"Your majesty"

...

"Sire"

...

"Sir, it is time to rise" announced the official, in a slightly disgruntled tone.

He lifted back the curtains on the bed to find that as usual, the King was lying in bed, staring listlessly at the canopy.

"It's already time, Tigranes?" asked his master

"Yes Sir, and as you are now awake, I wish to inform you that breakfast is ready" replied the Chancellor

The King sighed. He readied himself for Palace life's ritual and repetition. Reluctantly, he got up, and having dismissed his Chancellor prepared himself for the day ahead, whilst savouring his solitude.

He was not alone for long. Tigranes ordered some maids to attend to His Majesty's preparation for breakfast on his way out. The Chancellor's presence was thus replaced with that of two keen matronly women who came in hurriedly, as if someone were about to close the door on them.

"Good morning your Majesty" called the curtsying maids in unison

"Good morning Bella, Belinda, Lucy" replied their lord, in a half-bored tone.

"We're here to see to it that you're ready for breakfast- in other words to dress you" said Belinda, in as passionate a tone as one could muster for helping someone to dress.

"Thank you, but I think that might be necessary today" said their master in a tone that sought to reassure Belinda and her colleagues that he wouldn't suffocate while pulling his shirt over his head.

"But it is our duty to make sure that the King is safe before breakfast" insisted Belinda with a touch of self-importance.

After several minutes of such exchanges, he was obliged to allow his servants to dress him, as they had done every day for as long as he could remember. The small party then escorted him as he made for the exit of his bedroom, opening and closing its ornately carved doors as he passed through. He wondered how these women, who had played such a constant though minor role in his life could retain their enthusiasm. Indeed he half-expected them to not show up one day, citing boredom. But day after day they came, each time more eager than the last. The King wished he knew what gave them their motivation.

The maids accompanied him through several antechambers before he entered the Breakfast Hall. Taking the only seat at the head of the table, he started breakfast, a lavish affair, which involved the
whole table being covered in the finest food from the kingdom, or at least that was what he was told it was. Scanning the large table he found that though he could admire each dish individually, the combined "aroma" of sweet, savoury, sour and spicy food created a rather unpleasant atmosphere to live let alone eat in. Still, he enjoyed the experience of eating, as unlike dressing and almost everything else in his life, he was allowed to do it unaided. Though he was grateful for this small piece of freedom, he was still irritated by the many servants who were stationed in the hall, watching his every move and to "help" (or trip over each other in an attempt to do so) him should he require assistance. The steady gazes of the servants disturbed the King, and not even eating could distract him from their presence today. He announced that he was going to leave for court early and left the room alone.

He remained companionless as he headed to the throne room. But he was well aware that he was still being watched. After all, nothing escaped the Chancellor's notice.

The king swept past a great number of halls and corridors, and took a side-exit out of a sitting room into a well lit hall with a wall covered in mirrors. The light from the windows streamed in and met the glass of the mirrors, throwing light across the room. The king gazed transfixed and was struck, as he always was, by the pure beauty and simplicity it presented compared to the sickening luxury of the rest of the palace.

He looked at his own reflection. He saw in the mirror a young man with blonde hair and green eyes. He hadn't a clue about whether he was a good looking person, as whenever he had asked, he only received assurances from his servants in return. He was, however, told that he looked a lot like his father, the king before him; the man he had never met. He had grown up being king, and was so tied in with the title to the point that he no longer knew his name anymore. From the cradle, he had been "Your Majesty", "The King" or "Sire". He was not sure that even Tigranes knew the name he had been given by his father. Even if he did, he'd never reveal it.

He'd asked the Chancellor about his father, but Tigranes politely changed the subject. Changing the subject was a pastime of Tigranes, he did it whenever he asked to leave the palace. All his forefathers had never mixed with commoners for fear of corruption, and he should do the same, preached Tigranes, whilst trying to steer the conversation to more proper (or boring) topics.

The king turned away from the mirror and continued pondering. He noticed for the first time, that this was the only room he had seen without candles. Even in broad daylight, the staff in the palace insisted on lighting candles, and to get away from their sickly light made the king like the room even more. Though he owned the whole palace, this was the only part in which he felt at home, it was his sanctuary.

"My lord?"

The king jumped. He swivelled around to see the Tigranes or rather his "projection", an image conjured by magic, standing in the entrance to the room. He was annoyed at his personal sanctuary had been desecrated by the magic of a meddling minister and wanted to rebuke him, but instead he stared silently at the Chancellor's transparent figure, thinking it unwise given his ability as an advisor and magician.

"Yes?"
"You appear to be behind schedule, your Majesty. Perhaps you wish to postpone the court meeting and finish breakfast? I heard you hadn't eaten."

"No that won't be necessary. I'll come up now" the king said rather gruffly.

"Very well your Majesty" Tigrane's image disappeared.

The King headed for the throne room. He slowed down along the way to examine the portraits of past kings, which lined a corridor leading to the throne room. He gazed up at the painted faces, picking out the similarities they shared in features and attempted to compare them to his own. He noticed that all the portraits were tagged with a brass name-plate: "Horace IV"..."Henry II"..."Arthur"... all had names. He wondered if anyone would remember his name when the time came to hang his own royal portrait. After all, even if Tigranes knew his real name, the King doubt he'd live long enough to see him die.

"Sire?" asked the Chancellor's projection.

The King jumped again "Yes, Yes! I'll be there soon!" he said almost irritably.

He ran down the corridor to the door of the throne room, and flung it open ready to receive his "courtiers". But he found the room empty, save for the Chancellor himself. Not surprised, but merely accustomed to "court" with only one minister for as long as he had been on the throne, The King walked up the aisle of the dimly lit cavernous hall and ascended the steps leading the illuminated throne. Once seated, he began speculating about what issue Tigranes would choose to rattle on about today; a serf's revolt? a rise in the price of grain? The King had wagered that he would be lectured on problems pertaining to the maintenance of moats when he noticed that the Chancellor hadn't noticed him at all. He had instead been playing with a curious looking contraption, black in colour, which beeped at regular intervals, and occasionally let out a shrill scream, at which the minister would calm by talking to it. Rather offended at being ignored, the King cleared his throat.

"You called, Tigranes?" asked the King in a mockingly polite tone.

The Chancellor, alerted to his presence, immediately hid the curious item he was playing with from his master's sight. "Yes My Lord" He replied "I have something we need to discuss"

"As usual" replied the King, bored already. He wished that the Chancellor would just give him the usual documents to sign so he could be doing something else, though of course life in the palace never offered any opportunity for excitement.

"Well you see..."

"What's that thing you just hid from me, Chancellor?" The King cut him off "Is it something to do with magic, can you show me?"

"Not right now sire" replied Tigranes shakily. The King thought his advisor looked a bit nervous today, and was far from fitting his usual role as an assertive but obedient advisor.

"Well tell me what you need to and then show me" demanded the King.
Tigranes paused. "Yes sir. Well you see things have been going on of late that require our...."

But the Chancellor was cut off again, this time by a colossal roar which shook the palace to its core. Cracks appeared on the walls of the throne room, and debris fell from the ceiling.

"What's going on?" He asked Tigranes.

But Tigranes was in no state to reply. Panicked and distressed, he wrenched the gadget he had hidden from within his robes and screamed at it:

"Get me out of here! You have your puppet, now come and get me!"

"What is the meaning of this!" The King screamed at his advisor.

"I'm sorry" was all Tigranes could manage. The King, not an unwise judge of character, thought he saw genuine remorse in his eyes.

But Regardless of how Tigranes felt about the situation, he had a feeling that he was the "puppet" he was talking to the contraption about. He ran out of the throne room and made for his apartment, where he could see the people from the balcony and rally the people into rising up against whatever magical conspiracy the Chancellor had in store.

He made his way to his bedroom, amidst the general commotion of servants rushing to and fro, and rushed onto the balcony where he could see the people over which he ruled.

He stared at the crowd in astonishment. As another sickening thud echoed through the palace, the people on the ground below the balcony carried on as if they were unaware of the catastrophe that affected those inside. Hoping for help, the King waved his arm and shouted. One member of the crowd noticed him and soon a large gathering had come together to greet and wave at the King. The king shouted at them to break down the palace walls, but was only met with more cheering.

Confused at the crowds ignorance to his plight, he resolved to scale the walls to get to the outside himself to lead the charge. But as he was turning away, the crowd faded. The King returned to the balcony dumbfounded. The crowd had simply vanished, as had the street upon which the gathered and the buildings which lined it. In its place was a scene which left the King silent in fear. The city being destroyed was not the one he thought was in danger. He saw flying carriages trying to evade a monstrous flying warship, he saw fire and destruction consuming elegant and gigantic buildings; several hundred stories high. This was the kingdom over which he ruled. This was the Nation he failed. He made for the door to rally his servants to break out and fight the enemy. But before he could act, another thud caused the roof to cave in, leaving the King on the balcony: trapped.

Ian Pan