

Time ebbs and flows in a constant pattern; never stopping, never pausing for anything or anyone. This was a truth that came to me in a dream, a dream that I often have.

Tick, a second passes. Tock, a moment dissolves. Tick tock fills my soul. Fast forward to the women screaming: "Only happiness in my life!" A knife in the dark. A flurry of emotions. Anger. Betrayal. Sadness? Gears grinding against a force. Love. Passion. Obsession? I don't know. And now the cliff. Wind whipping my hair into a chokehold around my neck. Cold eyes turning to stone. My hand felt warm. Crimson Gold. The end. Falling. Black.

I woke from the dream with a start. I blinked away the grogginess. It had happened again. The nightmare. I wiped the damp sweat from my brow. These blasted rollercoaster dreams; some nights its good dreams, other nights...not so much. I slid out of my bed and walked into my private bathroom. My eyes were bloodshot and I looked like hell. I grabbed my pill bottle and swallowed the sleep aid. "Get it together Cedric," I told myself, "you have a big day tomorrow." With the pill steadily taking effect I nestled myself back into my bed amongst my pillows ready to dream about nothing.

In the corner of a room a flurry of leaves give way to a dark figure. The figure turns down the torch lit hallway. The eerie glow reveals flashes of details on the figure's face. It is a human male with long brown hair made into a braid. In the braid are flowers that seem to grow on their own and upon his brow is a golden circlet that glows in a golden hue. He walks with a determined pace, a pace that echoes those on a mission. Suddenly the hallway gives way to a huge chamber. The figure stops and places his fist over his heart.

"How does the Anchor fair?" The human male lowers his hand and responds to the vibrating voice.

"Oblivious as expected."

"And of the Shield?"

"Right beside him. As we have planned." Another figure stepped forward into the torchlight. This one revealed to be an older human male. He looked like he had been living for centuries; time clearly etched into his skin. Around his wrists were glowing iron cuffs.

"What about my heir?"

"Hum? Gaston? Oh he hasn't surfaced yet. You shouldn't worry so Chronos. We the gods overthrew him ages ago." Chronos turned his head sideways.

"I forget for all of your wisdom Gaia, you really are still young." Gaia walked forward.

"Young? That maybe, however my power rivals even yours, Lord of Time. Have you forgotten my ascension to godhood?" Chronos laughed.

"No Gaia we have not, nor will we ever." Chronos walked away from Gaia who followed closely behind. "You and your predecessor upset Earth Realm enough to echo through time indefinitely."

"I was only following what Gaia told me to do." The dark chamber opened up to a lavish balcony garden. Chronos turned and faced Gaia.

"We know and nobody blames you, which is why we were more than happy to let you ascend to take her place."

"And I was more than happy to do so." Gaia walked to the edge of the balcony and looked out over the clouds. "What do you think will happen to him when-"

"Him? Why did you use such a casual title? You're not getting attached to the Anchor are you?" Chronos interrupted. Gaia turned to Chronos.

"Why not? I feel for the child."

"Gaia..." Gaia held up a hand.

"I know. I know. Get attached and you end up with another war like the old Gaia orchestrated. But, I can't help but to think, won't there be another war when Gaston returns anyways?"

"It will be controlled. You know that." Gaia turned away from Chronos.

"I know. I just can't help but to feel sorry for him." Chronos walked up beside Gaia and put his hand on Gaia's shoulder.

"His sacrifice will be for the better good. He will be the ace to stop Gaston once and for all." Gaia turned and walked away from Chronos.

"I know. I've heard it all before."

I woke up feeling very well rested, almost like I hadn't slept for days. I felt like I could go back to sleep for hours. I rolled over and stretched as far as my body would allow; my joints popping in protest. I sat up and lazily looked around the room that had become familiar over the past month or so. So many memories had been made here in the short amount of time. Flashes of me coming back and crashing on the couch in the center of the room flooded my mind. Cedric had always worked me hard, but never overworked me. It's a weird kind of tired that sets into your muscles after doing a few runs on the track. Physically Airblade is like swimming, basically effortless, but makes you exhausted regardless. The suits do all the hard work, but to be able to move like Cedric does takes skill and practice. Pictures of him flipping and demonstrating the game's weapons stuck in my head. He always claimed that he would never be able to move like that off the track, but to watch him led you to think otherwise. Experience showed me just the type of physical condition you needed to be in to run with the dogs of this tournament. Painful memories flowed back to me.

"Again." The command rang out.

"Come on Cedric. We've been going at this for hours. At this rate you're going to kill me."

"No I won't. Again." I took a deep breath and rushed at Cedric. I threw a powerful left punch at him and was planning on following up with a right hook, but the elbow in my stomach cut me short. I stumbled backward.

"Too predictable. Try again." I stood up.

"I'm tired of this. What the fuck is this shit teaching me? You say again and I rush at you only to fucking countered!" Cedric straightened up.

"Please don't curse. It's unsightly and makes you seem like an idiot. Come at me again."

"Damn it!!!" I rushed forward blinded by rage. A quick left jab blocked by a tap on the wrist, a furious right elbow down thwarted by a quick side step and sweeping kick to my leg brought me to my knees. I grunted as my knees hit the hard floor. I was suddenly thankful for the knee pads Cedric made me put on. He crouched in front of me bringing me to eye level with him.

"Don't rush forward angry. It leaves you wide open." I rocked back and sat down.

"I just don't get it." I said through ragged breaths, "What are you beating up on me teaching me? You told me the only person that can out do you in hand to hand is Cecile. All I have to do is take her from a distance."

"What have I told you about her specialized weapon?" That's right. I had forgotten. Cecile specialized in sniping. Fuck. There goes my strategy. I put my head in my hands.

"Her special weapon is the sniper. Deadly at long range."

"And she will hit you if she gets you in her sights." I looked up at Cedric fully frustrated now.

"Yeah and how am I supposed to protect you against that shit? I can't even hit you during training." Cedric sat down and crossed his legs indian style.

"That's what you think that exercise was for? No Lance. That was to teach you constitution, energy maintenance and power control. You weren't supposed to hit me, you were supposed to take my hits. Which you did very well I may add. You have really good power behind your punches, a little too much at times, but good control none the less. You also didn't go in swinging wildly which tells me that you know how to survive a long fight. You actually did better than I expected during that exercise. Before long your power might rival Joshua or even Vince."

"You think so?" I blinked the sweat from my eyes.

"I know so. Remember I've been in this business for a while." Cedric stood up.

“Go on. You’re free for the day. You’ve worked hard enough.” I slowly rose from the floor, everything feeling like it was about to fall off. I watched Cedric walk away from me after his dismissal. He stopped near a table that had several hand wrappings and other assorted combat equipment.

“Cedric,” I called out to him, “if you could fight like this, why didn’t you just beat the shit out of Joshua and Cameron that day in the locker room at the track?” Cedric turned around slowly, leaned against the table and answered:

“One. Because Joshua and Cameron are both trained like I am. Two. The racing council would have expelled me in a heartbeat. Three. I knew that Vince was around the corner and four; I knew that you didn’t know and I wanted to see how you would have reacted.” His words sunk in slowly, their hidden meaning coming into light.

“So you used me?” Cedric stood up straight and looked like I had just struck him.

“N-no Lance. I didn’t manipu-“

“You did.” I interrupted. “You said it yourself. You wanted to see how I would react in the situation.”

“Well yes I did, but that doesn’t mean I manipulated you. Maybe if I had purposely placed Joshua and Cameron there, egged them on, and then yes. In that case I would have. That was a chance situation, it would have been ignorant of me to not turn it around and gather valuable information on your fighting style.” I stepped forward. Anger flowed through me.

“This,” I waved my hands in the air, “isn’t a game Cedric. You’re playing with real people. This is real life. You constantly toy with me and my emotions. You think that feels great? Well it doesn’t.”

“Lance I hardly see why you’re so-“

“Upset? Of course you wouldn’t. You never feel anything do you? All a game to you huh? Well, that’s a dangerous game you’re playing at and one day you’re going to get burned.” Cedric looked aghast. I had really struck a nerve.

“Lance I-“

“No.” I stopped him. I didn’t want to hear his honeyed words. The exhaustion returned renewed to my body. “Just no.” I looked at him. He looked at me like I was his dad and just had scolded him. I stood there heaving and just looking at him, neither of us daring to say anything more. I sighed.

“Look Cedric. That was the tiredness talking. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that stuff.” Cedric turned back to the table.

“Don’t apologize. You’re right. It was very wrong of me to use you in that way. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings; I guess...I guess I just expected you to be alright with it.” He walked behind the table to a little footlocker. “I’m not afraid to admit that I’m used to people being okay with what I do and say.

I have to remember that I don't work on you." I understood what he meant by that. I had seen countless examples of people falling over themselves to please Cedric. I understood how someone could get lost in and used to that. Cedric looked over at me, "However, the one aspect that I don't understand is the "You constantly toy with me and my emotions" part. What did you mean by that?" I didn't want to pursue this conversation anymore. We were getting to sensitive issues.

"Just...forget about that." Cedric stood up and walked up to me.

"I can't Lance. I may not feel real emotion, but you; what you displayed was. Let's work through this Lance." I shuffled my feet. What was I going to tell him? I looked back at him. The truth.

"I was angry, remember that." Cedric nodded. "I was talking about how I show you my feelings; how I feel about you and you always turn away from me. You may not realize it Cedric, but you put me in...weird situations all the time."

"You mean I flirt with you, act promiscuously towards you." I nodded my head sharply. Cedric turned around and slowly walked back to the footlocker. "I see. You are not the first to tell me that. A lot of times I know that I act flirty towards people, but that just means I'm comfortable around you. Not that I'm flirting with you. It's just the way I am. Just the way I act." Hearing Cedric say that stirred a lot of conflicting emotions in me; the most conflicting being pride. He felt comfortable around me. That was an accomplishment in my book. On another note, that fact also pressed the question of: how can some know if Cedric *is* flirting with them?

After that conversation with Cedric, I had waddled back to my room feeling intensely exhausted. However at the same time I was filled with renewed energy. I wanted to jump and down, but instead I had collapsed on the couch and slept for fourteen hours straight. When I had finally woke up, I found a note written by Cedric to meet him in a room that I hadn't been in yet, however, I did know where it was. I didn't know what to expect, but when I got to the room I found out why everyone called it the Waterfall room. The whole northern wall, which was the first wall you see when you open the door, was a "water wall". Water cascaded down it in a gentle manner and lights on the other side caused shadows to ripple all over the room; like when it rains and water runs down the window, except you couldn't hear it. To the east was a greenhouse like wall. There were huge plants growing in a little room. It was meant for pure viewing pleasure. The west wall surprised me the most though, because it was plain; nothing but a chrome finish. In the middle of the room were rocks, huge rocks. Complete with a little bit of fauna stuck here and there, but what made that area the focus point of the entire room was the baby grand jet black piano sitting in the middle of it all. And, of course, there sat Cedric. Cedric looked up.

"Oh Lance, thank you for coming." He turned to the piano. "I felt bad about working you so hard the other day so I wanted to help you relax." He looked back at me. "My way." I walked over to the piano.

"What do you want me to do?" He looked at me amused.

"Nothing. Just exist." And then the lights went out.

"Cedric?" I asked into the darkness.

"Just exist." And then the music started. It started off with the sound of water. No rain. Then from the greenhouse wall, light appeared. I turned and faced it. First the light was just pulsing with the soft piano music which was just a few notes repeated. I watched as the leaves on the various plants changed from green, blue, red, purple, pink, and pretty much every other color. Just as I was sinking into the pattern, it changed and wall exploded in light. It was like watching a universe being created. The room shifted, or maybe it was the lights that did and made me think that the room shifted, but the colors intensified and exploded and went dim. I thought that it was over so I started walking to the wall, but then balls of light sprang from out of nowhere and circled around me, Cedric and the room. I was entranced. I held out my hand in an attempt to grab one, but it floated away taunting me. I sat down and watched the lights dance around me. Then I heard a little laugh. I looked at Cedric who had his eyes closed. It wasn't him who laughed. I turned my attention to the greenhouse wall and gasped. There stood a young Cedric who was dancing and playing in a field. Birds would swoop in and out of the picture and even a feral fawn walked up to him. I got up and slowly walked to the picture until I was inches away. The fawn looked at me and dashed away. Cedric looked off after it sad then turned to me, smiled and ran off into the distance. The picture faded away. The balls of light reappeared, but this time where in the shape of butterflies. A sparkling trail marked wherever they flew. After a moment of watching their sky ballet did I realize they were converging on a single spot. Once there, a bright ball of light appeared, vanished and in its place stood a male fox. He was an adult. He screamed maturity...and danger. Something about his icy blue eyes turned my veins frigid. His brown hair cascaded down about his shoulders and part way down his back; I could tell that much. He wore a stark white robe, however nothing on his feet. His hand moved and my eyes were drawn to the sword hooked to his hip. What was I looking at? This wasn't relaxing me, if anything it was freighting me. I knew he wasn't real, but...still. A crouched figure moved into the picture. Closer inspection revealed this one to be a fox as well. Was he bowing to him? No he had too much anger in his eyes. I then noticed the blood on his hands; he was hurt. The robed fox drew his sword slowly like he was taunting the younger one. He raised it above his head and froze. Yet another figure materialized. This one was a female fox, dressed the same as the robed male fox. I couldn't help, but to notice the similarities between her and the bleeding fox. Her son maybe? She stepped forward and the robed male fox grimaced. A gold glint flashed from her grasp. A dagger of sorts? The hurt fox, now taking his chance, grabbed a sword nearby similar to the one the now stabbed male had and impaled him with it. The robed fox stumbled away and the picture dissolved in fuzzy sparkles. The lights came back on and I looked at Cedric who was panting and leaning on the piano. I ran to him.

"Cedric! Are you okay?" I put my hand on his shoulder to steady him.

"That...was not supposed to happen. The computer isn't capable of that much power." Cedric replied through ragged breaths. Cedric finally stopped swaying, but he still looked like he had seen a ghost. I took a step back.

"Computer?" I questioned. Cedric nodded.

"Yes. Computer. It's how all those visual effects happened. It's similar to the track software that controls the Airblade games. The visuals respond to different melodies being played, but the capacity of the images is subpar; nothing too flashy, but lights and such, no complex images."

"Nothing like the fox guy being stabbed huh?" Cedric looked up at me.

"Wha...What are you talking about?" I looked at Cedric like a deer caught in headlights.

"You didn't...you didn't see it?!"

"Nu..no..."

"Then why are you panting?!" Cedric smiled at me.

"I played passionately. I didn't mean to get that sucked in." Cedric turned to walk out the door. "Take the rest of the day off, Lance." He walked out and left me alone in the room. I went back to my room after that freaky ass display. The fuck was that shit? The more time I spend with Cedric the more crazy shit seems to happen. I finally slid out of bed when snapping back to reality. I hobbled over to the wardrobe and began to grab some clothes. I grabbed a simple ensemble of a white tee with blue jeans. Cedric would fuss at me later for that, but whatever, I liked how sexy this look made me seem. I looked at the clock. 9:30. Perfect. Cedric should be ready for me by now. I walked out into the hallway and practically ran to the front parlor. As I had suspected, there was Cedric waiting on me. His face lit up when he saw me.

"Good morning. I trust you slept well?"

"Yep. Just fine." Cedric tossed his braid over his shoulder.

"I'm glad. What do you want to eat this morning?" I thought for a moment

"Pancakes? Oh! Strawberry pancakes! Can we please?!" Cedric chuckled.

"Sure Lance, of course we can."

Gaia unbound his hand from the Communion Beads. He looked content at the success of his secret mission.

"...and the heron flies South." Gaia spun around and hid the Beads behind his back.

"Artemis!", he stammered, "What are you doing here?" She tilted her head to the side.

"You don't remember? You promised to show me how to grow oaks stron..." Artemis trailed off. "Why do I sense the Communion Beads?" It was more a statement than a question. Gaia let his hand fall from behind his back. Artemis gasped, "You were communing with the Sleeping again weren't you!?" Gaia stepped off the dais.

"I just sent a short message, nothing that he didn't already know."

"But Gaia! It is forbidden! You of all people know that!" Gaia paced around the room.

"I can't help it, Artemis. I can't just let him die."

"But Gaia..." Artemis began to protest.

"When we, as Gods, start to accept the inevitable death of even a single individual when it could be clearly prevented, we should die ourselves. We are no longer worthy to protect them."

"Protect them? Mortals you mean." Artemis moved toward Gaia who stepped back, "We are meant to rule them, not protect them."

"Since when do rulers not protect their people? We are not tyrants Artemis." They stood hard and stared at each other for some time. Finally Artemis spoke.

"I have to tell what you have been doing." Gaia didn't respond. "Nothing more to say?" Gaia took a breath.

"I can't let you." The threat hung placidly in the air between them. Artemis glanced at the door then back at Gaia.

"Watch me." Suddenly she broke for the door. Before her mind could process the ground missing beneath her feet it was too late. She procured a dagger and began slashing at the vines that were attacking her. Muffled screams echoed throughout the chamber. Artemis began to panic as her lungs began to implode. Tears streamed down her face. The dagger clanged to the floor as the vines continued to crush the life from her. Artemis watched as Gaia walked over and causally picked up the dagger from the floor.

"No. No you won't."