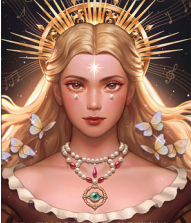


WE ARE THE  
SONG



CATHERINE BAKEWELL



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SONG

CATHERINE BAKEWELL

HOLIDAY HOUSE  NEW YORK

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*Movement One*

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with three loops: a small loop on the left, a larger central loop, and a smaller loop on the right.

# VERSE ONE



In Cadenza, my homeland, everything is flat and calm, covered in grass and clover.

I used to run through open fields, and Mother and Father would chase after me. We skipped rocks on a lake said to have been made from Caé's joyful tears when She created the world. Cadenza is full of stories like that; stories my parents told me with vigor.

Cadenza got its name from the Goddess, after all—the Place Where Caé Fell. And there were whispers, always, that Caé Herself had been seen there again.

But Lucio and I had been traveling through the kingdom of Basso for two years now, and day by day, we journeyed farther from home. The soft beauty of Cadenza's fields was almost forgotten to me. We were in the Bassan mountains, where the air was thin and crisp and cold. The lakes were frozen over. The grass was gray and trampled.

Worse still, for two years now, war had left scars upon this land as well as my homeland.

Mountains had great chunks missing. Houses had been turned into piles of brick and wood. The forests had been

felled, leaving only mangled roots. Debris, broken cannons, and beams from houses dammed up rivers. Wagons were tipped over, wheels missing, wooden panels torn away.

I saw it all from the warped window of our little carriage. So much destruction—but new beauty to be found as well. The sparkling snow that I'd never seen before two years ago; the tall, dark pine trees; the winter birds. Out the window, out beyond the road ahead of us, day faded into lavender evening, with the blue and black of the mountains around us as shards of stained glass.

In the front seat, as always, was my composer, Maestro Lucio, his white-blond hair pulled into a tight queue with a black ribbon. Most of his face was obscured by a large, bloodred scarf, its loose threads frizzy. My heart always swelled when I saw him wear that scarf—I'd knitted it for him years ago, when we'd first begun to work together at the monastery. It wasn't that long ago, truly, but in my memory we were such little children then.

His gloved fists trembled slightly as they clung tight to the reins of our horse, Melody. Little strands of hair broke free from his queue and whipped in the biting wind, from which I was protected, safe and warm in the carriage.

Lucio sometimes said that the Goddess was proud of us when we endured suffering. But I wasn't certain. When I watched him tremble in the cold, when I watched the destruction outside my window, when I sang for people starving for hope, I didn't feel proud. Just sad.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the basket full of provisions we kept hanging on a hook on the wall. The people we sang for donated money and food and clothing to us in return for our miracles. When I pulled back the cover from the basket, though, I realized that even the gifts we'd been given were becoming fewer and fewer. A day-old baguette. A quarter of a wheel of cheese. Three apples. Some cured ham, wrapped tight in paper. It would only last us a day or two, at most. The war was everywhere, touching everything.

With a frown, I chose a big red apple, then darted across the carriage on socked feet. I clambered atop my bed and rapped on the window as a warning before I opened it. Lucio scooted a little more to the left on his bench, and I stuck my arm out to offer him the snack.

"I thought you might be getting hungry," I said above the percussion of Melody's hooves.

He held the reins in one hand and accepted the apple, placing it in his lap. When he pulled the edge of his scarf below his chin, my heart lifted to see his smile. "Thank you, Elissa." His eyes, bright green as the meadows of Cadenza, met mine. A line formed between his eyebrows. "You look troubled. Is something wrong?"

I rested my arm against the windowsill and pressed my cheek against the crook of my arm as if it were a pillow. To our right, bricks were scattered across an empty field, along with the husk of three walls of a house. What little family had called that cottage home? And where were they now?

All of this chaos, simply because the Queen of Acuto and the King of Basso each wanted to claim the lush, beautiful, Goddess-blessed land of Cadenza for themselves.

“I thought the war would end by now,” I murmured. “But there seems to be more and more of it, no matter how many miracles we work.”

He watched the jagged horizon, his shoulders softening with a sigh. “I feel that way, too, sometimes. Our miracles help people, yes...but surely there is more power in our music than little healing spells.”

Those spells didn't feel “little” to me. They still left me weeping as the last bits of Caé's golden magic flowed through me after I sang a holy composition. But I understood Lucio. If Caé wanted the war to end, She could have done so. She could have done so through us. He didn't say this exactly; it would be blasphemous—but I knew what he meant.

“I wish I could see Her,” I said. “I wish I could speak to Her, face to face.”

He laughed, and it cut at me. I was perfectly serious.

“They say if we were to look at Her directly, we'd go blind,” he said.

That didn't sound like the Caé I knew, motherly and warm and beautiful. But if anyone knew Her best, it was Lucio. He had come to the monastery in the capital, Cadenza Citadel, when he was just six years old; he'd read all of the literature about the Goddess; he'd studied music theory and learned

all the holy songs before I'd ever arrived at the monastery myself. He was the youngest Composer the monastery had ever seen. The other members of Caé's Choir reminded me often how lucky I was to have such a gifted teacher.

But I did sometimes wonder if he was wrong about Caé. Once in a while.

"Couldn't She change Her shape if She wanted?" I asked. "If She wanted to visit the people She loved, surely She would know not to go about blinding people."

Lucio grinned at me over his shoulder. "You could have been a scholar, if you'd been born under a different star."

"Why not a scholar *and* a singer?"

His smile faded away. "You've been given a very special gift. One only twelve people in the whole world have. You must dedicate yourself to being the best at singing that you can be. You have to be obedient to Caé's plan for you."

*Caé's plan.* It made my stomach sink into my toes.

I was only twelve, Lucio just seventeen. We seemed so young to bear the weight of Her plans for us, never deviating, never questioning. But here we were. Spreading Her miracles. Just like that, the small, shiny idea, *Could I be a scholar, too?* was dismissed. But Lucio knew better. He was right. I was born to sing. My parents had nearly sacrificed everything because of my voice. Nothing else could distract me.

Lucio lifted the apple from his lap, holding it toward me.

"Have you eaten yet?"



“No, Maestro, not yet,” I murmured. “But it’s all right; I’m not hungry just now.”

He pointed to the horizon with the apple. At the end of this cold mountain pass, a gray splotch was growing bigger and bigger, clearer and clearer. “How about this—if there’s a bakery in town, I’ll buy you a pastry.”

I sprang from my slouching, sleepy posture so fast I almost hit my head on the top of the carriage’s window. “Really?”

He bit into the apple, a sharp sound. “That last composition was complicated, and you sight-read that final arpeggio perfectly on your very first try. I think you deserve a reward.”

My mouth began to water as I imagined a treat. I’d practically memorized every pastry there was. Little tarts filled with fruits of every color. Thick slices of pie, topped with clouds of cream. Puff pastries bursting with chocolate, stacked atop one another like the spires of the monastery.

Back in Cadenza, if I was a good girl and did not sing with the others during festivals, Father bought me a roll filled with chocolate.

One day, I sang, and others heard me. I didn’t get a pastry that day. It was the day that tore me away from Mother and Father.

I slipped back through the window so only my fingertips clung to the sill. “Thank you,” I mumbled, my appetite gone. “Maybe another time.”

His voice drifted soft as a breeze through the window, “As you like,” and I latched the little door.



We steadily approached the gray stone wall surrounding the tiny town.

Lucio drove the carriage to the stables near the town’s gate. From the window, I could see a thin horse and another wagon hitched outside, but not much else.

I pulled a deep-brown hood over my blond curls and tied it under my chin. We wore our hair loose in Cadenza, but women in Basso tended to keep their heads covered. Back in the monastery, my fellow Singers and I wore sapphire-blue robes decorated with silver thread: delicate stars and musical notes stitched across a night sky. But when my journey began, I’d traded my fine things for plain clothing that would be unremarkable among the common folk.

On the road, I couldn’t dress in the proud blue mantle of a Singer. It was not safe. Lucio said we must be discreet in a world hungry for miracles. We revealed our power only sparingly.

Before I exited the carriage, I took a thin wooden box off Lucio’s desk, holding it close as if it were delicate as porcelain and precious as gold. I kept it close to my heart under the folds of my cloak as if it needed to be kept warm, too.

As I stepped outside onto gray stone, the bitter chill that cut at my cheeks made me even more grateful for my

woolen cloak and knitted mitts, given to me by worshippers at the border of Basso. We didn't have weather like this in Cadenza. The world was always temperate and green.

Maestro Lucio stood beside the carriage with his arms folded, looking very severe and like a Bassan native in his dark coat and broad-brimmed hat. He even let his hair hang down in soft waves, as was the fashion, instead of tying it back, as he preferred. He handed some coins to a thin man with a thick black beard.

"What brings you to Passaggio?" asked the stableman.

Lucio's bottle-green eyes flitted to me. He took a small, sideways step closer. "We're traveling to the governor's."

The bearded man shook his head. "I'm afraid you won't be able to." He pointed to his left, to the road that led through the town. "The only road onward goes through a tunnel, but not a month ago the Acutians came and bombed it. It's all closed up now."

I looked at Lucio with wide eyes, pressing the hard wooden side of the compositions box tighter to my ribs. We had studied the maps together. There wasn't another way up to the governor's. There wasn't another way *onward*, not one that didn't carve through wild, freezing forests or jagged mountainsides.

Lucio pressed his gloved fingers to his lips, his sharp brows lowered as he thought. He glanced back at the emerald-green carriage, which was achingly bright against the white and gray of snow and stone. "Could you take us to the tunnel?"

The bearded man narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“We’d like to have a look at it.”

The stableman scoffed. “I don’t know you, sir.” He pointed at our carriage. “I don’t know that you aren’t an Acutian, loaded up with more gunpowder!”

Lucio sighed. Though the only passersby were several paces away in the town square, he lowered his voice. “I’m a Composer. From Cadenza.”

The stableman folded his wiry arms and shot me a glance, one eyebrow raised. “And the girl?”

I waited for Maestro Lucio to speak for me. Sometimes, he said I was a Singer. Other times, I was a servant girl, or his sister, or a lute player. Whichever was safest.

Reaching into the folds of my heavy cloak, I held tight to the little Goddess Eye bead against my heart, offering up a soft prayer to Caé. Mother and Father had asked me never to speak, never to sing. I’d broken that rule, and we all had to pay for it.

*Caé, teach me to obey.*

“She’s a Singer,” Lucio said, careful and quiet. He glanced my way, and his mouth curved into a reassuring smile, a smile for *me*, spreading warmth from my head to my toes. *One of twelve in the whole world*, he’d said. *You are special.*

The stableman scoffed. “We’ve had players come through town before. Asking coin in exchange for their merriment—”

“We aren’t performers,” said Lucio firmly. “We are mouthpieces of the Goddess.”

The man's face grew pale and his arms dropped to his side. His shoulders slackened.

"I... I will fetch the mayor. She will accompany us to the tunnel. If you are what you say you are... well, Caé knows we need you now." He waved his hand, saying *Come with me*. "Leave your carriage and horse for now."



A crowd had gathered to follow us to the tunnel. They looked much like other Bassans: gray clothes, gray faces, gray eyes. Their hands shook. Their cheeks were sunken in.

"We've been entirely cut off," explained the mayor, a tall woman with orange curls peeking out from under her hood. "Our crops were destroyed by the Acutians, and any aid we once got from the king we can no longer receive, with the road sealed off. All the food we had stockpiled for emergencies... it's dwindling fast."

I followed close at Lucio's heels and kept my fists balled tight. This morning, I had felt the food we had was not enough. But looking at the children carried in their parents' arms along the mountain path, at the old women hobbling onward with tears spilling down their cheeks, I felt an immense pang of regret. I'd easily give up my supper forevermore if I could help feed these people.

I wished I'd put my Goddess Eye in my shoe, so that it could hurt me and remind me of my sins. Instead, I slipped my hand within my cloak again, fishing the long string of my

necklace from underneath my itchy woolen scarf. Under the soft fabric of my gloves, I could scarcely feel the shape of the little bead.

“We have seen much destruction in our travels,” Lucio told the mayor as we walked.

“I imagine things are worse in Cadenza,” she replied, the snow crunching beneath her boots.

My stomach twisted sharply at the thought. I wouldn’t know. We had been away so long. Even if I wished it to remain the same, untouched and pristine, I knew it was not.

Years ago, the King of Cadenza had died suddenly—childless. He had a great many cousins and relatives who could have taken his place, but among those, unfortunately, were the royal families of both Basso and Acuto. The two nations tore each other—and Cadenza—apart, each claiming it was *they* who deserved the throne.

“Elissa?”

At the sound of my name, I whipped my head up, my heart galloping.

Lucio tipped his head toward the woman at his side. “Mayor Corde asked you a question.”

The woman dipped her head as if she’d been caught doing something shameful. “Oh, I don’t want to disturb her. Her voice isn’t made for idle chatter, anyhow.”

Lucio often warned me of that himself, so that I’d not lose my voice from overuse, but I had so *few* conversations outside the carriage. And I most certainly didn’t want to be

rude. I moved closer to the two of them, careful to balance the thin wooden box against my left hip. Within were the tools Lucio would use to perform our miracle.

“Please, I don’t mind,” I said. “What was your question?”

Her eyes crinkled at the corners. “I understand you come from Cadenza.”

“Yes, my lady mayor.”

“What’s it like there?” She smiled wistfully. “I had always wanted to visit. ‘The Place Where the Goddess Fell.’ Is it true that the birds sing entire arias to Her?”

I nodded eagerly. “That’s where our oldest hymns come from.” The tunes were ancient and familiar. Mother and Father would take me into the woods, sit beside me on a blanket, and teach me the words to the birds’ songs.

“It’s beautiful there,” I continued, the joy and enthusiasm in my voice decrescendoing little by little as the pain of the memories picked at me. I tried to turn away from the darkness at the back of my mind. “But Cadenza doesn’t have snow. I’d never even seen it before I came to Basso. It’s beautiful, too.”

The mayor laughed gently. “Yes, it’s quite pretty. But it can also be a bother. We’ve had a few roofs cave in from the blizzards. Many families are housed together now.” She sighed, her eyes narrowing at the stony side of the mountain. “Sometimes I wonder if Caé is punishing our kingdom.”

My brows pinched together. “But why?”

“‘Man fathoms not the compositions of the Goddess.’”

said Lucio, the words of a droning, croaking song that I'd never really liked. It was good for setting a broken bone but didn't do much for the spirit.

"Too true, Maestro," the mayor replied.

The gaggle of townspeople pressed closer. There was a massive arch carved into the mountain stone ahead, as a gaping mouth, but debris and boulders filled it from top to bottom.

"Curse the Acutians," growled the stableman a few paces away.

Lucio strode toward the mess, his hand over his mouth as he thought. He glanced back at the mayor.

"If you please," he said, "my Singer and I need a little time. And peace."

Mayor Corde bowed. "Of course." She shepherded the group a minute's walk away from us down the road. All still craned their necks to watch us. A father lifted his son up on his shoulders.

I stood at Lucio's side, unlatching the wooden case. A little wooden desk unfolded itself, along with a tray including parchment, a quill, and ink. I held it steady in my arms for him to write on.

He dipped the quill in the ink, working his lip under his teeth. "A spell to clear the path," he muttered.

"Something *sforzando* to open," I suggested, excitement quickening my words, "and accented notes, as a sudden blow through the rocks."



His eyes met with mine. “Shh, Elissa. I need to concentrate.”

I bit my lip. I was a Singer, not a scholar; not a Composer. To ignore Caé’s role for me was blasphemous. Mother and Father were in a cell for their blasphemy, held for a steep ransom worth more than I’d ever make from meager donations—and it was all my fault. All because I couldn’t shut my mouth.

If I wanted to earn their freedom, I needed to be better. Holier. Like Lucio. I pinched my teeth harder against the inside of my cheek.

Lucio squiggled the clef on the left side of the page. Watching upside down, I marveled as he dotted notes across the staff. Then he paused, thinking again. He scratched out the work he’d done.

Not wanting to distract him with my staring, I looked toward the mountain, the snow coating the rocks like sugar, and toward the woods around us. The still, piercing beauty that Caé had made with a song. What kind of song had it been? Loud and fast? Powerful, earth-shaking? Or quiet, subdued, and coaxing, like a lullaby?

When I turned back to the tunnel, a song started in my head, as clear as if Maestro Lucio had been playing the lute right beside my ear. I could even feel it reverberating in my chest. Bright, loud, rapid, with trills and cadenzas, successions of falling notes, winding like a river. I could almost tap my foot to the song. My throat ached, *yearning* to sing it, to feel that song upon my tongue—

Lucio lifted the paper and shut the lid of the box. He

passed the sheet to me. “Here you are,” he said. “Do you have any questions?”

The melody scrawled on the page was efficient, controlled, and did not stray far from its starting point. It was five notes, really—but Caé had created the world with only eight.

I breathed out, expelling the silly, made-up song from my head. *A Singer, not a Composer*. “I’m ready,” I told him.

He smiled and lifted the desk from my grasp, folding it closed again. He glanced back at the crowd, still maintaining a respectful distance. “Should we have an audience for our miracle, do you think?”

I nodded eagerly. Some people went a lifetime without seeing Caé’s magic. To keep this wonder of the Goddess from them was unthinkable.

My stomach soured at the thought. Hadn’t Mother and Father done the same thing when they kept me to themselves?

Lucio fetched the crowd, the crunch of his footsteps waking me from my swirling thoughts. I returned my focus to the music marked on the page and made comments to myself as I read. *Sing this part loudly. Crescendo the phrase here; delicately. Be mindful of that trill.*

The crowd gathered close at my back. Lucio came to stand before me, separating me from the mouth of the tunnel. He lifted his gloved hand and kept his eyes on me. On my inhale, I thought of the first time I’d learned to sing. Longing

and happiness intermingled in me; sour and sweet. Mother and Father sang lullabies over me every night. They said I had been fitful one night and that I'd reached for them; reached for their voices. I could barely speak, but I wanted to sing. They sang for me to repeat, call and response, the ancient words that birthed the world, the ancient words I sang now. So simple. Little bricks that could build up a mighty fortress.

Maestro Lucio kept time with the graceful sweeping of his hand through the air, *One, two, three, four.*

When I sang the melody, it was noble, grand; powerful. There was something royal and marchlike about it. The swelling phrases. The steady, authoritative meter. And as I sang, I could feel the presence of the Goddess around me, as sharp and real as the wintry air. My skin prickled like She was standing at my right side. When I took a breath, it felt as if She were breathing, too.

She was why I loved music. When I sang, I was never alone.

Yet as all songs did, this one came to an end. The final note, clear, piercing, resounding, and without vibrato, was long and cold and pointed as a blade.

A deep, low rumbling sounded, like mallets hammering in a steady roll against a drum. Lucio grabbed my arm, and with a crash, the boulders in the cavern fizzled into a fine dust, filling the air and stinging my eyes. As quick as a snap, the feeling of Caé at my shoulder disappeared, just in time

for Lucio to pull me close and shield me from the debris in the air. I hid my face against his shoulder and coughed.

The sound of cheering stirred me. I wiped at my eyes and lifted my head.

The pathway was entirely clear—bright daylight streamed through the open tunnel.

A large woman swept me up in a hug. A child kissed my hands. Men clapped Lucio on the back; bowed to him; kissed his knuckles.

The mayor approached the two of us, bending low with her folded hands pressed to her lips. “May the Goddess smile upon you both,” she said, her voice soft and strangled with tears. She beamed and touched my shoulder. “We do not have much to give, but please, rest here for the night before you continue on your journey. Anything we have, we will gladly share with you.”

They did not have flowers or gold to give—but I knew that every scrap of food they offered was just as precious.

Their praise and their offerings weren’t the thing that made my heart quiver. Lucio’s gloved hands squeezed against mine.

“Wonderfully done,” he whispered, his smile as brilliant as the snow around us. “Caé would be proud of you. I am.”

Happiness glowed like an ember in my heart.

## VERSE TWO



**T**hat night, we left the town hall with our bellies full of stew made from scraps. The Passaggians played music for us; plain music, nothing holy, in the Bassan dialect. Some of their songs weren't even about Caé. Still, something in my spirit lightened as I heard them singing in one voice alongside the strumming of Lucio's lute. Cheerful, swooping songs, some sharp and accompanied by stomps and claps, got men and women dancing and twirling. I spun and spun until I laughed from dizziness.

As we walked back to our carriage, the destruction left by the Acutians glistened in the white moonlight. Toppled buildings. A well that had been dismantled. The bakery windows, shattered and hollow. There were no treats Lucio could have bought me here.

The smile on my face faded away as I gazed upon the brokenness. I trailed after Lucio, faster and faster, a chill sweeping up my back, like something was chasing us.

I'd once cherished being able to see the world. Being able to escape some of the guilt I felt for my parents' fate when I was in my homeland. But gloom was everywhere now.

As we walked across the dirt-paved square in the white darkness, the only thing that brought me a bit of comfort was Lucio humming a song to himself. Hearing his voice kindled a warm hearth-glow in my chest. It was as familiar as the perfume of Cadenzan flowers, or the feel of my blankets swaddling me.

Long ago, it was his singing that first gave me peace when I thought I had none. On my first night at the monastery, I wept and wept and could scarcely sleep. I wandered the halls, restless, and sat in a window, wondering if I could jump out and run far, far away, run until I'd be back in my cottage where I belonged.

A boy appeared, looking almost like an icon with his candle making a golden halo around him.

*Why are you crying?* he'd asked.

My voice, this thing that was so venerated, trembled and caught. *I fear I'll never see my family again.*

He set down his candle on the floor, brought his lute—the same one he had still—and sat beside me on the sill. I watched in confused, sleepy silence as he plucked out a little tune.

It was an old hymn. The one the birds sang.

*Do you remember the words?* he'd asked.

I did. I sang them with him as he played again,

***“Mother Caé, e'er enfolding us within Her loving arms,  
She protects us, She will bless us, She'll shield us from  
every harm.***

***Dry our tears, hold us close, keep our loved ones safe and sound,  
Blessed be the kindly Goddess, by the stars forever crowned.”***

That night, his voice had been as calming as any lullaby. It dried my tears, as the song had said, even with no magic in the voice that sang it. Those words still rang in my heart when I grew fitful. They were always in his tones.

He was as dear as a brother might be, and his singing had always, always comforted me, but now he hated his voice. It was said that Caé didn't want sacrifice of us, just our songs—that even songs without magic were precious to Her. But he felt his voice was simply too poor to please her.

Only the twelve singers in the Holy Choir had the power to perform miracles with song. I could not understand it; Caé choosing me over him to have the power that I did. A girl from a village in the valley, not a boy from Cadenza Citadel? A girl who wanted to collect flowers, chase birds, roll down hills, not the boy who'd been raised in the Church, who'd been raised in music, who'd studied it before he learned his alphabet?

I skittered closer to Lucio—he always walked too fast for me—and hummed along with him in harmony. As soon as I did, he stopped. He bowed his head, striding forward into the stable. From the key ring on his hip, he unlocked the large brass lock of the carriage door.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I didn’t want you to stop.”

“Stop what?” The wooden door creaked on its hinges as he held it open for me.

I climbed up the small set of unfolding stairs. “Singing. I like it when you sing. It makes me think of the monastery.”

The blush on Lucio’s cheeks spread to his ears. He smiled, but it was forced. “That’s kind of you.” He scuffed one boot against the snow-covered cobblestone. “It’s better that I concentrate on my compositions. I’m not meant to be a singer.”

My heart fell. He loved music, he studied it day and night, and he smiled so brightly when a composition of his came to life. But even so, Caé had not given him the magic She’d given me. *Why?*

“The mayor invited us to visit her at her town house,” he said from the bottom of the steps. “But I think you should rest. You’ve done so much today.”

Relief washed over me. The day had been so loud, so beautiful, so much. To sit by myself and wrap up in a warm blanket seemed better than a dream now.

“But you’re still going?” I asked. He was always mindful to be proper, to be correct: accepting an invitation like this was good etiquette.

He nodded. “I’ll lock the door and come back in an hour or two. Can you manage on your own? Will you sing a protective spell?”

The lightness in my chest dissipated. “Oh,” I said. “Well . . .



I suppose.” I took a match from the little box near the door and lit candles throughout the carriage so that I could see my way and look at Lucio before he left.

In the golden light, the shadows beneath his brows and cheekbones were all the darker. In Cadenza, he would paint his lips gold and his eyelids purple; he wore flowers in his hair; he favored coats of violet and emerald. The style was so severe here. *He* looked so severe; pale and dressed in dark furs. Over time, his warm face had sharpened and grown colder. The soft pink blush on his cheeks from the chill was all the color he had.

I took hold of my Goddess Eye between both hands and pressed it against my heart.

“*May Caé guard you on your path,*” I sang, soft and sweet, despite the commanding, marchlike rhythm of the song. “*May Caé spare you mankind’s wrath. May Caé watch you as you sleep. May Caé hush you as you weep. Let it be so.*”

The final words, the benediction, were always my favorite part of Her hymns. Descending, landing in a minor key, and then resolving in one last final, peace-giving note. The melody *itself* restored—as Caé Herself would do in fulfilling my prayer.

As the song finished, Lucio smiled, his gloved hand taking mine. “I meant a spell for *you*,” he said with a laugh.

My fingers, tingling with cold, squeezed his tight through the thick wool of my mitt. “I’ll be all right.”

He touched his lips to the back of my mitt.

“Get some rest. I’ll be back soon.” His eyes glimmered in the lamplight as he shut the door between us.

My body uncoiled as I let out a deep sigh. Something had been bunched up and tense inside me, and being alone—it freed me, somehow.

I untied the hood I wore and tossed it aside, shaking out my curls. Feeling like myself again, I plopped into the blue-painted chair in front of his desk, hunching over and massaging my eyes as he did.

We were never apart, the two of us. Lunches in the sunlit courtyard of the monastery. Studying music theory by candlelight. The time he took me to a shrine in Dal Segno, the spring where Caé had bathed. He’d tutored me day and night. Even without him, whenever I found myself wondering what to do next, I heard answers in his voice:

*Say your prayers, Elissa.*

*Practice your scales.*

*Rest your voice.*

*Listen to the Goddess.*

When I opened my eyes, I gazed at the blank music sheet on his desk: jet-black lines on white paper like carriage tracks in the snow.

I remembered Lucio’s brow furrowing as he composed his spell today. Bombastic, crushing, powerful enough to clear the blocked path.

But I’d had a song, too. A song that still rang in my ears,

falling and sighing and sweeping at the end, a hopeful curve to it, like a question mark.

That song clung to my brain, and I knew it wouldn't let go.

I watched the sheet music on the table. And then my gaze shifted to the little icon of Caé that Lucio kept over his desk. I didn't care for this depiction of Her—Caé the Just. She had a spear in one hand and a set of balanced scales in the other. Her eyes, one all blue, the other brown, were wide and watchful. It was said that She gave one of Her eyes to serve as the moon, always watching over us, protecting us. Her halo of five staves jutted out in spikes behind Her head, more like horns than lines on which music was written.

I unwound my scarf from my throat and pulled on the string of the Goddess Eye, the blue bead tucked safe inside the collar of my gown.

With this little bead, she watched over us.

I held it in front of my face, frowning.

Had she ever looked at me before from this little necklace? Had she ever seen me face to face—or from the inside of my shoe? Could she really see me now?

“Caé?” I asked her, gazing into the bead. Tiny. Blue. Unembellished. Plain.

Could a goddess, the one powerful enough to create universes, to heal the sick, to tear open mountains, really be hidden in something so small?

That song continued to ring in my head, reverberating as if my skull were a stone cathedral. Along with it came a

smaller, atonal voice, Lucio's voice, saying, *Remember your place, remember your place, remember your place.*

He was right. Caé had given me a unique gift—singing—and I should not let myself be distracted by anything else. Our roles in this life were defined for us.

But the song in my head was louder than the voice of his logic. Music was aching to come out of me. My fingers twitched as they pinched the Goddess Eye.

“Just one song,” I murmured. “Goddess, why would you give me a song if you *didn't* want me to write it down?”

She didn't answer, of course.

I took the Goddess Eye and draped it over the nail that hung the icon of Caé the Just. If I was disobeying Her by writing down this song, at least I'd be doing it out in the open. If this was a sin, I wouldn't hide it.

From Her, anyway. Lucio . . . maybe.

I dipped the white quill in ink, and within moments, my hand had flown across the page, dotting note after note. It wasn't my own voice that was singing the song in my ear, guiding me, but someone else's, someone I didn't know. The voice was a woman's. Raw, broken at the edges, sliding the notes, but singing them so tenderly, like a lullaby.

Like my mother's voice.

I stopped. Ink blotted against the page. I squeezed my eyes shut and breathed.

Thinking of Mother and Father too long made me horribly sad, but they were always in my mind. Always. So many

times, when my eyes started to fill with tears, Lucio would notice, and give my chin a little nudge.

“That’s no way for the Voice of the Goddess to be,” he’d say. “You’re supposed to be joyful.”

Somehow, though, that female voice—rising and falling, singing to me—made me write even more. My hand moved faster, more harshly, and it took great effort not to break the nib of the quill, given the intensity with which I punctuated notes upon the page.

Then, my chest heaving, tears sticking to my cheeks, I blinked, and found that the song was done. It ended with the *Let it be so* that I loved, and with that, somehow, everything felt right again. I knew what this song was to be called.

*Song of Restoration.*

I looked over the page slowly, my eyes following the melody. It was perfect, peaceful, hopeful, simple. So simple. It was so clearly written by a child. But it was lovely, and somehow, it had come from my own mind. I hadn’t even studied for years and years as Lucio had. This song, stubborn and small, simply *wanted* to exist. And I was proud of it.

There was a clicking sound and the creaking of the carriage’s steps. I gasped, hopped to my feet, and hid the composition behind a stack of books. I stood between the desk and the door, watching and waiting with my heart thumping at an unhealthy tempo.

The door ticked as it unlocked, and then it drew back.

A woman was standing at the top of the little steps. She

wore a faded brown dress and a fawn-colored cloak and had a gray scarf wrapped around her throat and over her head like a veil. Her face was gray and thin, with round, curious brown eyes. Despite her frailty, she smiled at me, her hand still upon the doorknob.

“Hello, friend,” she said, her voice like a sugared cake, warm and light and sweet.

I kept my hands braced against the desk, a chill running over me as the icy wind slipped through the door. Lucio had locked the door—hadn’t he?

“Are—are you a friend of Lucio’s?”

She nodded, smiling. “I am on a pilgrimage to Cadenza,” she said. “I’ve been traveling for a while and need something to eat. Do you have anything to spare?”

Hanging from the hook near the door was our basket of food—the apples, the cheese, the meat, and the bread.

“Yes,” I said, then, thinking of my own belly, full and warm, added, “but there is a party going on in the town hall, down the road that way. They have food and hot cider . . . the townsfolk have been very generous to us.”

The pilgrim’s smile faded somewhat. “Oh,” she said. She stumbled another step into the carriage, clinging to the door for support. One of her feet was missing a shoe, and was bound in old, bloody bandages over her stocking.

I gasped, clutching at my chest. “You poor thing! You shouldn’t walk another step. Shut the door and come, sit here. Rest that foot for a while.”

The woman hobbled to the blue chair as I scampered to our basket of food. I gathered it all up and placed it before her on the table. Her dark eyes sparkled as she smiled up at me.

“Thank you,” she said.

One of the fingers of her gloves was missing, exposing a pale, shivering finger. Her cheeks, too, were dark pink, and even inside the warmth of the carriage, the pilgrim wrapped her arms around herself.

“It’ll only take a minute,” I said, “but can I make you some tea?”

She nodded, cradling an apple in her hands. “Only if you’ll join me.”

“Yes, madam.” I carefully held out my hand. “I’m Elissa, by the way. Though I’m sure Lucio’s told you before.”

She gave my hand a little shake, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “But that’s not your first name.”

I blinked. She was right, of course—almost every Cadenzan girl was, like me, given our first name in honor of the Goddess. “That’s true,” I said. “I’m Caé Elissa.”

Her smile deepened. When she smiled like this, true and unhindered and warm, her cheeks dimpled on both sides. “Elissa. It means ‘friend of the Goddess.’”

My forehead furrowed, and something in my middle twinged. “My parents told me it meant ‘promise of the Goddess.’”

“A good friend keeps her promises, doesn’t she?” She

batted a hand at the air and took a bite from her apple. “I always get languages mixed up, though.”

“And what’s your name, madam?”

“Madam,” she repeated, her laugh tired and dry as a dusty road. “Few people treat me so formally these days. I’m Caé Veronica. Just Veronica will do.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Veronica.” I turned from her, lifting the kettle off the small table a foot away from her. We kept it filled with snow or water as often as we could, and to my relief, I found it still to be full. As I filled up the tiny metal infuser with our gathered leaves and flowers from the mountains, I said, “What does your name mean, then?”

“‘Image of Caé.’” The bread crackled as she ripped off a piece, scattering fine white dust across her lap.

I lifted the little teapot with both hands, cupping the bottom. Then, in a soft voice, like I was murmuring to myself, I sang a spell of warmth.

As with each song, if used too much, it would grow less and less powerful. We’d used this spell many times, and Lucio would soon have to write another. For now, though, I just had to sing it a few times through to feel the smooth ceramic of the teapot start to warm beneath my palms. It was fast, in triple time, in a minor key, scaling up and down and up and down. In my mind, I liked to imagine a couple dancing together, dressed in flame red, twirling, spinning closer and closer to the fast beat of the music.

The heat in my palms stung, making me gasp and nearly



drop the tea. I'd been caught up in the music again. I blushed and took the handle of the pot, pouring the tea into two cups. When I turned to her, a cup in each hand, Veronica was grinning at me, her eyes shimmering.

"You have the gift of the Goddess," she whispered. Her voice was laced with pride.

A shiver rolled down my back. Mother and Father used to say it the same way.

"Yes," I said meekly, setting the cup before her on the table and sitting on the edge of Lucio's bed. "Lucio prefers that I rest my voice unless I'm on the stage, but really, there mustn't be any harm in warming up some tea." Unprompted, I could hear him lecturing in my head. I hid behind the curtain of my hair. "Perhaps it is wrong of me to use a miracle for such a trivial thing."

The warm, excited smile had quickly left the woman's face, replaced by a thin notch between her dark brows. "I have been wandering in the cold for a very long time," she said. "A cup of tea is no trivial thing."

My face burned as hot as the cup in my hands. "I—I didn't mean—"

She hushed me, a soft, lulling sound, like the hiss of the waterfall we'd passed in Allegretto weeks ago.

The light had returned to her eyes. "So," she said, "Caé Elissa, how long have you been out in the world, serving the Goddess with your songs?"

"I came to the monastery at Cadenza Citadel five years

ago, when I'd just turned seven. I studied for three years, and then, when the war began, our teachers sent Lucio and me out to help others. Bassans and Acutians and Cadenzans alike."

Veronica drank her tea and gazed into it. Her long lashes were suddenly decorated with little beads of tears. "You must have seen a great deal of hardship."

We had. Bassan soldiers mutilated by battle. Crops burned to the ground. Forests scored by fire. The houses in this little town, blasted to dust, and the people, thin-faced and empty-bellied. And yet they'd shared so much with us. They'd shown us such generosity and kindness, even after all they'd lost.

Another one of Caé's miracles.

Veronica sighed. "It breaks my heart, this war."

I nodded and then sipped at the tea. "I wish I could do more."

From behind the pale blue of the teacup, Veronica's lips curled in a smirk. "Be careful, saying such things. When you tell the Goddess you'd like more responsibility, She'll give it to you."

"I do, though," I said, leaning forward on the white sheets of the bed. A memory flooded my mind, making my nose sting with the odd, far-off smell of the beeswax candles and orange peels of my childhood home. Mother braiding my hair. Father singing prayers over my life. "The Goddess gave me a gift. And I want to use it. I want to make Her happy."

I want to help people. I want to give them hope again, like today—”

“Why, then, are you ignoring your gift?”

I paused, her words shocking me like a fist striking my breastbone. “I—I’m not. If she wants me to sing, I’ll sing—”

“Not your singing, Caé Elissa.” She set down the cup of tea, pivoted in her chair, and lifted up the stack of books on the table. Then she pulled out the sheet of music I’d written.

My stomach fell like she’d thrown it through a trapdoor. “Oh, no—I’m not a composer.”

“You composed this, though, didn’t you?” She winked. “Can’t imagine Maestro Lucio would feel the need to hide his music.”

“Yes,” I admitted, my fingers itching to grab hold of that piece of paper and crumple it into a ball. Forget it existed at all. “I wrote it.”

“Then you *are* a composer.”

“But it’s not—it’s not my gift. My *voice* is; you said so.” I bowed my head, my heart hammering in my throat. “Please don’t tell Maestro Lucio that I wrote that song. I won’t do it again. I don’t mean to act outside the role Caé gave me—”

“Child,” she said, firm, but kind, “that song in your head, the song you wrote down—where did it come from?”

I bit my lip. “From Caé, I suppose.”

Veronica nodded eagerly, tapping her forehead. “Every song, every work of art, everything beautiful, was first born in the mind of the Goddess Herself.” She pointed to

me. “If She sees fit to share one of Her songs with you, who are you—and who is Lucio—to say that you cannot write it down?”

I thought of Lucio, of how he carefully scratched each note upon the page. Of the hours he used to spend in the library of the monastery, learning about music theory, sketching out a new song only to crumple it into a ball.

Every song he wrote was laborious, painful, purposeful. For me to write one so flippantly and for it to be considered equal... it made my stomach turn.

“I haven’t trained like Lucio has,” I whispered. “That song, it—it’s just a collection of notes.”

She flicked the paper, making it crack like a whip, and then brought it to her eyes. “*Song of Restoration.*” Veronica held the music to me. “Sing it for me. Perhaps it will not just be a ‘collection of notes.’”

Cautiously, I took the paper in my grasp, glancing from it to her. Did she truly mean to imply that there was *power* in this music, in *my* music?

“I shouldn’t,” I whispered.

But looking at the woman before me, her bleeding foot, her tired eyes, her hungry, exhausted face, I considered which was more brazen—to sing a song I’d composed, or to possibly withhold a miracle from a woman in need.

“I—I could sing you a different song,” I offered, rising from the bed to step toward the trunk of compositions. But Veronica held up a hand.

“I want you to sing this one,” she said. There was authority in her voice, unshakable as the teachers’ in the monastery.

I wilted back onto the bed. The sheet of music trembled in my hands like the wings of butterflies that flew so freely in Cadenza. I squeezed my eyes shut and swallowed a lump in my throat.

*Sing*, whispered a voice in my head, a comforting, ageless voice. *It’s what you were made to do.*

I squared my shoulders and stared down the piece of paper—such a silly thing to find so fearsome!—and treated it as any other assignment. I pretended it was not my music. That it was not even Lucio’s. But that Caé Herself had written it somehow, and had handed it to me, and had asked for a private concert.

My voice came out shaky, soft, pathetic, but it slowly built, as the song did. Gentle, lulling tones, rising and falling, growing and growing, my voice changing from a piercing silver needle to a flood of liquid gold.

Then that gold spilled into the room. A warm, honeylike ray of light poured from my lips. It enveloped the woman’s foot, snaked up her body, filled her chest. She sighed and smiled.

“*Let it be so,*” I sang as the final benediction, the only words of the song; and the gold sparkling in the air faded, leaving behind only wisps of dust in the dim candlelight.

Veronica opened her eyes, rimmed with tears. She stood

tall, rolling her foot back and forth, now able to place all her weight upon it. She no longer hunched, no longer hobbled, no longer seemed cold or weary. She held herself as a queen.

“It worked,” I whispered, my heart pattering. “My song!”

The woman beamed down at me, her soft hands resting against my cheeks. “Remember this day. Remember the power of your song.” She looked me in the eyes, hers warm and attentive and watchful. “There is only one voice you must listen to, Caé Elissa. And that is your own.”

Without another word, she strode toward the door.

“Wait!” I said. “You are going to Cadenza, you said?”

She turned back to me and nodded.

“If you go there,” I said, “my mother and father are in the capital’s prison. Giacomo and Iole Marcia. Could you . . . could you tell them that I am well? And that I miss them?”

It was a foolish, desperate request; my heart ached just making it, and even more so at the sadness in her eyes. It was like she could hear the poisonous, cynical voice in my head, saying, *After five years in jail, are they even still alive?*

“If I see them,” Veronica replied, “I will tell them what a marvel their daughter is.”

With that, she slipped out the door. When I dashed after her, I took hold of the doorknob, only to find it locked again.

I pressed my back against the door and touched a hand to my forehead.

Lucio *had* locked the carriage. I was sure he had.

He had the only key. How had Veronica entered? How had she locked it again?

Perhaps I was imagining things. Perhaps she was like me, with some sort of magic to her—but no; why couldn't she have healed herself? Why did she need my song?

*My song.*

Amid the fearsome, troubled haze of my mind, I laughed, clapping a hand over my mouth.

I had made a miracle, not just with my voice, but with notes written by my own hand.

I'd always loved music; I'd always known about its power, siphoned straight from the Goddess. And now? Now I'd *created* it.

I was confused, and afraid, but equally overcome with a rush of excitement, building inside my chest, a crescendoing hum. Along with that rhythm, more music began to play in my mind. Descending, gentle bells; a *new* song of healing.

I raced to Lucio's desk.