been collected, articulate, and bright.

Like when they first met.

The editor from the OVC was a fresh young mind eager for the truth on all matters. He sought out those with invaluable information and wove their tales with words for all of Cloudbank to witness. It was why he asked Grant for the interview. Grant contemplated declining the inquiry back then, though Asher held himself better than most people his age, even those decades older. He sat opposite of Grant in a crisp suit with hair styled to perfection and long fingers working his keyboard to transcribe everything Grant uttered.

He had read Asher's article. He loved it. In time, Grant learned to love more than the digital words crafted by the young man. They both did. Asher was the third to join the Camerata, but he always came first in Grant's life.

"Do you mind if I ask you something off the books before we start?" Asher had said then.

They sat in Grant's study. A vast room filled with Cloudbank's finest photographs and sculptures. Tall windows overlooked the expansive cityscape. They were alone with nothing but the most lavish solitude imaginable. The distant hum of jazz was the only other sound accompanying them.

"Not at all," Grant said.

Asher shifted in his seat, recrossing his legs. "Why did you agree to this?"

Grant tried to recall the exact words he had said to Asher. Whatever weight they once held slipped through the cracks of his mind. A dull ring filled his ears and he opened his eyes once more to seek out the other man within the room.

A shred of brilliant sunlight pierced the room past the looming darkness in the sky. It fell upon Asher, who stood by a window. His cat meowed at his feet and nuzzled along his calf. Not once did Asher flinch. His eyes fixated - wide and unmoving - upon whatever lied past the window. Grant couldn't bring himself to join him and view what atrocities unfolded across Cloudbank.

"Asher?" Nothing. "Asher," he said a bit louder.

His voice shook like a twig bracing against a storm when he spoke to Grant. "Why did we agree to do this? Did it... did you *know* this could be a possibility?"

Not him exactly, but someone in the Camerata had to. The one who reluctantly handed the Transistor over to Grant in the first place. Maybe Royce was trying to warn him in a way.

Grant said nothing and Asher pivoted to face him. Light streaked across his face. "This isn't what we wanted, Grant. Please... tell me you didn't know. Tell me this isn't what you actually wanted to happen."

Every second Grant spent in silence, Asher shook in place. Each quiver along Asher's features was another crack on Grant's heart.

"Grant," Asher forced out of his constricted throat, "please...."

"I didn't know," Grant eventually said. "Not then and not now. I never intended for this. None of us did. You know that."

Grant braced himself for the usual retaliation, something about how Royce knew more than he let on. Asher might have been partially right on the matter, but the time for pointing fingers was long gone. Grant held his breath when silence hung between them.

Asher never did say anything; he nodded, dropped his gaze, ignored his pleading cat, and walked away.

There had been a time when Asher didn't second guess the Camerata's intentions. He always served as the voice which bound the group together during tough times. Always the brilliant writer with a way with words. At times he made Grant feel inferior when speaking with people. Asher had been devoted to the cause since Grant approached him that day.

Grant recalled the snowflakes falling from above and chilling all of Cloudbank. He purchased a hot cocoa from the fancy, overpriced cafe everyone raved about and handed it to Asher. The other man was bundled in his favorite thick scarf, woven out of crimson fibers, and nursed his beverage with a smile. Few pedestrians passed by them on the snowy streets. In between the icy breezes, Grant proposed the idea of the Camerata to Asher. Either he'd accept or walk away. There was no grey option in their world of black and white.

He didn't expect Asher to nearly knock him over with a hug. The younger man beamed and rattled off words of excitement as he accepted Grant's offer. Finally, a chance for him to delve further into the roots of Cloudbank and unearth the truth. He could *help*. The opportunity

overwhelmed Asher and his face warmed from a combination of the excitement and the hot drink.

Grant smiled and kissed Asher between eyes; he couldn't think of anyone better to join their cause.

Living up to his reputation, Asher worked the media to their advantage, always cloaking their activity thanks to his rank as editor. The OVC terminals fell silent and upon running a search for the Camerata always returned zero results. Grant couldn't have done it without him.

Back then, Asher would slave over his monitor, tired fingers slipping and caving into typos, but he always wore a smile. When Grant bowed out to retire for the night, Asher looked away from the next article he was working on and beamed at him.

"I'll be there soon," Asher whispered each time, nuzzling into Grant's hand and kissing at his fingertips.

Grant longed for Asher to smile now.

The once distant hum of the Process transformed into a muffled rumble vibrating through the walls. Grant had yet to peer out the window to spy upon the horrific state their beloved city was in. He dipped between reality and memory, no longer capable of separating the difference between the two, but there was no denying the miserable sobs he choked on.

The sound overpowered the Process ripping through Cloudbank to track *her* down. Grant buried his face in his palms, curling fingers into himself. The entirety of his body quaked. Losing stability, Grant dropped to the floor and Asher met him a second too late.

"I can't do this." Grant's voice cracked between sobs. He shook his head like it was a silent mantra. "But there's no point in anything anymore. We can't do a damn thing except sit and wait to die."

Asher rested both hands on either of his shoulders. "Grant, don't talk like that-"

"How else am I supposed to talk?!" He tore his hands away and flashed his reddened, tear-stained face. Hiccupping and sniffing, Grant cried hard and quivered before Asher. "It's what we've been doing. We already know we can't stop it and if someone even remotely knows what to do to fix this mess, it's Royce. We lost contact with him for some time, Asher. People are *dying*. Cloudbank is a lost cause. We tried to make it better and we failed. I... wish death wasn't an option."

"We won't die."

"Don't tell me empty promises." He lowered his gaze. "After what they did to Sybil...? No, I can't do this. I don't want to become one of them. I don't want to die like that." His feeble arms clung onto himself. "I don't want to die, Asher. I'm scared. Fuck, I'm terrified. I don't want to die. I don't want to-"

He chanted the words, even when Asher pulled him into a loving embrace. The cries never diminished and the trembles of his body rivaled with the pulses moving through the building. They weren't *safe* there.

When his tears softened, Grant pushed away from Asher and forced himself to his feet. He marched to the opposite side of the room where Asher's cat loomed above to watch. Past the blueprints, paperwork, and capsules of half-formed Process, Grant swiped several vials of blue liquid from the surface and retrieved several bottles of painkillers in the drawers.

Asher's eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

The tears still flowed down Grant's face, but the dread vanished. "I will not become one of them. I will not die by the hands of those monsters. I can't." He closed his hands over the bottles and vials. "Everything I've done for this city, the Camerata, and for *you*? It's gone. It doesn't matter. We don't matter. Cloudbank will hate us forever. Even if there is a way to fix this all, what the hell would we even say if we could make it right? Would the survivors listen to us?" He flicked his eyes to Asher. "I won't let them take me."

"Grant, wait-"

"Will you go with me?"

He fluttered his eyes. "What?"

"We can do this together. We can end it all, Asher. No more fear, no more anger." His lips twitched into a short-lived smile. "We can go to the Country together, be at peace. We don't have to let this burden us any longer."

They had talked about those very plans before, but not like this.

"We don't have to do this," Asher pleaded.

"And would you rather be tortured to death while watching your humanity tear away from your very eyes? There's no other way."

A second ago, Grant doubled over in hysterics over the concept of death. Now he was resigned to taking his own life.

Grant scoffed. "I never wanted any of this to happen the way it did. I wish we had another chance."

"What would you do differently?" Asher asked.

And yet Grant hesitated. "I don't know." He joined Asher off to the side with his back to the wall. "It doesn't matter anymore."

In a swift motion, Grant dispensed a handful of pills into his palm and consumed them, then washed it down with the contents of a single vial. Everyone knew better than to mix medication with alcohol, but this wasn't a chemical concoction meant for human consumption. Grant only hoped it did the trick.

"It'll be over soon enough." A precipitous calm washed over Grant's voice as the walls shook. His insides already tingled and churned. "Everything will be fine." A knot bundled in his throat and he hung his head back. "Everything will be-"

Asher shrieked out and lunged forward. The remaining vials and bottles dropped to the floor before Grant's limp body did. He jerked once upon coming to stillness and coughed violently. It had to beat the ruthless violence the Process would subject him... no, *them* to. Grant convinced himself of that.

None of this was supposed to happen the way it did. None of them could have predicted what would happen the night they cornered Red after her performance. Maybe Royce had a hunch. Maybe Grant should have trusted his old friend and co-founder. A moot point now when countless lives, including Asher's, sat on his shoulders.

And as for Asher himself? He cried the tears Grant no longer could produce. He clung onto Grant's dying body and screamed loud enough for the Process to trace the pain back the origin and slaughter them. He begged for forgiveness, for a second chance, for another way to end the madness.

But Grant meant what he said - it didn't matter now.

Only two options were left: be a victim to the Process or hope that the Country was indeed waiting for them on the other side.

Grant wondered if it could have been as simple as that. After all they worked for - it came down to *this*? A simple back door in the grand scheme. So easy. Too easy.

Was it selfish to accept this new fate without hesitation?

Asher released Grant's body to gaze into his eyes. Grant hated the tears overwhelming Asher, but it was better than not seeing Asher at all now.

"Mr. Kendrell," Asher had said at the end of the interview long ago, "do you have any final words? Something for the public, perhaps? A deeper glimpse of what it is you do - if you could sum it up?"

Grant smirked at Asher, having lost track of time throughout the interview. "Something deeper?" Despite the itch, he didn't utter a word of the Camerata. "Perhaps you should keep an eye out for me, hmm? Maybe you'll find out in due time."

Everyone would. That was always the plan.

And it failed.

Grant had no final words now. Asher calmly relayed everything he could to Red despite his previous outbursts of anger. Maybe she could find Royce, talk some sense into him, and find a way. They could have reasoned with the woman, conveyed their side and saved whatever face they could in the dilemma, but Grant had resigned himself to his fate. Fear of the Process engulfed Cloudbank. Grant paid no attention to the red glow emitting from the

window; it was only a matter of time before the things tracked him down. It didn't matter if she got to him first.

Asher grasped for the spilled vials and bottles beside Grant. He stared at them, tears dripping from his chin and into his lap. Whatever grace he had fine-tuned in his nimble hands over the course of decades vanished. Deep strained breaths flowed through Grant while Asher spilled a handful of pills into his unsteady palm. Asher's cat shifted, eyed them both from above, and meowed.

Back against the wall, Asher stared at the contents in his hands. He closed his hands over the capsules, flicked his eyes up, and sucked in a breath. Grant struggled to keep his head leveled, but he discerned Asher leaning into him through heavy eyelids.

In all the times they shared a passionate, intimate kiss - of all the times they felt *alive* within the presence of each other - nothing touched the intensity firing through Asher's being and into Grant's when their lips crushed into one another's now. Yet Grant couldn't twitch back to fully express every ounce of admiration and affection he ever held for Asher. In sense, it wasn't necessary; Asher conveyed in mere seconds what he couldn't explain in his lifetime weaving words together.

When Asher reeled back, his eyes glued onto Grant's. He choked on the words, but they trembled past his feeble lips. "I love you."

I love you, too. Grant wished he had the energy to breathe life to those words.

Instead, Grant thought of Asher and how his other half not only supported his efforts, but pushed him to go further. He thought of when he first met Royce, who was forever ahead of his time at such a young age. He thought of Sybil and her constant allure and how she could understand a person within five seconds of meeting them. Endless talent. The brightest of souls working collectively. And for what? For *this*?

Nestled next to him, Asher downed a mouthful of pills and polished off the contents of the vial. He coughed several times, clutching his throat. Grant longed to hold him, to comfort him.

His mind quieted, only the thought of an eternity in the Country with Asher seeping into him. It calmed him. His heart slowed down.

Inhale. Exhale.

The red glow outside disappeared.

Inhale. Exhale.

As Grant's head lulled over, his lover was nowhere to be seen. Asher had been right beside him one moment. From the corner of his eyes, he swore he spotted a body slumped over the nearby terminal.

Inhale. Exhale.

Before, his entire body was wracked with pain, but now it was numb.

Inhale.

But then there was Asher's voice.

“Grant... he couldn't wait any longer. Why he would leave me? I'd sooner take an eternity in the Transistor....”

Soon enough, they'd never have to wait again.

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