

EXCERPT

MARIE LU



A LEGEND NOVEL

CHAMPION

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DAY

OUT OF ALL THE DISGUISES I'VE WORN, THIS ONE might be my favorite.

Dark red hair, different enough from my usual white-blond, cut to just past my shoulders and pulled back into a tail. Green contacts that look natural when layered over my blue eyes. A crumpled, half-tucked collar shirt, its tiny silver buttons shining in the dark, a thin military jacket, black pants and steel-toed boots, a thick gray scarf wrapped around my neck, chin, and mouth. A dark soldier cap is pulled low over my forehead, and a crimson, painted tattoo stretches all over the left half of my face, changing me into someone unfamiliar. Aside from this, I wear an ever-present earpiece and mike. The Republic insists on it.

In most other cities, I'd probably get even more stares than I usually do because of that giant goddy tattoo—not exactly a subtle marker, I gotta admit. But here in San Francisco, I blend right in with the others. The first thing I noticed when Eden and I moved to Frisco eight months ago was the local trend: young people painting black or red patterns on their faces, some small and delicate, like Republic seals on their temples or something similar, others huge and sprawling, like giant patterns of the Republic's land shape. I chose a pretty generic tattoo tonight, because I'm not loyal enough to the Republic to stamp that loyalty right on

my face. Leave that to June. Instead, I have stylized flames. Good enough.

My insomnia's acting up tonight, so instead of sleeping, I'm walking alone through a sector called Marina, which as far as I can tell is the hillier, Frisco equivalent of LA's Lake sector. The night's cool and pretty quiet, and a light drizzle is blowing in from the city's bay. The streets are narrow, glistening wet, and riddled with potholes, and the buildings that rise up on both sides—most of them tall enough to vanish into tonight's low-lying clouds—are eclectic, painted with fading red and gold and black, their sides fortified with enormous steel beams to counter the earthquakes that roll through every couple of months. JumboTrons five or six stories high sit on every other block, blaring the usual barrage of Republic news. The air smells salty and bitter, like smoke and industrial waste mixed with seawater, and somewhere in there, a faint whiff of fried fish. Sometimes, when I turn down a corner, I'll suddenly end up close enough to the water's edge to get my boots wet. Here the land slopes right into the bay and hundreds of buildings poke out half submerged along the horizon. Whenever I get a view of the bay, I can also see the Golden Gate Ruins, the twisted remnants of some old bridge all piled up along the other side of the shore. A handful of people jostle past me now and then, but for the most part the city is asleep. Scattered bonfires light alleyways, gathering spots for the sector's street folks. It's not that different from Lake.

Well—I guess there are *some* differences now. The San

Francisco Trial Stadium, for one, which sits empty and unlit off in the distance. Fewer street police in the poor sectors. The city's graffiti. You can always get an idea of how the people are feeling by looking at the recent graffiti. A lot of the messages I've seen lately actually *support* the Republic's new Elector. *He is our hope*, says one message scrawled on the side of a building. Another painted on the street reads: *The Elector will guide us out of the darkness*. A little too optimistic, if you ask me, but I guess they're good signs. Anden must be doing *something* right. And yet. Every now and then, I'll also see messages that say, *The Elector's a hoax*, or *Brain-washed*, or *The Day we knew is dead*.

I don't know. Sometimes this new trust between Anden and the people feels like a string . . . and *I* am that string. Besides, maybe the happy graffiti's fake, painted by propaganda officers. Why not?

You never know with the Republic.

Eden and I, of course, have a Frisco apartment in a rich sector called Pacifica, where we stay with our caretaker, Lucy. The Republic's gotta take care of its seventeen-year-old most-wanted-criminal-turned-national-hero, doesn't it? I remember how much I distrusted Lucy—a stern, stout, fifty-two-year-old lady dressed in classic Republic colors—when she first showed up at our door in Denver. “The Republic has assigned me to assist you boys,” she told me as she bustled in to our apartment. Her eyes had settled immediately on Eden. “Especially the little one.”

Yeah. That didn't sit well with me. First of all, it'd taken

me two months before I could even let Eden out of my sight. We ate side by side; we slept side by side; he was *never* alone. I'd gone as far as standing outside his bathroom door, as if Republic soldiers would somehow suck him out through a vent, take him back to a lab, and hook him up to a bunch of machines.

"Eden doesn't need you," I'd snapped at Lucy. "He's got *me*. I take care of him."

But my health started fluctuating after those first couple of months. Some days I felt fine; other days, I'd be stuck in bed with a crippling headache. On those bad days, Lucy would take over—and after a few shouting matches, she and I settled into a grudging routine. She *does* make pretty awesome meat pies. And when we moved here to Frisco, she came with us. She guides Eden. She manages my medications.

When I'm finally tired of walking, I notice that I've wandered right out of Marina and into a wealthier neighboring district. I stop in front of a club with THE OBSIDIAN LOUNGE scored into a metal slab over its door. I slide against the wall into a sitting position, my arms resting on my knees, and feel the music's vibrations. My metal leg is ice-cold through the fabric of my trousers. On the wall across from me, graffiti scrawled in red reads, *Day = Traitor*. I sigh, take a silver tin from my pocket, and pull out a long cigarette. I run a finger across the SAN FRANCISCO CENTRAL HOSPITAL text imprinted down its length. Prescription cigarettes. Doctor's orders, yeah? I put it to my lips with trembling fingers and light it up. Close eyes. Take a puff. Gradually I lose myself in the

clouds of blue smoke, waiting for the sweet, hallucinogenic effects to wash over me.

Doesn't take long tonight. Soon the constant, dull headache disappears, and the world around me takes on a blurry sheen that I know isn't only from the rain. A girl's sitting next to me. It's Tess.

She gives me the grin I was so familiar with back on the streets of Lake. "Any news from the JumboTrons?" she asks me, pointing toward a screen across the road.

I exhale blue smoke and lazily shake my head. "Nope. I mean, I've seen a couple of Patriot-related headlines, but it's like you guys vanished off the map. Where are you? Where are you going?"

"Do you miss me?" Tess asks instead of answering.

I stare at the shimmery image of her. She's how I remember from the streets—her reddish-brown hair tied into a messy braid, her eyes large and luminous, kind and gentle. Little baby Tess. What were my last words to her . . . back when we had botched the Patriots' assassination attempt on Anden? *Please, Tess—I can't leave you here.* But that's exactly what I did.

I turn away, taking another drag on my cigarette. Do I miss her? "Every day," I reply.

"You've been trying to find me," Tess says, scooting closer. I swear I can almost feel her shoulder against mine. "I've seen you, scouring the JumboTrons and airwaves for news, eavesdropping on the streets. But the Patriots are in hiding right now."

Of course they're in hiding. Why would they attack, now that Anden's in power and a peace treaty between the Republic and the Colonies is a done deal? What could their new cause possibly be? I have no idea. Maybe they don't have one. Maybe they don't even exist anymore. "I wish you would come back," I murmur to Tess. "It'd be nice to see you again."

"What about June?"

As she asks this, her image vanishes. She's replaced by June, with her long ponytail and her dark eyes that shine with hints of gold, serious and analyzing, always analyzing. I lean my head against my knee and close my eyes. Even the illusion of June is enough to send a stabbing pain through my chest. Hell. I miss her so much.

I remember how I'd said good-bye to her back in Denver, before Eden and I moved to Frisco. "I'm sure we'll be back," I'd told her over my mike, trying to fill the awkward silence between us. "After Eden's treatment is done." This was a lie, of course. We were going to Frisco for *my* treatment, not Eden's. But June didn't know this, so she just said, "Come back soon."

That was almost eight months ago. I haven't heard from her since. I don't know if it's because each of us is too hesitant to bother the other, too afraid that the other doesn't want to talk, or maybe both of us are just too damn proud to be the one desperate enough to reach out. Maybe she's just not interested enough. But you know how it goes. A week passes without contact, and then a month, and soon too much time has passed and calling her would just feel random and weird. So I don't. Besides, what would I say? Don't worry, doctors

are fighting to save my life. Don't worry, they're trying to shrink the problem area in my brain with a giant pile of medication before attempting an operation. Don't worry, Antarctica might grant me access to treatment in their superior hospitals. Don't worry, I'll be just fine.

What's the point of keeping in touch with the girl you're crazy about, when you're dying?

The reminder sends a throbbing pain through the back of my head. "It's better this way," I tell myself for the hundredth time. And it *is*. By not seeing her for so long, the memory of how we'd originally met has grown dimmer, and I find myself thinking about her connection to my family's deaths less often.

Unlike Tess's, for some reason June's image never says a word. I try to ignore the shimmery mirage, but she refuses to go away. *So damn stubborn.*

Finally, I stand, stub my cigarette into the pavement, and step through the door of the Obsidian Lounge. Maybe the music and lights will shake her from my system.

For an instant, I can't see a thing. The club is pitch-black, and the sound's deafening. I'm stopped immediately by an enormous pair of soldiers. One of them puts a firm hand on my shoulder. "Name and branch?" he asks.

I have no interest in making my real identity known. "Corporal Schuster. Air force," I reply, blurting out a random name and the first branch that comes to mind. I always think of the air force first, mostly because of Kaede. "I'm stationed at Naval Base Two."

The guard nods. "Air force kids over in the back left, near the bathrooms. And if I hear you picking any fights with the army booths, you're out and your commander hears about it in the morning. Got it?"

I nod, and the soldiers let me pass. I walk down a dark hall and through a second door, then melt into the crowds and flashing lights inside.

The dance floor is jammed with people in loose shirts and rolled-up sleeves, dresses paired with rumpled uniforms. I find the air force booths in the back of the room. Good, there are several empty ones. I slide into a booth, prop up my boots against the cushioned seats, and lean my head back. At least June's image has disappeared. The loud music sends all my thoughts scattering.

I've only been in the booth for a few minutes when a girl cuts her way through the crowded dance floor and stumbles toward me. She looks flushed, her eyes bright and teasing; and when I glance behind her, I notice a cluster of laughing girls watching us. I force a smile. Usually, I like the attention in clubs, but sometimes, I just want to close my eyes and let the chaos take me away.

She leans over and presses her lips against my ear. "Excuse me," she shouts over the noise. "My girlfriends want to know if you're Day."

I've been recognized already? I shrink instinctively away and shake my head so the others can see. "You got the wrong guy," I reply with a wry grin. "But thanks for the compliment."

The girl's face is almost entirely covered in shadows, but

even so, I can tell she's blushing furiously. Her friends burst out laughing. None of them look like they believe my denial. "Want to dance?" the girl asks. She glances over her shoulder toward the flashing blue and gold lights, then back at me. This must be something her friends dared her to do too.

As I'm trying to think up some sort of polite refusal, I take in the girl's appearance. The club's too dark for me to get a good look at her, and all I see are glimpses of neon highlights on her skin and long ponytail, her glossy lips curved into a smile, her body lean and smooth in a short dress and military boots. My refusal fades on my tongue. Something about her reminds me of June. In the eight months since June first became a Princeps-Elect, I haven't felt excited about many girls—but now, with this shadowy doppelgänger beckoning me onto the dance floor, I let myself feel hopeful again.

"Yeah, why not?" I say.

The girl breaks into a wide smile. When I get up from the booth and take her hand, her friends all let out a gasp of surprise, followed by a loud cheer. The girl leads me through them, and before I know it, we've pushed our way into the crowds and carved out a tiny space right in the middle of the action.

I press myself against her, she runs a hand along the back of my neck, and we let the pounding beat carry us away. *She's cute*, I admit to myself, blinded in this sea of lights and limbs. The song changes, then changes again. I have no idea how long we're lost like this, but when she leans forward and brushes her lips over my own, I close my eyes and let her. I

even feel a shiver run down my spine. She kisses me twice, her mouth soft and liquid, her tongue tasting of vodka and fruit. I flatten one hand against the small of the girl's back and pull her closer, until her body's solidly against mine. Her kisses grow more urgent. *She is June*, I tell myself, choosing to indulge in the fantasy. With my eyes closed, my mind still hazy from my cigarette's hallucinogens, I can believe it for a moment—I can picture *her* kissing me here, taking every last breath from my lungs. The girl probably senses the change in my movements, my sudden hunger and desire, because she grins against my lips. *She is June*. It is June's dark hair that brushes against my face, June's long lashes that touch my cheeks, June's arm wrapped around my neck, June's body sliding against mine. A soft moan escapes me.

"Come on," she whispers. Mischief laces her words. "Let's go get some air."

How long has it been? I don't want to leave, because it means I'll have to open my eyes and June will be gone, replaced with this girl that I don't know. But she pulls on my hand and I'm forced to look around. June is nowhere to be seen, of course. The club's lights flash and I'm momentarily blinded. She guides me through the throngs of dancers, down the club's dark hallway, and out an unmarked back door. We step into a quiet back alley. A few weak spotlights shine down along the path, giving everything an eerie, greenish glow.

She pushes me against the wall and drowns me in another kiss. Her skin is moist, and I feel her goose bumps rise beneath

my touch. I kiss her back, and a small laugh of surprise escapes her when I flip us around and pin her against the wall.

She's June, I tell myself on repeat. My lips work greedily along her neck, tasting smoke and perfume.

Faint static sizzles in my earpiece, the sound of rain and frying eggs. I try to ignore the incoming call, even as a man's voice fills my ears. Talk about a buzzkill. "Mr. Wing," he says.

I don't answer it. *Go away. I'm busy.*

A few seconds later, the voice starts up again. "Mr. Wing, this is Captain David Guzman of Denver City Patrol Fourteen. I know you're there."

Oh, *this* guy. This poor captain's always the one tasked with trying to get hold of me.

I sigh and break away from the girl. "Sorry," I say breathlessly. I give her an apologetic frown and gesture at my ear. "Give me a minute?"

She smiles and smooths down her dress. "I'll be inside," she replies. "Look for me." Then she steps through the door and back into the club.

I turn my mike on and start slowly pacing up and down the alley. "What do you want?" I say in an annoyed whisper.

The captain sighs over the earpiece and launches into his message. "Mr. Wing, your presence is requested in Denver tomorrow night, on Independence Day, at the Capitol Tower's ballroom. As always, you are free to turn down the request—as you usually do," he mutters under his breath. "However, this banquet is an exceptional meeting of great importance.

Should you choose to attend, we'll have a private jet waiting for you in the morning."

An exceptional meeting of great importance? Ever heard so many fancy words in one sentence? I roll my eyes. Every month or so, I get an invitation to some goddy capital event, like a ball for all the high-ranking war generals or the celebration they held when Anden finally ended the Trials. But the only reason they want me to go to these things is so they can show me off and remind the people, "Look, just in case you forgot, Day is on our side!" Don't push your luck, Anden.

"Mr. Wing," the captain says when I stay silent, as if he's resorting to some final argument, "the glorious Elector personally requests your presence. So does the Princeps-Elect."

The Princeps-Elect.

My boots crunch to a halt in the middle of the alley. I forget to breathe.

Don't get too excited—after all, there are three Princeps-Elects, and he might be referring to any one of them. A few seconds pass before I finally ask, "Which Princeps-Elect?"

"The one who actually matters to you."

My cheeks warm at the taunt in his voice. "June?"

"Yes, Ms. June Iparis," the captain replies. He sounds relieved to finally have my attention. "She wanted to make it a personal request this time. She would very much like to see you at the Capitol Tower's banquet."

My head aches, and I fight to steady my breathing. All thoughts of the girl in the club go out the window. June has

not personally asked for me in eight months—this is the first time that she’s requested I attend a public function. “What’s this for?” I ask. “Just an Independence Day party? Why so important?”

The captain hesitates. “It’s a matter of national security.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” My initial excitement slowly wanes—maybe he’s just bluffing. “Look, Captain, I’ve got some unfinished business to take care of. Try convincing me again in the morning.”

The captain curses under his breath. “Fine, Mr. Wing. Have it your way.” He mumbles something I can’t quite make out, then goes offline. I frown in exasperation as my initial excitement fades away into a sinking disappointment. Maybe I should head home now. It’s time for me to go back and check up on Eden, anyway. What a joke. Chances are he’s probably lying about June’s request in the first place, because if she’d really wanted me to go back to the capital that badly, she—

“Day?”

A new voice comes over my earpiece. I freeze.

Have the hallucinogens from the meds worn off yet? Did I just imagine her voice? Even though I haven’t heard it in almost a year, I would recognize it anywhere, and the sound alone is enough to conjure the image of June standing before me, as if I’d run across her by chance in this alley. *Please, don’t let it be her. Please, let it be her.*

Did her voice always have this effect on me?

I have no idea how long I was frozen like this, but it must’ve

been a while, because she repeats, “Day, it’s me. June. Are you there?” A shiver runs through me.

This is real. It’s really her.

Her tone is different from what I remember. Hesitant and formal, like she’s speaking to a stranger. I finally manage to compose myself and click my mike back on. “I’m here,” I reply. My own tone is different too—just as hesitant, just as formal. I hope she doesn’t hear the slight tremor in it.

There’s a short pause on the other side before June continues. “Hi.” Then a long silence, followed by, “How are you?”

Suddenly I feel a storm of words building up inside me, threatening to pour out. I want to blurt out everything: I’ve thought about you every day since that final farewell between us, I’m sorry for not contacting you, I wish you had contacted me. I miss you. I miss you.

I don’t say any of this. Instead, the only thing I manage is, “Fine. What’s up?”

She pauses. “Oh. That’s good. I apologize for the late call, as I’m sure you’re trying to sleep. But the Senate and the Elector have asked me to send this request to you personally. I wouldn’t do it unless I felt it was truly important. Denver is throwing a ball for Independence Day, and during the event, we’ll be having an emergency meeting. We need you in attendance.”

“Why?” Guess I’ve resorted to one-word replies. For some reason, it’s all I can think of with June’s voice on the line.

She exhales, sending a faint burst of static through the

earpiece, and then says, “You’ve heard about the peace treaty being drafted between the Republic and the Colonies, right?”

“Yeah, of course.” Everyone in the country knows about that: our precious little Anden’s greatest ambition, to end the war that’s been going on for who knows how long. And so far, things seem to be going in the right direction, well enough that the warfront has been at a quiet stalemate for the past four months. Who knew a day like that could come, just like how we’d never expected to see the Trial stadiums sitting unused across the country. “Seems like the Elector’s on track to becoming the Republic’s hero, yeah?”

“Don’t speak too soon.” June’s words darken, and I feel like I can see her expression through the earpiece. “Yesterday we received an angry transmission from the Colonies. There’s a plague spreading through their warfront cities, and they believe it was caused by some of the biological weapons we’d sent across their borders. They’ve even traced the serial numbers on the shells of the weapons they believe started this plague.”

Her words are turning muffled through the shock in my mind, the fog that’s bringing back memories of Eden and his black, bleeding eyes, of that boy on the train who was being used as a part of the warfare. “Does that mean the peace treaty is off?” I ask.

“Yes.” June’s voice falls. “The Colonies say the plague is an official act of war against them.”

“And what does this have to do with me?”

Another long, ominous pause. It fills me with dread so icy cold that I feel like my fingers are turning numb. *The plague. It's happening. It's all come full circle.*

"I'll tell you when you get here," June finally says. "Best not to talk about it over earpieces."

JUNE

I DESPISE MY FIRST CONVERSATION WITH DAY AFTER eight months of no communication. I *hate* it. When did I become so manipulative? Why must I always use his weaknesses against him?

Last night at 2306 hours, Anden came to my apartment complex and knocked on my door. Alone. I don't even think guards were stationed in the hallway for his protection. It was my first warning that whatever he needed to tell me had to be important—and secret.

“I have to ask a favor of you,” he said as I let him in. Anden has almost perfected the art of being a young Elector (calm, cool, collected, a proud chin under stress, an even voice when angered), but this time I could see the deep worry in his eyes. Even my dog, Ollie, could tell that Anden was troubled, and tried reassuring him by pushing his wet nose against Anden's hand.

I nudged Ollie away before turning back to Anden. “What is it?” I asked.

Anden ran a hand through his dark curls. “I don't mean to disturb you so late at night,” he said, leaning his head down toward mine in quiet concern. “But I'm afraid this is not a conversation that can wait.” He stood close enough so that if I wanted to, I could tilt my face up and accidentally brush my lips against his. My heartbeat quickened at the thought.

Anden seemed to sense the tension in my pose, because he took an apologetic step away and gave me more room to breathe. I felt a strange mixture of relief and disappointment. “The peace treaty is over,” he whispered. “The Colonies are preparing to declare war against us once again.”

“What?” I whispered back. “Why? What’s happened?”

“Word from my generals is that a couple of weeks ago, a deadly virus started sweeping through the Colonies’ warfront like wildfire.” When he saw my eyes widen in understanding, he nodded. He looked so weary, burdened with the weight of an entire nation’s safety. “Apparently I was too late in withdrawing our biological weapons from the warfront.”

Eden. The experimental viruses that Anden’s father had used in attempts to cause a plague in the Colonies. For months, I’d tried to push that to the back of my mind—after all, Eden was safe now, under the care of Day and, last I heard, slowly adjusting to semblances of a normal life. For the last few months, the warfront had stood silent while Anden attempted to hash out a peace treaty with the Colonies. I’d thought that we would be lucky, that nothing would come out of that biological warfare. Wishful thinking.

“Do the Senators know?” I asked after a while. “Or the other Princeps-Elects? Why are you telling *me* this? I’m hardly your closest advisor.”

Anden sighed and squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Forgive me. I wish I didn’t have to involve you in this. The Colonies believe that we have the cure to this virus in our laboratories

and are simply withholding it. They demand we share it, or else they put all of their strength behind a full-scale invasion of the Republic. And this time, it won't be a return to our old war. The Colonies have secured an ally. They struck a trade deal with Africa—the Colonies get military help, and in return, Africa gets half our land.”

A feeling of foreboding crept over me. Even without him saying it, I could tell where this was going. “We don't have a cure, do we?”

“No. But we *do* know which former patients have the potential to help us find that cure.”

I started shaking my head. When Anden reached out to touch my elbow, I jerked away. “Absolutely not,” I said. “You can't ask this of me. I won't do it.”

Anden looked pained. “I have called for a private banquet tomorrow night to gather all of our Senators. We have no choice if we want to put a stop to this and find a way to secure peace with the Colonies.” His tone grew firmer. “You know this as well as I do. I want him to attend this banquet and hear us out. We need his permission if we're going to get to Eden.”

He's serious, I realized in shock. “You'll never get him to do it. You realize that, don't you? The country's support for you is still soft, and Day's alliance with you is hesitant at best. What do you think he'll say to *this*? What if you anger him enough for him to call the people to action, to tell them to rebel against you? Or *worse*—what if he asks them to support the Colonies?”

"I know. I've thought through all of this." Anden rubs his temples in exhaustion. "If there was a better option, I'd take it."

"So you want *me* to make him agree to this," I added. My irritation was too strong to bother hiding. "I won't do it. Get the other Senators to convince Day, or try convincing him yourself. Or find a way to apologize to the Colonies' Chancellor—ask him to negotiate new terms."

"*You* are Day's weakness, June. He'll listen to you." Anden winced even as he said this, as if he didn't want to admit it. "I know how this makes me sound. I don't want to be cruel—I don't want Day to see us as the enemy. But I *will* do what it takes to protect the Republic's people. Otherwise, the Colonies will attack, and if that happens, you know it's likely the virus will spread here as well."

It was worse than that, even though Anden didn't say it aloud. If the Colonies attack us with Africa at their side, then our military might not be strong enough to hold them back. This time, they might win. *He'll listen to you.* I closed my eyes and bowed my head. I didn't want to admit it, but I knew that Anden was right.

So I did as he requested. I called Day and asked him to return to the capital. Just the thought of seeing him again leaves my heart pounding, aching from his absence in my life over these past months. I haven't seen or spoken to him for so long . . . and *this* is going to be how we reunite? What will he think of me now?

What will he think of the Republic when he finds out what they want with his little brother?

1201 HOURS.

DENVER COUNTY COURT OF FEDERAL CRIME.

72°F INDOORS.

SIX HOURS UNTIL I SEE DAY AT THE EVENING BALL.

289 DAYS AND 12 HOURS SINCE METIAS'S DEATH.

Thomas and Commander Jameson are on trial today.

I'm so tired of trials. In the past four months, a dozen former Senators have been tried and convicted of participating in the plan to assassinate Anden, the plan that Day and I had barely managed to stop. Those Senators have all been executed. Razor has already been executed. Sometimes I feel like someone new is convicted each week.

But today's trial is different. I know *exactly* who is being sentenced today, and why.

I sit in a balcony overlooking the courtroom's round stage, my hands restless in their white silk gloves, my body constantly shifting in my vest and black ruffled coat, my boots quietly tapping against the balcony pillars. My chair is made out of synthetic oak and cushioned with soft, scarlet velvet, but somehow I just can't make myself comfortable. To keep myself calm and occupied, I'm carefully entwining four straightened paper clips in my lap to form a small ring. Two guards stand behind me. Three circular rows of the country's twenty-six Senators surround the stage, uniform in their matching scarlet-and-black suits, their silver epaulettes reflecting the chamber's light, their voices echoing along the arched ceilings. They sound largely indifferent, as if they're meeting about trade routes instead of

people's fates. Many are new faces that have replaced the traitor Senators, who Anden has already cleaned out. I'm the one who sticks out with my black-and-gold outfit (even the seventy-six soldiers standing guard here are clad in scarlet; two for each Senator, two for me, two for each of the other Princeps-Elects, four for Anden, and fourteen at the chamber's front and back entrances, which means the defendants—Thomas and Commander Jameson—are considered fairly high risk and could possibly make a sudden move).

I'm no Senator, clearly. I am a Princeps-Elect and need to be distinguished as such.

Two others in the chamber wear the same black-and-gold uniform that I do. My eyes wander over to them now, where they sit on other balconies. After Anden tapped me to train for the Princeps position, Congress urged him to select several others. After all, you cannot have only one person preparing to become the leader of the Senate, especially when that person is a sixteen-year-old girl without a shred of political experience. So Anden agreed. He picked out two more Princeps-Elects, both of them already Senators. One is named Mariana Dupree. My gaze settles on her, her nose turned up and her eyes heavy with sternness. Thirty-seven years old, Senator for ten years. She hated me the instant she laid eyes on me. I look away from her and toward the balcony where the second Princeps-Elect sits. Serge Carmichael, a jumpy thirty-two-year-old Senator and great political mind, who wasted no time showing me that he doesn't appreciate my youth and inexperience.

Serge and Mariana. My two rivals for the Princeps title. I feel exhausted just thinking about it.

On a balcony several dozen yards away, sitting flanked by his guards, Anden seems calm, reviewing something with one of the soldiers. He's wearing a handsome gray military coat with bright silver buttons, silver epaulettes, and silver sleeve insignias. He occasionally glances down toward the prisoners standing in the chamber's circle. I watch him for a moment, admiring his appearance of calm.

Thomas and Commander Jameson are going to receive their sentences for crimes against the nation.

Thomas looks tidier than usual—if that's possible. His hair is slicked back, and I can tell that he must've emptied an entire can of shoe polish onto each of his boots. He stands at attention in the center of the chamber and stares straight ahead with an intensity that would make any Republic commander proud. I wonder what's going through his mind. Is he picturing that night in the hospital alley, when he murdered my brother? Is he thinking of the many conversations he had with Metias, the moments when he had taken down his guard? Or the fateful night when he had chosen to betray Metias instead of help him?

Commander Jameson, on the other hand, looks slightly disheveled. Her cold, emotionless eyes are fixed on me. She has been watching me unflinchingly for the past twelve minutes. I stare back for a moment, trying to see some hint of a soul in her eyes, but nothing exists there except for an icy hatred, an absolute lack of conscience.

I look away, take deep, slow breaths, and try to focus on something else. My thoughts return to Day.

It's been 241 days since he visited my apartment and bid me good-bye. Sometimes I wish Day could hold me in his arms again and kiss me the way he did on that last night, so close that we could barely breathe, his lips soft against mine. But then I take back that wish. The thought is useless. It reminds me of loss, just like how sitting here and looking down on the people who killed my family reminds me of all the things I used to have; it reminds me too of my guilt, of all the things *Day* used to have that *I* took from him.

Besides, Day will probably never want to kiss me again. Not after he finds out why I've asked him to return to Denver.

Anden's looking in my direction now. When I catch his gaze, he nods once, excuses himself from his balcony, and a minute later he steps into my balcony. I rise and, along with my guards, snap to a salute. Anden waves a hand impatiently. "Sit, please," he says. When I've relaxed back into my chair, he bends down to my eye level and adds, "How are you holding up, June?"

I fight the blush as it spreads across my cheeks. After eight months without Day in my life, I find myself smiling at Anden, enjoying the attention, occasionally even hoping for it. "Doing fine, thanks. I've been looking forward to this day."

"Of course." Anden nods. "Don't worry—it won't be long before both of them are out of your life forever." He gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. Then he leaves as swiftly as he arrived, vanishing with the faint clink of medals and epaulettes, then reappearing moments later in his own balcony.

I lift my head in a vain attempt at bravery, knowing that Commander Jameson's icy eyes must still be upon me. As each of the Senators rises to cast aloud his vote on her verdict, I hold my breath and carefully push away each memory I have of her eyes staring me down, folding them into a neat compartment at the back of my mind. The voting seems to take forever, even though the Senators are all quick to say what they think will please the Elector. No one has the courage to risk crossing Anden after watching so many others convicted and executed. By the time my turn comes, my throat is parched. I swallow a few times, then speak up.

"Guilty," I say, my voice clear and calm.

Serge and Mariana cast their votes after me. We run through another round of voting for Thomas, and then we're done. Three minutes later, a man (bald, with a round, wrinkled face and scarlet floor-length robes he's clutching with his left hand) hurries into Anden's balcony and gives him a rushed bow. Anden leans toward the man and whispers in his ear. I watch their interaction in quiet curiosity, wondering whether I can predict the final verdict by their gestures. After a short deliberation, Anden and the messenger both nod. Then the messenger raises his voice to the entire assembly.

"We are now ready to announce the verdicts for Captain Thomas Alexander Bryant and Commander Natasha Jameson of Los Angeles City Patrol Eight. All rise for the glorious Elector!"

The Senators and I stand with a uniform clatter, while Commander Jameson simply turns to face Anden with a look

of utter disdain. Thomas snaps to a sharp salute in Anden's direction. He holds the position as Anden stands up, straightens, and puts his hands behind his back. There's a moment of silence as we wait for his final verdict, the one vote that really matters. I fight back a rising urge to cough. My eyes dart instinctively to the other Princeps-Elects, something I now do all the time; Mariana has a satisfied frown on her face, while Serge just looks bored. One of my fists clenches tightly around the paper clip ring I'm working on. I already know it will leave deep grooves in my palm.

"The Senators of the Republic have submitted their individual verdicts," Anden announces to the courtroom, his words bearing all the formality of a traditions-old speech. I marvel at the way his voice can sound so soft, yet carry so well at the same time. "I have taken their joint decision into account, and now I give my own." Anden pauses to turn his eyes down toward where both of them are waiting. Thomas is still in full salute, still staring intently at the empty air in front of him. "Captain Thomas Alexander Bryant of Los Angeles City Patrol Eight," he says, "the Republic of America finds you *guilty* . . ."

The room stays silent. I fight to keep my breathing even. *Think about something. Anything.* What about all the political books I've been reading this week? I try to recite some of the facts I've learned, but suddenly I can't remember any of it. Most uncharacteristic.

". . . of the death of Captain Metias Iparis on the night of November thirtieth—of the death of civilian Grace Wing

without the warrants necessary for execution—of the single-handed execution of twelve protesters in Batalla Square on the afternoon of—”

His voice comes in and out of the blur of noise in my head. I lean a hand against my chair’s armrest, let out a slow breath, and try to prevent myself from swaying. *Guilty*. Thomas has been found guilty of killing both my brother and Day’s mother. My hands shake.

“—and thereby sentenced to death by firing squad two days from today, at seventeen hundred hours. Commander Natasha Jameson of Los Angeles City Patrol Eight, the Republic of America finds you *guilty* . . .”

Anden’s voice fades away into a dull, unrecognizable hum. Everything around me seems so slow, as if I’m living too quickly for it all and leaving the world behind.

A year ago I’d been standing outside Batalla Hall on a different sort of court stage, looking on with a huge crowd as a judge gave Day the exact same sentence. Now Day is alive, and a Republic celebrity. I open my eyes again. Commander Jameson’s lips are set in a tight line as Anden reads out her death penalty. Thomas looks expressionless. *Is* he expressionless? I’m too far away to tell, but his eyebrows seem furrowed into a strange sort of tragedy. *I should feel good about this*, I remind myself. Both Day and I should be rejoicing. Thomas killed Metias. He shot Day’s mother in cold blood, without a second’s hesitation.

But now the courtroom falls away and all I can see are

memories of Thomas as a teenager, back when he and Metias and I used to eat pork *edame* inside a warm first-floor street stand, with the rain pouring down all around us. I remember Thomas showing off his first assigned gun to me. I even remember the time Metias brought me to his afternoon drills. I was twelve and had just begun my courses at Drake for a week—how innocent everything seemed back then. Metias picked me up after my classes that afternoon, right on time, and we headed over to the Tanagashi sector, where he was running his patrol through drills. I can still feel the warmth of the sun beating down on my hair, still see the swoosh of Metias's black half cape, the gleam of his silver epaulettes, and still hear the sharp clicks of his shining boots on the cement. While I settled down on a corner bench and turned my comp on to (pretend to) do some advance reading, Metias lined up his soldiers for inspection. He paused before each soldier to point out flaws in their uniforms.

“Cadet Rin,” he barked at one of the newer soldiers. The soldier jumped at the steel in my brother's voice, then hung her head in shame as Metias tapped the lone medal pinned on the cadet's coat. “If I wore my medal like this, Commander Jame-son would strip me of my title. Do you want to be removed from this patrol, soldier?”

“N-no, sir,” the cadet stammered.

Metias kept his gloved hands tucked behind his back and moved on. He criticized three more soldiers before he reached Thomas, who stood at attention near the end of the line. Metias looked over his uniform with a stern, careful eye. Of

course, Thomas's outfit was absolutely spotless—not a single thread out of place, every medal and epaulette groove polished to a bright shine, boots so flawless that I could probably see my reflection in them. A long pause. I put my comp down and leaned forward to watch more closely. Finally, my brother nodded. "Well done, soldier," he said to Thomas. "Keep up the good work, and I'll see that Commander Jameson promotes you before the end of this year."

Thomas's expression never changed, but I saw him lift his chin with pride. "Thank you, sir," he replied. Metias's eyes lingered on him for a second, and then he moved on.

When he finally finished inspecting everyone, my brother turned to face his entire patrol. "A disappointing inspection, soldiers," he called out to them. "You're under my watch now, and that means you're under Commander Jameson's watch. She expects a higher caliber from this lot, so you'd do well to try harder. Understood?"

Sharp salutes answered him. "*Yes, sir!*"

Metias's eyes returned to Thomas. I saw respect on my brother's face, even admiration. "If each of you paid attention to detail the way Cadet Bryant does, we'd be the greatest patrol in the country. Let him serve as an example to you all." He joined them in a final salute. "Long live the Republic!" The cadets echoed him in unison.

The memory slowly fades from my thoughts, and Metias's clear voice turns into a ghost's whisper, leaving me weak and exhausted in my sadness.

Metias had always talked about Thomas's fixation on being

the perfect soldier. I remember the blind devotion Thomas gave to Commander Jameson, the same blind devotion he now gives to his new Elector. Then I see Thomas and me sitting across from each other in an interrogation room—I remember the anguish in his eyes. How he'd told me that he wanted to protect me. What happened to that shy, awkward boy from Los Angeles's poor sectors, the boy who used to train with Metias every afternoon? Something blurs my vision and I quickly wipe a hand across my eyes.

I *could* be compassionate. I could ask Anden to spare his life and let him live out his years in prison, and give him a chance to redeem himself. But instead I just stand there with my closed lips and unwavering posture, my heart hard as stone. Metias would be more merciful in my position.

But I was never as good a person as my brother.

"This concludes the trial for Captain Thomas Alexander Bryant and Commander Natasha Jameson," Anden finishes. He holds a hand out in Thomas's direction and nods once. "Captain, do you have any words for the Senate?"

Thomas doesn't flinch in the slightest, doesn't show a single hint of fear or remorse or anger on his face. I watch him closely. After a heartbeat, he turns his eyes up to where Anden stands, then bows low. "My glorious Elector," he replies in a clear, unwavering voice. "I have disgraced the Republic by acting in a way that has both displeased and disappointed you. I humbly accept my verdict." He rises from his bow, then returns to his salute. "Long live the Republic."

He glances up at me when the Senators all voice their

agreement with Anden's final verdict. For an instant, our eyes meet. Then I look down. After a while, I look back up and he's staring straight ahead again.

Anden turns his attention to Commander Jameson. "Commander," he says, extending his gloved hand in her direction. His chin lifts in a regal gesture. "Do you have any words for the Senate?"

She doesn't flinch from looking at the young Elector. Her eyes are cold, dark slates. After a pause, she finally nods. "Yes, *Elector*," she says, her tone harsh and mocking, a stark contrast to Thomas's. The Senators and soldiers shift uneasily, but Anden raises a hand for silence. "I do have some words for you. I was not the first to hope for your death, and I won't be the last. You are the Elector, but you are still just a boy. You don't know who you are." She narrows her eyes . . . and smiles. "But *I* know. I have seen far more than you have—I've drained the blood from prisoners twice your age, I've killed men with twice your strength, I've left prisoners shaking in their broken bodies who probably have twice your courage. You think you're this country's savior, don't you? But I know better. You're just your father's boy, and like father, like son. He failed, and so will you." Her smile widens, but it never touches her eyes. "This country will go down in flames with you at the helm, and my ghost will be laughing at you all the way from hell."

Anden's expression never changes. His eyes stay clear and unafraid, and in this moment, I am drawn to him like a bird to an open sky. He meets her stare coolly. "This concludes today's trial," he replies, his voice echoing throughout the chamber.

“Commander, I suggest you save your threats for the firing squad.” Then he folds his hands behind his back and nods at his soldiers. “Remove them from my sight.”

I don't know how Anden can show so little fear in front of Commander Jameson. I envy it. Because as I watch the soldiers lead her away, all I can feel is a deep, ice-cold pit of terror. Like she's not done with us yet. Like she's warning us to watch our backs.