

I flopped down on my bed with my guitar strapped around me. I loved the feel of its cool wood against my exposed chest. I strummed a few notes. Playing my guitar always helped me think straight; always helped me make sense of my life. I stared at the lazily rotating blades on my ceiling. My thoughts drifted to my parents. Mom loves me no matter what, dad says he does too, but his actions tell me different. I played a sour note and automatically turned the right knob without looking down. I played the note again and it shimmered through the air. My thoughts drifted from my parents to my friends. I recounted those who had shunned me when I declared my sexual orientation. Even those who I had thought would stay by me no matter what, though thick and thin, left me at the drop of a hat. Even the guys on the football team hated me now and they had known me for years because we started playing together years ago. I hate school. Nobody there understands me. I turned my head and looked at the picture of all star Cedric Stone sitting on my dresser. He understands me. He's just like me. He *has* to understand.

I woke with a cool sweat damping my fur. I looked around, confused as to where I was. Slowly my senses flowed back to my body. *Cedric's House*. The dream stuck firmly in my head. Everything was true and familiar about it, everything except Cedric's picture. Why did I dream that? Did I feel connected to him? I shook my head; a walk would help me fall back to sleep. I slid out from under the luxurious sheets and slipped on a pair of, probably not clean shorts, from the floor. I stood in the silent room for a moment. This. Was weird. I padded over to the curtained window and peered out into the distant city lights. I had lived in the city for years after moving out of my parent's house way back when. Hearing about "New Beginnings!" and "A Fresh Start!", I moved from the States to Europe. New Alexandra was supposed to be a shining future for the world. In truth it was-for the rich. The technological hub was the center and heart of the place, however only the best of the best, the *crème de le crème*, the richest rich had any interaction there. Well those and the ones who had struck it high in the world. Those who had a perfect education, those who fell into all the "right" crowds, or those who were just freaking lucky. However, for those who are normal and mundane like me, New Alexandra was just another shit hole. The city has a rough underground civilization where the scum of the world seems to migrate. Or perhaps those who have nothing move here lured by the grandeur of "the future." People like me. I let the curtain fall back to its place. Yep. That's me.

I slipped out from my room into the dark hallway. Everything was quiet, save for a low ticking from a clock somewhere. I had been here for a few days now so I generally knew my way around. Several times, when Cedric wasn't making me do something, I would just walk the endless halls of his palace. I had even found this music room that had all kinds of instruments in it. I couldn't play any of them, except for a lone guitar in the corner. I didn't actually play it because it wasn't mine, but I couldn't resist the urge to pick it up and examine it. *-----* I had also found a huge ballroom, no doubt used for fancy parties. There was this game room that I had spent a fair amount of time in playing pool and chess with some of the cleaning staff. Apparently that was the popular hangout when nothing else better could be done. I found like fourteen different bathrooms, some with showers in them; others just a toilet and a sink. Also there was this small banquet room adjoined to a, compared to everything else in Cedric's house, tiny kitchen. I assumed that it was for staff use. This house confused me. The deeper that I explored from the entrance of the manor the more personal and random the rooms seemed. It's

almost as if the “front” of the house is used for entertainment and the face of the manor where, the back is what the house is actually used for; living. I even had more questions about the damn place after I started exploring. I found this “forbidden area” of the house. When I tried to go check it out, I was stopped by two guards who said: “Sorry sir. This place is off limits. Only Authorized personal allowed.” I was too intrigued to not investigate further. I hung around the area, occasionally walking by as if I had something to do and somewhere to go. One day I caught a quick glimpse of someone retreating beyond the double doors where the guards stood. I was able to overhear one of the guards greet the person as “Sebastian.” Sebastian? Who the hell was that anyways? Whatever. None of those places was where I was headed to now. Nope. I was headed to the small garden nestled in between the north and west sections of the manor. I found it randomly one day and loved how far off it was. It was completely surrounded by tall walls and was just about 2 acres wide. Perfect for alone thinking time. Not like the huge ass maze in the rear of the manor. Memories of getting lost in there flashed through my head. I shuddered. That place was a nightmare. I thought I was going to kill myself just as someone found me. Apparently, Cedric pays a group of people to memorize and walk the maze just in case someone gets lost in it on account he changes the layout every season. I reached my destination. I opened the door just in time to hear someone finishing up a song. I recognized the voice immediately. I peeked my head around the cracked door. There he was, watering flowers and plants; dressed in a big shirt and baggy-ish pajama pants, complete with his hair pulled back in a long braid. Cedric.

Before I stepped out into the garden, I realized that Cedric was talking on the phone. I held my ground in an attempt not to interrupt him. I could hear bits and pieces of his conversation.

“...no please. Don’t do that.” Cedric bowed his head. “I can’t win without...” He tossed his bangs to side, “That was my decision.” His voice rose a bit. “Oh really? I seem to have forgotten you were the expert racer.” He listened for a bit. “Look. Just trust me.” He opened his mouth like he was going to say more, but just listened. “Trust does win! It is what makes a team a team!” He seemed frustrated. “Fine. Do what you want.” There was a moment pause. “Bye.” He hung up the phone bitterly. I stood there in the darkness of the doorway, unable to move. I watched Cedric shove the phone back into his pajama’s and mope over to a bench where he sat down and buried his face in his hands. I couldn’t be sure, but I think he started crying. I stood there what seemed like an eternity before I moved to go to Cedric. Abandoning all my sneakiness, it wasn’t long before Cedric heard me approaching. His head snapped up. “Oh! Lance. I didn’t know you were still awake.” I sat down beside Cedric. Something about seeing him dressed so simple made my heart tug. It made him seem vulnerable; so *human*.

“Well, I wasn’t, but I can’t sleep so I thought a quick little walk would help me fall back to sleep.” In truth, If Cedric hadn’t been here, I’d probably had fallen asleep on the bench.

“Oh. I see.” Cedric responded, “I couldn’t sleep that much either.” We sat in awkward silence for a bit. I stole a glimpse at Cedric. He looks so simple dressed like this. I was used to seeing him “made up”. Here he looked so real, so plain. We said nothing to each other, however there hung so many words between us. Not being able to stand the silence anymore, I asked the obvious question.

“Who was that on the phone?” Cedric looked sideways at me.

"You heard all that?" He asked without hostility.

"Only bits and pieces. Nothing worth being able to tell what you were talking about." Cedric took a deep breath and exhaled.

"It was one of my sponsors." *Sponsors? What does he need sponsors for?* Cedric must have read my mind because he let out a little chuckle. "Every team needs sponsors regardless if they need money or not. In fact, the majority of us don't get them for money. We get them for publicity." He looked at me. "Yes. Even I have trouble making the whole world look at me." He turned his gaze back out across his garden, "Sometimes." I noticed a smirk making its way across his face.

"Oh. What did they want?" His smile faded and his gaze shifted to his hands in his lap. He started playing with his hands.

"They were telling me that they were dropping support for me."

"Why!? You're the best damn racer here!" The statement flew out of my mouth before I could think of anything else to say. Cedric flashed me a fake smile.

"I'm hardly the best. I'm only rank three after all." He looked back down at his hands. "Besides, it's not my ability out on the track that led them to their decision." He left the rest of the thought hang in the air. Of course, I knew what he was going to say before he even began to say it.

"It's me isn't it?" He nodded his head.

"Some people feel that it was a stupid move to accept someone like you to be my protector." I jumped to the opportunity and asked a question that had been nagging me some time now before he had a chance to change subjects.

"I have to ask Cedric. Why did you pick me?" He looked at as if the answer was a no-brainer.

"Do you know what your time was?" I thought for a moment.

"About ten minutes wasn't it?" Cedric's focus never faltered from my face.

"Nine minutes and forty three seconds actually." I shrugged.

"And so what? Yours was much better than mine." He made a gesture like he was shooing away a fly.

"That's irrelevant at the moment. Yours was the best time by far. On average, everyone else scored thirty minutes with at least three falls." He pointed at me, "You never fell."

"But what about all that stuff you said when we first met? About I was the best of the worst?" Cedric rolled his eyes.

"You were. But that doesn't mean that you yourself aren't worth something. Also, most of that stuff was a bluff to see if you would walk away right then and there."

"That may be. But you did make a good point." He looked at me, clearly confused.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that." I smiled.

"You basically said that I don't have any experience which is almost true. I don't have *a lot* of experience. At least not enough to be considered to be professional like you." Cedric rose from the bench.

"And that's exactly why I wanted you. No. Needed you." He turned around to look at me. "I didn't need someone who had experience."

"I don't understand." Cedric began to pace in front of me.

"With experience comes knowledge and with knowledge comes practice and habit. I needed someone who was green; rough around the edges if you will." He stopped in front of me. "That's why I'm so successful. In the tournament, I'm the youngest and the least experienced, but I'm also the least predictable. When one who has loads of experience looks at a certain situation they say to themselves, I shouldn't do this because the enemy will expect it; when in reality the opponents are expecting them NOT to do it because it is what had been accepted not to do. When I rush into an obvious trap, I catch the opposition off guard so by the time they realize what I just did, it's too late. Understand?" I sat there for a moment absorbing everything Cedric had just told me.

"So in short, you needed someone who is inexperienced so they would think like you and in turn do things and act like you?" Cedric nodded his head.

"Exactly."

"That's brilliant!" I exclaimed. "Really! It is! I never thought you chose me for a reason like that." Cedric sighed.

"If only everyone thought so." He slumped back down into the bench beside me. He looked so defeated. I was baffled at how much his personality had changed. Was all of this bubbling just beneath the surface all along? I couldn't take it anymore. This wasn't the Cedric that I had been bossed around by for the past weeks.

"Hey. What's with all this negative talk? That's not the Cedric I know." He looked at me surprised for a moment before composing himself. His face formed into a familiar mask.

"What do you mean the Cedric that you know? You hardly know me."

"I know you enough to know that you don't mope and give up when something goes wrong." Cedric looked shocked.

"I'm not moping!" I raised my eyebrow. "Ok so maybe I am a little bit. But, I'm *not* giving up." There he was. That was the Cedric I knew. "It just sometimes takes me a bit to get back on my feet when I get down. This is the time I usually..." He trailed off like he was catching himself before slipping up.

"When you what?" I questioned, attempting to push him to tell me more. He looked up at the night sky.

"When I paint, play music, draw, reminisce; lots of different things." Suddenly, I felt like I was looking at a different version of Cedric. He must have felt me staring at him deeply because he looked down at me and gave me a genuine smile. The one that kind of makes you melt into it. Like at the moment the smile registers with you, the world stops and listens and watches. Out of the blue Cedric perked up, "Have you explored the upper levels of my manor?" I stared at him flabbergasted.

"Ho-How did you know I was looking around?" Cedric shook his head like he was trying to get water out of his ears.

"Word gets around. Anyways, have you?" I slowly shook my head.

"No. The upstairs door was locked when I tried going up there." He put his hand under his chin.

"Not surprising. I try to keep it locked." Before I could even think of asking why he continued, "You see, up there I keep all my personal belongings, besides things I use on a regular basis of course. But yes, up there you could say is my personal sanctuary. The last person I gave a key for up there was..." He looked away and looked up at the stars again. "Was Leon." He sat there for a moment. "Gosh, he probably still has stuff up there." He then chuckled a bit. "Listen to me." The rest of his breath died at his lips. He continued to look at the stars thoughtfully, "You know, the media painted us as lovers when in reality we weren't. We were just really good friends. I remember we met when I first moved here to start practicing Airblade. That was when my mom was still alive. Come to find out he was here for that same reason and before I knew it, we were partners." His eyes slowly fell from the heavens and returned to earth. "Lackluster I know, but that's how it was." Cedric turned to me, an unfamiliar sparkle in his eyes. "It's really no surprise that Leon and I became partners like we did. Believe it or not, he was the charismatic one. He had this certain way about him that made you happy no matter what was happening. He could calm a fight, resolve the issue, and make everyone in the room best friends before the day was done. He was a really good person. And he didn't deserve to die like he did. You know what he said to me as he lay dying in his hospital bed?" I shook my head. "He said that he was proud to call someone like me his best friend and then made me promise not to give up on Airblading just because he was out of commission. I held his hand all the way to when the monitor flat-lined. He got hit hard by Joshua in the stomach. He stared bleeding internally and his organs began to shut down from the trauma. The doctors couldn't do anything." I watched as Cedric's eyes became misty. "Even as he knew he was dying, he smiled.... He smiled." Cedric got up and walked a few steps away from me. I knew now what that sadness was that I kept seeing. Cedric was crushed. He had just lost a best friend and was forced to replace him as fast as he could. Here he was suffering and all I could think about was getting in his pants. What the fuck kind of person was I? I knew now what he needed. I knew now what would help mend him. I knew now what my place was here.

Cedric needed a friend.