

In the beginning, there were two: the god, Laplace, and the goddess, Lenore. They were the ones who gave shape to Moraie – from stomping out mountains and valleys in the east, to conjuring oceans and rivers in the west. Often, their work would force them half-a-world away or more. Yet no matter how far apart they went, they could always find each other again by following the red string of fate – a symbol of their eternal love connecting them by the heart. It was so strong that not even the sharpest peak nor deepest valley could break it.

When their work was complete, the couple retreated home to enjoy what they had made, and for a while that was enough. But soon they realized that something was missing. Lenore wanted a child. So again they worked tirelessly, day and night, to sculpt one out of clay and water. Once it was perfect, they then cut a single strand from the red string and sewed it to the child's heart. Through it, they fed the child all the love and support needed to bring it to life – and thus, the first child of Moraie was born.

Seeing their creation brought the couple much joy, so they immediately set upon making more. One after another, they sculpted both men and women, affixing each one with a life-giving thread before sending them out into the world. And as those children went on to lead their lives, so too did they form their own threads through the bonds and relationships forged with others. This was the beginning of the Threads of Fate...

*Ancient Planatas creation myth.*

## Chapter 1

### The Chase

Run.

That was about the only thing going through sixteen-year-old Ella Gant's mind as she sprinted through the brick and mortar jungle that was Selene. "Just keep running." She repeated it over and over again, in rhythm with her pattering footsteps and rapid breaths bouncing off the alley walls around her. Meanwhile, the mid-day sun peeked down from open rooftops like a nosy neighbor trying to see what all the ruckus was about. She cursed that way that it hid piles of garbage and puddles of water in long dark shadows, because even a single slip up now would spell disaster. Yet still she refused to slow down. If anything, she pushed her burning lungs even harder – fighting for every second, every inch – until they almost burst. Only then did she finally stop to yank her tie loose, unbutton her collar, and double over to gasp for air. This stuffy school uniform left no room to breathe in!

"Where'd she go!?"

"Split up! She's around here somewhere!"

Furious shouts echoed from somewhere nearby, sending chills up Ella's spine. She spun around to check for pursuit, but it was no use. While Selene's maze-like alleys had done well to hide her so far, now they did exactly the same for her pursuers! No matter where she turned, their shadows and voices seemed to come from every nook and cranny at once. One thing was certain though; wherever they were, they sounded *pissed*.

Injected with fresh adrenaline, Ella took off again – around this corner and then that one, under one arch and then over the next. She twisted and turned like a hare dodging hounds, yet despite her best efforts they just kept on coming. Her pursuers footsteps closed in like a noose, until their towering silhouettes crisscrossed the walls all around her like giants. Eventually, all she could do was stick to the shadows, hoping to avoid an errant glance or make a wrong turn. She would never lose them like this!

As if things weren't bad enough, Ella rounded the next corner only to be greeted by a three-way intersection. Even worse, each fork ended in darkness; there was no way to tell which was the way out. She had to choose carefully, for the wrong one might lead further into this labyrinth or, even worse, right into her pursuers' midst. But she didn't exactly have time to deliberate her options either, as their excited whoops and hollers were quick to remind.

“She's nearby – I can feel it, boys! We've got her now!”

Not quite, *boys*. Though they were almost on top of her, Ella wasn't done yet – not when she'd saved her best trick for last. So after forcing out a couple of deep breaths, she reached into her waist pouch and produced a deck of palm-sized cards – her *tarot cards*. Brushing aside a lock of sweat-soaked hair, she then flipped through the deck before stopping at a specific one: *The Chariot*. She pulled the card out, touched it to her forehead, then closed her eyes and let the outside world fall to murmurs. “Fate, guide me,” she whispered, before throwing the card out in front of her. Then she waited – one second, two – before finally daring to peek.

The card had never hit the floor.

Just as she'd hoped, it now dangled in front of her in mid-air, bobbing up and down like a leaf on a web – or more accurately, a thread. With a satisfied grin, she reached out to poke it, and a shimmering streak shot out from the card down the left fork.

“Quick! She went this way!”

Right, those guys. This was no time for a pat on the back, so Ella plucked the card out of the air and took off down the left corridor in the direction of the thread. She followed it into the darkness all the way to a large dumpster, where she then hid while keeping an open ear.

“I thought you said she'd be here!”

“She was supposed to be!”

Ella peeked out from around the corner and breathed a sigh of relief as dark figures converged on her former location from not one but *both* of the paths not taken. Upon arriving to find nobody, they began to bicker, and Ella briefly allowed herself to delight in their confusion. But she knew she wasn't out of the woods yet. So after giving the Chariot a quick kiss, she held the card back up to find another thread, and then quietly skulked away to follow it before the boys could finish arguing.

Just like before, Ella again hurried through the maze of corridors, except this time following the guidance of the silver thread. She did so carefully at first, still unsure if this chosen path was right for her. A few times it edged perilously close to one of her pursuers, yet always managed to veer away just in the nick of time. With each one she slipped past, her strides grew

more confident, and her directions more deliberate. Meanwhile, their voices grew more and more distant.

“Which way?”

“How should I know!? Weren’t you supposed to be in front of her!?”

“Idiots! She must’ve gone that way!”

Ella couldn’t help but smile at her pursuers’ frustrated shouts as she sliced and diced her way through their ranks. This was so easy now that it almost felt like cheating! However, just as she thought that, she turned one last corner and came screeching to a stop. Fate must’ve heard her, because now all of a sudden she found herself facing a thick white wall of steam. It spewed out of a cracked pipe, which whistled ominously as it shrouded every inch of the alley in dense fog. There was no way to see inside – in fact, she couldn’t even see a foot into the shroud. Yet the thread led straight inside, as if to test her resolve.

“Hey, she went this way!”

Again, the boys’ voices drew near. Quickly deciding that the thread had gotten her this far, Ella took the leap of faith without another thought. As expected, the thick white haze completely overcame her senses, not only blocking sight and sound but also drenching her in a hot, sticky mist that reeked of grease and spoiled meat. The pungent aroma made her dizzy, forcing her hand to a nearby wall to steady herself. She gagged upon discovering that it was slimy to the touch. Still, she somehow managed to hold down her lunch and push onward. To her surprise,

the passage went fairly deep, but just as she allowed herself to believe that this might be a way out, Ella suddenly smacked into something hard in front of her. Reeling in pain, she reached out.

“Great,” she muttered. It was more brick.

Feeling around her other sides, Ella quickly confirmed her suspicion: it was a dead end. Of course it was. Suddenly without anywhere left to go, she turned back to examine the alley again, but could only make out vague shapes in the mist: a bunch of half-filled trashcans, a pile of old rags, and a fire escape bolted to one side of the alley. *Maybe if I double-back, I can find a way around*, she thought to herself. But before she even got the chance, voices began taunting her from the other side.

“Well, well, well – would you look at that? Seems somebody doesn’t know her way around quite like she thought! Maybe we should give her a hand, boys.”

Sinister snickers were followed by the sound of approaching footsteps. Ella instinctively pressed herself against the back wall, but it would do little good. She was a caged rat, with only the fog to buy her precious little time. What could she possibly hope to do? As if to answer her plea, a faint shimmer then caught the corner of her eye. The thread she’d been following had reappeared! Now it pointed towards the ladder attached to the fire escape at the side of the alley. Of course! With a relieved sigh she hurried over and was just about to climb up when she noticed that the thread wasn’t alone this time; a second glimmer appeared at the very edge of her vision. That was followed by another, and then another, until all around her tiny flashes – barely perceptible to the naked eye – began twinkling like stars. Immediately, her lip began to quiver.

Finally, after all that running and hiding, was fate offering her an alternative? The second she even considered it, the silver thread leading up the ladder vanished. Well that settled it – she was going to find out.

Ella hopped off the fire escape and put away her cards – there was no time for them anymore. Instead, she doubled her concentration on the twinkling points. One-by-one, each of them stretched into their own silver threads, which cut through the fog and stitched together everything around the alley: from dumpsters, to pipes, to windows, to even her pursuers themselves. Now this was more like it! At peak concentration, she could see about three dozen of the pulsing lines – crossing, twisting, and weaving their way around the alley. Letting her eyes dart between them, Ella followed their twists and turns while searching for any pattern that might help her out – all while her pursuers continued to close in.

“We know you’re in here,” one of them growled, his voice growing irritated. “You might as well give up and save us the trouble!”

“I could say the same to you!” she fired back, playing for time as she continued to work the alley. “Tell you what? Why don’t you give up and save *me* the trouble?”

“Save you the trouble of what? There’s three of us and only one of you!”

This time the taunts were backed by disturbing new sounds: the patter of a pipe against a palm, the shatter of a glass bottle, and the soft whirl of a twirling chain. Meanwhile, three new threads formed right on cue. They stretched out of the cloud to twist around her skull, arm, and

neck respectively. Ella swallowed nervously. Maybe she should have gone up the fire escape after all.

Or just maybe these were just the puzzle pieces she'd been searching for.

Hit by a sudden epiphany, Ella reached out and grabbed the thread wrapped around her neck. Then, maneuvering it in front of her, she snapped her wrist so that it hooked around the support beam of the fire escape. *I better have read this right*, she thought to herself, because her pursuers' silhouettes were practically on top of her now. There was only one way to be sure though; so with a deep, steeling sigh, she took a big step toward the man with the chain.

"I found her!" the shadowy brute shouted, as she came into plain sight.

He was a muscle-bound jock whose excited bellow shook the alley. It startled her at first, nearly causing her to forget what she needed to do. But seeing him snap that chain back like a rattlesnake ready to strike reminded her of the thread still in her hand. She yanked it taught just as the man whipped his weapon forward, and then flinched reflexively. But there was no need to be afraid anymore; after all, the weapon was no longer destined for her throat. Instead, it wrapped itself around the fire escape's support beam, jerking her assailant back in the process.

"What the?" he exclaimed, while looking back and tugging on the weapon in confusion.

The poor guy didn't even get a chance to contemplate his mistake. By the time he turned back around, Ella had already picked up a nearby trashcan and smashed it over his head. The blood curdling sound of tin crunching against skull echoed through the cloud – no doubt alerting

his pals to exactly where she was. But it didn't matter anymore; there was nothing they could do about it. Events had already been set into motion.

Fate had already been changed.

As the man with the chain went down, his weapon tugged on the fire escape's hinges – just as she predicted. He was a big guy, and the metal structure was old and rickety, so the force was enough to rip it right off the side of the building. Ella leapt clear just in time as it squealed its way down the alley wall, but the other boys weren't so lucky. Before they could escape the ominous shadow descending upon them, the fire escape landed with one final, agonizing screech – like a dozen nails clawing across a chalkboard. Ella rode the ruckus out on the floor, with her hands over her ears, until the symphony of chaos finally subsided. Only then did she turn back to view the aftermath.

At last the mist had parted, allowing her to see the fallen fire escape clearly – or rather, the twisted sculpture of metal that remained. It lay barely a foot from her toes, piled atop two fourth-year boys now groaning underneath it. Meanwhile, the third – ponytailed upper classman Demetri Yakov – stood flabbergasted on the opposite end of the wreckage.

“Hmm, that's odd. I thought it was supposed to get you too,” Ella said, as she stood up and dusted herself off nonchalantly. He could only stare back in disbelief.

“Y-You... You can't do that!”

He looked almost comical now, with those shaky knees and wide eyes – like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Completely lost for words, all he could do now was brandish his broken bottle at her and let out a desperate war cry, before charging like a crazed bull.

Then the bell rung.