

(Static.)

I am irrationally angry right now. I--- [Growl through gritted teeth]... (sigh)

(Music fades in)

Some people are just fricking horrible to work with. That's not a surprise. Right now, we have this patient, right? Well actually, her dad's the patient. But once again, genetic condition, so give it an unknown number of years, and then it's her turn. And do get it, that's scary, but really, it's... It's not like I'm the one who made her dad sick, okay? I'm not the one who put that ticking time bomb in her genetic code. Not my department. Not my responsibility, and sure, maybe occasionally I find myself thinking that this is some sort of cosmic justice, I guess. I think about how badly she has treated me in the past, and I assume that's justification. It's terrible, but at least, I know it's terrible. Okay but I remember her grabbing me by the forearm once and digging her nails into my arm until she struck a nerve, and I swear she was about to cut right through it.

And why did she do that, exactly? She was just mad. I don't remember why. Maybe Dad or one of the other doctors was late in seeing her father because, you know, their time is more important than yours. I don't fricking know. But I don't keep anyone's schedules or patient lists or anything. I don't have any control there. (sigh) Then again some people just get mad. They get mad. And it's not like they don't have a reason to be mad, but they don't have a reason to take it out on me or to be mad at me. That's the thing. Don't beat on me because you're having a bad... A bad... (softer) Okay, I don't know what to put there.

I just can't even look at her without my blood boiling. So when I saw her surname come up on the patient list for the day, I had to step away with the extra laptop, turning everything over to the still in training receptionist, and wandered off to the back room that had just enough of an internet connection to make doing some work possible just not ideal.

I mean, it would have been nice to not do any work, but then the office would have burned down, so not great long term. (sigh) Whatever.

Dad saw me as I walked--or I guess--stormed down the hallway. At the sight, he raised an eyebrow in confusion

"I don't want to see that woman," I said in response, assuming he knew whom I was talking about, which I guess he did.

He chuckled. And, yes, not a great response when you consider that I vividly remember this woman physically assaulting me, but you know, he's never been great at that sort of thing, and I have long since adjusted my expectations accordingly. So I brushed past him, and... Look, it was faint, but I swear I know what I heard. He muttered, "Good." Just under his breath. Like he was voicing approval at my reaction.

My blood chilled when I realized it, but I had to pretend nothing was wrong.

I can't admit something is wrong. No matter what. Right now, when I'm around him I just have to pretend everything is fine. It's not fine. And it might never have been fine. Relatively fine, I guess would be the better term. But right now, I just have to play... Dumb? Unchanged, more accurately.

(Pause) Do you hate lying? Or am I just... transferring things I think and believe onto you? Especially the big stuff. The non-negotiable stuff. Then again, how else could we have gotten along if we didn't agree on those things? But maybe we didn't get along. Maybe that's really what's going on, and I'm just making bold and outlandish assumptions.

Whatever. None of that is relevant. Or not so relevant. But I can't afford to think about that right now. I'm in survival mode, and you'd be surprised how little anything else matters when you think it's your life on the line. Or maybe that's not surprising. Maybe.

But Dad is suspicious. Very. And he's not all that good at hiding it. Or that's part of his game, trying to make me trip up. I can feel him study me as I make breakfast every morning now. He sits at the kitchen peninsula, sipping his selfishly made coffee, and while he used to stare off into the distance completely disconnected from the rest of the world, likely thinking about his work and only his work.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Now, he stares at me. I can feel it through my back when I'm working. His stare is cold and cutting. It's even more intense when I'm standing over a hot stove because of the difference in temperature between my front and back. I just get so distracted. and that's making everything worse. You'd think I'd be focusing more about the open flame in front of me, but I'm not. I'm not when he gets like that. The threat of burning or even being engulfed in flames isn't all that persuasive. Instead, I'm distracted by this

perceived pain and the fear that I'll burn the eggs, which objectively is not something I should be afraid of. They're scrambled eggs. I can always make more.

With so many people in the house, it's kind of inevitable that we overbuy eggs. And milk. The two main ingredients in scrambled eggs. I mean, I know it's wasteful, given the shelf lives of those things, but we always have too many eggs and too much milk in the house. But all the same, every morning, I'm panicked that I'll burn the eggs or that he's going to notice something. And I don't know what's going to happen if he notices something, but I know it's something I don't want to have happen.

So I'm frantically making eggs now while trying to pretend that I'm not frantically making the eggs and am just making eggs, no modifier. But I can't help but think Dad sees something. That he sees something in me has... not changed, exactly. (sigh) But I don't know. I'm still parsing out the details. And I need them. I need them now. I need them to understand what he's looking for if I have any chance of hiding it. But I have no clue what is going on.

And something is going on. It's not just me who's noticed the gears turning in Dad's head when I'm in his sights. Roslyn has noticed it too. I can hear it in her chewing. Whenever she eats around him, she has to force it down. Not by choice or panic, but the part of her brain that usually controls that function seems distracted by something or other.

Not something or other. That thing. That person. Dad.

He's been like that since he gave me the invitation for the gala. Since he saw me see your name. And it's like he has a head start now. In this race to figure it all out. I

mean, then again, he would have always had a head start. That's how he plays every game, lining up all the cards in such a way that even if you have a good hand, you don't know what you have And you make a mistake. And he wins.

But that's also assuming you could get a good hand. He minimized those odds, of course. He did not get where he is in life by not planning for contingencies. (Music fades out and new music fades in) That's part of who he is. That's a huge part of what medical professions are, it turns out. I don't know if they teach you that in med school, but they probably should.

Lucent. Lucent, my eyes were drawn to your name. Lucent. Even saying it feels... right. But in a way that isn't mind to demand. Like... I know I shouldn't say it. But I want to. Lucent.

That day in the kitchen I did tear my eyes away, even if I didn't want to and even though doing so was hard. I still did it. I did it, and I tapped the invitation on counter in the same irritated manner that I always did when those sorts of things happened. It helped that I still had reason to be irritated, right? I mean, this was a last minute obligation he was just throwing at me. Like he always did.

"I can't believe you're making me do this," I said.

He never responds when I say that. But that day his lingering silence seemed to have a cutting edge. I ignored it. And he ignored me ignoring it.

Exasperated, I asked him, "Are you at least going to be here to put the kids to bed?"

"Call the sitter," he said.

“I am the sitter,” I replied. “And despite my repeated pleas, you still haven’t cloned me.”

He grunted. “I’ll find someone.”

He never does. Then he was gone. And Roslyn came out a little later. And to her credit, she is old enough to hold down the fort for a few hours while I’m away and Dad’s being himself. I just don’t like putting that responsibility on her.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

But I pulled out some money for pizza and gave her my usual speech about how to interact with pizza delivery staff safely. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that.

Roslyn has these big brown eyes that are very rounded, more rounded than any set of eyes I’ve seen ever. Never mind those of the rest of the family that are all varying degrees of a mix between almond and hooded eyes. Roslyn has just always been different. In so many ways, she’s always been a doll. Or whatever else an uncorrupted being would be. And consequently, there is this desperate urge to protect her from all hurts and alleviate all of her discomforts.

Despite my best efforts, right then, I could see they had all failed. There was fear in her eyes when I said I wasn’t going to be home that evening. And sure, my speech about safety and pizza shop employees might have been frightening, but I didn’t mean it to be that scary. She was sitting at the counter, silently, just staring at me with a slight tremble in her pupils. It was a perverse sparkle in those big, round eyes.

I came around and took her by the hands. “What’s wrong?” I asked her.

She did not answer me at first. But then she said, “You’re coming home, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re coming home tonight, right?”

“Yes,” I stammered. “Yes, yes. I promise I’m coming home tonight. Roslyn, I always come home.”

She stared at me. So I repeated myself, “Roslyn, I always come home, don’t I?”

I wanted her to say it. (breath) I wanted her to affirm my assurances because I believed that it would comfort her, but she couldn’t seem to do it. This promise that I was trying to make, it wasn’t based in... her reality.

(Static fades in. Music cuts. Static fades out. Music fades in)

The office is incredibly sterile. It’s been incredibly obvious as of late. And sure, as a medical establishment, it does need to be that way. But it’s not just like it’s supposed to be: in the materials, in the way we dress, in the way we conduct ourselves. It’s also in the color palate, the waiting room furniture, and the way... Well, the way it feels. There’s no care there.

I was thinking about... about what I need to say to you on this broadcast. I was in Dad’s office within the office, watering his plants, and I couldn’t escape the thought even there because the plant I was watering sure looked artificial. But I know it’s not. I’ve brought that specific plant back from the brink of death because of course Dad neglected it. Like he neglects everything else. But I don’t know where that plant came from. I don’t know where any of this interior designing had come from. I tried to remember. I tried to remember any of that, but I just got this splitting headache. It was so bad that I couldn’t see. And then I couldn’t... be awake.

And someone found me on the floor. I don't know who it was. But they took me to an examination room. And dad came in, and he asked me how I was doing. I told him about the migraine, and he seemed to make a note of it.

"Mom got them," I reminded him. "Could you maybe do something about that?"

He hummed dismissively. And I actually thought that was a bit comforting. That he was still this... disinterested in my welfare.

Hoping down from the table did not come without a price though. I felt dizzy and almost fell over, stumbling a bit. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought his hand was extended to me, slightly but like he was going to catch me. When I turned to him, it was gone, but it had been there. I know it.

But I couldn't do anything about it. So I just walked away. Like what I did when it was Roslyn. When she was scared. I could not talk to her because I didn't fully understand why she was upset.

I only promised her again that I was going to come back. I kissed her on the forehead and squeezed her hands. But that was not enough. So I reached up and took my necklace off. I always wore this necklace. An emerald necklace. Maybe you gave it to me, I don't know. But personally, when I held it in my hands, it made me think of my mother. Or a silhouette of her. I don't remember her that well. All the same, I took it off and offered it to Roslyn.

"Keep this," I told her. "And if you ever think I'm not coming home. Just hold it very tightly in your palm, and I'll know that you need me."



She smiled. Whether or not she believed me notwithstanding, she helped me into this green dress I had. Where I got it, I don't know. (Music fades out and new music fades in) I definitely don't think too much about that stuff. Wherever I can get something that fits and looks halfway decent, I just buy it. I don't care about brands, and I don't care where. I don't cut a great figure, which normally does not bother me. Or I like to think there's some parallel dimension where I would not be so insecure because there wouldn't be any portion of my time spent as a prop to secure money, but life is currently what it is stuck being.

Come to think of it, though, I didn't look all that terrible in that dress, but I did not feel great about wearing it.

But whatever. I didn't have a choice. As the sun set over the horizon, I got into the waiting car and drove to the gala, pretending to feel like the most beautiful woman in the world because fake it until you make it.

There's some weird advantage, I guess, in that my status as a genius's daughter was independent of how well put together I was. And also, my status as his office manager seemed to lower what expectations there were even further. I mean, I knew what to say and how to say it. I know how to stroke egos and flaunt my dad's accomplishments. And that's all I need to do. It's all a game, I've come to realize. A game that I know how to play. You know, the rules are surprisingly simple once you get a turn at the board.

So Ms. So and So who you know all too well greeted me. With a huge smile across her face and spinach between her teeth which complemented the lipstick that

had spilled off of her lips and onto her teeth. She did not look so great, but different rules for different statuses of living, I guess. She could have as many bad days as she wanted to have simply because she could pay you and everyone else to pretend that it all never happened. And a lie like that is rather inconsequential, meaning it is easy to go along with.

I know of many. But all the same, I smiled and she greeted me with a slight slur in her voice. Too much wine, I hope, but if it's not the wine... Well, there's no need to speculate like that.

"My dear," she said to me.

I greeted her and earnestly mustered up some sort of apology for Dad's absence. "He's working," I said. "He needs to be."

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

She nodded. Her expression was a mix of disappointment and a bit of glee. Because the research couldn't happen without the researcher, and she does need the research. But at the same time, it would have been a huge honor had he attended. Particularly because it would have meant that her gala was the first public appearance he had made in quite some time.

But she couldn't have it both ways. Either he was there with her or he wasn't, but she technically stood to gain something either way. Or that's what she would tell herself.

"Well," she said. "You should look around. The manager tells me that Lucent actually selected these pieces by hand for my event."

Your name struck me. To hear it in someone's mouth. (inhale) Well, I guess it might not be your actual name, just the name you paint under. But all the same, hearing it just fueled this fire in me. Or pulled me closer, drew me further into your world. Into this... hole where your memory was supposed to be.

But Ms. So and So was so giddy at the thought that you had been involved in planning her event, that I couldn't fully be lost in a memory that wasn't quite there. She kept pulling me back in a self-indulgent type way. She talked and talked. And I smiled and nodded. That's an easy dance to get around. I didn't have to answer her at all because it's not that she really cared what I thought; I was just a placeholder: a blank slate her voice could bounce off of so she could get the pleasure of hearing it. And I could oblige for the short that I needed to. Before I could break free from her. And my moment was coming.

"It's an exercise in light and darkness," she said. "In tricks and deceit."

Gosh she was so obnoxiously giddy. And there was something ironic about that because, (breath) frankly it all seemed like a joke at her expense. I mean, "in tricks and deceit." Come on. How much did she pay you to display your work? And suppose you did a bait and switch? I mean that would play into the theme, and she'd never know the difference.

Some pieces were available for sale but not all of them. And all of it's for charity, so she won't make any of her money back. Well, tax write off. But whatever.

Your manager was in the corner. He is a bulky tank-like person, isn't he? And I'm sure that works out for him considering the great demand that meets your work. There's no pulling the wool over his eyes. But Ms. So and So really can't say the same.

I noticed very quickly that your manager was watching me. Staring at me, more like it. I tried to pretend it did not bother me. Ms. So and So talked and talked, but I couldn't even pay attention to her. I was too busy looking at him. She didn't tell me who he was. She did not tell me that was your manager. She did not need to. I just knew. I knew, and the fact that I knew who he was but could not call out his name was jarring. Jarring but brief.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

Because then she saw someone else who needed her attention, and I was free. It was still early in the evening, so I was somewhat excused, at least for a moment. There would likely be a speech portion, including a time in which I would be expected to speak, but it would come later in the evening, and I was fairly good at ad libbing those sorts of things. So I really was free to wander about. And I wandered through her gallery, which looked like a converted warehouse and given the area, given all of its serious but poorly thought out gentrification, it probably was a warehouse that wasn't fully turned over because it did not need to be for the check to clear. But that's not important.

In that wide space, I felt your manager approach me. Not directly, if you told him not to. He was circling me, navigating through the crowds as I gazed at all the artwork.

I think it's clever what you did, with all those different pieces. It must have been a pain to set up, but it was still brilliant. To have a set painting, a full canvas, and different lights set up around it, placed precisely to create different effects from the intermingling of light and paint as you stood in different places.

There was something special in the paint, I know. And everyone was oohing and awing at your ability to be both artistic and scientific. At what you would think was magic not science just from the way they were talking about it. But I mean, these were people who had always left science to the others, who let other people deal with it, so of course they were impressed by something they did not bother to understand. But I wasn't. I mean I appreciated the effort, but it felt... familiar.

I walked through the gallery admiring the colors, swirls, and shapes that you had so carefully crafted and hidden. But so was everyone else. Everyone else took turns crowding around each image underneath your manager's watchful eye. Except for one piece of art, completely neglected. The one in the corner. A plain green easel with several different lights hitting it. But unlike the other works, there was no indication that something was there. There was no hint from a stray piece of unknown metal catching a surprise ray of light. It was seemingly blank. And so no one had any interest. No one but me.

It was calling out to me. I know it's dumb to say, but I could hear it. All the while, your manager kept circling. He drew closer. But I wasn't afraid. I wasn't prey being surveyed. No, he was waiting for the right time to finish a sentence. By right time, I mean he was waiting for the sentence to begin.

(Music fades out and new music fades in)

I stepped forward towards the sickly green canvas. Slowly at first. This unseen force was not as strong as it needed to be in order to efficiently pull me in. The dance was slow, but it was still happening. One step. Two. Three. Your manager followed me in this direct type way. But then I stopped.

I could almost hear his breath catch as he was struck by the fear that I wouldn't go on. But he hid it well. And he hid himself well. (Music fades out) He found cover by engaging with a woman in a bright blue dress. Still watching me out of the corner of his eye. And then I took seven steps to the right.

(New music fades in)

And I saw her. Or me. The resemblance was uncanny. I knew who it was. (breathe) I knew. I knew it was me. I don't know how you did it. But it was me, staring back at me. Secretly. As I stood at this awkward angle against an artwork that looked like a failed attempt at a concept. It was a message. So well hidden that only I could find it, only I could see it. I stood there alone before the canvas, staring at my own eyes that were twinkling back at me. In some ways, though, they did not look my eyes. They were stronger than I had ever seen them. I was stronger. I was this different version of myself.

My heart trembled, seemingly in a scream that my mouth could not commit to. I wanted to stare at myself forever. I wanted to fall into that painting, into that mysterious portal.

But it wasn't a portal, was it? It was only a painting. A painting that was meant to go unnoticed.

Suddenly, your manager was in my ear. "Don't stare for too long, Zaneta. It would not be wise."

(Static builds. Music cuts. Static cuts. Silence.)

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