



Legend (Legend Trilogy)

By Marie Lu

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Unabridged, 7 CDs, 9 hours

Read by Steven Kaplan & Mariel Stern

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Editorial Review

Review

"a well-written, emotionally satisfying read..." ? "VOYA", starred review

"cinematic adventure featuring endearing, compelling heroes." ? "Kirkus", starred review

"the delicious details keep pages turning?" ? "Booklist", starred review

"many dystopian books are filling the shelves, but this book stands out." ? "LMC", starred review

"Lu's debut is a stunner." ? "Publisher's Weekly", starred review

About the Author

Marie Lu (www.marielu.org) is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling novels *Legend*, *Prodigy*, and *Champion*, as well as *The Young Elites*. She graduated from the University of Southern California and jumped into the video game industry, working for Disney Interactive Studios as a Flash artist. Now a full-time writer, she spends her spare time reading, drawing, playing *Assassin's Creed*, and getting stuck in traffic. She lives in Los Angeles, California (see above: traffic), with one husband, one Chihuahua mix, and two Pembroke Welsh corgis.

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LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

REPUBLIC OF AMERICA

POPULATION: 20,174,282

PART ONE

THE BOY

WHO WALKS IN THE LIGHT

MY MOTHER THINKS I'M DEAD.

Obviously I'm not dead, but it's safer for her to think so.

At least twice a month, I see my Wanted poster flashed on the JumboTrons scattered throughout downtown Los Angeles. It looks out of place up there. Most of the pictures on the screens are of happy things: smiling children standing under a bright blue sky, tourists posing before the Golden Gate Ruins, Republic commercials in neon colors. There's also anti-Colonies propaganda. "The Colonies want our land," the ads declare. "They want what they don't have. Don't let them conquer your homes! Support the cause!"

Then there's my criminal report. It lights up the JumboTrons in all its multicolored glory:

WANTED BY THE REPUBLIC

FILE NO: 462178-3233 "DAY"

WANTED FOR ASSAULT, ARSON, THEFT, DESTRUCTION OF MILITARY PROPERTY, AND HINDERING THE WAR EFFORT 200,000 REPUBLIC NOTES FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO ARREST

They always have a different photo running alongside the report. One time it was a boy with glasses and a head full of thick copper curls. Another time it was a boy with black eyes and no hair at all. Sometimes I'm black, sometimes white, sometimes olive or brown or yellow or red or whatever else they can think of.

In other words, the Republic has no idea what I look like. They don't seem to know much of anything about me, except that I'm young and that when they run my fingerprints they don't find a match in their databases. That's why they hate me, why I'm not the most dangerous criminal in the country, but the most wanted. I make them look bad.

It's early evening, but it's already pitch-black outside, and the JumboTrons' reflections are visible in the street's puddles. I sit on a crumbling window ledge three stories up, hidden from view behind rusted steel beams. This used to be an apartment complex, but it's fallen into disrepair. Broken lanterns and glass shards litter the floor of this room, and paint is peeling from every wall. In one corner, an old portrait of the Elector Primo lies faceup on the ground. I wonder who used to live here—no one's cracked enough to let their portrait of the Elector sit discarded on the floor like that.

My hair, as usual, is tucked inside an old newsboy cap. My eyes are fixed on the small one-story house across the road. My hands fiddle with the pendant tied around my neck.

Tess leans against the room's other window, watching me closely. I'm restless tonight and, as always, she can sense it.

The plague has hit the Lake sector hard. In the glow of the JumboTrons, Tess and I can see the soldiers at the end of the street as they inspect each home, their black capes shiny and worn loose in the heat. Each of them wears a gas mask. Sometimes when they emerge, they mark a house by painting a big red X on the front door. No one enters or leaves the home after that—at least, not when anyone's looking.

"Still don't see them?" Tess whispers. Shadows conceal her expression.

In an attempt to distract myself, I'm piecing together a makeshift slingshot out of old PVC pipes. "They haven't eaten dinner. They haven't sat down by the table in hours." I shift and stretch out my bad knee.

"Maybe they're not home?"

I shoot Tess an irritated glance. She's trying to console me, but I'm not in the mood. "A lamp's lit. Look at those candles. Mom would never waste candles if no one was home."

Tess moves closer. "We should leave the city for a couple weeks, yeah?" She tries to keep her voice calm, but the fear is there. "Soon the plague will have blown through, and you can come back to visit. We have

more than enough money for two train tickets.”

I shake my head. “One night a week, remember? Just let me check up on them one night a week.”

“Yeah. You’ve been coming here every night this week.”

“I just want to make sure they’re okay.”

“What if you get sick?”

“I’ll take my chances. And you didn’t have to come with me. You could’ve waited for me back in Alta.”

Tess shrugs. “Somebody has to keep an eye on you.” Two years younger than me—although sometimes she sounds old enough to be my caretaker.

We look on in silence as the soldiers draw closer to my family’s house. Every time they stop at a home, one soldier pounds on the door while a second stands next to him with his gun drawn. If no one opens the door within ten seconds, the first soldier kicks it in. I can’t see them once they rush inside, but I know the drill: a soldier will draw a blood sample from each family member, then plug it into a handheld reader and check for the plague. The whole process takes ten minutes.

I count the houses between where the soldiers are now and where my family lives. I’ll have to wait another hour before I know their fate.

A shriek echoes from the other end of the street. My eyes dart toward the sound and my hand whips to the knife sheathed at my belt. Tess sucks in her breath.

It’s a plague victim. She must’ve been deteriorating for months, because her skin is cracked and bleeding everywhere, and I find myself wondering how the soldiers could have missed this one during previous inspections. She stumbles around for a while, disoriented, then charges forward, only to trip and fall to her knees. I glance back toward the soldiers. They see her now. The soldier with the drawn weapon approaches, while the eleven others stay where they are and look on. One plague victim isn’t much of a threat. The soldier lifts his gun and aims. A volley of sparks engulfs the infected woman.

She collapses, then goes still. The soldier rejoins his comrades.

I wish we could get our hands on one of the soldiers’ guns. A pretty weapon like that doesn’t cost much on the market—480 Notes, less than a stove. Like all guns, it has precision, guided by magnets and electric currents, and can accurately shoot a target three blocks away. It’s tech stolen from the Colonies, Dad once said, although of course the Republic would never tell you that. Tess and I could buy five of them if we wanted. . . . Over the years we’ve learned to stockpile the extra money we steal and stash it away for emergencies. But the real problem with having a gun isn’t the expense. It’s that it’s so easy to trace back to you. Each gun has a sensor on it that reports its user’s hand shape, thumbprints, and location. If that didn’t give me away, nothing would. So I’m left with my homemade weapons, PVC pipe slingshots, and other trinkets.

“They found another one,” Tess says. She squints to get a better look.

I look down and see the soldiers spill from another house. One of them shakes a can of spray paint and draws

a giant red X on the door. I know that house. The family that lives there once had a little girl my age. My brothers and I played with her when we were younger—freeze tag and street hockey with iron pokers and crumpled paper.

Tess tries to distract me by nodding at the cloth bundle near my feet. “What’d you bring them?”

I smile, then reach down to untie the cloth. “Some of the stuff we saved up this week. It’ll make for a nice celebration once they pass the inspection.” I dig through the little pile of goodies inside the bundle, then hold up a used pair of goggles. I check them again to make sure there are no cracks in the glass. “For John. An early birthday gift.” My older brother turns nineteen later this week. He works fourteen-hour shifts in the neighborhood plant’s friction stoves and always comes home rubbing his eyes from the smoke. These goggles were a lucky steal from a military supply shipment.

I put them down and shuffle through the rest of the stuff. It’s mostly tins of meat and potato hash I stole from an airship’s cafeteria, and an old pair of shoes with intact soles. I wish I could be in the room with all of them when I deliver this stuff. But John’s the only one who knows I’m alive, and he’s promised not to tell Mom or Eden.

Eden turns ten in two months, which means that in two months he’ll have to take the Trial. I failed my own Trial when I was ten. That’s why I worry about Eden, because even though he’s easily the smartest of us three boys, he thinks a lot like I do. When I finished my Trial, I felt so sure of my answers that I didn’t even bother to watch them grade it. But then the admins ushered me into a corner of the Trial stadium with a bunch of other kids. They stamped something on my test and stuffed me onto a train headed downtown. I didn’t get to take anything except the pendant I wore around my neck. I didn’t even get to say good-bye.

Several different things could happen after you take the Trial.

You get a perfect score—1500 points. No one’s ever gotten this—well, except for some kid a few years ago who the military made a goddy fuss over. Who knows what happens to someone with a score that high? Probably lots of money and power, yeah?

You score between a 1450 and a 1499. Pat yourself on the back because you’ll get instant access to six years of high school and then four at the top universities in the Republic: Drake, Stanford, and Brenan. Then Congress hires you and you make lots of money. Joy and happiness follow. At least according to the Republic.

You get a good score, somewhere between 1250 and 1449 points. You get to continue on to high school, and then you’re assigned to a college. Not bad.

You squeak by with a score between 1000 and 1249. Congress bars you from high school. You join the poor, like my family. You’ll probably either drown while working the water turbines or get steamed to death in the power plants.

You fail.

It’s almost always the slum-sector kids who fail. If you’re in this unlucky category, the Republic sends officials to your family’s home. They make your parents sign a contract giving the government full custody over you. They say that you’ve been sent away to the Republic’s labor camps and that your family will not see you again. Your parents have to nod and agree. A few even celebrate, because the Republic gives them

one thousand Notes as a condolence gift. Money and one less mouth to feed? What a thoughtful government.

Except this is all a lie. An inferior child with bad genes is no use to the country. If you're lucky, Congress will let you die without first sending you to the labs to be examined for imperfections.

Five houses remain. Tess sees the worry in my eyes and puts a hand on my forehead. "One of your headaches coming on?"

"No. I'm okay." I peer in the open window at my mother's house, then catch my first glimpse of a familiar face. Eden walks by, then peeks out the window at the approaching soldiers and points some handmade metal contraption at them. Then he ducks back inside and disappears from view. His curls flash white-blond in the flickering lamplight. Knowing him, he probably built that gadget to measure how far away someone is, or something like that.

"He looks thinner," I mutter.

"He's alive and walking around," Tess replies. "I'd say that's a win."

Minutes later, we see John and my mother wander past the window, deep in conversation. John and I look pretty similar, although he's grown a little stockier from long days at the plant. His hair, like most who live in our sector, hangs down past his shoulders and is tied back into a simple tail. His vest is smudged with red clay. I can tell Mom's scolding him for something or other, probably for letting Eden peek out the window. She bats John's hand away when a bout of her chronic coughing hits her. I let out a breath. So. At least all three of them are healthy enough to walk. Even if one of them is infected, it's early enough that they'll still have a chance to recover.

I can't stop imagining what will happen if the soldiers mark my mother's door. My family will stand frozen in our living room long after the soldiers have left. Then Mom will put on her usual brave face, only to sit up through the night, quietly wiping tears away. In the morning, they'll start receiving small rations of food and water and simply wait to recover. Or die.

My mind wanders to the stash of stolen money that Tess and I have hidden. Twenty-five hundred Notes. Enough to feed us for months . . . but not enough to buy my family vials of plague medicine.

The minutes drag on. I tuck my slingshot away and play a few rounds of Rock, Paper, Scissors with Tess. (I don't know why, but she's crazy good at this game.) I glance several times at my mother's window, but don't see anyone. They must have gathered near the door, ready to open it as soon as they hear a fist against the wood.

And then the time comes. I lean forward on the ledge, so far that Tess grips my arm to make sure I don't topple to the ground. The soldiers pound on the door. My mother opens it immediately, lets the soldiers in, and then closes it. I strain to hear voices, footsteps, anything that might come from my house. The sooner this is all over, the sooner I can sneak my gifts to John.

The silence drags on. Tess whispers, "No news is good news, right?"

"Very funny."

I count off the seconds in my head. One minute passes. Then two, then four, and then finally, ten minutes.

Then fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes.

I look at Tess. She just shrugs. “Maybe their reader’s broken,” she suggests.

Thirty minutes pass. I don’t dare move from my vigil. I’m afraid something will happen so quickly that I’ll miss it if I blink. My fingers tap rhythmically against the hilt of my knife.

Forty minutes. Fifty minutes. An hour.

“Something’s wrong,” I whisper.

Tess purses her lips. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes I do. What could possibly take this long?”

Tess opens her mouth to reply, but before she can say anything, the soldiers are exiting my house, single file, expressionless. Finally, the last soldier shuts the door behind him and reaches for something tucked at his waist. I suddenly feel dizzy. I know what’s coming.

The soldier reaches up and sprays one long, red, diagonal line on our door. Then he sprays another line, making an X.

I curse silently under my breath and start to turn away—

—but then the soldier does something unexpected, something I’ve never seen before.

He sprays a third, vertical line on my mother’s door, cutting the X in half.

1347 HOURS.

DRAKE UNIVERSITY, BATALLA SECTOR.

72°F INDOORS.

I’M SITTING IN MY DEAN SECRETARY’S OFFICE. AGAIN. On the other side of the frosted glass door, I can see a bunch of my classmates (seniors, all at least four years older than me) hanging around in an attempt to hear what’s going on. Several of them saw me being yanked out of our afternoon drill class (today’s lesson: how to load and unload the XM-621 rifle) by a menacing pair of guards. And whenever that happens, the news spreads all over campus.

The Republic’s favorite little prodigy is in trouble again.

The office is quiet except for the faint hum coming from the dean secretary’s computer. I’ve memorized every detail of this room (hand-cut marble floors imported from Dakota, 324 plastic square ceiling tiles, twenty feet of gray drapes hanging to either side of the glorious Elector’s portrait on the office’s back wall, a thirty-inch screen on the side wall, with the sound muted and a headline that reads: “**TRAITOROUS ‘PATRIOTS’ GROUP BOMBS LOCAL MILITARY STATION, KILLS FIVE**” followed by “**REPUBLIC DEFEATS COLONIES IN BATTLE FOR HILLSBORO**”). Arisna Whitaker, the dean secretary herself, is seated behind her desk, tapping on its glass—no doubt typing up my report. This will be my eighth report

this quarter. I'm willing to bet I'm the only Drake student who's ever managed to get eight reports in one quarter without being expelled.

"Injured your hand yesterday, Ms. Whitaker?" I say after a while.

She stops typing to glare at me. "What makes you think that, Ms. Iparis?"

"The pauses in your keystrokes are off. You're favoring your left hand."

Ms. Whitaker sighs and leans back in her chair. "Yes, June. I twisted my wrist yesterday in a game of kivaball."

"Sorry to hear it. You should try to swing more from your arm and not from your wrist."

I'd meant this simply to be a statement of fact, but it sounded sort of taunting and doesn't seem to have made her any happier. "Let's get something straight, Ms. Iparis," she says. "You may think you're very smart. You may think your perfect grades earn you some sort of special treatment. You may even think you have fans at this school, what with all this nonsense." She gestures at the students gathered outside the door. "But I've grown incredibly tired of our get-togethers in my office. And believe me, when you graduate and get assigned to whatever post this country chooses for you, your antics won't impress your superiors there. Do you understand me?"

I nod, because that's what she wants me to do. But she's wrong. I don't just think I'm smart. I'm the only person in the entire Republic with a perfect 1500 score on her Trial. I was assigned here, to the country's top university, at twelve, four years ahead of schedule. Then I skipped my sophomore year. I've earned perfect grades at Drake for three years. I am smart. I have what the Republic considers good genes—and better genes make for better soldiers make for better chance of victory against the Colonies, my professors always say. And if I feel like my afternoon drills aren't teaching me enough about how to climb walls while carrying weapons, then . . . well, it wasn't my fault I had to scale the side of a nineteen-story building with a XM-621 gun strapped to my back. It was self-improvement, for the sake of my country.

Rumor has it that Day once scaled five stories in less than eight seconds. If the Republic's most-wanted criminal can pull that off, then how are we ever going to catch him if we're not just as fast? And if we can't even catch him, how are we going to win the war?

Ms. Whitaker's desk beeps three times. She holds down a button. "Yes?"

"Captain Metias Iparis is outside the gate," a voice replies. "He's here for his sister."

"Good. Send him in." She releases the button and points a finger at me. "I hope that brother of yours starts doing a better job of minding you, because if you end up in my office one more time this quarter—"

"Metias is doing a better job than our dead parents," I reply, maybe more sharply than I intended.

We fall into an uncomfortable silence.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity, I hear a commotion out in the hall. The students pressed against the door's glass abruptly disperse, and their shadows move aside to make room for a tall silhouette. My brother.

As Metias opens the door and steps inside, I can see some girls out in the hall stifling smiles behind their hands. But Metias fixes his full attention on me. We have the same eyes, black with a gold glint, the same long lashes and dark hair. The long lashes work particularly well for Metias. Even with the door closed behind him, I can still hear the whispers and giggles from outside. It looks like he came from his patrol duties straight to my campus. He's decked out in his full uniform: black officer coat with double rows of gold buttons, gloves (neoprene, spectra lining, captain rank embroidery), shining epaulettes on his shoulders, formal military hat, black trousers, polished boots. My eyes meet his.

He's furious.

Ms. Whitaker gives Metias a brilliant smile. "Ah, Captain!" she exclaims. "It's a pleasure to see you."

Metias taps the edge of his hat in a polite salute. "It's unfortunate it's under these circumstances again," he replies. "My apologies."

"Not a problem, Captain." The dean secretary waves her hand dismissively. What a brownnoser—especially after what she'd just said about Metias. "It's hardly your fault. Your sister was caught scaling a high-rise during her lunch hour today. She'd wandered two blocks off campus to do it. As you know, students are to use only the climbing walls on campus for physical training, and leaving the campus in the middle of the day is forbidden—"

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Metias interrupts, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. "I saw the helicopters over Drake at noon and had a . . . suspicion June might've been involved."

There'd been three helicopters. They couldn't get me off the side of the building by scaling it themselves, so they pulled me off with a net.

"Thank you for your help," Metias says to the dean secretary. He snaps his fingers at me, my cue to get up. "When June returns to campus, she'll be on her best behavior."

I ignore Ms. Whitaker's false smile as I follow my brother out of the office and into the hall. Immediately students hurry over. "June," a boy named Dorian says as he tags alongside us. He'd asked me (unsuccessfully) to the annual Drake ball two years in a row. "Is it true? How high up did you get?"

Metias cuts him off with a stern look. "June's heading home." Then he puts a hand firmly on my shoulder and guides me away from my classmates. I glance behind me and manage a smile for them.

"Fourteen floors," I call back. That gets them buzzing again. Somehow, this has become the closest relationship I have with the other Drake students. I am respected, discussed, gossiped about. Not really talked to.

Such is the life of a fifteen-year-old senior in a university meant for sixteen and up.

Metias doesn't say another word as we make our way down the corridors, past the manicured lawns of the central quad and the glorious Elector's statue, and finally through one of the indoor gyms. We pass by the afternoon drills I'm supposed to be participating in. I watch my classmates run along a giant track surrounded by a 360-degree screen simulating some desolate warfront road. They're holding their rifles out in front of them, attempting to load and unload as fast as they can while running. At most other universities, there wouldn't be so many student soldiers, but at Drake, almost all of us are well on our way to career

assignments in the Republic's military. A few others are tapped for politics and Congress, and some are chosen to stay behind and teach. But Drake is the Republic's best university, and seeing as how the best are always assigned into the military, our drill room is packed with students.

By the time we reach one of Drake's outer streets and I climb into the backseat of our waiting military jeep, Metias can barely contain his anger. "Suspended for a week? Do you want to explain this to me?" he demands. "I get back from a morning of dealing with the Patriot rebels and what do I hear about? Helicopters two blocks from Drake. A girl scaling a skyscraper."

I exchange a friendly look with Thomas, the soldier in the driver's seat. "Sorry," I mutter.

Metias turns around from his place in the passenger seat and narrows his eyes at me. "What the hell were you thinking? Did you know you'd wandered right off campus?"

"Yes."

"Of course. You're fifteen. You went fourteen floors up a—" He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and steadies himself. "For once, I'd appreciate it if you would let me do my daily tours of duty without worrying myself sick over what you're up to."

I try to meet Thomas's eyes again in the rearview mirror, but he keeps his gaze on the road. Of course, I shouldn't expect any help from him. He looks as tidy as ever, with his perfectly slicked hair and perfectly ironed uniform. Not a strand or thread out of place. Thomas might be several years younger than Metias and a subordinate on his patrol, but he's more disciplined than anyone I know. Sometimes I wish I had that much discipline. He probably disapproves of my stunts even more than Metias does.

We leave downtown Los Angeles behind and travel up the winding highway in silence. The scenery changes from inner Batalla sector's hundred-floor skyscrapers to densely packed barrack towers and civilian complexes, each one only twenty to thirty stories high, with red guiding lights blinking on their roofs, most with all their paint stripped off after this year's rash of storms. Metal support beams crisscross their walls. I hope they get to upgrade those supports soon. The war's been intense lately, and with several decades of infrastructure funding diverted to supplying the warfront, I don't know if these buildings would hold up well in another earthquake.

After a few minutes, Metias continues in a calmer voice. "You really scared me today," he says. "I was afraid they'd mistake you for Day and shoot at you."

I know he doesn't mean this as a compliment, but I can't help smiling. I lean forward to rest my arms on top of his seat. "Hey," I say, tugging his ear the way I did when I was a kid, "I'm sorry I made you worry."

He lets out a scornful chuckle, but I can tell his anger is already fading. "Yeah. That's what you say every time, Junebug. Is Drake not keeping your brain busy enough? If not, then I don't know what will."

"You know . . . if you'd just take me along on some of your missions, I'd probably learn a lot more and stay out of trouble."

"Nice try. You're not going anywhere until you graduate and get assigned to your own patrol."

I bite my tongue. Metias did pick me once—once—for a mission last year, when all third-year Drake

students had to shadow an assigned military branch. His commander sent him to kill a runaway prisoner of war from the Colonies. So Metias brought me along with him, and together we chased the POW deeper and deeper into our territory, away from the dividing fences and the strip of land running from Dakota to West Texas that separates the Republic and the Colonies, away from the warfront where airships dot the sky. I tracked him into an alley in Yellowstone City, Montana, and Metias shot him.

During the chase, I broke three ribs and had a knife buried in my leg. Now Metias refuses to take me anywhere.

When Metias finally speaks again, he sounds grudgingly curious. “So, tell me,” he whispers. “How fast did you climb those fourteen stories?”

Thomas makes a disapproving sound in his throat, but I break into a grin. Storm’s past. Metias loves me again. “Six minutes,” I whisper back to my brother. “And forty-four seconds. How do you like that?”

“That must be some sort of record. Not that, you know, you’re supposed to do it.”

Thomas stops the jeep right behind the lines at a red light and gives Metias an exasperated look. “Come on, Captain,” he says. “June—ah—Ms. Iparis won’t learn a thing if you keep praising her for breaking the rules.”

“Cheer up, Thomas.” Metias reaches over and claps him on the back. “Surely breaking a rule once in a while is tolerable, especially if you’re doing it to beef up your skills for the Republic’s sake. Victory against the Colonies. Right?”

The light blinks green. Thomas turns his eyes back to the road (he seems to count to three in his head before letting the jeep go forward). “Right,” he mutters. “You should still be careful what you’re encouraging Ms. Iparis to do, especially with your parents gone.”

Metias’s mouth tightens into a line, and a familiar, strained look appears in his eyes.

No matter how sharp my intuition is, no matter how well I do at Drake or how perfectly I score in defense and target practice and hand-to-hand combat, Metias’s eyes always hold that fear. He’s afraid something might happen to me one day—like the car crash that took our parents. That fear never leaves his face. And Thomas knows it.

I didn’t know our parents long enough to miss them in the same way Metias does. Whenever I cry over losing them, I cry because I don’t have any memories of them. Just hazy recollections of long, adult legs shuffling around our apartment and hands lifting me from my high chair. That’s it. Every other memory from my childhood—looking out into the auditorium as I receive an award, or having soup made for me when I’m sick, or being scolded, or tucked into bed—those are with Metias.

We drive past half of Batalla sector and through a few poor blocks. (Can’t these street beggars stay a little farther from our jeep?) Finally we reach the gleaming, terraced high-rises of Ruby, and we’re home. Metias gets out first. As I follow, Thomas gives me a small smile.

“See you later, Ms. Iparis,” he says, tipping his hat.

I stopped trying to convince him to call me June—he’ll never change. Still, it’s not so bad being called

something proper. Maybe when I'm older and Metias doesn't faint at the idea of me dating . . .

"Bye, Thomas. Thanks for the ride." I smile back at him before stepping out of the jeep.

Metias waits until the door has slammed shut before turning to me and lowering his voice. "I'll be home late tonight," he says. There's that tension in his eyes again. "Don't go out alone. News from the warfront is they're cutting power to residences tonight to save energy for the airfield bases. So stay put, okay? The streets'll be darker than usual."

My heart sinks. I wish the Republic would hurry up and win this war already so that for once we might actually get a whole month of nonstop electricity. "Where are you going? Can I come with you?"

"I'm overseeing the lab at Los Angeles Central. They're delivering vials of some mutated virus there—it shouldn't take all night. And I already told you no. No missions." Metias hesitates. "I'll be home as early as I can. We have a lot to talk about." He puts his hands on my shoulders, ignores my puzzled look, and gives me a quick kiss on my forehead. "Love you, Junebug," he says, his trademark good-bye. He turns to climb back into the jeep.

"I'm not going to wait up for you," I call after him, but by now he's already inside and the jeep's pulling away with him inside of it. "Be careful," I murmur.

But it's pointless to say now. Metias is too far away to hear me.

WHEN I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD, MY FATHER CAME home from the warfront for a week's leave. His job was to clean up after the Republic's soldiers, so he was usually gone, and Mom was left to raise us boys on her own. When he came home that time, the city patrols did a routine inspection of our house, then dragged Dad off to the local police headquarters for questioning. They'd found something suspicious, I guess.

The police brought him back with two broken arms, his face bloody and bruised.

Several nights later, I dipped a ball of crushed ice into a can of gasoline, let the oil coat the ice in a thick layer, and lit it. Then I launched it with a slingshot through the window of our local police headquarters. I remember the fire trucks that came whizzing around the corner shortly thereafter, and the charred remains of the police building's west wing. They never found out who did it, and I never came forward. There was, after all, no evidence. I had committed my first perfect crime.

My mother used to hope that I would rise up from my humble roots. Become someone successful, or even famous.

I'm famous all right, but I don't think it's what she had in mind.

It's nightfall again, a good forty-eight hours since the soldiers marked my mother's door.

I wait in the shadows of a back alley one block from the Los Angeles Central Hospital and watch its staff spill in and out of the main entrance. It's a cloudy night with no moon, and I can't even make out the crumbling Bank Tower sign at the top of the building. Electric lights shine from each floor—a luxury only government buildings and the elite's homes can afford. Military jeeps stack up along the street as they wait for approval to enter the underground parking lots. Someone checks them for proper IDs. I keep still, my

eyes fixed on the entrance.

I look pretty awesome tonight. I'm wearing my good pair of shoes—boots made of dark leather worn soft over time, with strong laces and steel toes. Bought them with 150 Notes from our stash. I've hidden a knife flat against the sole of each boot. When I shift my feet, I can feel the cool metal against my skin. My black trousers are tucked into my boots and I carry a pair of gloves and a black handkerchief in my pockets. A dark, long-sleeved shirt is tied around my waist. My hair hangs loose down my shoulders. This time I've sprayed my white-blond strands a deep black, as if I'd dipped them in crude oil. Earlier in the day, Tess had traded five Notes for a bucket of pygmy pig's blood from the back alley of a kitchen. My arms, stomach, and face are smeared with it. I've also streaked mud on my cheeks, for good measure.

The hospital spans the first twelve floors of the building, but I'm only interested in the one without windows. That's the third floor, a laboratory, where the blood samples and medicines will be. From the outside, the third floor is completely hidden behind elaborate stone carvings and worn Republic flags. Behind the facade lies a vast floor with no halls and no doors—just a gigantic room, doctors and nurses behind white masks, test tubes and pipettes, incubators and gurneys. I know this because I've been there before. I was there the day I failed my Trial, the day I was supposed to die.

My eyes scan the side of the tower. Sometimes I can break into a building by running it from the outside, if there are balconies to leap from and window ledges to balance on. I once scaled a four-story building in less than five seconds. But this tower is too smooth, with no footholds. I'll have to reach the lab from inside. I shiver a little even in the warmth and wish I'd asked Tess to come with me. But two trespassers are easier to catch than one. Besides, it's not her family who needs medicine. I check to make sure I've tucked my pendant beneath my shirt.

A lone medic truck pulls up behind the military jeeps. Several soldiers climb out and greet the nurses while others unpack the truck's boxes. The leader of the group is a young, dark-haired man dressed all in black, except for two rows of silver buttons that line his officer jacket. I strain to hear what he's saying to one of the nurses.

“—from around the lake's edge.” The man tightens his gloves. I catch a glimpse of the gun at his belt. “My men will be at the entrances tonight.”

“Yes, Captain,” the nurse says.

The man tips his cap to her. “My name's Metias. If you have any questions, come see me.”

I wait until the soldiers have spread out around the hospital's perimeter and the man named Metias has immersed himself in conversation with two of his men. Several more medic trucks come and go, dropping off soldiers, some with broken limbs, some with gashes on their heads or lacerations on their legs. I take a deep breath, then step out of the shadows and stumble toward the hospital's entrance.

A nurse spots me first, just outside the main doors. Her eyes dart to the blood on my arms and face. “Can I be admitted, cousin?” I call to her. I wince in imaginary pain. “Is there still room tonight? I can pay.”

She looks at me without pity before she returns to scribbling on a notepad. Guess she doesn't appreciate the “cousin” affection. An ID tag dangles from her neck. “What happened?” she asks.

I double over when I reach her and lean on my knees. “Was in a fight,” I say, panting. “I think I got

stabbed.”

The nurse doesn’t look at me again. She finishes writing and then nods at one of the guards. “Pat him down.”

I stay where I am as two soldiers check me for weapons. I yelp on cue when they touch my arms or stomach. They don’t find the knives tucked in my boots. They do take the little pouch of Notes tied to my belt, my payment for entering the hospital. Of course.

If I was a goddy rich sector boy, I’d be admitted without charge. Or they’d send a doctor for free straight up to where I live.

When the soldiers give the nurse a thumbs-up, she points me toward the entrance. “Waiting room’s on the left. Have a seat.”

I thank her and stumble toward the sliding doors. The man named Metias watches me as I pass. He’s listening patiently to one of his soldiers, but I see him study my face as if out of habit. I make a mental note of his face too.

The hospital is ghostly white on the inside. To my left I see the waiting room, just like the nurse said, a huge space packed with people sporting injuries of all shapes and sizes. Many of them moan in pain—one person lies unmoving on the floor. I don’t want to guess how long some of them have been here, or how much they had to pay to get in. I note where all the soldiers are standing—two by the secretary’s window, two by the doctor’s door far in the distance, several near the elevators, each wearing ID tags—and then I drop my eyes to the floor. I shuffle to the closest chair and sit. For once, my bad knee helps my disguise. I keep my hands pressed against my side for good measure.

I count ten minutes off in my head, long enough so that new patients have arrived in the waiting room and the soldiers are less interested in me. Then I stand up, pretend to stumble, and lurch toward the closest soldier. His hand reflexively moves to his gun.

“Sit back down,” he says.

I trip and fall against him. “I need the bathroom,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. My hands tremble as I grab his black robes for balance. The soldier looks at me in disgust while some of the others snicker. I see his fingers creep closer to his gun’s trigger, but one of the other soldiers shakes his head. No shooting in the hospital. The soldier pushes me away and points toward the end of the hall with his gun.

“Over there,” he snaps. “Wipe some of that filth off your face. And if you touch me again, I’ll fill you with bullets.”

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