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1800 words

Sober

Tom shivered in the chilly the November night as he waited for his cue. His hands were huddled by his chest, holding onto a rope. The rope ended in a blackened chain, and at its tip was a knotted dart soaked with oil. He angled his wrists away, trying to avoid spills on his t-shirt. *'It won't melt, but I still don't want it to catch fire.'*

"Our final performer, well, he needs no introduction. Fire spinning to Lorde's Sober, it's Tom Dylzryx!"

Tom stepped out of the sidelines to the centre of the stage. Normally, he'd take a moment to appreciate the applause all around him. But the cold was getting to him, and he could feel the morning's hangover creeping back. *'Let's leave the basking for a warmer show. And not schedule that one the day after a party.'*

Tom walked to the brazier, right in front of the three rows which were roped off from the public. He swung the rope around, bringing the knotted dart in front and dipping it into the coals in one fluid motion. Tom stepped back once the instrument was aflame, the rope hanging taut in front of him, and took a quick glance at the audience.

His eyes immediately found Nancy - she was in the first row behind the safety line. Her lips smiled at him, but her dark eyes were wide with her usual concern. The orange light on her burgundy highlights seemed to set her brown hair on fire, and they glimmered off the diamond on her finger. He still wasn't used to seeing that. His hands were feeling a lot colder. *'Let's hope they don't freeze in the middle of the performance'* he prayed, as the first vocals kicked in.

Night, midnight, lose my mind

Tom started swinging the rope, sending it right one instant and left the next.

Night, midnight, lose my mind

The swings flew farther and farther. Tom's body swayed like a drunk partygoer, adding a curve to the rope.

Night, midnight, lose my mind

Tom's torso tilted back as the rope swirled ever higher, until it circled right above him.

Night, midnight, get to-

With one jerk, the music stopped, Tom stood straight and the rope dart fell limp in front of him. Then he kicked it up as the real song began, and the crowd went wild.

Oh, God, I'm clean out of air, in my lungs

It's all gone

Played it so nonchalant

Tom swerved at the last moment as the dart came down, its heat radiating from the spot his head had been in a second ago. He paused for a second, and then the song's beat informed his muscles what to do. He'd been working on the intro for months, but he hadn't done it in November chill before. *'So you almost dropped a flaming dart on your skull!'* He scolded himself. He'd been too slow with his hands. *'And enjoying the dance too much. Still can't get last night's party out of your head?'*

We're sleeping through all the days

I'm acting like I don't see

Every ribbon you used to tie yourself to me

Tom drew the rope closer and closer, draping it in empty knots over his body. *'Left to right, then right to left.'* To the audience, he must've looked all wrapped up, but it could be slipped off in an instant. As the verse ended with an echo of "me", he had the rope around his whole body, with the dart held aloft right at the audience. It eclipsed the tiered seats, all the faces melting into the flame. Tom was glad - he didn't feel like seeing Nancy. Her face would only remind him of the search for ecologically sustainable wedding planning agencies, or looking for houses with 4 beds, 3 baths and room for 2 cats.

So let's get to know the kicks

Will you sway with me?

Go astray with me?

Tom danced even wilder, bringing the dart in for a moody circle for a second before thrusting it out to the side. He had practiced the pre-chorus to perfection, and he let his muscles take over as the flame darted back and forth above the stage. But the crowd kept up the "Ooh"s and "Ahh"s with every swing-it all looked the same to them.

We're King and Queen of the weekend

Ain't a pill that could touch our rush

Tom's hips flew sideways, his shoulders following behind. The persistent drum kicks had transported him to yesterday's party - the sound-activated lights, the sticky dance floor, the shuffling of bodies all around. His feet shifted over the ground, transferring his weight while making space for his dance partner. His hair is flicked aside as he locked eyes with her. And then he heard a crackling roar, and the reverie is broken. The fire is his partner tonight.

But what will we do when we're sober?

'That was vivid, much more than this morning.' He turned from right to left and right again, each time holding the rope a bit closer to the chain at the end. Each swing looked like he was holding a candle up to the crowd. *'The hangover must be clearing off. Maybe if Nancy had let me have more than three hours of sleep, it would've gone away sooner.'* Tom could hear her high-pitched nagging, could feel the insistent nudges of those soft fingers.

Oh, God, I'm closing my teeth

Around this liquor-wet lime

Midnight, lose my mind

But she had brought him that triple shot espresso with lemon juice. She knew he needed his hangover cure. Then he'd told her about the dancing. She'd immediately followed with stories of a night spent painting patterns onto the wall. He'd felt like she hadn't really listened to his tale of the party, but her story still made him smile.

I know you're feeling it too

Can we keep up the ruse?

Tom's hands were directing the rope dart without any conscious thought at this point. It was all choreographed weeks ago: a big swing, then a small circle for contrast. *'I wanted to tell her how fun the dancing was. And there were so many new faces, so many people on the dance floor. It was fun!'*

When you dream with a fever

Bet you wish you could touch our rush

But he didn't get the chance to tell her about the fun he had. They'd went off to shop for winter clothes. He recalled Nancy fastening a glove onto his hand while shopping. And then he had closed his fingers around hers, and stared into her dark eyes for one blissful moment.

These are the games of the weekend

We pretend that we just don't care

But we care

'Make that flourish right when the beat hits. Feel the music as you wrap the rope, then shoot the dart once it picks up again.' The flame was too far to make him feel warm, but his hands didn't feel cold anymore.

(But what will we do when we're sober?)

The sample of a tiger's roar startled him, as the song transitioned to the bridge. *'I wish I could do the fire breath trick - that would go well with the roar'* But it was better to not burn his lips. *'They're pretty useful.'* He'd certainly made good use of them at last night's party.

We know that, it's over

In the morning, you'll be dancing with all the heartache

Those had been blissful moments too, when his body had moved as one with his partner, their minds taken over by the synthesized beats and the feeling of each other's tongues. Tom swung the rope dart in rapid circles around his body. The oil was running low, and the flame turned blue as it swept through the same oxygen-deprived arcs.

And the treason, the fantasies of leaving

But we know that, when it's over

But he could still feel the wave of heat as the dart rose and fell. The flame wouldn't give out before the song ended. Tom realized that he had been off choreo for the past few bars. *'Well, why don't we improvise the rest?'*

In the morning, you'll be dancing with us

He kicked the dart up, letting it rise as the music slowed. *'I was not ready for this party.'* He had not expected to meet so many people. The blonde he'd chatted up at the bar, the redhead on the dance floor, the raven-haired girl who always ended up across him in the circle. *'But it was pretty fun.'*

Oh, dancing with us

Tom jerked forward, bringing the dart down. He swung his arms to the left, directing the dart's momentum to start a wrap around him. He searched for Nancy in the audience. Had she realized when he'd started improvising, or was she as clueless as the rest?

Oh, you'll be dancing with us

He could feel the heat in the air as his hands followed where the flame had been seconds ago. The rope swung pointless arcs around him - a wrap he could lift in one grand finale. His stare locked onto Nancy's dark eyes.

(Can you feel it? Can you feel it?)

But even though the rope wasn't trapping him, it kept bringing the flame closer and closer. The heat was starting to make him sweat, despite the November chill. It reminded him of the dance floor, the writhing bodies, his partner's embrace. But their eyes had been crystal blue. Or bright green. Or teary almond. Never dark.

Dancing with us, us

The fire cracked even louder as it rushed right by his ears, drowning out the drone in the background of the song. His gaze wandered off Nancy, and towards the others in the audience. *'So many people to meet.'* And only one of them had dark eyes, burgundy highlights, and a ring on her finger.

(But what will we do when we're sober?)

Tom stole his gaze away, and looked at the flame which now hung taut in front of him. And he released the wrap. He let the dart fly up, not caring where it landed, as Lorde sang her last word.

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