

I The Dream

Six hours and thirty minutes into the morning, his eyes opened, lazily coming apart with the blaring of his alarm clock. Five seconds later, his hand found the off button—another five seconds, and he was fast asleep. It was a movement he had rehearsed to perfection. Work began eight hours and thirty minutes into the morning; he woke a few minutes earlier.

His name was Kevin Umhoen.

He lived on the fourth floor of 680 Eben Street. It was a nice apartment building, if a little unkept: the carpeted floors in the lobby were more trouble than they were worth to clean, and the front desk went unmanned most of the day. It, along with 682 and 685 Eben Street, were owned by a retiree by the name of William Scent, though he was never there in person. William Scent lived eleven months out of the year on various cruises and beaches. Even when he was in the city, the residents of 680 Eben Street never dealt with him; it was William Junior they dealt with, who harboured a bitter gratitude for his father's gift and little enthusiasm for his career.

When you stepped outside room 406, the tiling in the hallway was pristine. A year ago, a drunken, violent confrontation between the residents of 402 and 403 broke out over the volume of 403's reggae. A hole in the drywall was left untouched for sixteen days before the senior Scent paid to have it fixed. The walls used to be soft blue—now they are a clinical cream.

It was a warm May morning. Eight hours and twenty-five minutes into the morning, he woke again. Angry streaks of light filtered through his curtain and made him long for the night; one look at the red numbers woke him up more than any cup of coffee ever could: **8:25**.

With the greatest exhaustion, he pulled himself out of bed. It was hard to pull the covers off of himself. In addition to his unwillingness, ten shirts and three hoodies weighed it down; his face was slick with sweat. He had to dance around the floor as he made his way to the ensuite. Littered around were plastic wraps and dirty dishes. He never let it get to the point of rot, though he never saw clean floors. On the days he did clean his room, he was always thankful it had no carpets.

It was hard for him to look too closely into the mirror, though you would never know it. His brown hair touched his shoulders, perpetually making his neck itch and him look neurotic. He was a skinny little thing—he'd been able to see his ribs for years, a far cry from his chubby schoolboy days. He was ghostly pale; with no muscle, no fat, and little enthusiasm for conversation, it was difficult to remember he was there. When he brushed his teeth, a pain in his upper right incisor reminded him why.

A shirt or a jacket would cover up all that neglect had done to his body. His face was far less gaunt—what stood out first were his waning eyebrows, strong jawline and the shaved stubble that reached each side of his face.

And when he spat into the sink and rinsed his mouth, he was in no hurry. He hated that he wasn't, but he couldn't be. A brief splash of water on his face did little more than make his eyes stick together. He opened the door and exited, and the red numbers seemed to holler at him: **8:27**.

The rest of his apartment fared much better than his bedroom, though its cleanliness was still substandard. On one side was the kitchen, with an oven left alone so long that it was difficult to open, empty cereal boxes, pots and pans left scattered on ceramic counters and a stained stove. There were plenty of cabinets, but most were abandoned and forgotten—especially the ones above. His refrigerator

was unique in that it was devoid of clutter; in fact, it was completely plain. There were no calendars, magnets, letters or reminders, and the inside strived to reach such a standard.

Today was like any and every day: he pulled open the bottom-most cabinet and retrieved a box of rolled oats. From his refrigerator he took a carton of skim milk. He would have sat to eat his breakfast, but the table was obscured by piles of mail, both opened and untouched. He would have leaned over the counter, but the same issue made it impossible. So for the seventeenth consecutive day he stood, completely naked, spilling milk onto his chest hair as he slowly ate.

This was not the first time he had been late to work, but it had been a while since the last.

He worked at the head office of Future Comfort Systems. His official title was quite impressive: Budget Analyst Assistant. David Umhoen liked to brag about his son's career to his coworkers, to the point where they instinctively froze in terror when they heard the words: "Did I tell you about Kevin?"

David was obsessed with his son's success. When Kevin was in kindergarten, twenty-four years ago, his teacher, a stern-faced Mrs. Corey, sang praises of Kevin's addition skills. In elementary school, Kevin would earn report cards with straight A's and congratulatory comments. From his first steps on school ground to his departure for university, David claimed each of his son's successes for his own. For years he talked the ears off of friends, neighbors, waitresses, cashiers, people on park benches, and dog-walkers—he was more satisfied with Kevin's life than Kevin was.

When he was finished with his cereal, he left the bowl in the sink, making a solemn vow to clean it and its six doppelgangers when he returned. Clean dress shirts draped over one arm of a small sofa; on the other were clean dress pants. He dressed, grabbed his keys, his wallet, his briefcase, rubbed his tired eyes at the door before he opened it, checked his pockets a final time, and left.

Most days, he woke up at eight. Ten minutes was enough time for his routine, and at 8:15 the 221B showed up just across the street. Today he had to walk—really, he should have been running, but he figured the damage had been done—he walked.

Nine hours and eight minutes into the morning, Kevin made it to work. He took the stairs up to the third floor, signed in, and sat at his desk for all of two minutes before his manager requested his presence.

"You're very late," she said.

"Sorry."

"I thought this issue was over."

"Sorry."

His manager was a kindhearted Alice Lai. She was generous and fair to her subordinates. But she also had three sons—the oldest was thirteen and the youngest was seven. At home, she found it an uphill battle dealing with her maniacal children; dealing with a child at work was the last thing she wanted.

"Is it going to be an issue again?"

“It won’t. I promise.”

Her managerial philosophy could be summed up by the idea of mutual respect and judicious use of punishment. She tried to solve problems through civil discussion, having little time and less patience for politics. So Alice took him at his word, something she hoped he wouldn’t make her regret.

Kevin’s work, to him, was the pinnacle of tedium. He felt like a glorified mailman: get this signed, get that signed, fill out these forms, talk to this vendor—it never ended, and it never changed. When he showed to work he was still diligent, but the days were grinding away at him, and every day he woke with less joy than the last.

If you asked him, there were only two coworkers he considered close friends.

One was Billy, a heavier than heavy-set man with the kindest face, the face that people tended to confess to—beyond their sensibilities. He had a mind that wandered, a mind that refused to lend itself to office work; he had a body that detested manual labour, however, so he devoted what he could to his studies, though he was a C student, through and through.

When Kevin looked at him, he was jealous: he wished he could revive his appetite. Of course, Billy had the opposite issue: he wanted above all else to restrain his appetite.

Kevin took his lunch break at noon. It was another thing that he should have looked forward to—but he didn’t. Mechanically, he took the same stairs downward, those same fluorescent lights jabbing through his eyes and into his brain.

Like yesterday, and every day since the food truck lovingly named *Freshico* made the front door of Future Comfort Systems its lunchtime home, he waited in line. He didn’t even have to speak; the owners knew his order by heart. It wasn’t that hard to remember: a simple, comfortable egg-and-sausage burrito.

By noon, the warm morning air had given way to a sweltering, humid wind that felt more like an oppressive, drenched blanket. He waded through to the space betwixt his workplace and its neighbors. There, the towering offices provided relief from the unrelenting sun, hateful gales chasing him in its stead.

There he ate. He felt shame as he ate, for the burrito was not inexpensive, and he knew he could do better—but when he committed himself to preparing meals beforehand, his commitment only lasted as long as the front door of 680 Eben Street. When he crossed the threshold, motivation evaporated—what little of it even remained.

Twelve minutes past noon, Billy found him, eyes vacantly staring at the graffitied walls, aimlessly searching for a meaning.

Most of their coworkers chose to eat in the cafeteria, especially in these warmer months. The Chief of Operations enjoyed a brisker climate—in this weather, the air conditioning would be at full blast. He also refused to allow the adjustment of the temperature when the heat waned; he would say the heat would return in due time. It was unfortunate for the other executives that the old curmudgeon was so good at his job—a string of popular decisions inflated his ego and his importance.

Kevin often chose to brave the elements during his lunch hour. The few days he lingered in the building, the walls, the linoleum, the monochrome wash of lights and the sea of blazers, the perfume that lingered in the air—it was all too fake.

And so twelve minutes past noon, Billy walked over to him. He held in his hands an oversized salad: a contradictory, insolent thing that looked as if it had more dressing than green.

“Hey, Kevin.”

He wrapped his arm around Kevin, who, unfaltering, continued to eat his burrito.

“Hey.” Kevin said, the sound struggling to pierce through tortilla, egg, and sausage.

“Want to go golfing tomorrow? Me, Joe, and Varun are planning on playing a couple rounds.”

“No, I’m good.”

Billy withdrew his arm.

“You’ve got something else planned? Maybe we could go on Sunday.”

“I’m booked for the weekend,” Kevin lied.

“Alright then. That sucks.”

He didn’t know why he lied. There wasn’t a point to refusing. He tried to justify it to himself: he was sure he wasn’t going to enjoy it, or that he needed time to himself, or that he could use the weekend more productively—in the end, he couldn’t explain it. He only knew that he had to.

“Did you hear they’re closing the East Kempton office?”

“No, I hadn’t. Didn’t Mary transfer there?”

“I’ve heard some guys saying our sales are down more than fifteen percent from last quarter.”

“Damn. If that’s true—”

“It’s true. I’m ninety percent certain it’s true.”

Kevin lost even more of the appetite he had little of.

“At least our jobs are safe, right?”

Billy didn’t hear the contempt in his voice—the contempt Kevin felt for his company, for the economy, for himself.

“We’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

Kevin was thankful for his presence. It made the dull day pass by so much faster, even when they had nothing to say. It was a sort of aura that Billy exuded: it made the hour more bearable, if not more exciting.

An hour past noon, both burrito and break came to an end.

He made the long voyage back to his desk, this time choosing to take the elevator. Billy, on the other hand, chose to use the stairs; Kevin waited so long for the elevator to arrive that Billy was already waiting outside the parting doors.

“Welcome, stranger,” he said, trying to hide his heavy breaths.

“Four hours left until the weekend,” said Kevin.

The workplace was in a frenzy. On their way to their desks, the two had to weave through agitated accountants and hasty managers.

An easy indicator for the difficulty of the post-lunch stretch was the condition of Alice’s hair—a stressful day would see it run wild, dry and free. It was all the more tragic that she cared so much for it. Difficult days like these would see her counting the years until retirement: then her hair would finally be safe.

Today her hair resembled the likes of *Nostoc flagelliforme*, and an unfortunate email from the CFO had her seizing her monitor in a rage, as if taking vengeance upon an ancient enemy. The sight caught Billy’s eye from across the room; he gritted his teeth and prepared for war. Kevin saw it as well, but he was fine—he didn’t have any hope to lose.

It was four hours and thirty-three minutes after noon when Kevin signed out. He had more work than usual, but it was the usual work—copying papers, calling suppliers—and his usual work was not nearly enough to inundate him. And so he left, taking the 41 back home, having accomplished his daily tasks in a shorter span of time; in one week, his paycheck would reflect his efficacy by paying him half an hour’s worth of wages less.

That evening, he exited the 41 and crossed the street.

When you entered 680 Eben Street, the first thing to greet you was the security booth—wide enough only for a single man to sit comfortably within, and more often than not unmanned. Its only resident, aside from the outsourced cleaning staff, was also the resident of 203, an old friend of Scent Senior. Mr. Tills was so old that when he sat within the booth you would somehow feel less secure. Scent Junior took pity on him. For that reason, and also due to the minuscule crime rates in the city, he neglected to hire a competent security staff.

Scent Junior was arguing over the phone in front of the door. He paced from side to side, vigorously shouting into his mobile phone. Kevin heard only a small portion—from what he did hear, there must have been an issue with a contractor.

“I paid three hundred and twenty dollars to have it fixed by Wednesday. It’s Friday now, and it’s not fixed, and I’ll be damned before I pay a cent more! Do you hear me? Do you fucking hear me?”

He was making a scene, something Kevin quickly avoided by dashing past him and through the door. Inside, he quickly understood why Scent Junior had exited for his deafening rant. Mr. Tills was seated there, leaning back into the chair. Was he awake, Kevin wondered, or was he dead? He seemed as if he had never been alive, completely motionless, glassy-eyed, with a mouth ever so ajar.

“Mr. Tills?”

And just like that: a miracle. The security man blinked, once, twice, stretching his jaw and returning to the Earth.

“Mr. Umhoen!”

Few people greeted him as they passed to the elevators. The Scrents were two; Kevin was another. Just to be recognized stretched his smile wide and made his wrinkles paint valleys into his skin.

“How are you today?” He stretched a shaky, wobbling hand out.

Kevin gave him a firm shake. To the unaware, the force he used would have seemed too aggressive for such a frail senior. He’d already made that mistake—the first time Mr. Tills shook his hand the pain took half an hour to pass.

“Same as always. Living life to the fullest. You too, I hope?”

“Of course.”

Mr. Tills coughed. Once at first, and he massaged his throat, coughing thrice more in a sickly crescendo. Then he saw the worry on Kevin’s face and tried to assuage his fears.

“I went to see the doctor today, and he—I’m okay, I promise.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, yes. You know doctors, they say a bunch of medical jumbo and they say not to eat this or that.”

“You should listen to your doctor,” Kevin said.

Mr. Tills nodded, a transparent attempt to be rid of his protests. Kevin stepped into the right hallway, pressing the button to call the elevator. And it arrived—and he entered—and he rode it up to the fourth floor.

The doors opened, and as he walked he could hear the faint hum of reggae travelling along the walls,

Ay, in the darkness there must come out the light,

and when he had his own door unlocked Marley asked, seemingly speaking to Kevin himself,

Could you be loved and be loved?

and Kevin closed his door, confining the tune to the hallway and away from his ears.

He thrust himself into the couch, the one surrounded on all sides by clean clothes, the television remote left carelessly on the ground and just within grasp. There wouldn't be anything on worth watching—what else was there to do? And yet he felt guilty to remember those sketchbooks tossed in some box or another, that dusty guitar he'd promised to himself he'd learn—each and every promise to improve that clung to his mind and refused to release him.

Even if he would've enjoyed the reality drivel that spewed forth from the screen, his guilt would never allow him.

There he sat, his frail bones sinking into the plush comfort of the seat, cooking competitions washing over him, Bob Marley's voice chasing underneath the door, growing louder, hunting him down.

And he had fallen asleep when his phone buzzed. Eyes fluttering open and fingers grasping for life, stifling a yawn as best he could, he fumbled through his pockets until he found it.

It was his other good friend, Lily. Kevin liked her—less so when she was pushy, which she tended to be.

Hey

What's going on?

*You disappeared right after work
I was going to invite you to that new coffee place
The one on Cabelton?*

You know I'm not really into coffee.

*Sure but
I'm not asking you*

Then I guess I can't say no.

*12:40 tomorrow
Be there*

He yawned again, in his head slightly thankful to have a reason to leave the apartment tomorrow, though he'd never admit it.

But he'd woken up four hours until midnight. A sudden jolt of restlessness overtook him. He was sure he wouldn't be able to return to sleep if he tried; instead he paced around the junk-ridden floor of his apartment, first picking up a few stray bits of plastic and discarded papers, then forfeiting the attempt as a lost cause.

The clouds had come out—the world was dim, and he felt more confined than ever. It was a day poorly suited for leaving his home, but something in him had risen. In his bedroom, he cracked the window; the winds now were cooler, though no less humid.

It was a sight he'd seen hundreds of times. It was a tired sight, one that comforted him, yet all too much reminded him of the life he couldn't escape. In the distance, even now with the gloomy skies, you could see the TC Tower—it rose higher than anything else on the horizon, though it would never win any world records. Out and to the right, you could see the edges of Fazlullah Park, right before the view was impeded by other complexes and stores.

On seeing it, Kevin was compelled to go there. He had no reason to, but he also knew he had little reason not to. For this one decision, he was able to break free of his endless hesitance—and since he hadn't taken the time to change his clothes when he'd arrived, it took him no effort to leave.

It was three hours and fifty-six minutes until midnight when Kevin walked through the doors and out into the evening. Mr. Tills was still at the desk; this time, Kevin was certain he was asleep.

The city in the evening is a different beast than it is in the day. Something about the shadows and the glow of lights in the windows, deserted cars parked in the street—to some, the evening is oppressive: its dark corners and foreboding sounds leave the anxious unsettled, or even scared, even in a peaceful city like this.

He'd lived here for years now, but the volume of activity at night always astounded him. To see drunken college students flaunting open-container laws, children and their parents treating themselves to convenience store snacks—the people in the city felt alive! The city made him want to feel alive, and every time he wanted it he felt ashamed that he didn't already.

Fazlullah Park greeted him as warmly as it always had. He'd been here previously, when he was more inclined to actually use his sketchbooks. As he walked deeper into the nest of trees along a weed-ridden path, that regret over his lost time tried to creep back in.

It was three hours and twenty-five minutes until midnight when he arrived at his favourite spot—to reach it, you had to follow the path from the southern entrance and turn left into the thicket. When exactly to turn left was, unfortunately, an inexact science; all manner of markings and tricks had at some point failed him. But he always managed to find his way there, and he liked to imagine that each time he deviated from the path, he learned a little more about the park.

There he was, in this secluded clearing hidden from view by a mess of trees. In the summer, flowers bloomed. He tried once to capture the beautiful meadow, but the sketch was a failure: he attempted to capture too much of the captivating detail—the result was a mess of indistinguishable lines.

He breathed in, deeply, this vestige of clean air in a lonely city freeing his lungs from its subjugation. He never felt more at peace than in this hideaway. Today, his dissatisfaction refused to leave him be. He wanted a better job, a new career; he wanted to run away; he wanted to be a famous artist, more for the economic liberation than the fame; he wanted to be happy. Each of these desires he saw as equally unrealistic. He believed himself bereft of opportunity—and so he had never seized the ones he had.

It was three hours and twenty-two minutes until midnight when the sight caught his eye. A flash of white, so dissonant from the darkness that befell the park. In the evening, the white was so bright it seemed to blind him. The sight roused him—it drew a curiosity from him, a childlike wonder he thought had wilted and died years ago. And now a new desire had taken hold of him: he needed to know what it was.

He stood, searching around in the shadows, but the glimpse of white was nowhere to be found. It had, impossibly, disappeared without revealing itself once more. Yet twice more this happened; at the edge of his vision a flash of white would dance. He would investigate—he would find nothing.

Eventually, the flashes were no more. Reluctantly, Kevin gave up the hunt. Was he crazy? Or did he truly see it? What was the harm in trying again next night? He returned home, that glimpse of white all he could see. When he slept, he saw it in his dreams: a blinding white ghost that taunted him; it jeered at his obliviousness.

A humid, May evening, three hours and twenty-two minutes until midnight, Kevin Umhoen's life had changed. He just didn't know it—he wouldn't know for weeks.

In the land of Ardentum lay two kingdoms: Gahn to the west, and Virland to the east. Between them lay a host of city-states; before the war eighty-three years ago, each one had declared allegiance to one side or another. They had no choice in the matter. An independent state would have been a traitor to both sides, and found safety in neither.

Gahnians and Virians hold against each other an ingrained, mutual hatred. If you were to say one name to the other, they might have some involuntary twitch or scrunch their face in disgust. Were David Gahn and Samuel Virsom alive, they'd be beyond displeased—the two founders were allies and, ironically, close friends. But David and Samuel were long dead, and their friendship was lost between the lines of history books.

It was a cool May morning when Joana woke. She'd woken so early that the sun hadn't risen yet, and the palace was quiet—her father would be one of the first to wake for his morning prayers, along with the kitchen servants and court ladies.

Joana hated to sleep longer than she needed. But so early in the day, there were little responsibilities to attend to—no court meetings, no lessons in mathematics or etiquette, the latter of which she already knew but refused to demonstrate.

Through those thin, soft curtains, a humid wind blew. Virland was close to the coast; the King's favourite were those pink-fleshed trout. The ones fishermen caught in the Tantal Sea were small and, to the unwary, not worth the effort in catching. Few people at court knew the wealth the King spent on his lovely fish; if more did, he might not have reached the same popularity he had.

From Joana's window, she could see the gardens, with those lovely buds and hedges and trees. Her father didn't care for it, but Joana adored it—it relaxed her, allowing her escape from the pains and obligations of her life. There, she wasn't royalty; she wasn't special—she was just a woman.

Joana donned a flat-blue tunic, quietly making her way through the corridors of the palace, hearing her father's snores through the doors of his chamber, greeting the few cleaning servants that had already woken.

"Good morrow, Lady Virsom," each would say, bowing to her.

"Good morrow, Dietrich," she would reply, or "Good morrow, Matilda," or "Trea."

And when she escaped out into the cool morning of the day, she couldn't suppress a smile. It'd been several months since she'd been home, taking in the fresh air of Virland. She'd been touring the city-states from here all the way to Gahn, overseeing the progress of the Royal Road. It was exhausting and demeaning: what was the point, Joana thought, of having her own seat if no lord would speak to her? It was her father they cared about. He was the king! And because he was the king, she would never be more than his daughter—she would never be anything other than Lady Virsom.

It was all these frustrations and limitations and etiquettes that made her long to burn it all down. A fleeting thought, not a genuine dream, but an idea still lingered in her mind: why could she not be free?

Her father loved her more than anything in the world—it could be said it was his only true flaw as a king. In all other ways, Charles Virsom the Third was admirable. The peasants adored him for his

generosity, and his vassals appreciated his diplomatic mind. If the members of the royal court were more crafty and ambitious, there was an obvious weakness to exploit: his love for Joana. It was the reason why he listened to her objections to marriage. It was the reason her education was so extensive, and why she could do little without his approval.

This morning she walked, free and proud, in the gardens behind the palace. They were impressively large, and commanded an army of servants all on their own. There, she dreamed. Many girls dream of being princesses; most people would give anything for the quality of life she lived. She fantasized of living a poor life, or perhaps an adventure—a rugged stranger might steal her away on the whims of love, and they would fight for their lives.

The sun had risen. Her father had woken, said his morning prayers, and arrived at the morning meal with wife in tow—his daughter was nowhere to be seen.

“Lady d’Ovell, have you seen Joana?”

“No, Your Majesty. Last I’d lain eyes upon Her Highness was yesternight.”

It was not her father who found her. He was, of course, worried about her, but he had dozens of worries on his mind, some of which pertained to that very day. Instead, with her eyes closed, listening to the birds sing, Joana heard the voice of Katherine Vitali, her Lady-in-waiting.

“Your Highness?”

Joana’s eyes opened, tearing her away from her fantasies and into the lame, familiar gardens.

“Kat?”

Katherine Vitali was the fourth daughter of Steven Vitali, Duke of Eastmince. Joana felt a kinship with her in that she felt the royal name was all the power she had. But Katherine truly had little influence—her only power was in Joana’s friendship.

Kat was as headstrong and willful as Joana, only she was twenty-two years older. The Lady Vitali had never been married; who would marry a lady seventh in line for the Duchy of Eastmince and disowned all but in name? Kat was content without the shackles of marriage or love—and in the courts, you could not typically have both.

“His Majesty is asking for your presence, Lady Virsom.”

“Oh, halt with your jests, Kat. And give Father my regards—I’ve not the stomach for his orders today.”

Katherine sat next to her, as Joana shook stray leaves from her hair and stretched her legs.

“You have never before brooded with such vigor.”

“Girls sing and play; women weep. Or such seems to be our plight.”

“It is your plight alone, Joana. You see not how His Majesty loves you—you take his foolishness for duplicity.”

“How treasonous a statement! If he loves me so, he’ll surely execute you for my pleasure.”

Katherine laughed, half of it coming out as a wheeze.

“If in forty-five years my insolence has not been my undoing, the pleading of a pampered princess will not be my end.”

Kat meant to be humourous, but another look at the princess’s face showed she’d struck a chord in her. She wanted to help the poor girl.

“Come, Joana. You cannot languish in these fields forever. Come, child. His Majesty’s patience is not endless.”

The palace’s halls were full of gold and lavish paintings. Charles was torn over the idea of keeping the indulgence on the walls—it was gold, after all, that began that war eighty-three years ago. Over her teenage years, when she was even more difficult than she was now, she came to the same conclusion, but her argument was not one of morality. Why keep all these valuables, she thought, if you could build armies instead? Though her father’s lessons of peace and tolerance were thoroughly impressed upon her, the objective became grand machines and towers.

It made it all the more worse when the day of supplication came. A single day each month, the King allowed men of all classes to come to the royal court and plead—for food in famine, for doctors during disease; since most believed the King to be God’s instrument, some even came to ask for a blessing. The last request was the easiest to fulfill, yet only logistically; Charles felt sacrilegious, compelled to deny the request out of personal honour. But the court wouldn’t approve. There was peace, yes, but the folk needed to know they could trust their King. And so men from all across Virland came to the court, begging for spiritual clemency from a balding, aging man.

Joana was forced to be there. As heiress to the Virian throne, the people needed to trust her as well. She felt no less turmoil watching these sunburnt, destitute beggars come to a place of prosperity and riches, leaving only with promises. What good were promises to dying folk?

She stepped into the court—the space was used for meals as well. Servants were carrying half-empty dishes through the many doorways; the untouched portions would be used to feed them, as well as some lucky peasants nearby if there was still anything left.

The grand tables had mostly cleared by now; the nobility had gone to pursue their studies or settle disputes.

Charles was still seated at the end, a full plate in front of him. He was still speaking with Lady d’Ovell: a proper and prim woman, who wore nothing but the finest dresses, who disdained Joana—never openly, of course.

“Father,” Joana called. She turned her head ever slightly to the right. “Lady d’Ovell.”

“Your Highness,” she replied, swallowing her outrage at such brazen disrespect.

“Joana! Little dove, where had you gone?”

“Such worry, yet such neglect to find me yourself.”

“Lady Virsom!” d’Ovell exclaimed.

“It is a venial sin, Lady d’Ovell. Attend to your duties—allow me discourse with my daughter.”

“As you wish, your Majesty.”

She swiftly rose, adjusting the fabric of her morning gown, retreating to her chambers. Joana’s eyes followed her path through the room and the doors, at least until Charles gestured for her to sit.

The King and Queen sat at the end of the long banquet line—united in marriage and in feast. Had they more children, the heir would be seated around the corner, to the King’s side. The rest would follow the tables down, soon replaced by lesser lords and ladies, dukes, their wives, and their sons. By the time Joana arrived, the nobility had gone. Even she would have hesitated to sit in her mother’s place had the room been more populated, and especially so if she knew the King would’ve minded.

“Famished?” Charles passed the plate to his daughter, smiling warmly. “A slice of Liebenhart—your preference.”

“These attempts to win my favour are obvious. Belittling, at worst.” A slice of fresh bread smeared with that Liebenhart cheese she adored was her first choice. “I will say a parent knows his child best.”

“Must you still be upset, Joana?”

“Must I? I am to marry a clod from Gahn!” She was hungry; he wasn’t wrong in that regard either. The brewing argument was, unfortunately, a detriment to the enjoyment of her fare. “I am paraded along the roads as a prized mare—now to be sold like one.”

“You have never met the boy. How can you insult him so?”

“Surely the King must know the true offense of such a proposition.”

“I would not marry you off to a boy you have never met; he will soon be here to meet you.”

“He will?” She nearly dropped her knife in horror.

“Have you yet further protest?”

“Protest? No—it is clear to see it is no discussion. Why deliver the pretense of a choice, Father? Say it is so and be done with it.”

“Joana, my gravest concern is your happiness.”

“Then allow me my choice.”

“But this summer marks your twenty-third year. The heiress has duties that must be fulfilled—lest the Virian throne be left in pieces. Already there is dissent growing from my desire for peace.”

“And my desires, Father? What of them?”

He sighed, hesitating. He truly did love her, though in this moment it might’ve been difficult to see. He was torn between his duty to his country and to his daughter—he wanted nothing more than to see them both satisfied.

“It will be your choice, Joana. If nothing else, I promise you this.”

The scars of warfare had seen the populace traumatized and the land tortured. The Gahnian army raped and brutalized the Virians; the Virian army scorched the fields and salted the earth of Gahn. The ripples of violence were abundant even now, though only the prosperous could commit themselves to resentment. Even now, the Dukes of Virland whispered hatred among themselves, a confident few urging the King against peace. It truly was a precarious situation—fear kept the peasantry from wanting war; doubt kept the King from asserting order; respect kept the lords from usurping the King.

Charles had never been silent about his agenda, especially not to his daughter; he thanked the Gods she agreed with him—he didn’t need more politics to come between them. He should’ve thanked Katherine for it; Katherine had been her favourite mentor, then her greatest friend, and she despised the prospect of another war. This opinion she impressed upon Joana quite frequently, and an impressionable child was guaranteed to be swayed.

He was not alone in his quest.

King Rumold of Gahn desired peace no less than Charles did. The two men were strangely similar in their philosophies—and both were smart enough to seize this opportunity to change the path of history. For years, correspondents had travelled between the two lands, carrying messages from the kings to one another. As time passed, the letters become much more personal; their natural friendship surely made the proposal of reconciliation more palatable. In the six years and two months the two had been writing, they had still never met, yet in their hearts they were the best of friends.

The idea to marry their children came not at first, but after a year of letters. The two men had already begun to complain about their familial issues. And though the messengers were sworn to secrecy, nobody could stop them from snooping on the roads—after all, their very mission was secret. What better surprise was there for a Virian than to read how their princess had blown out a stained-glass window with an antique handgonne? Or to read how the Gahnian prince had run off with a seductive servant?

The prince returned unharmed that very night—she’d planned to ransom him with the help of her more violent companions, but she fell just enough for the pretty heir to leave him be, taking only his jewelry and virginity.

Charles, I believe your daughter alone is capable of whipping my bumbling son into shape. Karl could barely tell his head from his ass without precise instruction! Let the two devils be married; let us suffer the consequences—anything to rid me of this simpering leech!

And in the letter Charles sent in response, buried in the lines,

Your proposal has no fault but one—where shall the joyous couple reside? Not in my home, no—should I endure life with that harrowing duo, it will not be for long!

Of course, Joana had her own views on the marriage.

“Absolutely not, Father. The Prince of Gahn? I will not endure a loveless marriage, especially not one so fraught with controversy.”

Was it any surprise that her answer wouldn’t change?

Then five years wore him down. Five years of Virian lords asking for his daughter’s hand, of whom very few had an argument beyond: “I believe this marriage will strengthen our houses and satisfy the Virian people.” Fewer still had the courage to ask Joana herself. She was an advocate for peace, and the peasantry knew her as an agreeable, kindhearted woman. She tried, to the best of her ability, to adhere to such a persona, and not all of it was deception. But on poor days, on maddening days, days when youthful arrogance and nihilism had seized her, she was no longer beholden to etiquette—it seemed her tongue was made from steel; her words cut as deep.

She knew her marriage was inevitable. It was one of her greatest frustrations, and nothing she could do would ever rid her of it. That looming threat drew closer day by day, when even the semblance of choice would be taken from her forever.

Charles hated to discuss it with her. She was inexorable—more than that, he knew how much pain the idea brought her.

“Joana, I beseech you: entertain the idea, at least.”

“Yes, Father,” she said, in that resigned tone that hurt Charles more than any insult.

“Tomorrow, I have something for you.”

“It is?”

“You shall know—tomorrow.”

He kissed her on the forehead, and stood.

“Lady Virsom.”

“Your Majesty.”

Off he went, and she stood. One of the last few servants apprehensively claimed her plate, scampering off to the kitchens.

That day, she had little to do. There were no crucial matters that demanded her presence—the only obligation was more practice with the harp.

Her teacher was also her great-aunt, widow of the late Sir Hale. Lady Hale had such little claim to the throne that she was left to her own pursuits. She was, however, a woman of little ambition. Her cousin was king, a cousin who hadn't an ear to spare for her, with a court that ignored her. In the end, her indifference was a boon—all she wanted from politics was satisfied by snide remarks and judgements. The Virsom lineage sheltered her from any hardship: a perfect life, in her eyes.

Joana's lessons comprised more of rumours and gossip than actual practice. Even more now, as Lady Hale grew older and lonelier, and her views more radical. Mostly she spoke of petty disputes among the lesser vassals, slighted honours and land struggles.

"Lord Emmett and Lord Richter are to duel again, the fools."

"Again? When did they duel prior?"

"Forgive me, Joana—you are so wise I often forget your age."

The two lords first fought before Joana was even born, in the castle's own court. It was the fiftieth year since the end of the war, and Joana's grandfather saw cause for revelry (though nearly any cause was sufficient for the would-be drunkard).

House Emmett despised House Richter—the first survived centuries and contributed thousands upon thousands of sacks of grain to the war. House Richter rose to power through the war: Sir Alan Richter famously led a force of cavalry in the Battle for Chelson Hill, his name becoming a symbol of courage for the Virian conscripts.

So when Lord Emmett and Lord Richter arrived for the celebration, they were specifically told not to greet each other. The two lords were angry, passionate, and in their late twenties: a combination nearly everybody foresaw would end in disaster.

"Greetings, Lord Richter," said the stumbling Lord Emmett, his head tilted ever so slightly upward in condescension.

It took eight men to separate them; they would've been laughingstocks if they weren't such deadly combatants.

"It's been years since I last saw them," said Joana. "Are they even still capable of a duel?"

"They'll be evenly matched, at least. I can't begin to imagine how much time they've had to devote to their swordsmanship. What else does a lord do?"

"I only hope neither is maimed. Or even killed. We needn't foster more hatred between ourselves."

They talked through the day, stopping briefly for a light supper in the court. There, the King and Queen retired early to their chambers, taking a plate with them.

"They scampered off like newlyweds," tittered Lady Hale. "How wonderful to see a love still so strong."

At that Joana's mind came predictably to her predicament. True love—it is a concept that claims the hearts of many. She'd relinquished the hope long ago, or so she thought. Her parents so content, so joyous—why did it hurt so much to see?

“Though I am sure the guests did not appreciate such a scene. Your father should really learn some propriety before such vulgarity ruins his reputation.”

“His reputation means nothing to the law; his blood will shield him from all but the most scandalous decrees. Something I am sure he knows.”

“Still, it was quite rude to leave us at supper.”

“Did it offend you as well, Lady Hale?”

“Of course not,” but both knew that it did.

It was sunset when Joana had enough. She excused herself, claiming she was dizzy, rebutting any attempts from Lady Hale to find help. And she returned to the gardens, the buds and leaves bathed in a purple haze.

She sat there, thinking on all that Lady Hale had said. She thought about the Prince of Gahn. What would he be like? Would he be kind? Would he be intelligent? Would it matter—would she be happy? Over the years, she'd seen the possibilities of her life torn from her grasp, slowly, certainly. And now, with a single sentence, her father had claimed all that was left, save for one. She would never be Joana again. She would be a king's wife.

How stupid could he be? Did Charles not know the strife such a marriage would bring upon them? Did he think Gahn and Virland would accept it? It was her life he was toying with. She wasn't a resource to be spent; she was his daughter, and he didn't seem to care.

True love. What is it like? Would her heart flutter as they said it would? Would she know, in an instant, the man she would die for—the man who would die for her?

She was doomed to never know—the vestigial child cried out, mourning her loss.

She paced in the garden, deep in the paths of trees and bushes, her white dress flowing about the grass, dirtier by the second. The inanity of nobility was a blessing and a curse. She would never know hardship; none of them ever would. And so, grasping for excitement, they conjure conflicts and grievances and disputes and now she must wrestle with the limits of her life in vain, for she was trapped, never to be free.

So she paced, her white dress catching the moonlight, those flashes finding their way through time and space, changing her life—she just didn't know it yet.

Friday ended, and Saturday came—Kevin had disabled his alarm the day prior, and so frightfully spent the morning dreaming of apparitions in the woods. He woke in a sweat, just before the claws of spirits claimed his soul. Last night, he'd barely eaten. Today, he felt the ramifications of his carelessness; he had not a single shred of energy to spare.

What time was it? He'd barely moved a muscle since waking, in the minute that passed. His promise came to mind, and then came his first movement: he turned his head to the right, the clock smugly telling him it was twenty minutes past noon.

Again—he brushed his teeth, wincing at the ebbing of his skin. It was more painful to see than usual, and so he slipped his shirt on faster than ever, hiding it away.

The pain in his stomach had no appetite accompanying it.

The coffee shop on Cabelton had opened eighteen days prior. Lily had talked about it on break, and though she'd always resolved to visit, she never had.

The address was 2940 Cabelton Street. It was nestled between a horde of chic tea shops and craft breweries that followed trends like the tide follows the moon. It was doomed for failure; most stores on Cabelton didn't last very long. They shone brightly, exhausting their limelight, extinguished by time. Perhaps Lily wanted to see this star before it faded away.

Cabelton was in walking distance of 680 Eben Street, another factor in how desirable his location was. It took him fifteen minutes before the crowds of young men and women told him he'd made it.

Ludicrously, there was a queue; six lined up outside, gazing impatiently at their phones, waiting their turn for lunch. It seemed everybody wanted to visit New Grounds Cafe; the smiles on the waiters faded more with each approaching customer.

When he was finally seated, feeling self-conscious about his solo arrival to a table-for-two, the smells of Arabica and brioche had awakened his hunger. And though he'd intended to wait until she came, he couldn't fight it.

Lily showed up at 12:48, still taking off her bicycle helmet as she sidled through the door, sweating litres. At work, she dressed professionally as possible, acting as such—she was driven, and took more than just the opportunities she was offered. Weekend Lily was a different woman. She tied her hair in the simplest, messy ponytail; she was frumpy, rowdy, unorganized. Even her face required a second glance; at work, layers of makeup hid her dry skin and flat features.

"Sorry I'm late," she gasped. "My niece had a Taekwondo tournament, it was on the other side of town, and my roommate had to borrow the car, and..."

Then she noticed Kevin was six bites into a smoked salmon sandwich.

"I guess it didn't bother you?" she asked.

"Sorry," he said. "I hadn't had anything to eat." He took another sip of his coffee to soothe his drying throat. "I wasn't sure if you wanted me to order for you, or—"

“Oh no, it’s fine. I’m not eating here, anyways.”

“You’re not hungry?”

“No, Tina, the girl from TLN—the company I told you about? She texted me this morning.”

“You’re fully booked, huh?”

She smiled, wiping some loose strands of chestnut hair to clear her vision.

“The most popular girl I know—do you feel lucky yet?”

He didn’t like to think about TLN. When she brought it up, it claimed his attention once more, reminding him of his stagnancy, reminding him that she would leave, and he would be one step closer to total loneliness. He didn’t like to be bitter about it, either. He should’ve been proud for her; he should’ve been cheering her on. Instead, he felt like he would be abandoned, further and further behind in the rat race.

“House blend, black,” she said to the advancing waiter, who spun on his heels and walked back.

“I turned down golf for you,” he said. “You should feel lucky.”

“Oh yeah? Before, or after I texted you?”

He was witless, and she smirked.

“But I’m not sure why you turned them down. What were you planning on doing today?”

“I don’t know,” he said, struggling to admit it.

“Come on, you can tell me.”

“How did you even know?”

“I know everything. I see everything. I’m like Santa—always watching.”

“Santa’s a creepy old man.” He squinted. “Yeah, I guess I see the resemblance.”

“Wow, okay. I see how it is.”

The waiter returned, mug in hand, delicately, gently setting it on the table.

“House, black.”

She said a quick thanks, and took a long whiff. Then the smallest sip, savouring the flavour.

“They use Liberica beans in the blend here,” she said. “That’s why I wanted to try it out.”

“I thought you tried Liberica. Didn’t you hate it?”

“Yeah, but—you can’t just try something once and write it off. I wanted to know for sure.” She took a longer sip.

“So? How is it?”

She shook her head.

“Nope. Nope. Better than last time. Still tastes like a tire fire.”

For half an hour, they talked, about where New Grounds sourced their beans, about fair trade and habitat loss, about the exploitation of farmers overseas. For half an hour Kevin didn’t think about his own life; for half an hour he was content. But Lily had more than coffee on her mind; she had a thousand little worries and dreams spinning around, and she knew Future Comfort Systems was on its last legs.

Anybody with a brain could see it; anybody with ambition was setting plans for its eventual demise. Still, most held out hope; it was hard to find work in a recession, and if it could just hold out long enough, it might all end well. Kevin was one of them, clinging on for dear life, hoping the recession would blow over and nothing would have to change. Even the Board, incompetent as they were, had the same hopes, knowing that when it all crashed, their nest eggs would keep them safe.

Lily had asked him about his plans before, in secret. When he explained he hadn’t any, she’d never been more worried for him. He wasn’t an idiot, she knew it—why, then, was he so complacent? His career was at stake; couldn’t he see the risks? But she’d forgone bringing the subject up; weeks hadn’t changed his mind.

He would see this company to the end. Out of loyalty, he told himself. Out of honour. He’d been with Future Comfort for so long; how could he leave his people to die alone? That vocal minority in his brain was disappointed with Lily—she was brave enough to do what he could not, and the only other option he saw was to hate himself more for it.

“Crap, gotta go,” she said, after a little more than half an hour. “Can’t be late for this one.”

She put her four dollars on the table, strapping on her helmet, again swiping away more hair. She would’ve saved more time properly tying it all up; most things never seem worth it in the moment.

“Tip included,” and before she left to meet Tina, “Sorry I was late. This was nice.”

“The coffee, too?”

But she didn’t hear him—she was already focused on the next meeting. For this one, she’d take a quick shower, a little makeup, anything to stack her odds and keep the good impression she hoped she’d made before.

Kevin stayed there, still ruminating on TLN. Future Comfort wouldn’t die. It couldn’t. The worry he felt in his heart was misplaced, he told himself. Still, he couldn’t shake it. An empty cup and empty plate urged him to leave—where to still unknown.

He wandered Cabelton, hoping a name or something in the windows might've caught his eye and fished out his inspiration. He kept wandering, all the way until the trendsetters ended and the offices began, walking still.

The streets were filled to the brim, cars starting, stopping, the drivers losing their minds at the helm. The city is a nasty beast in the day—humanity becomes indistinct from obstacles, faces melting into the concrete, impeding your every step. When there are so many people, it is difficult to see who they truly are. They become their aggressive postures, their harsh scowls, their ridiculous hairstyles and premium purses. The logos on their shirts describe their characters, and you are satisfied to judge them, no matter what conclusion you draw.

How did they see him? Did they notice how he wilted, how purposeless he was? All of a sudden, self-consciousness attacked. He became too painfully aware of who he was; more specifically, how unimportant he was. He didn't matter. Who would notice him gone?

He kept wandering, through the sea of glass and steel, pushing away these intrusive thoughts. He didn't want to think anymore. He didn't want to suffer.

Saturday is a work-day for the passionate few. As the economists continued with their pessimism, entrepreneurs expanded their hours further and further, trying to get ahead of the curve. Future Comfort was not a small business, nor were its citizens passionate. They were burying their heads, pretending everything was fine.

So was he—but as long as he recognized it, he was still above it.

Frustrated at his inaction, he returned home. Why had he wasted so much time on nothing? Given the opportunity, he'd have waited the whole weekend away, only to complain about another five days of work. The cycle was his enemy, yet it was all he had—how he wished he could just walk away from it all!

So he retraced his steps, back through the financial district, past the desolate, eerie lobby of Future Comfort, through the post-lunch, half-abandoned restaurants of Cabelton, weaving through the asphalt mess as cars drove at speeds that seemed far too dangerous for the space allotted.

Out in the front was Scent Junior, again. This time, with no disputes, no negotiations. He'd traded his phone for an unspecified drink in a paper bag.

It was no surprise that Junior was an alcoholic. It was even less surprising that he didn't think he had a problem. His sleeping aid was a glass of whiskey—his morning drink was a light lager. No, he was classier than a drunk; if anything, he was a connoisseur, with no recognition that tasting a product was not the same as indulging in it.

And who would stop him? Senior was likely in Italy this time of the year. If his father could throw temperance to the winds, then so could he. So day in, day out, he was drunk. He was probably drunk yesterday. The line between functional and functionally drunk had evaporated; his cerebrospinal fluid was probably half ethanol.

“Mr. Umhoen! Kevin,” he shouted out, drawing the glances of a few pedestrians.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Scrent.”

Scrent Junior scoffed, turning to take another swig. He hated to be called Mr. Scrent. Or William Scrent, or William, or William Junior. Over the years, he’d grown to detest any reminders of his father—which, given his job, were plentiful. The weekend was more than reprieve from endless documents and phone calls; it was salvation from his father’s grasp.

“How’s Tills doing?” he asked. “I got so angry last night I ran off. Didn’t see him when I came back.”

“Mr. Tills is doing fine. He didn’t say much though, about his visit to the doctor.”

“How about you?” Junior took yet another swig, shakily laying the package down.

“I’m good. I’m doing well.”

“Doing well,” he muttered. “Everybody’s doing well. Doesn’t answer the fucking question.”

“I’ll see you later, Will.”

“Whatever.”

Junior didn’t need friends. He didn’t need anyone. He was perfectly fine—he was doing well. The beer in his blood told him so; it told him Kevin’s consideration was condescension. In the end, it was only Junior who told himself he didn’t deserve his lifestyle, but he could never admit it to himself.

And again, just like ever, he walked past the now-empty security booth, into the elevator, back up to the fourth floor. The hall had never been more silent. Everybody else must have left, enjoying life. Kevin had returned, though today he didn’t intend to retreat.

David Umhoen had invested thousands of dollars into Kevin’s education. The man ate little, considering the intensive nature of his employment; every decision was thrice-planned to give Kevin the life he deserved; every mental faculty was likewise devoted to his future; David was determined to give Kevin the childhood he was too unprivileged to have. Scholarship essays, math contests, and chess clubs—he was unwilling to see his child destroying his body for a wage, as he was.

The future was the only priority; success was the only goal. All else could be discarded by the wayside.

That might’ve been why he lost his lust for drawing. There was no way to tell if he would ever have been good at it, but as a teenager, his product certainly wasn’t good. Would it have made a difference to David if they were? It was a waste of time, effort, and money—all three would be better used in service of his studies.

When he moved away, he bought sketchbooks, pencils, and erasers, but placing graphite to paper was never satisfying enough. It was never good enough. A lifetime of perfectionist expectations made the endeavor pointless to pursue. Months passed, and he felt the urge from time to time; ironically, it was the guilt of abandoning his craft that kept him away.

He wasn't sure why he retrieved his sketchbook today, of all days. It was buried in the back of a closet, beneath spare blankets and tissue paper and formal clothes. The dust formed a cloud that billowed out and into the room, rejoining its people.

He holed up in his bedroom for hours, searching for inspiration, waiting for it, hoping that one glorious image or another might come to him. His pencil hovered above the surface, unmoving, until his hand cramped, and he was forced to retreat and contemplate once more. He thought about drawing what he'd seen last night, but how could he capture it if he'd never seen it clearly? All the while, those failed sketches in the earlier pages taunted him, jeering at his empty mind, laughing at his incompetence.

He started, then stopped, scribbling away the failure he couldn't bear to look at. Then again, and again, eating through the pages, growing ever more furious at himself, at his worthless hands, the thoughts crawling their way back in, finding the cracks.

Frozen by fear, but fear of what? Nobody was there to see him fail—still he was afraid, afraid to make more mistakes, to waste the paper that cost him next to nothing.

He laid in bed, atop the scattered clothes he'd yet to gather, his eyes drawing closer and taking him into darkness...

What was he doing? He'd resolved not to waste his time, yet here he was: again throwing away his Saturday with more sleep he didn't need. He needed out of his suffocating apartment, he needed freedom; he wanted to be free.

He stood, peeling himself away from the bed, rubbing his eyes to try and steal a little more life for himself. He peered out the window to the waning light of the sky. A flash of white came to mind once more.

Why could he not get it out of his head? What could possibly have been the explanation? He'd searched the meadow up and down and found nothing—if someone was there who hadn't wanted to be found, he shouldn't go back looking. Still, he was so curious, and what else did he have to do?

Internet sensationalists would have had you believing the world was on fire, that families were losing their homes left and right, savings wiped out in an instant as trading indices continued to drop. Casual investors waited with bated breath as prices wobbled, as government relief unveiled, holding onto a dream.

Turning off the screen, walking out on the street, you would see nothing of the sort. The world went on, children begging for pocket change in the soft streetlight and tugging at the tired jackets of their guardians, fellows stumbling in the dark, laughing or wailing.

Of course, those unfortunate few—the recently homeless, the newly unemployed—they still existed. But it was simpler to shut your eyes, to turn into the corner and proclaim that, since it could not be seen, it could not have happened. Or else you'd face the inevitable conclusion: one of these days, *you* might become obsolete, and there wouldn't be much to do about it. Any day now, Kevin's continued employment might be deemed an unjustifiable expense. There was nothing he could do about it, he thought. Lily evidently thought differently.

The sun was falling; he had to eat something. Hunger was barely an instinct. He had to remember to eat, lest his body become irreparably frail.

In university, he'd learned how to cook. It couldn't be said that he learned properly, not at first. His new freedom was filled with junk food and bacon grease, filling out his waistline as well. Second-year came, and he shared an apartment with another student. Elliott was studying to be a dietitian, and, among a host of other overbearing quirks, took Kevin's health as his mission.

What would Elliott think of him now? How disappointed would he be to see the disregard for his labour? Yet another person Kevin felt guilty for failing—and angry for the expectations he'd never wanted.

No matter if he wanted to honour Elliott today, he couldn't: his refrigerator had nothing but drinks and sauces. Was there a meal he could summon from grape soda and tabasco? If there was, he didn't know it, and the stacks of TV dinners stashed in the freezer were enough. It eased the process, at least. Rather than finding recipes or searching for the right meals, he only had to choose between Salisbury steak or carved chicken.

Today was a chicken day.

He tore into the meat, chewing it dispassionately. In the kitchen, without the aid of the bedroom door to keep him hidden further away, he could hear the barest hints of reggae pounding against the walls. In the minutes it took him to eat his meal, hunched over the counter again, he swore the music grew louder, daring him to come and stop it.

"Will you shut that shit up!"

The man in 402's voice raised again, piercing the thin walls of the building. Nothing changed in response—Kevin supposed their transient peace had finally come to an end.

"No, it's not fine," he continued, yelling his voice hoarse. "That asshole knows he can get away with it! Turn that shit off!"

His threatening tone amounted to nothing; Kevin had finished, disposed of cardboard and plastic, taken his sketchbook and pencils with him to the elevator, never once hearing Max Romeo soften his voice.

The elevator took him to the ground floor, stopping briefly at the second.

"Mr. Tills," said Kevin.

"Kevin!" said Mr. Tills.

"What are you doing out this late?"

Mr. Tills leaned in close, with those mischievous eyes and crooked back, forcefully whispering: "I'm going to meet a lady. Don't tell my wife."

"Mr. Tills!" Kevin exclaimed. "How could you do that to poor Etta?"

Tills laughed, knowing he hadn't fooled him at all, enjoying the banter he so rarely found without his wife.

"Wh-what she doesn't know," he started, coughs interrupting his response, "what she—"

And he coughed again—and the doors were opening, the violence of his hacking frightening Ms. Otinz and her young son, who hadn't expected bacterial assault when they stood near the elevator's entrance.

"Sorry, sorry," said Mr. Tills. His face dropped, seeing Ms. Otinz cover her mouth, rushing past them.

It might not have been them she was trying to escape; Scrent still hadn't returned home, instead seated in Tills's throne, even more impaired than he'd been that afternoon.

"There you are!" he shouted. "Hello, leeches. Hello!"

"You're in my seat," muttered Tills.

"Your seat? Your seat! I own the goddamn seat—I'll sit in it if I goddamn want."

"Will, you should really go home," Kevin said, trying to calm him.

"Why, am I ruining the atmosphere? You don't like me poisoning the air?"

"You're going to get beer all over it—"

"Fucking come to my lobby—"

"The stink's gonna stay from now 'til forever."

"Fucking tell me what to do!"

"Mr. Scrent," said Kevin. "Go home."

Kevin was so much of a non-presence most of the time that people forgot he had a real voice. He didn't use it much—he was placid, mostly—and when he did, it made it all the more impactful. It wasn't anything special, really. Its weight was artificial; it had power because its rarity led people to believe in its power.

That unintended tactic gave his command so much gravitas that even the belligerent Junior had to back down.

"I'm gonna take a piss," he said, wobbling off.

"He's got a problem, don't you think, Kevin?"

So do you, Kevin thought, in his mind still hearing those wet coughs Tills now had regularly.

“So, what are you really up to?” Kevin asked, as they exited the front door.

“Oh, just buying some candies for Mrs. Tills.”

Of course, Kevin knew the candies were really for him.

“And you? What does the dashing Mr. Umhoen have in store for a Saturday evening?”

“I don’t know,” he said. This time, he did know—he was too embarrassed to say.

“Good luck with that, then,” and Tills wandered off, thankfully away from Fazlullah Park, letting out the coughs he’d contained in his chest.

The city is strange at sunset. It is undeniable that a sunset is one of the most enchanting sights gifted to us by the world. For half the day, the sky is a constant blue, only sharing its canvas with dull clouds. When the moon arrives, black is all that remains and, in the city, stars refuse to shine. The orange radiance and purple glare that signify sunset cannot be impeded even by the sterility of the city. The buildings, so mighty and grand, are nothing compared to the brilliance of the sunset sky—the colours bear down on everything, a warm embrace, soothing us, telling us that beauty will always persist.

Below it, people walk, uncaring or oblivious. Menial tasks and artificial pleasures consume them, never allowing their heads to rise.

Kevin was determined to find inspiration, yet he was also confident Fazlullah Park was the key. He needed to make sense of what had happened last night; his life was so bereft of variety that the tiniest of discrepancies could not go unexamined.

Again, along that path, only half-sure when to turn into the trees—this time, he’d turned later than usual, and so was quite confused for a minute.

He was almost disappointed to see an ordinary meadow. Why did he expect so much more? As if the supernatural would come and sweep him away—replace his disillusionment with something, be it pain, elation, despair, exhilaration. But there was nothing, and that momentary chagrin was nearly enough to turn him right back around in despondency.

But he stayed, the growing faction in his brain ordering him to find motivation, demanding inspiration.

The fresh air and darkening skies helped him concentrate. He breathed in deeply, clearing his mind of doubt or thought, allowing his hands to move without oversight, trusting them to lead. With abundant stimulus, he was able to draw much more freely, though he still could not shake his perfectionism.

Those flowers do not look so flat in life; strike it from the record. The shading of the trees is laughable; do it again. Do it again, and again—repeat until satisfied, which, with such insurmountable expectations, seemed it would never happen. And though he’d made it further than ever to even the

semblance of a finished sketch, he couldn't finish the job. What did he still need? Why wasn't this enough?

He didn't want to go back. What was there for him?

Kevin laid down in the grass, allowing the blades to tickle his skin, staring blankly to the rising moon. Slowly, as if dragged by a lethargic puppeteer, it sauntered across the sky. I am free, it said to him, and you are not. A glorified rock in the universe had more liberty than him.

How incredibly lucky he was that he refused to rise or return—a different man would have supposed it to be fate.

“...cannot believe him! He truly believes he can buy my agreement with an invention.”

Kevin sat up, but the grass was so long it still blocked much of his vision.

“That oaf! That ignorant oaf—how can he be king when he knows not how to be a father?”

Then he stood, for he knew he hadn't imagined it—or perhaps he'd truly gone mad, and imagined both.

What he saw finally satisfied his curiosity. The white flash—he hadn't imagined it. Here it was now, and he could clearly see it: a beautiful, flowing dress, catching the soft moonlight.

Then he looked up, and there she was: the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

The shock of seeing her was unmatched by any other. It added to her transfixing beauty; while she was a very pretty girl, she wasn't genuinely the most beautiful woman he'd seen, but it was the only thought he had.

A princess, he thought, and wiped it from his mind. But she looked so much the part: the necklace, the gloves, the absurd, ancient-fashioned dress. She even sounded the part—she even said the part!

Open mouthed, in shock herself, Joana stared at him, an invader in the royal gardens. He seemed as though he was an invader from another land with how he dressed, so bizarrely, with images emblazoned upon his chest she'd never seen, clothing nobody she'd even seen wear.

“Hello,” he said, now believing himself to be in a dream—or perhaps across from him was someone who could match him in insanity.

“Good even, Sir...” and she was at a loss, for never once had anyone dared enter the gardens at night, other than Kat or her parents, and he was none of them—had she lost her mind?

“That's quite a beautiful dress.”

“Thank you?”

Miriam Contell was born to Lord Jacob Contell and Lady Emily Contell. The Contells, in those days, ruled over the Duchy of Northfrie, and so were quite an influential family. Emily Contell gave birth to four more children—three daughters and, when Jacob had nearly given up his wish for a son, his beloved Connor Contell. Miriam was nine years old when Connor came into her world, usurping her inheritance. She was just old enough for intense jealousy and too young to understand restraint.

Lady Emily came looking for her beautiful baby boy, finding her eldest daughter standing ominously over the swaddled infant with dinner knife in hand.

In time, Miriam understood her rule would never come to be. She grew to love Connor, forgetting she'd ever intended to murder him, yet never once forgetting her fruitless ambitions. For Connor was a stupid boy, stupid and impressionable, and the ease at which he was confused or manipulated sent Miriam into silent fits.

Miriam was sixteen, when the King Manfred threw a grand celebration, inviting all the lords and ladies of the realm.

Manfred was tired and ready to abdicate the throne to his son Charles, having presided over the restless and hopeless children of the war. He'd wanted to end his reign pleasurably—in his youth, he might've wanted to die fighting; later, he decided hedonism should be his end.

There Miriam was, mingling with the older ladies, endearing herself to those with distinguished names, having been taught all her life the importance of ambition and connection. Open paths were all she saw: people she could control, people she could persuade, to take for herself the Duchy she'd been promised and which had been stolen away.

She pretended to drink the wine, knowing that in all the commotion and chaos nobody would be paying attention to her cup, of all things. The lords grew drunker and drunker, spilling little secrets, spurred on by Miriam to spill their souls.

So much information! Did you know that Lord Edmund's eldest preferred boys to girls? Miriam knew; by the end of two hours, under the flickering candlelight, beneath the sounds of jaunty tunes and the dancing of feet against the floor, she'd learned enough dirty secrets to cause an uproar. But she was a smart girl—chaos was no worthy goal for the skills she learned she had. The cheering and joking surged louder and louder, servants slipping away in the corner of her eye, noble couples doing the same. Then, suddenly:

“Lord Emmett, you haughty little loiter-sack—I'll do you justice and kill you right here.”

“Try it, you dew-beater. I'll run you through before your hand reaches your blade.”

The commotion drew the attention of everyone in the court; the shier, less able lords and ladies shimmied away, while the others ran to separate the suicidal rivals. Miriam scanned the room, hoping to catch the King's son while his guards were finally preoccupied.

Imagine the fury in her heart when she saw another's hand in his—how terrifyingly seething when she saw it was her own sister!

That day, Charles fell in love. A fifteen year-old boy would've fallen in love with any girl, of course. Miriam's sister was every part the beauty she was, with none of the venom and bitterness Miriam had for the world. A kind soul and a pure soul—Miriam never stood a chance.

“Why her, Father? I am your eldest daughter. I deserve this far more than she ever will.”

“Were it my choice, of course it would be you. You must remember: he may be a boy, but he is the King's boy, and it matters not to the King which daughter of which lord he marries.”

She saw the implication: it didn't matter to him which of his daughters he married.

Joana was born to King Charles Virsom and Queen Cassandra Virsom, once Cassandra Contell, to be adored by all who lived in Virland, save for Miriam Contell, who would never forget each and every time she'd been scorned, who would wait patiently for her opportunity, knowing one day it would come.

How Charles and Cassandra loved one another! Manfred believed his son's love would wane, in time—when he saw it did not, he forbid the boy from seeing his beloved. His orders did nothing; Charles was smitten, and there was no stopping a teenage boy from following his heart.

The two were wed in a beautiful ceremony. It was the one celebration they hadn't run off together, for even they could not ignore the significance of their marriage.

Let the doves be free! New love had sprung, the lad and lass as happy as could be, the smiles never once leaving their flushed faces. Drink and be merry, cast off your doubts and decorum! The prince had found his bride—let the Virsom name live on, forever!

Joana nearly killed the young Cassandra when she was born. Charles at least had the privilege of pacing in fear—Cassandra had been in labour for hours, the nurses trying their best to calm the poor girl, trying to keep her and her daughter alive.

After fourteen long, long hours, Joana was born, bawling, covered in her mother's blood. It was as if Joana knew what pain she'd brought on her mother, that she'd nearly killed her, that she still could die. If Cassandra had died, the guilt might've stayed with her forever—Joana hadn't the heart to withstand killing anyone, even by accident.

The princess Joana was a chubby little thing. All babies are adorable to their mothers, or so Cassandra used to think before seeing her daughter, the ugliest infant the nurses had ever delivered. Nobody would ever say anything—nobody wanted to offend the King and Queen, not knowing they shared the sentiment.

“She is ugly!” Cassandra cried one night, postnatal hormones having left her temperamental. “Is it my fault,” she asked Charles, the two wrapped up under the covers of their bed, him still within her, “have I blighted your name?”

“Of course not, my love,” he said, trying to comfort her, the position the two were in making it a difficult task.

But Joana's looks would inevitably be the least of their concerns. She grew to be a pretty girl, and a prettier woman, the kind of woman whose looks were so charming, so disarming that you couldn't hate her if you tried, and naturally you would think the best of her.

At least until, by one comment or another, you made an enemy of her, or offended her, and she would use her lessons in rhetoric to tear your very soul from your chest—you wouldn't think she was quite kind, then.

After Joana, the Queen never again became pregnant. Nobody knew why, and everything from experimental tonics to folk cures couldn't fix her. The princess thereafter gained the attention of nearly every suitor in the land, all of whom dreamed of ruling Virland at her side.

"I will marry none of them," she said. "None who do not at least try to present the illusion of love."

"You will marry one," Charles said. "That will not be debated."

It was that conversation that stuck with her. She began to notice everything. It was those last five words that made her understand just how deeply her life had been controlled. Such an integral part of her life was not a debate—she had no say.

She would learn, visiting the city-states, how true that statement was. The Prince of Gahn had his own list of suitresses; Joana wanted no part of it. But it wasn't her decision to make, of course—nothing was her decision to make. The King commanded it; listen to your father, Joana; listen to your king.

Did she think such a command was easy for him to say? Of course he wanted to see her happy. Had he another heir, he would have been more than happy to let Joana do as she pleased. But he couldn't—he, and by extension, Joana, had responsibilities to attend.

He'd taken her to the Academy, the better known name for the largest educational institution in all of Virland, just a short march from the palace. Scholars and clergymen came to the Academy to learn in both secular and religious subjects.

Joana both hated and loved to be there. The oldest, wisest men were also the most pretentious, arrogant men. There was no denying their intelligence, but in their gaits they carried a smugness only one who had devoted their life to studies could have. So many lessons she'd endured here—so much math, so much science, so much philosophy. The third tended to sail over her head, as she preferred not to think of the truly abstract; the former two toed the line, if not clinging tight to it.

In the Academy, some of the brightest Virian minds worked tirelessly on instruments of war. All secrets, as such designs must be kept from cruel hands—forgetting, of course, that the crown might one day lay cruel hands upon them. If the people knew just how much Charles had invested into this deadly insurance, they might not have doubted his neutrality towards Gahn—they might've then been confused about his hesitance to use them.

Research, experimentation, and development all happened beneath ground, led by a sadistic, cowardly Lord Victor. He'd been working at the Academy longer than Charles had been king; the Academy outdated both of them by hundreds of years.

It had gone through renovations and restructuring. Years before Charles, or even Manfred, the alchemists and engineers, who felt as if they were underappreciated and especially underpaid, sealed themselves within the Academy and threatened Virland with their deadly inventions. What they overlooked was how utterly terrifying a war was, much less a siege. When the army knocked at the gates, some fainted in fear—the rest surrendering quickly. A poor decision, as the King James was not known for mercy.

Thereafter, the minds at the Academy would no longer be left alone with their work. They would be scrutinized and audited, corruption ripped by its budding roots when even the hint of betrayal made itself known. Only some of the smartest minds worked beneath the Academy—the truly smart knew it wasn't worth it.

Charles had something to show her that day—dressed in plain clothes, they walked the winding alleys of the city to the Academy. She was surprised to see they were going below ground; she knew what work went on there, but her father never wanted her to be a part of it.

“Two thirds of the royal family have come. What an honour.”

Lord Victor was there, just beyond the gate, measuring out a portion of black powder.

“Your Majesty,” he bowed. “Your Highness,” again to Joana.

“Victor.” She greeted him with a nod; she didn't like him very much after all the lessons in alchemy she despised.

“Lord Victor. I heard news of success. Show us.”

“Your Majesty.”

Carefully, he took the cloth upon which the powder rested, neatly forming a teardrop pouch. It was dark, even with the aid of oil lamps (the fire, thankfully, kept safe behind glass partitions), and the two followed him deeper into the sanctum.

The size of the space always astounded her—the Academy itself was no small building, but the basement entrance was so claustrophobic and constricting that when the basement opened into wide testing ranges and machining rooms, it seemed like magic.

On the other side of this room sat large bags filled with sand, stacked upon one another, some already filled with holes. The side nearer to the door, where Joana still stood, was adjacent to a long, wooden table, upon which a leather sheet rested, whereupon all manner of tools and parts could be seen. Lord Victor strode over, picking up a long apparatus, inspecting it, and, reverentially, handing it to Charles.

What a beautiful work of art it was—but Charles knew its true purpose, and so he could not stop himself from looking beyond the smooth, perfectly shaped metal and engraved wood to its hopeless purpose.

“What is it?” asked Joana, unable to contain her curiosity.

Lord Victor began to answer, but Charles spoke first, eager to impress his daughter.

“The Battle for Etenburgh was fought in late April. Lord Richter’s soldiers could not keep the matches of their weapons lit; neither could the Gahnians. We knew where they would be marching—we had the advantage—then the rain ruined our plans, forcing a melee in the mud. In the Battle of Rinfield Hill, Sir Harry Gimold injured himself with his own powder horn and an errant flame. He was believed dead and abandoned by his fleeing men, captured by Gahn. The matchlock is an ingenious system, but not without its flaws. Lord Victor and his assistants have worked for years to design one superior.”

He handed the weapon to Joana, who handled the firearm with a mixture of fear and wonder.

“It is called the wheellock, and…”

Charles scratched at his curly beard, not-so-subtly gesturing for Victor to help explain what he could not remember.

“While the matchlock utilized a lit match to ignite the pan, black powder is not inert enough to require a lit flame.” He pointed towards one of the many bent and shaped pieces of metal, seemingly knowing each and every item there. “Fool’s gold is struck against a spinning, steel wheel during the pull of the trigger—”

“The sparks are thus enough to fire the weapon,” Joana concluded. “The mechanism is housed within and works regardless of the weather.”

“Indeed.”

She lifted the firearm, aiming at the bags across the room, imagining herself firing this magnificent machine.

“The design is precise—that is where I see the issue.”

“Joana?” asked Charles.

“A line of soldiers fifty wide will require fifty wheellocks. How do you intend on producing so many? If this is not enough of an improvement in practicality, its disadvantage in production may prohibit its use.”

“We are aware,” said Lord Victor. “This is our third model. When we reach a satisfactory design, we will focus on simplifying the machining process.”

“You mean to say your efforts are not complete?”

She asked her question to Victor, but she looked at Charles, as if to say she’d realized his intent—which she had.

Charles cleared his throat, interjecting: “Would you like to fire it, Joana? I have been assured this one is perfectly safe to use.”

Victor was already reaching for earplugs, but Joana, the princess who adored the science of war, refused.

“But you love these things, Joana. Far more than I do.”

“Of course I do. That is why you brought me here.”

Her tone was cold and curt; Lord Victor shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable with the coming argument. Joana strode over to him, laying the wheellock rifle on the table, then facing her father with enough confidence to match his rule.

“Yes, Joana. You have been dour and humourless. I wanted to please you.”

“No—you wanted to boast, not knowing this is nothing worth boasting about.”

Victor attempted to excuse himself; he found he could not speak a single word in such a suffocating atmosphere.

“Now you take issue with this work?”

“Why? Why spend the taxes of the fiefs on this? What good will more death do us? You claim you want peace; next you turn from it. Securing every possibility—never dedicated to a cause.”

“I will not tolerate this insolence, Joana. You may not agree, but you will accept it. As wrong as you think I am, I am the king—I will do what I wish for the security of Virland.”

“You have made that very clear.”

The two of them were fuming, Victor having already left. Poor Charles didn’t recognize the true reason why she was so combative—he’d tried to appease her and endured more vitriol for it.

“Go, then. I will not suffer you any longer tonight. Go, to your chambers, to the garden, wherever it is a petulant child goes to sulk.”

She turned and left right at the end of his sentence, leaving him to brood over what he’d said, trying to calm her furious heart. She walked through the door, through the workshop, past Victor, tinkering with springs and trying not to hear their conversation.

If anyone recognized her in her baggy shawls and underneath her hood, a million rumours would’ve spread—she was storming down the streets in a rage, muttering under her breath innumerable indecipherable curses, and at sunset! What could have driven the princess Joana to such a spell?

If they’d known the source of her frustration was familial tension, she might’ve been even more beloved. To know their lovely and kind Joana was just as human as they were, that beneath those extravagant clothes and within that lofty castle lied a woman vulnerable to emotion—if they knew more, maybe not.

She was walking toward the garden before she was aware of it—when she figured it out, her anger was inflamed once more. He was right in that most superficial way, but when you are angry with someone, you see any concession as defeat, unwilling to allow them a meaningless victory. So he must have been wrong with everything, and thus his anger becomes even more unjustified; her frustration growing deeper.

So she went to the garden, again to stew in her irrationality, having changed from those rags into a simpler, albeit still regal, white, evening dress. It was her domain. In the night, none would go there; none had reason to. It was a perfect microcosm of the world that would show her all she wanted to see. When she was there, she was gone from Virland, gone from her life. Nobody could reach her. Not even Kat's interruptions, which broke the illusion only temporarily, could mar the garden.

Even in the night, the soft light of the half-moon made him impossible to miss. If she looked closely, she would've noticed some differences in how the moonlight textured his face, how the pattern of the shadows on his shoulder was nonsensical, but the entire man was nonsensical. He was just lying there, on the short grass, pretending he wasn't invading the royal grounds, wearing ludicrous clothing.

It was almost as if he didn't see her—he just kept staring vacantly at the sky, as if he'd flown in like a bird and wished to be gone from the land again. She stared at him, not knowing what to say or do, or if she should've said or done anything, questions coursing like blood.

He was thin, the bones threatening to pierce through the skin, a strange sight for Joana, who knew more pudgy men than starving men. His eyes looked beyond the earthly domain, so much longing in them—she knew what it meant all too well. If he was a bird, he was caged—chained to the ground on which he sat.

Out of the corner of her eye, he saw her, in her billowing dress, a woman befitting the world she came from—which was not his world. He was intrigued and astounded; he stood and called out to her.

Before she knew it, she was responding. She should have ran; who was this man? Why was he here? Benign answers had no consequences for withdrawal; malicious answers were terrifying if she stayed. Yet she did, paralyzed by her inescapable curiosity, listening to this strange man speak stranger words.

“That's a beautiful dress,” he said.

“Thank you?”

The two fell silent, her fingers dancing upon the side of her thighs, and he scratched his scraggly hair.

“My name is Kevin,” he sputtered out. “What's yours?”

This indicated to her that he was foreign. But not from Gahn—and not like any one of the foreigners she'd ever met.

“Mine? Oh.” As if on instinct, because her mind was still too baffled to think clearly, she straightened her back and spoke: “Princess Joana Virsom, heiress to Virland.”

He wanted to speak, to say anything witty to this crazy lady, but the absurdity of what she'd said surpassed anything he could've thought up—he could only laugh, heartily. Joana's back unstraightened; she felt suddenly embarrassed, although he had no right to laugh at her. But embarrassment is also defeat—and she would not be defeated again today.

"You will not laugh at me, boy," which really shook him off balance, but did nothing to halt his laughter. "Cease your insolence now, or suffer the consequences!"

"No, no, I'm sorry," he said, trying so hard to stifle the chortles that tried to force their way out. "I wouldn't want to offend a *princess*," and then again he was lost to his giggling.

"Kevin," she said, trying to summon her most venomous, condemnatory voice, "whoever you may be, know that the title you belittle affords me the power to end you."

But he was wiping his tears away, grabbing his jaw, still unable to comprehend the woman who believed herself a princess in the twenty-first century.

"Do you hear me at all? I said stop!"

And she was finally unable to contain her indignation, striking him across the face. A most unladylike action—at least, if it had worked. He raised his arm in defense, finally lucid and apologetic for his condescension.

He watched as her arm drew closer, anticipating a great blow, closer, until his hair stood up and he could nearly feel the weight against his forearm, and then—

And she struck nothing. But it wasn't as if her arm had stopped, no—it sailed forth, right through his arm, her hand finding his cheek yet finding no satisfaction as it again passed through, coming out the other side, and the momentum's failure to find purchase sent her sailing too—he tried to grab her arm to keep her from falling, having failed to see what it meant, watching his fingers pass through her wrist as though he'd grabbed at a cloud.

Her ass hit the ground, and she must've been more frightened than she'd ever been in her life, staring up at the ghostly, thin man who stood threateningly above her, his hand still grasping for her.

Too scared to speak, she looked up into his eyes.

"Are you alright, Joana?"

She barely even heard him—she was still quivering in fear. Imagine what you would do, when faced with an apparition in the most private, most sacred place you hold dear? An apparition that mocks you, that you cannot even touch, much less harm? A spirit that defies all reason and rules? Joana learned then, what she would do—she shrieked in terror, in pure terror.

"Dear Lord!" whispered Lady Hale.

"What sound was that?" asked Charles to Cassandra, who brushed her fingers on his back, trying to calm her heart as she calmed him.

Miriam heard it too; she contented herself imagining some tortured spirit out there might've been spurned more than she had, that she too, could have her justice.

It was a scream that matched the foxes in its ineffable height. For years onward, the lords and ladies who resided at the Virian palace would remember it, and the servants would spin stories to the new arrivals, of the day a spirit came in grief and left just as swiftly.

Joana was breathing quickly, in abject panic.

Kevin was staring at his hands, dumbfounded, still trying to understand what had just happened to him.

"What just happened to me?"

"What are you?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"I don't know how to answer that," he said. "I'm human?"

"You are human or you are not. Do not toy with me."

"I am, I promise, it's just..." He laughed another nervous burst. "I'm sorry, I'm still trying to..."

Slowly, she rose again, holding her hand out, as if offering it to a jittery beast, testing the mirage. Breathless, her hand approached his chest—knowing it would do nothing, still expecting to feel a man under the clothes. And her finger plunged in, making her dizzy again—he was there, but he wasn't there.

"This doesn't make any bit of sense," he said.

"No," she replied. "But must it? It is; what matters most are the consequences."

The finger she refused to withdraw made him uncomfortable. He stepped backward, her finger following his movement for the briefest second, until it left, without sound, without feeling.

"Let's start again," he said. "My name's Kevin."

"And you are no spirit?"

"I don't think so. Are you?"

"No," she said, firmly, as if she had to convince herself of it.

He scratched his head, nails running along hairs, hundreds of questions fueling a fire that choked his voice.

"There must be an explanation. You may be neither apparition nor spirit, but your transience must have reason. You are not hostile—for now."

"For now?" he asked. "Why would I ever be?"

“I am not sure,” she admitted. “I always think the throne has enemies. But even Gahn has given up the war.”

And again he was bewildered. He couldn’t comprehend that she might genuinely be a princess, or that even just that she believed it. Royal families still existed, but not where he lived—and he’d never heard of a Princess Joana.

“What in the world is Gahn?”

His words contained more startling implications. He could not be from these lands without ever hearing the name Gahn. So who was he?

“You claim you are real, but you are not corporeal. You say you have never heard of Gahn—”

“Is that even a real place?”

“However, it would be impossible for a man of these lands to have never hear that name. So you must be from a distant place. But even then, you would still be physical.”

“I’m confused. What are you getting at?”

But she’d argued herself in circles. It seemed a situation impervious to reason. How could he be here and yet not be here? How could he be a stranger in every possible meaning of the word? She might’ve found humour in the fact that he was thinking the same thing, observing how she likened a mirage, wondering how she managed to conjure such a strange world for herself.

And how could they have ever come to the correct solution? Two worlds, linked by some inscrutable, unbelievable link through a plane beyond time and space.

It was too much for Kevin, who needed to sit again. But he had to pat down the grass, to take his seat and to see her again.

“What are you doing? Why are you swatting the air like so?”

“What does it look like?” he asked. “I’m getting the grass out of the way.”

“But the grass is far below,” she said, and her hands faded through the weeds, making his head spin once more.

“Why don’t you sit?”

“My dress will dirty,” she said, and stood, until long seconds passed and it seemed awkward to remain standing—she sat on the ground of the gardens, a sight that would be a scandal if seen by the more talkative ladies.

There they sat, beside each other yet so far away—in some time they’d be pouring their hearts out to one another—in more time she’d have the answer to her greatest question.

II

The Catch

Saturday ended and Sunday came. At the threshold of midnight they were still speaking, still thinking. Hours later, Joana was explaining her lineage when he fell asleep suddenly, no longer able to keep his eyes open.

She didn't want to shout, and she had no other way to wake him. If she made enough of a ruckus, someone might come find her sitting past midnight in the garden, and then she'd have to explain herself.

"Kevin? Kevin," she whispered, fighting the urge to try and poke him awake. "Kevin!" she said, in the halfway between yelling and whispering.

He was still just at the gate before blissful sleep—her words reached him and tore him away.

"Yeah... yeah?"

"I think you should sleep," she said.

"I was about to."

"No," and she laughed a little. "You said you were in a glade. Shouldn't you return home—sleep in your chambers?"

"My chambers? You mean my bedroom?"

"Well, you should not sleep in the grass." She yawned, covering her mouth with her hand, which was regrettably stained with dirt.

He left with no shortage of reluctance, still replaying her laugh in his head and the way her eyes crinkled when she did, those green eyes...

Neither did she want to see him go, him and his coal-black eyes, how eloquent he was—for the commoner he seemed to be. The way he spoke was so foreign; each word made her want to know more.

When Kevin arrived again at 680 Eben Street, Scrent Junior was passed out in the security booth. Mr. Tills must have seen him when he returned—Kevin surmised it was a fight Tills was unwilling to pursue. Kevin had to pass by him on the way to the elevator, and Junior mumbled something about water bills, and then the words "gin and tonic" could be heard, and then he was snoring again.

The fourth floor was bereft of reggae when he returned—the dim lights in the hall had an ominous tinge to them he'd never seen before. He winced at every step he took on the tiling, trying so hard not to wake anyone, and his heart almost stopped when he forgot his door slammed if not closed carefully.

He was dead tired. On days when he wasn't dead tired, the clutter in his apartment and the dread of housekeeping stole all his energy away—today he had nothing left, and still his energy was stolen. Without brushing his teeth—something he'd promised himself he'd never skip again—he sank into the bed, tossing the hoodies aside, fading into dreams of the ghost with green eyes.

Joana didn't fare much better. She should have been a professional at sneaking around the palace halls, given she'd done it so often, but she was the opposite of stealthy. Each step reverberated along the walls, sending the cockroaches into a frenzy, though this late at night the human occupants would not be woken so easily.

Except for Miriam Contell, the perpetual insomniac. Miriam was a different breed—she rarely slept more than five hours a day, and still she never had bags under her eyes, she never yawned, she never tired. Few knew she was so nocturnal—even those who did knew not what she did at night. Even her husband barely knew a thing; she told her husband few things, however, and the man was enough of an idiot to think this meant there was nothing at all.

If Miriam had known Joana was in the garden, she would've been there as well. She might've hid behind a tree, or a shrub. She was always learning, always waiting for her time—she'd been waiting for forty-three years.

Joana ran into Miriam on her way back to her chambers, hands still stained, clothes still dirty.

"Your Highness," Miriam said, not tearing her eyes away from the window at which she stared.

"Lady Contell," Joana said, trying to fight the instinctive intimidation she always felt at her presence.

"Please, your Highness—Miriam is fine." Her voice was smooth as silk and never once betrayed her cold motivations. Nearly everyone was smitten with the warmth in her deep voice; Joana was an exception, and she never knew why.

"Lady Miriam," she managed. "Wh-what are you still doing awake?"

"It is a beautiful night. We praise only the day for her beauty—never the night for hers."

She turned only her head to Joana, expressionless.

"But why? Are the stars not worthy of love? Is the waning moon not a treasure to behold?"

"I..."

Miriam laughed. Nervously, Joana laughed too. Miriam turned again to the window, looking up to the falling moon.

"I do not mean to keep you. It is late, your Highness. You should sleep."

"Yes," she said, and Miriam again tried to laugh a motherly laugh.

"Yes!" Miriam said. "Pleasant dreams, your Highness."

The encounter was yet another puzzling exchange to swim around her mind, as she undressed and cleaned the dirt from her extremities. And as she slept she thought of that man deprived of form, that oddly-handsome man with his eyes as black as the sky that Miriam adored so much.

Kevin woke strangely early on Sunday morning. The glare on the alarm clock still read **6:43**, and the tiniest part of his heart urged him to rise and find his purpose. But it was too tiny to have any say in Kevin's choices, so he slept—first ensuring his alarm was actually disabled.

When he woke again, the glare read **1:27**. The first thought across his mind was that he might've slept backwards in time. Thankfully, he recognized that option as impossible—he wasn't so far gone yet.

From the throne (or coffin) of his bed, he could observe the filthy station of his bedroom. He'd felt shame before, of course, but today he felt his shame couldn't be solved by ignorance. He didn't care from where his motivation came, only that it did—only that he could use it.

Where did all of these shirts come from? They'd been affixed to the bed so long that they felt like permanent fixtures—like the lights in the ceiling, or the window, like they'd been there from the dawn of all creation. He felt strangely impious as he peeled the clothes from the bedding, fighting the urge to toss them onto the floor.

He was in a frenzy—he became the Picasso of housekeeping. His room was so unorganized that he had to stumble over loose sketches, finding his vacuum buried under a layer of plastic bowls. But this did not stop him—nothing could stop him—not even the emptiness of his stomach.

Not that he wanted anything to stop him. Months without cleaning anything, and he'd finally summoned the strength to do it. If his will waned, he knew it would wither; he pushed any and every thought of stopping from his mind.

And he was in the thick of it, fighting a war against the clutter and the grime, finally getting all the plates and cutlery and cups to one corner, all the clothes in the basket—if not splayed against the side—finding erasers, paperclips, candy wrappers, a phone charger he'd replaced weeks ago, and then a knock at the door.

He closed his eyes, praying that he'd imagined it, knowing that even if he did, he'd stopped.

And then whoever was waiting at the door must have grown impatient, because they knocked twelve times again, in quick succession, just off-beat enough to achieve maximum annoyance.

"I'm coming!" Kevin called, though he just stood there, blinking. It took him a few seconds more to gather his wits and head to the door. He didn't bother looking through the peephole; he had a good idea of who it was.

His prediction was correct—but he'd forgotten he had to look down. The kid was standing around, leaning from side to side, goosebumps on his arms from the chilly hallway air.

"Hey, Hayush."

"Hi!"

Hayush stared up expectantly at him, as if Kevin should've known what he wanted.

"Hi."

“Hi!”

Kevin blinked, once and twice, trying to decipher what was happening, still stuck in the events of the prior night.

“What do you want, buddy?”

But Hayush only shrugged. Kevin looked behind himself, at the quarter-cleaned mess he knew he wouldn't have the strength to return to. Then he looked back at the kid, at the want in Hayush's eyes, and, with his mind no longer preoccupied, Kevin's stomach urgently reminded him how empty it was.

“You want to get some burgers?”

And then Hayush nodded, forcefully, his bangs bouncing—happy to have company, happier at the promise of a burger. And not fast food, either—Hayush's mother only ever bought from the dollar menu; Kevin had enough cash for real restaurants.

So they went down to the diner over on Hanford and 14th, a dinky little place, family-owned and the survivor of four buyout offers. The location was as perfect as could be for a restaurant and especially perfect for Kevin: it was just as far from 680 Eben Street as the Cabelton Strip—not far.

The diner was always suffocating. Jack Greene, the current proprietor of Greene's Grill, installed a new ventilation system four autumns ago—still, he swore it did nothing. It was best to visit in the winter, when the humidity and heat would be better received, but even in the summer months, the beef was mouthwatering enough to warrant frequent visits.

And many of their customers were frequent visitors—the Greenes once entertained the idea of starting their own chain, back in the 60's. But back then, the head of the family was Liam Greene, who wanted nothing more than to provide a proper life for his children. He wanted stability, not notoriety; one restaurant was work enough for him.

Hayush loved Greene's, even moreso than the average kid—and the average child is already enchanted by greasy cheeseburgers and crispy fries. His favourite was the strawberry-chocolate milkshake: the most expensive milkshake on the menu.

Kevin didn't mind. He wouldn't have minded even if he didn't know the details of Hayush's life. He was rather frugal. It wasn't by any conscious choice, however; he couldn't think of what to spend it on if he tried.

They were seated after a few minutes—time that blew by fast for Kevin, and were torturous, exhausting eternities for Hayush—in the corner of the diner, luxurious booth seats, where Kevin could watch out the window at passers-by and lost souls at the helms of their cars. As soon as they sat, Hayush began tinkering with the salt-shaker, knowing Kevin wouldn't stop him.

“Welcome to Greene's,” the waitress said. “How are you today?”

“Good!” said Hayush, making her smile.

For Kevin, a bacon cheeseburger with extra onions and hot sauce. For Hayush, a regular hamburger with extra onions—he tried to order hot sauce, but Kevin gave him *the look*, the look that every unruly child is familiar with—For Hayush, a regular hamburger with extra onions.

“There’s gonna be a new Mortal Kombat,” said Hayush, swinging his legs below the table, sometimes hitting Kevin’s shins.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup,” Hayush said, his eyes to the sky (rather, the ceiling), trying to recount what his friend told him at recess.

“There was a trailer, Jason said, there was,” and he really had to reach into his mind, “he said Sub-Zero and Scorpion were back, and they were, and they fought, and Jason said it was really cool, and, and I can’t wait until he gets it, and then we can play it together, and it’s gonna be so cool.”

“Yeah?”

“But Jason said his mom saw him watching it, and took his phone away. So I dunno. Maybe he won’t get it.” A few seconds, and under his breath, almost like he was embarrassed to admit it: “I wish I had a phone.”

And of course Kevin, not really following, could only offer the standard answer: “You’re too young to have a phone.”

“But Jason has one!”

“So?”

“It’s not fair!”

“Who says it’s got to be fair? What do you need a phone for? Who’re you gonna call?”

“I dunno. Mom?” Then his eyes lit up—he’d beaten Kevin’s argument. “I can call Jason if I have a phone and he has a phone too.”

“But you see him every day at school. Do you know how much a phone costs? It’s not cheap.”

And as soon as money was mentioned, Hayush knew he’d lost. His eyes plunged downward, his legs still, fingers still twiddling on the table.

He wasn’t old enough to be thankful for his limited attention span—when the burger came, his primitive understanding of economic inequity escaped, to return again when once more his mother’s finances could not satisfy his desires.

“So,” said Kevin, through the mouthfuls of bread and beef. “How’s school been?”

Hayush had more etiquette than Kevin—he at least waited to swallow before he spoke. Joana would’ve been amused to see how they ate, sauce dripping down their chins, sticking to their fingers—Lady Hale might’ve had a heart attack seeing these cavemen dribble food over themselves.

“It’s okay. We started doing factions last week. It sucks.”

“Factions? You mean fractions?”

“Yeah, fractions,” Hayush said, but this time his mouth was full, so it still came out sounding like “factions”.

It was little small talk, sometimes little rants, and it was enough for Hayush. It was liberation—he could be free to speak his mind, something he could rarely do with his mother, or under worry of humiliation at school. And best of all, Kevin bankrolled his lunch—his mother always thanked Kevin effusively, never forgetting to crack a joke about Hayush’s appetite.

“I’m going to have to lock the cabinets,” she said one day, ushering her child back into the apartment.

Kevin smiled and nodded in response, not really knowing how to reply.

“Thank you so much,” as she closed the door, a bit of her supermarket uniform getting caught, and she wrested it free.

She wasn’t wrong about Hayush’s appetite, though—he’d finished his burger faster than Kevin finished his, eyeing what was left of Kevin’s meal as it rested on the plate.

They’d ended the meal with vanilla shakes. They were out of strawberry at the moment, and Hayush was adamant that his favourite shake was nothing without the strawberry.

“Right, well,” Kevin started. “You’re going to head home?”

“I dunno.” He leaned into the table, already finished. “Mom’s still at work.”

“She told you to stay home, didn’t she.”

“You won’t tell her, right?”

Hayush had the feeling he didn’t need to ask, that Kevin wouldn’t say anything. He still did—an impulse to cover his bases.

Back at 680 Eben Street, Mr. Tills was still absent from his post, Scent Junior nowhere to be seen. Hayush was glad not to run into them; Tills was old and withered and scary, and Scent was just regular scary.

Kevin lived on the fourth floor. Hayush lived on the seventh. Why would Kevin have noticed how his eyes changed when the elevator doors closed? The smile became a frown just as quickly.

If Kevin had seen it, would he have noticed? Hayush wasn't old enough to recognize how distracted he was, how absentminded and departed he was, how his eyes stared at the walls, not really seeing, for his sight was in his mind. There was nothing more pertinent to him than the mystery of Joana, much of which had been solved by the long night.

This was Joana: a princess, living in some sort of feudal land, the only child of her father, Karl, or something like that, and they'd recently been in a war with a ridiculous sounding kingdom—he noted that Virland also sounded somewhat preposterous—and that the populace as a whole was unsure whether or not they wanted war again. Joana was a strange woman, a breathtaking woman. He wanted to know more, and he lied to himself about why.

He was surprised to notice the sound of reggae was still absent as he walked to his door. Did 402 finally succeed at his hopeless task? Regardless, he was surprised to find he was a little disappointed.

And when he stepped inside, the weight of the full lunch slowing his movement, he found himself unable even to look at the clutter on the counters or the jackets layered on the couch—he trudged on by, to the bedroom, where he could feel at least a little satisfied at the paltry work he'd gotten done earlier in the afternoon.

His sketchbook was tossed atop the nightstand, pencils scattered on top.

The clearest jolt of inspiration he'd ever had—nothing else could matter.

He was never very good at sketching people. The finer details were always lost. The bending of the joints would never be quite right, and the proportions would be just off-putting enough. But he tried, he really tried, to make her physical, to make her *real*.

But how could he? She was slipping away, the image of her wispy dress foggier by the second, and he hadn't committed her face to memory beyond recognition. He kept trying, however, certain that it would return to him, and with every attempt he more thoroughly deluded himself with the idea that he was getting closer.

His phone buzzed, still in the pocket of his jeans where he'd left it, stuck in the basket where he'd thrown the whole affair—he didn't notice, still trying, still trying.

By the beginning of the evening, he'd wasted enough paper to feel some justifiable shame. Still nothing was good enough. And though it might've been good practice, his work was actually getting worse over time, as his grasp of her features weakened.

It was already late. The sky was growing dimmer; soon he would be forced to open the lights to continue. He stood, stretching his limbs, feeling the stiffness that set in while he drew. He walked over to the bedroom window. A sight he'd seen a thousand times before—he'd see it thousands more. There, out in the distance, out and to the right, you could see Fazlullah Park. It had changed, or he had changed, for once he had to convince himself to join the rest of the world in living his life, and now he wanted to go.

He wondered if Joana would be there again. It wouldn't be so easy to coordinate. It wasn't as if she could simply knock at the door on a Sunday afternoon, or text him in a lazy evening. What if she wasn't there tonight? What if she'd never be there again?

This thought made him anxious, for if it were true—if those few hours were all he'd been granted—all those questions he hadn't asked would never be.

No, he thought to himself, just short of saying it aloud. If it comes to pass, it will. But it hasn't yet—what is the point of assuming it does?

He didn't wait before he left. He was gone before 402 even returned.

The city is a different beast with a goal in mind, especially when night has yet to fall, when the traffic is still prolific, with inattentive pedestrians nearly struck by hasty left-turns and middle-aged drivers still unaccustomed to the monitors in their vehicles. The people, a living entity on its own, transforms from an inert, placid beast into an enemy. They use up precious space on the street, wasting your time. There is almost hostility in how they behave, how spiteful their indolence seems to be. The city is nothing to be rejoiced, or enjoyed, for its interwoven streets and paths can only be seen for their unavoidable flaws.

He would've brought his sketchbook, but all that was on his mind was meeting her again, and then he could only think of how strange it'd be to ask permission to draw her. When he stepped off the path, again a little too early and getting momentarily lost in the trees, he realized there would be a long few hours before she showed—if she did at all. And what would he do?

He sat, feeling that still-warm wind sneaking into the meadow, the grass waving gracefully, calmly. Kevin closed his eyes.

He is forced to stand, then slowly, gently, his feet lift from the Earth. He rises, higher and higher, a dandelion's hair, taken away, blowing with the world's whims, and he is above the trees, reaching the clouds, looking out on the cityscape with something like pity, those fools trapped and bound to the ground, to their homes, to their jobs, to the cracks in the asphalt and their dull lives, and he is gone, beyond the horizon, transcending what he thought was all he had.

He opened his eyes. All that the breeze could move were the ends of his hair and his sleeves. The white shirt clung tightly to his chest and bared his bones for all to see—it pained him to look, so he scrunched his shirt and looked away.

“I do not understand.”

“Alright.” He sat up a little. “What about?”

“If I am to be candid—most of it. You sit in great towers, signing agreements and, talking through machines?”

“Yeah,” he said, searching through his pockets for his phone. “I don’t have one on me, but I’d show you if I could.”

“Might you explain the idea?” Her eyes lit up, so entranced by it.

“I can’t really,” he admitted, disliking how her eyes dimmed again. “I mean, I know it vaguely.”

“How vaguely?”

“Okay, so there’s a thing, an apparatus, I’d call it, and you hold it up to your ear—it’s pretty long, so the bottom comes to your mouth.”

“Then?”

“Well, you talk. And it goes through wires—sometimes waves—and on the other side the other person has a phone, and they hear what you say.”

“I see,” but she did not see. “But how does the sound travel so far? Would it not grow faint and inaudible?”

“The sound doesn’t actually go through the wires—electricity goes through. The sound is, I’m not sure—translated, somehow?”

“And electricity is a form of force, you said.” And again, it wasn’t enough of an answer. “But how does the machine do such a thing?”

Never more had Kevin regretted forgetting his phone.

“It is selfish of me to ask you so many questions, I suppose. You are clearly no engineer. This is meant to be conversation, not an interrogation.”

“No, it’s alright. It must be exciting for you.”

“It is! You live in such a fantastical world—such unimaginable luxuries and conveniences. And your life...” She hesitated. “It sounds so free.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can choose to go where you want. You can choose to be who you want. By way of education, any man has control over their ultimate destinies.” She tucked her knees into her chest, leaning her head on them. “I would love to live there.”

At this, he was puzzled.

“Aren’t you a princess? Wouldn’t you have more freedom than anyone?”

“You would think,” she scoffed. “And many do. And many are wrong.”

“Okay,” he said, and leaned back again. “How so?”

“I told you, my mother produced no more heirs,” and she waited for him to nod again. “By law of primogeniture, my father’s firstborn son succeeds him.”

“And he doesn’t have a son.”

Joana waited for a “therefore”; Kevin waited for her to affirm and continue. They sat there for a moment, each hesitating to break the sudden silence.

She unfurled herself, and continued: “I am the heiress to the Virian throne. And, as my father has said to me countless times, I have responsibilities—not simply privilege.”

“But you do have privilege,” he pointed out.

“Freedom is not one,” she replied.

“But then I don’t understand. Why can’t you just run away, if you hate it so much? If you hate your father so much?”

And Joana’s voice was stuck again, unable to admit that she didn’t hate her father to the length she proclaimed at any capacity, unwilling to expose the doubt in her interminable convictions.

“It is not so simple,” she said.

“But isn’t it?” And his thoughts were hijacked by optimistic fairy tales—few of which had the depressing message to accept the responsibilities you were never meant to refuse. He turned to her, true confidence in his answer: “You have to seize the life you want.”

She looked into his unwavering eyes—if they could feel each other’s presence, they would be aware of the closing distance between them, and perhaps their hairs would stand from the excitement.

Then she looked away, and: “I can’t.”

He didn’t know what to say after that, quickly aware that he might’ve crossed a line. He’d known her for two days—hardly qualification to be giving her life advice.

“I don’t really like my father, either,” he offered. “I can’t really hate him either.”

“How do you mean?” She was still looking at the grass, still thinking about his earlier words.

“Um, well...” he closed his eyes, having to convince himself to begin. “He was a blue-collar worker. Is. He is a blue-collar worker.”

“A what?”

“He did manual labour. Like, building houses—construction. He always came home tired and beat, and they never paid him enough for what he did. And he didn’t want me to have to live like that.”

“He sounds like a hard worker,” she said, thinking of all the common folk she’d seen who suffered in that capacity.

“He is. He’s still working, I think—Mom’s always mad about him working all the time. Sometimes,” and he laughed another uncomfortable laugh, “he sends me money—money I don’t even need. I guess he still thinks I’m his helpless kid.”

“I see,” she said, and this time she really did see; she really did understand what he meant to say.

“He always wanted me to go into business.”

“To start a business?”

“No, like the business sector.” He noticed her persisting confusion, and explained: “People study how to run businesses, like administration and finance—stuff like that.”

“Sounds horrible,” she said, thinking of her abstract studies and how much that already felt like a waste of time.

“I can still remember those stupid study books he made me do. He had a whole drawer full of them. Every time I finished one, he somehow had another. And another. And it just never ended. And always with the vaguest notion of it being ‘good for my future.’”

This, she could not relate to—but she could sympathize.

“You said we all get to control our destinies where I live? Not all of us.” Not me, he meant.

“You still have choices, however,” she said, trying to reassure him. “You still have options—you can still pursue what you want.”

And he recognized what she said for what he’d tried to tell himself, and again he thought the same: how could he pursue what he did not even know?

“Maybe,” he said. “And maybe you *could* run, maybe you *could* get away from all of it.”

Their eyes locked again, the most fleeting moment before she broke it.

“Maybe I could.”

Wanting to soothe the air, he asked a different question.

“What about your mom?”

“My mother? What of her?”

“You keep talking about your dad—how you live in his shadow. But you haven’t really told me about her.”

“As the queen,” she struggled to say, “she has far less power. And thus it is not her influence that stifles me. And she has not yet tried.”

She kicked her legs out, looking up at the moon—a different angle than Kevin would have to gaze.

“I love them,” she continued. “Do not take from my complaints that my sole feeling is contempt.”

“I didn’t.”

“Good,” she said. “Good.” She looked over at him, thinking he might’ve felt insulted—he was staring off into the distance.

She wanted to keep speaking—or to hear him keep speaking—but she wasn’t sure what to say. Little things came to her, but she was never sure if she should say them. And as the time stretched onward, it became even harder to begin again. Thankfully, he began for her.

“You know, I wasn’t sure I’d see you again. Tonight. Or any other night, really.”

“I almost did not come.” Then, hurriedly: “Not because I did not wish to see you.” Her fingers played with the tips of her hair, her eyes to the floor as she spoke. “Father held court for hours. It seemed as punishment.”

“Right, well.” He scratched his head. “Why do you have to be there?”

“I do not. That is my belief, at least—the vassals come to him for advice or permission. I am there, I suppose, simply because my father is the King, and thus I am automatically distinguished.”

“And you don’t get to do anything?”

“No,” she said, starting to feel a little self-conscious about her useless role in the court. “Even if I have anything to say, it is rarely my place to say it.” And there were many things she had wanted to say.

“Sounds like a waste of time.”

She giggled, unconsciously looking around to see if anyone overheard them (assuming that anybody else could hear him). His cheeks inflamed ever so slightly.

“At least you can say it. I cannot even begin to imagine the uproar if I dared to proclaim such a thing.”

“What could they do if you did? Imprison you?”

“Perhaps.”

He stared at her, his eyebrows furrowing—she looked away, and he could not see her smile.

“Really? That could happen to you?”

“Are you worried for my safety, Sir Kevin?”

“Obviously,” he said, realizing. “Unless you were joking.”

“I could be sincere. Maybe I am still waiting for someone to rescue me.”

“A knight in shining armour?”

“No,” she said. “I learned very early that those stories are embellished. Most landed knights I know are oafish and brutish—the knights-errant are worse.”

“I guess I’ll have to rescue you, then.”

His face was as stone, looking quite assured in his words. She could only laugh.

“How so? Will you frighten my suitors, perhaps, with your frightful gaze?”

“Could it work?” he asked, and raised an eyebrow.

“Such a courageous hero,” she said, smiling. “If only more men were like you.”

“I don’t know about that,” and a rosy tinge came to his cheeks, and reflexive insecurities swarmed his thoughts.

Another swift breeze flowed into the meadow, bathing him in its chill. Joana looked up to the stars that Kevin could not see, tracing the constellations she could remember. At times, the wind would push the shirt against his ribs, making him shiver, forcing him to mess with the fabric, making sure that she would not see it.

“Your clothing,” she started, trailing off as she tried to compose a question.

“What about it?”

“What... what is it?”

“Oh,” he said, relieved at her choice of topic. “It’s a T-shirt,” he said, holding the material out proudly.

“Teeshirt.” She tested the word out, just as she’d done for the other concepts he’d explained.

“Where I live, people don’t usually wear dresses, Princess.”

“Thank you for such enlightening information,” she snapped, almost immediately sorry. “I apologize,” she murmured.

“It’s alright—I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You did not offend me. I know you did not intend to patronize me, but I have been so frequently demeaned and discredited.”

“That’s a little hard to believe. You’re quite competent,” he offered.

“I know I am—others do not. It is as if they refuse to recognize my skill, as if it would be an affront if I were to be capable.”

“Because you’re a girl?”

“Because I am the Princess Joana, beloved maiden of Virland—it is all that I am to those who do not know me. Even to some who do,” she added.

“I get it.”

“Do you?”

“I spent four years studying for business administration. All I do at work is get papers signed. I didn’t need a degree to run errands.”

He sighed; she stared at the sprouting weeds.

“If only we could drink to our misfortunes,” she said.

“We could,” he replied. “I don’t know if it’s a good idea to get drunk out here, though. Or for you, in the… gardens?”

“It would not be too problematic for me; some time in the morning, someone will find me.”

“You didn’t even want to ‘dirty your dress’ yesterday—are you sure you’d want to sleep in the dirt?”

“No,” she admitted. “Oh, my hair would be so filthy; perhaps we should refrain from wine.”

“You like wine?”

“Of course. I do not adore it—not like Kat does—but I do enjoy it. Why, do you not?”

“Not really. Too… I’m not really sure. I can tolerate it,” he proclaimed.

“Then what is your favourite?”

“You tell me first.”

She hesitated, opening her mouth slightly, then thinking against it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “No judgements here.”

“Jenever,” she declared. “There. Be free to judge.”

“Jenever?”

“Especially when stored in maple—the taste is divine.”

He looked at her in confusion; she mistook it for doubt.

“You said you would not judge,” she chided. “Well then, say yours!”

“Right,” he said, even more confused by what she’d said. “I always order cider.”

“Cider,” she repeated.

“Yeah, cider. Hard or soft—I also love apple juice, so maybe I just like apples.” He neglected to speak in the past tense, knowing he hadn’t desired any drink in years.

“Cider is just wine,” she said. “Wine with apples.”

“Yeah—that makes it not wine.”

“Only in definition. You cannot claim that is distinction enough.”

“Of course I can. What else are definitions for? If we can just muddy the waters whenever we want, when is anything anything on its own? The more you blur the lines, the less justified any distinction becomes. Then you’ll order wine and mean cider—and you’ll be pissed you get wine.”

“I do not claim definitions are unimportant. Only that the definitions of wine and cider are pointlessly differentiated. It is with those examples I take issue, not the concept of definition in totality. And assuming I believe in what I say—which I do—if I order wine and receive cider, I would not care.”

“Others will. And that’s the point of language, isn’t it? You can’t expect everybody else not to care. The importance of definitions doesn’t rely on one opinion, no matter how important that princess might be.”

“You dare question the grandeur of my existence?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I dare.”

They couldn’t hold their chuckles in anymore—they needed to shake loose the humour (and the tension), Joana composing herself before speaking again.

“You speak in such an amusing fashion. ‘Yeah’,” she mocked. “So close to ‘yea’.”

“I’d sooner die than have to say ‘yea.’”

“Instead you say ‘yeah’, and make a fool of yourself.”

“Not here. Where I live, I’d be making a fool of myself otherwise.”

They were lying down now, Joana trying very hard to keep her precious hair away from the dirt, still failing—the white fabric of Kevin’s shirt would never lose its stains. She strained to turn her head to him, finding his face at the edge of her vision.

“Which one’s your favourite?” she asked.

“I guess I’ll go with ‘yeah’?” he replied, bemused.

“No,” she said through her giggles, assuming him to be joking still. “The constellations, you ninny.”

“Oh,” he said, and furled his brow. He stared up, beyond the tips of the trees, to the empty, washed-out sky, devoid of its lovely stars.

“What is wrong? Have you never learned them?”

Perhaps he could make out slight differences in the ceaseless void. But the only mark of the heavens was the moon, sneering down with its crescent body, hurtling through the emptiness, the only reminder of the world beyond.

“Where I live, I can’t see the stars.”

“What?”

“Maybe one or two, but it’d be more likely to see a plane—” He stopped himself, realizing she wouldn’t know what a plane was, or why it’d be mistaken for a star. “And no, I don’t know the constellations.”

“What do you see, then?”

“The moon. And darkness.”

“At least you have the moon! I could not imagine what horror would steal even that away.”

“Light pollution, I think.”

She was looking up at the sky—from where Kevin was laying down, he could not see how her eyes surged with curiosity.

“Please explain.”

And this time, he was prepared, having read a website about it recently. Thorough as his explanation was, however, it was ultimately futile—he was unprepared for how vague and philosophical her understanding of light was. To even reach the concept of light pollution would require the aid of countless websites: knowledge he did not have on hand.

“What a cruel phenomenon. To deprive even the joy of the stars from the bleakest of nights.”

“Yeah, well. At least you’re here.”

She scoffed.

“What?” he said.

“That may be the most romantic sentiment I have heard—wasted with such bilge for prose.”

“I’m not trying to be a poet.”

“Clearly,” she said. “‘Yeah’.”

“Okay, Robert Frost,” inwardly berating himself for his useless references, “how would you say it?”

She thought about it, and thought long enough that Kevin looked over to see if she was still awake, or even still there. She was lost in thought—he could see it—staring at the stars he could not see.

“I am ready,” she finally said. “Do not mock me.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“You absolutely promise?”

“‘Yea’.”

She mulled it over, finally closing her eyes to muster some amount of conviction.

“I needn’t the joy of the stars nor the wonder of the moon when the most wondrous sight of all lay by my side.”

“Wow,” he said, and she blushed. “But I don’t think anybody talks like that in real life.”

“I know,” she said. “And what a pity it is. Why can we not all revel in those fantasies and indulge ourselves in poetry? If those who have courted me even tried at it, they might have had a chance.”

“Do a lot of men try and court you?”

“Of course,” she said, and it came out in the tone one would use complaining about the weather. “They all desire my name—they have no patience for romance.”

“All of them?” She nodded, but he was still unconvinced. “Not a single one wanted to court you for you?”

“None of them even know me!” The vexation in her had overwritten her wariness. “I dare say you now know me more than most. Especially not...” And she trailed off, unwilling to discuss the Prince of Gahn with him.

“Not whom?”

“Nobody,” she said, a little too quickly—it did not dispel his worries. “Have you no suitresses of your own?”

“Nope,” he said, the bitterness at it having left him long ago.

“Really?” she asked, unable to believe it.

“I already said no. You don’t have to rub it in.”

“No, I did not mean to—” She stopped. “You are a kind man, is all I meant.”

“Kind isn’t enough, I guess.”

She didn’t know what else to say, feeling a little guilty for the useless platitudes she’d already said. Likewise, he was guilty—he didn’t want to make her feel bad for offering her sympathies.

“I wish I could be there,” he struggled to say. The struggle to break the silence, while daunting, was eclipsed by the courage to discuss his innermost desires. “With you.”

“Why?” she asked, unconsciously wanting a specific answer.

“I don’t really like this. Where I live. What I do.” He turned to her, shifting his body so he could fully face her. “And you talk about your life, and I just wish that I could be there. Not to court you, or anything like that. I just... I don’t know. I don’t know.”

She was struck by his sudden candor. It seemed he’d spoken the summation of his anxieties.

“It is the Prince of Gahn,” she blurted out. “He is my latest suitor.”

“Oh.”

“And it seems he is one I will not be able to escape.”

“Oh.”

“I do not wish to marry him. He knows me least of all—he has never seen me, nor I him. But my father wishes it, for the purpose of peace, and so I have no choice at all but to accept.”

“Oh.”

“It is my ‘responsibility’. I do not want these responsibilities. I have never wanted them. And so I hear of your life, how you are indebted to no one and nothing, and I want to be there.”

The two faced each other, now with a fuller picture of the one before them.

“Take me with you,” she said. “Take me away.”

“You first.”

She turned away again, on her back, staring out to space with her face ablaze, the weight of what she’d said finally reaching her. He laughed another nervous laugh, a self-conscious half-smile adorning his face, turning away from her.

“Sir Kevin Umhoen,” she said. “I’d have my father knight you immediately. Would that satisfy you?”

He hummed approvingly.

“I get a castle, right? And servants? And a squire to do whatever I want him to do?”

“I believe so. The latter two will be simple—the land is a different matter.”

“Sounds like paradise,” he said. “I live in a tiny apartment. There’s barely enough room in my bedroom—my chambers—to stand.”

“My chambers have enough space to dance,” she said, a little embarrassed.

“I’d probably break a wall trying that.”

“You are that strong?” Joana asked, incredulous, having never known a wall as weak as drywall.

“What? I think most people could break drywall. My mom did, once.”

He turned, once more seeing her look of bewilderment, realizing yet another thing he’d have to explain—sloppily, no doubt.

They talked for long, long hours. Not once more did they delve into those darkest of secrets their hearts held dear; they’d dabbled in it, and found it far too bleak for the discourse. But the seal was broken—the box was open—their souls had tasted kinship and would long for it, in time.

The nature of Virland's adoration for Joana was contrived and contradictory. As the sole daughter of Charles Virsom, all knew she had influence and power. Those who spoke to her could glean at least some modicum of intelligence and capability. Yet she was rarely treated as more than a little girl—a girl born into power most believed she could not handle.

When Joana was kind, they believed her weak; when she was angry and vengeful, they believed her irrational. The search for flaws in another's character can be endless, and many searched for hers, even if unconsciously.

Miriam's heart bled for Joana, in the slightest degree. For she, too, had been underestimated, and condescended to, and patronized, and ignored in favour of her witless brother. Yet Miriam also held within her also the same condescension for Joana, supported by a tinge of envy. After all, Joana could still be something; what could Miriam still amount to?

In their days of youth, Charles and Maximilian knew no temperance. At night, they feasted heartily, in the day paying their dues by sparring, dueling, and embarking on reckless, frenetic quests through the city.

Charles was twelve, his brother ten, and Lord Vitali had travelled all the way from Eastmince. Steven Vitali was so assured of his importance, so vain and paranoid, that he ordered the streets cleared of "the filth" as his carriage passed through. The roads of Cronwacht were empty, dust blowing in the place of full crowds and resting vagabonds, all so Lord Vitali could bumble by in peace.

Manfred's days were full with petty meetings and nonsense altercations. He was not lenient enough to let all the rabble in—but he could not ignore the wealthier of the public. And unlike Alice Lai, his patience was extremely limited; especially unlike Alice Lai, he dealt with his rowdy children by appeasement.

"What do you want?" Manfred groaned, his audience waiting restlessly for his return, anticipating the work that was coming with Steven Vitali.

"Fifty pence," said Charles.

"Why! Why would you want—or require—fifty pence?"

"Please?" asked Maximilian, trying to make himself seem cuter, overlooking both that he was no longer cute enough and that his father was the wrong audience.

"Yes! Now go, you runts—find Lord Contell and you can have your fucking pence."

"Thank you, father!" the two chanted, just out of unison—Manfred's head pounded hearing them, and he shoed them off.

They found Lord Contell in the training fields, trying to teach his son how to hold a sword. Little Connor was only four, furthermore the stupidest four-year-old boy anyone in the court had ever known. Jacob Contell's hands were shaking with frustration each time Connor dropped his sword—each and every time, the boy managed to drop the wooden replica on his foot.

"Max," whispered Charles to his brother. "Ask him."

“Me? Why me?” Maximilian whined.

Charles flicked his brother’s ear.

“No complaints, Max. Go!”

The littler Virsom was loath to follow his brother’s commands. They’d come up with the plan together, after all—they were supposed to be partners. And Charles was only two years older—hardly enough justification for his attitude.

It wouldn’t have mattered if Charles was a minute older, a second older—he’d still be ordering little Max around.

Miriam watched all of this with curiosity. She was hiding there, watching over Connor—she worried the boy could hurt himself, even with wooden swords. She’d wanted to practice too, planning to convince her father after Connor’s cries annoyed him enough, but now something else had presented itself—himself.

“Your Highness,” she said, with a perfect curtsy.

“Lady Contell?” he asked, stuttering. Of all the things in his plan, she was certainly not one.

“You look handsome today, Charles,” as she grasped his hand.

“Lord Virsom,” he corrected her, his voice still a little shaky, as he took his hand away and shifted uneasily. Miriam always scared him. Especially then—she was an early bloomer, a head taller than him, and she never relented in that frightening politeness.

“Of course, Lord Virsom,” she said, silently cursing herself for overstepping. “Forgive me.”

“A-all is forgiven,” he said, a little relieved at her words. “These are the practice fields, Lady Contell; what are you doing here?”

She smiled, and feigned hyperbolic annoyance. “My blundering little brother. Mother worries Jacob might hurt him. If you ask me, they fret too much over him.”

Charles’s eyes wandered over to Maximilian, who’d greeted the Lords Contell and seemed to be failing at his task. He watched as Connor struck Max’s behind with the wooden sword, squealing and running when Max lost his temper and tried at vengeance. He watched Jacob laugh heartily, cursing his brother’s unreliability, wishing he’d dealt with Jacob himself.

“So, Charles.”

“Yes?” he asked, so nervous he didn’t even notice she’d used his name.

“Lord Vitali is coming. The King will indubitably have much to attend to—so will my father.”

“What are you saying?” he asked, now fearing she might’ve somehow sniffed out their plan.

Miriam tried her hardest to hold back her escalating exasperation.

“What I am saying,” she said, advancing on him like a stalking predator, “is that for the coming hours,” and Charles gulped, eyes searching for an out, “we will be free to pursue what we wish.”

In the corner of his eye, he saw Jacob ruffle Maximilian’s hair, sending him away with a single crown.

“Charles!” said Max. “I’ve got it!”

“Good,” Charles said, his face as red as an apple. “Fare t-thee well, Lady Contell.”

“Fare thee well, Miriam!” said Max, who, far from his brother, adored Miriam from the moment the boy’d lain eyes on her.

“Fare thee well, Charles.”

The two brothers left, Max as reluctant as Charles was adamant to leave.

Miriam pursed her lips, wondering if she’d gone too far. She heard Jacob call her name and frowned, feeling she’d failed at both goals.

“I worried for Connor,” was the last Charles heard.

Charles walked, nearing a jog, until the fields themselves could no longer be seen. Max was lagging far behind, out of breath, sputtering questions.

“Why did you not stop,” Max gasped out, “and why was your face so red?”

“Shut it,” said Charles. “We have the crown. Next?”

“Meet Richard Butcher. Charles, we planned this together—you do not have to keep testing me!”

Charles was still flustered and unwilling to admit any more weakness. He walked off to the evacuated city streets, keeping out of sight from the presiding soldiers.

Richard Butcher was no man of importance and certainly no lord. He was not rich, either—true to his surname, he made a living selling fresh meat in the city’s markets. But competition was getting stronger as the population regained its strength, and Richard’s children were still growing boys.

“Do you have what we need?” asked Charles, holding his nose.

Maximilian stayed outside. When first he stepped into Richard’s home, the smell of chicken-shit made him vomit—luckily for Richard, Max held it long enough to retreat outside, away from his wares.

“Yes, thy Highness. Would’ye like for me t’bring the cages out for’ye?”

“Do you think you might have a wagon?”

An hour passed, Charles and Max anxiously waiting, knowing Steven Vitali would soon be upon them. They could barely contain their excitement and their impatience, as Richard laid cage upon cage of chickens upon the wagon.

“Here’ye’re, Lords,” Richard said, his voice mumbling closer together in his exhaustion.

Charles nodded to Max; Max held out the crown.

“Thank’ye, Lords Virsom,” the butcher said, eyes wide at seeing the coin. “Truly generous, ye’re, truly.”

His gratitude continued as the boys tried to push the wagon, slowly seeing its wheels move, and even as Richard disappeared through his door they could hear him offering his thanks.

“Come on, Max,” said Charles, believing his brother was contributing nothing.

“I am trying!” pleaded Maximilian, putting every bit of strength he had into it.

All the while, the chickens squawked and jumped in their shaking cages, making quite a ruckus. The two boys pushed, working as they’d never worked before, each brother as useless as the other.

Steven Vitali was complaining to his wife in their carriage about the smell of the Virian capital, about the duration of their travel, about the poorly-kept roads that made the carriage rock, about his queasy stomach. At some point, Lady Vitali drifted off to sleep, the monotone voice of her husband’s complaints too difficult to bear either sober or conscious.

“Halt!” shouted Sir Brennan. The whole affair came to a grinding stop, terrifying Lord and Lady Vitali.

“What is happening? Why have we stopped?” shouted Steven, when the shock of it had worn off.

“I hear something,” said Sir Brennan to his men. “Be ready.”

But Lord Steven was not patient enough to wait. They were at the very end of their journey—surely they were safe in the capital? He stormed up to the front of the convoy, his long robes catching the dirt and dust of the ground as it billowed over the road.

“Lord Vitali,” was all the knight could say.

“Do you claim the authority to control my movement? Hm? Do not forget your place, Sir Brennan. You were knighted on my good will and if you do not—”

Then Steven heard it, too, and he turned around with just little enough time that he could not scream.

“Now! Now, Max!” screamed Charles, and Max pulled the string, opening the doors to the cages. As he did, his sprinting legs lost their balance, and he tumbled down the hill. Charles fell too, but the

wagon had built so much momentum it could not be stopped. It flew towards Sir Brennan and Lord Vitali, narrowly missing them and crashing into a stone wall.

But that was not the end—a hundred starving and terrified chickens poured out of the disaster and assaulted the soldiers, chasing the bright, vibrant colours of Lord Vitali's robe.

“Cut them down, men! Cut them down!” shouted Sir Brennan, before the scattering fowl was too much for him to care, and he fled away from the horde of beasts, two of the birds nipping at his heels.

They found Sir Brennan and his guard cowering inside a storage building. Their swords bloodied—some missing—they ran, skin broken and leather split by the ambush.

And they didn't find Lord Vitali so much as run into him; long after the remaining chickens had been found and re-caged, Vitali collided with a guard when turning a corner.

That night, the feast served chicken—lots of chicken, for Manfred wanted to show his sons the consequences of their actions. They did not learn much; they happily ate, flicking skins at each other, missing Steven Vitali's glare and Miriam Contell's stare.

Charles had never intrigued her more than that day—her mind drifted easily to imagined futures, where, with their minds combined, they could rule Virsom as easily as cutting cake. It was then that she saw it: a path to glory and power. Indeed, the Duchy of Northfrie had been taken from her, but now something greater had presented itself—something grander.

And they were perfect for each other, were they not? She saw how he blushed in her presence—winning his heart would be the simplest challenge of her life.

And just like Northfrie, Charles would be taken from her. And she would again be second place in a land where only the first matters. It would be cruel to say she did not love Maximilian, but even Max could notice the cold that his wife would sporadically bear.

At the edge of her mind danced conspiracies and violence. Some nights she would stew in her bitterness, another reason for insomnia, and she would indulge in bloody fantasies. For Max was second for the throne—a single act could give her victory.

Once Joana was born, Miriam's hopes were dashed. Even if Charles died, his daughter would take his place. She considered convincing the Lords that a daughter would be an unfitting successor, but a slight sense of hypocrisy struck it from her thoughts.

Joana never even wanted her role—how utterly tragic for both women.

Perhaps that is why Joana spent so long speaking with Kevin, far into the night, speaking with a man so far removed from her life. That night, it was Kevin's time to usher her to bed; Joana stumbled through the hallways, so exhausted that she could not keep her head upright. She didn't even see Miriam this time, who remained silent, watching the deadened princess shuffling to her chambers.

And in her debilitating fatigue and prostration atop her bed, she more resembled Kevin—hair tussled and dirty, slips of grass on her evening dress, splayed out on the covers and asleep before her head fell.

Joana was always early to rise. And in those hours before the world had woken, she would find either peace or boredom—regardless, it was a helpful moment of contemplation to prepare for whatever awaited ahead. Yesterday morning, she still woke early enough to spend a calm minute alone. But she could borrow no more time.

Katherine opened the door. She'd been looking for Joana all morning, and had exhausted every possibility but her chambers. It was quite a surprise to see she actually was still in bed—Kat figured she might have to go searching through the city for her. She looked so peaceful, snoring loudly, not having heard Kat open her door.

“Joana,” she tried. “Joana?”

Kat considered letting her sleep. The morning meal was over—whatever remained probably didn't remain for long. And what did the duel matter? Two balding, aged men far past their prime swinging swords at each other like children, and two less-balding men before them. Kat knew Joana wouldn't mind missing it; she also knew Charles would be incensed.

“Joana! My dear, you must wake.”

Her eyelids fluttered just enough that Kat thought it worked—but they settled, some beastly groan coming from her, and she laid there, still asleep. Again Kat shook her, and this time Joana groaned more audibly, clearly cognizant, clearly unwilling to relinquish her comfort.

“Let me be,” she bemoaned.

“No,” Kat declared. “You are no child. Rise, girl.”

Joana weakly shushed her, curling further into herself, until it sunk in that Kat was not leaving without her.

“My, Joana,” Kat said as the princess rolled over, gingerly pressing feet to the floor. “You are absolutely filthy.”

“I know.”

“Might I know why?”

“No.”

“Well,” Kat continued, “you must bathe before we go. Were you to show up like that, I think your mother might faint.”

“Wait, Kat,” she replied, rubbing her eyes, still trying to rouse the rest of herself. “Where to?”

“Oh, poor girl.” Kat sat beside her, observing the princess for signs of sickness. “What were you doing yesternight? Are you well?”

“I was doing nothing! Nothing. Now, tell me where I have been summoned.”

“The duel,” Katherine sighed. “I reminded you yesterday, after court.”

“Lords Emmett and Richter? They are here?”

“Where else to duel but Cronwacht? They are as primping birds. This duel may be their last chance to boast—the fools know not failure.”

“Idiots,” Joana said, trying to stifle a yawn. “They must be fifty, now.”

“Lord Emmett is sixty-one. Lord Richter is fifty-eight. The former was at the morning meal—the one you decided to sleep through. As he walked you could hear the creaking and moaning of his tortured bones.”

“I did not decide to sleep so long.”

“You did decide to sleep so late.”

“I slept as I do—no earlier, no later.”

Kat didn’t bother contradicting her. Joana could rarely lie successfully to her, the second woman to have known her through her whole life. There were few secrets Joana kept from Katherine, but Kevin immediately became one; it bothered Joana that she didn’t know why.

She bathed quickly, the two hustling onwards to the arena. Most had already left—king and queen included. Kat had been looking for nearly an hour before she thought of Joana’s bedroom. It seemed impossible that she might still be there; what reason could there be that she’d still be asleep?

“Thank you, Sir Brennan,” said Katherine to the old knight.

Sir Brennan’s armour was more impressive than he was. Years ago, he was distinguished for his skill in combat; now, he tried his hardest to conceal the aching in his knees. And though Joana felt sorry for him, she also felt impatient—they might already be late, and Brennan’s abysmal pace did not help.

The palace at Cronwacht was far from the arena. For most of the journey, the roads were clear. As they drew closer, the reason why became apparent—the people were clamoring and clustering, each hoping to push their way past the walls and see the duels for themselves.

The arena at Cronwacht was a grand structure: great stone walls that held rows of seats at its edges, and at the centre flat fields of grass, perfect for the contests held within. It was built centuries ago and dedicated to all the people of Virland; the people never forgot that part, and so the arena was used by nobility as much as the public.

But public affairs were often prohibited by shame and doubt. Sometimes drunks would hold their own tournaments, engaging in idiotic horseplay—they’d be arrested for “desecration of a monument”, which was really the most severe law the guards could use. So for the most part, knights and nobles used the arena to host their own competitions, disallowed by their ancestors to exclude the common folk.

Not that the competitors wanted anything different. There was no better feeling than victory in the arena, to celebrate your victory not only with your own pride but the cheering of the masses. And how they did cheer! They screamed in delight as swords grazed leather, in horror as they drew blood, and in rhapsodies of admiration as they fell in forfeit. To the nobles, in their thrones of stone, the crowds of commoners were a blight; to the fighters, there was no greater audience.

Regardless of Joana's feelings on the matter, the truth there and then was that the crowd was in her way—there were two entrances to the cavity of the arena, and both were congested with humanity.

And before Joana could stop her, Sir Brennan bellowed: "Make way for Her Highness!"

"And Lady Vitali," Kat whispered, but Joana was in no mood for humour.

The common folk did not follow his command. As a group, they had just enough sense not to rush the princess, instead crowding around them and more effectively preventing their passage. Their adored princess was here—the Dove of Virland—and the attention she commanded was no surprise.

Fatigue gnawing at her mind, exhaustion dragging at her limbs, tugging her eyelids over the pupils, with the red veins cutting through the white and a yawn fighting to tear through her trachea—she fought off the claws of enervation in order to paint the smile back across her lips. With graceful steps she walked, the folk before her parting, wanting so much to speak with Her Highness yet fearful of her. They were hesitant to approach the royal blood, feeling that formless barrier that hangs heavy in all men's minds.

But Joana knew there was no good in snubbing the people. There was little reason to disdain them, but more than that: respect must be earned, or else it will exact its price. So she smiled, breathing life into the illusion they so desperately wanted to believe in, and the sea parted for its beloved (and her two friends).

At the clanging of steel she winced, for it meant the duels had already begun. Likely Charles was impatient and unwilling to part with his work for long. Her tardiness might already have been spinning rumours in the others' minds.

Their arrival through the gates was concealed by a surge of gasps from the crowd—Sir Brennan could not stop his excitement and ran off to see what had happened, leaving Joana and Kat to find their families.

It was more than easy for Joana to find the King and Queen. The regal seats lay in wait just below a tapestry of Samuel Virsom—the stony bench adomed with blazing red and purple fabric both to cement its importance and soften the experience. The rest of the nobles, if not forgetful, brought their own coverings—those commonfolk lucky enough or powerful enough to gain a seat rarely had anything to protect their bones.

Cassandra saw her immediately, but chose to stay silent, only gesturing very slightly with her hand as Joana looked at them. Charles was nearly asleep, chin resting on one palm, the other rising and waving reflexively as the crowd cheered and swooned.

Unlike the crowd outside, the spectators could actually see the action, and so at first they failed to recognize their princess. Joana hated to rely on her status, but here she had little option.

“Part for your princess!” she shouted, so tired and desperate to rest a while. They nearly leapt aside in response—those who could hear her, at least. The rest simply moved as their neighbours did. The mass opened before Joana and closed behind her, a strange phenomenon that followed her brisk pace.

“Your Highness,” said each lord and lady she passed. Many of the lesser nobles stood and bowed—thinking to be respectful yet only impeding her pace. She smiled and nodded, waiting for the obstacles to be seated again. The seats closer to Charles were filled more with familiar faces: people who recognized that look upon her face and did not stand. Miriam gave her a knowing smile, assuming Joana had noticed her the night prior—Joana had not and did not know what to make of it.

“I see you have finally woken, Joana,” said Cassandra, standing to embrace her daughter.

A surge of cheering from the crowd—the duelists were causing a stir with their skill.

“Do you feel well? Are you alright? It is unlike you to wake so late—are you sick?”

“I am alright,” and Joana withheld her protest.

The two separated. Cassandra sat, intending for Charles to greet his child—but the man had crossed into unconsciousness, his snoring fortunately drowned out by the commotion.

“Charles, love.”

The man shook a little, his hand coming up in a weak, celebratory gesture.

“Charles...” she said, getting a little impatient.

Joana stood there, unsure of what to do—the cloudiness of her mind did little to help.

“It’s fine, Mother,” she eventually said. “He must be tired.”

She sat, and as she did Cassandra continued to dote on her.

“Are you absolutely sure you are well? Your eyes, Joana—look at those dark circles!”

“Yes!” she snapped, swatting her hand away. “Worry for father.”

Cassandra sighed. Now she was stuck between two children—now she desired the end of these duels more than Charles.

“Feeling sluggish, Sir Eberhart? It is nigh time for forfeit—feel no shame in it!”

James Vitali, Edward Meering, many of the other younger nobles, and the commonfolk (most of whom simply following) laughed in response. Joana rubbed her eyes. When they cleared, she could see them below, dressed in their doublets, longswords in hand. Only one did she recognize.

The man she did not recognize was the supposed Sir Eberhart. He towered over his opponent by at least a head, or so it seemed from her elevated seat. Joana would later learn this man was head of the guard for the Contells—she would also hear rumours of his surprising unassertiveness, the lack of pride that saw him duelling Connor Contell.

It was easy to recognize Connor. One of the many things that infuriated Jacob about his precious boy was Connor's hairstyle. The boy loved to wear his hair down to his waist—he also was not quite diligent about his hygiene, so Jacob had two reasons to detest his son's hair.

Few in the audience had actually faced combat. None had known real warfare; only in the books could you find such violence and intensity. Whether they longed for it to return or prayed blood would remain unspilt, the image of war in their minds was always thoroughly inauthentic. So the commonfolk, of whom none remained that survived the war, had never faced conscription. And any street brawl could never compare to the swinging of swords: how the steel cuts the wind, how fast their feet move, and the blows come so close to connection that it makes one flinch.

They were amazed by this display—fathers would go home and explain to their sons what they could not possibly explain properly—the vain would indulge in the attention from their unfortunate friends left outside the arena.

In those seats of nobility, the sentiment was the same among the ladies. The lords, however, were all given at least some semblance of martial training—combined with a natural distaste for the Contell heir, they were quick to judgement.

“Look at his footwork, the fool,” they would chuckle.

“Flouncing around like a proper princess,” one would whisper.

“No doubt Her Highness Joana could beat that little girl,” Joana overheard, and she was unsure whether to feel offended or amused.

Not even Charles was immune to the allure of ridiculing the Contell boy.

“Look at him,” he said when he was finally awake. “Just look at him! Embarrassing his father for all of Cronwacht to see—and that awful hair!”

Joana had received no such martial training, and it really was a revelation that Connor's fancy prancing was not in fact an effective combat maneuver. She wanted to hear more, but Cassandra put a quick end to the King's rambling.

“Quiet, my dear. You have all the evening to complain. Do you really wish the others to hear such words from their King?”

“I do not care,” he said, but clearly he did, because he stopped.

Oh, and if you could hear Miriam's thoughts! She was getting angrier by the second, watching her stupid brother hopping and bouncing as if he really had a chance against Sir Eberhart. But of course he did, he had more than a chance—Sir Eberhart would never dare to embarrass his lord.

To the commoners, Eberhart's lack of offence clearly meant he was losing. If he was a capable fighter, why was he not attacking in any capacity? He seemed at his wits end, always backing away, parrying, blocking, never striking.

To the jeering nobles, it was obvious Eberhart was leagues ahead of Connor. Never once could Connor's blows do anything to unbalance him. And there were dozens of times Connor left himself open to be disarmed, grappled, tripped. At one point Miriam had to look away—her brother swung so violently that he leaned far forward, leaving his head open to be severed from his shoulders. If you looked close enough, down to the tendons in Eberhart's arms, you could see how he stopped himself from seizing these opportunities.

Thirty seconds elapsed—Eberhart released his grip, as ordered. His sword flew out of his hands, but Connor lost his balance; his blade went plunging towards Eberhart's chest. The knight swiftly dodged, and his instincts took over: his left hand clutched the grip of Connor's sword, his right hand controlling Connor's elbow. He pushed the heir away and knelt in surrender.

Connor steadied himself, looking back for where Eberhart was; he saw that he'd won, and was beside himself with glee.

"I did it! I did it, Father!"

The crowd cheered for their victor (some booing at Eberhart's shameful performance). The heir strode over and offered his hand to the knight. Eberhart stood, and hand in hand they received the applause of the audience. Charles applauded as well, but he did so genuinely—for Eberhart's evasion, of course.

Joana stood and clapped, but she was in no condition to appreciate the fight. The harsh sunlight, the obnoxiously loud audience, and the uncomfortable seats all worked in tandem to make her feel sick. She excused herself, knowing there would be time until the next duel, making her way down to one of the ancient hallways.

The arena at Cronwacht has a great outer wall, and if you'd never been inside you might wonder why it was such a marvel. How hard could it be to build a circular wall? But there were rows upon rows of seats carved from stone and stairways running all around. Most impressive was the space within the massive wall itself; there were rooms and halls and hidden corners. Common folk rarely noticed these hideaways, not that they'd be allowed in.

Joana did not appreciate these ancient passageways as much as her father did. They stunk, really; they had an awful odour, the smell of decay and antiquity and lifelessness. But it was a good place to be alone. The halls ran so far, and who else would be inside with the duels going on?

She wondered if Kevin would appreciate this display of barbarism. He lived in such a better, more civilized world. And he certainly wouldn't have an obligation to watch because of his name!

The dim halls calmed her—it reminded her of the garden at night, despite the scent. It was good to be alone, and the laughing of the audience faded enough to resemble silence. She wondered if Kevin knew how to fight, if he'd ever learned how to kill. She imagined, in his world, there'd be no need for death and violence. If they could have peace in Joana's lands, they could certainly have peace where Kevin lived.

And then, a voice: “He must concede. One of them will!” It rang down the hall, and Joana could not defeat her compelling curiosity.

She drew closer, and: “I have tried everything! He will not listen. They are determined to kill themselves.”

Closer still, and: “They will be fine, Isabella.”

And Joana regretted walking further, for she came upon the lady Isabella Richter and the lord Henry Emmett in a passionate embrace—from the corner of her eye Isabella noticed Joana, and hastily separated from him.

“Your Highness!” she squeaked, red in the face.

Henry grimaced, turned to her, bowed, and turned away in shame. “Your Highness...”

“I apologize,” Joana said, fighting a yawn. “I did not mean to intrude.”

“There was nothing to intrude upon!” Isabella responded. “Nothing at all.”

“Yes,” was all Henry could get out.

“There is no need to lie to me,” said Joana. “I care not for your dalliance. And, so you know, I also disapprove of your fathers’ idiocy. They are too old for this nonsense.”

“Yes!” Isabella said. “At last another agrees! All my family completely supports my father’s ridiculous goal. He cannot even breathe properly—how can he fight?”

“Father damaged his knee a year ago,” added Henry. “They are cripples. They will either die or make fools of themselves should they continue with this absurdity.”

“So utterly witless! There are more important things than a silly vengeance. How do they even remember their animosity?” continued Isabella.

“It must be the only thing on their minds. Father cannot even finish a meal without complaining about Lord Richter.”

“*They* might be the ones in love,” said Isabella, and she realized exactly what she admitted—Henry noticed soon after and the rant was over.

“Worry not about speaking your mind,” Joana said. “I wish...” and she stopped herself from saying more.

The two nodded, puzzled yet comforted by her words. Henry stammered out something about needing to leave—Isabella agreed and they left together.

Joana remained, pondering what she'd just seen. A surge of cheering reached her: the second duel had begun. Likely Mother was worried; Father was probably sleeping. She'd been absent far too long. The princess's empty seat would surely be noticed, especially after she'd finally shown up.

But did she want to return? Surely she could slip away easily, what with Cronwacht's populace concentrated on the duels. She brushed some collecting dust off her dress, still thinking whether to return to the seats.

"How are you, dear Joana?"

Miriam's voice was unnaturally warm—her voice echoed and released Joana from her daze.

"Lady Virsom—Miriam? Why are you here?" she asked, and the tiredness in her voice sounded more like enmity.

Miriam sighed, exaggerating it slightly, having heard the tail-end of their conversation.

"Their brutish act does not excite me," she said. It was a lie; she loved to watch knights train and spar.

"You as well?"

Miriam smiled, walking over to her.

"It seems so few of us truly approve of this ridiculous spectacle," Joana said. "You know them, do you not?"

"Not too well," said Miriam, who saw how guarded Joana still was. "I remember when I first saw their feud. It was the day the King met his Queen, actually."

"You were there?" Joana asked, now interested—she'd only heard of that party in passing.

"Yes, I was there," Miriam said, knowing why she remembered it so vividly. "Your father was so handsome." She laughed softly. "Lady Vitali fixed his hair. Your father hated it—I thought it looked wonderful on him."

"Katherine? Katherine groomed Father's hair?"

"No, not Katherine—her mother."

"Of course," Joana said, suddenly embarrassed. Katherine would have been something like twelve; how could she be trusted with the Prince's hair?

"Now," Miriam said, trying her best to summon a motherly tone. "Why are you here, alone? What worries you, girl?"

"I do not know if I should say..."

Miriam held out her arms—the shoulders of her dress made it a little difficult—and suppressed her frustration.

“Look around, Your Highness. Who else to tell? Keeping your anxieties within will not help you.”

“I,” Joana said, and stopped herself. “Well,” she continued, and hesitated again.

“Come now, girl—what have you to lose?”

This last argument persuaded Joana—there was so much to say that she hadn’t ever said, and Miriam really was correct about one thing: she needed to confess her discontentment before it consumed her.

“I am to be married,” she said, and it was all she got out before the audience’s cheers surged, louder now, the loudest she’d ever heard. Another sigh, and then: “I should return.”

“I suppose we should,” said Miriam.

The princess was to be married; if anyone was to know it, it would’ve been her. Yet she hadn’t; something was amiss. And if something was amiss, this littlest sliver of information could be the key to all of it.

“Joana, dear, if the question bothers you not—does this marriage have to do with your nightly troubles?”

“I seem to recall you roaming the palace at night, Miriam. Yet you are so quick to judge?”

“It was a harmless ask.”

“Yes,” Joana said, wincing at the growing sound of the crowd and her own hasty indignation. “It was.”

“You are correct,” Miriam said. “I spend the nights wide awake. I always have. But you do not. That is why I asked.”

Joana was silent in response. Miriam was right—but would she believe her? That a ghostly man lived there? Did she want to explain? Then that man in the gardens would be her secret no longer. And another sanctuary so sacred to her heart would be taken away.

“I see,” Miriam concluded. “I will strike it from my thoughts.”

“I appreciate that, Miriam.”

The light streamed brighter and brighter, the crowd growing similarly louder. They stopped just at the edge of the shadow, at the very end of the hall.

“Are you ready to rejoin this travesty of chivalry?”

“No,” Joana grumbled, and pushed onward.

Traditionally, tournaments held at Cronwacht would end with a climactic melee. Ten of the King’s greatest guard competed against ten unaffiliated knights—sometimes wealthy and ambitious mercenaries, sometimes other confident nobles. The King’s guard almost always won. They had no choice but to win; a loss in the arena would see the Virland’s faith in them crumble like dry earth.

There would be no melee that day. Such an impressive event would detract from the greatness of Emmett and Richter’s duel. It wasn’t even that either truly wanted so grand an audience. To admit otherwise would be the same as expressing fear. Defeat was not an option. It could not even be allowed to approach on the horizon.

Half the crowd chanted the Richter name—the other half, the other. Very few of them were actually so fiercely loyal to the two families, but it was the spirit of the affair! You could feel the intensity in the air. Lord Emmett and Richter were such legendary fighters in their prime, from legendary families at that. The commonfolk could barely wait for it to begin.

Charles could barely wait, either, if only because he could barely wait for it to end. Cassandra, beside him, was unsure to be excited or worried. And despite what she’d heard of the two and her overall disinterest, Joana could not fight her own curiosity.

Finally, the two approached the field, clad in fantastic, glossy armour adomed with their respective sigils.

“Richter,” shouted Lord Emmett, uncaring about the etiquette of the tournament.

“Emmett,” Richter tried to shout, his chest already heaving under his breastplate.

“I am surprised you managed the courage to show, coward!”

“Courage is such a foreign concept to you, is it not!”

“Lords!”

Charles’s voice silenced them—the crowd hushed at the sound of their King.

“There will be honour on the field today. Honour and chivalry. Prepare yourselves!”

The duelists were six paces from each other—at his command, they turned to face each other, longsword raised. Miriam noticed Lord Emmett’s weight was balanced heavily on his right foot—she noticed how Lord Richter breathed too heavily.

The King raised his hand. The crowd watched. The duelists exhaled—inhaled—exhaled.

“Begin!”

The crowd exploded into cheers and roars, expecting frenzied combat from the two just as Sir Eberhart and Lord Contell had done.

But the lords did not strike. They circled, swords pointed at each other, years of training easily apparent in their graceful movements. The sound of the audience quickly dwindled, but the energy of the arena did not dissipate. Joana was transfixed, watching feet dance across the sand, the combatants barely blinking in their incredible focus.

Five seconds, ten seconds, fifteen seconds—why did they refuse to attack! The anticipation built, the lords still pacing and twenty, twenty-five, twenty-seven!

Richter coughed—Emmett lunged. The blade flew toward Richter's neck, who brought his sword up just in time. Richter's blade followed forward, catching on Emmett's rising cross-guard. The weapons swung in an arc—Emmett pulled his sword up, forcing Richter backward. Richter caught himself and immediately thrust forward; Emmett parried to his left and seized Richter's wrist with his right hand. The maneuver forced Richter to kick at Emmett's knee—his damaged knee, but Richter didn't know. The duelists separated, Emmett's face contorting in pain, Richter's lungs on fire.

All in six seconds.

Even in their sixties, the fighters were incredible to watch. It seemed as if the strength never left them. The audience was silent, but they wanted more of this skill, more swordsmanship—more movements they couldn't discern from each other.

What they could not see was how difficult those six seconds were for them. The duel ended at first blood, but to them it might as well have been a duel to the death. For whoever lost in the arena lost their honour forever—whoever won would have won the feud for all eternity. This was more than their grudge—this was about the family!

And again they were back to circling, pacing. Five seconds, six seconds, seven—Emmett winced and hobbled, but Richter was too dizzy to strike—eight seconds, nine seconds, ten—Richter was wheezing now, barely moving now, and Emmett's knee was seizing—eleven seconds, twelve—the footwork continued at a sluggish pace, but the audience was bewildered as to whether this was strange to see.

Joana was worried; Charles was beginning to worry; Miriam was curious to see what would happen next.

Thirteen seconds. Emmett struggled to move his leg.

Fourteen seconds. Richter's throat was rife with phlegm.

Fifteen seconds. Could they still go on?

Then Richter could hold his sword no longer. He choked, grabbing at his throat, wheezing harder than ever, tugging at the breastplate that seemed to be his coffin.

“Richter? Norman! Norman!” Emmett tried to rush to his side, but the pain proved too much—the old man fell onto the sand. “Norman! One of you fools! Help the man!”

Everyone was still confused. Nobody moved.

“Idiots!” Emmett screamed. “Help him!”

“Someone help Lord Richter,” began Charles, “or I will hang the lot of you!”

Isabella Richter could not be stopped from running to her father’s side. With her was Lord Richter’s physician and his three aides. They carried Lord Richter off, the old man coughing and retching, the poor heiress sobbing as she followed.

The tournament was over. Slowly, the audience left, urged by the nobles to cease their gawking.

“So, Father,” Joana would ask, and never receive an answer. “Who won?”

What answer could he give?

III

The Promise

He slept quite late the night before. Unlike Joana, who could have afforded to miss her entire violent affair, he was in no position to be late for work. Not again—not with Alice’s goodwill running dangerously low.

His tiredness was nearly unconquerable. He woke six hours and thirty-six minutes into the morning; for six minutes the beeping of his clock wormed into his dreams. He lingered there, in the limbo between life and death, believing he was still talking with her. A leaf fell and clung to her hair. He brushed it away, feeling the silkiness of it and the warmth of the skin below. But his brain grew steadily more lucid—suddenly he could no longer ignore the cracks. And those crickets are so loud!

He was so disappointed when those damn red numbers shattered the veil. The angry digits could not be reconciled with the dream. One last attempt to return to her failed, and the sensible side of him rose to admonish his languor. He couldn’t be late. Not anymore—he wouldn’t do that anymore.

But how could he keep going like this? Those hours with Joana began in the evening, and he couldn’t (or didn’t want to) pull himself away. When he swung his legs away from the bed, they returned to the sheets immediately. So while he woke six hours and thirty-six minutes into the morning, he left his bed twelve minutes later. Each passing second saw him promising to gather the strength. He gathered no strength, and he was no stronger when he stood—only more frustrated with himself.

His room resembled some amateur, avant-garde art project. It was half clean; most of the criminal elements were neatly arranged into piles and stacks, but whoever’d gotten so far seemed to have given up halfway through.

He grimaced, walking through to the bathroom, and when he saw the grassy stains on his shirt, his grimace sunk deeper. The green would never leave the fabric—and now his bed-sheets were dirty.

And the grimace felt as if it would never leave his face when he squeezed the toothpaste out, realizing he’d forgotten to brush the night prior. He was ruining himself with his indolence. And his bones showing through the shirt, and the shadows of his eyes—the redness of his eyes!—and his neck had this pounding, regular pain!

And he still wasn’t hungry when he choked down that cereal. He wasn’t thirsty when he drank that milk. And of everything, he wanted to go to work the least; it was this last obligation that was the strongest.

It was nearly seven. The 221B arrived at 8:15. He would arrive at work by 8:25. He’d never actually gotten out of bed when his alarm begged him to. On a more typical day, he would stay in bed, but his mind was so cloudy he knew he wouldn’t wake again.

There was so much he could do. Most obvious was to finish the job and clean his room; perhaps he could even be so ambitious as to clean the rest of his apartment. He contemplated this, and for a brief moment it was what he decided, before he entered his room and saw the sketchbook—the most recent page filled with scrawled-out failures.

At 8:10, his room was filled with torn pages, and the air was heavy with graphite shavings. He was desperate to finish this last one, so sure that this would finally be the one, but again it proved as fruitless as the other dozens of attempts. He set pad and pencil down, defeated by the clock.

In two minutes he'd changed, patted his pockets, and left for work. When he reached the front door, he saw the 221B about to leave him behind. He rushed out, hollering for the driver to wait.

He was late; the door closed, and the bus lurched forward—only to meet traffic just a metre ahead. The driver let him in, judgement clear on his face. Kevin didn't care. He'd made it.

When Kevin first moved to the city, he was amazed at everything, at all of it: a seamless network, pulsing with business, and what one corner boasted was always so dramatically *different*. It was not enough. He never found anything greater, or even anything else. And suddenly it wasn't so strange to see the Finnish and the Israeli in the same cafe; how could he cling onto the excitement of the 221B after months of its mundanity?

Billy and Lily were great—Kevin loved them, but something kept him away. As if to know them would be to ruin them—as if their loveliness was but a thin veneer. And what if they didn't like the man he truly was? He didn't take great strides to disguise it, but he knew they'd never even guessed at the limits of his failings, for if they knew, they'd be long gone, as disgusted with him as he was himself.

It was so easy to confess to Joana. There was a natural kinship, sure, but the greater boon was how simple their relationship was. She was nothing to his work, to his life—she wasn't supercilious, no matter how banal his worries were. For a few hours, he could be a little more comfortable with who he was. He hadn't been for a long, long time.

That day, Kevin was the worst employee in the building; there could be an argument for the city. He was tired, distracted, inefficient. While the former was not uncommon, the latter two certainly were, and this anomaly did not go unnoticed.

“Are you feeling alright, man?” said Billy.

Kevin barely even heard him—he was staring at reimbursement forms, losing himself in the serif font.

Billy snapped his fingers, a technique so obnoxious that Kevin finally took note.

“What!” Kevin said, regretting his aggression when he saw the culprit. “Why are you doing that?”

“You've got to get it together. Mateo needs those forms by tomorrow morning. And Alice...”

Kevin followed his look to Alice's office, where the woman's poor hair looked like dried seaweed.

“She's not doing well, is she?”

“And you're not really helping,” said Billy. “Something's off with you. Are you sick? What's going on?”

What an excellent question, Kevin thought. So easy to answer—I've been staying up late to talk to a ghost lady in the middle of a park. Oh, and she's a princess!

“Girl trouble,” Kevin offered.

“What are you, fifteen?”

“Definitely don’t feel like it, these days.”

“Get some sleep, Kevin.”

“I’ll try,” he lied.

And the papers kept stacking, and his attention kept lapsing, and before he knew, it was 4:30, and he wasn’t finished yet.

Before he knew, it was 5, and he wasn’t finished yet. Billy stayed behind, at first to finish his own work, but soon to help Kevin with the enduring list of tasks—but Billy’s family could wait no longer, so at 5:15, he left as well.

By 5:25, Kevin was worried he’d never finish—it seemed he could work for days and he’d never be done. It didn’t escape him that this was his normal workload, that today he was that incredibly useless.

“Give it up, Kevin,” said Alice.

It was 7:31, and that sun was quickly falling.

“Get your things. You’re done for the day.”

“What about Mateo?”

“We’ll deal with him tomorrow. You—and I—need a drink.”

“Excuse me?” Kevin asked, zipping his briefcase.

“We’re getting a drink. Lily’s coming, too.”

“Are you legally allowed to order me to the bar?”

“I could fire you instead.”

“That doesn’t seem any less illegal,” he noted.

“Don’t be a party-pooper,” Lily said, walking towards them—she was too impatient to wait in the lobby. “Hurry up! I’m getting really sick of this place.”

“Things keep going like this,” Alice said, “you won’t have to suffer it much longer.”

“Yeah,” and Lily smiled a guilty smile, knowing she had an out—and the other two didn’t.

Alice Lai was married to a Barry Ku. Barry was once a middling car salesman—when their oldest, Joey, turned six, they realized they were losing more money to daycares and babysitters than Barry actually earned. So he made the change from a mediocre salesman to an excellent father. It was a foolproof plan. It could only be thwarted by the loss of her job, say, to a failing economy.

The stories she heard from her friends only exacerbated her fears. Some of them had children trying—and failing—to enter the workforce. Now Joey was thirteen, a headache to deal with, and not a headache she wanted to support in his twenties. And if he made it, what about Nathan? Or Joshua?

Three sons were depending on her. They needed an education. They needed a solid plan. Of course, they could never be trusted with their own. And it would all fall apart if she lost this job.

“I should be home right now,” she said, as the three walked to the bar.

“I’m sure your kids’ll be fine,” Lily said.

“Oh, the kids are fine. It’s the house I’m worried about.”

“You live out in Kitchener, don’t you?” asked Kevin.

“Markham, actually.”

“How’re you getting home?”

“I get an Uber.”

“You *get* an Uber?” Lily pressed. “Alice?”

“Shhh!” Alice said, encroaching on the tone she’d shush her own kids with, a shameless smile on her lips—Lily was genuinely perturbed, but she didn’t show it.

Alice picked the place: a softly-lit Rian’s Irish Pub. It was far from the Cabelton Strip, not just geographically; the other patrons were either older gentlemen or younger college kids who’d just turned nineteen. She didn’t need more headaches—in other places, the worry of hepatitis or the pounding music destroyed what was meant to be a relaxing experience.

“To what, pray tell, are we toasting on a Monday?” Kevin asked.

“No toasts,” Alice answered, and took a swig of whiskey far larger than he’d have expected.

“Drinking to drown, I see,” Lily said.

“I can do that,” Kevin said, before Lily could begin with her fretting.

So she pushed her worries to the back of her mind, just as her colleagues were, sipping her gin while the others drank greedily.

“The company’s going down,” Alice said—grim words served with an indifferent voice and a casual smile. “Evan’s breathing down my neck every day. Like I’m the one sinking the ship!”

“You keep—” Kevin started, stopped for a burp that refused to come, and: “You keep tearing your hair out at your desk. Is that Evan’s work?”

“It is!” She tugged on her frazzled hair, once smooth, now dull and split. She held it out for Kevin to see while Lily gave her sympathies. “Every day, every single day, I get two-hundred emails from him. And, of course, half of them are nothing. But I have to read them all! And it’s like he never learned to type, Lily.”

“Your emails are pretty bad, too,” Kevin said.

“Well, I’m your boss, Kevin, so you’re not allowed to say that.”

“You’re not *my* boss, so…”

“Sure, but Matt’s going to listen to me, so…”

Another gulp for Alice, another drink for Kevin, another sip for Lily.

“How’s Barry doing?” Kevin asked.

“He’s doing alright. He, um—he’s redoing the tiling right now, in our first-floor bathroom. I think it’s helping to keep him sane. It’s just really annoying to have to run upstairs.”

“Yeah, but,” and he stopped, feeling as if he was about to cross a line. “You know.”

“Oh.” Alice took another gulp. “He’s doing alright,” she said, her voice sharp and curt. “Let’s talk about something else, please!” She brushed her hair smooth again (as much as it could be). “No more of this doom and gloom.”

“Right,” Kevin said. “No need to worry—we’ll be fine.”

“Yep,” Alice said, but she couldn’t keep her eyes up to match that nervous smile. “We’ll be fine.”

Across the table, Lily’s brow furrowed. This was wrong; why were they repeating these worthless mantras?

“Say,” Kevin started. “What do you suppose princesses like?”

“Princesses? You mean like, the Middle Ages?” The non-sequitur caught Alice off-guard.

“Yeah.”

Alice laughed a little, still a bit bewildered. “I don’t know, Kevin. The last time I thought about princesses was when I was eight. No, wait—I was nine.” Feeling the need to explain her specificity: “I broke Cinderella’s neck. We didn’t have enough money to buy more toys, so…”

“Well, I mean—if you were to guess, what do you suppose they’d like?”

She thought about it, the motherly creases along her cheeks deepening, really digging for an answer.

“Kevin,” she said, shaking her head, “I really can’t guess.”

“We won’t be fine,” Lily said.

She spoke so suddenly, and with a sudden, unfamiliar anger in her eyes. The other two turned, disoriented, the alcohol seeping into their blood failing to aid their comprehension.

“We won’t be fucking fine!” Lily said again, gritting her teeth.

“Lily?” Kevin asked. “Calm down,” he said—this did not achieve its intended effect.

“Absolutely not,” she said. “Future Comfort is going the way of the *Hindenburg*, and you’re content to just go down with it.”

“You don’t know that,” he started. But his argument was weak; how could it ever work when he did not believe in his words?

“Yes, we do! You know it, Kevin. You damn well know this company’s dying—it’s dying, and it’ll be dead by fucking Christmas.”

“Lily, please calm down.” Alice said, but her words found no purchase in the young woman’s mind.

“And you know what? I can sit here, Kevin, and I can watch you ruin your own life—no matter how much it hurts me to see it—but Alice has a family, and you’re lying to her. How are empty promises going to help her family?”

“Lily—” was all he could say.

“Tell me!” she yelled. The other patrons looked, no longer able to ignore the commotion. At once, the embarrassment and intense frustration overwhelmed her. Her eyes darted around, until she darted out, no longer able to remain.

“Wow,” Kevin said, as the rest of the customers returned their attentions to themselves. “That was a lot.”

“She’s really in a panic, isn’t she?”

There they sat, for a few, gruelling moments.

“I’m going to talk to her,” he said. “Sorry.”

“No, go,” she replied, thankful for it. “Make sure she’s doing alright.”

He considered drinking the rest of his glass, lingering a second or two longer, before abandoning it.

Lily was pacing outside, on the street. She, too, was wondering whether to go back inside and apologize—but why did she have to apologize? She knew she was right. It seemed wrong to leave, but she was too prideful to return, so outside she waited and walked to nowhere, mulling over her outburst.

Until Kevin exited, and their eyes met, and she wished she *had* left, for this conversation was sure to be awkward.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said first.

“Why are you apologizing?” she asked, out of instinct.

“You’re just trying to do what’s right. I get it.”

“Do you?” she asked. “It doesn’t seem like you do, Kevin.”

“I just don’t see the point in being so pessimistic about it. The company hasn’t failed yet.”

“Do you even hear yourself? Hasn’t failed yet? Why are you waiting for it to fail before you do what you know is right?”

“It’s not right,” Kevin said. “There are still hundreds of employees who need this company. It’s not just about me, or Alice.”

“Oh!” she said, and she couldn’t stop herself from laughing. “That’s what it’s about? Some bullshit chivalry? You’re not some big-shot, Kevin—you really think the company *needs* you?”

He was speechless. She hadn’t meant to say it so cruelly—it was the first time he’d ever heard her say something so callous.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her brain finally catching up to her words—her eyes fighting the tears. “I didn’t mean that.”

“No, you did,” he said, unable to suppress his bitterness.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, turning away. “I’m going to go.”

“What, are you going to walk home?”

“Yes,” she said, wanting to wipe the wetness of her eyes.

“Don’t do that. At least let me get you an Uber.”

“I can get my own Uber.”

“Then do that,” he said. “It’s late.”

It was a painful few minutes, waiting for the Toyota to arrive. She left without a word, wishing she could’ve taken it all back, yet somehow, deep inside, a little thankful that she’d finally said it.

Back inside, the mood was sour. Alice and Kevin never admitted their agreement with Lily to one another. There was a pretense to uphold—of optimism, of courage—a belief powerful enough to overrule reality. But reality still slithered back in. It made the drinks foul and the seats uncomfortable. It was a stain you wanted to reject, for it was so disagreeable—how could it be true?

The power of the human mind—it searches for patterns, and it chooses the patterns it wants to see, not the ones that are.