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Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

This Life Unlovely

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Clara Asuncion

June 2013

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my committee members for their support and helpful comments throughout my time in the program. Thanks also to Susan Straight for her critiques. And great thanks to Bryan Bradford and Michael Jayme for all their help and encouragement.

A world of gratitude to Minh and Melody for their friendship. And to Isabella, a true appreciation for our shared enjoyment of fantasy, adult or otherwise.

The most invaluable praise to Lexie, a true friend for always supporting my story-babbles and also verbally smacking me when I was being silly about my writing.

Gracious credit to Ellen, for her friendship, and the conversation--about soul mates accounting for friends as well as lovers--that sparked Cadence Delagostino's story.

Thanks to my family for being a net when I thought I might hit the ground.

Love to Christine for being the cushion I didn't know I needed.

Appreciation to several members of the Online Writing Workshop for Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror for their encouraging comments and spot-on critiques.

Unending gratitude to Angela for housing me the fateful winter that changed all I thought I knew about Cadence. And for letting me tell her adventures as bedtime stories.

Thank you, Soichiro Honda, for giving me the place and inspiration to dream.

To my mom and dad:

I hope your second lives have been and always will be
full of joy and peace, whether on earth or in light.

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Chapter 1 – Infamy

I could have gone my entire life without holding a sword.

My godfather raised me on war history and tactics, and I knew how to assemble and disassemble firearms. But weapons violence was practically a myth in Wellington, CA, and Poppy didn't even own the guns he'd trained me with. He wouldn't keep them in the house outside of that single hour every day during junior high. Thank God. I preferred theory, thanks.

So I was nervous. But holding the relic in my hand made me wonder at the history this sword had seen. Who wouldn't be proud of the history in the room? The weapon was way more interesting than the wooden spoon, ceramic plate, and silver goblet in the shipment. Maybe whoever originally owned them had wanted a fancy dinner knife? The sword had surprised me, inspiring affection the second I'd seen its photo and blurb in the Natural History Museum's catalog: "Uncategorized."

It had the thin sleekness of a younger Eastern blade, but the matching guard, grip, and sheath suggested Western feudalism. Both an anomaly and a wonder, none of the tomes surrounding us in the Rare Books room could compete with that.

The pale bronze showed nicks in the guard as engraved streaks of black. This blade had seen heavy fights. The grip was thick in my palm, pliant and easy to grasp. I'd never thought a weapon could feel so comfortable. Instead of the standard Hollywood sand-and-sandal battle scenes, I imagined holding the sword out in front of me, blocking

another blade, listening to the scrape as the offending weapon slid down to rest upon the hilt guard.

My surprise at having imagined a physical altercation jolted me. I couldn't afford to get distracted by the sword's former life--right now, it needed the display that did not yet exist. From my original request to today's delivery, about nine months had passed. I'd given up hope after four months of flustered calling and waiting, and because the payment hadn't posted to the library's December statement, I'd been completely unprepared to receive the shipment this morning. I'd scraped up the funds for the sword at the end of the previous fiscal year, and my boss had approved the rental then. Now, the presentation needed to prove worthy of both the long wait and the hit our current budget would take. We were expecting major cuts in three months. Unsubtle hints suggested my job and its requisite history projects would be the first to go.

Maybe the sword had the magical power of drawing in patron donations. Biting my lip, I nudged the sheath just a few inches with my thumb--giving enough exposure to take in the slim blade, wicked sharp and curved. The metal glinted an innocent greeting.

"Hope you're worth it," I whispered.

"Honey," said a strange man behind me. "You know how to use that thing?"

I'd nearly leaped out of my flats. With my heart pounding, I turned to face him.

The best tip I could ever give someone with a public contact job would be to track regulars. I didn't know by heart every patron who stepped through our doors, but I tended to recognize locals just from being out in the city, and they appreciated when I asked after a son's dance recital or a daughter's archery competition. This man had a peculiar aura about him. I couldn't reconcile his appearance with the Wellington I knew.

He was older, but not as old as Poppy. From the short white hair under his beige flat cap, I guessed he was barely pushing early fifties. Or fourteen-hundred, given the red cravat accenting his white t-shirt and blue blazer. Combined with the short white beard, he seemed a cool-looking incarnation of Santa Claus.

I cleared my throat. "It's a display model," I explained with a smile. "Too old for swordplay." Time to close shop. Usually there was a rope blocking the stairway to Rare Books. Maybe someone had left it unhooked again.

I set the sheathed weapon back in the shipment box. Then I put the bubble-wrapped plate and spoon parcels in to join it. I intended to do the same with the silver goblet, but that bubble wrap fluttered off when I grabbed at it without looking.

The cup's silver was cool to the touch, and very heavy, as if the thin construction was more dense than the eye could judge. I thought I heard a high-pitched humming, almost what I'd expect from my friend's tuning fork. It was faint, almost far-off.

I turned to ask if the man heard the sound too. But when he looked into my eyes, I suddenly felt like I was falling until--

A man with short white hair stood over me. I tugged hard on his pant leg, mutilating the cotton in my fist. "WHERE IS MAMA?!" I screeched. All I wanted was to protect Mama. Augusts were protectors and that was what I did when Daddy was on duty. Especially when Mama had been so ill as the past few days.

She was always there. Always. Until this day when Daddy had forbidden me from entering her sewing room, or their bedroom. "Archie, answer!" I yelled as I bounced, stamping at his feet. I blamed him. He was following Daddy's orders, but he knew I needed to find Mama!

Archie frowned at me, his eyebrows drawn, as if he did not know what to do. I forced huge coughing sobs, hoping he would give in, despite the already dry tear streaks on my cheeks. If Archie understood my despair, he would surely take me to see my mother.

He grunted as he bent to haul me up by my underarms. I cried out in triumph. He was taking me to her now!

Then he set me down atop the ottoman and leveled his gaze with mine.

With a pout, I kicked my feet up. My blue dress rustled with each leg swing.

"Mistress Cadence," he said gently, dabbing at my eyes with a silky blue handkerchief. "It is not safe."

"I want Mama!" I yelled. "I want her now!"

I blinked and gasped.

Where was I? Tile floor, deep brown shelves. Library.

Screams still bubbled in my throat, but I was nineteen now, not five. And I wasn't begging to see my mother. I had to remember what was real.

The Santa Man's cold hazel eyes calmly watched me.

Minutes in my daydreams were only seconds in real life. Had he said something? I had to be normal.

I put the goblet back into the box.

"Some things," the Santa man mused, "they're more than what you see of them."

I almost replied that sounded like a Poppy-ism, but I didn't like how he'd moved closer to me and the box since our conversation had started. There was no way I would risk anyone but me touching the shipment, even if this guy secretly *was* Santa Claus.

I held out my hand to direct him away from the box. "I'm sorry, Sir, but the exhibit isn't ready yet." I smiled to keep my voice amiable. "Is there something else I can help you with?"

Instead of moving, he directed his gaze to my chest and let it stay there. So, he was either looking at my name tag, my boobs, or both. Or all three, rather.

An appreciative smile sprouted on his lips. "Cadence, is it?" His gaze snapped up again.

Official creeper status was well within his reach. There was no way Santa Claus would ever look at someone like that, like he was trying to claim her. This man was more of a Bad Santa. "Is there something I can help you find?" I tried again.

"You have very Eastern eyes," he said, as if it were a compliment. He stepped closer.

"Excuse me?" I backed away to compensate. The box shifted when my calf nudged it.

He moved again. "Your mother was Asian?" His tone said he already had the answer.

I put my hands out in front of me. There wasn't much room between us. I didn't want to start a physical altercation, so I kept my palms an inch from his chest and forced calm breaths, despite the pounding pulse in my ears. "Sir," I said with a slight tremor, "I'm sorry, but this area is off-limits. If there is something *in the main library* that you need, I'd love to help you with that."

"Do you worry about your body?" he asked, leaning in over my hands.

"What?" I whimpered. My heart was practically in my throat.

We were in a secluded area. I didn't know what he wanted from me, but it probably wasn't good, and this conversation was definitely *not* okay.

He looked me up and down, then reached for my arm. "We can work with your weight, but--"

I flexed my hand, remembering the shipment box reached my thigh. With a swipe, my fingertips caught the edge, tipping it over. I caught the sword with my toe as it toppled out. A flick sent the grip into my hand, though my slick fingers fumbled. When I held the sheathed weapon up between us, I was silently grateful my spatial dexterity worked for more than finding fire exits.

He smirked, keeping his eyes on my face. "So you *do* know how to use it."

He was teasing me! I held the grip in my right hand, but I had my arm crossed over my chest while the scabbard angled back toward my shoulder, the drag hovering in front of my face. An unstable defense like this would never hold in a fight.

I flinched as he lifted his hand up close to my face. He pinched a single white thread between his fingers.

No one would go this far to remove a thread. Would they?

"Sir," I said, my voice still shaking, "if you'll please step outside. I need to close up."

"Why's that?" he asked. At least this time he didn't advance.

"Lunch," I replied. A guess.

Bad Santa glanced up at the clock behind me. I held my breath.

"I'd hate to deprive you," he admitted. Then he tipped his cap down. "Enjoy."

I kept the sword up for about a minute after he had gone. Then, for another minute, I let the sword and my arm hang at my side.

"What just happened?" I asked the room quietly. Then I realized what I had just done.

The shipment and I were safe, but now the rest of the library was fair game.

Swearing, I shoved the sword back into the box. Then I flipped the lights off and swung the door shut. A tap on the security pad activated the lock.

Running was forbidden in the library, but I made the stairs in about three leaps. I scoured aisle after aisle for Bad Santa, or Jules. Jules wasn't in Folklore/Mythology, Fantasy, Historical, or Romance. She was probably collecting stray books.

After about fifty study tables, I saw her.

"Jules!" I hissed. I ran over to a table laden with enough books to fill a shopping basket.

The frown on Jules' face wasn't so much unhappy as disdainful. "I," she said as I stopped beside her, "may need to start an intervention if we keep our funding." She

already had an armful of Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda stacked against her torso. The mess bothered her most, despite the fact that it was better for library staff to re-shelve than untrained three-year-olds.

There were patrons around, including moms with babies. I needed to act calm. I grabbed up my own armful, squeaked as the books began to topple, then Jules held out a pinky to even out the balance.

"Thanks," Jules said as we started toward the nearest book cart.

"Creepy guy alert," I said. "Short white hair, short white beard. Red cravat."

"He sounds dashing," Jules said in amusement.

"No!" I cried. How could she be so calm? Even Wellington had to stop being charming some time. "He cornered me in Rare Books. I think he has an Asian fetish and he was checking me out." I shuddered. "Euw."

Jules got the lemon look on her face. It appeared when she thought something was really terrible and at the same time she had the inappropriate and inexplicable urge to laugh, so she scrunched up her face to avoid smiling or grinning.

"Lemon," I warned her.

"Sorry," she said, a soft bubble of laughter creeping up under her breath.

"Seriously, though, you're okay?"

"I'm fine." At the book cart, I dumped my stash. "Creepy Bad Santa could still be around. What if he approaches some poor girl?" I couldn't live with that being my fault.

After Jules dropped her books, she nodded to the East Wing. "Hey. Calm. It's fine. Let's see if our three cameras got the guy's face."

My heart sank. We had more than three cameras, but not nearly enough to cover every angle.

"We're in finals mode," I said, lethargic from my defeat. "Older students will stay for the long haul. Can you have everyone keep an eye out for the carrels along the walls? I really hope nineteen is his threshold."

"Gross." She shuddered too. "He'd better keep away from this South Asian, or he'll have a red noose. How'd you get rid of him, anyway?"

"Closed for lunch." I was grateful he'd gone away, but I wished I'd done more.

"He's probably gone."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if he's targeting Asians or... equal opportunity." I didn't like either prospect.

"Maybe your Detective Friend's sketch artist--" she faltered. "... Oh."

If anything could stop Jules in her tracks, it was the golden-haired head two tables away.

Jules let out a heavy, lovelorn sigh.

I cleared my throat and headed over to the table. "Hey, Harper," I whispered.

Harper lifted his eyes from his laptop screen, then his expression brightened. "Good..." He checked the time on his computer. "Morning, Cadence, for another half hour. Did you know that 13 inches of new snow melt down to only one inch of water?"

"Uh... I totally didn't," I said. Harper was nine months younger than me, but he already had at least two degrees. Ever since we'd met in World Lit he liked to tell me odd facts about water. Jules thought it was cute. She thought *he* was pretty cute, too. "Thanks, I guess. Have you noticed a creepy red-cravat guy around?"

His eyes widened behind his glasses. "I haven't," he said. "Has something happened? Is everyone all right?"

I shrugged. "I'm fine. He was just really creepy. Jules thinks he's gone, but we'll check the cameras. If you see him, can you let one of us know? White hair, short beard."

His face went ashen, as if this were the worst news he'd heard in a year. Harper worried easy, but had never looked so unsettled.

"Hey," I said. I touched his arm. "You okay?"

He took a deep breath and cleared his throat. After throwing on a smile, he nodded. "Just concerned. I don't want anything to happen to you. If you need anything at all--"

"I need to ace our finals," I said grimly. "Study group tonight?"

"Of course," he replied.

"Thanks. Later."

Jules sighed again when I rejoined her. "Why didn't you keep him talking?" she moaned. "That British--"

"South African," I corrected her.

"--Sexy. Accent. Is perfect."

"If you really want to hear it, you should try talking to him."

"You're mean!" she whimpered. She pressed her hands to her cheeks as she turned away.

"The word 'hi,'" I said, holding my arms open. "Simple. Almost like it occurs in nature, you know, organically."

"Yeah, I'll talk to Harper the day *you* talk to Easton Wyndham," she said, quickening her pace.

"What?" I jogged to catch up. "I talk to Easton all the time!"

"Beyond small talk and pleasantries?"

"Um..." I thought hard. "Oh! Sometimes he asks about school! Ha! I win."

"You're not allowed to lecture me about crushes." She sniffed.

As we walked, I gave each aisle a good visual sweep in case Bad Santa emerged.

Though Jules was calm, and she had every reason to be given the sparse criminal reports printed in the weekly paper, every passing moment felt more uncomfortable. I wondered how far he could get, how many more people might be exposed.

"Cadence," Jules said, so suddenly that I jumped, "this is your freedom. I want you to enjoy it. Easton sits in your house almost every night drinking wine and watching you run around in your skimpy shorts. He's not there for the great table service."

"They're my comfy shorts," I said. "And he's there to hang out with his friend. Fiore? Who collects my rent check?" I wanted her to drop it. We needed to strategize. Limon County HR had policies for problem patrons, but negative activity had been so sparse the rulebooks wore more dust than some of my Rare Books collection.

As we passed the main lobby, I slowed. The information desk was a good vantage point for watching the exits, or anyone spying on patrons walking through them.

"Hold on," I said.

Jules pressed against my arm. "You save Easton dinner. He's actually eating out of the palm of your hand." She raised her eyebrows. "While he ogles your lovely curves."

"He works at least sixty hours a week," I said. "He's hungry and tired." Had I seen Bad Santa's shoes? I'd heard him walk away. I listened for any familiar footfalls.

"Don't you fix his buttons, too? You're common-law married."

"We're not. You've never heard him deny his precious Michel is stiffing him on those thousand-dollar shirts."

A short shriek made me jump. It was a laughing little girl.

I couldn't stand feeling so disadvantaged and unready.

"Cadence," Jules said slowly. "Buttons are all the same."

"Mine have three holes. Three points make a stable plane. Easton has never asked me to fix a shirt twice." I scanned the lobby for red. "Anyway, he hasn't been to the house since he and Fiore started fighting. Well, technically he has, but Fiore never lets him inside."

"So what's eating you?"

I took a deep breath. I was terrible at hiding things that bothered me. "I miss Thomas."

Jules pointed her index finger in my face. "No. You surprised everyone by finally putting yourself first. You can't backtrack—that'll make everything worse."

Pain pierced my chest.

"Hey," Jules said, snapping her fingers in my face. "Focus. Corporate VP—"

"Jules!" I cried.

"-Hot, rich, and single!"

"Hey!" called a familiar voice. "Sounds like you're talking about me."

Jules scoffed at my roommate. "You're as hot as a dead goldfish. Go away."

Averill held his hand to his heart. "Thanks, Jules. But I'm here for her."

"You going to eat anything good?" Jules asked, her tone full of suspicion.

"Isadora's," I answered, but I wasn't so sure as I peered through the Dracaena Massangeana leaves guarding the desk. A guy with a blue blazer walked away from me, his phone to his ear. My heart thudded. If that was Bad Santa, I could stop him for our no-phone policy.

Jules frowned. "They're not open during the day. And aren't they kind of expensive?"

"Easton paid them to open for lunch," Averill said casually.

A loud, almost pained gasp ripped through the air. When I started around the plants to get a better look, Jules grabbed my shoulder and whirled me around to face her. "You're going to eat lunch with Easton Wyndham?!"

"I can't," I said. The leaves blocked the guy's face. If this wasn't him... "Sorry, Averill. Tell him I'll email a Fiore update."

Averill held up his phone. "He's already--"

"You're going," Jules said.

Red flashed in the corner of my eye. I whipped my head around, but it was someone's cardigan. The blue blazer was gone, too. My pulse stuttered, then calmed. "I said I can't." I started for the East Wing. I needed to see the camera footage.

Averill grabbed my arm. "Cadence, just eat something you haven't cooked for once."

Yeah, I thought, and beg for a job from the person paying for my expensive meal. "I've got to--"

"You're going," Jules whispered into my ear. "Or I will text him from your phone."

"What?!" I exclaimed.

She raised her eyebrows. "When you were trying *things* on?"

"What'd you say?" Averill asked, oblivious. "Jules, I didn't hear."

I pressed my fingers to my chest. "You can't--" I stuttered.

Jules knocked my hand away and pressed her phone against my bra cup, through my dress. My phone lay just beneath the thin layers. It chirped to confirm that files had transferred.

I grabbed at Jules' phone but she stepped away. "Don't you dare!" I hissed.

"I've got it covered, Cadence," Jules said nonchalantly as she tapped at her screen. "It's Wellington. What could happen?" With her voice low and urgent, she added: "Every. Detail."

As she ran off, I reminded her, weak from shock, "The carrels against the wall."

"Got what covered?" Averill asked, letting his dark brown bangs scatter over his eyes.

###

When we stepped into Isadora's, I almost threw my phone at the Caravaggio-adorned reception area. My Detective Friend hadn't answered his desk phone or his cell phone, and Dispatch couldn't give me his location.

"I should have worn shoes," I complained when Averill and I arrived. My white flip-flops were already squeaking from use.

"They're always business casual," Averill replied with a shrug. "It's not like you're interviewing for a job. Unless something *else* happened at the library."

I bit my lip. I wasn't ready to admit that I'd considered asking Easton for such a huge favor. Averill had gotten his job on his own, before he'd rented one of Fiore's rooms. I aspired to look half as capable.

"I don't want to think about the library," I moaned, burying my face into my palms. A chill hugged my bones and my hands were unsteady. "Oh God, now I'm starving." I drove my fingers into my loose hair. This was not the time to stress-eat.

"You should've picked Korean when he asked," Averill said. "I could go for *boobiba*."

I stared at him with my mouth open. "What? *Boobiba*? Do you mean *bibimbap*?"

"I dunno." He shrugged. "The hot rice pot with the vegetables and egg?"

"*Bibimbap*," I confirmed, "And no, not better. Can't deal with Korean people right now."

"Why do you hate your own people?"

"They're half my people," I corrected him, "and I don't want to embarrass myself by stumbling through what should be one of my native languages."

"You order Italian food without an accent all the time!"

"That's different," I groaned.

"You're cranky. I'm running out of safe topics," Averill said. "Oh! I know.

We're in Old Town Caldwell!" He pointed out the window. "Look, culture!"

It was cheesy, but amidst the worry it made me smile. Though Wellington was diverse and affluent, it was also cookie-cutter, chain-driven, and more nouveau riche than legacy. A city needed to feel lived-in, reflecting the many lives and cultures it had witnessed. My hometown's squeaky-clean slate had lasted for twelve years too long.

I snapped a phone-pic of Averill pointing at the dilapidated restaurant front across the way. He grinned. The photo caught the glint of upside-down wine glasses in the bar beyond him.

"Good afternoon," said a man in a burgundy silk vest.

"Hi, how's it going?" Averill said cheerily. "We're here to see Easton."

The maître d' nodded and smiled at me. He gestured for me to go ahead. "After you, Miss."

As we walked through the main dining area, I did my usual scan. Ever since I was three, I didn't observe a new place so much as conduct surveillance. I took in the space between tables, routes to the bathrooms and exits, standard silverware save for the thick, black handles of three steak knives indicating three beef entrees.

My stomach gurgled. I wanted meat, but it had to be pricey at Isadora's.

Easton liked giving things to the people he cared about, but I didn't feel secure in that demographic yet, and I didn't enjoy being excessive.

Arnaud opened the banquet room door and gestured inside.

Easton stood just past the doorway, looking up from his phone. "Good afternoon."

"Hi," I said. "Have you been waiting long?"

"You're perfect," Easton replied, drawing close. His dark hair looked as touchable as ever, and his gray vest matched his eyes perfectly. I wanted to know his secret to being so put-together, alert, and not cranky after a 12-hour flight from Suzhou, China. Even with my usual six hours of sleep raccoon eyes plagued me.

Easton's sharp cologne tickled my nose as he stepped past me. He nodded to dismiss the maître d', then offered Averill a packet. "Fay is still out on errands with James," said Easton. "If you could start organizing these papers from the conference?"

I started toward the table, but Easton hooked my pinky with two fingers. The sudden jolt of heat stopped me, my skin tingling, as well as the tissue beneath. It wasn't the first time I'd felt it, but I always forgot it could happen because it only ever happened with him.

Covering my surprise, I pivoted to face Easton.

He nodded. "I appreciate you agreeing to lunch."

"Sure," I breathed. I continued toward the table, trying to shake the tingling out of my hand.

At the table, Easton announced he'd already ordered and gestured to the water glasses. "Please."

"Thanks." Slowly, I lifted the nearest glass to my lips. As long as I had a physical distraction, I could zone out while Easton discussed the Suzhou conference with Averill.

"Cadence," Easton said, "any plans for the week?"

"Oh," I said. I blinked. He rarely put *business mode* on pause. "Still figuring out birthday plans."

"That's soon?"

"Saturday."

"Didn't you mention a while back plans with, hm, Thomas, is it?"

The rim had just touched my lips. My sharp inhale echoed in the cup.

Averill's chair creaked as he shifted. "Oh," he groaned very quietly into his hands.

I took a tiny sip and lowered the cup.

"What is it?" Easton asked.

The frigid water had stung my tongue, adding to the ache elsewhere. I stared into the glass, then past it, down at the blurry white tablecloth beneath. "I broke up with him last week."

"Oh Jesus," Easton said, repentant. "I'm--I apologize. I had no idea."

"It's okay." I tried to smile, but my lips trembled. I continued staring through the glass. I hadn't had the heart to discuss my now-broken birthday plans with Jules. But the last thing Easton Wyndham needed was for me to cry at him over some jerk.

Easton's fingers slipped over my wrist. "Cadence, I'm so sorry," he apologized again. "I shouldn't have brought him up, it's not my business."

I lifted my head and pushed a real, solid smile onto my lips. The concern gave me strength. "It's fine." I turned to Averill. "Right? I'm better off." The smile went back to Easton. "I'm free." Jules' reminder didn't sound so refreshing and relieving when I said it. "To work on my finals," I added. Then I smirked. I put my fingers over Easton's. "Please don't ask about those." I giggled lightly at my joke to ease the mood.

Easton blinked twice, then a slow smile crept into his shamed expression. He chuckled a little. "I'll silently wish you luck."

"Appreciated," I replied. With a slow, churning panic I realized I was stroking his knuckles. I hadn't noticed when I'd started. When Easton's hand jerked, I covered my mouth with my fingers and coughed.

Then my stomach growled. "Oh!" I laughed, grateful for the distraction. "That's totally me. Sorry."

"Better in than out," Averill whispered, loud enough for just me to hear.

Without looking, I jabbed at his knee with my finger.

Easton waved off my apology. "And how is Fiore?"

I swished the water and ice around in my glass. Down to business. It felt weird talking about Fiore to Easton when Fiore didn't want anything to do with him. The fight was so bad Fiore now refused to acknowledge Averill at home. As if working for Easton made Averill a traitor. I felt bad for everyone. I wanted to go back to the comfortable routine we'd established in the past year.

"Fiore's okay," I said. "I guess. Aside from being mad at Averill too, he's stressed over grading reports and figuring out budget stuff. And there's a research grant application."

Easton looked put off. "He could just ask me for the money."

I refrained from saying it wasn't about the money. A donation was a nice thought. "It's prestigious," I said. "It could help the college gain some clout. And he thinks *that*

would help some of the Physics guys get noticed by the government's new space program."

Easton nodded. "I heard about that. It's been very hushed. How did you know?"

He sounded impressed. My pride ballooned right up. "The Mayor's astronomy program." Likely to be funded with my salary. "I helped with preliminary research. Now we have trade subscriptions, and contacts at observatories and research facilities."

"Well done," Easton said. "If you weren't helping him, I'd ask you to work for me."

"Hey," Averill said, sounding only half-offended.

"You know you could use help," Easton told him, sounding firm yet good-natured.

While Averill laughed, I reeled. Easton thought I was good enough to work at Wyndham Corp. Was this a sign? An opening? Worth finding out.

"Do you--?" Easton said just as I did. He held his hand out. "Please, darling."

"No, it's okay." I shook my head. "Go ahead."

He tilted his head down to eye me, but I pressed my lips together.

After a second, he went ahead. "Cadence, do you have plans Friday night?"

"Just work 'til seven." I had exchanged my birthday shift for Friday night.

"Fay committed me to a hospital fundraiser gala," he said in his good-idea proposal voice. "Would you be my plus one? Our arrival time won't be an issue."

Hearing the word "gala" almost made me laugh. All I knew about a gala was that it was an expensive party.

Averill took gulps of water. From *my* glass.

Jules would have had a fit if she'd been there, but I wasn't going to tease myself by thinking anything would happen with Easton. The invite was probably to make up for upsetting me.

Maybe I could network. Find donors for the library. "I'll go," I said.

I flinched as water shot out of Averill's mouth and all over me.

My glass tipped over, and Averill leaned forward, coughing over the puddle he'd made.

"Oh my God!" I cried. I rubbed his back. "Breathe."

"Will you be all right?" Easton asked.

Averill nodded, still coughing.

Easton shot up out of his seat. "I'll fetch the wait-staff," he said on his way out.

"Averill," I said. He coughed less violently now. I gave his back a heavy pat.
"What happened? Wrong pipe?"

"You--" he wheezed, turning to me. "You're going on a date with Easton?!"

"It's not a date," I said. "It's a fundraiser."

"On a Friday night. When people get dressed up to eat out. While they're on dates."

"We've established you haven't harmed your ability to talk," I said.

Averill coughed again and wiped his mouth with his wrist. "Don't go."

"It's not a date," I said. "And he's not a stranger. I'm pretty sure if Easton were a serial killer, Fiore or our Detective Friend would warn us."

The look on Averill's face wiped the smirk off of mine. He leaned in. "This isn't a joke," he said quietly. "He never sleeps with the same woman twice."

"He's a gentleman!" I exclaimed. "He set up a lunch to check up on Fiore. You're wiggling over nothing."

Averill shook his head. "If you'd had a normal break-up I'd tell you to go out and have a good time," he informed me. "But with *him* after that--!"

"Stop!" I shut my eyes against the spasm of chest pain. "How is this your business? Easton's your boss. You shouldn't talk about his personal life, or mess with mine."

"You're hurt," Averill said, his gaze fierce. "It's a weird time. I don't want to see you get more hurt. Believe me, I will kick Easton's face in if he tries anything. But I want to avoid the whole you getting hurt part. Fiore told the Detective you're like a wilted flower, and he's right."

Averill had made me wary of the fun I wanted to have, but I couldn't be mad at him. I smiled and flicked his bangs out of his eyes. "You're a good friend. Thanks. But I want to do this." Then I added, "And it's not a date. Though I do kind of like his face."

He shook his head. "Doesn't it weird you out?"

"What?"

"The age difference."

"Sometimes I forget he's remotely near thirty," I answered. "Anyway, after fending off my ex's urges for the past year and a half, I'm pretty sure I would know if the guy wanted to sleep with me."

"*You* would know the fastest way to the fire exit. You don't notice how he looks at you."

Easton looked at me? "How does he look at me?" I would have noticed that.

Averill hesitated. When I gave him my glare-stare, he sighed. "I don't know how to describe it. He looks at you. And he shouldn't."

"Well, he has eyes," I said. "The natural application of sight can't be denied."

"That's not what I mean," he replied with a grim smirk.

"Sorry," I said. "But I'm allowed to go out with people. And I *deserve* to spend time with a guy who, one, I don't live with and, two, isn't actively trying to get into my pants."

"You do," Easton said behind us.

"Oh God," I squeaked. Mortification had been achieved.

Two waiters went to work on the table.

I avoided looking at Easton as I stood. "Excuse me," I muttered. I didn't want to attract any more attention. "I'm going to go clean up."

"It's just water," Averill called after me.

After stepping into the now-empty main dining room, I let my shoulders sag. Easton had heard my stupid comment. Possibly more of the conversation. It would take some mad creativity and effort to embarrass myself more. There wouldn't be a gala. Or another lunch. I would have to hide in my room if Fiore ever let Easton back into the house.

My phone's birds chirped. Fiore's name flashed on the screen. "Hello?" I said.

"I know you're with him," Fiore said.

"He just wants to make sure you're okay," I said, sullen as I kept walking.

"There is a point to not talking to him and deleting all of his messages."

"I think it's cruel," I said. "He cares. He's really trying."

"Well, he should have put all that energy into not doing what he did."

"But what did he even--Oof!"

To brighten the day, a waitress plowed right into me. The phone flew out of my hand and slid an impressive distance, stopping nearly halfway across the expansive dining room.

I turned to address her. "Exc--" I began. She kept on, like I was a ghost. "Geez."

I peered under the tables to determine how best to retrieve my phone. Then I got a cold tingle in the back of my neck.

Great. Now this.

Colors distorted, everything in gray tones like a black-and-white film. My heart raced fast and hard in my ribcage. I heard honking car horns through a bathroom window, two bus boys swearing outside between cigarette huffs.

I turned.

I needed to pay attention.

As the waitress hustled into the banquet room, her hair, her skin, her clothes were tinted gray save for a bright red--where her hand hid in her vest.

Weapon, I thought.

It could've been something else. But why else would she hide her hand? I needed to find the maître d'.

The reception area was clear. "Hello?" I said softly. "Hello?" I tried the bar. "Are--Oh!"

I stifled my urge to scream with my hand on my mouth. After the nausea passed, I held the bar's phone receiver to my ear.

"Nine-one-one, state the nature of your emergency."

I gave the restaurant name and street and asked for help. Then I slipped off my flip-flops and sprinted back.

There had been three carving knives. One of those tables hadn't been bussed. I plucked the steak knife from the plate and kept running. It was better than nothing.

The waitress' back faced the banquet room doorway. Averill, Easton, and the two waiters were on their feet, breathing hard, hunched from tension.

Averill's gaze flickered to me, then back. "Lady, just put the gun down, and--"

"Shut up!" the woman hissed.

She had a gun. Her colors showed, from her deep brown hair to the freckled fair skin of her hands.

"Wyndham, I'm not going to tell you again," the woman said, pointing the weapon at Easton. "Down on your knees."

"Whatever they're paying you," Easton said calmly, "I can afford more."

The gunshot surprised me. When I recovered, I was hiding behind the doorframe.

"What is he, twenty?" the woman asked. "Shame to see him go."

She was talking about Averill. A lump punched my throat.

What could I do? I tightened my grip around the knife. I'd have to book it across the room for any chance to stop her.

"Don't," Easton said quietly. "Please, just end your business and leave everyone be."

"Knees," the woman ordered. "Now."

I poked my head in again. Easton dropped one knee down, then the other.

I shut my eyes. I couldn't bear to watch.

I tried to recount how the counselors had taught me to bear the memories of my mother's violent death, but my thoughts refused to bend that way.

I was not beholden to Easton Wyndham. I had no interest in his money. What I felt for him could not be qualified as love. We had barely had conversations that excluded the people we had in common either in presence or in mention. But I knew the woman would kill him. And though Easton despised his mom and dad, he loved his sisters and grandparents, and they him.

I would not abide someone forcefully tearing a hole in his family, or in their business of saving lives.

The barrel met Easton's forehead. He paled, then shut his eyes.

"We're going to bleed you dry," the woman announced happily.

Easton jerked. His eyes widened as his gaze shot up to the woman. He shook his head. "You can't be real--!"

I shot across the room and grabbed the woman's wrist, forcing her gun up. With my other hand, I held the knife to her throat.

"Jesus!" Easton breathed.

"Get away from us," I warned. Then, to the woman, "Drop the gun."

The blade touched her skin. With her free, bare hand she grabbed it and yanked the knife away from me. Then she tossed it up and caught its handle in mid-air. That fist swung out, smashing into my skull.

I toppled into a heap, groaning, pressing my hand to the site of the intense pain.

There were running footsteps, then two shots. And two thuds.

I had to know who was hurt. Gingerly, I turned my head. The waiters had tried to run.

"Oh God," I breathed.

Averill stood in front of Easton now, shielding him from the gun. "Lady," Averill said, his voice so unfamiliar and dark that it surprised me. "You need to stop." He had his thumb and forefinger tight on the small hoop that hung on his right ear.

"Idiot," the woman said just as she aimed.

"NO!" I yelled. I jumped at her legs to collapse her knees.

She let out a shout of surprise and dropped forward.

I flung myself onto her back to keep her down.

The gun had slid across the room. Averill moved for it. "Cadence, I've got this--"
The weapon lept out of Averill's fingers, then skidded with a hockey puck's ease back to the woman's grasp.

"What?!" I let out. She had fired again.

Averill dropped like dead weight.

"Averill!" I yelled, scrambling. Multiple moving targets. Direct hit without aiming. Beyond dangerous.

She couldn't get away.

Just as my fingers touched the barrel, the world flipped. I yelped as my back hit the floor. The cold, greasy knife settled against my throat, and I whimpered. There wasn't anyone to step in for me. Why had I thought I'd be safe? Wellington's twelve years of peace had made me soft.

The woman peered down at me, grinning. "Cadence, is it?" There were three pounding steps before she held the gun up, steady. "Make me use this, she goes painful and slow."

"No," Easton said, his voice hollow and hoarse. "Please, I'll do anything you ask. I'll go with you. I won't fight. Just let her walk away from this."

I could still hear beyond the room. Voices. Quiet orders. Gun safeties clicked off.

It wasn't all for nothing.

The woman gave an exaggerated sigh. "With you gone, she won't last long anyway."

What? I flipped my gaze between them. They were having a conversation that didn't make sense. Did Easton know her? He spoke like he knew what she wanted.

"Then give her more time," Easton said. "She's about to turn twenty, for God's sake."

The woman's eyes met mine. Pure glee and malice lit her expression, but nothing indicated why she would take such pleasure in this.

"Not even twenty?" the woman asked. Her lips curled with satisfaction.

"Why--?" I started to ask. I clenched my jaw as the blade shifted.

"Please," Easton implored. "You don't know her. She could do so much good in the world. Just say what you want me to do."

"Easton, it's okay," I said. "You'll be okay." He had direction and purpose in his life. He didn't need to worry about me.

"Your very good Grace," the woman declared with mirth, "I want you to watch."

"No!" he shouted.

The blade that sunk into my belly was eight inches long at the most. It drew the strength and warmth from my body in an instant. I couldn't take full breaths, though I focused on trying.

Each inhale tore my belly. With my eyes shut tight, I willed my heart to stop beating so fast. *I need the blood, I begged, I'll lose the blood.*

There were shouts, muffled crashes. I was so tired that I closed my eyes.

"Hey," Averill's weak voice pulled me back to consciousness.

I turned my head. Averill hunched beside me, propped up on one good hand. His bloody right arm hung limp at his side. His shirt was drenched with the red, and there were splatters on his neck and jaw.

"They got her," he said shakily. "Ambulance is coming."

"Mr. Wyndham!" someone yelled.

"Cadence," Easton said as he dropped down on my other side. "I'm going to fix this."

"Wait," Averill breathed, "what are you--?"

A weight settled on the knife. Terror thundered through me. "Stop!" I choked out.

The wound, free of its source, made itself fully known through my sobs.

Easton pressed his hands down firmly on my belly. "It's all right."

I listened as his panting breaths grew ragged. Then--

"There's so much blood," he said, his eyes unfocused. "I can't staunch the flow."

"Easton?" I whispered. I didn't understand. Even I knew not to remove a knife from a wound you weren't about to fix.

Why would he do this to me?

"I can't," Easton said. He pulled himself and his blood-drenched hands away. "I can't."

"Easton!" I cried, a plea he ignored as he stood.

I turned to Averill. I didn't care how much it hurt, I was about to go hysterical. I sobbed on top of every inhale.

Averill groaned as he lifted his chest. He planted his good hand on my wound, all of his weight pressing down.

I choked on my shout of pain, and coughed up liquid that filled my throat.

"Don't..." Averill knew what my body was trying to tell us.

The blood washed over my tongue. "Visit Poppy everyday," I squeezed the words out.

"Don't," Averill said again, his voice losing strength. He dropped closer to catch my wandering gaze. "Every moment of your life before now proves how tough you are. Don't you dare give up now."

Breathing was too painful, my eyes felt heavy and my head floated feather-light. This was really happening.

Then someone, not Averill, spoke in my ear. I turned my head to see the new speaker, but my vision had gone dark.

"*Everyone will know your name,*" said the man in the darkness. I knew this voice, but not the speaker. "*Everyone will know the good you've done.*"

"Cadence?" Averill called from somewhere else.

"*It was enough,*" the unfamiliar voice insisted. "*It was always more than enough. It's over.*"

I didn't notice breathing. The pain had faded.

"Cadence!" Averill cried. He sounded so far away.

"But," I said, my own voice hardly audible, "there's so much left to do."

"*You're free*," came the trembling, whispered reply.

Then, encouraged, as if being locked away in darkness were a good thing, I had no recourse but to let go.

Chapter 2 - Visitors

When I opened my eyes, I was in a hospital room with machines and electronic monitors, and the daydream man named Lord Wyn.

Lord Wyn sat beside my bed in his usual black suit and half-cape. His straight posture, and his hands gripping the chair arms, betrayed his alarm. Though his face was turned to me, his expression was obscured by his top hat's shadow.

I knew from experience light would reveal Easton's face there.

"Am I dead?" I breathed. Having control over my actions and feelings in Lord Wyn's presence, there weren't any other conclusions to draw.

"Not if I can help it," he whispered.

I shut my eyes for what felt a second before something hot covered my hand. The hot thing didn't go away, so I tried to shake it off.

"Cadence?"

I groaned and blinked. "Thomas?" I croaked. Being awake wasn't nearly as easy now. Through my blurry vision, that was his shape in the sparse fluorescent light.

I could only turn my head, and even that took all my strength. My throat and mouth were drier than a zen sand garden, my entire body felt like a giant laceration suspended in a painful limbo, and my brain ached with fury. Breathing, which I was glad

to do, felt like a huge undertaking each time my lungs expanded, inciting uncomfortable belly twinges.

"Averill told me," Thomas said.

"He's doing okay?" I whispered.

"Flesh wound," Thomas said, "he got stitches."

My eyelids fluttered. I liked keeping them closed. I wanted to hide and sleep for a week.

"I think we should get married," Thomas said.

I dropped an f-bomb.

"Whoa," Thomas replied.

Glaring, I tried to keep my breathing steady, but my flaring anger won. "Get out."

Thomas scooted forward and touched my hair. "Hear me out," he said. He gulped. "My mom really likes you. She got upset when I told her we broke up."

"I dumped you," I reminded him. I ignored his flinch. "She know why?"

"She always thought we would get married," he explained. "High school sweethearts." He smiled, but without reciprocation it didn't last long. "She said it was foolish to let you go. When Averill said you were hurt--"

"I almost died," I said slowly, partially because I was vainly trying to control my anger, and partially because I really believed he was an idiot. "I literally felt my body shutting down. A lot of people got seriously hurt."

"That's why," he said, toying with a lock of my hair. "I want to be with you. Make memories. We were happy for four years." He paused. Gulped again. "I guess we can work up to sex."

My eyes burned, but I would not cry. Maybe almost dying had changed me. Two days ago, this conversation would have left me blubbering. Now, I couldn't believe that at a time when I was supposed to be grateful to open my eyes, grateful that someone was with me, I felt trapped and helpless. "Please just go away," I said.

He frowned and released my hair. "I acknowledge you're upset. Can we discuss it?"

He sounded like he'd read a conflict resolution self-help book. I didn't care if he'd taken a sensitivity training class, I had no desire for him to finally be sensitive at me.

I fumbled through my bed sheets and blanket for anything resembling a calling device.

He reached down and grabbed my wrist. "You can't call them. It's not visiting hours."

I blinked, not comprehending. "What?"

Thomas pressed his lips together. He ducked his head sheepishly. "I snuck in."

"Thomas," I said with my cracking voice. "Let me go. And leave. Or I will scream."

"Cadence," he said, like anything he had to say was too important to miss. "I love you."

The sting lodged deep in the left side of my chest. I didn't believe it was possible to feel so angry and hurt and betrayed by those three words together. Again.

My body came up with enough water for two tears, one from each eye. After they fell, he murmured something in Welsh and pecked my cheek. Thomas straightened quickly. "Your tears are sweet," he whispered in awe, pressing his fingers to his lips. "Not salty."

"I'm *sick*," I grit out.

Footsteps pattered into the room. "Excuse me!" a short woman in blue scrubs exclaimed. "Excuse me, are you family?"

I clung to a flash of hope.

"I'm her boyfriend," Thomas explained, squeezing my hand.

"Ex," I said.

"You cannot be here," the nurse said in her Filipina accent. She pointed to the hallway and wagged her index finger up and down. "During visiting hours eight to eight, you can come and see her, okay?" The nurse touched my shoulders, but didn't push. "Relax, you will be sore."

I laid back, gritting my teeth against the discomfort. It felt worse when I relaxed. I shut my eyes, summoning the will to endure.

"My name is Evelyn, all right?" the nurse said. "I'm here if you need things." She felt the sheets at my side, then tugged on a cord until a device emerged. "Press this red button to call. Do you have questions?"

Only a thousand. Like, why did I think risking my life was a good idea? In what decade-long lapse of judgement did I believe Thomas was a suitable male specimen? "Am I going to heal okay?" I asked. "What day is it?"

"It's only--" Thomas started.

"It's only Tuesday," Evelyn answered, giving Thomas a pointed look. "You are awake earlier than we thought. But your procedure was good. The surgeon and your doctor are seeing you today." She paused and smiled. "How brave you are."

And stupid. "Thanks," I said reluctantly.

"You are a good girl," she said, patting my hand. "I see you here with Mr. Poppy every time. Your cookies are my favorite." Her fingers were ice-cold, but her palm had

heat. Her whole hand was smaller than mine, like a child's, except the wedding band glinting on her finger.

"Thanks," I said, meaning it this time.

Evelyn scowled at Thomas. "You come back later."

Thomas squeezed my fingers. "I really love you. This weekend was hell."

I stared at him until he gave up and left.

With him gone, dry sobs wracked my body. Every cell in my core screamed from the pain.

It was all wrong. The man whose life I'd saved had abandoned me to die. The guy who once made me happy just for being alive had no concept of empathy or love.

"Your heart rate," Evelyn chided. "The wound. Please try to calm. You will hurt."

The longer I stayed awake, the more it hurt, like my guts were being yanked by spiked hooks in every direction. I cried out, louder.

Evelyn started for the door. "I will get a doctor."

"Give me something," I gasped. "Please, give me something for the pain."

Evelyn, I'm not supposed to be awake. I can't do this."

Her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Please!" I yelled.

"Twelve more seconds," she whispered.

I blinked, panting. "What?"

"Nine more seconds and I am justified for your vitals." She went over to a cabinet, opened a drawer, and pulled out a syringe.

I moaned with each breath until she uncapped the syringe. The needle sank into the IV tube slot, and I wondered if the knife had slid into me that easily.

The plunger descended, slowly.

"Thank you," I slurred before the liquid had all been dispensed.

My body went limp and my vision darkened.

I prayed I'd wake up to something better.

###

The butterfly was breathtaking. I had been tugging on a weed nearly as tall as myself when it had fluttered into view. Though the flowers and plants in the garden surrounding me were rich yellows and inviting reds, the butterfly was living art, shimmering blues and purples splashed across its wings in a natural gradient.

"Lord Fiore!" I cried with glee. He had stayed in the manor to consult with Lord Wyn about a healing salve. Lord Fiore would agree that the butterfly might please Daddy's horse groom. Though the Marquess would not yet admit to me why he enjoyed pleasing our horse groom, I imagined he would like the chance to trap the creature safely. "Lord Fiore, I found a beautiful butterfly! Help me catch it!"

"Just a moment, my lady!" my protector called.

I ran after the creature, giggling as it evaded my grasp, and twirling in circles as I followed its flight. Its wings were twice the size of my hands, but I was not afraid. The smaller butterflies were very peaceful. This one flit back and forth, playing with me.

We ventured away from Mama's garden, into the dense forest. This was not our land, not orderly. The trees grew obscenely full, nearly haphazard. I enjoyed crossing Daddy's invisible borders for these proud declarations of the Earth Mother's beauty. It seemed darker than I could remember, though. And I had known the area for all my seven years.

I trotted ahead and tried to touch my new playmate, but it was too quick and graceful.

Then the butterfly froze in mid-air. "Ah," I said in awe. I thought it had found an invisible tree branch. But when I stepped under it, I realized I had broken up a very thin, nearly invisible web of thread. The butterfly's wings were caught on the weave. Then I felt a cold chill, and my vision went gray, color throbbing into view from above.

"No!" I yelled as another creature skittered from overhead. I leaped up, barely catching the edge of the butterfly's wing with my fingers before the spider ambushed its prey.

I tumbled to the ground. The butterfly's wings flapped, but the thread was too sticky.

The spider dropped down before me. It was longer than I was tall. Black fur dashed with orange streaks fluffed up all over its round body. Eight emotionless, black eyes blinked at the same time when it regarded me, mandibles twitching.

"Ugh!" I exclaimed. I had seen spiders, but none so large and ugly. With the butterfly cradled in my elbow, I squirmed backward across the grass.

"Cadence of August," said the spider. Its voice unsettled me, a mix of high and low tones, as if it had enough vocal cords to match its legs and eyes. Before I could jump to my feet, the spider leaped onto me. "The butterfly's magic is mine. Give it over!"

"No!" I denied him. I flipped over to shield my fragile charge. Spurred by my frenzied pulse, I swiped at its wings, hoping not to injure it in my haste.

"So young to start protecting," the gruesome spider mocked, prancing as it hovered above. "Did Lord August not teach you it gets you killed?"

How dare he! An August's protection was sacred. "Do not mock a mandate of the gods!" I warned. When the butterfly lifted off the ground, I turned and smacked my fist into the spider's eyes.

It gave a horrendous shout, and I launched onto my feet. I scooped up the butterfly, raising it higher. "Go!" I called. When it had reached steady flight, I turned to run.

My legs flew out from under me and I crashed onto my stomach. Before I recovered, something yanked me backward by my ankle. My scream echoed, caught in the thick trees.

When finally the dragging stopped, my exposed skin was scraped and stinging. I was near a webbed nest, not too far from the forest edge. I gulped air, peering around me. Everything appeared in gray shades. When I thought the quiet was safe, I sat up. And I screamed again.

The spider crouched low over me. "Your family magic must be tasty." It snapped its mandibles in my face. "It will have to sustain mine."

For all the magic I was said to have in my blood, I had no way to use it.

"Please release me, Sir Spider," I said quietly. "I do not think it is just to judge you on another god's reputation. I am giving you a chance to do the right thing."

"The right thing," it repeated. A claw settled on my shoulder. The slow strength of the leg pushing me down frightened me more than anything in my life. The multiple voices sang, calm and satisfied. "Is to feed a hungry family."

As it lunged down, I grabbed one mandible in each hand and pushed with all my strength. "HELP!" I shrieked, "LORD FIORE! HELP--!"

A clutch of thread snapped tight around my throat, trapping air in my chest. The thread pulled me up until my toes dangled above Sir Spider's head. My heart pounded so quickly I was afraid it would burst before I suffocated.

"They say a hanging death is one of the most dishonorable," Sir Spider mused. "Just a step above the Four Executions. This satisfies me."

I clutched at the thread with my fingers, hoping to tear it. More thread encircled my hands, pinning them into place.

The spider stood up on four legs, waving the other four in mirth. "Goodness," it said, "this was too easy. My sisters will be sorry they could not see it."

Its mandibles spread wide. It lunged, then slammed right into a web of vines that shot up from the ground. Cursing, Sir Spider tumbled down, but the vines folded over him, entrapping him in a writhing, green cage.

I fell, and before I hit the ground, a thick patch of wheat sprouted to cushion my impact.

The thread held around my throat. I had not the energy to struggle.

"Cadence," Lord Wyn said, leaning over me. His hand fell upon my cheek, his hot energy spreading through my skull and throat. He pried at the thread. "Fiore, cut it."

"Knight!" Sir Spider bellowed, "That is our catch, you'd best not--!"

Lord Fiore pressed the tip of his sword against the thread, his eyes thin with concentration as he pricked the silk.

My hands came unfettered, then my throat was freed.

I wanted to breathe in and exhale at the same time. I coughed, gasped, then coughed some more. My vision was spotty and my ears rang.

"There," Lord Wyn said, rubbing my back. "You'll be fine, my sweet."

"Lord Wyn!" I sobbed. The tight fear from before clamped upon my heart.

He collected me in his arms, enveloping me in thrilling, warm solace.

I grabbed at his shirt and cried.

"Get!" shouted Sir Spider, hissing between breaths, "Your! Hands! Off! Our! Food!"

Lord Fiore spoke, his voice low with fright. "Great Mother's mercy," he breathed, "the trees and grass say there are many. They were not here before."

"Magic attracts magic," Lord Wyn whispered above my head.

"You don't think..." said Lord Fiore. "Did we do this? When we saved her before?"

I sniffled, my tears waning. I kept my face pressed to Lord Wyn's chest. Magic did attract magic. I could never fully remember how Lord Wyn and Daddy's other friends had saved me from my sickness, but the secret friend I had met afterward had taught me the adage. With Lords Wyn and Fiore speaking as if they had a hand in my magical exposure, I did not wish to contradict them.

"I demand release!" Sir Spider screeched. "The girl wronged me! She robbed my family of a butterfly that was rightfully ours!"

"How did this come to be?" Lord Fiore asked calmly.

"She plucked it from my web just before I came upon it."

Lord Wyn's hand squeezed my shoulder. "Cadence," he said, his smile curious and playful, "your father never taught you magic. How did you know to protect a butterfly?"

I froze. I knew not how to respond. How could I explain the danger I had sensed? I was not entirely certain why I had felt it.

"Cadence?" Lord Wyn said again, his voice concerned now.

"I..." I started. "I..."

"Cadence," Lord Fiore said carefully, "have you learned magic?"

I looked away. "Return me home, please."

Lord Wyn's arms tightened around me. "Who? Who was it?" he sounded casual, but I knew he was calming himself. "When?"

I whimpered. My secret was not ready, nor I.

"Cadence, you are in danger," Lord Fiore said. "This affects your father and myself. You know we would give our lives for you."

Sniffing, I scrubbed at my cheek, which stung from my tears. I did not wish them to be hurt. "The man you were all angry at. The one Daddy told to stay away after I felt better."

"Giordani," Lord Wyn said the name like a curse. "He did this on purpose."

"He is not a bad man," I said. "Did he not help you heal me?"

Lord Wyn pulled back to look into my eyes. "Giordani is a thief, Cadence," he said, holding my face in his hands to keep our gazes locked. "There is only one thing he is interested in doing."

I blinked as my breath quickened again. I could not imagine why my father or his friends would ever have invited a thief to cross August manor's barriers. "Then why did you all--?" I started.

"We were drawn here," the spider said, voice light with amazement. "We felt it. We had no idea it was her. She is a power that can change the world."

"Go," Lord Fiore said, "Wyn, take her back. Send word to Lord August."

"What are you going to do?" Lord Wyn asked.

Lord Fiore's jaw clenched as he hefted his sword, his eyes downcast. "An execution."

"What?!" the spider shouted. It thrashed in its invisible cage. "You cannot! It is dishonorable! Misconduct! Abuse!"

Lord Wyn stood and carried me away.

"What is happening?" I peered over his shoulder. "Who must Lord Fiore execute?"

"Sir Spider," Lord Fiore said, "as a Marquess from the Eastern kingdom of Sobariat, I have witnessed your attempt to murder a member of Sobariat's royal house of Suei."

"We are in Cydonia now!" the spider yelled. "You have no jurisdiction!"

"Therefore," Lord Fiore went on, sounding pained, "as a knight of Cydonia's Order of the Chalice, I am bound to the execution of you and your family. It is sanctioned by the gods."

"No!" I cried. "No!" I wriggled in Lord Wyn's hold, but he held me tight. "Lord Wyn, please, you cannot let this be. They are a family! An entire family!"

"Mother's mercy upon you," Lord Fiore forced out with a shaking breath.

"I am a god!" the spider shrieked, the last I heard through the trees. Then something else caught my attention.

Small clumps rained down from the limbs and branches we passed. Spiders, their legs curled, falling like dead, cursed snow.

I reached out to catch one. It plummeted past my trembling fingers. "We must stop this."

"We don't have a choice, Cadence," he said. He sounded exhausted and defeated. "Your mother was Eastern royalty, and Fiore was enlisted to knighthood for your protection."

"But she is gone!" I wriggled. He kept his arms tight. "I am Cydonian. I am an August. I will protect them!"

"Darling, you'll fall," he warned.

"Please. Release me, please," I said. I pushed against his chest and shoulder, but he was too strong. "Please," I said again. It was hopeless. I buried my face into his neck as the sobs gripped my chest. "I have shamed my father's house."

"It will be your house one day, Cadence." He stopped walking and stroked my hair. "We can't help who were," he assured me softly, "what we bring with us when things change. None of us have a choice. I fear we haven't had any choice for much longer than I've been keeping count." His breath tickled my forehead, and he pressed a kiss to my hairline.

I soaked his shirt and jacket. It was my fault. Many would die. And they would do so because of me.

###

I woke regretting that my dream-self had helped the butterfly. I didn't like knowing that saving one life could endanger so many others. If my other self had known what would happen, she would have put more thought into her actions. But at seven-years-old, she couldn't have anticipated any of it. There was a lot of the story I didn't know. I should have known more than little Cadence of August. I wanted to know why, in a world of magic, it was such a huge deal for her to be exposed in particular. It was a world and life in my own head, and the missing pieces puzzled me. But reality called, in the form of an ache in my middle.

I blinked as I strained to make sense of whispers over my beeping heart monitor. Half-consciousness was enough to think Thomas might be back. I kept my eyes closed and listened.

"I was thinking," Fiore said in a hushed tone, "maybe the patrol schedule."

"Do you really think people would agree to that?" Averill asked.

"The sergeant would," Fiore said. "After yesterday, definitely."

This made me curious. Fiore knew our Detective Friend. It followed logically he could know a police sergeant. A patrol was a good idea for Easton's protection.

"We're lucky at least some of us local," Averill muttered.

I squinted to adjust to the sunlight blazing through the window. "What time is it?" I asked.

Both Averill and Fiore started. They held huge vases with the most gorgeous, vibrant flowers I had ever seen in my life. I could have sworn they were from the garden in my dream. More likely, they were from Fiore's campus greenhouse.

"Hey," Averill said.

My eyes widened. His arm was in a sling, and with circles under his eyes, he looked beat. "Should you be up?" I asked.

"I should be asking that." He set his vase down on top of the red Biohazard Waste bin. Then he slid onto the bed so gently I hardly felt it.

"Sorry," he said, his eyes wide. "Did that hurt?"

"I'm in pieces," I said. I forced a smile. "Not your fault." My voice croaked terribly. There was probably more water in the air than in my body. Lying in bed wasn't supposed to hurt so much. "Thomas was here."

"We know," Averill said darkly. "He came to the house to pick up things for you."

"He's either stupid or crazy," I said.

Averill raised an eyebrow. "I told him I would punch him in the face if he came back."

"...Thanks," was all I could muster. "Talk about something else."

"I'd like to know something," Fiore spoke up.

His eyes looked heavy, as if his own smile couldn't lift them. And either he was intentionally growing his goatee again or he had forgotten to shave. Or hadn't had time to. It was very possible that he had skipped a meal or five with everything going on.

"Yeah?" I asked.

Fiore stepped closer. "Why did you do it?"

Good question.

"Couldn't let her hurt him," I said. "Probably should have weighed my odds. But if he's okay, I wouldn't take it back."

Fiore nodded. "You saved my best friend." He touched my foot through the blanket. "He and I may not be on speaking terms, but I'm glad he's all right. Thank you."

"You're not still fighting with him," Averill said with a sigh.

Fiore lifted his eyebrow. "He's still himself."

I didn't comment on Averill and Fiore having a real conversation. At least two good things had come out of my stupidity.

"Cadence," Fiore said. He moved to my side. "About your relatives."

Dread overwhelmed me. The last time I had been ill around my relatives was a bout of stomach flu. After three days of being unable to eat or move, I had lost seven pounds. Aunt Penny had decided I had never looked better in my life and told me I should try to keep the weight off. "Tell me you couldn't reach them."

"I spoke with Dana--"

"Oh God." I knew, without being told, my cousin had been rude.

"I waited until we knew you had gotten out of surgery all right. Your aunt is flying in from Korea tonight."

I swore.

Fiore looked utterly scandalized. His mouth hung open until I apologized.

"Sorry," I said, "I. God. She is *not* coming from Korea to see me." Aunt Penny had been in Korea for the past three months. I couldn't imagine her shortening her trip to watch me look and feel swollen. Briefly, I considered trying to call the airline to put a message through that she should head right back to her motherland. Dana would never forgive me for unnecessary hospital bills. "What did Dana tell her?" I asked. "What did you tell Dana?"

"I told Dana you had a medical emergency and had been in surgery."

"Is she coming to visit?" I asked softly, as if a mention might summon her from NorCal.

"She's waiting for your aunt."

They were my closest relatives, but their supposed concern would not end well.

"There's nothing you can do," Fiore said soothingly. "Relax and heal."

"Yeah," Averill said, "Harper's going to share his notes. The library knows, too."

"You talked to my boss?" I asked.

Averill shrugged his good shoulder. "Jules picked up cuz I used your phone."

"And Poppy?"

"I stopped in yesterday," Averill replied. "Almost got my head ripped off."

"Sorry," I said. "You know he gets cranky."

"You mean like you? Total family resemblance." Averill went on, pointing to his throat. "There might actually be a little bit of a tear in my neck. Can you check for me?"

I gave one chuckle and groaned. "Ow! Jerk, don't make me laugh!"

He put his hand on my hair and gave a rueful smile. "I understand how Poppy feels. I'll go pick him up later. I think it'll be good for both of you if he visits."

I nodded. I wanted to see Poppy more than anything. "Thanks. Poor Poppy. I never miss a day."

"He understands," Fiore said. He opened his mouth to say more, but his jazzy phone notification sounded. He handed his vase to Averill and pulled his phone out.

"Voicemail," he said. "I'll try for a connection outside."

When he was gone, I asked, "How is Easton doing?"

Averill shook his head. "Haven't talked to him since the attack."

I gulped, but my throat and mouth were still dry, so it was more of a gag. "He hasn't called? To check up on us?"

"No."

"Oh." My disappointment clumped in my chest. "What happened? After... you know."

Averill propped one knee up on the mattress. "Supposedly she made a break for it through one of the windows."

"Whoa. Geez."

"You know how the restaurant is near the bottom of the hill?"

"Uh huh."

"Cyclist," Averill said.

It was horrific, but at least she hadn't gotten away. With my mouth still open in shock, I smirked a little. "Is the cyclist okay?"

"Oh yeah, she's fine."

"I should send her a gift basket."

Averill smiled at the story until Easton spoke up at the doorway: "I'm sorry I missed it."

Though Averill jumped up and shook his bangs out, they fell back in his eyes.

"Hey."

"Hello, Averill," Easton said cordially. "Are you healing all right?"

"That report is gonna have to wait," Averill answered, pointing to his sling.

"Which one?" Easton's slight smirk softened his business tone.

"The one due last week," Averill replied, his amused tone rising to the challenge.

"There were two due before my outbound flight."

"Hey, aren't you supposed to have a police escort?" Averill asked.

"I do," Easton cut him off.

Averill blinked. "Where are they?"

Easton shook his head. "I'm quite happy to say I have absolutely no idea. It was a terrible challenge losing them. James is certainly getting a large bonus this year."

"Uh," Averill said, sidestepping toward the door, "I have to check on something."

"If you say so," Easton said, turning to watch Averill drift toward the hallway.

"Do you have to go now?" I asked, hoping my friend would get the hint. "Can it wait?"

"Nope." He bolted.

"O... kay," I said.

Easton faced me now. Great.

I turned my head to avoid looking at him.

"Good morning," he said, less casual than usual. "I'm certainly glad to see you."

"You're not hurt?" I asked, still refusing to look at him.

"No."

"Good," I said. "I'm pretty tired and sore. You should--"

"Look at me," he said in a meek voice.

"No thanks," I replied.

I was angry at him. More angry than I should have been, I knew. He had been through a traumatic experience, and anger wasn't one of my favorite emotions. It wasn't something I reveled in, because it was a hard funk to get out of. But I was sure a lot of the anger came from my deep sadness over the fact that he had left me when I thought I was dying. And he hadn't even checked on me or Averill until now.

I knew it was hard to lose someone. But if you cared about them, it was supposed to be hard to leave them, too.

"Please," he said. "Look at me."

My lips trembled. I refused to cry. I didn't want to waste any more energy on him. Talking would damn me for sure. So I just shook my head.

"Cadence," he tried again, "at least let me look you in the eye when I thank you. Then, I'll let you alone."

Instinctively, I took a deep breath, then I groaned at the painful aftermath. Focusing on the pain, I turned and leveled a mostly neutral expression at him.

His eyes stared deep into mine. "I've never done anything to deserve your selflessness and courage," he said, "but I have the chance to do so now. Thank you."

I continued staring at him.

"Of course, I don't expect you to bear any portion of the hospital expenses."

Now he was trying to buy my good graces. That, or he didn't think I could handle my own finances as a result of my decisions.

My lips started to twitch into a frown, but I forced them back into a straight line.

After a minute of silence, he nodded. "I'll be back tomorrow with some supplies."

As he turned to go, I sneezed.

Definitely one of the worst experiences of my entire life.

I was practically ripped open again, the pain marking a jagged line on my insides as I clutched at my bedsheets. With my eyes squeezed shut, my whole body tensed. Each breath was like another two knives jabbing into me until I stopped. I kept myself from inhaling, but small cries of anguish escaped in coughs.

It felt better if I stayed still. Not a huge improvement, but preferable to the alternative.

"Cadence," Easton said.

The pain would subside if I was vigilant. I had to stay strong.

"Cadence," Easton said, forceful now. "Breathe."

A tug in my chest called for air. But I was scared and tired. I didn't want it to hurt so much again. I wasn't sure I could take it.

Easton's hot hands settled on my cheeks, the tingles blazing through my skull. I gasped, then moaned from pain.

My head fell back against the pillow, his hands still on me. I moaned again.

"I'm sorry," he said, leaning over me. "I failed you."

One breath at a time, I endured. "Why did you do it?" I panted out.

"Pardon?" he asked, confused.

"Why did you take the knife out? What did you think you were going to do?"

Easton jerked slightly, as if in surprise. His lips were slightly parted as he considered what he wanted to say next. "You don't know," he declared, as if some truth had dawned on him.

"Don't know what?" I replied.

He pulled a chair up to the bed and sat beside me, placing both of his hands on either side of mine on the mattress.

I closed my eyes. He was hot and his scent tweaked my nose and I didn't want to be close to him ever again. But I wasn't angry enough to shove him away.

After he stared intently at my fingers, he let his right hand hover above mine. Then, slowly, his fingertips alit upon my knuckles.

"Have you ever felt you might have come from a different place?" he whispered. "That you might be a different person than you thought?"

I was only half-listening as my gaze slipped to the TV. A puppy pranced on-screen. The puppy, sadly, was the most logical thing in the room.

Easton said more, but the image changed, and my heart dropped out of my ribcage. I grabbed his shirt.

"What is it?" he asked, alarmed. He gripped my wrist. "Have I hurt you?"

I fumbled through my sheets for the TV controller. "How many times on the news?" My breath came hard. I ignored pain.

"Pardon?"

I found the controller. "The attack. How many people know the assassin failed?"

"The case is confidential."

I stabbed the volume button with my finger as many times as I could. I needed to know if Easton's life was still in danger. I needed to be ready. I didn't care if it was a stupid ambition. If I were ready at least, maybe I could help him without getting so hurt.

The TV blared: "--lauding Cadence Delagostino for the heroism that nearly took her--"

It became white noise as a cold tingle scurried down my back, different from before. The sensation fluttered down my legs, through my whole body. It battled the ache in my wound.

"My God," Easton let out, pacing toward the TV. "I've put you in danger."

His back, the room, all of it was in gray shades. Several phones rang at the nurse's station. I turned my head to listen. A woman answered a line and said, "Oh, she's in 302."

The small white board under the TV was labeled with my bed number. 302.1.

"Cadence, I'm leaving," Easton announced as he hurried to the door. "I'm sorry. I don't know when--"

An odd rainbow of color came in through the window.

"The window," I wondered aloud. What would come in through the window?

Easton jerked to a stop. "Pardon?" he asked, veering back toward my bed.

Just as the idea hit me, I tackled him. He let out a short yell, but I was the one wailing when we hit the floor.

The window had shattered, and the bullets meant for us had showered the room.

My ears rang. I thought I would faint.

When I tried to steady my hand on the floor, it slipped from the blood.

"Help!" I cried.

Easton put his hand on my arm. "Cadence, I'm here," he said. He eased me onto my back and looked down at my stomach. "Jesus," he breathed.

"Easton!" Fiore yelled from the hallway. He crouched, peering out from behind the doorframe. "Where's your police detail? What are you doing here?"

"Clearly I am trying not to die!" Easton replied, irritated.

"The police called," Fiore said. "The story leaked."

"Obviously!" Easton replied.

"Has she been shot?" Fiore asked. "We have to get her out."

"Have you been shot?" Easton asked me, his eyes wide .

"No," I managed. The pain was worse than before. I was exhausted.

"Then we need to leave," Fiore said.

"Fiore, she's bleeding, she just had surgery, she shouldn't be moved until a doctor--"

"I know you hate listening to me," Fiore said, "but right now she's a target in this building, and you along with her."

"The police," I said. "We should wait."

"It's a major public attack," Fiore said, "the police will complicate this, sweetie. They don't all understand. More people might get hurt--"

"But *I'm* hurt." Fear soaked through my nerves. I didn't want to end up on a floor somewhere, bleeding out, with Fiore pressing his hands to my belly while I drifted off.

"More than one room was hit," Fiore said. "You might be putting everyone in danger."

The nightmare still wasn't over. "But why?"

"I'll have Fay go through my contacts," Easton said. "She'll find the best doctor in a half-mile radius, wherever we are."

"Let's just get her out," Fiore ordered.

Easton's breath heated my arm. "Fair suggestion," he said, his tone heavy with derision. "Just how do you propose we do that?"

I struggled to stay focused. Easton slid his arms behind my back and under my knees. "Wait," I moaned. "We shouldn't."

"I need you to be all right," Easton whispered as he hefted me against his chest.

I whimpered as we emerged from the room. There was a lot of noise, and a lot of yelling. The whole hospital was in a frenzy. I didn't have the energy to hold my head up, but I wriggled my legs, trying to force Easton to stop or risk dropping me.

"Please, Cadence," Easton urged, keeping his grasp on me firm.

"I know this place," I whispered as I rested my forehead against his shoulder. "I can make it safe."

A feminine wail soared through the hallway. A gurney rushed against the flow of patients, carrying a petite woman in scrubs soaked with red.

"Evelyn," I sobbed. She had been hurt. She hadn't deserved it at all.

If this was because of us, we had to go.

As Easton carried me down the hallway, every harried step jostled me. I ignored the pain in my belly as best I could, but whimpers fell out of me. I wanted to sleep until I was better, but the cacophony of the besieged hospital slipped beneath the surface of my semi-conscious state.

When we had stopped moving for a few seconds, I lifted my head. Fiore pounded on an elevator call button with his fist. "Not working. Stairs?"

"Not main stairs," I murmured. Everyone who wasn't helping patients was supposed to take the main routes out.

"This is the service elevator," Fiore said. "With the main elevators crowded, it's the only other option."

I lifted my arm as high as I could and pointed to the opposite end of the hallway. "Balcony. Stairs to courtyard. Right at the end, third left."

"How do you know this?" Fiore asked.

"Poppy's hospital," I explained. My voice bumped with Easton's steps.

"Hey!" a man called. "Where are you taking that girl?"

"It's okay," I said weakly.

Easton and Fiore broke into a run.

"Hey, she's hurt!" the man called again. "Come back here!"

"Second left," I ordered. "Hematology."

"Keypad lock," Fiore said frantically.

Through muddled thoughts, I remembered the last few times I'd spoken to someone in this hallway. "Three-one-one-seven," I offered.

"You know their code?" Fiore asked, offended on the staff's behalf.

"Don't watch numbers," I explained, "hand movement." I added, "Space. Like fire--"

"Fire exits and bathrooms," Fiore finished as he punched the buttons. The lock clicked and he pulled the doors open. "What do you talk to them about?" He made sure the entrance slammed shut after Easton and I were inside.

"How they are." I didn't mean to whisper. I didn't have energy for much else.

"Now what?" Easton asked.

"Right. Balconies together. Stairs." I closed my eyes.

Our escape was only a matter of minutes. Averill had the car ready when we reached the obscure exit point.

Easton rode in the backseat, cradling me in his arms.

When everything was quiet, my ears still rang. I looked up at Easton. He stared right back down at me. "Don't leave me," I begged him. More for him or me, I won't ever know.

"Darling," he said, his gray eyes bright, "not for the world."

Chapter 3 - Fraction

Jules might have fantasized that I end up cradled in Easton Wyndham's lap, but the reality wasn't great. It wasn't until I made soft sounds of pain that he loosened his crushing hold--only to start the whole cycle over again. Through the hospital gown, I could feel the still thrilling warmth radiating from his body, arms, and fingers. Though it comforted me, the physical closeness and lack of other clothing made me self-conscious. With the pain that had wedged itself into my belly, and the increasing red dampness between us, I was too uncomfortable to sleep while my body still gave me a choice.

"Where is it?" Averill muttered. He rifled through the middle storage compartment with his good arm, tossing clear CD cases and crumpled tissues behind Fiore's seat. "It's not in here."

"It's in the car," Fiore said. He reached up and ran his fingers inside the driver side visor. "Try the glovebox."

"Fiore, where are we going?" Easton asked. He shifted me. I shut my eyes and focused on not moving, as much for Easton as my own comfort. I'd been crushing him for at least ten minutes. "Perhaps we shouldn't have left."

"A friend's," Fiore said.

"Andrew?" Easton guessed. "He'll be occupied."

"Not Andrew," Fiore answered. "He's definitely trying to clean up the hospital situation."

"Here!" Averill burst out, holding up a small, blue remote.

"Who's Andrew again?" I slurred. I was supposed to know this.

"Andrew Grant," Easton reminded me. "*Mayor* Grant."

"Oh, you're friends?" I asked. Did I know that? My voice was getting lighter and lighter.

He traced his fingertips down my cheek, leaving a sticky, warm trail. "Rest, darling."

As we hit a speed bump, I hiccupped in pain and seized another handful of Easton's shirt. The bunched material leaked red.

Easton smoothed my hair down. "Just a little longer," he said. Then, "Fiore, a remote-controlled gate is not going to stop a sniper."

"What gate?" I murmured.

"It's not the gate," Averill said stiffly.

"Pardon?" Easton asked.

"The gate's not why we're here," Fiore said grimly. The car stopped moving and the engine shut off. "Averill."

"On it," Averill said. He dashed out.

Easton glared at the driver's seat. He shook his head. "I'm fine, thank you," he said. "I've only been nearly shot twice this week."

"I'm not going to do this in front of her," Fiore said, like he was trying to calm himself.

"Good," Easton announced defiantly. "Stay calm. It won't do to aggravate your asthma."

"Don't start."

"I'm not starti--" Easton jumped when Averill popped up beside the passenger's side window.

Averill pulled the door open. "It's clear."

Fiore came around. He tugged my shoulders out of the car before catching my legs with his left arm. When Easton stepped out, his shirt hung heavy with blood.

That would be hard to pay for.

I opened my mouth to comment, but instead squeaked in pain as Fiore trotted until we reached a corner. After two loud men passed, we moved again.

My body wasn't plagued by plain weakness, but the feeling that something it really needed wasn't there. I clenched my jaw to hold in groans until we stopped on a porch overlooking a pool. We stopped at a house just beside a tennis court.

Averill knocked on the door.

When it opened, the blood drained from my face. As if I had any to spare.

"Harper?" I murmured.

"My goodness," Harper said, his eyes wide. "Please, come inside."

"No," I said, clasping at Fiore's shirt. "We can't."

"What's wrong, Cadence?" he asked gently as we moved.

"The bed in the back room," Harper said.

"Dangerous," I pleaded. "We can't."

After Fiore laid me on the bed, Harper came up on my other side. "Cadence, do you trust me?" He squeezed my arm, his smooth fingertips like cool satin.

Harper had helped me and Averill through the better part of the past school year, but this wasn't exactly the canon of English literature.

"I trust you," Harper went on, smiling. "And I quite like that you're here for trusting."

I shut my eyes. I was so weak and cold. I wanted to believe that nothing else would happen. That this place could really be safe.

"I need to change before my lecture," Fiore announced. "Averill has the hospital bag."

"Not safe," I implored.

Fiore shifted his keys from hand to hand. The jangle rang like tiny church bells, announcing the apprehension he hid. "I'll be fine. We can't all cloister, anyway. I have to be out, observing."

"Going to the home?" I asked. Tuesdays were Fiore's volunteer days.

He nodded. "I'll stop by Poppy's during my rounds."

Averill came in with the bag.

The keys stopped. "Take care of her," Fiore ordered. After one more clink, he left.

With the commotion over, I relaxed and became more aware of my different pains. Sore spots on my legs and arms, a stitch in my elbow, and the stab wound.

"Averill," I gasped. "It really hurts." My whole body throbbed.

"Try to relax," Easton said from the doorway. "I've got a doctor on the way."

"Wait," Averill said, "if we have too many people, it might compromise--"

"We can trust Ganesh," Easton said. "We were in the same cohort. He was the top of our class. Cadence ripped her stitches and aggravated the surgery site. She needs proper care."

"No doctor," I said. They all looked at me. "Not until it's safe. Clean the blood." I couldn't ask a doctor to walk into danger. We had left the hospital to keep people safe.

Easton cleared his throat. "With all due respect, darling, you don't have a medical degree."

"Neither do you," I replied faintly.

The next thing I knew, Averill shook me by the shoulder.

"Ow," I groaned.

"Stay with us," Averill said, worry etched in his face. He turned to Harper.

"Thoughts?"

Harper wrung his hands where he stood at the foot of the bed. "It would be best if Dr. Ganesh arrived quickly," he said. "The longer we stay in one place, the more risk we incur."

"How long do we have?" Averill asked. "An hour?"

"At the most," Harper replied. "But still precarious."

"I said no," I reminded them.

"You can barely stay awake," Averill said without looking at me.

I sighed, then winced. "Ow." I was so tired of the whole mess. I just wanted to go to school, keep my job, and avoid doing stupid things. Was that so hard?

Yes.

Easton crouched beside me and pressed two fingers to my throat. His heat made me shiver as it spread, down the back of my neck and along my spine. When he removed his hand, the sensation stopped. I felt deprived. The contact had made me feel better.

With a subtle tug, he covered me with the sheets, then opened my gown at the belly. I tensed, feeling exposed, but Easton murmured soothingly as he peeled the cloth apart. I was glad the gown had a side opening.

All coherent thought fled my mind as Easton touched the skin around my wound. I inhaled sharply and let out coughing groans. I had no idea how a doctor would get through examining me if I wanted to kick him from the pain.

"We'd best clean this," he said. He turned to Harper. "Do you... What is your name?"

"Harper, sir," came the reply.

"Sorry," Averill said distantly. He gestured to Easton. "Harper, this is Easton Wyndham."

"I-I know who you are," Harper said. "I admire your work."

Easton wiped his bangs away with his wrist. His fingers and palms were smeared with blood. "Do you have any alcohol we can use? And some clean cloths."

"I'll see what I can find," Harper said, walking out. "Averill would you mind helping me?"

"Sure," Averill said, following him.

Easton settled into a chair. "You have trouble relaxing, don't you?" he remarked as he placed his hands on my shoulders. "Unclench."

"Can't," I said. I sounded weaker than I felt, but only because he was touching me.

"You're weak and you've lost much blood. Your body needs time to heal."

"Danger," I reminded him. "You or Harper or--"

His eyebrows drew together. "You have no responsibility to me, Cadence." As he spoke, his mouth curved downward in a grim frown. "I'm flattered, believe me, but this is not the risk an injured nineteen-year-old girl needs to take."

"Twenty," I corrected him. "Saturday."

"Twenty," he amended. He slid forward in the chair and put his hand on my cheek. The angles of his finger-joints sculpted to my cheeks through the electric current and drying blood. My pain, my whole body, floated.

I jerked back into painful reality when he shook me. "Cadence!"

I groaned. "What?" Why did people keep doing that?

"You just stopped breathing," he said in a hushed voice. He hovered over me on the bed now.

"What?" I murmured, only half-feeling the disbelief. "No. Sleep."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "No, this wasn't like a minute ago. You were dying."

"I woke up." I wasn't really up for a debate.

"I..." He looked away, then down at his hands. His fingers and his palms and his arms all caked with my blood. "I..."

Just like the other day. Maybe blood was the reason he'd never finished med school. "Clean up?" I suggested.

He frowned at me. "I'm going to try something." He pressed his hands to my wound.

"What--"

He shut his eyes. "I need quiet, please, my dear."

Trusting him wasn't second nature after the attack, but I didn't see how he could make things worse. I turned my head to focus on the mirrored closet doors. Something strange sat in the reflection, something in the shadows looked wrong. Before I could register the object, the spasm hit me. Easton's hands might well have injected lava through my belly, because a molten heat pumped through me. As it grew worse, he pressed harder on my wound. I gasped and tried to pry him off, but I could barely grip his fingers. "Stop!" I cried. "Please!"

I pushed at his arm, then his chest, but he wouldn't move. The heat was heavy across my arms and legs, in my gut, in spots all over my body. Soon, I was dizzy with it. I thought I'd pass out as my head burned, but just when the world darkened, my sight cleared.

I laid still, gasping hard. Easton leaned down close, his breath fast and heavy. He stared at my face, but not my eyes. His hand braced against my pillow, beside my ear. I squirmed backward, out from under him, scooting until my shoulder hit the headboard.

"How..." Easton breathed, "do you feel?"

I started to give him an indignant response. Then I realized what exactly my response was. I leaned forward and pulled my gown away to show my belly. The stitches were in my skin still, the thread ripped. Those and the bloodstains were the only way I could tell I had been stabbed.

I tested my skin, pressing carefully. No pain. It had healed. I shook out my arm, the one with the hurt elbow. Perfect.

I stared at him. "I'm better?"

He nodded, and his eyelids fluttered. Then he dropped onto me.

I yelled in surprise. "Averill!" I tried to push Easton off, but he was too heavy.

"What's wrong?!" Averill skidded into the room. "Hey!" He grabbed Easton's shoulder.

I pushed while Averill pulled. "He did something--"

Averill growled. "I'm gonna--"

"No, no, not like that!" I grunted as I squeezed out from under Easton. When I stumbled back from the bed, Averill let Easton drop. He lay very still. His elbow hung off the mattress edge. His face was turned toward me, almost paper white as he took shallow breaths.

"I'm about to be sick," he moaned.

I grabbed the nearby rubbish bin and he scooted closer to the edge before he threw up. He was so extraordinary, and so fragile. I rubbed his neck and combed his hair back with my fingers. The light gel crunched as I tore through it.

When he was done, he groaned and went slack.

I crouched so Easton could see me. "What did you do?" I asked. He had saved me. Easton Wyndham had saved my life. I didn't know how, or even that I fully believed it, but he was just as generous and powerful as Lord Wyn.

Averill looked at the bed, then at me, then back at the bed. "What happened? Cadence, how are you--"

"I'm better," I said, standing. I opened my gown to show him my stomach. "I'm fine--"

"Whoa," Averill breathed.

"-but now Easton's sick. He did something. I don't know what."

"Whoa," Averill said again, holding out his open hands. "Whoa."

I crouched again and resumed brushing Easton's hair. "I know. But stop saying 'whoa.'"

Easton gave a weak smile. I settled my fingers on his jawline. The current ran through me, strongest in my chest. He reached up and put his hand over mine.

Averill turned his face toward the hallway. "Harp!" he called.

###

Harper's bathroom didn't smell like a guy's bathroom. Having lived with Poppy, visited Thomas' apartment, and been the only female inhabitant of Fiore's house, I

thought I had a pretty accurate frame of reference for male quarters. Fiore kept his abode in meticulous order and grew all those flowers, but Jules always wrinkled her nose when she came to visit me.

Harper's house didn't have a scent.

Clean was good. Harper deserved a high-five for the spotless shower doors. But it all seemed off, and that unsettled me.

Someone knocked while I scrutinized a bottle of body lotion. Even that didn't smell.

"Yeah?" I called.

"What are you doing?" Averill asked through the door.

I blinked and looked up at my reflection. "I'm almost ready."

I put the lotion back in the little zip-up baggie.

I had bigger concerns, as my smirking reflection reminded me. Averill had packed the bag with my toothbrush and toothpaste, two towels, my black cotton shorts, black slip-ons, pawprint hipsters, red bra, and a white tank.

That was it. My house shorts, the tank I only ever wore *under* anything, and the obnoxious push-up plunge bra I was supposed to reserve for nights when I wanted to practice "the sexy, come-take-me look," as Jules had whispered during my last birthday

gathering. Thomas had been ready to throw things when he remembered he wasn't the only guy there.

Jules had gotten yet another wish with the shorts, but I wasn't optimistic about walking around with everyone seeing pretty much everything.

On Jules, the ensemble could work, if she survived her family on the way to her front door. My exposed arms were thicker than I liked. The top was long, so my non-six pack wasn't too obtrusive if I kept good posture. I sucked in the swell of my healed belly as I observed my profile.

Poppy always said I should eat more. He claimed I wouldn't find a real man if my butt didn't fill in properly. According to him, I'd inherited my boobs and hips from my father's side and my butt from my mother's, and I was lucky my father got four things right.

I was happy to have a whole, functioning body again. I just didn't want to show it off quite yet.

"Do you need help?" Averill asked.

I huffed and opened the door. "Do you have a hoodie or something?"

Averill stared blankly. "No. It's sunny," he said. "What's wrong? You look ready."

I flicked off the bathroom light. It was nice enough that they had put the bag together. But I was annoyed. "These are house clothes," I said. I tugged on my tank.

Averill nodded. "Yeah. I thought you'd want to be comfortable at the hospital."

"This tank top is white," I said, tugging on the shoulder strap with my thumb. "And this is a *red* bra." I tugged the red strap until it snapped back.

Averill scrunched his nose. He scratched the back of his head. "Okay, something's wrong with the bra? I don't know how this girl stuff works."

"And yet you know how to *unhook* a bra. Because I taught you."

"You *helped me learn*," Averill corrected. "There is a difference. Also, let's remember that *my* objective is to get it off--" he reached around my back and, with a gentle flick of two fingers, the bra clasps fell loose, "--Not match it with the rest of the outfit."

"Ugh!" I caught my free-falling cups to salvage what little decency remained. I smacked his good arm with my free hand. "Jerk!" I turned my back toward him. "Hook me back up."

"Can't you do that?"

"You did this to me, you fix it."

"You never taught me this part."

Turning to scowl at him, I grabbed the flaps at my back and worked to navigate the five hooks. "You're not even going to try?" I let out a sound of success as a hook caught, then groaned at the tightness around my chest. Wrong hook. "What a gentleman."

"You hate the bra so much, why don't you just not wear--"

I fumed as I yanked to unhook the bra again. "You finish that sentence, Averill de Sidèreale--!" My breath caught in my throat as the flaps were tugged out of my grasp.

There was a solid wall of heat behind me, and Easton's cologne caressed the air just above my shoulder.

I turned my head a little, almost daring to glance back at him, but I couldn't muster the courage as clasp after clasp snapped into place. When I turned my gaze in the other direction, I met Averill's conflicted expression. He looked like he wanted to punch Easton, but he also looked surprised.

Easton managed to not touch me through the entire process, until the end when he bent his head forward to adjust the position of the band. That was when just a little bit of his hair tickled my shoulder, and his breath warmed my skin. When his task was done, he inhaled and released a deep breath of satisfaction, and tugged the hem of my tank down.

My cheeks were practically flaming as he stepped forward to gaze at my face.

"All right?" he asked.

I gulped. Then I nodded. "Uh. Yeah." I couldn't keep eye contact for too long. I was scared my clothes might burn off.

Easton turned back toward the bedroom, then planted his palm against the wall.

"Careful," I said, catching his other arm as he swayed.

He panted lightly. He was pale again, but not as bad as before. When he opened his eyes, they were unfocused, so I put my arm behind his back and guided him to the bedroom.

"Sorry you feel so sick," I said.

He held onto my shoulder, sinking down onto the mattress. With a sigh, he pressed his forehead against my collarbone. I froze, or tried to. Of course, I was then acutely aware of how my chest rose and fell with each heavy breath, how my hand was making a sweaty palm print on what had been the one remaining clean spot on his shirt.

Easton's eyelashes fluttered against my skin, and I suddenly fully appreciated the idea of butterfly kisses.

Then Easton lifted his head and blinked. He slid away, patting the pillows for his back. "I didn't mean to do that," he said. "I wasn't thinking."

I knew he wouldn't hurt me, but he thought the nice moment was a mistake. My chest ached.

Harper had heated soup, now sitting on the bedside table. Easton tried a spoonful. His pleased moan made me hurt more. Easton Wyndham enjoyed canned soup more than he enjoyed being near me.

Easton nodded to the mattress. "Please, darling, have a seat."

I sat and pulled my legs up onto the bed. Then I turned and let my limbs curl, relaxed at the knee, with my left ankle tucked under my right knee. Thankfully, I had shaved the day before. Some lotion wouldn't hurt, but this wasn't the time for luxury. I liked the feeling of my own skin. It was safe. I let my fingers drag up my thigh.

Averill, in his bedside chair, glared at something past me.

It was Easton, the spoon in his mouth, frozen in mid-gulp. His eyes were trained on my fingers moving my leg.

I stopped. Easton blinked, then tried to find the answer to life in his soup. I raised my eyebrow but didn't say anything. Whatever what was going on with him, it wasn't my problem.

"Cadence, care for anything?" Harper asked from the hallway.

I wasn't hungry, but it was time for serious hydration. "Water, please."

I had downed Easton's crackers and three huge bottles of enhanced water by the time Averill's techno ringtone sounded.

"It's Cora," he said, stepping into the hallway. "Hey, babe."

Easton squeezed my ankle. "Darling, are you cold?" he asked.

"Oh," I said. I had slipped my toes under the comforter without realizing.

He pulled the comforter up so it covered my legs, then reached around my shoulders and rubbed my bare arm with his palm.

I opened my mouth to protest, but stopped. I hadn't noticed Harper's house was unusually cold for a Southern California winter. And Easton was the perfect warmth. I didn't mind that he could see down both my shirt and bra if he tilted his head. Even with his issues, he had saved my life. It wouldn't hurt to have a friend to save my life from time to time. It wasn't the best thing to need, but I didn't have a choice.

"Babe," Averill said loudly in the hallway. "I'm fine. I wasn't in the building. I was in the parking lo--Cora. No. It's not safe--I can't tell you where. I'll explain later. Cora!"

I bit my lip as Averill let out a heavy breath. I wasn't Cora's biggest fan, but he was mad for her. He came back into the room wearing a half-hearted smile that soured when he saw Easton's hand on my arm.

I squinted as I remembered Averill's words at the restaurant. I didn't believe Easton was as bad as Averill thought. He could be aloof, but he wasn't selfish.

Harper followed Averill into the room. He'd been fluttering around the house the entire time.

"The hour's going to be up," I said. "We need a next step."

"Yes," Harper replied, folding his hands. "I'd best explain before we move on."

Easton's fingertips dug into my skin. "You're going to explain the past 48 hours?" he asked.

"Most of it," Harper offered. "Part of it. A good fraction." His mouth twisted up a bit as he thought about this, then he nodded. "Yes, a good fraction."

"Go on," Easton urged.

Harper bowed his head forward, then looked up at us on the bed. "You've had vivid daydreams you can't control?"

"Yes," Easton said, just as I did. We both looked at each other.

"And you recognize some people," Harper went on, "but not others?"

"Certainly," Easton said. "Since preschool, Fiore was the only person I saw clearly. Most of the rest were blobs and blurs."

"Same," I said. "In junior high, it was just Averill."

Harper licked his lips as he carefully considered his next words. "Those daydreams are memories from your past lives." He held up his hand for silence just as I opened my mouth to scoff at the idea. "Before the world was this one our humanity knows, it was a very different place. There are knights in these memories. Magic. Impossible things, events, and beings."

"Yes," Easton said. He sounded like he believed it. That worried me.

Harper gestured to Easton. "You tried to heal Cadence because you felt you had succeeded before. In your daydreams."

Easton didn't reply.

"And Cadence," Harper said, regarding me, "you have an instinct for protecting others."

"I... guess," I admitted. "But I'm not very good at it."

Harper pushed his glasses up with his index finger. "You've witnessed your true nature. You've witnessed your life as that person. Because you *are* Lady Cadence Audra Suei, knight and Duchess of August." He regarded Easton. "And you. Lord Etesian Wyndham Caedmon... His Grace, the Duke of Prospero. A healer."

"There's no Duke," I complained with a frown. "Who's Lord..." I was about to repeat the name, but it dawned on me.

Before the idea hurtled straight to the part of my mind that could grasp it, Easton tucked my hair behind my ear. My whole body jerked, hypersensitive to the tingling his fingers left on my skin. He had done it before, once, when I'd complained about ear pain and pressure. But this time shot a bolt of ice through my chest. This time, I wondered what that gesture really meant.

"Darling," he said, looking very, very aware of the space between us, "you used to call me Lord Wyn."

My jaw dropped. Breathing required conscious effort.

I had grown to love Lord Wyn, grown accustomed to the way he cherished me, the way we were bonded. But I couldn't imagine he might truly have lived.

Yet he wasn't here now. Not in this reality. As much as I liked Easton, there would always be a distance between us. We were too different.

And why was I acting like I believed all this?

I didn't.

I stood up. "This..." I started. A million other thoughts collided, exploding like new stars. There had been too many moments I had admired Cadence of August because she carried herself without pretense and was generally unafraid. She was flawed, too. But I had always thought that reflected the real me. I had lived with her for the better part of my life, but I was still only me. "This can't..." I knew Averill before I knew

Averill? "I meet people, and they stick in my memory," I said, trying to find the logic.

"My imagination plays with what I know." It was a coping mechanism. That was what every counselor had said.

"How else can you explain Easton healing you?" Averill asked.

"Healers can exist," I said. That much I believed. Stories cropped up around the globe everyday. If others had witnessed it, I could get behind it. "My cousin swears by a faith healer who stops in California maybe twice a decade. But in that world, Cydonia?"

"The continent was Rodinia," Harper explained. "Cydonia was the Western kingdom, one of four regions dictated by the allegiances of the gods--"

I put my hand up to get back the floor. "In that supposed life, only men became knights. Harper said *I* was a knight. And that couldn't have happened."

Averill stepped closer to me. "Cadence," he said slowly. "Why can you believe in healing, by someone who clearly isn't a faith healer, but not this other stuff?"

I backed away from him. "Why would I *want* any of this to be true?"

"Because you are more than you think you are," Easton said.

I shook my head. I had been grateful before, but I felt like I stood on thin ice, waiting for whatever lay beneath to engulf me. I needed to feel safe and regroup. "I'm out," I said.

"Cadence," Averill warned as he stood.

"Give me one shred of evidence that what Harper said is true," I dared them, making eye contact with them all. "Prove who you say I am."

"Your father's name was Adalbero," Easton tried.

"Ancestral name," I said. "Lucky guess."

"We can't prove what you don't remember," Averill said. "And we don't have your sword."

"Kiss her, Averill," Harper said flatly.

"What?" the rest of us said together.

Harper whispered into Averill's ear. I strained to hear, but not a single sound strayed.

Averill frowned. "Are you sure?"

Sniffing, Harper nodded.

"Uh, no," I said. "I'm not kissing anyone."

"How will this help?" Easton asked.

"Cadence," Harper said, "people could die. Your life is at risk. But I will not force this on you. This is all I can do to prove it's real. If you let Averill kiss you, and

you still don't believe me, then may the gods be with you, and I hope you make it. But I'm afraid for you. Please give me this chance to earn your trust. This kiss will demonstrate a magic and a knowledge that no one else could have." He turned to Easton. "Trust me."

I eyed Averill. He didn't look so enthusiastic either.

"Please, Cadence," Easton said. "I'd rather you not go through with this, but if it will keep you with us, consider it."

I shook my head. How it had come to this, I had no idea. But Easton had saved me. Averill was my best friend. The danger outside of Harper's house was real. Whatever happened, if this was the last time I ever saw them, I would regret that I didn't give them a chance.

"Fine," I said. "Do it. I don't know what you expect to happen, but get it over with."

Averill stepped toward me, his mouth curled in an unhappy smirk. "No offense," he said, "but this is gross. You're like a sister." Then he added, "Don't tell Cora."

"No one outside this room ever knows," I said. "No one *in* this room ever breathes a word." God, how embarrassing.

Averill leaned in, then stopped. "You have to meet me halfway," he complained, "I'm not doing all the work."

"Jerk," I said. I gripped Averill's good shoulder for balance and pushed up onto the balls of my feet so he wouldn't have to stoop too much.

Groaning with reluctance, Averill lowered his head. My balance wavered for a second, so he grabbed my waist with his good hand and planted his lips onto mine.

One thing was clear: we had absolutely no chemistry. If it were possible, we had negative chemistry. We kept our mouths closed, and it felt like we were both frowning as we stayed that way. Out of respect for my best friend, I resolved to wait two more seconds before I slapped him, kicked Harper, and ran out of there.

Then Averill's hand slid down to my behind. At the same time, his sling-arm pivoted, and that hand grabbed my boob.

With my insides screaming in pain, I fell.

My shoulder hit the floor, and my head hung without support. I had no strength to lift it. I gasped unevenly for breath, my body twitching every few seconds, the contractions pulling whimpers out of me. My eyelids fluttered. I didn't know whether I wanted to be awake or asleep.

"That's it," Harper announced.

"Goddamn it, Harper!" Averill cried. He dropped to his knees. "Cadence, I'm sorry! I didn't know." He reached for me.

"Don't!" I sobbed. I turned onto my stomach. My chest and behind burned, branded.

"Cadence," Averill said again, like he hurt too.

I kept my cheek against the floor, squeezing my eyes shut to stop the tears.

Something warm settled beside me. "You're in pain," Easton said gently. "May I?"

I wouldn't acknowledge him witnessing this.

"What is that, Harper?" Averill demanded. "What happened to her?"

Harper said something quietly. There was a crash, and he let out of a soft cry of pain.

"That wasn't an answer," Averill growled.

Easton eased me onto my back, cradling me again.

I wriggled and dug my heels into the floor, steeling myself against whatever his touch would bring.

With his brow furrowed, he made eye contact with me. Then he carefully laid his hand on the hurt part of my chest.

I gasped, but he kept eye contact, and the pain ebbed. My breath stabilized.

Averill spoke again. His voice could have scared death itself. "Why did you do that?"

"When," Harper said, his voice wavering and tinged with pain, "when Lord Wyn and Lady Cadence were engaged in Cydonia, her father used a powerful magic to seal the vow. I had mentioned it in passing. I didn't know he'd used it until too late."

A thud. "And?" Averill demanded.

"It hurts her," Harper gulped out. "The intimate touch of another man hurts her."

"That's why," Averill whispered. "With Thomas." Then, slowly, the horror seeped in with the realization. "Cadence, he *hurt* you?"

My tears leaked out. No one knew. No one. Hugs, some touches, and kisses were okay. When it started to go too far, the pain made me stop Thomas. He got so frustrated, assuming my silent slouch was me hiding from him. I never corrected him, wishing he would notice the truth.

It was supposed to be okay. It was supposed to be okay to wait. But it didn't feel okay to constantly disappoint someone I thought I loved, who thought I didn't love him enough to bear the discomfort and go that extra step.

I peeled Easton's hand from me and pushed it away.

"Why would her father do that?" I asked weakly.

"He was trying to protect you," Harper said. "Others came for you. Your power. Engagement vows kept the affianced from being unjustly claimed, or worse."

I shut my eyes, wishing it couldn't be real. Then, I faced Adalbero of August.

Giordani held his arm around my neck.

Daddy was in gray shades, kneeling about thirty paces away. He held his hand out, beckoning. "Cadence," he said, his tone gentle, "it's all right."

"Daddy?" I wanted him. Being torn from the manor had not been nice, and though I was not without blame, I wanted to feel safe again. I lurched forward, but Giordani tugged me back.

"She's mine now, Adalbero," Giordani said. "I earned her. You owe me."

"She's nine-years-old," Daddy said through grit teeth. "She's my daughter, not a thing. You have forced yourself into her life, and you have ruined it."

"He's angry," Giordani announced, stroking my collarbone. "He wants you back so he can punish you for learning magic. Remember, girl, I am your freedom. You are power. You need only commit to the life I will give you. You can't imagine all you'll do."

"Daddy?" I said again. Daddy was always so angry about Giordani. He would punish me for giving the thief another chance.

My father shook his head. "Cadence, you already trust me. You're grown. You know if I did punish you, if you were ever to deserve it, I would do so within reason."

"It's your decision," Giordani said. "Remember, Adalbero hid your power from you. Your legacy. Do you want these stiff-lipped peons to stifle you the rest of your days? That's not living."

I did have power. Sir Spider had said so. But I needed to learn how to use it properly, for the right reasons. To keep others from harm.

"Damn it, Giordani!" Lord Wyn yelled. "I will see you punished, I swear it."

"Daughter," said my father steadily, "listen to me. It is your decision, that much is true. But please remember the two most important things I have always impressed upon you. I am begging you now, Cadence--"

"Augusts do not beg," I reminded him.

"I would give everything I have," he corrected himself, "for you to remember I love you dearly. And that you will always be an August."

My father never told a lie, and I could not deny either of these things. The only person who had challenged my father's love was Giordani. He had given me power. But I favored my father's love above all else. I was an August, not someone who opposed one.

"Now," Daddy went on, "Cadence, what is the most important thing an August does?"

I flinched as my hair bun came loose. My locks unfurled, and I caught my hair stick before it fell.

"Augusts protect others," Giordani sneered. "Cadence is my protection now. I'm going to be royalty."

"You are wrong," I said, steadying the hair stick. For all he had taught me, Giordani was ignorant of the first, most basic lesson I had learned in my life:

Action without charity is a lethal weapon; charity without action is worthless.

I regretted I had ever trusted this wretched man. "Augusts fight." The hair stick drove into Giordani's arm like a butterknife through cream. He shouted an obscenity and I pushed his arm away to run.

My toe caught on my dress and I fell.

Daddy shouted, calling for his ice dragon. Escalier roared as he passed, a rush of frigid air chilling my exposed ankles. Giordani yelled again, and there was a terrible crash as Escalier pinned him to a tree.

"Cadence!" Daddy called. He ran to me. "Wyn, check her."

Lord Wyn touched my arm, heat plunging through my skin. "Shaken more than anything else," he assessed.

"Daddy," I whimpered, keeping my head down low to the ground. "Lord Wyn. I have shamed you both by trusting a dishonorable man. I am not worthy. If you should have any mercy upon me, please let me be banished to the care of the house of Suei."

"No," my father whispered, urging my chin up. "I would never send you away." He looked to Lord Wyn. "Do it."

Lord Wyn paled as he considered my father's order. Then he cleared his throat. "Cadence." He took my hand. "I have wanted to protect you and give you the world since I heard the sound of your first breath. Please allow me the privilege of being able to do so for the rest of our lives. Would you do me the great honor of agreeing to marry me?"

I blinked. I was not expecting this. I looked to my father for an explanation. "Daddy?"

My father nodded.

Was I being promised away for convenience? Was this my punishment? I did not understand.

"Don't do it!" Giordani screamed. "It's a trap! Augh!!--" His voice cut off into strangled groans.

"Darling," Lord Wyn went on, "we will wed when you see fit. And you may be released from the engagement if you so choose. We would only have to find the official to unbind us." He put his hands on my cheeks, and I blinked against the hot thrill. "You will not be trapped. I will not force you."

Lord Wyn was a very good man. He had been in my life since I could remember. Doting on me, watching over me when Daddy was on assignment. Healing me if I was ill. I had often imagined I might marry him if I were given the option, but it was too soon. I was afraid of my power, not knowing what I could do and what it would bring upon him.

I looked again to my daddy.

The look on his face was tortured. He suffered. But his voice was bright as he gave a strained smile. "You are so strong and brave. You will do what is best."

He said this, despite that I had hidden my magic lessons with Giordani. My father believed in me still.

"Don't you see?" Giordani gasped out, his breath wheezing, "They will never let you go."

Anger exploded in me. I stood and turned to address the lowly thief in Escalier's jaws. My father and I had been happy before the visits and the magic. I was quite

content to go back to it. "I would never want them to let me go," I told him. Then I turned to Lord Wyn. I placed my hand in his, our palms nearly sparking.

"Your Grace," I said. "That would please me very much."

###

Back in Harper's house, I blinked, in Easton's arms still.

"I'm going to hurt Thomas," Averill said, like it was the most mundane fact he'd ever read on the internet. "I'm going to inflict bodily harm on that jackass."

"I didn't know," Easton said.

"Adalbero was a good man," Harper said. "If he had understood there was a remote possibility it could harm you, he would never have done it."

Nine-years-old was so young to be so imperiled. There was too much pressure on all of these people. It wasn't trivial melodrama, it wasn't a coping mechanism. I could never, in a mental escape, dream a life as complicated or as terrifying as hers.

Cadence of August's power was real. I didn't know what it was, other than devastating. But that was why I had to find out.

I believed.

"They're memories," I said. I started to sit up. Easton supported me, lifting my back until I could lean my forehead against his shoulder.

"Yes," Harper said, relieved. He sat on the bed, cradling his right elbow in his left hand. I felt bad that Averill had hurt him. But there was something about Harper I was starting to not like.

I wiped my tears away with the heel of my hand. It hurt. It hurt somewhere I couldn't describe, knowing I was going to be alone for the rest of my life. But the rest of my life wouldn't last very long if I didn't pull myself together. "So what does this mean?" I asked, sniffing. "What does this have to do with getting stabbed and shot at?"

"You were the only female knight, and one of the greatest fighters," Harper explained. "You had many enemies when you died. I believe some have been reincarnated with us, scattered throughout the world. I've never really considered them a threat, but it seems someone very powerful has put forth an effort to gain an upper hand." Harper hung his head. "We were trying to hide you both. I'm sorry."

I forced myself to breathe steadily. Logic. I had to get a clear picture. "How would they know I'm... that I was her?" I shifted onto my knees. Easton stood, offering his hand to me. "At the restaurant, the assassin decided to stab me when she knew my name."

Back on my feet, I swayed. Easton caught me.

"That woman is known as The Weaver," Harper said. "She's an unaffiliated assassin. I believe she may be a reincarnation manipulated by..."

"By?" I asked.

"By someone like me," Harper said reluctantly.

"What do you mean?" Easton asked.

Harper played with the hem of his sweater-vest. "Unlike the rest of you, I was privy to our true nature very early on. And I've done my best to organize a network of support. If someone else had the same inclination, he may be using the advantage of his knowledge to hunt us. Unfortunately, unlike a chess game where the pawns fight first, these people went directly for our prized piece."

"Me," Easton said.

"You were-you are very powerful," Harper confirmed. "If you recall."

"Not my most cherished memories," Easton admitted.

"Agreed. Their end-game has become their first move," Harper continued.

"Cadence's demise would have been a bonus for them. I have no doubt they will continue to hunt the rest of her former charges as well." He turned to me. "The people you protected, your friends, were also your strongest allies."

"Why don't I remember the way you do?" I asked.

"After you turn twenty," Averill said, "a lot more knight stuff will come back to you."

"Hm," Easton said, "the Weaver's face lit up like the Fourth of July when she heard Cadence's age."

"Yes," Harper said. "We must take great care until then, for any reincarnations may be in danger. Including Averill and the professor."

I shook my head. Fiore was in on this too.

"But especially Mr. Wyndham, given his power and your former... relationship."

"I could fight," Averill said. He flicked his earring with his index finger.

"Sparring's getting old."

My breath caught in my throat. Averill had a sword. And probably magic.

"What about me?" I asked.

"I'd hidden your weapon on the East Coast," Harper said, frowning at a patch on the wall. "It was never to be removed, but someone shipped it off yesterday morning. The records were scrambled. I will keep trying."

"You lost my magic sword?"

"I temporarily lost track of it," Harper corrected me.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't want to back down from the fight, especially if Easton was in danger, but there was no way I could keep going with my track record. I

wasn't getting any better at avoiding trouble, and being laid up in the hospital wasn't the best way to protect anyone. "Fine. Who else is there? Because I need a break."

Harper looked like he wanted to speak but lacked the courage to let the words out. So Averill did it for him: "We still need you with us."

"Why?" I asked. "Isn't there someone to fight who, you know, can actually fight?"

"There is," Harper said. "There are. But you're in danger. We must work together."

"I'm not in danger," I told him. "Easton is the target. In case you haven't noticed, the only thing I'm good at right now is getting hurt. So you guys need to do whatever you do--"

I flinched as Easton's palm and fingers burned my arm. "There are people out there who will not hesitate to kill you."

As I absorbed the dark emotion in his eyes, my breaths grew shallow and quick. "Why?" I asked. "Why would you say that?" His words sank so deep I felt the cold in my bones, and it would not let up.

I wanted Easton to take his hand off me. I wanted to slip into the closet and hide.

Then his hand grasped my chin. He tilted my face up. "Listen to me," he said, it was his business voice. "You are a good person. You always were. But every time you saved someone, you left your enemies alive. Your mercy--"

"Stop!" I cried. I shoved at his chest, but he was solid and didn't give. So I turned away and pressed my palms over my eyes. "It's not like I was a superhero," I said, pleading, because I needed a reason to fold. "I was only one good fighter. There have to be other good fighters. They have to do it. I don't know how to save the world--"

Easton's fingers slid across my back, leaving a trail of sparks along my skin. "It's simple, darling," he said as he spoke over my shoulder. "One person at a time. We can do this. Together, hm?"

The way he touched me just reminded me he was the only one who ever really could.

This wasn't right, or fair. Harper was supposed to explain things, and they were supposed to make sense. But my life was getting more insane by the second. And Easton, who should have been right there with me staring in horror at the crazy train, was hopping on for the ride. I turned on my heel to face him.

"Do not patronize me," I said, in a tone that surprised me. I had never sounded so cold before.

Easton's expression twisted in confusion.

I addressed Averill next. "How long have you known?"

Averill pressed his lips together. "Well, Fiore didn't tell me immediately when I moved in either. You and I were both knighted when we were twenty. After I turned twenty, the pull of the past started to make sense. Then they explained everything." He smiled, and for once I noticed his cheer was forced. It had never been forced before.

"So you've known for two years." I looked up at the ceiling, then at the closet doors, then at my own hands. I was ready to explode from trying to keep up with everything. "And you guys think you can just tell me these things and act like everything's going to be okay?"

"It's going to be hard," Averill said, "but we're here to help you."

"Help me," I said. "Help me do something I can't and don't want to do."

"It's who you are," Harper said. "I had hoped it would not come to this, but we can't escape who we are."

My chest felt tight. I was trapped, like with Thomas in the hospital. "This isn't supposed to be my life. The past happened and it's done." I rubbed at the growing tension in my neck. "I need some air." I moved toward the hallway.

"She doesn't know," Easton said. Though he wasn't speaking in my direction, I paused. "She doesn't understand what it was like after she died." I turned and caught his

gaze as he went on. "I can recall every one of those memories because they are terrible. A world died with you."

For once, when I thought I would cry, I didn't. "I've spent half of my life thinking I'm half-crazy. You're telling me I'm going to feel crazy *and* be in danger until I finally get caught and die. Excuse me if I am hard-pressed to offer my sympathy."

Cadence of August cried, screamed, and wanted love like any other kid, but she would never back down from a challenge, and she would never have to think before risking herself for others. But I was nothing like that. I was not some brave girl who could make enemies, then defeat them. "I couldn't even keep my parents from dying," I said as I turned to continue on my way. My voice broke as I went on, "How am I supposed to protect everyone else?"

"You had a banner," Harper called.

I stopped again, trying to understand him.

"The first August," Harper went on, "was the first Cydonian knight. On the family coat-of-arms, the motto loosely translated was 'Charity Without End.' Anyone who came under an August's protection... that protection was said to be especially considered by fate and the gods."

"What does that even mean?" I whispered.

"Your kindness," he said, urgent and near tears, like he was the one trapped in a painful, terrible nightmare, "can make the most powerful forces in the world hesitate."

"But it does end, doesn't it?" I asked hoarsely, facing him. "It ends if I die. That's what went wrong the first time."

Harper looked at the floor.

"All of you need to figure it out," I said slowly. "I'm not a knight. And I'm not an August. I'm just me."

"Cadence, I'd like to speak with you," Easton said.

I kept walking.

###

Despite Cadence of August's dark life, Cydonia seemed like a nice place. It was lush with bright trees and vibrant grass and a spectrum of colorful flora in-between. There were fountains everywhere in evocative shapes like snakes or birds, or odd creatures I'd never heard of or seen in my present life. Torches lit up automatically wherever it was dark. Knights were reverent and truly chivalrous, bound by holy vows and their swords to serve and defend.

Women weren't kept from being knights because they were deemed unfit. It was because they were supposed to be politicians. That was the story, anyway. The ruling goddess of the continent of Rodinia was Mother Earth, and she thought men should be

the ones on the front line while women advocated for their people. Everyone believed this was why no woman--before me, allegedly--had managed to find a sword to protect her and allow her the magic to fight. Girls could be pages, even squires. But only a few daring women had tried hundreds of swords for years in search of a willing match.

I wasn't sure what I thought about the magic, and the gods. Easton's healing was one thing. But that there was a whole hierarchy of deities, from the Sky Father to the Earth Mother, and their children and relatives... there was some resistance coming from the strict religious habits my parents, then Poppy, had engrained in me. Until I figured out myself and whatever baggage little Cadence of August had brought with her, I couldn't accept that such powerful entities would let my friends get hurt like that. Or that I had been brought back to fight battles long done. Especially when my charity, so to speak, was supposed to give these bigwigs pause.

I got the feeling little Cadence had about as much control over her own life as I did right now. That wasn't much.

Averill gave me ten minutes before he pretended to discover me at the pool. Thanks to a tree with low branches, I had hopped the gate. Sitting still hurt on one side, but I needed to collect myself, so I had settled on the top step, just above the water.

Water always calmed me. When my parents had taken me to the beach, I'd floated on my back and fallen asleep.

I loved watching the shimmering blues and greens shift and change and be perfect in every shape. Getting lost in the pool's serene ripples and thinking about Poppy would usually have made me feel better. I made a plan to visit him, and hug him, and tell him he was the best godfather in the world. Then I wondered how he might react if I died. I didn't want to leave him. I wanted my life back.

"So that's where you went to," Averill said as he plopped down next to me.

I didn't look at him.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "I feel like shit for hurting you. That's the last thing I want to do."

I kept my focus on the water. "How would you feel if someone told you your life has built-in enemies? Who you've never met before but who want to hurt you and a bunch of other people you're supposed to protect?"

"Probably not great."

"I can't believe you lied this whole time."

"It wasn't lying," Averill defended. "I wanted to wait until the right time. We all did."

I dipped my fingers in and splashed water across the pool. "That worked out well."

"You told me about your parents. Poppy in the home. Your relatives," he said. "We wanted to let you be happy before you turned twenty and got handed a whole new responsibility. And we had no idea this would happen. Until yesterday, being a knight was fun."

I shook my head. "Fun." I thinned my eyes at him. "These flashbacks are fun?"

"Maybe not right now, but--"

"I am watching this girl, who I used to be, get her life ruined one moment at a time."

"It gets better," he said quietly.

"Yeah," I said. "Until I die."

"Just think of it as getting to know an important part of yourself."

"My teachers thought I was delinquent. I went to see counselors. I zone out when people are talking to me and I have never actually felt *good* at a job--"

"Hey." He waved his hand in front of my face. "Haven't you ever thought maybe it's all because they weren't what you're meant for?"

"No," I spit out at him.

"It will all feel better once your birthday hits," he assured me. "I promise."

"Oh sure," I said, "everything will be perfect. If I last that long."

"Don't be like that."

"You're don't have to be a human shield with manufacturing defects."

"You don't win a fight by believing you're going to lose."

"I've almost died," I told him. "More than once. It's a matter of probability.

Math is the universal truth, and it's not going to be on my side much longer."

"Cadence," he said, "you have to believe you can do this."

"I'll believe it when I see it--"

"I've seen it. We've all seen it."

"And then you all saw me die. That didn't end well, either, did it?"

"Just," he said, clawing at his eyes, "just get past yourself. Get past how hard you think this is going to be. Because every risk you sit around being afraid of is another opportunity for someone to get hurt. Including you."

I stared at him. "This isn't a very inspiring pep talk."

He gave a sad smirk. "It sounded better when you used to say it to us."

I buried my fingers in my hair. "I don't know what to think. I don't know how to start handling this. There's no way I'll ever be as good as you guys say she was."

"Start small," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Concentrate on one person. That should be Easton, right?"

"He's the one in danger, yeah."

Averill opened his mouth, but didn't speak. He looked down at his hands as he considered what he wanted to say.

"What about him?" I asked. "What makes him so powerful?"

"If he had the tools, he could do a couple of things really well, but..." He shook his head. "I shouldn't tell you this."

"What's stopping you?"

He caught my gaze. "If you're going to win, you have to believe it's the only option."

"Okay."

"Easton died last," he explained. "They had to put me out of commission to get to him. Once they had him, he wasn't there to heal me, so I died first." He paused. "Took a while, though."

"I'm sorry," I said. And I was. But I wasn't sure what this meant.

"That healing power," Averill went on, "that's not just something he channels through his hands. It's in his blood. It's in every cell of his body."

"So he shouldn't have died," I said. "Then if he had been shot--"

"You don't get it. His power, you have to get him in the heart to kill him. Otherwise, you disable him and his body sustains the magic. His blood will still heal. A pound of his flesh will still heal."

I blinked. "What are you trying to say?"

"After I got hurt, they found him. They ripped him apart. They did really, really twisted stuff. He was in pieces, and they kept his heart in a jar. Still beating."

I shut my eyes. "They tortured him?" That was sick. It was cruel, and sick. I felt nauseous. What kind of people were we dealing with?

"They used what they had of him to heal every wound from every blow the knights or anyone else dealt them. They had what we didn't have on our side anymore. And it became a commodity. Everyone who could pay used a part of him to become invincible."

The blood rushed in my ears. "Because I wasn't there."

"No blame," he said. "It isn't about blame. Not when you can't do anything about it."

I crossed my arms and hunched. I was lightheaded, specks floated in my vision. I didn't want to try to think up how Easton had been misused and disrespected. Like he wasn't a person. "This is a lot of pressure," I said, forcing a laugh. "Just being honest."

"Why did you save him in the first place?"

"I think he's a good man, who has touched many people in his life. And it's wrong to hurt anyone the way she wanted to."

"Hold onto that."

"What can I do?" I asked. "What's my power? Adalbero had a dragon."

"You can call on the dragon," Averill said. "You inherited him. But you mainly manipulate water."

"That sounds totally useless. What can I do with water? Give them a shower?"

"Don't limit yourself," he warned. "You'll create your own handicap. All forms of water, Cadence. It bends to your will. Some knights, and some of the others, they can command the elements. But water wants to please you. If it's around, it's there for you."

I sighed. My voice sounded more weak than I intended when I told him, "But I'm not Cadence of August." Though I witnessed key events in her life, I couldn't immerse myself in her experience, in her motivations. What made someone able to do the deeds they did was everything that came before.

"You don't have to be," he said. "Anyway, she could be kind of rude sometimes."

I huffed. "I wasn't rude. I was direct and had a low tolerance level for bullshit."

He smirked. "She's not you, remember?"

I pressed my palms against the warm cement. I wished I could laugh, but there was still that heavy weight in my chest. "I'm still scared. You know I'm the last person fit to be a war hero."

"You weren't a war hero," he said. "You were all about protecting people, and you were good. You even spared your enemies. It would be nice if any of them appreciated that. But *we* do. That's why we're here for you." He touched my back. I flinched away.

"Sorry," he said, wilting.

My own body had betrayed me again. "It's not you." I touched his arm. "I know you wouldn't hurt me on purpose."

He nodded. "You and I were partners when we were squires and knights. You know, technically we've been friends for thousands, maybe millions of years." Smiling, he added, "I totally beat Jules on this one."

I nodded. "Guess you're right. But don't tell her."

He laughed. "She'll kill me."

"It's okay. I probably wouldn't let her." I only half-felt the humor, but it was nice to smile. Averill's friendship was the one thing keeping me sane. I was peeved at Harper for using it against us, and creating tension between us. But I wouldn't let the world's most unsexy kiss stand in the way of a real, true partnership.

"Bro-hug!" I called. I launched myself at Averill.

"Whoa!" He toppled and we collapsed into a laughing heap. "That was not a bro-hug!" he announced, doing a bad job of sounding offended. "Bros are not squishy like you!"

"Jerk!" I punched his stomach.

"Ow!" he grunted, curling. "Ow, ow. Those muscles connect."

"Oh no!" I moaned, touching him gently. "I'm sorry! I--" A cold chill seized my lungs. I dropped onto my side, shutting my eyes against the physical invasion.

"Cadence?" Averill asked. "Was that me?"

I groaned. My heartrate had gone wild. "When I sense danger," I squeezed the words out, "I feel it now, but it's so strong."

He grabbed my waist, tugging me up. "It's the water. It's amplifying your August instincts. Trying to protect you. Come on, let's go inside. We have to plan our next move."

I leaned heavily against Averill's good side, stumbling toward the pool gate. The world was in gray shades, as usual, except for a small spot in a bush, as big as my palm. I focused on it.

A fuzzy, orange tarantula sat. Patient. Still.

It gave me the idea of numbers, the advantage our hunters had. "The snipers," I said. "We need to find the snipers."

"Police are doing that. We need to get somewhere safe."

"I can reverse-engineer tactical strikes," I said. "Poppy taught me. None of us are safe until people stop coming after us. We're going to see our Detective Friend."

Averill stopped pulling me along to give me his Doubting Eyes.

"Police will keep us safe," I said. "Won't they?"

"We'll talk to the guys." We moved again.

On a whim, I glanced back at the pool. There were now five glowing rainbow spots, moving fast. I broke my gaze when I stumbled on a fountainhead, then looked again at the pool area.

The rainbows were gone.

I wasn't so sure about the danger.

TO BE CONTINUED