

In the beginning, there were two: the god, Laplace, and the goddess, Lenore. They were the ones to give 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 that connected 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 alive 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 each other. This is how the *Threads of Fate* came to be, which act as a constant reminder of our deep connections to each other as well as those who came before us.

Ancient Planatas creation myth.

There is no mysticism to fate.
It is a force that is subject to rules and principles.
Its momentum persists until we actively choose to change it,
and “consequence” is merely the name we give to its realignment.
This is the Nomos Motus Totalus – The Law of Conserved Momentum.
It is the foundation upon which all fate-based science is built,
and the invariable truth that grants us mastery over it.

Excerpt from the *First Principles of Fate Mechanics, vol. I*

Looking back, it’s laughable how little any of us really understood.

From the journal of *Ella Gant*

Prologue

“Cetus celebrates 62nd Annual Fair!” That was the headline emblazoned on the cover of the aptly named Cetus Gazette. Below it lay a black-and-white photo of the town square, beautifully decorated in celebratory banners, bows, and balloons. The article was dated just yesterday. However, as Noal Kai lowered the newspaper he felt his heart sink along with it, for there was no sign of that celebration here today – not amongst the collapsed buildings, fallen arches, or toppled trees, and certainly not amongst the distraught townsfolk standing in the ruins of their once beloved homes. The little town of Cetus was now gone.

Noal crouched down to pinch some of the soot between his fingers. He didn't need to ask what had happened here; his surroundings already told the whole story. Scattered footprints clearly marked where innocent people – acquaintances, neighbors, and friends – had pushed and shoved each other out of the way while running for their lives. Piles of debris lay scattered where shingled roofs had torn away from their homes or stone walls had ripped away brick-by-brick. Gaping holes were all that remained of cobblestone roads that looked like they'd literally sucked themselves out of the ground, or trees that had been uprooted like garden-variety weeds. The air hung stagnant, without a single bird's song, insect's buzz, or even the slightest breeze to break the stillness of decay. To anyone else, all of this would have seemed unfathomable. To him, it was all too familiar. It was just like *Orion City*.

Noal squeezed the ashes tightly before slamming the ground in frustration. That certainly caught the attention of a few nearby folks, but they just as quickly forgot about him again to return to rummaging through the remnants of their former lives. After all, what could this diminutive, fifteen-year-old boy possibly have to do with any of this? But the truth was that this *was* his fault. It was his fault because he'd been too late to stop it – his fault because he'd failed in his mission. And the worst part was that it was destined to be his fault again, unless he could track down the *tattooed man* and end this vicious cycle once and for all. That thought alone would have to be enough to keep him going.

Trekking to the outskirts of town, Noal pulled a worn-out map from his cloak pocket. He frowned as he looked at all the open land surrounding Cetus. The nation of Terra was only sparsely populated; most of it was wide open plains, forest, or desert. That meant that his quarry would likely head for a hub – somewhere he could find transport. The closest one just happened to be the capital of Terra itself.

Selene.

Noal exhaled a conflicted sigh. Selene had a population over a hundred times that of Cetus; a confrontation there would surely endanger even more lives. But what choice did he have? *One day*, he decided. He would give himself one day to get in there and hunt down his prey – no more.

The *tattooed man* would not escape this time.

Part I

Selene

Chapter 1

Pattering footsteps and hurried panting echoed through tight city alleys, as eighteen-year-old Ella Gant dashed through the brick and mortar jungle that was Selene. She leapt over piles of garbage and splashed through pools of stale water, while sprinting as fast as her weary legs would take her. Meanwhile, the mid-day sun peeked over rooftops like a nosy neighbor, casting long shadows on the ground that obscured all but the most obvious obstacles. She cursed the way that it forced her to watch her every step, because even a single slip up now would spell disaster. At the same time, her burning lungs screamed for mercy, but she responded only by pushing them even harder. She pushed them until they almost burst, at which point they *forced* her to stop. Only then did she finally pull her tie and collar loose, double over, and gasp for air. These stuffy school clothes left no room to breathe!

“Where’d she go!?”

“Split up! She’s around here somewhere!”

Furious shouts echoed from nearby, sending chills up Ella’s spine. She twisted around to search for signs of pursuit, but it was no use. While Selene’s labyrinth-like alleys did well to hide her so far, they now did exactly the same for her pursuers. No matter where she looked or listened, their shadows and voices seemed to come from every crooked corner or snaking throughway at once. Wherever they were though, they sounded pissed – hardly a surprise, given what she

did to them recently. She shuddered to think of how they might return the favor, which provided all the motivation she needed to get going again.

Injected with fresh adrenaline, Ella took off – around one corner and then another, under one archway and then over the next. She twisted and turned like a hare dodging hounds, going so far as to squeeze through dank narrow spaces, or crawl under jagged fences in her bid to escape. Yet despite her best efforts, she just couldn't shake them. Her pursuers' footsteps and voices continued to close in like a noose, until their towering silhouettes crisscrossed the walls surrounding her. At that point, all she could do was stick to the shadows and hope that she didn't catch an errant glance or turn a wrong corner. She would never lose them like this – not without some sort of cover at least!

Ella turned a few more corners, and then came to a screeching stop. Lo and behold, before her suddenly stood exactly the sort of cover that she'd been hoping for! It came in the form of a dense cloud of steam being fueled by a cracked pipe. The cloud seemed thick enough to mask anything inside, though it did have an off-puttingly sour odor. That, combined with the foreboding hiss coming from the pipe itself, gave her cause to pause. There was something a little *too* convenient about all this – as if someone *wanted* her to run blindly into this place. Even so, could whatever lay within really be as bad as what lay behind her now?

“Quick! She went this way!”

Quickly deciding that the answer was *no*, Ella doubled-down and dove headlong into the cloud. Just as expected, her senses were immediately overcome by its thick white haze, which not only blocked sight and sound but also disoriented her with sickly scents of grease and spoiled meat. She gagged reflexively, but somehow managed to hold her lunch, as she fumbled around blindly for the alley wall. It was slimy to the touch, but remained the best way forward. In fact, she was able to follow it quite a way – and at a pretty good pace too – before eventually smacking into something directly in front of her. Reeling in pain, she reached out and felt around, only to discover the exact same solid brick she'd been following now directly ahead of her too.

“Great,” she muttered to herself.

Ella tried following the bricks left, only to run into another wall there as well. She even tried jumping to test the height of the walls, but their tops were well beyond her reach. There was no doubt about it; this was a dead end. So without anywhere left to go, she turned around and examined the rest of her surroundings. She 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 she doubled-back now she'd have enough time to find another way around. But before she could retrace a single step, voices began taunting her from the other side.

“My, my, my – would you look at that, boys? It seems that somebody doesn’t know these corridors quite as well as she thought she did!”

Those sinister snickers were soon followed by the sound of approaching footsteps. So much for doubling-back. Ella instinctively pressed herself against the wall at her back, but it wasn’t like she was going to go *through* it anytime soon. She was a caged rat, with only the fog to buy her time now. It wouldn’t be long before those bigger, meaner, stronger boys found her, and once they did it would be all over. After all, they were the only other ones in these alleys, and anyone watching wouldn’t be able to see through this thick fog anyway. That meant that she was alone; there was nobody to scare these boys away now, nobody to stop their advance, and nobody to come to her rescue.

Finally.

Ella licked her lips as she felt the goosebumps crawl up her skin. After all the running and hiding, *finally* it had come to this. At last the stakes were high enough to prove what she could *really* do. So after forcing herself into a couple of deep calming breaths, she got to work. Reaching into her waist pouch, she produced a deck of palm-sized cards – her tarot cards. Brushing aside a lock of sweat-soaked hair, she then flipped through them in search of a specific one: The Chariot. She pulled the card out, touched it to her forehead, and 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 seconds – before finally daring to peek.

Just as she hoped, the card never hit the floor. Instead, it now dangled in front of her in mid-air, bobbing up and down as though suspended on a wire – or more accurately, a *thread*. With a satisfied grin she reached out to poke it, and a shimmering silver streak shot through the fog to the fire escape at the right side of the alley. Of course! With a relieved sigh, she snatched the card up and hurried over to climb up the metal ladder. However, just as she got there she noticed another glimmer at the edge of her peripheral vision. This was followed by another, and then another. All around her, tiny flashes – barely perceptible to the naked eye – began twinkling like stars. Immediately, her lip began to quiver as her hands shook with excitement; was fate offering her an alternative to running away? The second she even considered it, the thread leading up to the fire escape vanished. It was settled – she was going to find out.

Ella hopped off the fire escape and put away her tarot cards – there was no time for them anymore. Instead, she doubled her concentration on the twinkling points all around the alley. One-by-one, each of them stretched into their own silver threads – threads of fate – that cut through the fog and stitched together everything from dumpsters, to pipes, to windows, to even her pursuers themselves. Now this was more like it! At her peak concentration, about three dozen of the pulsing lines

appeared in total – crossing, twisting, and weaving across the whole alley. Ella let her eyes dart between them, following their twists and turns while searching for any pattern that she might be able to use – 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, trying to play 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. Right on cue, three new threads formed as well. They stretched out of the cloud to twist around her skull, arm, and neck, causing Ella to swallow nervously. Maybe she should have retreated up the fire escape after all.

Or maybe these were just the puzzle pieces she was looking for.

Inspired by that idea, Ella reached out and grabbed the thread wrapped around her neck. She then carefully snapped her wrist to hook it 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

she was going to find out, so with a deep, steeling breath, she took a big step toward the man swinging the big chain.

“I found her!” the shadowy brute shouted on sight.

His excited bellow startled her briefly, nearly causing Ella to forget what she needed to do. However, watching him snap that chain back like a rattlesnake ready to strike reminded her of the thread she was holding. She yanked it with all her might, then reflexively flinched as the man whipped the chain forward. But there was no need to be afraid anymore, because the weapon was no longer bound for her throat. Instead, it wrapped itself around the fire escape’s support beam, stopping her assailant mid-swing.

“What the?” he exclaimed, while looking back and tugging on the chain in confusion.

The poor guy didn’t even have 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 crunch echoed through the cloud as her assailant went down like a ton of bricks. Meanwhile, the ruckus quickly summoned his accomplices, but it was too late now; events had already been set into motion.

Fate had already changed.

As the man with the chain went down, his weapon tugged on the fire escape. He was a big guy, and the fire escape was old and rickety, so the force of his fall ripped it rather easily off its hinges – exactly as Ella predicted. After that, only the screech of metal against brick and an ominous growing shadow could warn his poor friends, but they didn't notice nearly soon enough. Meanwhile, Ella took a big step back and plugged her ears, but even that wouldn't keep out the sound of wrenching metal or the sensation of shaking ground as the fire escape landed right on top of their heads. It crashed down in a glorious symphony of noise – like an entire orchestra playing their instruments for the first time. Once the ruckus finally settled, Ella turned back around to find the mist temporarily parted.

Now she could see the fallen fire escape in its entirety – or rather, the abstract sculpture of twisted metal that was left of it. It lay barely a foot from her toes, along with two fourth-year boys groaning underneath it. Meanwhile, a 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,” she said nonchalantly, while he struggled to comprehend the sight before him.

“Y-You... You can't do that!” he wailed back.

He looked almost comical now, with those shaky knees and wide pupils – a far cry from the taunt-spewing bully from just a few minutes earlier. Completely at

a loss for words, all he could do now was point his broken bottle and let out a desperate war cry, before charging at her like an angry bull.

That's when the whistle finally blew.