THE SECRET OF TIME

There were days, when she'd wake up in the morning after not even a couple hours of fitful sleep and with her eyes still red and puffy, where Cris actually felt *dead* inside. The ache in her heart suffocated her no less than a physical ailment.

And yet she'd get up, wash her face, get dressed and move on with her morning as if nothing unusual was going on. The pain was heaving on her, numbing, suffocating; but while her heart cried out in agony, her body went on about its everyday routine, as if numb – as if a glass wall had been built up between the two entities that comprised her. Maybe it _was_ for the best that her days were always so busy. Make breakfast. Wake the children, help them eat, get them ready for the day, get ready herself. Work painstakingly. Watch, observe, learn. Talk. Interact. Smile, laugh, speak, nod, as if on command.

Sometimes she wondered if this was what being a factory-new robot – not one with a developed personality like Anton and Emily, but a freshly programmed out-of-the-box automaton – felt like. She'd arrive at the end of the day without even realizing it, and all the while, her soul died a little bit. Week after week, she continued to live… yet it was almost as if she wasn't *really* there.

She had no reason to feel so dismal. Many would think her privileged, and happily give a limb to be at her place. She had her life, two beautiful children who were the joy of her heart, the secret of this third little one who was growing in her and that no one else knew about. There'd be plenty of time to worry of how to break the news to the Aliprandi Clan that her husband had left her with *something* they couldn't take from her; for now, she'd rather not think about it.

And yet she could feel the pain. She felt it in the grim line of her mouth, when no one could see her. She felt it in the bitterness of her eyes, when she'd raise them over her present and her past alike. And she felt it, mightier than ever, when she wondered soundlessly if there was, if there had *ever* been a point to it all.

She had been so certain that the world was hers to change and life was hers to shape. And where had that led her? *Look at yourself now,* the voice in her head mocked. By turns, it sounded like her Clan relatives, like the scornful laugh of Captain Hades, like Stephens's derisive drawl. *You're tied to the memory of a man you loved and who's never coming back.* She could lie all she wanted, pretend to have moved on like her grandfather demanded, but the truth was that every time she thought about *Shadow*, her heart jolted as if stung by high tension wire, and wounds haphazardly stitched bled out anew, over and over as tears stung her eyes. *Where's the old you who went crazy with love, who was drunk on life and happiness?*

THE SECRET OF TIME
(R. Facchinetti – R. Fogli)

There are days when you die inside and you don't know it
Because you wanted to change a world that's never changing
Your life does not want you, it seems to choose without asking you
(While) You smile and try again, but you're not really there.

There are days when you look back and ask about you
To an old friend, to the person you loved but who has since left
And you get restless and moved to tears
If they still mention your lost love
'Cause it's possible to drift apart, even without leaving.

You feel the weight of every mistake you made
You'd like to give up and go away
You'd want to close your eyes, just for a moment
And let it be

I've seen you go crazy with love
Get drunk with happiness
My dear friend, you have lost your heart
But it'll find its way back to you.
The secret of time is that it always forgive
Those who delve in life with all that they have

I have seen friends breaking down, it's happened to me as well
Throw away certainties, hugs, a part of yourself
Sometimes you cannot change without destroying what you have
And you ask the heavens to get your time back, but you won't have it.

And you're frail and want to escape
From the dizziness of advancing age
So you won't feel so alone with yourself.

I've seen you go crazy with love
Get drunk with happiness
My dear friend, just ask your heart
It'll remind who you are.
The secret of time is that it always forgive
Those who delve in life with all that they have

You've failed at everything you set out to do. You've failed your friends. They have all left you, by turn, haven't they? And why's that? Because you drove them away. You've destroyed all that you were. You're broken, unwanted, alone. That's all there'll ever be to you—

Like hell it is, she'd retort, and grit her teeth even more and fight even harder to silence that damned voice. White noise in the back of her head, that was all. *Keep going. Another step. Another day. Another mile*. It was just a matter of *getting used* to trudge on, under the weight of every mistake she had made, of all the times in which she had begged to get those carefree days of old back. Trudge on, even when she desperately wanted to close her eyes for just a second and let herself float away.

She was just shy of twenty-four, an age where most people were barely dipping their toes in all that life had to offer. But when she looked back, the past seemed to stretch behind her in a long endless road. Those were the days when she *felt* old… old and tired like the mountains, like a fox that had outlived its hunters and was left to roam aimlessly among the brambles.

She sat in front of the mirror and gazed helplessly at her reflection. The deep shadows under those haunted eyes spoke of sleepless nights, of long, quiet cries muffled in the pillow, of all the weaknesses she had learned to bottle up and hide from the world at large. *'You have lost your heart, dear old Cris. But it's alright. It'll find your way back to you, somehow. You've seen others make it through worse, you can do it too. Sure, you might feel fragile and lost among the ruins of what once was… but you'll pull through.'*

She always had.

And she wasn't alone, no matter what that stupid voice in her thoughts wanted her to believe. She had Emily, Anton, her children. Not a day would pass without them letting Cris know just how much they needed her.

And she had Damien. Damien who had known her in the old days and who hadn't turned away, or fled like everyone else. He had always seen her true colors and stood by her regardless*. 'Please, come over soon, Badzooka',* she found herself wishing*. 'Come to remind me who I am, and that I still live even when my soul and my heart feel so desperately dead.'*

No sooner had these thoughts crossed her head, that the communicator on her night stand buzzed. She glanced at the incoming message, and the shadow of a smile touched her lips. *Figures...* He had a way of sensing her unease, almost as if he had read her thoughts. Some bonds were like that, eluding distance and logic, eluding time.

Time…

She leaned wearily back into the armchair. Time and it passing… it had an exhausting quality, no doubt. But eventually, it would chart her, bruised and weary, into this weird new life that was so unlike anything she'd ever asked, a life where her heart had been broken and patched together once too often until all that was left of it were fragile shards. A life that had spurned nearly every of her expectations and wishes, turning them upside down. It wasn't the life she had dreamed, but she'd delve in it regardless, with all that she had. That was the trick… the *secret*.

Sure, she might feel unfit and too weak under a burden too heavy, but time would show her the way to pull through. Time would teach her to survive. And eventually, it'd teach her to forgive. Forgive herself, so she could move on.

She always had.