Summary

Mornings bring unpredictable days, the fear of unknown things to come. Now, she is here. She is beside him. She is safe. He wishes he could keep her here, but he knows he cannot.

This is not what we expected. We believed in gristle, tendon and bone. Pathogen and host.

But we are minor kingdoms of salt and heat. We trace each other's scars - proof of our small green hearts and violent beginnings, engines of cell and nerve, yielding to this silent, lonely union.

- Traci Brimhall, "Noli Me Tangere"

She did not come to bed again tonight. He awakens in the earliest hours of the morning with half the bed still made beside him, no soft angles of a body beneath the tight-pulled blanket, hunched shoulders, tucked chin, the way her body guards itself even in sleep. To his ruined eyes, everything is pallid halos in the dark. The moon outside is high but on descent, a waning gibbous at the top of the window, and, beneath it, as always, he finds her. The chair embraces her in her slumber, her head resting limply against the curve of its back, though her feet remain purposefully on the floor, slender arms dutifully on the armrests, paleness bathed incandescent in the moonlight. On the table beside her, as always, a glass holds an inch of water where the ice at the bottom has melted.
Every night in all the years he's known her, he's woken up alone, but it has only been for the past two months that he has known each time precisely where to find her. Every night for two months, he has found her here, her glow intensifying and diminishing with the phases of the moon, the shadows of her eyelashes lengthening and receding along her cheeks. Every night the commander's figure, every night the slump of her head, every night the inch of melted ice.

He places a hand on her shoulder (every night), and she does not jolt awake, as once she would have, but only stirs and sighs.

"Come to bed," he whispers (every night), and she stirs again, but blinks and nods softly. One hand on her shoulder, the other around her waist, he helps her from the chair, and they make their way to the bed together. He does not see well, but he knows the way by memory, and her gait beneath his guiding arm is astonishingly lucid, even if she herself is not.

He pulls back the covers for her, and she curls herself into the empty space, nestling her head into the pillow, her hair cascading like a waterfall over the edge of the mattress. When he lies down beside her, she turns away from him, as she always has, but then she reaches back — and this she has not always done — and pulls his arm around her. In the dark, he smiles.

The first time Guilford met her, he'd been so young, with a chip on his shoulder and so much to prove. He remembered the way she had sized him up, and he had thought, So this is her, huh? This was Cornelia, the young princess whose capability they spoke of so highly. Of course, he had seen her before — on television, in newspapers, always flanking the Emperor along with the eldest of her siblings, another facet of his great shadow. Nothing prepared him, however, for the striking grace with which she moved or the strength that concealed itself within her lissomeness.

She was an excellent fighter, but he was still better. She wanted a knight, so he gave her the best display of his abilities that he could, and, ultimately, he came out on top, although not without an impressive struggle. But when she glared at him from her submission, eyes all but spitting venom, he hesitated, wondering if perhaps he ought to have let her win. Well, she made clear the absurdity of that idea — the utter preposterousness of it, which became so painfully obvious in retrospect — and dismissed him with a sneer that was itself impressive.

He had a cigarette between his lips before he was even out the door, and as soon as he broke out into the air, he lit it and inhaled deeply. You fucked up.

Then the doors swung open at his back, followed by harsh, purposeful footsteps that nearly startled him out of his skin. Then her hand was on his shoulder, she spun him around to face her, and she yanked the cigarette from his mouth, pitching it to the ground and crushing it under the heel of her boot.

"Disgusting habit," she said. "I don't want to see it again. Don't make me change my mind." By the time he registered what had happened, she was already walking away.

"W-wait…" he stammered after her, running a befuddled hand through his hair, garnering not even a hint of a glance back.

The doors behind him opened again, and Darlton sauntered out. He looked over toward Cornelia, who was already rapidly disappearing into the distance, then back to Guilford.

"Uh…congratulations," he muttered with a small grin, before heading briskly after her.

Guilford never picked up a cigarette again.
Until now. Now he stays up every night, sometimes for hours, waiting for Cornelia and smoking cigarette after cigarette because it is the only thing that can calm his nerves, the acrid smoke curling into his lungs in deep, measured breaths, the nicotine buzz in his head not quite enough to suppress the ringing in his ears that never goes away.

He waits for Cornelia because Nunnally cries herself to sleep every night, someone needs to stay at her side for hours after in case she wakes up again screaming, and the boundaries of Cornelia’s compassion fall beyond those of her deepest grudge. For that, he remains in even greater awe of her.

"I hate him," Cornelia had said once of the brother whom Nunnally cried for. "I hate him so much," and he detected a break in her voice, however slight, "and I hate that I hate him." Then she laughed a wry, black laugh.

Guilford hates him too. Perhaps not as deeply as Cornelia does, but, unlike Cornelia and to his own shame, he does not love Nunnally deeply enough to overcome that hatred in order to console her. He sincerely hopes that Lelouch is burning in Hell right now, and that is a hope that he cannot bring himself to compartmentalize, so he stays away and waits for Cornelia, smoking his cigarettes down to the filter.

He wonders if it is simply that she, too, knows all too well what it feels like to miss someone the whole world hates. He knows better than to ask.

Another part of him knows that Cornelia and Lelouch were once close, that once she cared about him immensely, perhaps almost as she cared about Euphemia. He wonders if she still cares on some level, if she misses him herself. He would die before asking her that.

The reason Guilford had so much to prove back then was, of course, Cassandra. Cassandra had been his first love, his first kiss, his first everything. Blonde hair and brown eyes and a sweet smile, he had been sure she was the woman he would marry some day. That and the fact that she was heir to a minor lordship had been enough to endear her to his parents — she made their son happy, and she would bump the family up a rung to boot.

Well, that all came crashing down when he learned that, for two years, there had been another man, whose child she was already carrying by the time she finally got around to informing Guilford. So, while Cassie planned her wedding to someone else, Guilford swore up and down to himself that he would become a greater man than she ever could have made him. Admittedly, everything had been about proving that to her. He hated her, but not as much as he privately longed to win her back.

The truth was that he had not loved Cornelia from the beginning. He had gone to meet her that first time completely, utterly, and indefinitely done with love. Falling for a princess was out of the question — there were too many rungs between them for even the most ambitious men of his station — and, besides, Cornelia had no patience for such frivolities.

So, of course, he didn't know quite what to think when she called him into her office after their first decisive victory in Area Twelve, both of them still sticky with sweat from hours inside stifling knightmare frame cockpits, and her favorable professional appraisal somehow culminated in him fucking her on her desk.

They didn't talk about it afterward, and he promised himself it would not happen again, but it did happen again, and again, and again. Eventually, there came to be a mutual, if unspoken, agreement between them that this was strictly a thing of convenience. And wasn't it, after all,
incredibly convenient? Cornelia was wholly unobtainable, to the point that it was not even worth consideration, but she was there, and she was, frankly, superior to Cassie in every way: sexier, more beautiful, far higher status, and exponentially more accomplished. (Oh, it kills him now to recall that he ever thought of her so crassly).

"Has anyone ever warned you about shitting where you eat?" Darlton asked him once, adjusting the collar of Guilford's uniform to cover some hideous mark she had left on his neck (A hicky? A bite? What the hell was it? How had he not even noticed it was there?).

Guilford was sure he turned as red as his jacket. "Never heard it put that way before," he mumbled.

"Yeah, ok," Darlton said. "We're all adults here, I can't make the two of you exercise good judgment. I just want to make it understood that I'll cut your dick off if you hurt her." It didn't sound like a joke.

"I would never hurt her," Guilford shot back with more certainty than he had ever had in his life.

He still wore the necklace that Cassie had given him: a gold dog tag with his family's crest on it, hung on a gold wheat chain. He wore it because he liked it, of course, not because of her. Then one day, Cornelia came up from behind him and yanked it with a terrifying strength that sent his neck snapping backward.

"You should never wear anything around your neck that does not break when pulled," she said definitively. "Your neck is more valuable, Guilford. Get rid of it."

That night, he took the necklace off and left it on his desk, making a mental note to buy a different chain, but soon the papers piled up on top, and he never got around to it.

He has learned every scar on her body by touch. As she drifts back into sleep beside him, he rubs her back softly, as he does every night, and his fingers are once again drawn to them.

Some of her scars he has known from the beginning: the smooth patches on her knees, the series of raised nicks across the knuckles of her right hand, the fencing gash on her upper arm.

Some she has gained in the time he has known her: the soft white line of a healed fracture wrapping from the palm of her left hand and around the wrist, the calloused-in chafe of knightmare restraints across her collarbone.

Others are recent: the near-invisible streak beneath her hairline, the long trail of a surgical incision that snakes around her ribs and up her left shoulder blade, the sharp red mark on the side of her neck where a bullet grazed her, and the horrible crater just beneath her shoulder where another passed clean through.

The last two are courtesy of another demonic brother, another betrayal of her trust, the thought of which eats him up inside. He had always known that family was a harsh thing to her, ever since he had heard of her siblings' banishment, and he had known that her protectiveness of her sister had gone beyond the mere fear of outsiders, but only now did he fully understand the evil that had run in the royal blood. Cornelia's armor had saved her life, but her back still bore a constellation of deep bruises, and her anger and hurt ran deeper.

Schneizel was still alive, if that is what it could be called. His presence was haunting to Guilford, but not because this was the man who had hurt Cornelia — the man he deeply hated for hurting Cornelia — because Schneizel was no longer that man. He had become something else entirely: a
will-less body, a walking dead, a man without a chest. The sight of him, following meekly behind Zero, a human shadow with empty, empty eyes, was enough to send a chill through Guilford's entire body. There was no way he could have known the way in which nothing was more frightening, more viscerally disturbing, than a man with no volition of his own.

Guilford had once believed that he knew the look of a wholly broken person. Once, years ago, he had watched a boy emerge from a bombed building in Area Fourteen. It had just been a small restaurant, family-owned, but they had had reason to believe the family was holding weapon stockpiles for a resistance faction, so they had blown it up. That belief, they would later learn, had most likely been baseless, and the memory of that boy had flashed into his mind at the strangest of times for months after. He had stumbled from the rubble, covered from head to toe in dust, dragging a mangled leg behind him, eyes wide, but looking at nothing. His whole face had seemed to pull downward, mouth hanging open, as if he was trying to scream but could not find the sound within himself. It was the mask of horror that he wore, the face of one who has, in a moment, lost everything he was.

In the weeks that followed, he found himself wondering about that boy, again and again. He had an urge to call every hospital in the area to inquire about anybody matching that description who may have been admitted. He wondered if the boy was still alive. But there was no time. There was no chance.

He never mentioned it to Cornelia. He didn't dare. In time, he learned to push the casualties from his mind, to ignore the distractions that stood between him, the great iron fist of Britannia, the Spearhead of the Empire, and his purpose. *Salt the Earth. Do what needs to be done.* In time, he almost even forgot the boy, but he never forgot the face.

He found the face many more times over the years. Sometimes it was the prisoners who wore it, the tortured and starved, as they swore *I know nothing, I know nothing,* eyes crazed and empty all at once, the pleas rolling out of parched mouths like holy tongues. Sometimes it was his own soldiers who wore it, before they were deemed no longer fit to serve and sent home to families whose adulation could never fully bring them back into the world. It rose again and again, like an archetype in a dream.

It was the face that Cornelia wore when he told her that Euphemia was dead, and the moment he watched it take over her, that horrible mask taking over her, embodying her, was the moment that terror coursed through his numbed mind because *Oh God, not her too, not her,* everything was falling apart, none of this made a lick of sense, and this was the part of the dream where he was supposed to wake up, the jolt, the nightmare pinnacle that would bring him back to the world where Euphemia was just a sweet girl and not an inexplicable killer, and she was alive, and Cornelia was herself, not trapped in her own nightmare where he could do nothing but watch her be devoured by it, not trapped on an island as it crumbled into the sea…

But the look that Schneizel wore now went beyond even that. Even those who had been broken down never fully lost their hearts. On the contrary, the very terror of them was the heart laid bare, the defenses of the psyche torn apart. Schneizel did not have that; Schneizel was wholly empty, hollowed out, bearing only the most vestigial traces of the person he used to be. He was like a seashell washed up on the shore, whose inhabitant had long ago died and decayed, but which still held within it the faint sound of the ocean.

It was a fate that Guilford could not wish upon the worst of his enemies. It haunted him through and through.

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Guilford never meant to fall in love with Cornelia. He never wanted to. Love had never been on the menu. But somehow, he fell anyway. Somehow he did not even notice when he slipped from
the precipice and fell for her a hundred stories down, and it wasn't until his bones cracked against
the hard ground that he realized he had never even known what love meant before. It was nothing
like his tender feelings for Cassandra, not soft light and comfort, but complete intoxication, self-
renewing catastrophic rapture.

He cannot pinpoint the precise moment he fell in love with Cornelia, but he knows he did not love
her from the beginning. In the beginning, she had borne a distinct shape, a reliable form, and
somewhere along the line, that had all fallen apart in his eyes. It was not that she hid any part of
herself; rather, it was that the minute complexities of her lay tucked away in the corners,
overshadowed by the harsh image she so loudly projected, but still there to be found. Perhaps all
that changed was that he became willing to look.

He began to see that nothing about her was as effortless as she made it seem. He saw the way
small failures rattled her beneath her skin, even when everything on the surface was keep moving
on, keep moving forward. He saw the way she took pleasure in little things like good whiskey and
autumn days. He saw the way she adored her sister, always finding small trinkets to send home to
her, becoming uncharacteristically at ease whenever she spoke of seeing Euphemia again. He
understood then how everything she did reached far beyond her own ambitions.

But such a love as his for her was far from ecstasy with the constant looming shadow of work to
be done. He stayed up for nights on end, mulling through his conflicted feelings in the dark. When
he began to fear that the lack of sleep was finally beginning to undermine his competence, he
turned to Darlton.

"I don't think I can do this anymore."

Darlton raised an eyebrow, "Why?"

Guilford stumbled. What was he supposed to say? "I—I think I've compromised myself."

He watched the understanding spread on Darlton's face. I warned you, didn't I?

Then Darlton simply asked, "Would you die for her?"

"Without hesitation," Guilford replied.

Darlton smiled and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Then I really don't see the problem."

That night, Guilford slept soundly once again.

Then one morning, he awoke to her gone again, and this time she was nowhere to be found. She
had made him promise not to try.

The emptiness that he found within himself in the year that followed was the opposite of love, or
perhaps its counterpart: the freezing winter to the seven-year summer that had been her. He forgot
how to sleep again, but now what kept him up was not the strangely stirring thought that she was
sleeping somewhere nearby, the placid smoothness of her closed eyelids and her hair all strewn
across a pillow, nor was it the fresh memory of her ragged breath in his ear, her hair falling sweat-
soaked across his face, her fingers bruising his back. It was the nagging ache of knowing that she
inhabited some unknown space in the vastness of the world and that he could speculate all night
and never guess where she was, what she was doing, what she was thinking.

Every day, he looked into the sun until his eyes hurt, wondering if she could see it at that moment,
if it was rising or setting or not there at all. He worried about her, even though such worry felt
forbidden, as if, however many miles away she was, she would wake in the night and take offense
in the way she always did when he worried. Her wondered, selfishly, if she was wondering about him, too. But, mostly, he just wondered why, why, why.

He wondered why because he had never been apart from her so long, and he had almost had the presumptuousness to believe that he finally knew her like he knew himself. Better than he knew himself, even, because he had made her life his purpose. Without her, he was centerless.

But Euphemia's life had been her purpose, and with Euphemia gone — destroyed (and, still, he can hardly think of it now without weeping), he saw that an order of things had collapsed. She was shipwrecked and would not drag him into open water with her, so she pushed him away, perhaps thinking, absurdly, that somehow he would find his way to the shore without her.

It was only when he awoke in pitch darkness — in a hospital bed, he slowly came to realize, with a bandage over his eyes — with the interrogators who came in two times a day (or more? It was impossible to follow the turnover of days after that), demanding over and over again, "What happened? Why did you do it?" to which he could only say over and over again, "I don't know what happened. What did I do?" (I know nothing, I know nothing — he remembered Gottwald, he remembered the prisoners with their broken faces — I know nothing), that he finally allowed the last, forbidden thought to enter his mind: She is dead. It has been more than one year, she is dead, she is not coming back.

The despair had been too great then. He lost track of time entirely, surrendering to his private darkness and to whatever would await him when his body healed. His mind fell into a great, unceasing loop of the last kiss she had given him before she went (so warm, so intimate, so unlike how he'd thought she was, and so like how he'd always wished she would be) because she knew, she knew she would not be coming back, and he had been a fool to wait. Nothing mattered anymore.

Then, by a miracle, he found himself at her side once again. He sat with her, while the whole world turned to ruin, the Emperor dead, Pendragon in ashes, a usurper on the throne. He held her hand, and even through the haze of retinal burns, he could see the tears in her eyes at what they had all become, and all he could do then was cry. He cried with shame because he had failed to protect her, with joy because she still survived, but ultimately with sorrow because if the world could break her down like this, there could not be much hope for any of them.

The months that followed were chaos. The assassination of the usurper Lelouch had left a great power vacuum that quickly filled with violent uprisings worldwide. Nunnally was still named Empress, but the world remained skeptical of rule by one who had been raised by the Demon Emperor. Cornelia reluctantly took the role of chief adviser but made it clear that she would have no more part in leadership than was required of her. Cornelia had never wished to rule and had never chosen her actions in the expectation of doing so, so she was hated by many, as was Guilford himself, he came to realize.

When they attended the wedding of Villetta Nu to a former Black Knight and the newly named Prime Minister of independent Japan, Guilford saw it as a healing gesture, if a small one. Through the two of them and their expected child, at least one of the world's many wounds was finally being stitched back together.

It had been a perfect day, not a cloud in the summer sky, and if just for those moments, things almost seemed to be sweet in the way they had been before. Lloyd Asplund pranced through the crowd in his typical manner, shovelling cake into his mouth and spraying everyone with crumbs as he made cheerfully inappropriate banter. Gino Weinberg was almost kicked out after trying to
slip the bartender five hundred pounds to overlook the birth date on his ID. Li Xingke invited the Tianzi to dance with her feet on his. Just for those moments, they were able to collectively forget. People were smiling, and Guilford mused over just how long it had been since he had seen a real smile.

But the absences were felt. Guilford found that even the smiles were oddly diminished by the ones that were not there — Euphemia's bright eyes, Darlton's lopsided grin.

Cornelia wore an open-backed summer dress that day, one that showed those fresh scars, all the tolls the world had taken on her body. He found that she was all the more stunning for it. At the end of the day, she had taken home the bouquet, not because she had caught it, but because Villetta had forced her to take it, shooting Guilford a sly glance that made his cheeks burn. When Cornelia returned to his side, she punched him playfully on the arm and said, "Don't get your hopes up, Gil." Everyone was smiling…

They keep a single flower on the balcony of their suite at the magisterial building where they currently reside. It is a lone sunflower in a plain terra cotta pot, and he brought it to her one day because Euphemia, who had been buried in Pendragon, no longer had a grave to visit.

"It's what my mother used to call her," he remembered Cornelia saying once. "Little sunflower."

He had the pot engraved, just "Euphemia", no dates. When he brought it to Cornelia, he had worried about how she would react. It was not unusual for her to lash out in anger at the mention of her sister, but she had just stood in silence for some time in front of the spot where he had placed it down. After several minutes, he realized that tears were running down her cheeks, and finally she spoke.

"She deserves a monument."

He placed a hand on her shoulder. "I should have made them know," she continued, her hands curling into fists. "They should know what happened to her. Everything I tried, and they still don't know. They've all just forgotten her. What kind of redemption is that?" She inhaled deeply. "All her life, all I did was fail her. And now I'm supposed to just be happy she's forgotten? Instead of hated? This is all I have to remember her by?"

"I'm sorry," Guilford whispered.

She turned to face him, "No. Don't be."

He found himself embracing her face, and he wiped her tears away softly with his thumb. When he kissed her, she did not pull away. He kissed her for what seemed like forever, feeling her body relax into his arms, and when they finally broke apart, she smiled up at him.

"Thank you."

After the wedding, she placed the bouquet beside the sunflower, spreading the flowers over the bare dirt.

"I don't want her to be all alone," she said.

Guilford wakes just as dawn is breaking. Cornelia is still sleeping soundly beside him. He watches her back, her ribs rising slowly with each breath she draws, then dropping again with each exhalation. He knows she will rouse herself soon, gingerly so as not to disturb him. She will dress
herself in the faint light of the coming day and slip out the door. She will run for hours, countless miles. It is the only thing to do, she says, to keep herself sharp, to occupy herself with something other than her thoughts.

He wants to hold this moment forever, to drench it in amber and render it timeless. He has always hated mornings, but now mornings bring headaches and horrors and the weight of rebuilding the whole crushed world. Mornings bring unpredictable days, the fear of unknown things to come. Now, she is here. She is beside him. She is safe. He wishes he could keep her here, but he knows he cannot.

Minutes pass; the moment comes. Cornelia moves beneath the blankets. She lifts her head from the pillow and runs a hand through her hair. She walks to the chair where her silk robe hangs and pulls it over her bare shoulders before walking outside to water the flower. He lies still in the bed and listens to her fumbling in the bathroom, combing her hair, brushing her teeth. He watches the robe fall to the floor, and she walks across the room, a goddess in the sunrise, to fetch her clothes. She dresses.

As she moves to leave, he wants to say, *Wait, don't go.* But he stays silent.

As she leaves, he recites silently to her back, *I love you, I love you.*

He knows she can feel it follow her out the door.

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