


M A R I E L U

NEW YORK TIMES

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF LEGEND

THE
YOUNG
ELITES



Also by Marie Lu
LEGEND
PRODIGY
CHAMPION

THE
YOUNG
ELITES



M A R I E L U

G. P. Putnam's Sons

An Imprint of Penguin Group (USA)

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10014



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China
penguin.com
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-698-17172-5

Version_3

To my aunt, Yang Lin, for all that you do

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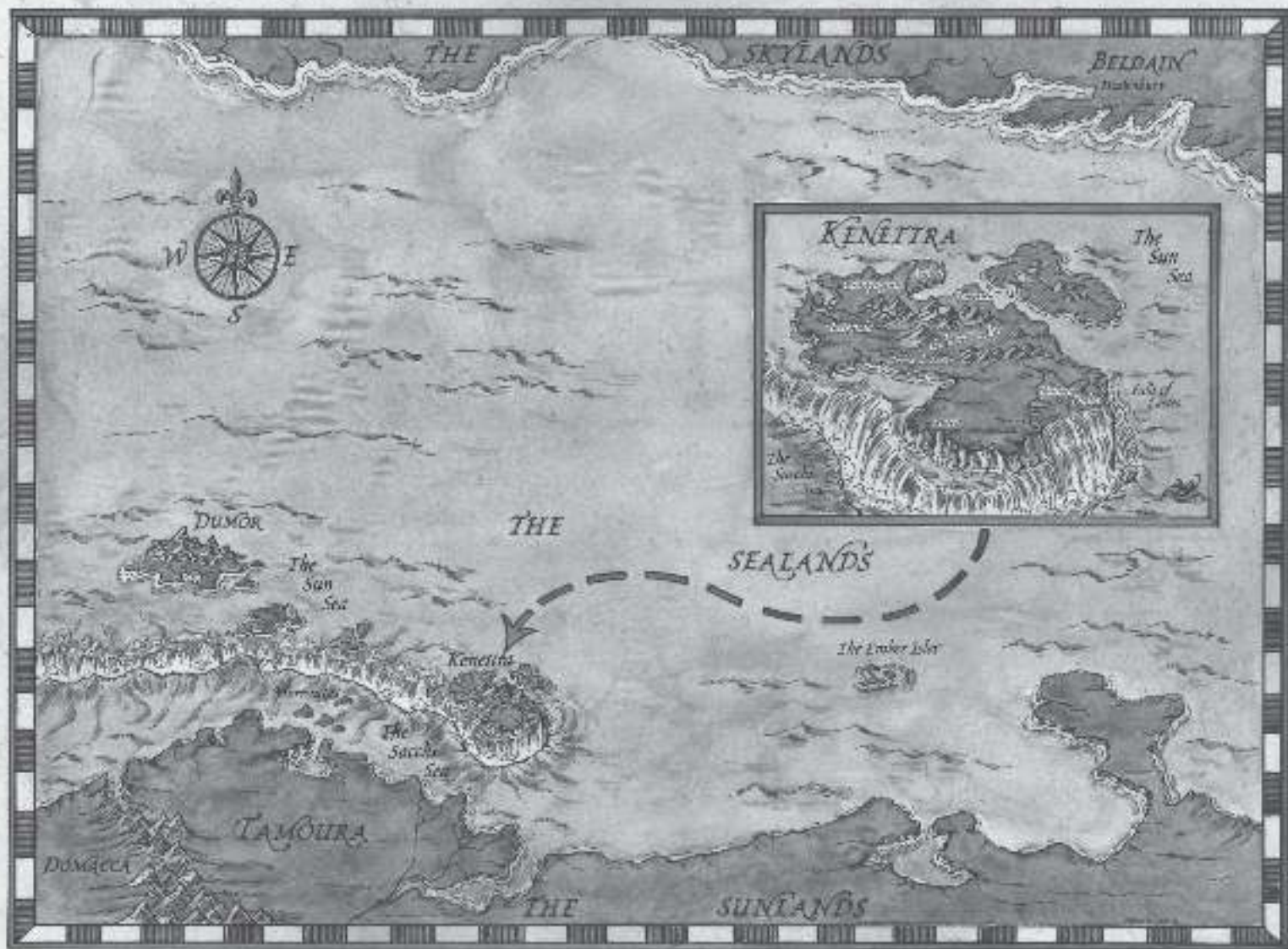
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Four hundred have died here. I pray that yours are faring better. The city has canceled celebrations of the Spring Moons on quarantine orders, and the typical masquerades have become as scarce as the meat and eggs.

Most of the children in our ward are emerging from their illness with rather peculiar side effects. One young girl's hair turned from gold to black overnight. A six-year-old boy has scars running down his face without ever having been touched. The other doctors are quite terrified. Please let me know if you see a similar trend, sir. I sense something unusual shifting in the wind, and am most anxious to study this effect.

Letter from Dtt. Siriano Baglio to Dtt. Marino Di Segna

31 Abrie, 1348

Southeastern districts of Dalia, Kenettra

13 JUNO, 1361

City of Dalia
Southern Kenettra
The Sealands

Some hate us, think us outlaws to hang at the gallows.
Some fear us, think us demons to burn at the stake.
Some worship us, think us children of the gods.
But *all* know us.
—*Unknown source on the Young Elites*

Adelina Amouteru

I'm going to die tomorrow morning.
That's what the Inquisitors tell me, anyway, when they visit my cell. I've been in here for weeks—I know this only because I've been counting the number of times my meals come.
One day. Two days.
Four days. A week.
Two weeks.
Three.
I stopped counting after that. The hours run together, an endless train of nothingness, filled with different slants of light and the shiver of cold, wet stone, the pieces of my sanity, the disjointed whispers of my thoughts.
But tomorrow, my time ends. They're going to burn me at the stake in the central market square, for all to see. The Inquisitors tell me a crowd has already begun to gather outside.
I sit straight, the way I was always taught. My shoulders don't touch the wall. It takes me a while to realize that I'm rocking back and forth, perhaps to stay sane, perhaps just to keep warm. I hum an old lullaby too, one my mother used to sing to me when I was very little. I do my best to imitate her voice, a sweet and delicate sound, but my notes come out cracked and hoarse, nothing like what I remember. I stop trying.
It's so damp down here. Water trickles from above my door and has painted a groove into the stone wall, discolored green and black with grime. My hair is matted, and my nails are caked with blood and dirt. I want to scrub them clean. Is it strange that all I can think about on my last day is how filthy I am? If my little sister were here, she'd murmur something reassuring and soak my hands in warm water.
I can't stop wondering if she's okay. She hasn't come to see me.

I lower my head into my hands. How did I end up like this?

But I know how, of course. It's because I'm a murderer.



It happened several weeks earlier, on a stormy night at my father's villa. I couldn't sleep. Rain fell and lightning reflected off the window of my bedchamber. But even the storm couldn't drown out the conversation from downstairs. My father and his guest were talking about me, of course. My father's late-night conversations were always about me.

I was the talk of my family's eastern Dalia district. *Adelina Amouteru?* they all said. *Oh, she's one of those who survived the fever a decade ago. Poor thing. Her father will have a hard time marrying her off.*

No one meant because I wasn't *beautiful*. I'm not being arrogant, only honest. My nursemaid once told me that any man who'd ever laid eyes on my late mother was now waiting curiously to see how her two daughters would blossom into women. My younger sister, Violetta, was only fourteen and already the budding image of perfection. Unlike me, Violetta had inherited our mother's rosy temperament and innocent charm. She'd kiss my cheeks and laugh and twirl and dream. When we were very small, we'd sit together in the garden and she would braid periwinkles into my hair. I would sing to her. She would make up games.

We loved each other, once.

My father would bring Violetta jewels and watch her clap her hands in delight as he strung them around her neck. He would buy her exquisite dresses that arrived in port from the farthest ends of the world. He would tell her stories and kiss her good night. He would remind her how beautiful she was, how far she would raise our family's standing with a good marriage, how she could attract princes and kings if she desired. Violetta already had a line of suitors eager to secure her hand, and my father would tell each of them to be patient, that they could not marry her until she turned seventeen. *What a caring father*, everyone thought.

Of course, Violetta didn't escape *all* of my father's cruelty. He purposely bought her dresses that were tight and painful. He enjoyed seeing her feet bleed from the hard, jeweled shoes he encouraged her to wear.

Still. He loved her, in his own way. It's different, you see, because she was his investment.

I was another story. Unlike my sister, blessed with shining black hair to complement her dark eyes and rich olive skin, I am flawed. And by flawed, I mean this: When I was four years old, the blood fever reached its peak and everyone in Kenetra barred their homes in a state of panic. No use. My mother, sister, and I all came down with the fever. You could always tell who was infected—strange, mottled patterns showed up on our skin, our hair and lashes flitted from one color to another, and pinpoints of blood-tinged tears ran from our eyes. I still remember the smell of sickness in our house, the burn of brandy on my lips. My left eye became so swollen that a doctor had to remove it. He did it with a red-hot knife and a pair of burning tongs.

So, yes. You could say I am flawed.

Marked. *A malfetto*.

While my sister emerged from the fever unscathed, I now have only a scar where my left eye used to be. While my sister's hair remained a glossy black, the strands of *my* hair and lashes turned a strange, ever-shifting silver, so that in the sunlight they look close to white, like a winter moon, and in the dark they change to a deep gray, shimmering silk spun from metal.

At least I fared better than Mother did. Mother, like every infected adult, died. I remember crying in her empty bedchamber each night, wishing the fever had taken Father instead.

My father and his mysterious guest were still talking downstairs. My curiosity got the best of me and I swung my legs over the side of my bed, crept toward my chamber door on light feet, and opened it a crack. Dim candlelight illuminated the hall outside. Below, my father sat across from a tall, broad-shouldered man with graying hair at his temples, his hair tied back at the nape of his neck in a short, customary tail, the velvet of his coat shining black and orange in the light. My father's coat was velvet too, but the material was worn thin. Before the blood fever crippled our country, his clothes would have been as luxurious as his guest's. But now? It's hard to keep good trade relations when you have a *malfetto* daughter tainting your family's name.

Both men drank wine. Father must be in a negotiating mood tonight, I thought, to have tapped one of our last good casks.

I opened the door a little wider, crept out into the hall, and sat, knees to my chin, along the stairs. My favorite spot. Sometimes I'd pretend I was a queen, and that I stood here on a palace balcony looking down at my groveling subjects. Now I took up my usual crouch and listened closely to the conversation downstairs. As always, I made sure my hair covered my scar. My hand rested awkwardly on the staircase. My father had broken my fourth finger, and it never healed straight. Even now, I could not curl it properly around the railing.

"I don't mean to insult you, Master Amouteru," the man said to my father. "You were a merchant of good reputation. But that was a long time ago. I don't want to be seen doing business with a *malfetto* family—bad luck, you know. There's little you can offer me."

My father kept a smile on his face. The forced smile of a business transaction. "There are still lenders in town who work with me. I can pay you back as soon as the port traffic picks up. Tamouran silks and spices are in high demand this year—"

The man looked unimpressed. "The king's dumb as a dog," he replied. "And dogs are no good at running countries. The ports will be slow for years to come, I'm afraid, and with the new tax laws, your debts will only grow. How can you possibly repay me?"

My father leaned back in his chair, sipped his wine, and sighed. "There must be something I can offer you."

The man studied his glass of wine thoughtfully. The harsh lines of his face made me shiver. "Tell me about Adelina. How many offers have you received?"

My father blushed. As if the wine hadn't left him red enough already. "Offers for Adelina's hand have been slow to come."

The man smiled. "None for your little abomination, then."

My father's lips tightened. "Not as many as I'd like," he admitted.

"What do the others say about her?"

"The other suitors?" My father rubbed a hand across his face. Admitting all my flaws embarrassed him. "They say the same thing. It always comes back to her . . . markings. What can I tell you, sir? No one wants a *malfetto* bearing his children."

The man listened, making sympathetic sounds.

"Haven't you heard the latest news from Estenzia? Two noblemen walking home from the opera were found burned to a crisp." My father had quickly changed tack, hoping now that the stranger would take pity on him. "Scorch marks on the wall, their bodies melted from the inside out. Everyone is frightened of *malfettos*, sir. Even *you* are reluctant to do business with me. Please. I'm helpless."

I knew what my father spoke of. He was referring to very specific *malfettos*—a rare handful of

children who came out of the blood fever with scars far darker than mine, frightening abilities that don't belong in this world. Everyone talked about these *malfettos* in hushed whispers; most feared them and called them demons. But *I* secretly held them in awe. People said they could conjure fire out of thin air. Could call the wind. Could control beasts. Could disappear. Could kill in the blink of an eye.

If you searched the black market, you'd find flat wooden engravings for sale, elaborately carved with their names, forbidden collectibles that supposedly meant *they* would protect you—or, at the least, that they would not hurt you. No matter the opinion, everyone knew their names. *The Reaper. Magiano. The Windwalker. The Alchemist.*

The Young Elites.

The man shook his head. "I've heard that even the suitors who refuse Adelina still gape at her, sic with desire." He paused. "True, her markings are . . . unfortunate. But a beautiful girl is a beautiful girl." Something strange glinted in his eyes. My stomach twisted at the sight, and I tucked my chin tighter against my knees, as if for protection.

My father looked confused. He sat up taller in his chair and pointed his wineglass at the man. "Are you making me an offer for Adelina's hand?"

The man reached into his coat to produce a small brown pouch, then tossed it onto the table. It landed with a heavy clink. As a merchant's daughter, one becomes well acquainted with money—and could tell from the sound and from the size of the coins that the purse was filled to the brim with gold talents. I stifled a gasp.

As my father gaped at the contents, the man leaned back and thoughtfully sipped his wine. "I know of the estate taxes you haven't yet paid to the crown. I know of your new debts. And I will cover all of them in exchange for your daughter Adelina."

My father frowned. "But you have a wife."

"I do, yes." The man paused, then added, "I never said I wanted to *marry* her. I am merely proposing to take her off your hands."

I felt the blood drain from my face. "You . . . want her as your mistress, then?" Father asked.

The man shrugged. "No nobleman in his right mind would make a wife of such a marked girl—she could not possibly attend public affairs on my arm. I have a reputation to uphold, Master Amouteru. But I think we can work this out. She will have a home, and you will have your gold." He raised a hand. "One condition. I want her *now*, not in a year. I've no patience to wait until she turns seventeen."

A strange buzzing filled my ears. *No* boy or girl was allowed to give themselves to another until they turned seventeen. This man was asking my father to break the law. To defy the gods.

My father raised an eyebrow, but he didn't argue. "A mistress," he finally said. "Sir, you must know what this will do to my reputation. I might as well sell her to a brothel."

"And how is your reputation faring now? How much damage has she already done to your professional name?" He leaned forward. "Surely you're not insinuating my home is nothing more than a common brothel. At least your Adelina would belong to a noble household."

As I watched my father sip his wine, my hands began to tremble. "A mistress," he repeated.

"Think quickly, Master Amouteru. I won't offer this again."

"Give me a moment," my father anxiously reassured him.

I don't know how long the silence lasted, but when he finally spoke again, I jumped at the sound. "Adelina could be a good match for you. You're wise to see it. She is lovely, even with her markings and . . . spirited."

The man swirled his wine. "And I will tame her. Do we have a deal?"

I closed my eye. My world swam in darkness—I imagined the man’s face against my own, his hand on my waist, his sickening smile. Not even a wife. A *mistress*. The thought made me shrink from the stairs. Through a haze of numbness, I watched my father shake hands and clink wineglasses with the man. “A deal, then,” he said to the man. He looked relieved of a great burden. “Tomorrow, she’s yours. Just . . . keep this private. I don’t want Inquisitors knocking on my door and fining me for giving her away too young.”

“She’s a *malfetto*,” the man replied. “No one will care.” He tightened his gloves and rose from his chair in one elegant move. My father bowed his head. “I’ll send a carriage for her in the morning.”

As my father escorted him to our door, I stole away into my bedchamber and stood there in the darkness, shaking. Why did my father’s words still stab me in the heart? I should be used to it by now. What had he once told me? *My poor Adelina*, he’d said, caressing my cheek with a thumb. *It’s a shame. Look at you. Who will ever want a malfetto like you?*

It will be all right, I tried telling myself. *At least you can leave your father behind. It won’t be so bad.* But even as I thought this, I felt a weight settle in my chest. I knew the truth. *Malfettos* were unwanted. Bad luck. And, now more than ever, feared. I would be tossed aside the instant the man tired of me.

My gaze wandered around my bedchamber, settling finally on my window. My heartbeat stilled for a moment. Rain drew angry lines down the glass, but through it I could still see the deep blue cityscape of Dalia, the rows of domed brick towers and cobblestone alleys, the marble temples, the docks where the edge of the city sloped gently into the sea, where on clear nights gondolas with golden lanterns would glide across the water, where the waterfalls that bordered southern Kenettra thundered. Tonight, the ocean churned in fury, and white foam crashed against the city’s horizon, flooding the canals.

I continued staring out the rain-slashed window for a long while.

Tonight. Tonight was the night.

I hurried to my bed, bent down, and dragged out a sack I’d made with a bedsheet. Inside it were fine silverware, forks and knives, candelabras, engraved plates, anything I could sell for food and shelter. That’s another thing to love about me. I steal. I’d been stealing from around our house for months, stashing things under my bed in preparation for the day when I couldn’t stand to live with my father any longer. It wasn’t much, but I calculated that if I sold all of it to the right dealers, I might end up with a few gold talents. Enough to get by, at least, for several months.

Then I rushed to my chest of clothes, pulled out an armful of silks, and hurried about my chamber to collect any jewelry I could find. My silver bracelets. A pearl necklace inherited from my mother that my sister did not want. A pair of sapphire earrings. I grabbed two long strips of silk cloth that make up a Tamouran headwrap. I would need to cover up my silver hair while on the run. I worked in feverish concentration. I added the jewelry and clothes carefully into the sack, hid it behind my bed, and pulled on my soft leather riding boots.

I settled down to wait.

An hour later, when my father retired to bed and the house stilled, I grabbed the sack. I hurried to my window and pressed my hand against it. Gingerly, I pushed the left pane aside and propped it open. The storm had calmed some, but rain still came down steadily enough to mute the sound of my footsteps. I looked over my shoulder one last time at my bedchamber door, as if I expected my father to walk in. *Where are you going, Adelina?* he’d say. *There’s nothing out there for a girl like you.*

I shook his voice from my head. Let him find me gone in the morning, his best chance at settling his debts. I took a deep breath, then began to climb through the open window. Cold rain lashed at my

arms, prickling my skin.

“Adelina?”

I whirled around at the voice. Behind me, the silhouette of a girl stood in my doorway—my sister, Violetta, still rubbing sleep from her eyes. She stared at the open window and the sack on my shoulders, and for a terrifying moment, I thought she might raise her voice and shout for Father.

But Violetta watched me quietly. I felt a pang of guilt, even as the sight of her sent a flash of resentment through my heart. Fool. Why should I have felt sorry for someone who had watched me suffer so many times before? *I love you, Adelina*, she used to say, when we were small. *Papa loves you too. He just doesn't know how to show it.* Why did I pity the sister who was valued?

Still, I found myself rushing to her on silent feet, taking one of her hands in mine, and putting a slender finger up to her lips. She gave me a worried look. “You should go back to bed,” she whispered. In the dim glow of night, I could see the gloss of her dark, marble eyes, the thinness of her delicate skin. Her beauty was so pure. “You’ll get in trouble if Father finds you.”

I squeezed her hand tighter, then let our foreheads touch. We stayed still for a long moment, and it seemed as if we were children again, each leaning against the other. Usually Violetta would pull away from me, knowing that Father did not like to see us close. This time, though, she clung to me. As if she knew that tonight was something different. “Violetta,” I whispered, “do you remember the time you lied to Father about who broke one of his best vases?”

My sister nodded against my shoulder.

“I need you to do that for me again.” I pulled far away enough to tuck her hair behind her ear. “Don’t say a word.”

She didn’t reply; instead, she swallowed and looked down the hall toward our father’s chambers. She did not hate him in the same way that I did, and the thought of going against his teaching—that she was too good for me, that to love me was a foolish thing—filled her eyes with guilt. Finally, she nodded. I felt as if a mantle had been lifted from my shoulders, like she was letting go of me. “Be careful out there. Stay safe. Good luck.”

We exchanged a final look. *You could come with me*, I thought. *But I know you won't. You're too scared. Go back to smiling at the dresses that Father buys for you.* Still, my heart softened for a moment. Violetta was always the good girl. She didn’t choose any of this. *I do wish you a happy life. I hope you fall in love and marry well. Good-bye, sister.* I didn’t dare wait for her to say anything else. Instead I turned away, walked to the window, and stepped onto the second-floor ledge.

I nearly slipped. The rain had turned everything slick, and my riding boots fought for grip against the narrow ledge. Some silverware fell out of my sack, clattering on the ground below. *Don't look down.* I made my way along the ledge until I reached a balcony, and there I slid down until I dangled with nothing but my trembling hands holding me in place. I closed my eye and let go.

My legs crumpled beneath me when I landed. The impact knocked the breath from my chest, and for a moment I could only lie there in front of our house, drenched in rain, muscles aching, fighting for air. Strands of my hair clung to my face. I wiped them out of my way and crawled onto my hands and knees. The rain added a reflective sheen to everything around me, as if this were all some nightmare I couldn’t wake from. My focus narrowed. I needed to get out of here before my father discovered me gone. Finally, I scrambled to my feet and ran, dazed, toward our stables. The horses paced uneasily when I walked in, but I untied my favorite stallion, whispered some soothing words to him, and saddled him.

We raced into the storm.

I pushed him hard until we had left my father’s villa behind and entered the edge of Dalia’s

marketplace. The market was completely abandoned and flooded with puddles—I'd never been out in the town at an hour like this, and the emptiness of a place usually swarming with people unnerved me. My stallion snorted uneasily at the downpour and took several steps backward. His hooves sank into the mud. I swung down from the saddle, ran my hands along his neck in an attempt to calm him, and tried to pull him forward.

Then I heard it. The sound of galloping hooves behind me.

I froze in my tracks. At first it seemed distant—almost entirely muted by the storm—but then, an instant later, it turned deafening. I trembled where I stood. *Father*. I knew he was coming; it had to be him. My hands stopped caressing the stallion's neck and instead gripped his soaked mane for dear life. Had Violetta told my father after all? Perhaps he'd heard the sound of the silverware falling from the roof.

And before I could think anything else, I saw him, a sight that sent terror rushing through my blood—my father, his eyes flashing, materializing through the fog of a wet midnight. In all my years, I'd never before seen such anger on his face.

I rushed to jump back on my stallion, but I wasn't fast enough. One moment my father's horse was bearing down on us, and the next, he was *here*, his boots splashing into a puddle and his coat whipping out behind him. His hand closed around my arm like an iron shackle.

"What are you doing, Adelina?" he asked, his voice eerily calm.

I tried in vain to escape his grasp, but his hand only gripped tighter until I gasped from the pain. My father pulled hard—I stumbled, lost my balance, and fell against him. Mud splashed my face. All I could hear was the roar of rain, the darkness of his voice.

"Get up, you ungrateful little thief," he hissed in my ear, yanking me forcefully up. Then his voice turned soothing. "Come now, my love. You're making a mess of yourself. Let me take you home."

I glared at him and pulled my arm away with all my strength. His grip slipped against the slick of rain—my skin twisted painfully against his, and for an instant, I was free.

But then I felt his hand close around a fistful of my hair. I shrieked, my hands grasping at the empty air. "So ill-tempered. Why can't you be more like your sister?" he murmured, shaking his head and hauling me off toward his horse. My arm hit the sack I'd tied to my horse's saddle, and the silverware rained down around us with a thunderous clatter, glinting in the night. "Where were you planning on going? Who else would want *you*? You'll never get a better offer than this. Do you realize how much humiliation I've suffered, dealing with the marriage refusals that come your way? Do you know how hard it is for me, apologizing for you?"

I screamed. I screamed with everything I had, hoping that my cries would wake the people sleeping in the buildings all around me, that they would witness this scene unfolding. Would they care? My father tightened his grip on my hair and pulled harder.

"Come home with me now," he said, pausing for a moment to stare at me. Rain ran down his cheeks. "Good girl. Your father knows best."

I gritted my teeth and stared back. "I hate you," I whispered.

My father struck me viciously across the face. Light flashed across my vision. I stumbled, then collapsed in the mud. My father still clung to my hair. He pulled so hard that I felt strands being torn from my scalp. *I've gone too far*, I suddenly thought through a haze of terror. *I've pushed him too much*. The world swam in an ocean of blood and rain. "You're a disgrace," he whispered in my ear, filling it with his smooth, icy rage. "You're going in the morning, and so help me, I'll *kill* you before you can ruin this deal."

Something snapped inside me. My lips curled into a snarl.

A rush of energy, a gathering of blinding light and darkest wind. Suddenly I could see everything—my father motionless before me, his snarling face a hairsbreadth away from my own, our surrounding illuminated by moonlight so brilliant that it washed the world of color, turning everything black and white. Water droplets hung in the air. A million glistening threads connected everything to everything else.

Something deep within me told me to pull on the threads. The world around us froze, and then, as my mind had crept out of my body and into the ground, an illusion of towering black shapes surged up from the earth, their bodies crooked and jolting, their eyes bloody and fixed straight on my father, their fanged mouths so wide that they stretched all across their silhouetted faces, splitting their heads in two. My father's eyes widened, then darted in bewilderment at the phantoms staggering toward him. He released me. I fell to the ground and crawled away from him as fast as I could. The black, ghostly shapes continued to lurch forward. I cowered in the midst of them, both helpless and powerful, looking on as they passed me by.

I am Adelina Amouteru, the phantoms whispered to my father, speaking my most frightening thoughts in a chorus of voices, dripping with hatred. My hatred. I belong to no one. On this night, I swear to you that I will rise above everything you've ever taught me. I will become a force that this world has never known. I will come into such power that none will dare hurt me again.

They gathered closer to him. *Wait*, I wanted to cry out, even as a strange exhilaration flowed through me. *Wait, stop*. But the phantoms ignored me. My father screamed, swatting desperately at their bony, outstretched fingers, and then he turned around and ran. Blindly. He smashed into his horse and fell backward into the mud. The horse shrieked, the whites of its eyes rolling. It reared on its mighty legs, pawing for an instant at the air—

And then down came its hooves. Onto my father's chest.

My father's screams cut off abruptly. His body convulsed.

The phantoms vanished instantly, as if they were never there in the first place. The rain suddenly grew heavy again, lightning streaked across the sky, and thunder shook my bones. The horse untangled itself from my father's broken body, trampling the corpse further. Then it tossed its head and galloped into the rain. Heat and ice coursed through my veins; my muscles throbbed. I lay there in the mud, trembling, disbelieving, my gaze fixed in horror on the sight of the body lying a few feet away. My breaths came in ragged sobs, and my scalp burned in agony. Blood trickled down my face. The smell of iron filled my nose—I couldn't tell whether it came from my own wounds or my father's. I waited, bracing myself for the shapes to reappear and turn their wrath on me, but it never happened.

"I didn't mean it," I whispered, unsure whom I was talking to. My gaze darted up to the windows, terrified that people would be watching from every building, but no one was there. The storm drowned me out. I dragged myself away from my father's body. *This is all wrong*.

But that was a lie. I knew it, even then. Do you see how I take after my father? I had enjoyed every moment. "I didn't mean it!" I shrieked again, trying to drown out my inner voice. But my words only came out in a thin, reedy jumble. "I just wanted to escape—I just wanted—to get away—I didn't—I don't—"

I have no idea how long I stayed there. All I know is that, eventually, I staggered to my feet. I picked up the scattered silverware with trembling fingers, retied the sack, and pulled myself onto my stallion's saddle. Then I rode away, leaving behind the carnage I'd created. I ran from the father I'd murdered. I escaped so quickly that I never stopped to wonder again whether or not someone had been watching me from a window.

I rode for days. Along the road, I bartered my stolen silverware to a kind innkeeper, a sympathetic

farmer, a softhearted baker, until I'd collected a small pouch of talents that would keep me in bread until I reached the next city. My goal: Estenzia, the northern port capital, the crowning jewel of Kenetra, the city of ten thousand ships. A city large enough to be teeming with *malfettos*. I'd be safe there. I'd be so far away from all of this that no one would ever find me.

But on the fifth day, my exhaustion finally caught up to me—I was no soldier, and I'd never ridden like this before. I crumpled in a broken, delirious heap before the gates of a farmhouse.

A woman found me. She was dressed in clean brown robes, and I remember being so taken by her motherly beauty that my heart immediately warmed to her in trust. I reached a shaking hand up to her as if to touch her skin.

“Please,” I whispered through cracked lips. “I need a place to rest.”

The woman took pity on me. She cupped my face between her smooth, cool hands, studied my markings for a long moment, and nodded. “Come with me, child,” she said. She led me to the loft of their barn, showing me where I could sleep, and after a meal of bread and hard cheese, I immediately fell unconscious, safe in the knowledge of my shelter.

In the morning, I woke to rough hands dragging me from the hay.

I startled, trembling, and looked up to see the faces of two Inquisition soldiers staring down at me in their white armor and robes lined with gold, their expressions hard as stone. *The king's peacekeepers*. In desperation, I tried to summon the same power I'd felt before my father died, but this time the energy did not course through me, and the world did not turn black and white, and no phantoms rose from the ground.

There was a girl standing beside the Inquisitors. I stared at her for a long moment before I finally believed the sight. Violetta. My younger sister. She looked as if she'd been crying, and dark circles under her eyes marred her perfection. There was a bruise on her cheek, turning blue and black.

“Is this your sister?” one of the Inquisitors asked her.

Violetta looked silently at them, refusing to acknowledge the question—but Violetta had never been able to lie well, and the recognition was obvious in her eyes.

The Inquisitors shoved her aside and focused on me. “Adelina Amouteru,” the other Inquisitor said as they hauled me to my feet and bound my hands tightly behind my back. “By order of the king, you are under arrest—”

“It was an accident”—I gasped in protest—“the rain, the horse—”

The Inquisitor ignored me. “For the murder of your father, Sir Martino Amouteru.”

“You said if I spoke for her, you would let her go,” Violetta snapped at them. “I spoke for her! She's innocent!”

They paused for a moment as my sister clung to my arm. She looked at me, her eyes full of tears. “I'm so sorry, mi Adelinetta,” she whispered in anguish. “I'm so sorry. They were on your trail—I never meant to help them—”

But you did. I turned away from her, but I still caught myself gripping her arm in return until the Inquisitors wrenched us apart. I wanted to say to her, *Save me. You have to find a way.* But I couldn't find my voice. Me, me, me. Perhaps I was as selfish as my father.

That was weeks ago.

Now you know how I ended up here, shackled to the wall of a wet dungeon cell with no windows and no light, without a trial, without a soul in the world. This is how I first came to know of my

abilities, how I turned to face the end of my life with the blood of my father staining my hands. His ghost keeps me company. Every time I wake up from a feverish dream, I see him standing in the corner of my cell, laughing at me. *You tried to escape from me*, he says, *but I found you. You have lost and I have won.* I tell him that I'm glad he's dead. I tell him to go away. But he stays.

It doesn't matter, anyway. I'm going to die tomorrow morning.

Enzo Valenciano

The dove arrives late in the night. It lands on his gloved hand. He turns away from the balcony and brings it inside. There, he removes the tiny parchment from the dove's leg, caresses the bird's neck with one blood-flecked glove, and unfurls the message. It is written in a beautiful, flowing script.

I've found her. Come to Dalia at once.

Your faithful Messenger

He remains expressionless, but he folds the parchment and tucks it smoothly inside his armguard. In the night, his eyes are nothing but darkness and shadow.

Time to move.

They think they can keep me out, but it does not matter how many locks they hang at the entrance.

There is *always* another door.

—The Thief Who Stole the Stars, by *Tristan Chirsley*

Adelina Amouteru

Footsteps in the dark corridor. They stop right outside of my cell, and through the gap in the door's bottom, an Inquisitor slides in a pan of gruel. It careers into a black puddle in the cell's corner, and dirty water splashes into the food. If you can call it such a thing.

"Your final meal," he announces through the door. I can tell that he's already walking off as he says, "Better eat up, little *malfetto*. We'll come for you within the hour."

His footsteps fade, then disappear altogether.

From the cell next to mine, a thin voice calls out for me. "Girl," it whispers, making me shiver. "Girl." When I don't respond, he asks, "Is it true? They say you're one of them. You're a Young Elite."

Silence.

"Well?" he asks. "Are you?"

I stay quiet.

He laughs, the sound of a prisoner locked away for so long that his mind has begun to rot. "The Inquisitors say you summoned the powers of a demon. *Did* you? Were you twisted by the blood fever?" His voice breaks off to hum a few lines of some folk song I don't recognize. "Maybe you can get me out of here. What do you think? Break me out?" His words dissolve again into a fit of laughter.

I ignore him as best as I can. A Young Elite. The idea is so ridiculous, I feel a sudden urge to laugh along with my crazy dungeon mate.

Still, I try once again to summon whatever strange illusion I'd seen that night. Again, I fail.

Hours pass. Actually, I have no idea how long it's been. All I know is that eventually I hear the footsteps of several soldiers coming down the winding stone steps. The sound grows nearer, until there is the scrape of a key in my cell's door and the creak of a rusty hinge. *They're here.*

Two Inquisitors enter my cell. Their faces are hidden in shadows beneath their hoods. I scramble away from them, but they grab me and pull me to my feet. They unlock my shackles, letting them fall to the floor.

I struggle with what little strength I have left. *This isn't real. This is a nightmare.* This isn't a nightmare. This is real.

They drag me up the stairs. One level, two levels, three. That's how far underground I was. Here, the Inquisition Tower comes into better view—the floors change from wet, moldy stone into polished marble, the walls decorated with pillars and tapestries and the Inquisition's circular symbol, the eternal sun. Now I can finally hear the commotion coming from outside. Shouts, chanting. My heart leaps into my throat, and suddenly I push back with my feet as hard as I can, my ruined riding boots squeaking in vain against the floor.

The Inquisitors yank harder on my arms, forcing me to stumble forward. "Keep moving, girl," one of them snaps at me, faceless under his hood.

Then we're stepping out of the tower, and for an instant, the world vanishes into blinding white. I squint. We must be in the central market square. Through my tearing vision, I make out an ocean of people, all of whom have come out to see me executed. The sky is a beautiful, annoying blue, the clouds blinding in their brightness. Off in the distance, a stake of black iron looms in the center of a raised wooden platform, upon which a line of Inquisitors wait. Even from here, I can see their circular emblems shining on their breastplates, their gloved hands resting on their sword hilts. I try harder to drag my feet.

Boos and angry shouts come from the crowd as the Inquisitors lead me closer to the execution platform. Some throw rotten fruit at me, while others spit insults and curses at my face. They wear rags, torn shoes, and dirty frocks. So many poor and desperate, come to see me suffer in order to distract themselves from their own hungry lives. I keep my gaze down. The world is a blur, and I cannot think. Before me, the stake that looked so far away now draws steadily nearer.

"Demon!" someone yells at me.

I'm hit in the face with something small and sharp. A pebble, I think. "She's a creature of evil!"

"Bringer of bad fortune!"

"Monster!"

"Abomination!"

I keep my eye closed as tightly as I can, but in my mind, everyone in the square looks like my father and they all have his voice. *I hate you all.* I imagine my hands at their throats, choking, silencing them, one by one. I want peace and quiet. Something stirs inside me—I try to grab at it—but the energy disappears immediately. My breath starts to come in ragged gasps.

I don't know how long it takes for us to reach the platform, but it startles me when we do. I'm so weak at this point that I can't go up the stairs. One of the Inquisitors finally picks me up and swings me roughly over his shoulder. He sets me down at the top of the platform, and then forces me toward the iron stake.

The stake is made of black iron, a dozen times as thick as a man's arm, and a noose hangs from its top. Chains for hands and feet dangle from the stake's sides. Piles of wood hide the bottom from view. I see it all in a cloudy haze.

They shove me against the stake—they clap the chains onto my wrists and ankles, and loop the noose around my neck. Some in the crowd continue to chant curses at me. Others throw rocks. I glance uneasily at the roofs that surround the square. The chains feel cold against my skin. I reach out in vain again and again, in an attempt to call on something that can save me. My chains rattle from my trembling.

As I look at the other Inquisitors, my gaze settles on the youngest of them. He stands front and center on the platform, his shoulders squared and chin high, his hands folded behind his back. All I

can see of his face is his profile.

“Master Teren Santoro,” one of the other Inquisitors now introduces him with formal flair. “Lead Inquisitor of Kenettra.”

Master Teren Santoro? I look at him again. The Lead Inquisitor of Kenettra has come to see me die?

Teren approaches me now with calm, confident steps. I shrink away from him until my back is pressed solidly against the iron stake. My chains clink against each other. He lowers his head to meet my gaze. His white robes are embellished with more gold than the others I’ve seen, definitely clothing befitting his status, and an elaborate chain of gold winds from shoulder to shoulder. He’s surprisingly young. His hair is the color of wheat, pale for a Kenettran, and cut in a stylish fashion I haven’t seen much in southern Kenettra—shorter on the sides, fuller on the top, with a slender tail wrapped in gold metal trailing down the nape of his neck. His face is lean and chiseled as if from marble, handsome in its coldness, and his eyes are pale blue. *Very pale blue. So pale that they seem colorless in the light. Something about them sends a chill down my spine. There is madness in those eyes, something violent and savage.*

He uses one delicately gloved hand to brush bloody strands of my hair from my face, and then lifts my chin. He studies my scar. The edges of his mouth tilt up into a strange, nearly sympathetic grin.

“What a shame,” he says. “You would have been a pretty little thing.”

I jerk my chin out of his grasp.

“A temperamental one too.” His words drip with pity. “You don’t have to be afraid.” Then quietly his face close to mine, “You will find your redemption in the Underworld.”

He steps away from me, turns to the crowd, and raises his arms to call for silence. “Settle now, my friends! I’m sure we’re all excited.” When the crowd’s noise fades to a hush, he straightens, then clears his throat. His words ring out across the square. “Some of you may have noticed a recent rash of crimes on our streets. Crimes committed by people—twisted imitations of people—that feel more than . . . human. Some of you have taken to calling these new outlaws ‘Young Elites,’ as if they’re exceptional, *worth* something. I’ve come here today to remind you all that they are *dangerous* and demonic. They are murderers, eager to kill their own loved ones. They have no regard for law and order.”

Teren glances back at me. The square has fallen deathly silent now. “Let me reassure you: When we find these demons, we bring them to justice. Evil must be punished.” He scans the crowd. “The Inquisition is here to protect you. Let this be a warning to you all.”

I struggle feebly against my chains. My legs are shaking violently. I want to hide my body from all of these people, hide my flaws from their curious eyes. Is Violetta somewhere in this crowd? I scan the faces for her, then look up toward the sky. It’s such a beautiful day—how can the sky possibly be this blue? Something wet rolls down my cheek. My lip quivers.

Gods, give me strength. I am so afraid.

Teren now takes a lit torch from one of his men. He turns to me. The sight of the fire sends a greater terror through my veins. My struggles turn frantic. I’d fainted when the doctors removed my left eye with fire. *What kind of pain must it be to let fire consume your entire body?*

He touches his fingers to his forehead in a formal gesture of farewell. Then he tosses the torch onto the pile of wood at my feet. It sends up a shower of sparks, and immediately the dry kindling catches fire. The crowd erupts with cheers.

Rage surges through me, mixing with my fear. *I’m not dying here today.*

This time, I reach deep into my mind and finally grasp the strange power I’ve been searching for.

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