

Process Start

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Process Start

by [zealousprince](#)

Summary

A quiet morning with the Camerata, at the start of everything.

Notes

Rated T for mild sexual content.

Asher groans as Grant's hands slip under his clothes. It's early enough to be ghastly and he's still half-asleep but every touch feels amplified, so all he can do is shift his body encouragingly to give Grant more room. For a few long moments all they do is touch and breathe. When Asher comes into Grant's hand it's with a whimper, and Grant sighs appreciatively against his nape, and presses his lips to the fine hairs.

"Buenos días," he says.

Asher breathes a laugh. "Buenos días."

Grant twists to grab a tissue for his hands, then resettles against Asher's back. They just lie there for a while, listening to the sounds of the early morning. All the apartments in Highrise are soundproofed for the tenants' convenience, but Grant likes to have the bedroom windows open, so they can hear the sounds of the city starting up even from way up here.

Asher has been spending more and more time in this apartment lately. It's nice to wake up next to someone a few mornings in the week, though he does miss his cat. Usually she'd be lying right on his pillow beside him, unless she was pawing at him to get up and feed her. Kind of like Grant, in fact.

The thought makes him snicker, and Grant shifts to wrap his arms around his waist and to push his nose against the crook of his neck. "Mm?"

"Nada," Asher tells him, which earns him a squeeze and sucking kiss to his shoulder. "Ah...do you...need a hand?"

"No, I'm all right," Grant says against his skin. "I came just from watching and touching you."

Asher did think he felt him pressing rather insistently against him. He turns in his arms to kiss him full on the mouth. "You dirty old man."

Grant makes a face but doesn't deny it, and Asher takes the opportunity to kiss him again, slowly. Grant staunchly refuses to open his mouth to him until they've brushed their teeth but that's all right, it's the touch and closeness that matters. He hasn't ever had anything like this, so even though it's been months since they started, every day still feels new.

They settle down again and idle away the next few minutes. Grant dozes but Asher's wide awake, so he takes the time to map every single sound and sensation he gets from the early morning: the chirping and twittering of the birds nesting under the parapet above the window, the faint rustle of the canals down below, the faraway rumble of traffic starting on the highway. Grant's arm is a familiar, comforting weight across his body, and he'd be happy to just stay here well into the morning, but duty calls. Duty always calls.

He disturbs Grant for just a moment so he can stretch to snatch his phone from the nightstand. A few emails, but he can deal with those at the office later. A text message from

Sybil, reminding him about the gala she's throwing over the weekend. *At least show your face*, she advises. *The people love to see their icons*.

I'm no icon, Asher texts back, but he knows he'll go. It's one of those events for writers and publishers and journalists, and Sybil isn't wrong when she implies it'd be questionable for him to not be in attendance.

He relaxes into Grant's embrace again as he starts going through his social media feed, mentally bookmarking things to follow up on later. There's an update from that singer-songwriter, Red, whom he only follows because it's his job to do so: "beautiful Cloudbank sunrise seen from the rooftop ♥ #goodmorning". The attached picture is from a cell phone, middling quality, with the above mentioned sunrise in the background and the silhouette of a wide-shouldered figure in the middle ground. The person's face is turned away, but Asher knows it must be him, the man who's gotten Sybil so riled up lately. Asher's been trying to figure out who he is for weeks, but every picture his guys take comes back fuzzy, too far-off, or at an angle that doesn't allow for positive identification. The mysterious, repeated failures only make him want to try harder, although the man's only distinguishing feature seems to be the fact that he hangs around with Red. Grant, unhelpfully, finds the whole thing hilarious.

"Him again," Grant mumbles. He's awake now and has one eye on Asher's feed. "Can't escape him even in my own bed, can I?"

Asher knows a hint when he sees one. He clicks the phone off and shoves it under his pillow. "Sorry."

"S'all right." Grant kisses his temple sleepily. "All part of the job."

Asher isn't sure if he means his editor's job or Grant's administrator job. Possibly both. In any case, he tries to push work out of his mind for a little longer. He presses close to Grant's chest and loops his arms around his waist, and Grant hums contentedly as he returns the embrace.

Nestled right next to Grant's beating heart and surrounded by his warmth and solidity, Asher can allow his mind to drift off to more sentimental topics. Usually, it feels like more of a routine check-up than anything. *Am I comfortable with this? Yes. Are there any outstanding issues to resolve? No. Am I content with the current state of affairs? Yes.*

Do I love him? Yes. Yes. Yes.

Not that he's told Grant that last bit yet. It still seems too soon. It feels strange to think it during the day, when he's busy and Grant is busy and they're both trying to keep track of their separate lives, but in quiet moments like these, he can admit it. He feels love in every fiber of his being. It warms him up to the very tips of his fingers and down to his toes.

The sun has risen enough to begin slanting through the east window, and soon Asher can see Grant's face clearly. There are worry lines and laugh lines mixed together on his face, all those beloved creases that Asher doesn't need to see to know, as familiar to him as the map of Cloudbank's streets he keeps hanging in his office. Slowly, he reaches up to touch his fingertips to Grant's cheek. Grant smiles automatically, his eyes still closed, as Asher traces

his way down to his jaw, then up to his lips. Grant kisses the pads of his fingers as they pass, an affectionate echo of the gesture he offered him last night, during a pause in their lovemaking in the warmth of midnight.

A shrill electronic beeping shatters the stillness of the morning. It's Grant's frighteningly advanced state-of-the-art coffee machine. Because the only thing he loves more than his job is his coffee.

"Did you set it last night?" Asher asks. Grant's eyes tell him no. "Then it must be Royce."

"Must be," Grant agrees, then looks contrite when Asher scowls. "I'm sorry. You know how he is."

"All too well." At least he's learned to not come barging into Grant's bedroom at all hours. Asher still isn't over the smug "I knew it" face Royce gave him upon catching them at it that one time.

Asher sighs. "I suppose that's our cue to get up." Royce may have no use for timing or decorum but he never shows up just to say hello. He'll have something to say.

Grant pouts a bit but he's known Royce longer than any of them, so he knows it's time to sit up and stretch and yawn in preparation for the day ahead. Asher slips out of bed to wash up in the adjoining bathroom, then returns to dig his phone out from under the pillow.

Grant finally hauls himself out from under the covers and yawns one more time. "I suppose I'll go talk to him now."

"You must still be sticky," Asher points out. He smirks and goes to him as Grant blushes. "You take a moment. I'll say hello to Royce."

"Try to be nice to him," Grant murmurs as Asher strokes a hand through his tousled hair. "It's too early for you two to be fighting."

Asher makes a noncommittal sound and Grant laughs quietly, shaking his head. He presses a kiss to Asher's sternum and stands. His hand slides affectionately over Asher's hip as he moves past him to the bathroom.

Asher fishes his pajama shirt out of the tangled covers, pulls it back on, straightens his flannel trousers, and wraps himself securely in his bathrobe before stepping out into the kitchen. Royce is seated at the sleek, modern counter on one of the sleek, modern stools, sipping on an espresso as he types one-handed on his portable computer. He's fully and impeccably dressed but the intensity of his gaze and the jitter of his leg tells Asher he probably hasn't slept in a few days.

"Good morning," says Asher.

Royce says "Hn" and pauses in his typing just long enough to gesture loftily to the two steaming cups of coffee sitting in wait on the counter. Asher takes one up immediately. Royce doesn't often bother making coffee for anyone else, but when he does it's second to none.

Asher tastes the coffee black as a courtesy, then goes straight for the milk and sugar, ignoring the dirty look Royce gives him for daring to ruin a perfectly good cup of joe. His imperious look is greatly tempered by the mug he's using -- one of Grant's novelty cat ones, ceramic ears and all -- but Asher knows better than to laugh.

Asher sits across from Royce and just watches him type for a while, sipping his transgressive coffee. Royce seems primed to disregard his presence for a while but then he abruptly says, "Slept well, I hope" between gulps, though he isn't quite looking at him.

"I did, thanks," Asher replies. "You look like you could use a few hours yourself."

Royce raises his cat mug demonstratively as his other hand keeps typing away. His version of "duty calls", Asher supposes.

Royce's computer bleeps and Royce's brows knit together. Then something bumps hard against one of the bay windows, making Asher jump. Royce merely looks exasperated.

"Would you be so kind as to open a window?" he says to Asher. Asher looks at him but does as he asks, and jumps again when something white and red goes streaking past him into the kitchen to come to a stop right by Royce.

Asher stares. It's unmistakably part of the Process: a small entity with rounded edges and a bright, eager, eye-like center. Royce is looking at it in an evaluative manner, like he's quite used to having the Process follow him around.

"Progress," he mutters. "Progress, indeed."

Asher returns slowly to his seat, never taking his eyes off the tiny bit of the Process currently floating by Royce's elbow. Royce returns to his typing and coffee like the small white creature is little more than a house cat lounging by his side.

"I see," Asher says finally, for something to say, and Royce answers, "Yes" like this is quite reasonable.

That's when Grant comes in, washed and brushed and dressed. He stops for a second when he sees the Process thing bobbing gently in his kitchen, but recovers faster than Asher and focuses on the coffee instead. He takes a sip and makes an appreciative sound, then says, "Hello, Royce".

Royce looks up briefly. "Hello."

"And hello, you," Grant says to Asher, prompting a smile. He leans to kiss Asher on the mouth, with just a bit of tongue, and it's a good thing Asher is sitting down because that makes him a little weak in the knees.

Royce's computer beeps again, but Asher doesn't register it until he notices the Process entity drifting right into his peripheral vision, and he yelps and scoots as far back as his stool will allow. The Process merely floats and gazes at him, betraying nothing.

Grant goes around the counter to cuff Royce gently on the back of the head, and Royce grins crookedly, his eyes still on his computer screen. Asher rolls his eyes and switches seats to put more space between him and the Process. "Funny."

"Very much so, yes," Royce says pompously.

"Is this what you wanted to tell us?" Grant asks, peering with interest at Royce's screen, then at the little bit of the Process drifting placidly around in his kitchen.

"Yes, yes, it is, indeed. The details can, ah, wait until Sybil gets here."

"Sybil is coming?" Asher says. Royce doesn't even dignify that with a response, and Asher sighs, putting his nose back in his coffee. "Of course Sybil is coming."

Right on cue, there's a knock at the front door, and Asher goes to answer it without having to be asked. Sybil smiles at him in the doorway, holding her parasol aloft to shield herself from the early morning sun. She's also completely and impeccably dressed, and that makes Asher feel a little self-conscious, but not enough for him to actually want to get changed.

"Good morning," Sybil says pleasantly. Asher nods in greeting and steps aside, taking her parasol and hat as she comes in. Her steps light and balletic, she precedes Asher into the kitchen, where Grant says "Sybil!" in his big, jovial voice.

Sybil says, "Good morning," then makes a beeline for Royce and snatches away the cigarette he's about to light from between his lips. "Not in here, dear."

Royce looks consternated, like a chastised child, and Asher and Grant both have to hide their smiles in their coffee. Sybil tucks the cigarette into the breast pocket of Royce's jacket and kisses him placatingly on the temple. "You had something to tell us?"

Looking straight ahead into the middle distance, Royce jabs one key on his computer keyboard. The computer bleeps and so does the tiny Process entity across the room. It approaches the group at the counter with the apparent interest of a small animal, though of course, Asher tells himself, that's impossible. The Process isn't alive. It's a process. They shouldn't even be able to see it, let alone command it the way Royce is, casually, with one hand on the hand Sybil has on his shoulder and with a lopsided smile slowly growing on his face.

"Oh," Sybil says wonderingly. She reaches out with her free hand as the Process draws near, and before Asher can stop her she touches the thing's smooth outer shell. The Process reacts with a shiver and a kind of electronic screech, surprising Sybil into pulling her hand away. Over Royce's shoulder, Asher can see lines of data appearing on the computer screen, faster than the eye can follow.

Royce laughs, a loud, sudden sound in the early morning stillness. "Lovely! Oh, sweet, lovely thing!"

Asher can only stare at him incredulously, then at the Process, then at Sybil and Grant, who seem nearly as enchanted by it all as Royce himself. And he has to admit, when he looks at

the Process creature hovering in the soft morning light, that he feels excited too, somewhere deep in his gut.

The city is theirs. The *world* is *theirs*.

“Now that we have this much,” Royce says, sober again, “the Transistor can do the rest.”

Grant’s face goes still and hard at the mention of the Transistor, and Asher sees him flex his hands, in that way he does when he’s fighting an outburst of passion. He felt that touch around his hips just last night, but that seems ages ago, now.

Asher puts his empty coffee cup down on the counter and goes to stand by Grant’s side. Grant puts an arm around him and pulls him close like it’s the most natural thing in the world, and maybe it is.

They all contemplate the Process in silence for a long time, united by touch and feeling, as the sun rises higher, and Cloudbank comes to life beyond the four walls.

exit()

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