

Summary

I'd find you in every lifetime - Palindrome: Cursed to endlessly lose you

By: SleepyDreamyLullay

... = listener is speaking or general pause

[*words*] = sound effects and sounds

(words) = tone/mood/voice direction

{words} = replace with desired pronouns, subject, alternative etc. or do away with it as you please

[1st loop: The incident]

[*Ticking clock and crackling fire*]

[*Door opens*]

[*Sigh*]

(chastising from far away, like on the other side of the room)

Wherever I go, whatever happens, it's *always* you.

... [*Pause of contemplation; letting the statement ruminate*]

The chase is over, and regardless of what's to follow, I *know* I've already won. I've finally found what I've been searching for...

(loudly, to the room; teasing) A crafty little *menace* who thinks they can escape the consequences of their terrorizing, and who, for some reason, thinks they're *so* clever as to evade me and believe I don't know they're hiding right under---

(louder, closer, surprising listener) here :)

...

[*Laugh*]

(mirthfully) And a good evening to you too, your grace.

Or, at least, I'm choosing to *believe* that's what you meant to say. It was a bit hard to tell with all the cursing and yelling. Good thing I'm very adept at interpreting the things you say.

And the things you leave unspoken ;)

...

[Laugh]

You're getting creative! Wonderful use of the iambic pentameter! And such an *interesting* employment of vocabulary with the word '*undulating*'. I never knew it had so many rhymes!

(teasing) Did you compose that *just* for me? How'd you know I'm such a ~sapiosexual~? Good to see those tutors aren't just for show, though your curriculum certainly is lacking in subjects that are... *exciting. Stimulating.*

(closer; teasing; conspiratorial) I could fill in those gaps for you, among other things. And I promise: you won't find *me* lacking ;)

But really, your grace. We've *got* to instill some manners into you.

...

(unconvinced) uh-huh. And does this so-called "dignified diplomacy" include pouring drinks down the backs of dresses, placing sharp tacks on the insides of shoes, stomping on the feet of dance partners, and telling highly, *highly* inappropriate jokes?

...

(flatly; lightly scolding) Sir Brandtfell did *not* enjoy the comment on his romantic pursuits, your grace.

...

[Snort]

Yes, yes. "Or lack thereof".

(playful, trying not to laugh) *Stop* that.

It doesn't suit the conventions of propriety expected for someone of your station.

(mischievous) No, no... If you're itching to let loose and act a bit *improper*, look no further than *me*, your grace.

...

[Laugh]

Point to the guard! No clever response, I see. Perhaps you wasted all your raunchiest jokes on turning Sir Brandtfell's face red.

And now I'm using *my* best material to make *you* blush.

... I have *other, specialized* methods to achieve the same results as well, your grace ;)

But! Though this is quite the fun activity in *private*, that still doesn't change the fact that this way of speaking is frowned upon in high society. Unfortunately, this behavior is deemed beneath you, your grace.

...

(confused; echoing listener) I don't understand... What do you mean you want *me* to be "beneath you in private"---

(realization; embarrassed) oh.

Oh.

(sputtering, flustered) That's uh.

You're---

You shouldn't---

Why would you---

[Sigh]

(embarrassed, don't want to say it, trying to say it with the same bravado as before)

(stuttering) I---. Is that--- is that an invitation or a.... a promise?

...

[Embarrassed groan]

(indignant) You play unfair, your grace. I can't---

... This game--- it's only fun when / say things like that. When you do it, I---

... *[Gathering themselves]*

When you do it feels too...

[Sighs again]

(pouting, resigned, exasperated) It's just not fair.

If only you were born an entertainer. You embody a particular knack for coy flirtation and suggestive flattery. You always have.

Among the talents--- (teasing) or lack thereof--- that you possess, none are quite as troublesome as those ones.

(embarrassed; blushing) And none are quite so... unravelling.

(trying to regain control) Your *other* troublesome traits, however--- *Those* can and certainly *need* to be addressed.

I seem to always be asking you the same thing. So, for what seems like the thousandth time:

Why?

...

[Exasperated sigh]

Of course. Why am I not surprised? Only you could attend a gathering of the most influential aristocrats in all the land, in the most opulent grounds in the *world* no less, and still find such a juvenile excuse as *boredom* to justify your mischief.

But at least it's a simple fix. Your grace: If you wanted a bit of company, you only need ask. It's part of the reason why I'm *here* after all.

...

(sputtering) No--- that's *not* it. I didn't mean it like *that*.

I'm not here to "*distract and entertain*" you in "all the right ways", I---

I don't----

...

[Sigh]

(good-naturedly resigned) Point to you, I suppose. No matter how far I pull ahead, you always manage to finish on top, huh?---

--- Do *not* comment on that.

[Disbelieving laugh; trying and failing to not be so charmed]

(musing aloud) How is it that you're always able to do this to me?

...

I only mean...

... These jokes you tell. These games you play--- I try to follow along to the best of my abilities, but... You're just too good at making it feel *real*. Making me want to *believe* it's real, and it always has me questioning... *hoping*, even...

Is there any truth to them?

...

(regret; building up walls) No, wait. Never mind. Apologies, your grace. I shouldn't have spoken. That was a highly out of line thing for me to say. Seems you've had more of an influence on me than I previously thought.

...

[Exasperated laugh]

Another point to you. Yes, you *have* "*touched me*"---- touched my *heart*, your grace.

[Clears throat]

Now, then. Now that I've located you, it's time you returned to the gathering. You know what that means: be on your *best* behavior. A model heir of utmost poise and elegance. I'll do the same, ever the stoic, serious, *professional* guard.

(more to himself than listener) One that does *not* flirt with their sovereign. No matter how tempting.

...

I know, I know. It's not much fun, but you have a duty to uphold, and I...

I'm just lucky that I *have* this position... That I even get to be *near* you.

Our lives are a never-ending play. Maybe more accurately, a series of fairytales in a never-ending book. But in any case, we have to put on airs. We have to play our part. To maintain our respective stations.

(lost in thought) You have no *idea* how delicate our situation is. How even the smallest misstep might... (trailing off)

(shaking himself) Think of it this way: Once you get all the small talk and pleasantries out of the way, we'll be free to explore the palace. Does that sound like a plan?

...

(softening) Of course. I'll only be 15 paces away the entire time. I won't leave you, I promise.

Now: what are we going to do about that pouting face of yours?

...

There you are.

(teasing) But don't you remember what I said? No causing trouble--- and *that* particular smile could start *wars*, your grace.

...

[Laugh]

If you say so, your grace.

(under their breath; to himself; fondly) Only for me, huh?

(shaking from stupor; attempting stoicism once more) Up, up. Before anyone else notices you're gone.

...

Well? Go on. You lead the way and I'll guard the rear. As is standard protocol.

...

[Sigh]

Did you forget how you wound up here? Do you not remember what part of the palace you're in? Is that why you look so embarrassed? Your grace: I would happily provide verbal instructions for how to---

--- No?

...

Oh.

Oh.

I, uh... That *is* against typical guarding procedures, but I *suppose*...

Since you're asking so nicely... And since I can't seem to bring myself to say no...

Yes. You can hold my hand. But *only* up until we see another guest. Not a moment longer. And to clarify: I'm only allowing this because you claim your legs are numb from crouching in your hiding spot for so long and you don't want to stumble.

(softly; sweetly)... Nothing more.

Let's get going. You've chosen *quite* the secluded hiding spot, and I fear being caught alone in such an area might encourage rumors.

...

(laughing) As *enticing* as that sounds, I think that'd go against my code of honor as a bodyguard to "make them *truths* instead of *rumors*", your grace.

...

[Sigh]

Yes, yes. Another point to you. Though you can't *actually* think I'm keeping score. It doesn't matter how many sly jokes you make: you've already won in my eyes.

...

So *competitive*. I'm fairly certain that most nobles don't---

(alarmed) Stop.

...

(tense) Be silent, your grace. Something feels wrong...

These sconces--- they were lit when I last passed through this hall. And it wasn't so... Eerily quiet before.

Did you notice anyone following you when you came to these rooms? Anything strange at all?

...

... It's probably nothing. But I have a feeling---

Your grace, watch out!

[2nd Loop: Denial]

[Ticking clock and crackling fire]

[Door opens]

[Clears throat]

(calling from far away, like on the other side of the room)

(shaky; testing; trying and failing to maintain calm) Your grace? Your grace. I know you're in here.

[Quick footsteps to listener's hiding spot]

(close; sighing with relief) Thank goodness. You're alright.

...

(hiding something; deflecting) No, it's---

Everything is fine. I was just... worried about you, that's all.

...

Déjà vu?

[Laugh]

(conjuring an excuse; deflecting) Well if you're feeling like we've done this before, it's because we *have*, your grace. You're *always* wreaking havoc at high-profile parties then running off to sulk, all alone.

...

That is certainly *not* an exaggeration. Yorndale? Rellfern? Plinthmorn? And those are only the parties you've pulled this stunt at in the past 3 *months*, your grace. Your habits are getting a bit... *predictable*, don't you think?

I know you're *bored*, but that's no reason to---

...

Oh. You... *didn't* tell me that you were bored yet?

... I must've... imagined it.

Assumed it.

Yes, I... I *assumed* it. Through logical deduction from your previous habits.

(hiding something) Nothing more.

(changing topics) But if you're looking to alleviate your boredom, let's go to the castle gardens, shall we?

...

Yes, I know I hate the outdoors but...

(suspiciously insistent; hiding something) This part of the castle is so *dreary*, isn't it? I'd rather not dwell here, so let's go.

...

Yes, your grace. As I said: everything is *fine*.

...

Yes, I'm feeling well, only it's a bit stuffy and I'd really like to be outsi----

...

(growing in agitation as listener continues to interrupt)

Yes, I *know* I don't like the outdoors at night especially, but would you just---

Your grace.---

Your *grace*.---

Your *grace*.---

ENOUGH.

...

(panicked; overly insistent again) Everything is... Everything is *fine*. Or--- or it *will* be. If we just leave. *Right now*, before--- (stopping themselves)

...

No. Before nothing. Forget I said anything. Come now.

...

Now, your grace.

... [*Walking in silence for a bit*]

(guiltily)... I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to be so sharp. It's just---

It's just I really, *really* needed to get out of there. I can't *stand* the thought of you... (trailing off)

I needed to get *you* out of that room as quickly as possible...

(lightening the mood; joking; wincing at cheesy attempt) ... And uh... And uh, into *my* bedroom?

...

[Laugh]

There it is. I knew you couldn't stay mad for long. And again, I really am sorry.

...

Yes, I'm feeling better already. After all, *that* particular smile could dazzle a diamond, your grace.

---the finery of which is so at odds with the current state of your attire. Miss Daulier would have a fit if she saw how disheveled you made her best custom-piece look.

...

(laughing) No, your grace. I'm not interested in "*other* ways we could wrinkle your garments *together*".

(cheekily added on)... For... wouldn't it be more efficient to do away with your clothing altogether?

...

[Laugh]

That gleam in your eye--- why is it that it shines brightest when we're teasing each other? And I swear, you don't have nearly as quick a tongue in the course of conversations lacking in double-entendres.

...

(sputtering) Your grace!

(laughing) Keep your voice down. No one needs to hear about the various adjectives and activities pertaining to your *tongue*.

We should... Save that loudness of yours for *later*, your grace ;)

...

(laughing) What do you mean?

...

(laughter dying) No, I-I'm fine. I promise.

(sobering but maintaining faux-cheeriness) Do *you* think something is wrong?

...

(faux-cheeriness; trying to put worries aside) Well! Sounds like *you're* just being a sore loser! Can't handle when your suggestive joking is returned in full force, now can you?

...

Oh, stop that. I'm *fine*, your grace. I'm *your* bodyguard, *I* have to be fine. Always.

I'm... used to this by now.

Sure: in the past, I've been more... *flustered* by this genre of joking, but I've realized...

Well. Life is just too short to be so *serious*. What harm could a bit of fun do? And anyway, you always seem to catch me with those jokes when I least expect it and am worrying about someone overhearing us. But not this time.

(seriousness doesn't match topic; clearly referencing something else) No, this time I'm *fully prepared*. No threat to look out for.

...

[Clears throat]

No threat of snoopily guests intent on spreading ill-words about you, that is. Everything is *fine*. You're safe.

(catching themselves) --- Er, safe to be yourself, I mean.

...

Here we are: The patio gardens. Lovely, aren't they? And the view is *stunning*, isn't it?

...

Yes... Of course. I meant the... view of the... *city*...

Come. Sit.

...

... You look a bit cold. Shall I fetch you a coat?

...

Oh, well if it's only your hands, I have a pair of gloves here---

...

Oh.

Well...

I suppose that *could be* more efficient...

Yes. You can hold my hand. But *only* until your fingers are warmed up. Not a moment longer. And to clarify: I'm only allowing this because my hands offer a direct source of heat...

(softly; bashfully) Nothing more...

...

(distracted; tense; struggling to find positive things to say) Hm? Oh yes, yes. Very nice. Moon. Stars. Night... time... Um... Crickets?

(dismissive) Beautiful, beautiful.

...

Well, I'd be lying if I said I found such scenery to be captivating. Rather, I believe it's the company we choose to surround ourselves with that makes these spaces more enchanting, don't you think?

Here I am lucky enough to be so close to someone who outshines the stars.

...

Ha! Good one! Yes, I suppose the night *was* made for staying indoors and *in bed*.

... But that's not really the reason why I can't stand being out here...

...

No, it's nothing. It's fine. *I'm fine*.

...

Your grace, I said I'm *fine*.

...

[Sigh]

Persistent and inexhaustible as ever, huh?

...

[Laugh]

Okay, okay. I walked right into that one. Point to you.

... The night just... reminds me of someone. Someone who used to be dear to me.

(rambling; lost in thought)

Perhaps there was a time where I would look out at the night and appreciate the glow of the moon, the gleam of the stars, the serenity brought forth by those moments where all to keep one company are dreaming souls, but...

But now all I see is... darkness. The void. Staring back at me, *watching* me...

(troubled) Waiting to swallow me whole...

...

[Caught off-guard laugh; shaken from stupor]

That one was a touch too predictable, your grace.

... But... Thank you. For trying to make me feel better.

...

Oh, no. You don't know the person I'm talking about.

At least... you *shouldn't*.

I hardly recognize him nowadays. All the good days spent with him, all the fond memories... They might as well not exist. Erased by...

Time. I suppose.

It's like... Well it's like that was a whole different life.

...

(laughing; teasing) Oh, you're going to challenge him now, are you, hm? You and what muscles, your grace? I'm *your* bodyguard after all.

...

(amused) I insist. There's no need. It's all in the past now. Nothing we can change.

We were close, and then we fought, and... That's the end of it. Really.

...

(alarmed; breaking the moment) Your grace, get down.

Under this bench. Now! Hurry!

...

(panicked) Someone's shooting arrows at us--- I can't find the source.

I *knew* I shouldn't have chosen such an exposed place. We're too vulnerable out here.

I didn't think he'd try *again*. Didn't think he'd send *archers* of all methods---

Your grace. Your grace, *keep your head under the bench!*

They're going to see yo---

[?????nd Loop: Anger]

[Ticking clock and crackling fire]

[Door slams open]

[Hurried strides to Listener's hiding spot]

(frenzied) On your feet, your grace. *Now!*

...

No time for questions. Get out of the room. Go, go, *go!*

...

I'm right behind you. Keep walking. And *don't you dare stop*, even for a second!

...

Take a right at the junction up ahead.

...

Good. Now take a left 2 hallways down.

...

Okay. Now keep to the left side of the hallway--- not a *centimeter* past the middle.

...

I *said* there's no time for questions. Hurry, *hurry!*

...

Okay now. Stop--- *Stop*.

Close your eyes and *do not* move until I say so.

...

[Sounds of conflict and struggling/fighting]

...

(slightly out of breath)

Time to move again. Let's go.

...

Your Grace, ignore the blood. *Let's. Go.*

...

Take the servant's passage, up here. Don't make eye contact with *anyone*.

...

Keep your gaze down.

...

Okay. Okay, we're almost there. Just a little bit longer, your grace. Hold on.

...

Take five paces and--- *stop*. Wait ten seconds.

...

Alright. I'm going to need you to hold your breath, then run through that stone wall. Can you do that for me?

...

Your grace, there's no time. Just promise me you'll run as fast as you can and that you won't take a single breath.

...

Your grace, I swear, this will all be over in a moment, but right now I just need you to trust me. Do you trust me?

...

Good. Now: Hold your breath, and *sprint*. Can you do that for me?

Please?

...

Thank you. Now go.

... [*Moments of tense silence*]

[*Speaker rushes in, gasping for air*]

[*A few moments of catching their breath*]

[*Exhale of relief and exhaustion*]

(alarmed) Your grace! You're hurt!

(searching; frantic) What happened? When did this happen? *Where* did this happen? Are you feeling dizzy? Light-headed? Lay down--- wait no. Sit up. We don't know if doing that could block your airways. Or— is it better to do so to minimize bloodloss? Look at you, you're--- you're *covered* in blood. We need to stop the bleeding. Where's the wound? Where's all this blood coming from? I don't know what's wrong. I don't--- I don't know--- I can't---

...

(softly; losing all energy) oh.

(realizing) It's... *My blood*...?

You're fine, it's just...

(building hysteria) It's all... *My. Blood*...

[*Crazed laugh*]

...

(hysteric) Your grace, why do you look so troubled? It's only *me*. It's only *my* blood. I can take it. However many bruises, however many wounds. For however long. *Forever*, if I have to.

(loudly; to the ceiling/to another entity that isn't present; angrily)

Do you hear that? Do your worst! Strike me down! Tear me apart! Crush my soul and tear my heart out, but that doesn't change the fact that *this* is *all* you can do! I will *not* relent and you will *never* win.

NEVER.

However long it takes!

However. Long. It. Takes!!

... [*Fevered breathing*]

(shaken from raving; too sharply) What? Of course I'm not talking to you. I'm...

I'm just thinking aloud.

(stern) We can stay here for approximately 10 minutes, then we're on our feet again. And this time, when I say *move* you will *move*, your grace. And *when* we are moving, you are *never* to question me again.

Ever.

Do you understand?

...

(relieved; already feeling guilt) Thank you, I---

(concerned) Your grace, you still look shaken and it's only getting worse. Are you *sure* you're all right?

...

(rising anger)

I see.

... and... I'm sorry.

I'm so sorry.

But this is the only way.

If it weren't for that... that *cretin*. That *psychopath*. That gods-forsaken *sadist*, you wouldn't be hunted. You wouldn't be running for your life. You wouldn't be *here*, *hiding* in a secret crypt, even though you're *terrified* of the darkness...

(realizing; softly) With a guard that's beginning to terrify you, too...

(getting angry again) That *bastard*. When this is all over, I'll find him and I'll *destroy* him. I don't care about the bargain. I don't *care* about the rules. What he's done--- what he's *doing* to you, it's--- it's deplorable. Despicable. Disgusting. For all I care, he can rot---

...

Your grace. Your grace. Calm yourself.

Calm. Yourself.

If you fall into a panic now, you won't be able to flee when the time comes.

...

(sharply) Yes, flee *again*. We have to. For your safety.

Life as we knew it is *over*, and nothing will be the same. Starting now, we're on the run. Bear it any way you have to, but you *must* bear it all the same. I am *never* letting go.

...

We can't afford this! There's no time! You need to *pull yourself together*. Show me that you can *do this*, or by the gods, I'll---

...

(shocked guilt settling in) Your grace, I didn't mean...

You don't have to...

...

What am I saying??

(gently) Stop that. You don't have to put up a strong front for me, your grace. No matter how hard you try to mask it, I *know* that face. That smile--- heartbreaking in more ways than one.

Your grace, I'm so sorry. I just---

I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do.

(whispered; realizing) ... I don't know what to do.

And that *swine* is going to get us because of it.

He's planned it all out this time. At every turn, he's outsmarted me, used all my weaknesses against me, and now we're all but trapped.

I don't know what to do.

I don't know what to do.

I don't know what to do!

I don't---

...

[Soft, sad laugh]

That simple of a fix, huh?

And in of all the places... a *crypt*?

...

[*Sigh*]

Fine. Yes. You can hold my hand. But *only* until it's time to run again. Not a moment longer. And to clarify: I'm only allowing this because you claim it's "the answer to all our problems".

(softly; gently) Nothing more...

...

[*Bitter laugh*]

I suppose it *would* feel like deja-vu to you, wouldn't it?

Already seen before. Already *lived* before...

But... No, your grace. Only in secret and in snatches of moments like these. In all your life, I have never been outwardly permitted to hold your hand like this.

In *all* your lifetimes, I'm never allowed.

He made sure of it.

...

(dismissive) He's no one you should be worrying about. A villain. A demon. A devil. He's not worth the time, (bitterly adding on) but he'll sure try to steal some back from you...

...

Is it that obvious? I guess I can't fault myself for being unable to hide it. He isn't exactly subtle, either.

Yes. Yes, I hate him. Loathe him. Despise him.

If only you knew the things he's done. All to win.

...

No, I... I can't talk about it. I'm sorry. If any of it ever came to light, you'd---

I'd---

[*Sigh*]

All you have to know--- all you *need* to know--- is that while he fights so that he can *control*, so that he can *trap*, so that he can *own*, all I do, and all I *will* do is for the purpose of making things *right*. He acts out of jealousy. I act out of---

I act out of lo---

(alarmed) Your grace?

...

Your grace, what's wrong?

Don't tell me you're---

(overcome with frustration at helplessness; too sharply)

Where are you hurt?

...

Here, on your wrist!

Why didn't you tell me? Even if it's a scratch, even if you thought it wasn't important, *why didn't you tell me you were hurt??*

The arrows. They were poisoned.

After all this time, I thought I *finally* found a route out, but... but...

--- *NO*.

Your grace. Your grace, hold on! Don't you *dare* leave me now!

I need more time. I need more time I need more time I need more *gods-damned* time!

(to the room) Damn you, Aevior! I'll have your head, I'll rip you apart molecule by molecule, I'll---

No. Your grace, don't close your eyes. No.

No, *no*, *NO*---

[??????th Loop: Bargaining]

[Ticking clock and crackling fire]

[Door slowly creaks open]

[Shuffling strides to Listener's hiding spot]

(defeated; tired; softly) Your grace. Up. I need to take you somewhere.

...

[Small, bitter laugh]

Point to you.

I wish...

I too wish we could go back to your quarters. Not even...

[Laugh]

Not even for the subtext you were intending. Just a moment to rest. A moment to *breathe* with you, but...

But I'm out of options and I just...

Don't know what to do anymore.

... *[Drawn out, heavy silence]*

Let's just go, yes?

... Please?

...

Thank you, your grace.

Be very quiet now, okay? I've finally found a route that's a tad less... distressing...

... *[Walking in silence]*

(tiredly giving directions)

Watch your step--- don't touch that tile.

...

Close your mouth and plug your nose here, and don't let any of the mist enter your airways.

...

Put this cloak on and draw the hood up to cover your face.

...

In 10 paces--- Duck.

...

Okay, we're here. You go through the doors first. He'll want you to be the first one who walks in.

...

Yes, I know it's a church of the old ones. It's *why* I brought you here. Just---

Walk in. Please. And when you get to the front pew, kneel.

... *[Listener walks to front of church]*

(loudly; to the room; echoing in the space) Here we are. Are you happy now?

... *[Silence]*

We've finally come to strike a deal, so come out you coward!

... *[Silence]*

Face us! Challenge us! I know how you love your wagers--- so set your terms!

... [Silence]

You *dare* ignore us? Show us your face!

... [Silence]

After all this time.

After all this time...

... [Silence]

I curse you! I curse you and the rest of your miserable existence! I curse you in the name of all that lives and breathes under your domain! I curse you to know no peace! I curse you to live all of eternity in agony! I curse you for this--- *hell* you've put us through, this--- this---

(breaking down with realization)... *This*.

(hopeless)... How could you do this to us?

(choked up) ... How...?

...

(to listener; wretchedly) You're wrong, your grace. This church is *not* empty, don't you see? He's here, even now. Even through his imprisonment. He's *always* here. Watching us...

Waiting for... (realizing)

...

(to the room) Do you want me to surrender what was stolen? Is that it?

You lack for none of it! You drown in your own richness of it! How could you ever ask for any of it back when it was because of *you* that the duties were separated so!?

I'll tell you this much: I've stolen enough to where I'll *never* have to go back for more. I will remain here *forever*, and you will stand by and watch.

Nothing that you do from so far away will ever change that, so set your terms! End this stalemate!

... [Silence]

Answer me!!

...

How about we re-role for our roles? You've *always* been bitter about what you were relegated to. As the human here is my witness, I swear I'll relinquish my hold over my domain to you if you win the wager, but if you love them, if you *truly* love them as you say you do, you'll release us from this eternal suffering!

...

Anything! I'll give you anything you need.

Just not—

(breaking down; desperate) Just not my Time. Not my love.

Please don't take away...

Don't take them away from me.

...

Bastard.

(frenzied) Then I challenge you! I challenge you myself! On your honor, on your pride, on your cosmos-sanctioned seat as Pillar, if you ignore this call *one more time* I'll---

(to listener; with sharp frustration)--- *WHAT, your Grace?*

...

(immediate regret; calming) I mean...

(still tense) What--- What do you need, your grace?

I'm so close. I'm *so*. Close. With you here, *surely* he'll relent. I just need to find the right angle. The right terms.

He'll agree. He'll *have* to agree. For you.

It's always for you.

...

Yes, of course. Anything. I'll do anything. What do you need?

...

[Soft, sad laugh]

Oh. Of course, I—

I'm sorry.

... Yes. You can hold my hand. But *only* until your nerves are settled. Not a moment longer. And to clarify: I'm only allowing this because I've done a terrible job as a guard and ended up frightening *you* with all this.

(softly; tenderly) Nothing more...

...

[Sad Laugh]

You always seem to be saying that, you know.

With that twinkle in your eye, and that smile. With that smile, I remember how to *live*.

And then it has me thinking...

Hoping...

But that never is the case, is it? Not really, anyways.

You may always have this vague sense... This *déjà vu*, as you said.

But *you'll* never truly remember...

...

(realizing; to the room) Is that what you want?

[Laugh]

Don't tell me you've done this, *all of this*, just for *that* goal!

Their affliction affects us *both!* What was done cannot be *undone* you idiot! It was our fault, and we will live and cope with the consequences. *Forever*. As is our punishment. To circumvent the ironclad rules set by the Pillars would---

...

(strangled) No.

...

(to listener) Your Grace, *please---* I know you can't hear him but just wait a little longer.

(to the room) No. I won't do it! You don't know what will happen to them, and I'll---

The Council will surely...

No. Negotiate a different deal. I will *never* do that. I can't put them through that.

Not again.

...

How *dare* you! You shameless bastard! You've rigged this from the start! This is no bargain, this is a *death sentence!* You set impossible terms and standards that can never be kept! This deal only has *one* winner!

Change your requirements! I can't---

(to listener; alarmed) Your Grace?

...

(to the room through gritted teeth) Damn you, Aevior.

(to listener; soothing through heartbreak) Your Grace?

I know... I know it hurts, he coated the pews in poison. I didn't know... I'm sorry..

(to the room) Do you see what you're doing to them?

(to listener; gentle, soothing; stark difference when addressing the room)

Please. Please don't go... we're so close... we're...

If I just find the right words... Find the right thing to trade away...

(to the room) How can you call this love?!?!

(to the listener; desperate) Stay with me. *Please*, your grace, stay---

[?????????th Loop: Sadness]

[Ticking clock and crackling fire]

[Door slowly creaks open]

[Shuffling strides to Listener's hiding spot]

(tired; softly) Your grace. It's awfully cramped down here... Wouldn't you rather be on the couch?

...

[Soft, sad laugh]

Good one. How is that you always have a new one *every* single time? After *everything* we've been through... You still manage to make me laugh.

Point to you.

But... No. No, I don't have *that* in mind. I just---

I just want to be near you right now. I just want to look at you. To see your face.

... May I join you down here then?

...

Thank you...

...

I wish I could say I am, but...

No.

I'm not fine. Nothing is fine. Nothing might ever be...

...

Worry not, your grace. It's nothing you can fix, but...

You're making it better just by being here.

... [*Heavy silence*]

We don't have to talk. We don't have to do much of anything, right now. The...

Problem will resurface here soon enough, so...

I'm fine just sitting here. Side by side. With you.

...

It's alright. You can relax. There's nothing we can do to stop it from coming. That much is certain...

I tried. I really, really, *really* tried, but...

Nothing I ever did seemed to work. In the end it's all the same.

So I figured: Why not just rest for a bit?

...

You too? Yes. I'm feeling a little sleepy...

(laughing tiredly) That face you're making--- it's so goofy, but fitting. Afterall, *that* particular smile is one I'm certain most can only ever hope to see in dreams alone.

...

I know, I know. Déjà vu. Always Déjà vu. I'm certain I've said that or something like it to you before.

Once.

Twice.

A thousand times in a thousand lifetimes...

... But *that* signature smile always comes out when you're about to pass out.

...

[*Laugh*]

Well, if it will help you relax a bit...

Yes. You can hold my hand. But *only* until you start to dream. Not a moment longer. And to clarify: I'm only allowing this because you claim it will help you fall asleep.

(softly; sadly) Nothing more...

... [*Content silence*]

Your eyes are getting tired now, aren't they? Your breaths are coming in slower? My voice seems watery and like it's fading in and out?

(rambling) It's the smoke. From the fireplace. The burning of deadly herbs set into motion long before I ever discovered it. Set at a time I can never return to in order to prevent. Just another stage in this endless labyrinth of traps that build off one another, seamlessly picking up where the other might fail. The more you evade, the more entangled you become. In my hubris, I thought I could disarm them all. What a fool I was. I thought I was doing something *right*. That ultimately, all of what I did, all of *this*, would come to a happy ending. Or at least, as happy as it ever can be, with us.

But in the end, I was no better than this cage, this prison.

Taking. Always taking, heedless of consequences.

... But not anymore. With this one...

At least it's one of the more peaceful ways to go.

...

Your Grace? Are you still awake?

...

Good, good. I was just... making sure.

...

No. Close your eyes if you need to. Rest your head on my shoulder if you want. You don't have to fight sleep and struggle to maintain consciousness, just to keep me company.

There was never any point in fighting. So just... let go.

I'm trying to do the same... and it's so much more difficult than I ever imagined.

... [Silence]

Your Grace? Are you still there?

...

Good, good.

I know it's selfish of me, but...

I mean I've always been selfish.

I *want* you to stay awake, but...

You've been through a lot. So much. Too much. And I just want to have a few last memories with you that are peaceful, even if you're barely conscious enough to enjoy them. I'm selfish enough that I might even have to go through a few more loops before I'm fully ready, though...

I know what I have to do, and I know what I'll lose because of it.

But it'll be worth it. For you, it'll always be worth it...

...

Your Grace? Are you still there?

...

... Your Grace?

[????????????th Loop: Acceptance]

[Ticking clock and crackling fire]

[Door swings open]

(cheerfully; from across the room) Up, up, up your grace! Off that lazy butt!

...

(suddenly up close; joking) *BOO*.

...

[Laugh]

Not as funny when *you're* the one being teased now, huh? Now you know what it feels like to get the wits scared out of you. Though, you've always had a knack for giving *me* a different sort of heart attack <3

Come, come. *We* are headed back to the ballroom.

...

I know, I know. 'boring', 'stuffy', 'performative', blah blah blah--- but this time your absolute favorite and devastatingly gorgeous guard will be in attendance. I'll be right there, at your side for as long as...

(pretending nothing is wrong) ... I'm able.

...

(laughing) *Really?* Well, I'd certainly be happy to tell Sir. Brandtfell and any others who disdain you where they can stick their rigid, uptight opinions. Probably up their up-tight *asses*, that's where.

Who *cares?* What have we got to lose now? You've already shocked and pissed off half the people at this party.

(teasing) Why don't we give them a ~scandal~ worth their judgmental whispers.

...

Ha! Point to the guard! And trust me, there's *plenty* more where that came from. I've got *excess* in *all* the right places ;)

Now *C'mon* let's go! There's no time to lose! There's not much time---

(catching himself) Before all the best songs are played!

...

I'm not acting weird, *you're* acting daft!

Up! Get *up*. Let's *go*.

...

Right, um. Ahhhhhhh (deliberating)

The fastest and safest out way would be...

Right, right. Of course.

This way, your grace.

...

Yes, yes, I know it's not the same way you used to get to this room but, uh. Think of this as... an adventure.

Our own little secret.

That is, unless you *want* to give those nobles something to talk about ;) I'm never opposed to kissing and telling ;)

Now come *on*.

... [*Walking in silence for a bit*]

Everything is *fine*, your grace. Better than it has been for a long, long while, in fact. I'm just... Relieved, mostly. Sad, yes, but... Relieved.

(changing topics; teasing) ... Were you always this *slow??*

...

[*Laugh*]

I'm going to miss that indignant glare. That sly attitude, those lightning-quick quips. I'm going to miss... (trailing off)

(abruptly) Hold my hand.

...

(laughing) *Seriously??*

Now is the time you decide to be chaste and shy??

...

(exasperated) Do I really have to explain myself? I want to hold your hand because you're taking *way* too long to go through these corridors, and we're run-run-running out of time! I want to hold your hand because I've only ever wanted one person by my side, and as we hurtle toward the end, I need to make sure it's *you*. I want to hold your hand because...

(simply) I want to. I've wanted nothing else in all my life. Nothing *more*.

Well--- I suppose that isn't *entirely* true. I'll *always* want more with you, but anything at all was more than I ever deserved. Even if they were only stolen moments, mere blinks in the grand scheme of things, I've cherished it all. And now's my final chance.

(joking; teasingly helpless) Now: Are you going to just leave me here with my stupid hand stretched out just *waiting* for you to take it forever, or can I go ahead and find a broom so that I can sweep up the slivers of my shattered heart?

...

Why, instead of *breaking* my heart, you've seemed to have made it beat even faster.

How *mischievous* of you. How *charming* of you.

How completely and utterly perfect— you.

Come now.

[Sounds of classical music approaching]

Ha. How fitting. It's the final song of the night.

Well then... shall we?

...

(laughing) *Obviously* I want to dance. What else would I be asking? Who *else* would I be asking? There's no one on earth I'd rather spend these last few...

[Clear throat]

This last song with.

...

Since when did *you* care about what everyone thought? Ignore the whispers. Ignore the stares.

I only have eyes for you.

Won't you honor this last request from your ever-loyal and devoted guard?

...

Thank you

... *[Dancing in silence for a bit]*

[Laugh]

(stupidly happy; can't help but joke) You know, on second thought, maybe your crushing of your dancing partners' feet earlier in the night *wasn't* a part of your ~master plan~ to bring some excitement to this Gala. It's hard to monitor your steps *and* ensure the bones of my feet remain intact when all I want to do is look at yo---

...

(sobering) Ah... You managed to catch those last few words, huh?

Well... Earlier I said 'last request' because I'm...

[Sigh]

(quietly) I'm leaving, your grace.

...

No, no. Don't stop. I want to dance with you until the very end, want to preserve this happiness until the very last second. I know you're shocked. I know you're confused. I didn't want to tell you while we were in the room because I didn't want to scare you off and spoil the rest of our time together. I thought of about a thousand different ways to do this--- I only have one shot, after all. I wanted to maintain this little bit of normalcy, and if I could, I would draw out this moment forever...

But I can't. It's funny— I had all the time that anyone in the world could ever possibly need, and yet everything pales in comparison to this moment. Isn't it tragic how we only realize how precious something is right before we lose it? I've learned that lesson countless times, and still it never sticks. I was always fortunate enough to brush off that wisdom with more fond memories.

... But I suppose we both don't have the luxury of forgetting it now.

As it stands, we only have a small window of time before another one of his...

... Never mind. There'll be time for you to think on that later. Without me, that is.

I'm ready.

Now, can we keep dancing?

Please?

... *[Slight pause gathering their wits]*

[Deep readying breath]

This song... Do you like it?

...

(laughing) I promise this is relevant to the explanation. Now: Do you like it?

...

[Laugh]

Ouch. That stings. I know it isn't my *best* work, but I thought it was decent.

You never thought that though, of course. 200 years later and you're still making the same *wounding* comments.

Hmmm... I wrote this one... why was it? Oh right. I finally found you after years of searching. I had been looking amongst the nobility, but you ended up being a peasant forge-hand at that time.

Whether you were an aristocrat or a vagabond, a hero or a cutpurse, I always, always found you— all the while writing books, composing music, carving sculptures, sketching drawings, painting murals... There are probably entire *museums* where half of the works are dedicated solely to you. Millennia's worth of tributes and odes with you as my muse.

...

That's right. *Millenia*.

(joking) I look pretty great for someone as old as Time, don't I?

...

(soothing) Hey. Hey, look at me. I know you're confused--- that the curse will do anything to prevent you from remembering--- so you'll just have to listen to me for a bit.

You'll do that for me, right? Once I start, there's no going back. And once I finish...

Everything will change.

You'll remember again.

You'll be *safe*.

...

You're familiar with the cult of the Old Ones, right?

...

And do you remember story of Time and Space?:

From an endless void, Pillars of our reality were birthed. Thought, Will, Life, among others formed the Grand Cosmic Council. And then there came twin brothers. Time and Space. Aevior and Astrion. Where Aevior extended his domain, there existed a *plane* for existence to start upon. Where Astrion extended his domain, there arose a *place* for existence to take root. And there the two lived; and they created and they thrived and they wondered at the miracle where their powers collided. *Together*.

Until a new Pillar was born.

At first it was a gentle thing--- this rapture with the new Pillar. An innocent and timid enchantment that even the Pillar of Love approved. But soon, a rivalry arose between the

brothers, fighting for the hand of the new Pillar, and with it the very thread of existence was threatened.

The brothers, once essentially synonymous, once two halves of the same whole, once a single heartbeat in 2 bodies, could now no longer be trusted to roam freely as they once had. And so, they were separated--- forced to live *outside* of existence, all the while maintaining the 2 forces on which its foundation was laid upon.

Aevior, who would live always, nowhere. Astrion, who would live everywhere, never. One outside the realm of space, one outside the stream of time. Never to cross paths again.

And life continued...

...

(relieved; happy; hopeful) Yes. Yes. The curse is lifting! You're remembering, aren't you?

(excited) This isn't where the story *ends*.

For the Council didn't anticipate the devotion of Astrion. The younger of the two brothers, always willing to break a few rules, he stole a Shard of Time for himself and sought to join the Pillar whom he loved where Time and Space met.

... Only to find...

... *[Struggling Silence]*

(choked up with emotion) I didn't *mean* to, your grace.

I didn't know.

If I knew that the Council would...

... I should have *never* fought with Aevior...

... *[Gathering up strength to finish the story]*

But even so, even after everything that happened, I'd have paid the steepest price for *any* life with you. No matter how short-lived.

A hundred lives. A thousand lives. Countless were lived, and countless more were promised. Every single one as brilliant and fleeting as a shooting star, and still I want for nothing more.

And at the end of each one, I searched to the ends of the earth to start anew. Sometimes, I'd find you a bit too late, where you were all but an elder, already at the end that life. Sometimes, I'd find that you'd taken a vow of solitude, and could only see you through snatches of interactions.

In the best ones, we're inseparable.

In the worst ones, I lose you too soon.

But it didn't matter the nature of our relationship--- mentee, friend, monarch, lover--- it only mattered that it was *you*.

The Pillar of Memory may have taken away your recollection, the Pillar of Life may have taken away your immortality, and the Council may have taken away your very function and purpose *as* a Pillar.

But I have stolen time. I have traversed desolate voids. I have defied the cosmos. And I would do so, over and over. Even for just one minute, one *second* more.

All to find you again. In *every* lifetime.

...

[Relieved outtake of breath as speaker finished the story]

[Surprised laugh as listener goes in for a hug]

(softly; tenderly) You have no *idea* how long I've wanted to tell you this.

How long I've wanted to hold you like this.

(sadly)... But this *still* isn't where the story ends.

...

No, don't let go. We can---

(voice cracking) Can we stay like this?

I just want to be closer for little while longer, but soon...

I've broken the pact. I've unveiled my location, I've confessed my crimes, and now---

Now the Council comes for me.

...

I know, your Grace. I know. I'm sorry.

It was the only way. Aevior, he---

...

He knew I broke the rules, orchestrated this whole *mess* to force me into relenting. Twisting the bit of Time I stole so that I'd have to relive losing you over, and over until I could take it no longer.

(helpless laugh)... though I suppose you won't remember it all now yet, right? Not until the curse is completely erased.

Not while I'm here.

...

(gently; voice starting out strong but slowly fading away)

It's okay, your grace. Keep dancing. Keep holding me.

Don't cry--- I'm happier than I've ever been, don't you see?

Close your eyes. I don't want you to look when they take me away.

And pretend--- pretend I'm still here long after I'm gone. Can you imagine it now? After this song, I'll take you to the gardens. I'll whisper terrible poetry in your ear and hum a tune for us to continue our waltz. We'll sing, and we'll sway, and I'll finally gather up the courage to kiss you like I've always dreamed, and it'll feel like we're the only ones in the world, alone in a pool of moonlight and midnight, and I'll tell you how much I love you until you're sick of it, vowing to say it until the end of time—*our* time that was *promised*— and it'll be perfect because it's *us*.

Pretend. Pretend that the silence that follows is me reflecting on my own boundless happiness, speechless at just how *lucky* I am. And when the music has long since ended, and the sun rises to end this flawless night, and you can't pretend anymore--- remember. Remember everything, good *and* bad. This moment is *ours*, and they can never take that away from you.

I hope you find happiness. Even if it's not with me. I couldn't ask for anything else.

The chase is over, and regardless of what's to follow, I *know* I've already won. I've finally found what I've been searching for.

Wherever I go, whatever happens, it's always you.

[Voice completely fades away until all that's left is the sound of music, continuing to play heedless of 1 fewer dancer]