

A PENGUIN SPECIAL

MARIE LU

LIFE BEFORE
LEGEND



PUTNAM

LIFE BEFORE
STORIES OF
THE CRIMINAL AND THE PRODIGY

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CONTENTS

EPISODE 1: DAY

EPISODE 2: JUNE

EPISODE ONE



DAY

THREE YEARS BEFORE THE EVENTS OF

LEGEND

Author's Note: In *Prodigy* (the sequel to *Legend*), June asks Day to tell her about his very first kiss. This is a short story answering that question.

DAY

I'M TWELVE YEARS OLD.

I live in the Republic of America.

My name is Day.

My name used to be Daniel Altan Wing, younger brother to John, older brother to Eden, son to a mom and dad who lived in Los Angeles's slum sectors.

When you've been poor all your life, you never really think it could be any other way. And sometimes you're even happy, because at least you've got your family and your health and your arms and legs and a roof over your head.

But now I'm without most of those things. My mother and brothers think I'm dead. I have an injured knee that might never heal. I live on the streets of Lake sector, a slum sitting along the shore of Los Angeles's giant lake, and every day I manage to do just enough to survive.

But things could always be worse, yeah? At least I'm alive; at least my mom and brothers are alive. There's still hope.

This morning I'm perched on the balcony of a three-story, torn-up apartment complex that has all its windows boarded up. My bad leg dangles over the edge while I lean casually on my good one. My eyes are fixed on one of the piers lining the lakeshore, its waters glittering through the haze of morning smog. All around me, JumboTrons on the sides of buildings broadcast the latest Republic news above the steady, never-ending stream of Lake sector's factory workers. Several streets over, I can see a crowd of boys and girls heading off to the local high school. They seem like they're around my age—if I hadn't failed my Trial, I'd probably be walking with them. I look up and squint at the sun.

Pledge is about to start any second. I *hate* that goddy pledge.

The newsreel running on the JumboTrons pauses for a second, and

then a familiar voice rings out across the city from every building's speakers. Along the streets, people stop whatever they're doing, turn to face the direction of the capital, and then raise their arms in salutes. They chant along with the speaker's voice.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the great Republic of America, to our Elector Primo, to our glorious states, to unity against the Colonies, to our impending victory!

When I was really little, I'd say this pledge like everyone else, and for a while I even thought it was pretty cool, declaring my undying love for our country or whatever. Now I just stay silent throughout the whole thing, even though all the people on the streets recite the lines obediently. Why bother playing along to something I don't believe in? It's not like anyone can see me up here, anyway.

When it's over and the streets' bustle returns, the JumboTrons switch in sync back to a newsreel. I read the headlines as they roll:

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD TRIAL PRODIGY JUNE IPARIS BECOMES
YOUNGEST STUDENT EVER ADMITTED TO DRAKE UNIVERSITY,
TO BE OFFICIALLY INDUCTED NEXT WEEK.

"Ugh," I snort in disgust. No doubt that girl's some goddy rich trot living the sweet life farther inland, in one of LA's upper-class sectors. Who cares what she scored on her Trial? The whole test is rigged in favor of the wealthy kids, anyway, and she's probably just someone with average smarts who bought her high score. I turn away as the headline goes on, listing the girl's gaggle of achievements. The whole thing gives me a headache.

My attention wanders back to the pier. One of the boats has workers bustling along its deck. They're unloading a bunch of crates that probably have canned food inside, stacks of beef hash and potatoes and spaghetti, sausage and pygmy pig hot dogs. My stomach rumbles. First things first: stealing breakfast. I haven't eaten in almost two days, and the sight of the crates makes me light-headed.

I inch along the side of the apartment complex, careful to stay inside the building's early-morning shadows. A few street police are patrolling the pier, but most of them look bored, already exhausted by the day's

humid heat. They usually don't pay attention to the street orphans that sit on practically every corner of the Lake sector, and on a good day, they're too lazy to catch all the ones that attempt to steal food.

I reach the edge of the building. A drainage pipe runs along the side, shakily bolted to the wall. Still, it seems strong enough to support my weight. I test it first by tentatively putting one foot against it and giving it a good push. When it doesn't budge, I grab the pipe and slide all the way down into the building's narrow alley. My bad leg hits the pavement wrong—I lose my balance, then fall backward onto the ground.

One of these days, this stupid knee will get better. I hope. And then I'll finally get to shimmy up and down these buildings the way I want to.

It's a warm day. The smells of smoke, street food, grease, and ocean salt linger in the air. I can feel the heat of the pavement through my threadbare shoes. Hardly anyone notices me as I limp toward the pier—I'm just another slum sector boy, after all—but then a girl heading off to school meets my gaze. She blushes when I look back, then quickly glances away.

I pause at the water's edge to adjust the cap on my head, making sure all my hair is tucked underneath it. The orange and gold light reflecting off the water makes me squint. Out along the pier, workers are stacking the food crates right next to a little office where an inspector is typing up notes about the shipment. Now and then he looks away and talks into an earpiece. I stay where I am for a while, watching the pattern of the workers and the inspector. Then I glance down the street that runs along the shore.

No street police in sight. Perfect.

When I'm sure no one's looking, I hop down the edge of the bank and limp into the shadows beneath the pier. Beams crisscross the pier's underbelly, supporting it as it juts out into the water. I grab some rocks from the mud near the water and shove them into my pockets. Then I pull myself up into the maze of beams and start climbing through them toward the crates. Salt water sprays me. The sound of waves lapping against the pier mixes with the voices above.

"You hear about that girl too, yeah?"

"What girl?"

"You know. The *girl*, the one that got into Drake at, what, *twelve*—"

“Oh yeah, that one. She must have parents with a deep wallet. Hey, where’d you get sent to again?”

Some laughter. “Shut up. At least I got some schooling.”

The waves drown out their conversation again. Several muffled thuds sound out from the planks over my head. They must be stacking crates here. I’ve reached the spot right under the little office and the shipment of goods. I pause to readjust my footing. Then I climb up several beams, grab the edge of the pier’s walkway, pull myself up, and peek around.

The office is right over my head. The inspector stands on its far side, his back turned to me. I scramble quietly up onto the walkway and huddle in the shadows of the office’s wall. The rocks in my pocket clack against each other. I take one of them out while keeping my eyes turned toward the workers. Then I fling the rock toward the boat as hard as I can.

It hits the side of the boat with a loud thud, loud enough to get the attention of the boat workers. Several of them turn toward the sound—others head over to it. I take the chance and dart out from my hiding place, then make for the stack of crates. I manage to skid right behind it before anyone catches sight of me. My heart thuds frantically in my chest.

Every time I steal Republic supplies, I imagine myself getting captured and dragged off to the local police headquarters. Getting my legs snapped, like what happened to Dad. Or maybe I wouldn’t get taken to the headquarters at all. Maybe they’d just shoot me dead right on the spot. I can’t make up my mind which would be worse.

Time’s running out. I pull my pocketknife from where it’s tucked neatly against my shoe, and then jam it into the side of one of the wooden crates until it breaks through. I hack away in silence, careful to keep an eye on which direction the guards are looking. Most of them have wandered away by now, thankfully. Only two still remain, and even they stand a good distance away from the crates, lost in mindless chatter.

This shipment’s definitely stuffed with canned goodies. My mouth waters as I fantasize again about what I might find inside. Hot dogs and sardines. Meats of all kinds. Corn, pickled eggs, beans. Maybe even peaches or pear slices. I’d once managed to steal a fresh peach, and it was the best thing I’d ever eaten in my life. My stomach lets out a loud

rumble.

“Hey.”

I jump. My eyes dart up to see a teenage girl leaning against the crates, chewing on a toothpick and watching me work with an amused grin on her face. All my food fantasies vanish. Instantly I yank my knife out of the crate and make a run for it. The other men on the pier see me, shout something, and give chase.

I run as fast as I can down the pier. My bad knee burns from the sudden movement, but I ignore it. Bad knee won't matter if I'm dead. I brace myself, waiting for the searing agony of a bullet in my back.

“Charlie!” one of them yells. “Get that little con!”

The girl replies with something I can't hear.

I stumble through a pair of bewildered port workers, reach the pier's end and the beginning of Lake's streets, and run toward the closest alley I can see. Behind me, I can still hear the sounds of my pursuers. Stupid, so stupid. I should've been quieter, or waited until nightfall. But I'm so hungry. Now I just hope I can lose them in the maze of Lake's alleys. My cap flips off my head, but I'm too scared to stop and go get it. My white-blond hair tumbles down past my shoulders in a wild mess.

Someone tackles me from behind. I squirm right out of his grasp, then try to make a leap for the wall and get a grip on the second-floor ledge. But my bad knee—already weak from my hurried escape—finally gives way, and I collapse to the ground in the shadows of the alley. All the breath in my lungs gets knocked out in one whoosh, but I still twist around and bare my teeth, ready to sink them into whoever's grabbing me.

“Hey, chill out!” It's the girl who had first spotted me. She has a nonthreatening face, but she pins me firmly to the ground. “It's just me. I told my dad's crew that I'd track you down. They're all still back at the pier.”

I keep struggling.

“Look, we could do this all day.” The girl tilts her head at me and gives me a frown. I keep expecting her to slide a knife against my throat. But she doesn't. After a few long seconds, I calm down. She nods at me when I do. “What were you trying to steal from my father's shipment?” she asks.

“Just some food,” I reply. I’m still having trouble catching my breath, and the pain in my knee isn’t helping any. “I haven’t eaten in two days.”

“You from the Lake sector, cousin?”

I give her a smile. I hope she can’t see how nervous I am. “As much as you,” I say, noting her slang. “You’re probably even from the same neighborhood as me.”

She studies me for a moment. Now that I finally get a good look at her, I can see that she’s kind of pretty, with brown skin and frizzy black hair pulled back into two haphazard braids. She has a light smattering of freckles on her nose, and her eyes are golden brown. Her eyebrows look permanently set at an amused angle. She’s probably somewhere in her mid or late teens, although she looks small. A grin spreads on her face as she notices the way I’m checking her out. She carefully lets me sit up, but she doesn’t release my arm.

“You gonna let me go anytime soon?” I ask. “Or are you gonna drag me back to your dad and his pals?”

“That depends.” She clicks her tongue against the inside of her cheek in an unconscious gesture. “You were out to steal food from our shipment. If you’d succeeded, my father would have to explain to Republic port authorities why he didn’t meet quota. You think we like paying extra fines? Or getting arrested?”

“Well, I’m sorry. You think I like going hungry?”

The girl laughs at me. “Listen to you, tough boy. You’re so adorable, I could pinch your cheek right off.” I blush at her taunt, but I don’t want to give her the satisfaction of knowing she got to me. So I glare at her without blinking. She stops laughing, chews thoughtfully on her toothpick, and then says, “So *what* if you’re hungry? What if I just drag you back to my dad right now? I could tell them to toss you into the lake. Or I could tell them to take you to the police station. My dad’s crew loves me. They’ll probably agree to whatever I tell them.”

I swallow hard at the thought, then put on a brave face. “Oh, *come on*, cousin.” I hold my palms up to her and give her as innocent of a look as I can. “You’re really gonna do that to a starving street boy? Just pretend I escaped. I won’t come back, I promise. You can even take my pocketknife, if you want something in return. It’s all I got.”

“How old are you?”

“Almost thirteen.”

“Aw, you’re just a baby.” She grins at me, and then hesitates for a good minute. **“Look. I know how you feel,”** she finally says, **“and believe me, there’s nothing worse than the pain of an empty stomach.”**

“You still thinking about turning me in, then?” I let my hopes rise. **“Anything I can do for you to keep myself out of a Republic jail?”** I ask.

“What are you *willing* to do?” she replies.

I give her a practiced smile. **“Whatever you want me to do, sweetheart.”**

The girl’s eyebrows lift in surprise—then she throws her head back and laughs. I can’t decide if I’m flattered or insulted. *I thought I sounded pretty cool.*

Another moment passes before the girl finally calms down, stands up, and hauls me to my feet. Now that we’re both up, I can tell that she’s only a few inches taller and just as lean. She nods in the direction of the pier. **“Tell you what. You’re going to work for my dad for three days, and in exchange, I’ll give you three cans of food. You can pick any three cans—no fruits, though.”** She shakes her head when she sees my disappointment. **“Sorry. Three days of work won’t earn anyone a can of fruit.”**

Working in one spot for three days. The thought makes me a little anxious—I don’t like staying anywhere for that long. There are Republic eyes all over the place. But I don’t really have a choice, and it’s about as good of an offer as I’ll get.

I give the girl a hesitant nod. **“All right. Fine. You got yourself a deal.”** I reach my free hand out to shake hers.

She doesn’t take it. Instead, she tilts her head a little, spits out her toothpick, and grins at me. **“I’m not finished,”** she says.

My hand wavers. **“What else do you want?”**

“You’re a bold one in front of ladies, aren’t you? Ever kiss a girl before?”

Kiss a girl? What does that have to do with anything? For all my flirting, I’ve never gotten that close. Well, I’ve kissed a couple of girls on the cheek, and vice versa—but right on the lips? I was trying to work my way up to that. My eyes wander to her mouth, now dark and smiling,

and I feel my face growing even hotter than it already was.

“I’ll take that as a no.” She laughs. “Well, give it a shot, kid. Let’s see if you can back up your smooth talk.”

When I still don’t make a move, the girl leans toward me, closes her eyes, and presses her lips against mine. I stiffen. They’re much softer than I expected—I don’t know *what* I expected, actually. Of course they would be soft. A tingly feeling shoots down my spine. *What should I do? Should I move? Eyes open or closed?* For a while, I just stay completely still and keep my lips frozen. *Maybe I’m supposed to follow her lead.* So I try that instead. Gradually, I start kissing her back. It doesn’t seem so hard after a while . . . I even relax into it, letting my mind wrap around the fact that I’m lip-locked with an older girl. My hands are numb. I can’t feel my legs.

She pulls away. Although she doesn’t take her hand off my arm, her grip is less ironclad. I’m still trying to catch my breath. “Not *too* bad for your first try,” she says cheerfully. Her nose brushes against mine. “Are you trembling?”

I cringe. I’d hoped she wouldn’t notice.

To my relief, she laughs before I can say anything embarrassing. “Boy, you are just cute as a goddy button.” She taps my nose and leans away from me. “All right, we got a deal. Back to the pier. If you behave yourself the whole time, I might even give you another kiss.”

For the next three days, I work alongside her on her father’s Republic-assigned boat. Her name is Charlie, I learn, and she just turned sixteen. She tells me about her life working the piers as we load and unload shipments from dawn until dusk. Her mother had died a few years ago in a factory accident. She has a sister who actually got a Trial score high enough to get her assigned to a college. She loves the lake area, even if it means she smells like the ocean all the time. She’s happy that the Republic at least assigned her to work the piers with her father, instead of sending her off to the warfront to clean up after the troops. I don’t bother telling her that that’s what *my* father does—*did*, I mean—before he stopped coming home. My hands get splinters from dragging crates back and forth, and by the second day, my back feels like it’s going to break into pieces. Charlie’s dad—an enormous, bearded, pale-skinned man—ignores me completely, although sometimes he’ll nod in

approval if I'm working really hard.

I like the job. The girl gives me two cans a day instead of just one, which means every day I get to eat a can as well as save one for future meals. I also get a chance to stash trinkets that might be useful later on—sharp splinters of wood I could use as weapons, a couple of abandoned burlap sacks, a round tin good for carrying water.

Charlie catches me as I walk along the pier, snatching up stray nails and stuffing them in my pockets.

“What are you doing, preparing for battle?” she asks with a grin.

I shrug. “I haven't survived this long without some self-defense.”

Charlie laughs, but she lets me carry on.

In the evenings she sits with me while her father's crew gathers farther down the pier. I watch, with a little jealousy, the way she flirts with the workers whenever her dad's not around. She was right about one thing—she's their darling, and if she ever told them to throw me overboard, they'd probably do it without hesitating. Slowly I grow used to the sound of the lake lapping against cement pillars and the unusual comfort of sleeping out in the open, knowing that in the morning I'd have a can of food waiting for me. What a luxury. Sometimes I'll glance over at Charlie when she's not looking, and I'll try to replay our kiss in my head. I wonder if it meant anything to her. And whether or not she was serious about giving me another.

On our last night together, Charlie leans back and regards me over the glow of our dim lamp. We're sitting together at the far end of the pier, watching the skyscrapers of downtown light up one by one. Pretty nice evening. Even the humidity doesn't seem as bad as usual, and now and then I can feel a cool breeze.

“So, you paid off your debt. What are you going to do tomorrow?” she asks me.

I shrug. “Don't know yet. I usually take things one day at a time.”

We eat in silence for a few more minutes before she speaks up again. “You haven't told me much about yourself,” she says. “I don't even know your name.”

I put down my half-eaten can of sausage and beans, then lean back on my elbows. “Ed,” I reply, blurting out the first name I can think of. “What else do you want to know?”

She studies me. In the flickering lamplight, her eyes take on a honey-colored tint. “How long have you lived in Lake?” She takes another bite of food and then tosses her can aside. “What happened to your family? And how’d your knee get that way? You always lived on the streets, or what?”

I’m quiet throughout her questions. It’s only fair that she’s asking, of course, since she’s told me so much about herself. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned from living on the streets, it’s to keep details about myself secret. Where would I even start? My name’s Day. My family lives about thirty blocks northeast of here. I have a mother, an older brother, and a younger brother. All of them think I’m dead. Republic doctors sliced open my knee while experimenting on my body. I was shipped to them after failing my Trial, and they’d left me for dead in a hospital basement. I stumbled around, bleeding, for weeks afterward. I always travel alone, because if the Republic ever finds me, they’ll snuff me out like a candle. I keep my head turned away as the memories fill me up and threaten to burst out of my chest. So many stories to tell.

But I fold them away one by one.

Charlie sobers at my silence. “Well,” she starts, looking a little awkward for the first time since she’s known me. She fiddles with one of her braids. “All in good time, whenever you’re ready.”

I smile at her over the lamplight.

“If you want, you know, you can stay for a few more days,” she says. “My dad says you’re a good worker and proved your worth . . . he’d be happy to keep you around a little longer. He might even give you some wages under the table. And, well, you’re a nice kid. The streets are a harsh place to live—I dunno how long you’ll make it out there on your own.”

Her offer’s tempting. My heart warms, and there are unspoken words of gratitude on the tip of my tongue. I soak in her freckled face and rumpled braids, and in this moment I’m completely ready to say yes. I can see myself working here beside her and making some sort of life for myself. I ache to belong to a family again, to become friends with this girl. Wouldn’t that be something, yeah? I close my eyes and lose myself to the fantasy.

“I’ll think about it,” I finally reply. It’s a good enough answer for

now.

Charlie shrugs, and we both go back to finishing our dinners. We sleep side by side out on her boat's deck that night, close enough that our shoulders touch and I can feel the warmth coming from her body. I spend most of the night looking up at the sky. It's clear enough for me to make out about a dozen stars. I count them over and over again until they lull me into a light sleep.



A shriek jolts me awake.

I instinctively hop to my feet, then wince as my bad knee twists and forces me to sit back down. My pouch of random trinkets pokes me uncomfortably in my side. What's going on? What happened? Is it morning? All I notice in my confusion is the dim light of dawn that paints everything bluish gray.

"No! You can't!"

Another shriek. This time I hear it come from farther down the pier, where the crew's crowded around something. Curious passersby have started accumulating along the street. *Don't get close. Stay away.* My instincts flare up, and instead of joining them, I hurry over to a nearby stack of crates and crouch in the shadows.

At first I can't tell what's going on. Then, as I squint closer at the scene, I realize what's happening. A few Republic soldiers dressed in the attire of a city patrol—not street police, an actual *city patrol*—are shouting questions at a large man. *Charlie's dad.* The shrieks come from Charlie, whom several of the crew members are holding back.

One city patrol soldier punches her father squarely in the jaw. He falls to his knees.

"You damn dogs!" Charlie shouts at the patrol. *"You liars! We're not behind on shipments—we're not even in charge of that! You can't—"*

"Calm down," one of the soldiers snaps at her. *"Or you'll feel the bite of a bullet. Got that?"* Then he nods to his companions. *"Confiscate their shipment."*

Charlie screams something I can't make out, but her father shakes his head at her, giving her a firm warning. A trail of blood leaks from the edge of his mouth. *"It'll be okay,"* he calls out to her even as the soldiers

hurry along the end of the pier and load crates onto their truck.

I wait quietly in the dark as they fill their truck. If they take Charlie's whole shipment, then that means they won't get paid for at least two weeks. Some of them would go hungry for sure. A memory rushes back to me of when the city patrols had once taken my dad away for questioning, how they'd brought him back bloodied and broken. Anger and recklessness rush through my mind. I narrow my eyes at the soldiers, then dart quietly from the shadows to the edge of the water. As the chaos continues to unfold at the end of the pier, no one notices as I slip soundlessly into the water and make my way off along the shore. My bad knee protests as I paddle, but I grit my teeth and ignore it.

When I've swum far enough to reach the next set of piers, I make my way up to the banks, crawl up to street level, and melt into the early-morning crowds. Water drips down my chin; my soggy boots squish with each step I take. The soldiers will probably take another few minutes to finish loading everything up and checking off the crates—by the time they head back out this way to Lake's police station, I'll be ready for them. As I limp through the crowds, I reach down to my belt and tug open the pouch of trinkets. I've got a good stash of nails. I scatter them all across the street until I'm confident that I've covered a large swath of the road. Then I turn a corner, dart into a narrow alley, and crouch behind a large trash bin. My knee throbs in protest. I rub wet strands of hair impatiently away from my face.

I gingerly stretch out my leg, wince, and rub at the old scar that runs across my knee. Gotta move fast if I want this to work. I check to make sure my pocketknife's tucked securely against my boot, then settle in to wait.

A few minutes later, I hear what I've been hoping for—the sound of a city patrol truck approaching from farther ahead, its recognizable beeping alarm ringing out down the street. My body tenses.

The truck draws nearer. People clear to either side as it honks its way through the morning rush.

Then—

Pop!

One of the truck's tires bursts—it skids, then careens haphazardly to one side, sending up some shrieks from the crowd. It crashes to a halt

several feet from where my alley is. I struggle to my feet. The back of the truck has popped open in all the chaos, and a dozen or so crates lie open and spilled on the streets.

Two soldiers hop out from the truck right as crowds of people gather around the truck, some already eagerly picking up cans of meat that have rolled out of the broken crates. “Back up!” one soldier shouts in vain at the crowd. The other soldier pushes people back with his rifle.

I rush in with the pack. If I could grab even *one* of the crates and bring it back to Charlie, I’d call that a win. The people tower over me, jostling me back and forth as everyone tries to snatch a small portion of the food. I duck my head, fold myself down as small as I can, and push doggedly on. Finally, I see the truck before me—and the spilled contents all over the ground.

I reach down and shove two tins of meat right into my pockets. Then I grab the edge of one crate, pull back with all my might, and start dragging it along the ground. Several other soldiers have arrived to back up the original two; I try to work faster as they begin pushing people back from the scene. I clench my jaw and pull harder.

“Hey—get away from that!”

A soldier catches sight of me, grabs me by the collar of my shirt, and tosses me unceremoniously back against the throngs. My bad knee buckles—I cry out in pain and land in a weird position. The soldier grabs the crate I was dragging and shoots me a furious glare. “Damn baby street cons,” he spits at me. “Go back to your alley. Keep your hands off Republic property.”

That’s mine, I scream silently. That’s for Charlie. To my surprise, an urge to cry surges up from a deeper part of me. That’s for my family. For people I care about.

But there’s not much I can do now. I’m too late, I’m too small, and I’m too weak. The scene I’ve caused is useless to me now—enough soldiers have arrived that the people no longer have the guts to grab for the crates’ contents.

I scramble to my feet, then shove my way through the people as the soldiers gather to inspect the burst tire of their truck. *At least I banged up one of their precious vehicles, I think darkly.*

I make my way back to the pier where Charlie’s crew works. By the

time I get there, my knee's sore. I'm sweaty and exhausted. Charlie sees me from a distance, jumps down from the stack of crates she's sitting on, and rushes over. "There you are," she says. She seems to have composed herself since her earlier outburst. Her eyes run over my damp clothes. "Where'd you go?"

I just shrug. I pull the two tins of meat out of my pockets. "There was some sort of commotion down the street," I reply, handing her the tins. "Truck overturned. I grabbed these. Sorry—they wouldn't let us get any closer. How's your dad?"

"He's okay. He's taken harder hits before." Charlie gives me a wry smile of thanks, but hands the tins back to me. "You keep these. Two tins won't do us much good." She looks over her shoulder at the crew. Then she bends down, leans toward my ear, and whispers, "That was you, wasn't it? You saw the whole thing this morning. You found some way to mess that truck up, didn't you?"

I blink at her. "I—"

Charlie grins when she sees my guilty expression. "Yeah, we were out there too. Your little stunt let some of my dad's crew get in there and grab a few of our crates back."

The weight on my chest lifts a little. I look at her in surprise, and then break into a small smile. "You guys were there? You saw the truck?"

Charlie's eyes study mine. For a moment, it's as if she can see right into my heart. "You got a death wish or something?" she finally says. She reaches up to ruffle my hair. "I'll hand it to you—you've got some nerves of steel, running off like that and messing up a city patrol's truck."

I blush, then look down at my feet. "Just got lucky," I mutter. But deep down, I can't help feeling a spark of pride. They'd gotten some of their supplies back. Maybe my stunt hadn't been useless after all.

Charlie's expression softens. Her hand lifts my chin so that I meet her stare. She leans down and gives me an affectionate peck on the lips. "Thank you," she says. "You're a good kid. I bet the Republic hasn't seen the last of you."

I sleep on the boat's deck with the crew that night. But early the next morning, when dawn has barely reached the water's edge and Charlie's eyes are still closed, I get up and sneak quietly away. I take nothing with

me except my few trinkets and tins of food. I don't look at her one last time, and I don't leave her any notes or say good-bye. The air is cool, nipping at my cheeks and lips, a reminder of the empty space around me. I keep my hands in my pockets and my head held high. My hair is loose.

I can't stay here. If anything, yesterday's events reminded me very clearly of why I wander the streets alone, why I don't dare let myself get tangled up in relationships with anyone else out here in Lake. Soldiers had attacked Charlie's dad just for falling short on a shipment—what would happen to them if the soldiers found out that they were harboring a boy who'd escaped from the Republic's labs? A boy who's supposed to be dead? Dad had always told me to move forward, never backward.

So I keep my toes pointed away from the pier and inland toward the slums. Best to be alone out here. I'm a floating soul, a phantom . . . I belong nowhere. Charlie's words echo in my mind.

I bet the Republic hasn't seen the last of you.

I smile. No, I sincerely hope that they haven't.

My feet feel heavy, but they don't make a sound.

EPISODE TWO



JUNE

THREE YEARS BEFORE THE EVENTS OF

LEGEND

Author's Note: In *Legend*, we meet June just as she's receiving yet another disciplinary warning from her school, Drake University. The following short story is a peek at June's very first day at Drake, and why she finds herself incapable of staying out of trouble.

JUNE

“WHAT’S WITH ALL THIS TRAFFIC?” I ASK MY BROTHER.

Metias leans forward in the driver’s seat and cranes his neck. He’s in his full captain’s uniform, but from the backseat I can see his hair is tussled, the result of spending most of the morning raking his hands through it. He sighs, gives me an apologetic glance. “Sorry, Junebug. I shouldn’t have taken the shortcut through Lake. Let me get a report,” he says, then mumbles something into his mike.

I cross my arms and count the military jeeps around us to pass the time. (There are exactly nine vehicles in each of the three lanes on the street, as far as I can see.) I try to estimate how much farther we have to go before we’ll reach Drake University. At this rate, it’ll take us at least thirty minutes. Chances are high that I’ll be late for my orientation. *Twelve-year-old prodigy officially inducted today at Drake University.* That’s what the JumboTrons have been broadcasting. I can still remember the way my heart thumped from accepting my Drake uniform earlier in the week. Today I start school at the university, the only twelve-year-old who will be wandering the campus grounds. The thought sends a pulse of anxiety and excitement through me. What will the other students think? Will I make any friends?

Metias finishes his conversation and looks back at me with a weary frown. “Sounds like the streets throughout north Lake are all jammed—apparently we had to deliver a new truck to some of our guys at a nearby police station.”

“Really? What happened?”

“They busted a tire, right in the middle of a busy street. There’s a huge mess of food crates spilled across a main intersection and a crowd of people fighting over it all.”

I wrinkle my nose at the thought of people clawing over canned food, and Metias catches me. “June. Don’t judge like that.”

I erase my expression, feeling guilty. “Do you think we’ll be late for my

orientation, then?”

“I’m afraid so. I’ve left a message for Drake’s officials already. Let’s hope it’s not a big deal.”

I smile. As we inch along through the slums, I focus on the churning water wheels along the shoreline. The morning sun paints a sheet of gold across the lake’s surface. “After today,” I say, “you’ll have to call me Cadet Iparis.”

Metias can’t help laughing at that. “The whole city’s patrols are murmuring about you, *Cadet Iparis*—I still can’t believe my baby sister’s officially a *Drake University* student. How about that?” He raises an eyebrow at me. “Now, this doesn’t mean that anything changes. You *don’t* get any extra privileges. You come home on *time*. You *tell* me if you need to stay late for any homework. You *definitely* are not allowed to hang out with any of your older classmates after school unless it’s something related to class—”

I roll my eyes and stick out my tongue at him. “Yeah, yeah.”

“I’m serious, June. You call me if you need anything. Understand? Don’t make me worry about you more than I already do.”

We travel in silence for a moment. “Do you think Mom and Dad would’ve been proud of me?” I say after a while.

Metias looks at me again through the mirror. Even though we’re twelve years, four months, and twenty-three days apart, there’s no doubt that we’re related. We have the same eyes, dark brown with hints of gold, the same dark hair and tanned skin. “Mom and Dad would’ve loved to see you inducted into Drake,” he says quietly. “The whole country is proud of you. *I’m* proud of you. Very, very proud.”

His approval fills my heart with warmth. I tuck my knees up to my chin and smile. “Love you,” I say.

Metias smiles back at me. “Love you too. Keep at it, Junebug—someday, you’ll shake the Republic to its very core. You’ll be absolutely unforgettable. I know it.”

After a full forty-one minutes, we finally get through the traffic in Lake and speed off through Batalla sector toward the university. Metias hurries me along through the campus grounds. We can hear the music of the morning pledge blaring out across the university, and I know orientation is already under way. I’d read somewhere that Drake takes tardiness very seriously—and if that’s the case, I’m already in trouble on my first day.

All the other students have gathered on the main campus quad for the ceremony, and Metias and I have no choice but to make a bit of an entrance. As the university's president continues his speech on stage, my brother ushers me toward my seat as quietly as he can, but the irritated looks from professors are obvious. I know what they're thinking: *Maybe the Republic should've assigned June and Metias an official guardian instead of letting the older brother raise his sister. Maybe he just can't handle it.*

Metias returns their looks with an apologetic expression. I hold my breath, fighting back a desire to defend my brother. It's not easy to single-handedly raise a baby sister when Metias is only twenty-four and the captain of a Los Angeles patrol. And it's even harder to raise a girl like me. But I keep my head down and take a seat near the back. Once Metias sees me properly settled down, he taps his soldier's cap once in a good-bye salute. "Have a good time," he whispers to me. "Keep your chin up, don't be intimidated. And stick up for yourself, like how I taught you. Understand?"

"Don't worry," I reply with a smile, even though butterflies are starting to flutter in my stomach.

Metias smiles briefly in return, and then hurries off to the rest of his duties. I'm left to face the university alone.

The orientation is, as expected, boring. I look around and study my new classmates while the speakers drone on. Will any of them want to be friends with me? A familiar sense of hope hits me. The first year I'd skipped was second grade, and since then, I'd skipped three other grades. Each time, I'd hoped that skipping a grade and forcing myself into a class full of new students might give me another chance at making friends. Now I'm in a new school again, and the probability of bonding with some students early in the year should be high. Many of the freshmen must be from outside Los Angeles; they'll need friends too. I have a shot.

By the time we've finished sitting through all of the speeches, it's nine minutes before 1100 hours, and my stomach has started growling. Beside me, the other students (all at least a year ahead of me, judging from the colors of their uniforms' stripes, which means I've seated myself with the sophomores instead of the freshmen) look unbothered. Maybe older students don't get hungry so early in the day. I feel a little embarrassed, then try to forget about food. A couple of the students cast smirks and raised eyebrows in my direction, emphasizing the fact that I don't look like I belong. I stay in my

seat, my back straight, and try to remind myself of what Metias said. *Keep your chin up, don't be intimidated.*

Orientation finally ends and we all start heading off to our first class of the day. I stay toward the back of a group of students and let my earpiece tune into the campus's map. The place is huge—at least ten times the size of my high school—and I quickly make note of which buildings the students in my grade level are clustering around. If I get lost on campus today, at least I'll know which buildings will probably have my classes.

Suddenly, someone shoves me from behind. I stumble forward and barely catch myself before hitting the pavement, but in the process I knock over another student. We both tumble down. "I'm sorry," I gasp out, scrambling back onto my feet and reaching a hand out to the other girl. She takes it gratefully. But when she sees who pushed us, she just shifts her eyes away and leaves me behind. I frown. When I turn around, I see a boy (sophomore level, judging by the gold stripes running along his uniform's sleeves, which means he's at least seventeen years old) with his head thrown back, laughing at the expression on my face. He keeps walking with a group of his friends. "Sorry," he says as he brushes past me, his shoulder purposely knocking me off balance. "Didn't see you."

I bite my lip as snickers rise from those nearby. Only a few actually look at me sympathetically, and when I do meet their eyes, they dart away. Just like the girl I'd helped up. I grit my teeth. It isn't as if I'm new to teasing, but throughout grade and high school, I knew to let the taunts slide and keep a low profile in order to survive. I became an expert at evasion, and it worked . . . back then. But this isn't high school—this is Drake University. I already know that I can't go through Drake's training by keeping my temper down and taking the punishment. I am officially a soldier-in-training; I'm going to fight for the Republic someday. And even though this boy is easily the same height as my brother, I can't let him push me around on day one and then expect Drake to see me as a potential officer—especially not with all of these students looking on. I have to start earning my respect today.

Metias's words come back to me. *Stick up for yourself, like how I taught you.* He'd started training me early, after I came home one day with a black eye and a gash on my arm.

So instead of letting the boy who pushed me walk right on past, I hurl an insult back at him. "Get some glasses, then. A blind person could've seen me

walking there.”

The boy looks at me, his eyebrows raised in surprise, the conversation with his friends paused in midair. I swallow hard. Suddenly I wonder if I made the right choice—but it’s too late now.

“You’re that twelve-year-old, aren’t you? June Iparis?” he finally says, his hands in his pockets. The tight smile on his lips reminds me of twisted wire. When I hesitate, he tilts his chin at me. “Well, speak up. Why so shy now?”

“Yes, that’s me,” I reply.

“They did say you were a cocky one, thinking you’re a big shot now that you’ve made it into Drake on account of your family’s money.”

A small crowd of curious students have gathered around us, and the boy’s gang of friends are making some sort of joke at my expense. I wish my uniform fit better—Drake had hurriedly ordered a uniform tailored to fit me, but it’s still not quite right, and the sleeves bunch loosely around my wrists. I hope it isn’t too noticeable.

“I’m on scholarship,” I say, careful to keep my voice calm, just like how Metias taught me.

“Oh, is that so?” The boy opens his mouth in an expression of mock admiration. “Congratulations, little girl—did they take pity on you because of what happened to your parents? Well, we all know how you really got in. If your last name wasn’t Iparis and your brother didn’t slip a wad of cash to the admin officials, and if they didn’t fake your talents for some sensationalist news, I bet you’d still be sitting in your little grade school chair.”

They’ll say things to provoke you, Metias told me. But don’t let yourself be the first to throw a punch. Don’t let them get the best of you. Not that I’m actually strong enough to take anyone down, of course, but Metias’s words help keep my temper from bubbling over. I take a deep breath. “It doesn’t sound too different from how *you* must have gotten in,” I say, looking him up and down. His smile wavers—the crowd shifts uneasily, and several laugh at the idea of a twelve-year-old talking back to a six-foot-tall sophomore. “Your hands look too soft to have handled enough weapons over the years, and your buzz cut is too long. That would never pass in an inspection. In order for you to have received your ranking today with such a lazy haircut, I bet *your* parents paid off some admins.”

The boy’s mouth quivers in irritation. He takes a step toward me and

raises a hand. At first it looks like he might hit me, but he probably realizes that would look bad. So instead he tries to push me over. I see his hand coming long before he can do it, and I dodge him effortlessly. It throws him off balance; he stumbles forward a step. I can't help smiling a little—what a slow soldier. Maybe everything I said was correct; maybe he did bribe his way into the university after all.

He whirls on me. This time, the irritation in his eyes gives way to rage. He lunges for me again—his fist flies toward me. I dance out of the way again. More and more spectators have rushed over to watch (I wonder if this sophomore is known on campus for pushing others around), and as they look on with wide eyes, I dodge a third strike from the boy. This time I whirl around behind his back, and when he flinches, thinking I'm going to strike, he trips over his own feet. He falls onto the pavement and scrapes up one of his cheeks. His friends have stopped laughing, but giggles do come from several of the other onlookers.

The boy hops to his feet and tries again—this time in earnest, his eyes intense with concentration. I duck and roll, then dart to the side, then spin in a circle—all of his intended blows breeze right past me. My confidence starts to rise as some in the crowd watch me with fascination. *This isn't so hard*, I think as I tease the boy, hiding behind his back on light feet. *If this is all I have to worry about on campus, then—*

My confidence distracts me too much. When I'm not careful, the boy finally catches me on my shoulder and sends me tumbling to the ground. I land hard on my back, and all the air in my lungs rushes out in one *whoosh*. He's going to hit me again. But before I can dodge my way out of this one, someone comes rushing into our makeshift circle.

"What's going on here?" a voice barks above me. Instantly the crowd scatters. "Cadets! Back to business, all of you—have you all forgotten the reports against you for tardiness? *Get to your classes!*"

I wince as I get to my feet. My shoulder feels like it ran right into a brick wall. I suppose it's not that far off, actually. The person who broke up our fight looks like a young officer, and now she folds her arms and regards both of us.

The boy holds up his hands in defense. "She provoked me. You've heard the warnings about this girl before—"

"Yes," the officer cuts him off, "and responding to a twelve-year-old

child's provocations is truly a sign of a mature sophomore." The boy flushes at her words. "Get to your dean secretary's office. You'll be lucky if you're not suspended for a week after this."

The boy does as she says, but not before casting an ugly look in my direction. *Good riddance*. I don't even know his name.

I'm about to thank the officer when she cuts me off with a glare. "On your feet and at attention, cadet," she snaps. I hurry into the stance. The officer puts her hands behind her and sneers at me. "Harion High warned us about you, you know. They said that even though you could handle the coursework at Drake, you might not be mature enough to survive the rest of the university. And it looks like they're right."

"But I didn't even touch him," I say.

"You were right in the middle of a fight with him," the officer replies, gesturing around her. "I saw it with my own eyes."

"No, you didn't. Did you ever see me strike him?"

A small hint of frustration appears in the officer's eyes. "Do we really need to debate this, Iparis? An entire crowd of students witnessed the two of you, and I should think that's plenty of evidence for your secretary to deal with."

I shake my head. "With all due respect, ma'am, what the other students saw was a sophomore boy who tried over and over again to hit me but failed. They also saw me spend the entire time ducking and dodging. I never put a finger on him. And until that last hit that you saw, he also didn't lay a finger on *me*."

To my pleasant surprise, the officer hesitates for a second. Everything I said does match what she actually saw. I press on. "It can't be a fight between the two of us if I never even touched him, right?"

She searches my face, and behind her irritated expression lies some small, subtle hint of admiration. Somehow, I've managed to impress her. "I'll let your dean secretary decide what to do with you," she finally replies, although she doesn't sound as harsh as she did a second ago. "Her name is Ms. Whitaker, and she's in Albott Hall. Say what you will in defense of yourself, cadet, but if every day turns out to be like this first day, then Drake just might have to send you right back to high school. I have my eye on you. Understand?"

I mutter a response and head off toward my dean's building. When I

glance over my shoulder, the officer is still standing there, watching me go. She places a call on her earpiece and I wonder if she's talking about me.

Despite all my pleading, I'm hit with a report for the whole thing. I stare miserably at the gold slip of paper as I sit at the back of my last afternoon class (Republic History 2080–2100), hoping that the students several seats down from me don't notice. Slapped with a report on my very first day at Drake. Based on my own research about the university, if a student got more than five reports in one year, she would be placed on leave—a nice way of saying that she'd been suspended for the following year and required to attend a series of disciplinary classes at a boot camp. If a student got more than five reports after that, then she'd be expelled. Apparently I've given myself a head start on suspension. Metias won't be happy to hear about this—although I don't think I can get into *that* much trouble with him. He'd been the one who wanted me to stand up for myself, right? I'd done nothing wrong. I'd only defended myself. Still, the whole ordeal makes my stomach churn . . . I thought I was being so clever, that doing what I did would leave some sort of impression on my elders, that it would help my standing in the class and put me on a better track to becoming an officer. What was I thinking? Why would the Republic want such a rebellious soldier as one of their officers? At this rate, I'll be lucky to make it through my first year without getting suspended, and I'm sure I'll run into that boy again. What do I do next time?

“Hey,” somebody whispers from the row behind me. “Kid.” I turn around. It's a girl with two long braids tied back into a bun behind her head.

“Hi,” I whisper.

“I saw what you did out there in the quad today.” She smiles. “Nice job. I didn't think I'd ever see a twelve-year-old get the better of someone like Patrick Stanson.”

Her words lift my mood a little, and despite my report, I sit up straighter in my chair and smile back. “Thanks,” I reply. “I don't think Drake will want to see me doing that again, though.”

“Are you kidding?” The girl laughs and nudges her friend. “You heard it was posted in the classroom, right?” Her friend nods.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Rumor has it that your name's been added to the class Intermediate Defense 231. Some people saw it on their updated attendance rosters in their

course tablets.” She waits for a second, as if to see my reaction, but when I just continue staring blankly at her, she sighs and makes a circular gesture with one hand. “*Intermediate* Defense. You know that class is only for sophomores, right?”

I blink. *Only for sophomores*. Had the young officer who’d sent me off to my dean secretary put in a word for me? Had she actually seen something in me, something I’d been trying to put on display? I think back to that hint of admiration on her face, her hesitation at scolding me in the end. Maybe what I did was a good idea after all. I smile in the darkness of the classroom. “Thanks for the heads-up,” I tell the girl gratefully. “Otherwise I’m pretty sure I would’ve gone to the wrong lecture hall tomorrow.”

The class ends—the professor dismisses us, and the girl’s friends all rise and start making their way out of their aisle. The girl looks at me again and shrugs. “No problem,” she says with a smile. Before I can reply, she utters a quick “Bye!” and scurries off to join her group. I watch her go for a second.

My happiness fades. I’m grateful to her for the moment of friendship, but a moment *isn’t* friendship . . . and as I adjust my own bag across my shoulders and head into the hall, I come to the slow realization that this might never change. I’m twelve years old. Everyone else in my class is at least sixteen. No matter how nice some of them are to me, who’s going to want a twelve-year-old tagging along with them? What could I possibly talk with them about? What would I have in common with any of them? *I don’t have anything in common with them*, I admit to myself as I step back into the glare of the afternoon sun. And when all’s said and done, I’m pretty sure I will be spending the next four years alone.

My coping instinct kicks in. *I have to skip a grade*. I’d skip all of them, if I could. The faster, the better, and then I can get out of here. I can leave and then I can finally find my group of friends. Even though I try to brush off this train of thinking, knowing it makes no sense, that it’s all illogical, I can’t help feeling some sort of weird reassurance from it. If I start over again . . . if I just have one more try at a new school or environment, with new people . . .

I start to run. I run until my feet fly off the ground and my breath comes out in ragged, desperate gasps. I run all the way across the campus until I reach the edge where other students are being picked up and dropped off.

I just want to go home.



“So,” Metias says to me later that night as I lounge alone on our living room couch and watch an old cartoon. He hands me a mug of hot chocolate. “Do you want to talk about this report thing?”

I don’t answer right away, but I do take the mug in both hands and savor the rich chocolate scent. My brother knows me. I can tell right away that this is a different type of hot chocolate than he got last time—no powder, just real chocolate melted into steaming-hot milk. Floating on top is a soft, handmade marshmallow. My favorite. It’s as if he could sense my mood and stopped to buy this even before he came to pick me up. Or perhaps he’s seen me have one too many rough first days of school.

We sip our drinks in silence for a while. “They said I got in a fight,” I finally blurt out. “But I didn’t. I didn’t even touch the other guy.” Metias raises an eyebrow at me, but he doesn’t argue, and I find myself rambling on. “And then Ms. Whitaker—that’s my dean secretary—she said that I don’t respect authority enough, and that I talk back too much. Then they assigned me into Intermediate Defense instead of Introductory Defense. That’s a good thing, right? But they also gave me a report.”

Metias clicks his tongue in disapproval. “June. What have I told you about talking back to your teachers?”

“She’s not my teacher. She’s my dean secretary.”

“Whatever. I know I said to stick up for yourself, but that doesn’t mean I want you to go around picking fights or causing trouble on purpose. It sounds like you deserved that report, kid.”

I glare at him, annoyed that he isn’t taking my side. “I don’t know whether they’re trying to punish me or praise me.”

Metias leans on one arm propped up against the back of the couch, and unless I’m seeing things, I swear there’s both a smile and a frown hidden along his mouth. He studies me thoughtfully. “Maybe they’re trying to do both,” he replies. “It sounds like they saw your talents as well as your attitude problems, and it’s a bit confusing for them to deal with those at the same time. Maybe they’re just like your other schools. They just don’t know what to do with you.”

“Nobody ever knows what to do with me.” Suddenly I’m unleashing all my frustration onto my brother. “The school doesn’t fit me—nothing ever

does. I can't even carry on a normal conversation with my classmates for longer than thirty seconds, because what in the world do we have in common? They're all sixteen and up, and they talk about dating and careers. None of them are twelve-year-olds in a university. I'm not interested in what they have to say, and half of them don't even understand the things *I* want to talk about."

"A little modesty, Junebug," Metias chides me in a soft voice.

"Well, it's true!" I exclaim. "*I'm not normal*, Metias—I see things that other people don't see. I'm not in the same league. Why should I try to deny that?" My voice softens for an instant. "There's something wrong with me."

Metias sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "I know you'll have a hard time making friends," he says after a brief pause. "I know that's what this is all about, all the grade skipping and showing off, and I won't sugarcoat it for you. You *aren't* normal. The things that make you special will give you all kinds of advantages in life, but they will also hold you back and expose your weaknesses. That isn't going to change. And you'll have to learn to adapt to that."

I stare into my mug, my sweet tooth abruptly gone. "I don't know how," I mutter.

"You know everything." Metias says this in a light, teasing way. "You'll figure it out. Your strengths might make you hard to approach, and might make your words sound uglier than what you actually mean, but they also make people look up to you. They admire you, whether you realize it or not. If you stop trying so hard to impress them, maybe a few will start warming up to you." My brother reaches out and taps my forehead gently. "Behind that brain of yours is a good heart, Junebug. I see it every day."

I don't know why his words bring a lump up in my throat, but suddenly I'm fighting it down and trying my best not to cry. When Metias sees my face, he shakes his head. "Come here, kid." I scoot over to him and snuggle underneath his arm. We sit quietly with our mugs of hot chocolate, savoring the peace of the night.

Poor Metias. He's not supposed to be a father. He's supposed to be out on his own, independent and free to concentrate on his job as a young captain. But *somebody* has to take care of me, and I make his life so much harder than it needs to be. I wonder what things must have been like for him back when our parents were still alive, when I was a toddler and Metias was a teenager

and he could focus on growing up instead of helping someone else grow up. Still, Metias hasn't complained once. Not a single time. And even though I wish our parents were here, sometimes I'm really happy that this is our little family unit, just me and my brother, each watching out for no one but the other. We do the best we can.

"Everything good about me, I learned from you," I whisper.

"You're giving me too much credit. We got it from our parents." Metias chuckles a little. It's a sad sound. There's another long, ten-second pause before he goes on. "You'll find your tribe," he says. "We all do. Someday, someone out there will see you for the girl you really are. Someday, you'll find someone who understands you."

I take another sip of hot chocolate. "Well, I hope that happens sooner rather than later. But it doesn't really matter." I finally smile at my brother. "At least *you* understand me."

He raises an eyebrow again. "Sometimes."

I laugh a little, and at least for tonight, everything is okay again.

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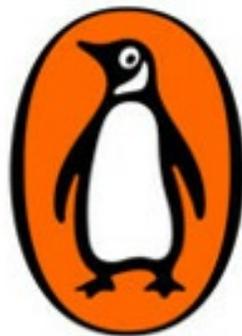
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